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PLUS Simon the Magician / Beyond Quiet Time / Will We Give Back Our Rewards? /
John Wesley on How to Read the Bible / A Good Soldier / Genuine Disagreements /

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FROM THE EDITOR

Why dedicate a whole magazine to our blogs?

To convince you to sign up.

When Bob and I started blogging, we saw it as another item for our lengthy to-do lists. We weren't enthusiastic.

But people insisted that we enter the 21st century. They wanted a regular source of content, the way other ministries produced daily content. And they wanted to read it on their phones and tablets and computers.

So we started blogging.

At first, it was hard. We each aimed to write one blog a week. We would write on whatever came into our heads that particular day, whether it was a substantial topic or not.

As it became part of our routine, the blogging got easier. And we began to get a response from readers.

People would call or write or email to tell us how encouraging this or that blog had been.

So we wrote more. We began to track whose blogs got the most shares. Bob and I are both competitive like that, so we tried to improve. The more we wrote, the better the blogs got (in our opinion) and the larger our subscription list grew.

Now the blog has gone from an afterthought to one of our main ministries! In fact, I set aside each Monday to write blogs.

We now have nearly three thousand subscribers receiving the blog in their inbox and many more who read us online. And the number is steadily growing a little every week.

There are eleven thousand of you reading this magazine. I would love for you to receive our blogs.

Grace in Focus provides a forum for longer articles from different Free Grace writers. By contrast, the blog is a forum to hear a brief word from me, or Bob, or Ken. The content is



Sign Up for the 21st Century

Shawn Lazar, **EDITOR**

different. The blog complements the magazine and vice versa. And I believe it will be a blessing to you, as it has already been a blessing for many.

Go to our website and click on "blogs" to sign up today. In return, we will be sending you a free ebook!



123RF

Simon the Magician Was Born Again

(Acts 8:4-25)

BY BOB WILKIN

We have run articles before in which we showed that Simon the Magician, *aka* Simon Magus, was a believer who sinned, not an unbeliever who sinned.

Today I came across an article by Dr. Michael Heiser, a Logos Bible Software scholar. While most commentators and most scholars say that Simon Magus probably was an unbeliever (see, for example, Stanley Toussaint, s.v. “Acts,” *BKC*, p. 373; F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, pp. 179-84; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, pp. 156-60), I was pleased to see that Heiser stuck with what Luke says about Simon and concluded that he was a believer who sinned and then repented.

Here is part of Heiser’s article:

The book of Acts is a favorite of preachers, so you are likely familiar with the showdown in Acts 8:9–24 between Peter and Simon the Magician. Luke tells us that Simon had practiced his magic in a city in Samaria where he had been hailed as “God’s Great Power” [“the great power of God,” NKJV]. Simon heard the gospel preached by Philip and

believed, but later, after Peter’s arrival, he tried to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter.

His name consequently has not been remembered for any great deeds, but for the payment of money for church office (“simony”). But is that all there is to the story? Hardly. Don’t look away now or you’ll miss what’s behind the magic...

But how could the Samaritans speak of Simon as though he were God? Well, Simon was able to do amazing things. We aren’t told if what he was doing was something he picked up learning magical trickery or enablement from a demonic power, but the effect was the same... Like many Jews and Christians, Samaritans considered one particular angel—the one in whom Yahweh’s name dwelled (Exod 23:20–23)—as the embodied Yahweh. Since this angel was viewed as a physical manifestation of the true God—the “Great Power”—Simon’s acts of magical power had convinced many Samaritans that he, too, was a fleshly manifestation of God.

It's easy to see how Luke, writing in full knowledge of the incarnation of God in Christ, would have sought to use this encounter. The drama is palpable. Philip had taken the message that God had become man in Jesus Christ to Samaria, where they already had their own incarnate deity, Simon the Magician, "God's Great Power." Incredibly, Luke records that the power of the gospel broke through to Simon, moving him to embrace the message of Philip. And when he saw the signs and miracles Philip performed, "Great Power" was drained. So much for all that Hogwarts tuition!

