Joel Osteen and the Glory Story: A Case Study
By Michael Horton

“Name it, claim it”; the “health-and-wealth” or “prosperity gospel”: these are nicknames for a heresy that in many respects is only an extreme version of perhaps the most typical focus of American Christianity today more generally. Basically, God is there for you and your happiness. He has some rules and principles for getting what you want out of life and if you follow them, you can have what you want. Just “declare it” and prosperity will come to you.¹ God as Personal Shopper.

Although explicit proponents of the so-called “prosperity gospel” may be fewer than their influence suggests, its big names and best-selling authors (T. D. Jakes, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer) are purveyors of a pagan worldview with a peculiarly American flavor. It’s basically what the sixteenth century German monk turned church reformer Martin Luther called the “theology of glory”: How can I climb the ladder and attain the glory here and now that God has actually promised for us after a life of suffering? The contrast is the “theology of the cross”: the story of God’s merciful descent to us, at great personal cost, a message that the Apostle Paul acknowledged was offensive and “foolish to Greeks.”

Joel Osteen: Another Verse of a Really Long Song
The attraction of Americans to this version of the “glory story” is evident in the astonishing success of Joel Osteen’s runaway best-seller, Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential. Beyond his charming personality and folksy style, Osteen’s phenomenal attraction is no doubt related to his simple and soothing sampler of the American gospel: a blend of Christian and cultural elements that he picked up not through any formal training, but as the son of a Baptist-turned-prosperity evangelist who was a favorite on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). However, gone are the eccentric caricatures of “prosperity” televangelism, with its flamboyant style and over-the-top rhetoric.

In the Wal-Mart era of religion and spirituality, every particular creed and any denominational distinctives get watered down. We don’t hear (at least explicitly) about our being “little gods,” “part and parcel of God,” or the blood of Christ as a talisman for healing and prosperity. The strange teachings of his father’s generation, still regularly heard on TBN, are not explored in any depth. In fact, nothing is explored in any depth. Osteen still uses the telltale lingo of the health-and-wealth evangelists: “Declare it,” “speak it,” “claim it,” and so forth, but there are no dramatic, made-for-TV healing lines. The pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, which now owns the Compaq Center, does not come across as a flashy evangelist with jets and yachts, but as a charming next-door-neighbor who always has something nice to say.

¹ This position is extensively documented in Michael Horton, ed., The Agony of Deceit (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990).
Although remarkably gifted at the social psychology of television, Joel Osteen is hardly unique. In fact, his explicit drumbeat of prosperity (word-faith) teaching is communicated in the terms and the ambiance that might be difficult to distinguish from most megachurches. Joel Osteen is the next generation of the health-and-wealth gospel. This time, it’s mainstream.

As community philosopher Karl Marx said of a consumer-driven culture, “All that is solid melts into the air.” Religion, too, becomes a commodity—a product or therapy that we can buy and use for our personal well-being. Exemplifying the moralistic and therapeutic approach to religion, Osteen’s message is also a good example of the inability of Boomers to mourn in the face of God’s judgment or dance under the liberating news of God’s saving mercy. In other words, all gravity is lost—both the gravity of our problem and of God’s amazing grace. According to this message, we are not helpless sinners—the ungodly—who need a one-sided divine rescue. (Americans, but especially we Boomers, don’t take bad news well.) Rather, we are good people who just need a little instruction and motivation.

“Law-Lite”: Salvation From Unhappiness By Doing Your Best
There is no condemnation in Osteen’s message for failing to fulfill God’s righteous law. On the other hand, there is no justification. Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful. “Don’t sit back passively,” he warns, but with a gentle pleading suggests that the only reason we need to follow his advice is because it’s useful for getting what we want. God is a buddy or partner who exists primarily to make sure we are happy. “You do your part, and God will do his part.”2 “Sure we have our faults,” he says, but “the good news is, God loves us anyway.”3 Instead of accepting God’s just verdict on our own righteousness and fleeing to Christ for justification, Osteen counsels readers simply to reject guilt and condemnation.4 Yet it is hard to do that successfully when God’s favor and blessing on my life depend entirely on how well I can put his commands to work. “If you will simply obey his commands, He will change things in your favor.”5 That’s all: “…simply obey his commands.”

Everything depends on us, but it’s easy. One wonders if he has ever had a crisis of doubt or moral failure that stripped him naked in God’s presence. Osteen seems to think that we are basically good people and God has a very easy way for us to save ourselves—not from his judgment, but from our lack of success in life—with his help. “God is keeping a record of every good deed you’ve ever done,” he says—as if this is good news. “In your time of need, because of your generosity, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of.”6

It may be “Law Lite,” but make no mistake about it: behind a smiling Boomer Evangelicalism that eschews any talk of God’s wrath, there is a determination to assimilate the gospel to law, an announcement of victory to a call to be victorious, indicatives to imperatives, good news to

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3 Ibid., 57
4 Ibid., 66
5 Ibid., 119
6 Ibid., 262
good advice. The bad news may not be as bad as it used to be, but the good news is just a softer version of the bad news: Do more. But this time, it’s easy! And if you fail, don’t worry. God just wants you to do your best. He’ll take care of the rest.

So who needs Christ? At least, who needs Christ as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29)? The sting of the law may be taken out of the message, but that only means that the gospel has become a less demanding, more encouraging law whose exhortations are only meant to make us happy, not to measure us against God’s holiness.

