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It's wonderful to be here this morning. Thank you for bringing us missionaries home for this wonderful conference. My wife, sons, and church send you their greetings. Well, I was intimidated to take on the topic of evangelism for this sermon. I have sat through many sermons on evangelism that clearly communicate disappointment that Christians aren't active enough in sharing the gospel, and I wonder if you're wary about the same thing. But my hope today is that God will make you curious to take another look at your own view of evangelism and excite you about what new things he might do through you.

I have been profoundly blessed because of evangelism. My sister Alyson was a freshman at Stanford in 1990 when someone did a spiritual interests survey with her in a dinner line and followed it up with a visit to her dorm room. A young missionary shared the gospel with her by using the booklet the Four Spiritual Laws. She prayed to trust Christ and then immediately was struck by frustration at the thought "how is it that I spent my whole life in church and no one ever told me that this is what it really is all about?!" She started to share with me during school breaks. Her Bible study, led by Cenia Wong, prayed for me, and by the time I also came out here for college I was really intrigued to get involved with both her church – PBC – and her college fellowship – Campus Crusade for Christ. God used those days in college to change the course of my life.

I also would not be married to my wife Sandra without the fruit of initiative evangelism. Young college graduates went to Zagreb, Croatia right in the middle of the war in 1992 to share the gospel with university students. One student they met, Sasha, was a bit afraid of these strange foreigners, but agreed to meet with them again. So Sasha begged his friend Domagoj, who spoke excellent English, to come along to a cafe. Domagoj accepted the offer because he heard this American was from Seattle and since grunge was really popular, he thought he could get the God talk out the way and then hear about the grunge scene from a real local. Of course this good missionary knew next to nothing about grunge, but somehow Domagoj accepted the invitation to come to a showing of the Jesus Film, where, to his own shock, and that of his girlfriend Biljana, he found himself standing at the end to accept Christ. Soon Biljana also came to believe in Christ from a totally atheistic background. Soon after that she "coincidentally" ran into Sandra, her best friend from high school, whom she had lost track of two years before because of the chaos of the war in former Yugoslavia. Sandra was elated to see Biljana and have someone safe with whom to speak about what she and her family were going through because of the war, but was shocked to find out that Biljana seemed to have just recently joined a sect. So for six months Sandra read the Bible to prove her wrong – and ended up also believing. We met three years later while doing missions work.

Yet, evangelism is controversial. Christians are rarely more sharply critical of each other than when it comes to the efforts of others to spread the gospel. That fault line ran down the middle of my own early Christian life, growing up in this church and Campus Crusade. Here at PBC I heard about the importance of our identity in Christ and the way that identity needs to be source for our actions. I heard concern that a lot of Christian activity, including evangelism, is motivated by guilt. Meanwhile, in Campus Crusade I was offered incredible opportunities for stretching my faith. I did a lot of evangelism – always with fear, usually thinking of something I should have said 20 minutes after the conversation was over, and sometimes seeing God do amazing things. I also often heard complaints that the average Christian wasn't doing enough and didn't know how to present the gospel.

And so what I have learned comes from struggling with understanding what we are doing when we share our faith. I will not regale you with stories of the people I have led to Christ on airplanes and other forms of public transportation. I am actually quite weak in that area. But I am a part of a band of people who get up every day to give their lives away to make Christ known in a difficult environment where few people respond.

Working out a proper understanding of and love for 'preaching the gospel,' began years ago when, to my fascination and also horror, someone pointed out that no one in the New Testament is criticized for not sharing their faith enough. And Paul himself never gave a challenge to his churches to do more evangelism. As the missions thinker Lesslie Newbigin put it: "One searches in vain through the letters of St Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his hearers that they ought to be active in mission."

And yet, though Paul was silent on exhorting others to a missionary duty, he could not conceive of being quiet himself. Understanding his heart can transform our understanding of the place of evangelism in our lives, and we desperately need to better understand his heart living in an era where culture has shifted and traditional understanding of evangelism has reached a breaking point.