From Luke's account, Simon must have realized very quickly that his own repertoire of tricks, however stunning they were to the masses, fell far short of what he had seen from Philip. Simon's conversion reads quite genuine. Luke is careful to note, though, that Simon saw the powerful deeds of Philip only after he believed, when he began accompanying Philip in the city (Acts 8:13). But he hadn't seen anything yet.

Luke tells us that when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that the gospel had reached the Samaritans—a people hated by "pure" Jews for centuries (John 4:9)—they sent Peter and John not to investigate whether it was true, but to pray for the Samaritan believers that they might receive the same Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–17) that had abided with them since the explosion of the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2). This alone is a powerful message. Two Jewish men who had grown up with their own prejudices about the Samaritans didn't doubt that the grace of God included people they had scorned. Nothing Jesus had promised was to be withheld from them.

Unfortunately, Simon had a lot to learn about the real Great Power. When Simon saw that the Samaritans upon whom Peter and John laid their hands had received the Holy Spirit (no doubt evidenced in some tangible, powerful way), he wanted to experience that power himself. That's understandable. But where he went wrong was trying to pay for it (Acts 8:18–19). Peter rebuked him harshly, and Simon repented immediately (Acts 8:20–24).

Nevertheless, Simon's name lives on in infamy. Because of his on-the-spot repentance, not to mention the fact that he'd probably only been a believer for at most a couple of weeks, it seems unreasonable to vilify Simon. In Simon, we have a man who was one day hailed as the incarnate God but the next repented at the words of a couple of fishermen. We should remember the broken heart more than the misguided gesture.

“Simon was not the great power of God, but he came to faith in the one who is, the Lord Jesus Christ. His coming to faith is indeed a magnificent testimony.”

When inspired Scripture says that someone believed in Jesus, we are not at liberty to say that the person in question was a false professor. The issue is not what the person himself professes. The issue is what the Word of God professes to be true.

I also like Heiser's analysis of the significance of Simon's being called "the great power of God." I think he is right that Luke is utilizing that fact to underline the amazing nature of this man's coming to

faith. Simon was not the great power of God, but he came to faith in the one who is, the Lord Jesus Christ. His coming to faith is indeed a magnificent testimony.

I agree with Heiser. Well done. The evidence is overwhelming that Simon has gotten a bad rap. **GFH**



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Beyond Quiet Time

By Shawn Lazar

Are you a trifler? That's not a word you hear very often. To *trifle* means to talk or act frivolously. If you're a trifler, you are not taking things seriously; you are not pursuing them with purpose.

John Wesley warned his itinerant preachers against being triflers in religion:

Fix some part of every day for private exercises...Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way: else you will be a trifler all your days (Quoted in Steve Harper, *Devotional Life*, p. 11).

Wesley was calling on his preachers to take personal responsibility for their spiritual growth. They would grow by reading the Bible daily and by praying regularly.

Do you do that?

Steve Harper explains that Wesley practiced what he preached. He looked for ways to express his spiritual life throughout the day. Whether he was traveling, or working, or with family, he was intent on devoting his life to Christ. He did not try to have a devotional *time*, so much as a devotional *life*. Hence, Harper distinguishes between having a “quiet time” and living a “devotional life”:

While it is certainly appropriate to have a quiet time with God at the beginning and end of the day, we must not see that time as equal to the devotional life or separate from the rest of our day (*Devotional Life*, p. 18).

The Apostle Paul said, “For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus,” (Phil 2:21).




LIGHTSTOCK

Paul expected believers to seek Christ first.

That seeking did not only happen for a few minutes in the morning, and then another few minutes in the evening.

You are to put the things of Christ first, all the time, every day, in every way.

If that's not true of you, are you just trifling? 



