

What does the Bible say about temptation, leadership, and Islam?

TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** You're listening to the Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, Executive Director of Denison Forum, and host for today's conversation where we want to sit down again and seek to find ways to equip you to think biblically, to live holy, and then to serve eagerly, to foster and cultivate flourishing in your community, wherever and however God gives you the opportunity to do that.

And we were going to call this episode, Ask Jim. But we've expanded it from one Dr. Denison to two. So this is Ask the Doctors Denison, Dr. Jim Denison, our founder and cultural apologist, and Dr. Ryan Denison, our senior editor for theology. And they may actually ask me a question or two, which should cause great trepidation in every significant way.

Gentlemen, good morning and welcome to the first episode for the two of you in 2025. We're glad to have both of you, Jim. How are you doing?

[00:01:05] **Dr. Jim Denison:** The only problem that we really have here is there's another Dr. Denison, who is Ryan's wife, Candice, who is the person who really should be on this podcast. Could you go get her?

[00:01:17] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** She's occupied at the moment.

[00:01:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** So yeah, there, she's a dentist and she's probably doing something much more redemptive than this conversation. I don't know, but you should book her in the future. She addresses real pain. That's right. There's doctors who preach and doctors who practice.

And so that's right.

[00:01:33] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yep. So, Ryan, she is already upstaging you, but we're glad to have you back with us this morning as well.

[00:01:40] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Thank you very much. You get used to it. Okay.

[00:01:44] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Exactly. So, yeah, so we've collected a few questions. I, you know, full disclosure here, some of these are my questions.

Prompted from various things, including in particular Jim reading daily articles over the last number of weeks and months and just so grateful for the way that you spark our thinking and help us to consider important things going on in our lives and in our world and doing that from a biblical way.

Ryan is well doing that when he writes the daily article at least once a week and sometimes in your absence while you're away. Just anyway, really grateful for both of you and the work that you do. In the writing ministry of the daily article as well as other articles that appear on our website and in other places so these things are always coming into my mind in various ways including the last few days Of some of the writing that y'all have done and so we're just going to dive in Ironically, I wanted to start with a question about presidents and leaders And we are actually recording even as the state funeral of You President Jimmy Carter is taking place in Washington, D.C. at the National Cathedral. So, maybe that is an apt place to start. But what I wanted to ask you, Jim, is the Bible says in relationship to another leader, King David part of the conversation we read about in the Old Testament is it says that That man judges by outward appearance, whereas God judges by the heart.

And I've always been struggling with that, with that idea and with that verse as if there were something wrong with my perception and with my ability. But we typically now in our country, in many ways not only the president, but in other ways as well, we choose leaders often based on personality.

Based on charisma this really got much more amped up in 1960 early 1960s when JFK was the first presidential candidate to appear on television and really changed the equation. But how should we understand that biblical idea of man judging on outward appearance? God being the only one who can truly see our hearts.

And then related to that, some of the checks and balances in our democratic republic form of government. And then I'm. All of this kind of sets up the question I really want to land on, which is what does the Bible say about how we're supposed to share power and how there's supposed to be accountability for those who lead.

So with all of that, jump in.

[00:04:19] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's a great place to start. It really is, especially given what's happening today. A number of years ago, a fellow named Bert Decker did a fascinating study relative to effective speaking. Effective persuasion and communication. And we've all known that most communication is nonverbal as opposed to verbal.

There, there's a statement that will say only about 7 percent of how we persuade people is based on the words. The vast majority is based on our inflections, our facial expressions, our body language, all the things that go in that. Decker made the argument and proved it pretty empirically. I think that we have a kind of a gatekeeper to our decision making process relative to trustworthiness.

He called it a primal brain and he put it in some evolutionary context. But whether we go there or not, there's this basic idea that it's hard for me to listen to you if I don't trust you, if I don't like you, if I don't believe in you, it's hard for me to believe you as it were, and he tested that in a variety of different ways.

I won't go into, but he proved it pretty empirically that that is the case, that if we're going to be persuaded by somebody, typically it's somebody we think to be credible and likable. Somebody that we find ourselves gravitating to on a personal level. Somebody did a study going back to 1960 to JFK and Richard Nixon relative to likability and discovered that every election from that point forward, the candidate considered more likable won the election, the only exception being in 2000 when George Bush and Al Gore tied.

Unlikability and we know how that election turned out. And so all that to say, especially with television, especially with the ability to know candidates on a more personal level these days with podcasts, the Joe Rogan experience in the most recent election, for instance, likability, a sense that we know who you are, that we know your heart, not just the external, but the heart.

That we know who you are internally is a massively important motivator to who we vote for, who we listen to, who we trust. On a variety of levels, not just on presidential levels, but in our personal relationships as well. It goes directly to pastoral ministry. The most effective pastoral communicators, I think, are people who earn the right to preach by virtue of their pastoral ministry.

Who are known to their people, who know their people, who are connected with their people, who love and like and admire the people that they're seeking to serve, and earn the right. To be heard. I think that's true in servant leadership, even in a corporate context. I think gone is the day that leaders effectively work out of positional leadership, do it because I'm the CEO or transactional leadership, do it to get a raise or even charismatic leadership, do it just because you, you're attracted to me in some way it's servant leadership, do it because you believe that I'm here to serve you.