First we'll see in 1 Corinthians 9 that Paul's motivation for and understanding of evangelism is different in subtle but important ways from the way we often talk about it. Then I will talk briefly about how the growth of the early church was fueled by the same kind of understanding that Paul had. Lastly I give some suggestions about what that means for us today. So please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 9. I'll first read vs 11-18.

11 If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12 If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. 13 Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at

the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14 In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. 15 But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. 16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.

That drops us right in the middle of a complex argument Paul is making, so allow me to give some background. The church in Corinth was young, excited, and full of controversy, scandal and factions. After Paul founded the church, built it up, and moved on criticisms came up – what kind of teacher works with his hands? What kind of community submits to the leadership of a common laborer? The ancient world was incredibly sensitive to questions of honor and position. Paul goes out of his way to confirm that *if* honor *is* due to anyone, it *is* due to preachers of the gospel. But then he insists that he did not and will not accept financial help from the Corinthian church (although it is clear he did so from other churches at other times.)

What was at stake for Paul in refusing financial help from the Corinthians? One thing is that, in a church containing both poor and wealthy people, the financial support would come overwhelmingly from the wealthiest and most socially dominant Christians. In the ancient world one of the fundamental building blocks of society was the patron/client system. Accepting support from wealthy Corinthians would naturally put Paul in the position of client to a rich patron. And when patrons called the tune, clients played. Paul would not allow his ministry to fall under the sway, or even the appearance, of such a powerful system. Also, Paul lived in a cynical age that saw oratory as a device by which skilled speakers used fine but empty words to secure a wage for themselves. Paul was willing to go to extreme lengths to make sure that the light of Christ was not dimmed by or confused for something else.

As is so often the case with Paul, he then uses a practical issue to open the door to far deeper truths. He moves from explaining and defending his financial donor policy to a series of deeply personal statements about his determination to share the gospel and his disciplined flexibility in doing so.

This is what we're going to see in this passage: Paul was overwhelmed by the person of Christ, and that gave him incredible tenacity. We tend to look to charisma and skill in leaders, and appreciate them based on their short-term success. But Paul's distinguishing characteristic was his ability to suffer for the cause while leading a holy life. We tend to want to boil things down to principles out of which we can live secure, controlled lives. But in Paul's mind the risen

Lord was always personal, immediate, and beautiful. We tend to want simple, easy programs to see people come to Christ, but Paul disciplined himself to cross barriers and reach towards those far away from the gospel.

There are two phrases in this paragraph that stand out in expressing his tenacity. The first is in vs 12: he and his band “put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” The relative weight of the good of anything next to the good of the gospel for Paul is 0. In contrast, we live in an age when everything is supposed to have a worth in dollars assigned to it. But as soon as something has a price, it is potentially exchangeable for something else. One of the most popular and overused words in business is “leverage.” A good manager must “leverage” what they have to get more of something else. But leverage really means stretching or risking or exchanging something in the service of something else.

But Paul admits no horse trading of the gospel for other goals, no backscratching with other causes, no thinking win-win of the gospel and some other good. Anything that would even appear to draw into question is just not worth doing.

The second phrase that shows Paul’s tenacity is in vs 16: “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” Paul, the apostle of the heart set free, the author of the charter of Christian freedom, the champion of grace – this very man says “I am *compelled* to preach.” How does this work? He even says that in preaching he is merely discharging a duty – as if being the greatest preacher of the gospel doesn’t get him any points at all. He has to also do it for *free* in order to get any credit! What is he talking about?

I hope to make you more intrigued about Paul as a person. Liberal Protestantism has been completely embarrassed by him, and I think that over time some of that has spilled over into evangelicalism. We evangelicals love his lofty theology but really don’t talk all that much about all of his personality: his cranky cajoling, his talk about boasting, and his often awkward self-disclosure. But over the last nine years, as a faltering missionary myself, Paul has become so alive to me, a great mentor, and even a friend. I would have loved to be the water boy on his team.