Shawn Lazar is the Editor of *Grace in Focus* magazine. He is married to Abby, and they have three children. He is the pastor of Gateway Baptist's Faith Fellowship in Denton, TX (www.faithfellowshipdenton.org).





Will We Give Back Our Rewards?

By Bob Wilkin

Casting Their Crowns

A reader wondered:
I thought of Rev 4:10-11, where it says the 24 Elders will cast their crowns down before the feet of Jesus. *The Grace New Testament Commentary* doesn't say much on this. I looked at another commentary and it said that maybe we will be so full of gratitude that we will be overwhelmed and realize only God is worthy of glory, honor, and power. That whatever we did on Earth to earn rewards will pale in comparison to being in the presence of the Lord Jesus who alone is worthy. Crowns will seem an insignificant gift to present to the One who gave Himself for us.

I remember seeing a video on eschatology put out by Dallas Theological Seminary. In one of the lessons, the three famous Dispensationalist speakers, Drs. John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost, discussed the Judgment Seat of Christ and eternal rewards. One of them brought up Rev 4:10-11 and the casting of crowns at the feet of Jesus. They all agreed that meant that any rewards we receive we will immediately give back, laying them at the feet of Jesus.

123RF

Despite the fact that I much look up to those men, I concluded they were wrong. The Scriptures clearly contradict that view.

In Luke 19:17, 19 we read of one servant of Christ who will rule over 10 cities and one who will rule over 5 cities. Those rewards cannot be given back. The Lord gave those men commissions.

In Rev 2:26 the Lord said that He would give authority and rulership over the nations to those who overcome. Again, those positions cannot be abdicated.

Here are some contextual observations regarding Rev 4:10-11 which help us understand it:


1. Verse 10 is part of a sentence that begins at v 9 with the words, “Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him...” According to v 8, “they do not rest day or night, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’” *Thus the crown casting is not a one-time event.* The 24 elders keep on casting their crowns at the feet of Jesus *every time the living creatures give God glory, which they do incessantly.* This drama goes on continuously for the seven years of the Tribulation.
2. What the elders are acting out is that all glory and honor and power flows from the Lord Jesus Christ. They are not denying that men will have glory, honor, and power. What they are saying is that all glory and honor and power are delegated from the Lord.
3. There is nothing in the context to suggest that the crowns represent all eternal rewards. Even if one of the rewards given out at the Bema were literal crowns, and even if Rev 4:10-11 says we give the crowns back in a one-time event (which it does not say), that would still not deny the many other rewards that faithful believers are guaranteed to receive.
4. Eternal rewards are spoken of later in Revelation, in the section dealing with the eternal kingdom on the new earth (Rev 21:7; 22:14). If Rev 4:10-11 means that humans will give back *all* rewards, then Rev 21:7 and Rev 22:14 contradict that earlier claim.

In an excellent article entitled, “Degrees of Rewards in Eternity: Sanctification by Works?” (JOTGES, Autumn 2011), Douglas Bozung says this about crown casting in Rev 4:10-11:

“However, as can be cogently argued, the casting of crowns is an act of worship that continually acknowledges the One to whom all glory belongs. Therefore, it does not by itself negate the very real possibility that some will enjoy a greater capacity to worship God or other privileges in eternity.”

Bozung cites Ken Quick’s Doctor of Ministry dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary as agreeing with his understanding. Quick writes:

“[T]hough they cast their crowns before him, they do not cast their thrones, nor do they give up their position and proximity to Him. The casting of the crowns before the throne is symbolic of the words they say, ‘Worthy art thou...to receive glory and honor and power’...But this action *in no way changes the glory or honor He has bestowed on them. They keep it permanently*” (Kenneth B. Quick, “Living for the Kingdom” [D.Min. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989], 234, emphasis original) [cited by Bozung on pp. 38-39, note 25].

Revelation 4:10-11 does not say that we will give our rewards back to Christ. 