So while many supporters offer testimonials to his kinder, gentler version of Christianity than the legalistic scolding of their youth, the only real difference is that God’s rules or principles are easier and it’s all about happiness here and now, not being reconciled to a holy God who saves us from ourselves. In its therapeutic milieu, sin is failing to live up to our potential, not falling short of God’s glory. We need to believe in ourselves and the wages of such “sins” is missing out on our best life now. But it’s still a constant stream of exhortation, demands, and burdens: follow my steps and I guarantee your life will be blessed.

A TIME story in 2006 observed that Osteen’s success has reached even more traditional Protestant circles, citing the example of a Lutheran church that followed Your Best Life Now during Lent, of all times, “when,” as the writer notes, “Jesus was having his worst life then.” Even churches formally steeped in a theology of the cross succumb to theologies of glory in the environment of popular American spirituality. We are swimming in a sea of narcissistic moralism: an “easy-listening” version of salvation by self-help.

This is what we might call the false gospel of “God-Loves-You-Anyway.” There’s no need for Christ as our mediator, since God is never quite as holy and we are never quite as morally perverse as to require nothing short of Christ’s death in our place. God is our buddy. He just wants us to be happy, and the Bible gives us the roadmap.

I have no reason to doubt the sincere motivation to reach non-Christians with a relevant message. My concern, however, is that the way this message comes out actually trivializes the faith at its best and contradicts it at its worst. In a way, it sounds like atheism: Imagine there is no heaven above us or hell below us, no necessary expectation that Christ “will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead” and establish perfect peace in the world. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find anything in this message that would be offensive to a Unitarian, Buddhist, or cultural Christians who are used to a diet of gospel-as-American-Dream. Disney’s Jiminy Cricket expresses this sentiment: “If you wish upon a star, all your dreams will come true.”

To be clear, I’m not saying that it is atheism, but that it sounds oddly like it in this sense: that it is so bound to a this-worldly focus that we really do not hear anything about God himself—his character and works in creation, redemption, or the resurrection of the body and the age to come. Nothing in the past (namely, Christ’s work) nor in the future (namely, Christ’s return in judgment, raising our bodies in everlasting life) really matters. Maybe I haven’t heard enough
of his talks on TV, but I have never heard anything that approached a proclamation of any article mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed. Despite the cut-aways of an enthralled audience with Bibles opened, I have yet to hear a single biblical passage actually preached. Is it possible to have evangelism without the evangel? Christian outreach without a Christian message?

If God matters, it is for the most trivial concerns—or at least those quite secondary to the real crisis that the gospel addresses. One could easily come away from this type of message concluding that we are not saved by Christ’s objective work for us, but by our subjective “personal relationship with Jesus” through a series of works that we perform to secure his favor and blessing. God has set up all of these laws and now it’s up to us to follow them so that we can be blessed. I can think of no better illustration of what sociologist Christian Smith has identified as “moralistic, therapeutic deism”: the gospel of American Religion.

As the New Testament repeatedly affirms, those who want to be saved by their own obedience need to know that God doesn’t grade on a curve. His record-keeping is bad news, not good news, unless Christ’s obedient record has been credited to us through faith alone. God’s law says, “If you want to be saved by your own effort, here are the terms: Do all these things and you’ll go to heaven; fail to do them and you’ll go to hell.” The revivalists of yesteryear came up with their own list, but it was basically the same threat: “Do or die.” The kinder, gentler version is, “Try harder and you’ll be happier; fail to do them and you’ll lose out on God’s best for your life here and now.” No heaven, no hell; no condemnation or salvation; no perfect obedience of Christ credited to us: Just do your best. Remember, God is keeping score! Christ becomes totally unnecessary in this message.

Osteen reflects the broader assumption among evangelicals that we are saved by making a decision to have a personal relationship with God. If one’s greatest problem is loneliness, the good news is that Jesus is a reliable friend. If the big problem is anxiety, Jesus will calm us down. Jesus is the glue that holds our marriages and families together, gives us purpose for us to strive toward, wisdom for daily life. And there are half-truths in all of these pleas, but they never really bring hearers face to face with their real problem: that they stand naked and ashamed before a holy God and can only be acceptably clothed in his presence by being clothed, head to toe, in Christ’s righteousness.

This gospel of “submission,” “commitment,” “decision,” and “having a personal relationship with God” fails to realize, first of all, that everyone has a personal relationship with God already: either as a condemned criminal standing before a righteous judge or as a justified co-heir with Christ and adopted child of the Father. “How can I be right with God?” is no longer a question when my happiness rather than God’s holiness is the main issue. My concern is that Joel Osteen is simply the latest in a long line of self-help evangelists who appeal to the native American obsession with pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Salvation is not a matter of divine rescue from the judgment that is coming on the world, but a matter of self-improvement in order to have your best life now.
Whatever Happened to Sin?

In his interview with Larry King (CNN, June 20, 2005), Joel Osteen said that he is not sure what happens to people who reject Christ. King followed up with the question about Jews, Moslems, and other non-Christians. “They’re wrong, aren’t they?” Osteen replied, “Well, I don’t know if I believe they’re wrong. I believe here’s what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person’s heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don’t know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don’t know. I’ve seen their sincerity. So I don’t know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.”

King (and a caller) gave him a few more chances to answer the question, but it kept coming back to the heart: “God’s got to look at your heart.” Evidently, the last judgment will be based not on God’s standard of holiness and justice but on the purity of our hearts.