That we're here together to serve our common purpose and our mission. And the more we do that, the more that we'll benefit and that rising tide will raise all boats. So all that to say, while only the Lord can truly see the heart with the advent of television and means of communication today, we can get closer to that.

And the more effectively we communicate our hearts, the more effectively we are able to lead and to serve. And those two things on some level go together. Jimmy Carter, I think, is an exhibit A of that. I remember, I'll say this quickly, Mark, but I remember well, the election back in 1976 and how he came to the country and said, I'll never lie to you.

This is in the post Watergate era, how he came to the nation and said, I'm going to lead with integrity. I'm going to be who I am. I'm an outsider. I'm not a person embroiled in the politics of day to day Washington and all of that. And he was elected on that premise, on that model, and he kept it to the day he died.

He tried to be authentic. I knew him personally, and I knew him to be a person who strove for authenticity, for integrity, could disagree, I certainly disagreed with some of his positions politically and even culturally, but he sought to be a person who was genuine and transparent in who he was, and I think that was the secret to his leadership and one of the reasons he's being mourned and remembered as he is today.

[00:08:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, good example for sure in every way. Take that a little bit further. We, we talk in, as we watch things like a state funeral and upcoming inauguration, that type of thing. We know that our country is Got this system of three branches of government checks and balance that type of thing. What do you think the biblical principles that might undergird some of that in terms of shared power?

I think of Jesus saying that we are not to Lord over each other our positions and our power that we are to be more servant minded rather than domineering. What are the things might the Bible say to us about how we would hope and pray for power to be shared and for leaders to be accountable?

[00:09:04] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Jesus was clear that those who would lead must serve and those that are greatest among you are those who serve. And then he demonstrated that by washing the feet of his disciples, by blessing the children, by dying on the cross for us. And so that model of servant leadership is really, I think, the pervasive biblical construct of what effective leadership looks like.

When Saul ceased to serve, he lost his kingship. When David ceased to serve, relative to Bathsheba and the issues about that, then corruption came into his government and we see some of the results of that. When Solomon ceased to serve the Lord and other people effectively is when his kingship started to to on some levels be fractured.

And so there's this model, I think all through scripture of serving. One of the reasons I think American governance has been so effective over these centuries is that it seeks to preserve that,

as you mentioned, there are these various checks and balances within our system so that no one branch, whether that's the executive or the judicial or the legislative has a dictatorial authority.

Has the ability to govern out of the will to power, has an ability to to govern unchecked by others. I think of something C. S. Lewis said about power some years ago that I thought was especially appropriate. He said in democracy, that he believes in democracy, not because people are so good that they deserve the right to rule others.

He believes in democracy because people are so flawed that none of us can be trusted with unaccountable leadership. None of us can be trusted with unaccountable power. I believe that's exactly right. That's why we're a nation of laws, not men. That's why the founders so wisely created checks and balances within our system.

It makes it slow. Yuval Levine has in recent books on democracy made that clear. It's a, it's a slow, laborious, cumbersome process, but that's by design. That's a feature, not a bug. That's because the founders knew. That they couldn't trust, we couldn't trust individuals to be kings and to be monarchs and to have unaccountable power.

And so it's going to take time and it's going to be frustrating and there's wins and losses and, and it's laborious. But all of that is how we manage in a fallen world with fallen people to the best outcomes. It's all in my mind, exhibiting the kind of servant leadership that Jesus modeled and that he called us and invited and even commanded us to follow as well.

[00:11:15] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, that's and that's not only applicable in politics, it's also important, you know, in business and in church where we're having all kinds of of experiences and stories, especially within the church. in recent days about some poor examples of leadership and what accountability might look like in the context of a local church.

Some of the, some of the people we have known best and admired most we're having to rethink some of the ways that we understand that. Let me pivot the conversation to a different direction. Two or three questions that I wanted to discuss with both of you just about the idea of how sin of how temptation, sin and separation work.

And so, Jim, I'm going to ask you to get us started and then ask Ryan to kind of take it a little further in this way. But going back to that original story in Genesis three, where The devil comes and creates the first temptation and Adam and Eve become embroiled in that choice that ultimately leads to the fall of all creation and to all of us inheriting a sin nature from them.

Jim, I was wondering just off of some of your writing and some other things I've been reading, is there any idea that We should understand that Adam and Eve had any understanding of what

death actually meant. Do you think that there was in some way natural death occurring among plants and animals within the garden?

We don't have any kind of a long record that God explained to them what death was or what death meant. I guess my question is should we understand at least intuitively that Adam and Eve knew what the stakes were when they were tempted to disobey God?

[00:13:06] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's a wonderful question. Theologians have been debating for a very, very long time, even back to rabbinic traditions and various ways of looking into this on one and the other, you could argue from a biological point of view that if natural physical death was not a part, even prior to the fall of the, of the created order at some point, don't you just overcrowd the system?

Don't you just overpopulate the planet? If everybody lives forever on this planet, also, if we're created for personal relationship with God in heaven, and there is no such thing as death, how do we get from here to there? How do we step out of these bodies and go in the house as it were, if there weren't natural death?

And so there are some that would argue that natural death was always a part of God's created order. And when the Bible, when the Lord is warning that if they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they will surely die. That this is a reference not to dying physically, but how they would die.