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. Check out his book *Grudem Against Grace: A Defense of Free Grace Theology*.

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John Wesley on How to Read the Bible



By Shawn Lazar

If you want to grow spiritually, you must read the Bible everyday. Or you should listen to the Bible being read. As the Psalmist said,

Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law *he meditates day and night*
(Ps 1:1-2, emphasis added).

But how can you get the most profit out of your Bible reading?

There's a difference between reading it *carefully* and reading it *carelessly*. There's a difference between *speed-reading* through the pages and *meditating* on the Word.

Are you reading the Bible seriously, or not?

John Wesley suggested asking the following questions to determine your level of seriousness.

"Am I reading the Bible in a way that brings me in contact with the whole of it?"

"Do I read Scripture in large enough portions to see isolated passages in their larger context?"

"Do I use responsible aids to add the insights of others to my own study of God's word?"

"Do I have any means of marking, noting, and recording my discoveries?"

Aren't Wesley's suggestions very practical?

To paraphrase: First, aim to read the whole of Scripture, not just your favorite parts of it. Second, don't just read your favorite verses out of context. Third, use good commentaries. Fourth, make notes so you'll remember later.

At church I have been emphasizing the importance of making notes as an aid to learning. I bought a box of Bibles and notebooks in case someone was missing either.

Wesley understood that good Bible students are made, not born. Has your reading been profitable? What tips would you suggest to get the most out of Scripture? ■



Shawn Lazar is the Editor of Grace in Focus magazine. He is married to Abby, and they have three children. He is a refugee from Canada and a learn-as-you-go handyman.

A GOOD SOLDIER





BY KEN YATES

Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim 2:3).

Technically, I was a soldier for over 20 years. But I was not a real soldier. I was a chaplain. As a chaplain I was an officer, and I got many benefits that a real soldier did not. If things got uncomfortable or hard, I could usually find a way, or an excuse, out of the situation.

But did I ever have a great deal of respect for real soldiers. Not only do they spend time away from their families, but they often deal with many physical hardships when they do so. Their food is often terrible. Their bed is sometimes the ground. The weather beats upon them. They have to spend many nights without sleep as they accomplish either real world or training missions.

We have seen on television how many of them spend years in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. In those places they face the possibility of injuries or even death. A good friend of mine, a real soldier, volunteered for his

second tour in Iraq. On that tour he lost both of his legs in an explosion.

I say these things just to give civilians who have never been in the military an idea of how difficult it is to be a real soldier. The country singer Toby Keith wrote a song called, "An American Soldier." He tried to capture what they do. Part of the lyrics are as follows:

And I will always do my duty,
No matter what the price,
I've counted up the cost,
I know the sacrifice.
Oh, and I don't want to die for you,
But if dyin's asked of me,
I'll bear that cross with honor,
'Cause freedom don't come free.

Perhaps that puts Paul's words to Timothy in a more understandable context. He tells Timothy to endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ.

Paul was such a soldier. He had endured many hardships for the Lord, and when he wrote this letter he was in prison waiting to be executed. He wants Timothy to follow that example.

“When all these things are taken into consideration, it is clear that Timothy was in the midst of a spiritual battle. Just like a real soldier, he would have to endure hardship if he was going to complete his mission.”

Timothy had been left at Ephesus. Even though Paul had spent a long time there, it was not a city that was particularly friendly towards him. Paul’s ministry there had caused a riot (Acts 19). It was a center of idolatry. The church was in danger of false teachers (Rev 2:2), just as Paul had predicted (Acts 20:29-30).

Timothy was following the footsteps of a condemned criminal. We also know that he had some physical ailments (1 Tim 5:23). He was a young man, and some in the churches resented his youth (1 Tim 4:12), since he was the lieutenant of the Apostle Paul. Couldn’t Paul have found somebody more qualified?

When all these things are taken into consideration, it is clear that Timothy was in the midst of a spiritual battle. Just like a real soldier, he would have to endure hardship if he was going to complete his mission.