Certainly there is truth in this position. God will expose all of the secrets of our hearts on the last day. However, where Osteen seems to think that God’s judgment of our heart (like his record-keeping) is good news, Scripture treats it as the worst possible report, since “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer 17:9). Jesus added, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Mt 15:11). My heart has conceived and committed sins that my hands have never carried out. Far from being a relatively unspoiled beach of sanctity, the heart is the citadel from which our mutiny against God and neighbor is launched. Even when I have done the right thing as far as other people are concerned, if my sincerity were weighed, it would actually count against my righteousness. So to think that our trial before God’s all-knowing justice can somehow turn in our favor by examination of our heart or the record of our life is a dangerous mistake. I keep thinking of St. Anselm’s great line to those who thought that Christ’s death was not a vicarious substitution: “You have not yet considered how great is your sin is.”

Osteen’s outlook may resonate with Americans steeped in a sentimentalized version of the Pelagian heresy of self-salvation. But it is not Christianity.

When asked by Larry King if he uses the word “sinners,” Osteen replied, “I don’t use it. I never thought about it. But I probably don’t. But most people already know what [when] they’re doing wrong. When I get them to church I want to tell them that you can change.” What’s remarkable is the he has not even thought about it.

Osteen’s view of sin, ironically, is actually quite similar to the “hellfire and brimstone” preaching of a prior generation. To be sure, you’ll never hear him threatening, “You’ll go to hell if you drink. Don’t smoke, or you will incur God’s judgment.” Heaven and hell are not exactly your major themes when the message is all about “your best life now.” But his message is still very much about moral therapy: changing your lifestyle to receive God’s favor. It’s not heaven in the hereafter, but happiness here and now: but it is still up to you to make it happen.

The older fundamentalists whom Osteen has in mind had their “sin lists” for which you could be condemned. Not only were most of these major “sins” never mentioned in Scripture; they
reduced sin to “sins.” Of course, sins can to some extent be managed, especially when they are taboos that we have invented. I can stop going to movies. It may be hard, but I can probably swear off of a nice pint of Guinness every now and then. Such churches were filled with people who thought well of themselves because they had managed to shun legalism’s “sin lists.” However, the sins that the Bible mentions are less easily managed: gossip, envy, strife, coveting. For many of us, these vices actually mentioned in Scripture were often more evident in the church than they were among our neighbors. So the first thing to do in order to trivialize sin and make it look as though our righteousness can withstand God’s judgment is to come up with our own sin list rather than God’s.

The second move in this trivialization of sin is to reduce it to actions rather than a condition. If I can stop committing sin x, then it is at least logically possible that I can stop committing sin y, and so on, until I am at least avoiding all known sins. If, however, sin is first of all a condition and only secondarily actions, then no matter how many sins I “conquer,” I’m still sinful! No matter what advances I think I’ve made, according to God, “There is no one righteous, no not even one; no one who understands; no one who seeks for God” (Rom 3:10-11, quoting Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3). “Our righteousness”—never mind our sins!—“is like filthy rags” (Is 64:6). So now we can no longer rest confidently in our own behaviors, standards, Judeo-Christian ethics, virtues, discipleship, deeds of love and kindness, and pious spirituality. We can no longer divide the world neatly into “decent” and “disgusting.” We must take our place with the prostitutes and publicans rather than with the Pharisees in order to enter the kingdom of God.

Wouldn’t Osteen’s message have a lot in common with what I’ve just said? In tone, perhaps. However, instead of considering us Christians as just as disqualified from heaven on our own merits as publicans and prostitutes, his message assumes that deep down, we are all—including publicans and prostitutes—pretty good people who could just be a little better. Ironically, he shares with his “hellfire and brimstone” forebears an assumption that sin is not an all-encompassing condition from which we cannot free ourselves, but particular actions that we can overcome through good instructions. And he too has his own lists. He may include some of the older taboos, but the main “sins” are failing to put God’s principles for success into practice.

There are important differences, of course. First of all, “sins” seem to lack any clear vertical dimension. That is, it is not obvious that sin, in Osteen’s view, is an offense against God. That’s why he does not speak of sins, but mistakes or failures to be all we can be. According to the Bible, it is their offensiveness to God that makes such attitudes and actions sins in the first place. Without that vertical (God-oriented) dimension, even sinful actions lose their moral context. Instead, they become translated into the therapeutic language of “dysfunction,” unhealthy behaviors that fail to merit God’s favor on us in our daily search for good parking spaces. But sinful actions, in this view, even lack the usual horizontal dimension: an offense against our neighbors. Even the social gospel, which made sin more of an offense against our fellow-humans rather than first and foremost against God, at least recognized it as a failure to give to someone else the love and service that I owe. In the increasingly pervasive message of preachers like Osteen, however, sins become offenses I commit against myself that keep me from realizing my own expectations. It is therapeutic narcissism: I have failed to live up to my
potential, or to secure God’s best for my life, or to follow the instructions that lead to the good life. Can we even comprehend in our human-centered universe of discourse today the God-centered orientation of David’s confession to God, “Against you and you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4)?

Second, Osteen does not even use the word “sin” or “sinners,” as he himself observed above. In its place apparently is something like “mistake.” No longer “falling short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), sin is falling short of my best life now. “Is it hard to lead a Christian life?” asked Larry King. “I don’t think it’s that hard,” Osteen replied. “To me it’s fun. We have joy and happiness.... I’m not trying to follow a set of rules and stuff. I’m just living my life.”