And that it would be a painful and difficult death and their lives would be imperiled in the meantime. And that's the rest of that punishment in Genesis three, much more difficult life is going to be for women in childbirth and for men in farming and agricultural and all of that. And that the death that's in view there as a spiritual, as well as physical death, it's a relational as well as physical death, that there's going to be a relational catastrophe that will come here with me, with you, with others, as well as spiritual distance from God.

As we're cut off from a Holy God. And then ultimately a physical death as well. And so now, to me, that's not conclusive to argue that if there'd been no physical death, that the planet would be overpopulated by plants and animals and people and all of that. I would imagine God could have solved for that.

I would imagine there'd be a way an omnipotent God could either limit procreation or find some other means of doing that. To me, the larger question, if there were no such thing as death, would be to ask did God intend us prior to the fall to live forever on this planet? Was that really his intention or didn't he intend us to live with him in paradise, to live with him in heaven, in which case he's got to get us from here to there.

Now, that wouldn't have to mean death. Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him. You think of Elijah who was taken up into heaven and the whirlwind and the chariots of fire and all of that. So it wouldn't have to mean a physical death for God to take us from this planet into his presence in paradise.

So I suppose you could go that direction as well. It's a speculative question. But the bottom line that's very practical that you're pointing to is they at least knew enough to know that there were dire consequences to what they did or what they did and couldn't be the sin that it was the Lord couldn't bring that kind of punishment that he brought for their sin if they didn't understand the consequences on some level on enough of a level to know that this was worthy of the judgment.

God brought God is not a holy God. If the judgment doesn't fit the crime is what I'm saying. Yeah. You're a bad parent. If you ground your kids for a month for doing something, they had no idea was punishable on that level for doing something you hadn't warned them about on some level that made sense to them and made them understand the severity of the consequence then I'm being a bad father.

If I'm doing that and so on some level, they understood enough for God's judgment to be warranted and to be just when he responded to their sin as he did, whether they understood physical death at that early point in the process, whether plants and died by then, whether wildlife had died by then. We just don't know.

The text doesn't tell us. We don't have the time construct within all that, but we know that God is just. And he did whatever was just, whatever that means, whatever that looks like. That's the thing we can take away from the conversation, is to know that God always does the right thing. Whether we understand ultimately what that means in the biblical construct or not.

[00:16:45] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Good word. Let's stay in the garden. Ryan, I wanted to ask you to kind of expand on this story out of Genesis three. And part of my goal here is to just help us all understand how temptation and sin work in our lives. Even today second Corinthians two 11 reminds us Paul talking about the way that the devil continues to tempt us and to try to draw us away from God.

He says, partly in that verse, We're not unaware of the devil's scheme. So my, my goal in this conversation is to kind of help us understand how temptation may approach us even today. So. Go back to the garden. I don't know if this is fully theologically sound, but it would seem to make sense to me that the first temptation and the first sin is in some way a paradigm of all temptation and all sin.

Kind of building on that, we know that social media, we, you know, we deal in our ministry in the environment of, social media. We try to get our message out into those environments and in

other ways. We know that social media is in many ways much more driven by image and by pictures by video than it is by text.

But I want you to kind of unpack for us the the approach the scheme of the devil that we read about in Genesis three in the combination of approaching Adam and Eve and playing on their their, their reality as consumers. They were like all human beings consuming air and consuming resources. Of food and water.

Talk about the craftiness. The Bible describes the devil as crafty in Genesis 3. Kind of talk to us about that craftiness and what we need to remember about how he may approach us today.

[00:18:33] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Absolutely. And I think one of the main ways that Satan is crafty is by just understanding where we're likely to fall.

For Adam and Eve in the garden, he tempted them with essentially saying, you know, all those good things that God has given you, you don't need God to get those. You can get them yourself. And I think in a lot of ways that continues to be the basic human temptation is this idea that we can experience God's blessings on our terms rather than his.

And I think the visual side of that is something that Satan absolutely uses to reinforce if not the idea that You can get this on your own. The idea that it's worth the chance that you might be able to because on some level, like, like, my dad just discussed, there was a basic understanding that going against God had consequences, and I think that's kind of what the idea of death in Genesis one and two and three is meant to relay is this idea that the life you have.

That God has given you the life that you're enjoying that is at risk if you go against the God who gave it to you. And so I think a big part of what we see with Satan's temptations, the way that he's crafty all of that is by knowing what is most likely to get us beyond that point where we think the potential gains are worth the risk of losing God's blessing.

Because even if we don't have a full understanding of, you know, Our blessings coming from the Lord of the degree to which God is the source of all those there is a I think there is a basic human human understanding that we do when we send when we do what we know is wrong. It comes with consequences.

We just think that maybe we can get beyond it. Maybe the consequences will be less than the gains and The way that Satan is so crafty is by just getting, adding whatever is going to be most tempting to us to get us beyond that point where we think it's worth crossing God to try and do this. And that was true for Adam and Eve in the garden.

I think it's true for us today. Especially if you're a Christian that already has the Holy Spirit. whispering into your mind or sometimes shouting into your mind, don't do this, or this is wrong,

or you're going down the wrong road. That just raises the bar for how much Satan has to deceive us. And yes, the Holy Spirit is really in us, is really speaking within our lives to help us know right from wrong, to help us know what the Lord wants us to do, and that Satan has to be all the more crafty.

