

Interview with John Piper

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Audio Transcript

The prosperity gospel is alive and well. It seeps into American churches. It's been called America's theological export to Africa. And it has seeped into the American prison system, of all places. Even into Angola, the largest maximum-security prison in the US, a home to 6,300 prisoners, "only murderers, rapists, armed robbers, and habitual felons. The average sentence is 88 years, with 3,200 people in one place serving life sentences. Ninety percent of the inmates will die here" (Decision Magazine, "Violence to Peace"). Yes, the prosperity gospel reaches into even here.

John Piper traveled to Louisiana and [preached in Angola's chapel](#) on November 19, 2009. About eight hundred prisoners packed in to hear a message on John 6, on Jesus's feeding of the five thousand and his walk on water. "I preached with all my heart to those who could fit in the chapel," Piper recounted later. "I pulled no punches." Hundreds of other prisoners heard the sermon through closed-circuit television, including those on death row like Gerald Bordelon, a convicted rapist and child-murderer we met in [episode 1445](#). Piper pulled no punches. And the result is one of my all-time favorite sermons, with Pastor John at his most urgent. Here's a clip from the Angola sermon.

I want very much to say the best news in all the world for Christians is this: on the other side, there's life.

There's another young lady in our church in her late forties with four kids — two in college, two smaller — and the doctors have told her she has maybe two weeks before her leukemia takes her out. We're still praying, "O God, make this last-ditch, unusual, creative, never-tried-before kind of chemo do the thing that might heal her," but they are preparing themselves. Oh, I am willing, big time, to do that funeral if it comes, because I've got such good news for that elder in my church, and that family, and those kids.

Sent to Satisfy

God cares about the body. He'll never, ever throw it away. He will make it new. But he didn't come mainly to do that here. He didn't come mainly to cause all of our physical desires to be satisfied, but to change those desires at their core so that he becomes our treasure over everything. That can happen in this prison way better, sometimes, than it can in the free, prosperous, hell-bent world.

I hope you men get this: Jesus Christ came into the world mainly to do what can be done here, even in prison — mainly to do what can be done here in human beings. Treasuring him, loving him, following him, living for him, rejoicing in him, being satisfied in him, making much of him in

everything you do morning to night can be done anywhere on the planet, and that's the main reason we exist. That's the main point of the message.

Bread from Heaven

Now, let's go to the text. If you have your Bible, you can read with me. If you don't, well, just listen. [John 6:1–15](#) is the story of the feeding of the five thousand. It goes like this:

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii [two hundred days' wages] worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." So, they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Now, the rest of this chapter is a total of 71 verses, and it's all about bread. It's all about Jesus as the bread. Jesus has come to give a sign in the multiplying of these loaves that he himself is the bread of heaven — not mainly that he can make enough bread to feed everybody.

Beams from the Sun

He calls this a sign. What is a sign? Let me tell you what I think a sign is. A sign is glory coming into the world. [John 1:14](#): "We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Shining down from that glory is a beam, a beam of glory shining from Christ, the glorious, eternal, divine Son of God. A beam is shining down, and when it lands, it produces out of five loaves and a few fish enough food to feed five thousand people. It creates out of nothing food to feed five thousand people.

The sign is meant to do this: your eyes behold the landing of the beam, and your eyes should run up the beam to the glory. Instead, what did they do? They saw this miracle and they fixated on the product of the miracle, not the person of the miracle. The crowd found Jesus the next day, and this is what he says to the them: Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you

are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” ([John 6:26](#)) He’s angry. Can you imagine Jesus being angry that somebody is seeking him? Why would he get upset if you sought him? It’s because they were seeking him as useful, useful for the bread, the money, the health, the prosperity. He’s useful to my stuff. They didn’t let their eyes run up the beam and say, “There he is. That’s my treasure.”

Or picture it as the sun. From 93 million miles away, the sun sends out rays, and it does amazing things. It causes plants to grow, and it makes us warm, and it produces vitamin D in our skin, and it enables us to see beautiful things. Now, make sure you track the analogy with me. The sun is Christ; the sunbeam is like a ray of God’s glory; and the sunbeam landing is like Jesus’s miracle. And to that miracle, most people just say, “Whoa, I love what I see. I love my skin. I love my plants that grow.” They don’t let their eyes run up the beam to the sun of glory, Jesus Christ.

When I said at the beginning that Jesus Christ came into the world not to be useful mainly, but to be precious mainly, that’s what I mean. The people in the crowds didn’t do it. What does [John 6:15](#) say? “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” They didn’t see him as precious. They saw his gifts as precious. “Oh, what a useful king he will be, right? Yes, let’s have Jesus be our king. He will keep our bellies full.”

Life Is About Him

Jesus doesn’t want that kind of a disciple. I don’t know how many times you get that kind of a preacher in this place, but they’re all over the world. The main export from America to Africa is this kind of theology that says Jesus wants your stuff to multiply mainly: “Get the car, get the gold watch, wear the suit, the shoes, get all that. That’s what Jesus is for.” I think that’s demonic theology.

Jesus came into the world to bless us in some measure now — and I’ll get to that in a minute from this very parable — but mainly he’s trying to forgive our sins, clothe us with righteousness, make himself our treasure, seal our eternity forever, and then put us to work in the world, whether we’re in prison or on the outside. The same reality is here as out there. The main thing is here.

The other stuff feels really important, but that’s why I said it may be that your very presence here will enable you to see better than the people in my church can see. They’ve got all this stuff. They just take it for granted that that’s what life’s about. It’s not what it’s about. It’s about him.

[John Piper](#) ([@JohnPiper](#)) is founder and teacher of [desiringGod.org](#) and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of [more than 50 books](#), including [Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist](#) and most recently [Why I Love the Apostle Paul: 30 Reasons](#).