Again we meet the swinging pendulum: recoiling from the decidedly “un-fun” legalism of his youth, Osteen rebounds into the arms of antinomianism (no law). No wonder he does not speak of sins (much less the sinful condition that renders us all—even believers—“sinners”), since there is apparently no divinely given “set of rules” that might identify such an offense. The standard is not righteousness, but fun; not holiness before God, but happiness before oneself.

It is not obvious that Christ—at least his incarnation, obedient life, atoning death, and justifying and life-giving resurrection—is necessary at all in Osteen’s scheme. “But you have rules, don’t you?”, King pressed, to which Osteen replied, “We do have rules. But the main rule is to honor God with your life. To live a life of integrity. Not be selfish. You know, help others. But that’s really the essence of the Christian faith.” Notice how Osteen’s happy, fun-filled Christian life without rules suddenly becomes the most demanding religion possible. He is certainly correct when he says that God commands a life of integrity and helping others, not being selfish. In fact, Jesus exorciated the Pharisees for substituting their own petty laws for God’s commands, which actually served some good purpose for our neighbors. However, this is precisely what the Law prescribes. Jesus said that “the whole law” is summarized in one sentence: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37). Osteen apparently thinks that this is easier than following “a set of rules.” In truth, as the rich young ruler learned, it is not. I may keep from literally killing my neighbor, but if I have not sacrificed everything for my neighbor’s good, I have not really loved him or her. Osteen thinks that loving our neighbor is easier than “a lot of rules,” but Jesus showed us that it’s the other way around. One may be sexually pure to one’s friends, but God knows whether adultery has been committed in one’s heart.

Osteen said that perhaps talk of God’s judgment “was for a time,” a generation ago. “But I don’t have it in my heart to condemn people. I’m there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us.”

At first glance, this sounds humble—and perhaps, compared to some of the moralistic and self-righteous jeramiads of yesteryear that threatened God’s judgment for drinking a glass of wine or going to a movie, it is. However, the answer to bad law-preaching is good law-preaching, not its elimination. The proper preaching of the law—God’s holiness, righteousness, glory, and
justice—will not create an “us” versus “them” self-righteousness, but will expose the best works, done from the best motives of the best among us as “filthy rags” before God’s searching judgment. Bad law-preaching levels some of us; Osteen’s omission of the law levels none of us; biblical preaching of the law levels all of us.

It is actually arrogant for ambassadors to create their own policies, especially when they directly counter the word of the one who sent them. Osteen seems to admit that Jesus Christ is in some way unique and important, but he presumes ignorance of a point that Christ made perfectly clear: namely, that he the only way of salvation from the coming judgment.

Was Jesus’ message (however radically different from the rambling jeremiads of fundamentalism) only “for a time” as well? Did Jesus think that people are basically good when you look at their heart? Did he think that sincerity and moral effort would suffice as our clothing when we appear before the judge of all the earth?

If Jesus and the apostles clearly proclaimed the total depravity of the human heart and redemption by Christ alone through faith alone, then Osteen is not being humble when he declines to represent that central announcement. It was Jesus who said that those who do not trust in him “stand condemned already” (Jn 3:18). That was because for Jesus, the judgment that he came to save us from by enduring it for us had God and his glory, not me and my temporal happiness, as its reference point. The ditch we had dug for ourselves was so deep that only God incarnate could pull us out of it by falling in and climbing back out of it himself as our substitute and victor. For him, the good news is that on judgment day God will look at our heart. According to Scripture, that is actually the bad news. The good news is that for all who are in Christ, God looks on the heart, life, death, and resurrection of his Son and declares us righteous in him. It is not a cheap gift, but a free gift.

The Bad News Is Far Worse
The bad news is far worse than that we are not experiencing health, wealth, and happiness now. It is that we are actually dying and nothing can reverse this fact. It gets worse. Death is just a symptom. We will all have a different “cause of death” listed on the medical certificate. However, death itself is the result of a condition we all share: “The wages of sin is death...” (Rom 6:23); “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:56). Notice that it is not sins (particular actions), but sin (a condition), that requires our death. Even now, we are falling apart on our way toward death—even if we are having our best life now.

The Good News is Far Better
The good news is far greater than finding a way to mask our symptoms. In both of those passages just cited, it is the counter-point to the bad news: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:23). “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:56-57). The victory here promised is far greater than relief from stress, sadness, loneliness, disappointment, and even illness leading to death. It is the victory over everlasting death through the resurrection on the last day, as we share in Christ’s victory over
the grave: “When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” (1 Cor 15:54-55). Christ did not deal with symptoms; he went right to the source: the curse that his law justly imposes as the penalty for our participation in Adam’s sin. As the first Adam brought death, the Last Adam brought eternal life (1 Cor 15:20-24).

Far greater than living longer, enjoying ourselves and our circumstances, is the unfathomable richness of our life together with God, reconciled even while we were enemies, made alive even while we were spiritually dead, brought near even while we were strangers, and adopted as co-heirs of the entire estate even while we were hostile to the things of God. Even now we begin to enjoy a foretaste of this feast, as those for whom “there is therefore no condemnation” (Rom 8:1). Through faith in Christ, we have the assurance that the last judgment has already been determined in our favor despite our sinfulness even as Christians. In the midst of our suffering, pain, and even death, we can confidently cling to the promise that Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4, namely that which “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). Where the gospel has salvation from the guilt and tyranny of sin now and from the presence and effects of sin in the future, Osteen’s very American message has the gospel as salvation from the symptoms of sin now without any clear proclamation of the far greater liberation from God’s wrath.