But just as when we look at real soldiers in the army, we can look at what was required of Timothy and ask if such hardships were worth it. Paul tells Timothy that all the hardships he faces are indeed worth the sacrifice. He says that Timothy is working for a prize (2 Tim 2:5). That prize would include reigning with Christ in His Kingdom (2 Tim 2:12).

When I saw real soldiers in the Army do what they do, I often wondered: Why do they do it? The answers I would get when I asked them were many. Some did it because it was the best paying job they could find. Some did it for the benefits. Some did it because their fathers and grandfathers had served in the Army. Some did it for patriotic reasons, such as a response to September 11th. Almost all of them said that they also desired higher rank and more responsibility in the Army. If they performed well, they would obtain that

goal. Whatever the reason, they did it because they thought the reward was worth the hardships they endured.

As a Christian, Timothy was asked to endure hardships for his commander, the Lord Jesus Christ. Clearly we are as well. As Free Grace people we have the gospel that so desperately needs to be proclaimed. The vast majority of the world opposes our message. If we are going to faithfully proclaim it, we will have to be like real soldiers.

But Paul says the sacrifices will be well worth it. He thought so even after all he had gone through. He thought so even though he was about to die in his service to the Lord. He did it because he desired to please the Lord and reign with Him in His coming Kingdom. He wanted great responsibility in that Kingdom. We should too. Let’s not be the kind of soldier I was in the Army. Let’s be like the soldier in Toby Keith’s song. Let’s be real soldiers of the Lord. ■



Ken Yates (Lt. Col., retired) is Editor of The Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society and GES’s East Coast and International speaker. He is the pastor of Little River Baptist Church in Jenkinsville, SC.



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Bible Study Fellowship and Salvation by Works

By Shawn Lazar

Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) has done much good teaching people the Bible. But I hope, like any other ministry, they are open to some constructive criticism.

This past semester [Ed.: This was in 2017] they went through the Gospel of John. I was disappointed to read how often the Notes changed the promise of life from a message of salvation through *belief* in Jesus to a message of salvation by *obedience*. It seems they do this most often by redefining faith to include good works.

But you be the judge of that.

SOME GOOD INSIGHTS

Now, I'm not saying the Notes are rubbish. Not at all! For example, here are some good things in the Introduction Lesson:

"Eternal life comes only through *personal belief* in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom the signs reveal" (BSF Introduction Lesson, p.3, emphasis added).

I'm glad the Notes say that you get eternal life by belief in Jesus. Amen! But I have to ask, what is the opposite of "personal belief"—*impersonal* belief? What is that? This kind of language can confuse people because it suggests there might be different *ways* of believing (e.g., impersonal vs personal), instead of different *objects* of faith (e.g., the saving message vs a non-saving message).

The truth is, if you believe in Jesus—if you are persuaded that what He promises is true—you have eternal life.

Period.

It doesn't matter if your faith is "personal" or "impersonal." That's not a Biblical distinction.

Something else I appreciated is how the Notes teach that eternal life is a present possession for believers:

"Unending life and joy reaching forever into eternity—that is eternal life! Believers receive this gift immediately. God never makes His children wait until after death, at the judgment seat, to receive life. When people *truly believe* in Jesus, they have (present tense) everlasting life and have 'crossed over from death to life'" (Lesson 4 Notes, p. 4, emphasis added).

I'm glad the Notes emphasize that believers have eternal life "immediately" and that it reaches "forever." But what does "truly believe" mean? What's the difference between *believing* in Jesus for eternal life and *truly believing*? I worry that BSF is saying that you can believe in Jesus for what He promises—eternal life—but not "really" believe if you don't show it *through your behavior*.

REDEFINING BELIEF

I think my worry that BSF is redefining *belief* to include *behavior* is confirmed in the notes on John 3:36. That verse says,

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

John the Baptist's point is clear. We are commanded to believe and unbelief is disobedience. If you don't believe in Jesus, you are doing something wrong.

