

What I learned from my PhD oral examination.

After being interrogated for 4 hours and 15 minutes, I sat down and reflected on a few lessons God taught me in this process. Here are a few of them:

1. I am not humble.

I went into the exam terrified, afraid, mortified, and scared. Period. But I felt prepared. I had studied for months and been reading the list of required books for years (literally). But I went into the exam feeling as though I could handle myself alright and that I knew the basic gist of many of the issues. But that all changed after I updated them about my ministry plans at the beginning of the examination time! They asked question after question that were hard, difficult, and mind-stretching. After pontificating for a few minutes and they quickly ascertained that a particular issue was a weak spot for me, they would take that issue a step farther and ask a similar question that relates to the previous issue that I struggled my way through. At the end of the four hour examination, I felt as though I was an inch tall—which is one inch too tall! I was humbled, broken, and low.

2. I do not know everything.

I did not go into the exam arrogantly self-exalted thinking that I would master everything. But one truth I learned loud and clear in the time that I spent with my three examiners was that I do not know everything. Not a very new thing to those of you who *do* know me! But nevertheless, God reminded me, a stubborn and hard-headed guy, that I need to be humble because I do not know everything. Questions they asked—whether it related to Greek grammar, textual criticism, inerrancy, Hebrew grammar, theological interpretation of the Bible, chronology of certain NT letters—embraced afresh on my mind the reality that I just simply don't know everything. Therefore, I learned to be humble, seek for God, and study His Word *daily* and *ferently*.

3. Godly men know much more than me and I must strive to learn from them.

My examiners are professors for a reason. They know much more than me. At times, they even had to exegete the questions they asked me so that I could understand them. These godly men know the Word, know theology, know grammar, know text criticism and other relevant issues and God reminded me that there are those (many!) that know a great deal more than me and I must strive to learn from them. A PhD is not the end goal of a road of research and study; it merely begins the road of research and the journey of joy in learning about God and His Word.

4. Be willing to say "I don't know."

Words that came from my mouth more than once were: "I don't know." If I said that after every question they asked that'd be a problem. But there were a few times I just had to suck it up, swallow my pride, and spit out the words: "I just don't know." Not only is that

humbling—especially on a PhD oral examination, but it reemphasized to me (again—cause I need constant reminders) that I just don’t know it all.

5. When those who love you tell you where your “weak spots” are, be humble enough to write it down, ask questions, and commit to doing further study in those areas in particular.

After the exam, they brought me back into the conference room, I took my seat at my end of the roundtable and then they shared with me four areas that are “weak spots.” I wrote them down and told myself that I will read up, study, and improve in those areas. I had lunch with my mentor and dissertation advisor, Rod Decker, and I asked him to elaborate and help me understand some of those weak spots better. He helpfully explained some of those issues and provided some resources for further study.

6. God is faithful and gives strength in the hardest of times.

I prayed and asked the Lord to give me the grace to endure the preparation—and He did. I begged the Lord to sustain me through the four hours of examination—and He did. I pleaded with the Lord to be merciful to me and allow me to pass—and He did. I committed the day—and the exam—to the Lord as an act of worship asking that He would be glorified in my efforts—and I believe He was. Truly the psalmist penned the words that are on the tip of my lips (and a text that I’m eager to preach this Sunday morning):

גִּבֹר עָלֵינוּ חֶסֶדוֹ וְאֶמֶת יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם

*“His covenant-love is great toward us; and the truth of the LORD is everlasting”
—Psalm 117:2*

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