Because he does not face the bad news, Osteen does not really have any good news. To paraphrase Jesus’ description of his generation in Luke 7:31-35, Osteen’s message teaches us to sing neither the Blues nor the triumphant anthem. It’s more like a steady, droning, upbeat hum that we hear on the elevator or at the mall, keeping everything light and undisturbing.

If Osteen were a herald, ambassador, and messenger of the gospel, he would humbly yet confidently proclaim the message that we have been given, rather than deciding for himself what kind of ministry for which he wants to be remembered. An ambassador is sent with the word of his superior. However, Osteen sees himself “more as a coach, as a motivator to help [people] experience the life God has for us.” Not only does Osteen’s commitment to his own message and ministry fail to serve the interests of God’s kingdom; they fall far short of truly serving his hearers. If he loves the people to whom he speaks, he will give them the truth about their situation before God and the good news of God’s grace in Christ.

Of course, it is a lot easier to say, “…I don’t have it in my heart to condemn people,” when you are asked if Jesus is the only way of salvation. It makes us look good. We can be the “nice guy” in a culture that prizes being nice. But being nice isn’t always loving. A doctor who can’t bring himself or herself to inform you of your cancer in time to receive a possible cure is actually selfish. We trust such informed people to tell us the truth regardless of the personal anxiety or unpleasantness of the news.
God’s Truth vs. Our Spin

God’s love is far greater than being nice. He tells us the truth. First, he tells us the truth about our condition. We are not sick, but “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1); not good people who could do better, but those who are in ourselves incapable of meeting God’s righteous standard (Rom 3:1-20). If we are to be judged on our own integrity, we will be lost. Although God could have left the matter there, he freely determined from all eternity to choose, redeem, justify, regenerate, sanctify, and glorify a new humanity “from every race, kindred, tongue, people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Even when we try—in fact, especially when we try—to supplement Christ’s perfect righteousness with our “sincerity” and our good intentions, God says, “What, as if it’s not enough that I bear all the burden of saving sinners, but you now want to add something of your own and get a little glory for yourselves? You presume to add a little bit of your own ‘righteousness’ to the finished work of my Son?” So we add ingratitude to our explicit violations of God’s law.

When God finishes telling us the bad news, it is not just the non-Christians or “backsliders” who feel its sting, but the most pious believers who recognize that their “righteousness” is actually “dung” compared to the righteousness that God requires and the righteousness that Christ fulfilled (Phil 3).

But God also tells the truth about the good news. No doctor can actually assume your cancer, suffer its terrible results, and assure your resurrection by his own victory over death. But God has done this! As God incarnate, Christ fulfilled his own law in our place, bore its judgments against us on the cross, and was raised the third day for our justification (Rom 4:25). “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). True love is exhibited in God’s act of reconciling sinners to himself by doing what he commanded us to do, bearing the judgment that we deserved for not having done it, and clothing us in the perfect righteousness of the incarnate Son. Salvation is therefore a free gift for us, though it cost God dearly. “Nice” seems trivial in comparison to God’s love and mercy.

Osteen is certainly correct when he says that we cannot assume God’s role in the last judgment. We cannot condemn anyone. Nevertheless, we have no choice—if we are faithful witnesses—other than to announce the condemnation that rests on all who have not turned from their own claims to righteousness, decency, sincerity, and piety to embrace the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. It is not our condemnation, but our clear warning of God’s just condemnation of all who are outside of Christ, that the Lord of the church mandates. Osteen’s message is softer, but it is not kinder. He thinks that people who show signs of integrity and a willingness to change are candidates for God’s blessings. He does not believe that God justifies the wicked, but that he says, “You’re not too bad” to those who do their best.

By contrast, the gospel is that God justifies the ungodly—even hypocritical Christians like me. It is the good news of free forgiveness and justification that he gives us the privilege to announce to sinners such as ourselves. The bad news is worse than having our worst life now. But that also means that the good news is far better than having our best life now. “The present
sufferings,” according to Paul, “are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).

Fulfilling his calling to pronounce God’s judgment (”woes”) on the nations, Isaiah beheld a vision of God in his majestic holiness and the only words he could eek out were, “Woe to me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.” Why? Because he has compared himself to the others? No. “For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (v 5). Integrity means having it all together, like a seamless robe. “Lost” in some sense captures the Hebrew idiom, but the old Authorized Version has a slightly better rendering: “I am undone.” Undone here means “unraveled.” In other words, a life that seemed to exhibit integrity in comparison with “the wicked” now seems perverse in comparison with God’s holy beauty. Yet Isaiah’s despair is only the prelude for God’s gracious act: In the vision, a heavenly being is sent from God’s throne to bring salvation and forgiveness. It is only because of this gracious action on God’s part that Isaiah then cries out, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” (vv 6-13).

It is this sense of God’s majesty, holiness, and righteousness—his distance from us as our judge and king—that is totally absent in Osteen’s message. God is our buddy who exists for our happiness, not we for his glory. At the end of the day, Osteen’s “good news” is the worst possible news. God’s blessing on my life depend on my honoring God with my life, living a life of integrity, and not being selfish. Not only does Osteen affirm this; he adds, “But that’s really the essence of the Christian faith.” If so, what makes Christianity any different from other religions? Is the essence of the Christian faith my life, righteousness, integrity, and helping others or Christ’s? We meet here Paul’s absolute contrast between “the righteousness that is by the works of the law” and “the righteousness that is by faith in Christ.” There is no more damning criticism that one can offer of Osteen’s message than that it takes the former route, albeit in a more upbeat, pleasant, and cheerful tone.