To understand him is to understand that the day he became a Christian was both the best and worst day of his life. His Christian life started with a cataclysm. Strolling down the road to round up and kill or imprison the next bunch of Christians, incredibly knowledgeable about God’s law, he was knocked down to the dirt and found out that he was the most wrong man in the Roman Empire. He immediately started to learn from and submit to the very people had despised. Imagine if right after you became a Christian someone said to you, hey, did you hear there is a word from the Lord about you? Wanna hear it? OK, here it is: “You are the Lord’s chosen instrument to carry his name before both Gentiles and Israelites.” Oh, and, um there’s something about the Lord showing you how

much you must suffer for his name. Paul felt like he didn't even deserve to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church.

When Christ blew up Paul's life, it was an explosion of joy, but a lot of us can relate to such a complete break only by thinking about tragedies. Tragedies are things you just never quite get over. You never get back to "normal" after a tragedy – you instead learn to find a "new normal." Paul never got over his experience of meeting Christ. His new normal continually reflected Christ's invasion of his life.

Paul is not serving Christ out of what we call 'guilt.' He just is totally bowled over by Jesus, and that makes him incredibly determined. An example that captures this kind of determination, born out of relationship, is from the 90s movie Tombstone about Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. Doc Holliday, played by Val Kilmer, insists on sticking with Wyatt Earp's posse despite being violently ill from consumption. While sitting under a tree, coughing up blood, Jack Johnson, one of the other posse members asks Doc "what you doin' this for, anyway?" In response Doc slowly says "Wyatt Earp is my friend." Johnson replies (in the network TV version) "Shoot, I got lots of friends." Doc simply says "I don't."

Paul never got over what Jesus had done for him, and because of that, he just couldn't be silent. An explosion of joy left his ears ringing for the rest of his life. I want to be just as deeply amazed at what Jesus did for me.

In the next section we will see that because the Lord was so alive to Paul, he is incredibly flexible and yet disciplined in the steps he will take to help others to understand Jesus. The joy of the Lord makes him strong enough to be a slave. I'll read vs. 19-27.

19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Though Paul is truly free, he chooses to make himself a slave to others. The great persecutor of the church was chosen to meet Christ face to face as an apostle unnaturally born. Only the otherwise demeaning term 'slave' could describe his joyful reaction to Jesus. All of what we teach and uphold to one another in this church about the freedom we have in Christ is true. But it doesn't *stop* at freedom. For a mature believer, there is a really profound and holy 'dance' between total freedom and worship that leads us to pick up our crosses and follow Christ down the path he walked. And carrying our crosses leads us ever deeper into freedom and praise. This isn't about heroism – it's about an overflow of praise.

Evangelism, extending yourself across cultural gaps, and suffering are intertwined. Evangelism in particular brings on a kind of dislocation in trying to really relate to different people.

These verses speak very powerfully to me. Supposedly Garrison Keillor once said "you're never as smart in some other country as in your own." As someone who likes to sound smart, this is really hard for me. I am inarticulate, stumbling, weak and unwise among Croats. My deficit of knowledge, wrong intuition, misunderstanding of subtle cultural cues, and grammar mistakes are always with me. I almost never feel like I am hitting on all cylinders in an open, wide-ranging conversation in Croatian. But I keep going and I do everything so that Croats can more fully share in the gospel's blessings.

In a place as diverse as the Bay Area, you can experience this just by crossing the street. Friends of ours, a couple in this body, befriended an immigrant family from a country very much closed to gospel. But it is not an easy process. Sometimes the family appreciates the help given them, sometimes not. Our friends are building trust, but it is messy and complicated, and they are limited by some of the challenges in their own lives as well. But their lives are an example of this kind of stretching towards others.