And so we just, I think the best way to avoid that is by just walking with the Lord to the extent that we recognize When those impulses are coming from God and when they're coming from from the enemy because they can be fairly subtle differences of time. Satan is very good at sounding like God when he really wants to tempt us.

But the more we recognize God's voice, the more we, the more time we spend with him listening to his word reading scripture, the easier it is to recognize when it's, when it's the devil and not the Lord.

[00:21:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, really helpful. Jim, could you maybe even go a step further? Kind of a couple of popcorn questions I had that relate to this, which is getting even more specific with the story in Genesis 3.

Do we have a sense that, that Adam and Eve, and particularly Eve in the first part of the temptation, that she had not noticed the beauty of this tree? The reason I'm bringing this up is the way that temptation comes to us. We had a podcast recently with one of our friends, Pedro Reyes. He talked about his very painful journey in sexual addiction and how God has brought him through that and how in, in approximately the late nineties year 2000, how he stumbled into an understanding of the reality of internet pornography and how, how that temptation came to him in a visual kind of way.

That took me back to some of this story of how, how the devil tempts Eve and the thing that it says in commentary about it is that she saw that the tree was good for for food. And what I'm wondering about is, did the devil suggest to her that it was beautiful in a way that she had not considered before?

Did he suggest that she look at it in a different way than what God had in, had in intended. In what sense did she, what do we, what does the Bible mean when it says that she looked at it and saw that it was desirable for attaining wisdom? That's a pretty powerful phrase.

[00:22:54] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, it really is a powerful phrase.

We'd like to know more than we do in the text in order to be able to get really to that. But what seems I think to be implied in the text is that Satan is focusing her attention on this tree and on its fruit in a way that she had not focused her attention before. The fruit hasn't changed, obviously.

It's not like it became more desirable. Satan, through the serpent, had some ability to transform it or to enhance its capacities in some way. Nor do I think that he had the capacity to modify her psychology in some way, so that she now saw it in a different way or was, was on some empirical level different herself.

My guess is. That because the Lord had so warned them about this, they had just ignored it. They had gone around it. They'd paid no attention to it because they knew they weren't supposed to eat from it, which is a really good principle. By the way, the best thing to do about temptation is flee temptation.

Stay as far away from it. As scripture says, as possible, the more I consider it, the more likely I am to commit it is the idea. Satan likes to turn the lights down slowly until we're sitting in the dark and don't realize it. And so maybe they were doing the right thing by avoiding this thing. Avoiding this tree so fully that she hadn't even really paid attention to it until now.

And now Satan focuses her on the forbidden fruit. And now she sees it on a level that makes it more enticing than it would have been otherwise. If that's true, if that's what's going on here, there really is a principle there. And Pedro illustrates it. My good friend, Pedro illustrates that the best thing to do with temptation, especially visual temptation, is not allow it into our minds to begin with.

Because once the image is there, it doesn't leave. It's one of the problems with pornography addiction. Over the years as I've had people on our staff and folk that have spoken directly into this and taught about it. It's one of the things they talk about is how those, how long those images will last and how quickly they can come back in horrible situations and such.

And so just don't let it in to begin with. Don't sip any of the poison is the idea. Don't let a single cell of malignancy into your body because it will always be the old saying is Satan, sin will always take you further than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay and cost you more than you wanted to pay.

It always will. It's never easier to defeat than when it first appears. And so the right thing to do is to ignore the tree is the point here. Maybe that's what she'd been doing until now satan focuses her on it Maybe that's the first step toward the sin is considering the sin in a way that she just hadn't before Perhaps that's what's going on there.

I know that's what happens in our lives today. Yeah, because

[00:25:22] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** One thing I would add to that, I do think with the fruit in the garden, I mean, they were living with this potential temptation every day, and we don't know how often they passed it, and she gave a little glance and then kept going, but just hadn't gotten

to the point where it was even a consideration until Satan was like, you know, you could take that.

The reason God doesn't want you to have it isn't because it's bad for you. It's because he doesn't want you to be like him. He wants to keep you down. He wants to keep you subject to him. Like that, I think that as much as anything is what looked desirable to her was this idea that this was a key to become my own God in a lot of ways.

And I think that's why Adam, who was standing right next to her when she took the fruit why he did the same thing. Why he didn't push back on that or warn her or anything. Okay. Is they both at the end of the day, they wanted to believe satan was telling them the truth, even though they knew that he wasn't.

And I think that's continues to be why satan's temptations are so effective is that he tells us what we want to believe and gives us reasons. Why we can trick ourselves into thinking it's true when at the end of the day, it's simply not like one of the things my dad has written frequently is that Satan hates us and he will never give us any good.

That isn't any good that comes from Satan has to be outweighed by the bad that will come from accepting it. And I think that continues to be true. And we see it in the garden like Satan is fine with us. losing a battle here and there if it means he advances the war and understanding that about who he is and how his temptations work is key to defeating.