Are You in God’s Story or Is God in Yours?
Famous for their creed, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” Epicureanism anticipated the late nineteenth-century German nihilist Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that although one’s life has no meaning, one can give it meaning. Although there is no transcendent purpose, I can make one for myself. “Truth is made, not discovered,” he said. Take your own short life out of the drama of God’s purposes in creation, redemption, and the age to come and it’s just so many pieces of film on the cutting room floor.

Our first parents wanted to make a story for themselves instead of play their supporting role. It’s called “autonomy”: being a law to oneself. It’s all about being in charge. “I did it my way.” “I am the master of my fate the captain of my soul.” “I want it all, I want it now.” “Sure it costs more, but I’m worth it.”

But going “solo” isn’t all it is cracked up to be. There is a terrible burden in trying to be God when you are not. When God casts us as new characters in his drama of redemption, we realize that we were created for a purpose larger than ourselves and look forward to a future
that is grander than anything we could imagine, much less create, for ourselves. Ironically, those who seek their best life now, centering on themselves and their story rather than on God and his story, not even their life here and now makes any sense. Their own script—even when it allows God a supporting role—becomes dull. No wonder so many people walk out of the theater in the middle.

We are witnessing a resurgence of Epicureanism, but this time not only in its usual (and, I think Paul would argue, sane) form; it’s a form of evangelical Epicureanism in which Christianity is offered as a more effective path to our own self-fulfillment and self-salvation. Each of us is the center of the universe and religion is entirely subjective: how we feel, what we want out of “god,” and what it takes to make us happy. It has nothing to do with whether any of this is true or has any connection to someone or something outside of us.

Today, “nihilism” is what we call this Epicurean philosophy of “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” It is John Lennon’s “Imagine,” with a denial of heaven and hell as the basis for peace and harmony in the world at last here and now. At least Lennon was imagining a world of peace and love rather than narcissism and greed. Today, however, it is now evangelical TV preachers who purvey this cruder form of Epicurean nihilism in the guise of religion. Get your life together and establish a personal relationship with God by following certain principles, and you’ll be happy and successful. Even if God doesn’t exist and never raised his Son from the dead, it’s a useful lie. No, says Paul, the only sane alternative to Christianity is Nietzsche’s brand of Epicureanism straight-up: the courageous embrace of power and glory here and now. Grab it while you can. For the things that Osteen and many other preachers today promise, you do not need Christ. You do not need the Bible, just Tony Robbins. You do not need the kind of redemption that is promised in the gospel. It is not even clear why you would need God simply to have a more positive outlook on life.

When we try to fit God into our “life movie,” the plot is all wrong—and not just wrong, but trivial. When we are pulled out of our own drama and cast as characters in his unfolding plot, we become part of the greatest story ever told. It is through God’s word of judgment (law) and salvation (gospel) that we are transferred from our own “life movie” and inserted into the grand narrative that revolves around Jesus Christ. In the process, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us,

We are uprooted from our own existence and are taken back to the holy history of God on earth. There God has dealt with us, with our needs and our sins, by means of the divine wrath and grace. What is important is not that God is a spectator and participant in our life today, but that we are attentive listeners and participants in God’s action in the sacred story, the story of Christ on earth. God is with us today only as long as we are there. Our salvation is ‘from outside ourselves’ (extra nos). I find salvation, not in my life story, but only in the story of Jesus Christ...What we call our life, our troubles,
and our guilt is by no means the whole of reality; our life, our need, our guilt, and our deliverance are there in the Scriptures.7

Suffering and a Theology of Glory
Jesus knew why he came. It was not to help people find a little more happiness and success in life. In fact, his life was filled with suffering, under the long shadow of Calvary. “For this purpose I have come,” he said, referring to the cross (Jn 12:27). “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk 19:10). The disciples thought that the road to Jerusalem led to victory. Entering as conquerors at the side of the Messiah, they would drive out the Romans and usher in the everlasting reign of God. Each time he reminded them that he was going to Jerusalem to die on a cross and be raised on the third day, they either didn’t respond or (especially in Peter’s case) reprimanded Jesus for his “negative thinking” (Mk 8:31-38; 10:32-45; Mt 16:21-23). Ever since his temptation by Satan, Jesus had been offered glory without a cross, but it was a false promise, and that’s why Jesus rebuked Peter’s attempt to dissuade him from the cross by saying, “Get behind me, Satan. For your thoughts are the thoughts of men, not of God” (Mt 16:23). We can be grateful that Jesus embraced the cross and then entered his glory, instead of demanding glory first.

Paul regularly picks up on this theme. Familiar to suffering himself, Paul was always joyful not because of his circumstances but because of the gospel’s promise that after we suffer for a little while we will share in Christ’s resurrection glory. He warned the church of false teachers who deceive “by smooth talk and flattery.”

The “health-and-wealth” gospel that Osteen preaches cannot deal with suffering. It is a theology of glory: the offer of the kingdoms of the world here and now. For those who take this path, it may well be that they will have their best life now. But even now, there is no place for suffering in this quintessentially American religion. Not Christ’s suffering for our sins or our suffering for being united to Christ. In a New York Times interview, Osteen was asked why there is suffering. Although he is correct that we cannot solve this dilemma philosophically, he offered no suggestion that it is solved in historical terms by Christ’s resurrection as the first-fruit of the new creation. “The answer is I don’t know,’ Mr. Osteen said. “We deal every week with someone whose child got killed, or they lost their job. I don’t understand it. All you can do is let God comfort you and move on. Part of faith is not understanding.”8

How can God comfort those who mourn apart from the gospel? Even here, Osteen easily skirts the tragic dimension of our existence by burdening believers once again with their duty to “name and claim” prosperity in their life. So much for the more “positive” message of Joel Osteen. He has nothing to say to people who are at the end of their rope except, “It will get better.” But what if it will not, at least in this life? Can his message reach someone who is in the final throes of AIDS? Could his message provoke anything but cynicism for a mother holding her dead infant?