Do you notice Paul says in vs 22 that he does all of this to win *some*? No matter what you read in prayer letters and missions marketing, know that evangelism is messy. You rarely know what's really going on. The person you get most excited about often ends up the least interested. People who seem to be uninterested come back later and tell you how God totally changed lives without your help. It's often two steps forward, one or two or three steps back.

Paul joins this to a discussion of discipline, of sticking it out in these kinds of stretching, pulling situations. Discipline really does play a role in evangelism. I love people, but I need time alone – I need a lot of time alone. So we stretch ourselves to say yes to invitations, to pursue friendships, while also listening for our limits and taking time to be alone. We work at setting our lives up so that we are with people as much as we can and have the energy for. But we do what we

can, not what we can't. Getting a good sense of your own limits is a big part of growing in fruitfulness.

I feel like in saying this I am probably bumping up against a lot of deep feelings in many of you about work and grace, but I'm not suggesting you "try harder." What God is working to do in us involves a lot more patient endurance than we are accustomed to, but a lot less frenzy and a lot less obsession with results than our culture has programmed us to believe in. It's about being set free to give ourselves away.

Paul never got over what Christ did for him, and that made him determined, but also free to take on the incredible challenge of communicating the gospel across divides. He was free to from the mania of his own time. His focus was always on Christ, and I think that the early church followed his legacy in this as it expanded throughout the Roman Empire.

It's tricky to take a look at the early church. We evangelicals don't make the mistake of liberal scholars who in their search for the historical Jesus always just found their best selves – the peace loving hippy Jesus, or the Marxist revolutionary Jesus, or the guru Jesus. But I think we often make a parallel mistake with the early church, picturing it as the best possible version of our own churches.

I had an interesting chance to watch this in a seminary class taught by Chris Armstrong, the former editor of Christian History magazine. Armstrong asked our class of mostly youth pastors and church planters what we thought really made the early church keep growing for 300 years. The answers we gave reflected our own ideals for churches – passionate worship, incredible community, great teaching, clear doctrine, etc. Armstrong brought us up short by saying, yeah, that's all great, but how about things like this – Christians cared for each other and outsiders during plagues. This meant that some Christians did things that directly led to their own deaths, but the survival rate of Christians not only then exceeded that of the general population but also non-Christian friends and neighbors were deeply affected by the behavior of believers. Christians did not abort their children or abandon baby girls as was customary in Roman society, and rescued many babies abandoned by others. These and others are sociological arguments made by Rodney Stark in a fascinating book called *The Rise of Early Christianity*, in which he claimed that Christianity did not take over the Roman world so much by continual public preaching as by living in an incredibly distinct way. The population density in Roman cities was incredibly high, and Christians' lives could not help but be readily visible to the lives of those around them. It was the lives of poor, ordinary, usually illiterate believers that fueled the growth of the church. The church probably doubled in size every 20 years or so generation after generation for 300 years.

The early churches were often a mess – they often even had poor teaching. But what the early Church had was what Paul had: rock solid convictions about Christ as the clue, source, and goal of history. In a crazy world they saw everything through Jesus-colored lenses. They shared in his weakness; they also shared in his powers. They confronted everyone around them with ultimate issues of existence. And they did this generation after generation after generation.

A later Roman Emperor, Julian, who earned himself the title “the Apostate” by turning away from the Christian faith he was raised in, sought to restore the glory of paganism. Julian’s exhortations are quite revealing of the behavior of Christians in the fourth century. This is Julian giving a pep talk to pagan priests:

"Why do we not notice that it is their kindness to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism [i.e., Christianity]? ... [this is what I want you to do:] in every city establish hostels in order that strangers may profit by our generosity; I do not mean for our own people only, but for others also who are in need of money...for it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg and the impious Galileans [another derogatory term for Christians] support both their own poor and ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us."

Based on Paul, based on the church throughout history, I take encouragement that we do not need today to be paralyzed that Christianity is losing its cultural grip on America. It is something to mourn, but something to also accept as the new normal. Somehow Christ, the Lord of history, has a reason for bringing the western world to the point of thinking the good news is neither good nor news. It’s a tough situation today: Tim Keller talks about the fact that we don’t just need to do apologetics anymore, we need to do apologetics for our apologetics – to defend the idea that our ideas are worth listening to.