However, John is not saying that obeying God in our behavior is what it *means* to believe. He is not saying that good works are part of the

definition of believing. But that's how the BSF Notes understand it:

"Two opposite attitudes *and accompanying actions* result in two opposite and eternal consequences...The attitude of faith *involves the action of obedience...*" (BSF Lesson 4, p. 5, emphasis added).

This is very bad.

First, BSF redefines faith as an "attitude." That's unclear. What's an attitude?

The Collins Dictionary says, "Your attitude to something is the way that you think and feel about it, especially when this shows in the way you behave."

To be clear, the condition of salvation is *not* thinking, feeling, or behaving. It is believing. So taking the popular English meaning of "attitude" as the condition of salvation is not only confused, it also implies that works are a condition of salvation.

Second, BSF makes the condition of salvation faith *plus* "accompanying actions." Isn't "accompanying actions" another term for "works"? Are the Notes saying we are saved by faith plus accompanying actions?

Third, BSF specifically redefines faith to "involve the action of obedience." That's even more explicit. Are they saying that if you "really believe," your faith will involve obedience? It sure sounds like it.

Put those three together, and the BSF Notes teach salvation by works. They teach the condition of salvation is obedient faith plus accompanying actions. That is not the saving message. That is the exact opposite of the saving message.

WHOLLY COMMITTED

I'm sure that many people attending and leading BSF do not believe in salvation by works.

I'm sure many of the writers and editors of the Notes do not believe in salvation by works.

Nevertheless, that's what the Notes teach (in places).

If you aren't convinced, then consider what the Notes say about John 5:24. Here is the verse,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

Again, Jesus very simply makes *belief* the condition of eternal salvation. But here is what the BSF Notes say,

"Whoever *trusts* in Jesus *and commits wholly to Him* 'has crossed over from death to life.' Immediately, at that moment in time, Jesus gives eternal life. This life cannot end, for it comes with Jesus' promise that they 'will not be judged.' All who receive life from Jesus are free from God's condemnation. They need not fear final judgment and eternal death" (BSF Lesson 7, p. 4, emphasis added).

How did belief become commitment?

Although I appreciate the BSF Notes's emphasis on eternal life as a present possession and the implied promise of eternal security, I have to loudly object to redefining the condition of salvation from simply believing to "trusting in Jesus and committing wholly to Him." What does that mean?


When we consider the other Notes, we can conclude that, "committing wholly" to Jesus must include actions, obedience, and other works.

That's a big problem.

Let me ask you—how on earth can you know if you've *wholly* committed to Jesus through actions of obedience? How long does it take for you to know? How many actions of obedience does it take to pass from death to life? How much do you need to do before you know that you "really believe" and need not fear final judgment and eternal death?

PAY ATTENTION THIS SEMESTER

I have not read through the Notes in detail. From what I saw, they contain many profitable insights. But I think they can be improved by removing the references to salvation by works and making it clear that the *only* condition of eternal salvation is to *believe* in Jesus for what He promises—eternal life that cannot be lost.

I understand that BSF will be going through Romans this semester [Ed.: That was spring 2018]. Do me a favor. Pay attention. Specifically, pay attention to how the Notes present the condition of justification. Paul repeatedly says it is by faith apart from works. He couldn't be clearer. Will the BSF Notes agree, or will they try to say that works, behavior, actions, attitudes, and so on, are also necessary to be saved? Let us know. 



Shawn Lazar is the Editor of *Grace in Focus* magazine. Read his book *Chosen to Serve: Why Divine Election Is to Service, Not to Eternal Life*.



Rocky Mountain grace

Denver Regional Conference Crosspoint Community Church Centennial, CO September 14-15

The speakers were Bob Wilkin, John Niemelä, Lucas Kitchen, Steve Lewis, Lon Gregg, and Dix Winston. Ken was not able to come to this conference due to Hurricane Florence.