[00:27:01] **Dr. Mark Turman:** It's a good word and reminds me of what the Bible says in various places where it says one of the best things we can do when we confront temptation is to run away, to flee it. And that was, that was an option for Adam and Eve just like it's an option for us. Also thinking that conversation that God inspired Paul to write to the Corinthians about that, where he says, Hey, Just realize you may feel overwhelmed and outmatched by the devil, but your temptations are common to all people And that god will provide a way of escape there would there was a way of escape for adam and eve they chose not to take it too many times We choose not to take it.

But god is always there to help us if we are willing to turn to him And will give us the ability to avoid subjecting ourselves to sin in a renewed way and that he is confident and capable of helping us to overcome it. So,

[00:27:55] **Dr. Jim Denison:** James says, submit yourself to the Lord, resist the devil, and he will flee from you in that order.

Submit to the Lord, and then you'll be empowered by God to resist the devil. And then when you resist the devil, he will flee from you. But it has to be in that order, doesn't it?

[00:28:11] **Dr. Mark Turman:** It's kind of interesting that James, that James tells us to, to resist in such a way that the devil will run away from us. And then Paul says, sometimes you need to run away from the temptation that the devil's in putting in front of you.

So it can be. Either or or both and depending upon the situation, right?

[00:28:29] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Part of what resisting looks like there are times that resisting means you flee There are other times you can't flee but you have to stand And in those places you stand submitting to god and that's what resisting the devil looks like is that you don't run If you're given an opportunity to share your faith With somebody submit to the Lord resist the devil when he tries to tempt you with a lack of courage when he tries to Tempt you with fear that they're going to reject you or make fun of you or whatever at that point in time You're not running from that you're resisting the devil by standing with obedience and then he flees from you So it kind of depends on the circumstance, I guess as to who's doing the fleeing But in both cases god's winning and he's winning through you.

[00:29:05] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. Yeah, great way to think about it all right, let me turn the the page a little bit to another question, which is really fundamental, which is the idea of just basic belief. Ryan, you and I got to read a book together that was written by Ross Douthat that will come out in a few weeks. We got to have a marvelous conversation with him recently, just about this fundamental idea of faith and belief.

And we had some really great interaction with him about the problem of disbelief and his struggle to respect any form of atheism. But it made me think in part this, this idea that should we have faith in, in something, at least in some kind of a powerful and we would hope good God, because the choices of not believing are just.

Kind of abysmal. I mean, it just leaves us with an empty fatalism. And if you got to build on that I guess we should believe in Jesus because it's just the best option available. Do you think that's a, a, a good way to think is that? Kind of a cop out way to think what's your reaction.

[00:30:13] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** I think it's good in the sense that it's rational like whether God exists or not is a binary choice.

Either it's yes or no. And we have to, as a result, I think the most rational way to approach faith in general is this idea that if it's more likely than not that God exists, it's better to believe that it makes sense to believe that God exists. And that doesn't mean getting to 100 percent certainty with our faith.

It doesn't mean 90%. I mean, in a good week, I have some days I'm like 75 to 80 percent sure all this, all Christianity is true. Other days, I'm at 95 to 100. And there's days where I have to walk

back through all the reasons why I believe that God is who the Bible says he is, that Jesus is God and Jesus is Lord.

And it's not a bad thing to have. It's not like a bad thing. It's not evidence of a lack of faith to have those moments. It's evidence of being human and believing in a God we can't see. And so I think on some level, the atheist approach to religion is to say, because I can't be fully convinced that God is real, I reject the idea that he is.

And I think one of the things that So the doubt that this book does an excellent job of is demonstrating why that is an irrational choice when you weigh all the evidence for God's existence. And so as Christians, I think it's okay to have days where you doubt. I think that's why it's so important to understand your faith rather than simply accept your faith.

And that's something God calls us to do. God calls us to come and reason with him. The Bible is filled with examples of God revealing not only that he's real, but why we can trust that he is. That was a key part of Jesus ministry, is rejecting the Religiosity of his day that focus so much on even if you don't understand why all these Sabbath laws are important doing because we say they are or because we God's because the Old Testament says this is how you get close to God.

This is our interpretation of all those rules and the ones we got into it. That's how you get close to God. Just do it. And I think Jesus comes and rejects that and so much of whether it's the Sermon on the Mount or elsewhere in the Gospels is Christ is coming in and saying you don't need the the rules the actions.

That's not where the heart of this is It's about a relationship and a relationship is fundamentally built on this on the belief in the trust that This is true. Even if you can't fully understand it or fully rationalize your way all the way there, it's still rational to believe more so than it is to disbelieve.

And I think that's one of the things that doubt this book does an excellent job of. I'm looking forward to people being able to hear that conversation as well. I think it's going to be good when it comes out. And I encourage y'all to read the book when it comes out as well, but on a more basic level, I do think it's important for Christians to understand that faith is rational.

Belief in God is intellectually viable. It's intellectually better. Just, it makes more sense to believe that God exists and that he doesn't. And we can stand on that, even if there are days where we can't get to 100%. Even if there's days we still have questions that that's all right. And God's answer in those moments is just, you know, Come ask it.

Search the scriptures. Search, like, you have to be a little careful when you search online because there's a lot of lies in it to go along with the, with the truth. But, I mean, be discerning. Rely on

the Holy Spirit to help you walk that path. Because at the end of the day, no one wants you to understand God more than God.