There are fewer and fewer people today in a state of spiritual need like my family in the 90s – people who have a regard for God but who grew up in churches that did not teach the gospel, needing nothing more than a direct explanation of the truth to change the course of their lives. Today we more often that not have to *earn* the right to be heard.

A good example of this comes from a New York City pastor named Kristian Rose, who intentionally leads his church to do volunteer work in secular organizations. He explains that "If post-Christian, postmodern, secular New Yorkers are ever going to listen to the gospel, it's going to have to be legitimized in their eyes. So, while we're not doing mercy ministry to legitimize our message, we're doing mercy ministry because it's a demonstration of the message. And we have seen this awaken people's hearts."

"In some of our ministries, we're upfront and explicit in preaching the gospel (in soup kitchens, for instance). In others, we have to be more patient and build some relational capital first.

"We've been at the Ronald McDonald House for a couple of months and I would venture to say that not all the residents there know that we're Christians. We didn't come in holding a 'Jesus Saves' banner or wearing church t-shirts. But as conversations are started and relationships are built, it becomes apparent. We're not trying to broadcast it, but just trying to be sincere."

Believers have the answers to questions – such as “how can I be saved” – that fewer people are asking anymore, but when we are together with people, they slowly start asking the right questions. This is a huge cultural shift, but the early church also had an enormous cultural shift to navigate – that of the fact that the Gentiles had been allowed into the people of God. It bewildered and confused many, even Peter at times. But the early church responded to their sovereign Lord and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the gentiles. They accepted what Christ the Lord was doing.

I was trained in methods of evangelism that sought to stay on comfortable ground, where simple answers made it “easy and fun for the whole family.” So when it got messy, I usually something was wrong with me and what I was doing.

But we have entered an age in which evangelism as a method, material, or media is less and less significant, so to “apply” what I am saying by ending with a bunch of tools to try is not likely to be fruitful. Before I make any suggestions, let me say that for me the finest fruit of this sermon would be that the next time you're out among people, feeling disjointed, off-center, and uncomfortable, and a voice in your head is screaming “this is not uncomfortable, therefore, I do not belong here,” you will instead hear the voice of Jesus saying “I am right here. This is the place to know me and the joy of my father.”

But I do want to mention some areas of both learning and engaging that you might find useful, starting from our own hearts, going on to our personal lives, then to our life as a community.

In terms of learning in your heart, what would it be for you to be sold on your own product - the whole thing – God, Jesus, the Bible, and even the Church? If it has been a while since the beauty and truth of God's plan and work has been impressed on your heart in a new way, you're not going to be excited to talk about him with others. I am a mess in so many ways, but I am so thankful for God's enormous patience with me, and the way he shows me over and over how limited my own perspective is, especially by my cultural position. And almost every time he does, it allows me to see a little bit more of his beauty. Every time I realize that the problem is not with him, the problem is with me and my perspective. When I am excited about him, I am excited to talk about him.

The problem is not that Jesus and his ways are no longer relevant. The problem is that Jesus' ways have so deeply but imperfectly infused into our world it has no idea what it owes him. We assume so many things that would not exist if not for the Jews and then Christ – regard for life in an ordered community that also values the worth of each individual as precious, a life marked off by rhythms of rest and work, redemption for broken people, confidence that the world is ordered enough to make scientific inquiry worthwhile – the list goes on and on. Knowing the big picture of what this world owes to Jesus can make a big difference in facing the anxious blame it places on Christianity for so many of its problems. So do the hard intellectual work of learning about his role in history.

In terms of engaging your own heart, talk to Jesus about it when you feel a lack of enthusiasm for talking to others about him. I find myself asking him “Jesus, how is it that I am not really getting how precious you are?” “Where is my thinking wrong about what you've done for me?”