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Life Together (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 62
8 Quoted in “A Church That Packs Them In, 16,000 At a Time,” New York Times, July 18, 2005
At the end of the day, God’s favor—measured in temporal terms—depends entirely on our obedience:

I believe one of the main ways that we grow in favor is by declaring...And some of you are doing your best to please the Lord. You are living a holy, consecrated life, but you’re not really experiencing God’s supernatural favor. And it’s simply because you’re not declaring it. You’ve got to give life to your faith by speaking it out.⁹

Thus, to those who are burned out on trying to merit God’s favor, Osteen’s only answer—though said with a smile, is, “Do more.” “Believe more for your miracle and God will turn it around.” Is this a kinder, gentler God or a more than slightly sinister tyrant who keeps raising the hoops for us to jump through before he gives us what we want?

Christianity announces the good news that God in Christ has saved us now from the condemnation of the law, dethroned the tyranny of sin, and delivered us from Satan’s oppressive regime. But it gets even better: One day, this salvation will be consummated in the gift of resurrection, glorification, and everlasting life, free of the very presence of sin, pain, evil, and violence. According to America’s pop religion, we save ourselves with God’s help from feeling guilty and unhappy. Osteen has at least helped us to see just how stark the contrast is between the gospel of Christ and the motivational hype of popular American culture.

Doesn’t God Want us to be Happy?
So does God want us to be poor, sad, lonely—generally unsuccessful in our life and relationships? This view would simply be the mirror opposite of the prosperity gospel. God is not abstractly interested in ensuring that we are either wealthy or poor, successful or unsuccessful; he has far larger plans for us. He has chosen us as his children—co-heirs with Christ of the whole estate. Fellowship in the age of everlasting peace, not where believers live above poverty, but where the poor are rich and there is no more poverty; not where believers are spared a little pain and even tragic news of a loved one killed or seriously injured in war, but where no one gets killed or even fights anymore because sin, evil, injustice, violence, and oppression no longer exist.

It is sometimes said that it is not our happiness but our holiness that concerns God. A helpful way of drawing us back to a God-centered orientation, this contrast nevertheless assumes that happiness is found somewhere else than in God’s glory, which is holiness epitomizes. Created by God—in God’s own image, humanity is the creature who was designed for holiness. More than a static moral quality or attribute, this holiness was to characterize every thought, action, and desire. Things in fact went this way until our first parents willfully determined to set their affections on themselves rather than on God. Immediately, they were unhappy: ashamed, guilty, fleeing from the presence of the best thing that had ever happened to them.

⁹ Audio clip on “The Bible Answer Man” radio broadcast, April 26, 2004
So the problem is not happiness, but that we do not even know real happiness when we see it. More than happiness, we crave power and control over our circumstances, fellow-humans, the whole creation, and even God. We will surrender happiness to being in charge because we mistakenly believe that the latter is the realization of the former.

What we have trouble understanding as Americans—especially Boomers (sorry to pick on my generation again)—is that what we call happiness is really this sense of being in control. Even if we get cold, we are comforted in knowing that we have control of the thermostat and can change it whenever we want. We have choices. We’re in charge. If we get in a pickle, there is nothing that we cannot turn around with the right credit card. But take away the cherished props of our life movie and we can get pretty dramatic. It is like cutting off the oxygen supply to a deep sea diver. Like overweight children sitting on the sofa with their Happy Meals watching a report of starving children in the Sudan, we think that we are better off. But are we? Of course, in one important sense we are, but in the big picture?

Our most significant domestic crisis right now seems to be our health care. We are all, especially us Boomers, doing everything we can to make sure that we do not die—or experience the tentacles of that coming death by unhappiness, discomfort, or sorrow. But we will die. In fact, we are all dying right now. Christ and Everlasting Life versus you and Your Best Life Now: That is the clear choice. At least Osteen has given us the opportunity to see just how clearly that choice staves us down.

God’s glory is most manifest in our salvation. God’s holiness is most vividly portrayed in his salvation of the unholy. That he not only judges righteously, but freely gives his righteousness to the unrighteous as a gift, is an astonishing feat indeed. The benefits for us, however, seem to weighty, too staggering, to be characterized by the word “happiness,” as we typically understand it. It is something more than not being bothered, disappointed, or set back. It is the full possession of riches we were not even aware existed, awakening senses that we did not even know we had. In short, the biblical word for it is joy. Rather than another fast-food meal that we consume by ourselves, it is a feast that we share with each other—indeed, even with the other creatures we dragged into the wasteland. With our Creator and Redeemer as the host, even now we share a foretaste of that joy of the wedding feast whenever we are gathered by the Spirit to receive the word and participate in Holy Communion. The message of American consumerism is a Happy Meal. It offers no foretaste of heaven, just more of the same—with a choice of dipping sauces.