And I think we can find peace in that.

[00:33:39] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and it just makes me think of what you read in the book in the book of Hebrews in the Bible, where it says, be careful that there's no unbelieving heart among you. Really the whole argument of the book of Hebrews in some ways is that believing is not only fundamental to, to human experience, but is beautiful in its rationality, and our ministry is built on that in many ways as we try to help people and equip people to think biblically and to follow along when Jesus said that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength that Christianity doesn't ask us to turn off our thinking, it asks us to turn it on in the most Significant way.

So yeah, really, really helpful. All right, let's turn the page

[00:34:26] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Real quick what said in an unthinking mind is a strange gift something essentially an unthinking mind is a strange gift to give to the God Who gave you a mind or the ability to think and I think that's always been helpful to me that idea that if God didn't want Us to understand him.

He wouldn't have given us the capacity to try

[00:34:47] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Good deal. Yeah, that's fair. Yeah. I love that quote. Love that quote. So, all right, let's move I I was wanting to talk a little bit about metaphors in the bible and how metaphors help us think different things, about Our faith and and in the case of the church there's a book out called the great de churching As we learn in our culture that we're now in a season in america where less people are going to church than ever before Some people, including Ross Douthat and others, are saying that they're starting to see maybe the earliest signs of people turning back to faith because of disappointment in science after the COVID experience and other things like that.

But part of what the great de churching says is if the church were a sports team, it might be good for us to think of shepherding as the defense. Of this team and equipping as the offense. I'll just let either one of you react to that. You think that's a helpful metaphor?

[00:35:53] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I think it is. I'd start by disputing the premise that the country is de churching to the degree that a lot of folk and media seem to think it is.

Wrote an article the other day, for instance, about the growth of the Orthodox Church. In America, more masculine form of Christianity as that's understood to be and, and growth, especially among young men, some of the congregations in Orthodoxy tripling in growth, 80

percent growth in the Orthodox denomination in the last four years, new Orthodox churches being started all over the country.

I for years been hearing about an attraction to Orthodoxy on college campuses. For example and the reason being that it seems to have more historicity. It's very conservative theologically. It's in no sense to sell out to the culture. It's kind of the opposite of that long services that you have to stand through in their entirety, Orthodox churches and yet enormous growth there.

Philip Jenkins and others have been saying for a while that there's a great deal of growth in the country. It's just not measured the way we traditionally measure church growth. It's Bible studies on Tuesday nights, it's worship services on Thursdays, it's online experiences. It may not be Sunday morning in traditional church, but it's in a variety of other places as well.

And then one other thing to say about de churching is it depends on the denomination and the faith manifestation as to the numbers that you're looking at here. You're seeing enormous decline in the mainline traditions, for example, but you're not seeing that in the evangelical churches and again in the orthodox church.

very conservative denominations, you're seeing growth as opposed to decline. So it's really taken as a whole in the sense of thinking of Christianity as though it were an empirical entity. When it's not, there's no such thing as religion, just religions, no such thing as leaves, just individual leaves.

So it is with religion in America. I think it's a wiser to look at it and its various manifestation. But having said all of that, secularized age. There is no question that many in the secular culture see especially evangelical Christianity as dangerous to society, as as homophobic and bigoted, prejudiced, near minded, discriminatory, and all of that.

That book I wrote called The Coming Tsunami tries to document all of that to some degree. In that context, the idea that we shepherd those that we have while equipping them to reach people we don't, It's a way of looking at playing defense and playing offense. I think that it's vital to us that we care for those gods already given us.

We ought not take for granted that the fact that they're here this week means they'll be here next week. The fact that they have joined our church means they're going to be active in our church. Shepherding is going to be a vital way that we continue to minister to them for the sake of their own souls, for the sake of being faithful to our own biblical call, but also for the sake of conserving the results.

For the sake of not just assuming that we have them next year because we have them this year, Josh McDowell for a while now has been warning churches not to assume that your young

people have a biblical worldview in a large, a large percentage, they don't, they've come to your church, they've shown up, but they're, they're much more influenced.

by what they're seeing during the week and their friends and social media than what they might be hearing from the youth minister, their pastor. So shepherd to conserve the results as well as for the sake of protecting the souls, but then equip them to reach the people you can't reach. And that would be, I guess the offensive move here.

They're going to be people hearing this conversation who have relationships with secular people. The three of us will never have, they'll see more lost people in a day than we'll see in a month. It's much more likely that Christians in the marketplace. Are going to end that mission field, be able to interact with people who need the gospel.

Then that those people will show up at our churches to hear us preach sermons. And so as we're discipling and equipping our people, then they're able to reach people we can't reach. And then we can shepherd the people that they win to Christ through the context of the church. And it's kind of a cyclical process.

The more we shepherd, the more we meet their needs. The more we earn the right to disciple and equip them to reach other people so that we can then meet their needs. You And then there's a kind of a cycle of multiplying sort of a factor that sets in, I think, by which the kingdom grows. Jesus spent three years with 12 men, shepherding them, as well as equipping them, meeting their needs and equipping them to meet the needs of others.

And by Acts 17 6, they had turned the world upside down. So the model clearly works. It worked then and it can work again today.