In terms of personal learning, moving out from your heart to your relationships, it is good spiritual exercise to learn how to share the gospel simply. 1 Peter 3:15 tells us to always be ready to give an explanation for the hope that is in us. If you've never done so, get someone to help you write a simple, honest 3 minute testimony of what God has done for you. And learn or write a brief explanation of the gospel. There are many innovative gospel presentations available today that have moved away from tract-shaped booklets and involve such things as drawing on napkins or discussing thought-provoking images from a deck of cards.

In terms of engaging those around you individually, in your everyday life, each one of you is God's chosen light for the family, neighborhood, school, and workplace in which he has placed you. So be a real friend to non-Christians. This can be unpleasant - it means really allowing yourself to be on their turf and see the world through their eyes – politically, philosophically, spiritually. But Paul was willing to become like people in order for them to understand. God's plan of salvation depends on incarnation. If he could bear being human, I can bear sitting in a smoky café, listening to a friend go on about stuff that sometimes breaks my heart, wondering how I could bring Jesus into the conversation.

Ask openended questions like “what would have to happen for a relationship with Christ to seem interesting to you” – and let their answers form your prayers. Take the stance of a learner. Tell people you're curious to let them explain to you how they see the world.

In terms of corporate learning, I exhort you as a body to become a learning community about the culture right here in the Bay Area in the same ways a missionary team does when it comes to a new land. Here are some questions that I don't know the answers to, nor what effect they have on us: Why do California homes have high fences? What does that do to our relationships?

Why is it that both Southern California and the Bay Area are famously secular communities, but the gospel's place in the life of Los Angeles is so much more obvious: it is the birthplace of modern Pentecostalism, Billy Graham, Campus Crusade, and a host of other movements of God. On the other hand, the Bay Area was the home of the most monstrous American of the 20th century, Jim Jones? What is the lasting effect of the fact that Jones' church looked "evangelical," multi-cultural, and oriented around social justice? What does it do to us that when you watch the local news they (at least used to say) "the news from the best place on earth?" This church has such a wealth of thoughtful people who work in enormously influential institutions, who are tied into the cultural factory of Silicon Valley. This area excels any other place I've ever seen in terms of the excellence of its work and play, but it doesn't have a soul. God is looking to work through you to confront and unmask that soullessness by your life together in Christ.

Learn together also about the kind of steps people go through in coming to Christ in this time and place. Two Intersociety missionaries wrote an excellent book recently called "I once was lost" based on interviews with hundreds of students who have come to Christ in recent years. They identify a number of thresholds that people far from Christ cross on the way to him. One excellent observation they make is that people need to first get over the threshold of learning to trust a Christian, but that after that they need to get over the threshold of becoming intrigued about Christ. This can require us to have some finesse in our friendships – to be patient friends who win trust, but also provocative friends that challenge people to think.

Engage corporately by making your relationships with outsiders a part of bible studies and home fellowships. Pick 3-5 friends each and make regular prayer for and discussion of their needs and hangups a part of your time together.

In everything, be patient. There's a saying in missions circles that you will overestimate what will happen in two years but underestimate what will happen in five. Pick commitments to a volunteer organization, neighbor, or group of friends, and stick with it for longer than your intuition tells you should be necessary to "see something happen."

I'd like to close with a charge to you: the joy we yearn to experience isn't to be found only in one more excellent Bible study or spiritual discipline. It is instead to be found in struggling to love people in Jesus' name. Christ's love does not make us slick or full of answers – it instead *compels* us to love people, to extend ourselves across boundaries. We have seen his beauty and we want to be with him. And he is out on the edge of the darkness. Evangelism is really just an act of worship, by which we seek to be with the Lord where he is. So may the beauty of Christ so overwhelm us that we love those around us with patient endurance. We've got nothing to lose, nothing to prove, but so much to gain by being with the Lord on the edge of the darkness.