It is neither that God wants us to be successful in our daily living or unsuccessful, but that he has a larger goal that is even sometimes served by temporal suffering. In all of these things, delightful and disappointing, God is working all circumstances together for a good that is beyond a mere absence of discomfort. In fact, God often has to go to extreme measures, taking away our props, in order to get us off of our own glory-trail (viz., thinking we’re “in control”) in order to give us the deeper happiness that he calls joy. When something greater than happiness as we usually define it is the goal, all sorts of things—good, bad, indifferent—can be accepted as part of God’s plan for our life. We do not know whether, in a given instance, God
has planned for Bob to be healed of cancer or Sue to get that raise at work. But we do have God’s public, certified, and certain promise that all who die in Christ will be raised for a life that is far greater than even the most pleasant circumstances of our best life now.

If the gospel is not true, then it cannot even make us happy. If Christ was not actually raised bodily in real history, then nothing we say is even useful. That was Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 15: If Christ was not bodily raised on the third day, we are “still in our sins” and have no hope of our own resurrection in his wake. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” (1 Cor 15:32). So for Paul, Christianity is not useful for whatever needs we think are important at the moment; it’s true. If it is not true, it does not matter how many marriages it has fixed, how many healthy families it has engendered, or how much stress it has relieved. “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (v 19).

After defending the resurrection of Christ as the harbinger of our own, Paul explains in this letter why only a solution as deep as the cross and resurrection of Christ can match the depth of the problem. Our ultimate enemy is not failing to get everything we want out of life, but something much more serious. Sin and death came by Adam. However, righteousness and life came by Jesus Christ, the Last Adam, so that through faith in Christ we too may be raised on the last day (vv 20-28). Death is the penalty for breaking God’s covenant, but those who are in Christ are justified by his righteous life, atoning death, and triumphant resurrection (vv 50-56).

Significantly, when the Apostle Paul addressed the auspicious assembly of philosophers in the famous Areopagus of Athens, Luke reports that many Epicureans were present. Epicurean philosophy held that if there is a God, he is distant and aloof. There is no heaven or hell. “So let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” went their motto. There, if anywhere, we might have expected the Apostle to the Gentiles to woo the group by appealing to their craving for autonomous happiness here and now. Instead of trying to show them how God fits into their scheme, he told them where they fit in God’s story of creation, the fall, Christ’s resurrection, and the coming judgment (Acts 17). Christianity isn’t therapy. It is either true or the Epicureans win hands-down.

C. S. Lewis, author of the Narnia series and Christian apologist, once observed, “I haven’t always been a Christian. I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”10 In another essay, he wrote,

We are defending Christianity; not ‘my religion’....The great difficulty is to get modern audiences to realize that you are preaching Christianity solely and simply because you happen to think it true; they always suppose you are preaching it because you like it or think it good for society or something of that sort. Now a clearly maintained distinction between what the Faith actually says and what you would like it to have said or what you understand or what you personally find helpful or think probable, forces your

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10 C. S. Lewis, “Answers to Questions on Christianity”, God in the Dock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 58
audience to realize that you are tied to your data just as the scientist is tied by the results of the experiments; that you are not just saying what you like. This immediately helps them to realize that what is being discussed is a question about objective fact—not gas about ideals and points of view.¹¹

It all depends on whether we start with what we have decided to be our greatest need or with the God in whose presence we discover needs we never knew we had.

If we begin with ourselves and our felt needs, we may have room for a spirituality that assists us in our self-realization and success in life, but the chief question will be how we can justify God in a world so obviously out of whack. If we begin with God—his holiness, justice, and righteousness as well as his love, mercy, and grace—then there will be a very different question: How can I, a sinner, be justified before this God? Describing his own process of conversion, Lewis explains, “I was the object rather than the subject in this affair. I was decided upon. I was glad afterwards at the way it came out, but at the moment what I heard was God saying, ‘Put down your gun and we’ll talk’…I chose, yet it really did not seem possible to do the opposite.”¹²

We do not “put down [our] gun” until we give up even on religion and spirituality as our way of ascending to heaven. We do not know what is relevant or of utmost concern until God’s word addresses us. Discourses on “modern man” may be occasionally interesting, says twentieth century German theologian Karl Barth.

But who and what [humanity] is before God, as the one addressed in His Gospel, is something which Narcissus as such cannot discover in any age for all the loving exactitude of his self-analysis, self-appraisal, and self-description, and something which he cannot accept even in his most ruthless sincerity. To know himself as the one who is intended, addressed and known by God in the Gospel, he must first be radically disturbed and interrupted in the work of self-analysis by receiving the Gospel of God. Then perhaps a posteriori he can see whether or how far in his self-analysis he was on the right track, or on one which was quite wrong.¹³

Like Charles Finney, Joel Osteen is less a pioneer than a clear example of a wider phenomenon. Even in circles that would not countenance the full-strength version of the prosperity gospel, Osteen’s emphases seem increasingly typical.

Topical sermons, focusing on improving our lives by following biblical principles, easily eliminate the offence of the cross, using the Bible for whatever we want to say, rather than proclaiming it as those who have been sent. In Osteen’s TV sermons (at least the handful I’ve seen) and best-selling book, we learn more about the preacher than about God. We hear more personal

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” God in the Dock, 91
¹² C. S. Lewis, “Cross-Examination,” God in the Dock, 261
¹³ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/3.2, 803
anecdotes than biblical exposition. We learn how God gave him a bigger house, a good parking space, gave him the best table in a restaurant, and a seat in first class. For anyone interested in the sociology of pampered American Boomers, Osteen is a valuable source. However, for anyone interested in knowing God in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Holy Scripture, for anyone wanting to know how God saves sinners, for anyone who senses that there are more pressing issues in life than having their best life now, Osteen will surely disappoint.

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