[00:40:12] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** One thing I would kind of add to that is I, I do think it's a helpful metaphor on some, to some extent, I think where it breaks down is that if you think about, if you think about this context of football, some players play offense, some players play defense, think about basketball, people play both.

And I think that's a better way of seeing it, that it reinforces the both shepherding and equipping are necessary versus you can specialize in one or the other. And Mark, one thing I was curious about is if you could speak into this your history, like your experience as a pastor, what's the best way to help people understand that both of these things are necessary?

[00:40:47] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And it's, it's really important, you know, because there are, you know, there are biblical metaphors that I think are helpful to talk about the church, the church being people, not so much being a building, but the people. The Bible talks about that. The church is the bride that Jesus loves and will be married to for all of eternity.

It's his beloved. The Bible calls the church. The building of God is the place where his spirit dwells in that church. You know, we claim very boldly that when we're together as the church, even in small numbers, two or three are gathered, the Bible says that Jesus shows up in a special way, that his presence is understood communally when we get together, and I love that idea that the church is the building, the dwelling place of God, and of course it says that the church is his body, that we are his we are his voice.

We are his hands, his feet, his eyes. We are to be individually and together doing the things that Jesus did when he was physically on the earth, and we're able to do it at a much larger scale because there's so many of us, and we are to We are to mimic those same kinds of things and to act as his body and to be his presence.

But there are other metaphors that have been sometimes helpful in thinking. I remember reading years ago that we should think of the church as a hospital for sick and injured people who need to come and find healing both spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and even sometimes physically. That's helpful.

And. And then I, you know, I remember a friend of mine preached a sermon in my church that I can still remember where he said, we need to help people understand that you're, you're getting on a ship of faith and it's not a cruise ship. It's more of a battleship. And yet there are some similar functions.

There are places where we need to invite people into the community of the faith so that they can rest. So that they can be restored so that they can recover from the way that sin has injured and wounded them and, and debilitated them. But there's also this sense that not to take the militaristic idea too far, but we do have a mission and our mission is one of compassion.

It's one of conviction. It's one that we exercise in civility. We've talked about that a lot in the previous year. But we do have a mission to accomplish and we are, we are soldiers in the army of grace. And we are missionaries on his behalf. And I think, I think the reason that the Bible piles up so many metaphors is because metaphors help us to, to have windows of understanding that maybe will help us to grasp what God has invited us into and really been helpful to me to think both of the biblical metaphors and some of the others that.

And you know, I love sports metaphors. The Bible uses a sports metaphor on a number of occasions. And that's certainly very much something that resonates with our culture because we watch so much. You know, one of my favorite teams is still in the college hunt. So, you know, that really helps me on the offense and the defensive side and to help people understand that you have to be a part of both.

If you're going to have a meaningful experience of faith, there is that sense in which you need to be shepherded and cared for and led as Psalm 23 says, but there's also that sense in which you need to be a part of the mission. And so I think all of those are helpful. Jim, I want to turn we got just a few minutes and like I said, we got plenty of questions, but we're going to use our time well here.

Recently in some of your writings, you've made references over recent weeks and months to the Muslim belief that some of their radical actions, at least a subset of Muslims, is necessary to prepare for what you've described as the arrival of their Mahdi, or a savior, a messiah like figure. That I had not really even heard that much about until you started writing about it in the last, I don't know, 6 12 months.

Tell us this idea, the Muslim idea of the Mahdi. What is the Mahdi? Was he here before? Is there a promise in the Quran that he's coming again? How is that similar? How is it different from what the Bible teaches us about Jesus coming again?

[00:45:15] **Dr. Jim Denison:** It's a massive subject. We'll try to do this very, very quickly because it's a really important issue, especially with what's happening in Iran relative to Israel today.

So as most people would know, there are really two versions of Islam that are predominant in the world today, Sunni and Shia, but 85 percent of the Muslim world is Sunni, about 15 percent is Shia. One of the major differences in the two is that the Shiites, which is The Shia believe that Abraham was succeeded by 12 different individuals, the imams, they would think of them.

The 12th of whom was born in 868 AD and disappeared. They would say occluded from the world in 941, excuse me, in 974. And on that year, 974, this 12th imam who was Muhammad Al Mahdi by name was hidden. From the world, but didn't die. He will come again. This is in Shiite theology. Most Sunnis wouldn't agree with this to this, at least to this degree.

This is why it's so important to Iran because Iran's primarily a Shiite country. Most Shiite Muslims, about 70 percent of Shiite Muslims believe that this 12th Imam who was occluded, who disappeared in 974 AD will come again at the end of history as a kind of Messiah figure. He will come to dominate the world for Islam.

They believe that Jesus, who they consider to be one of the six most important prophets, will actually come ahead of the Mahdi to prepare the way for the Mahdi. Something like John the Baptist coming ahead of Jesus in New Testament understanding. And then this Mahdi, this twelfth imam, will then come to dominate the world.

For the Islam, that's how 70 percent of Shiites understand their eschatology. The reason that's relevant to geopolitics is that Supreme Leader Khamenei in Iran and Ahmadinejad before him, and some in the Iranian revolutionary core have on record said. But they believe the only reason the Mahdi has not yet reappeared is that Islam tolerates the existence of Israel.