The subject was, "Is Calvinism Biblical?" All of the messages were excellent. They fit together very well.

We had 50-60 at the conference. Good attendance. Dean and Pat Thompson (age 83) drove in from Omaha! One man drove 14 hours from Idaho to be there. Three people from Chafer Seminary in Albuquerque were there too.

You should be able to listen to the audio from the conference on our website.



Bob bribing the audience with Chick-fil-A

JAARS September 20

On Sep 20, Ken Yates and new GES board member Tony Taffar traveled to Waxhaw, NC to take part in the Day of Celebration at JAARS. JAARS is an organization that is in the business of translating the NT into languages that do not have it. They train pilots and boat captains in order to take translators to isolated places



Ken and newbie Board Member Tony Taffar



Cheeseheads for Jesus! Trego, WI

to work on these translations. They also provide aircraft and mechanics to work on these aircraft. In addition, they use their computer expertise and special computer programs to work on these new translations.

Ken has been in contact with staff members at JAARS about the possibility of going to one of the groups of people with a new NT translation to teach Bible courses.

At the Day of Celebration, JAARS celebrated the fact that in the last year 42 new translations of the NT were completed to 42 different

language groups. While the average length of time to complete each translation was around 10-12 years, one took almost 60 years! In the pictures you can see some of the aircraft that JAARS uses to accomplish their mission. The other picture shows the 42 new translations completed in the last 12 months.



Hear," Luke 8:5-18), Saturday night ("What's Your Aim in Life," 2 Cor 5:1-11), and Sunday morning ("Gaining Your Life by Losing Your Life," Matt 16:24-28). During Sunday School I fielded questions.

Attendance was good, with seven coming from around Madison, WI (a four to five hour drive) and one from the Twin Cities (two hour drive).

Several people asked about having a regional conference in Wisconsin next year, possibly in the Madison area (which is also close to Dubuque, IA). That is certainly a possibility.

Sharon was able to come with me. We enjoyed the ministry, meeting many wonderful people, visiting with Bill and Jeanette, seeing the largest of the great lakes, Lake Superior, and seeing the beautiful country there, including the changing color of the trees and about five bald eagles.



New Books Coming

Ken Yates's commentary on Hebrews is nearly typeset. Shawn is hoping for a December release. You'll really appreciate what Ken does here.

Bob has made a lot of progress on a new book on repentance.


Bob has also made some headway on a book about 100 verses that teach faith alone.

Shawn is eager to finish up his book about hell.

Trego (WI) Community Church September 28-30

Bill Lee was pastoring in the Dallas area. He retired and he and his wife Jeanette moved to Trego, WI. They found a church and the church found them. Soon Bill became their pastor. He wrote about his experience there in *Grace in Focus* magazine.

I spoke once each Friday night ("Take Heed What You



J. I. Packer and the Bondage of Tradition

By Shawn Lazar

J. I. Packer, the famed Reformed Anglican theologian, has written more book forewords than anyone I know. It seems that every book published by a Calvinist has a foreword or an endorsement written by Packer.

Packer, along with O. R. Johnston, translated Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957). They did a great job. Luther was a great writer. A fighter. *The Bondage of the Will* is dripping with sarcasm, wit, and zingers, and Packer and Johnston make it very readable.

But *The Bondage of the Will* is also worth a place on your bookshelf because it is the best defense of the doctrine of total depravity. A Free Grace response to total depravity *must* take Luther's arguments into account.

Packer provides a historical and theological introduction to the book. And along the way, he reveals some key assumptions in this debate. Let me offer some quotes and point out the assumptions behind them:

"The truth is that [the Reformer's] thinking was really centered upon the contention of Paul, echoed with varying degrees of adequacy by Augustine, and Gottschalk, and Bradwardine, and Wycliffe, that

**“As a Biblicist, you
can’t simply take *their*
word as *the* Word.”**



the sinner’s entire salvation is by free and sovereign grace only” (p. 58).