They see the founding of Israel in 1948 as a theft of land from its rightful Muslim owners. They believe in, because of the Quran in Surah 2, verse 190, that Muslims are required by Allah to defend Islam from those that attack it. And so this radical fringe. In Shiite Islam believes that attacking Israel is necessary in obedience to the Quran so that the Mahdi will then appear to dominate the world for Islam.

One last piece of this, you can therefore take that further to say, Ahmadinejad said this to his own people. He didn't say this for English language consumption, but he said this to his own people. If they, and hominy has apparently said this too, if they were to attack Israel, even with nuclear weapons.

The Mahdi would then appear to protect them from retribution. So the reason that matters is one of the reasons we in the West don't worry so much as I think we should about Iranian nuclear weapons aspirations is this idea of mutually assured destruction, that if Iran were to launch on Tel Aviv or launch on Jerusalem, that Israel and America in the West would obliterate Iran, but there's no way they would ever use a weapon against Israel because they have to know the consequences.

And what's happened recently when they've launched in conventional terms on Israel and Israel has responded so effectively would absolutely have to make that case. So we don't have to worry about Israel, Iran's nuclear ambitions and this theological sense because they just know that they would be destroyed if they tried.

Not if. They believe they have to try to obliterate Israel for the Mahdi to appear. And when they do, the Mahdi will then appear to protect them from that retribution. That's why Prime Minister Netanyahu calls Iranian nuclear ambitions an existential threat. To Israel because of this theological undercurrent that we're talking about right now, now nobody knows, at least I certainly don't, I don't, you have to read minds almost, would know the degree to which they actually believe that.

That there are leaders in Iran who actually believe that it would make sense for them to launch a nuclear attack on Israel in the expectation that the Mahdi would then appear to protect them from obliteration. I'm not saying they actually believe that, but they've indicated it. There's been some language toward that effect, and there's definite language toward the belief that the reason the Mahdi hasn't come back is that they tolerate the existence of Israel.

And all of that explains why Iran is on the seven front attack against Israel. People come along and think, why does Iran care about Israel? Iran is massively larger in land space. Then Israel, they don't even share a border. There's some distance from each other. What is it to the Iranians that this Israeli tiny little nation, the size of New Jersey even exists over here.

The Palestinians are not Shiites. They're Sunni. So why do the Palestinians matter to the Iranians? It's more of a problem for the Arabs. The Iranians are not Arabs. They're Persians. Persians are not Arabs. There's a, in fact, there's a cold war right now going on between Saudi Arabia and Iran that goes back to Cyrus and the Persian empire and the degree to which they oppress the Iranian, the Arabs in the Middle East and such.

And so if they are, if the Iranians are not Arabs, if they're not Palestinians. If they don't even share a common faith to the degree that they're Shiite versus Sunni, then why do they care about Israel? It's because Israel is at the very least the impediment to Iran's desire to have a Shiite crescent, as it's called.

It goes through Iraq and through Syria and through Lebanon with Hezbollah to advance its Persian Empire aspirations. Israel is the strong impediment to its desire to rebuild the Persian Empire. That's just on a geopolitical level. The case that's a meta narrative is to rebuild the Persian empire, but maybe there's this other piece as well that they think attacking Israel would bring about the return of the Mahdi and ruling the entire world for their version of Islam.

So there's a lot more to it than that, but that's kind of a short version as best I can describe it, what this Mahdi figure is and why this matters to geopolitics today.

[00:51:21] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Now we may, we may have to have a podcast just on that topic because it's pretty big because you know, For, for all these years since the arrival of nuclear weapons, right?

We've, we've all generally held to this idea that nobody will, nobody will push the launch button because of this idea of mutually assured destruction. But if you have a group or a nation state that has a theology that argues in a different direction that they will receive, you know, divine protection in the midst of a nuclear experience.

And that changes equations in all kinds of ways. are hard to comprehend and become kind of scary, really. Mark,

[00:52:05] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I'd hasten to say real quickly. I know we have time issues, but I'd hasten to add, that's not the only reason Iran should not be allowed to have nuclear weapons. It's not just because of this kind of esoteric theological thing that we're talking about right now.

We can have a long conversation about other reasons why it's a bad idea. For them to have nuclear weapons relative to how now Saudis would want weapons as well. You think about a nuclear proliferation across, hard word to say, across the Middle East and across the Far East as well, and larger consequences relative to their relationship with China and Russia and North Korea and the Shanghai economic cooperative they're a part of.

A lot of other geopolitical issues here, but that's one of them is mutually assured destruction and the degree to which they really believe in it. That's a massive part of the conversation.

[00:52:50] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, really helpful for that. And we'll look for more insight into that going forward. Gentlemen. Thank you. I'd love to ask.

We got a number of more questions, but we'll save those for our next ask the doctors Denison episode. We'll do this again maybe in a few weeks and follow up with some of these additional questions. We'll save those. For then but want to thank you for your time this morning and hope that you have a great And awesome and safe day want to thank our audience for being a part of this conversation as well We hope that it's been useful to you And that if it has that you'll rate and review us on your podcast platform share this As we encourage you to do and again Thank you for being followers along with us as we seek to serve the lord and to be salt and light for him God bless you.

We'll see you next time on the denison forum podcast.