What does Packer mean by “free and sovereign grace”?

I, too, believe that salvation is by God’s free and sovereign grace, but Packer and I would define those terms differently.

For Packer, “free,” “sovereign,” and “grace” all mean the same thing: *that God predestines everything that happens.*

For Packer, freedom is determinism, sovereignty is determinism, and grace is determinism. But is that the Biblical meaning of those terms? (Hint: No).

Here’s another quote:

“The sovereignty of grace found expression in [the Reformer’s] thinking at a profounder level still, in the doctrine of monergistic regeneration—the doctrine, that is, that the faith which receives Christ for justification is itself the free gift of a sovereign God, bestowed by spiritual regeneration in the act of effectual calling” (p. 58).

In this quote, Packer raises two major topics in the debate over total depravity. First, does God choose who comes to faith in Christ? And second, does regeneration precede faith? That is, does the Bible teach you must be born-again to believe, or that you must believe to be born-again? (Hint: What is the sequence in John 3?)

Here’s a final quote:

“What is the source and status of faith? Is it the God-given means whereby the God-given justification is received, or is it a condition

of justification which is left to man to fulfill? Is it a part of God’s gift of salvation, or is it man’s own contribution to salvation?...to rely on oneself for faith is no different in principle from relying on oneself for works, and the one is as un-Christian and anti-Christian as the other” (p. 59).

Packer is saying that believing in free-will is equivalent to believing in salvation by works. If you believe in free-will, then you’ve made the act of faith a work that contributes to your own salvation.

Based on this, it seems that, when Packer reads the phrase “by faith apart from works,” what he understands is “determinism apart from free-choice.”

That’s a huge assumption. Is that a Biblical understanding of faith and works and of the difference between them?

Ken Yates has been doing important work on the question of total depravity. I’ve been tinkering with it, too. The Reformers got many things right. They also got many things wrong. As a Biblicist, you can’t simply take *their* word as *the* Word. You have to check all their assumptions about the bondage of the will against Scripture. If not, you’ll suffer the bondage of tradition. **GLE**



Shawn Lazar is the Editor of Grace in Focus magazine. He is married to Abby, and they have three children. If you’ve ever doubted your salvation, read his book Beyond Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation.

It Just Makes You Wonder

(Revelation 21:1-2)

By Ken Yates

Many years ago there was a late night talk show hosted by Arsenio Hall. Each week he would have guests to interview. He would also do little comedy skits. One of these skits was called, “Things that make you say ‘hmmmmmm....?’”

In this segment Hall would point out how people contradict themselves. This could be in reference to some news item of the time or examples of people saying one thing and doing another. He would poke fun at these inconsistencies and say, these things make you say “hmmmm.”

A simple example (even though Hall never used it as far as I know) is when people say they like jumbo shrimp. How can a shrimp be “jumbo?”

My experience is that people often do the same thing when it comes to theology. They say they believe what the Bible says but then contradict what the Bible says. They are extremely inconsistent.

It would be easy to point to Bible passages that clearly teach Free Grace theology and how many who profess to believe in the Bible reject what the Bible clearly teaches. But let’s put those things aside for just a minute.

Whether a person holds to Free Grace or Lordship salvation, both believe that there is an eternal



kingdom of God coming. But where will this kingdom be?

Many in Free Grace (as well as others) have pointed out that the eternal kingdom will be on earth, not in some mystical place in the heavens. The Bible is clear on this point. For those interested in this topic, Bob Wilkin has a great discussion about it in his book *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible*. But we see how clear the teaching of the Bible is from verses like Rev 21:1-2:

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

In this description of eternity, could it be any clearer that the kingdom of God will be on a “new earth?” The capital of the kingdom will come down from heaven. The New Jerusalem will not be in heaven.

But isn’t it amazing that the vast majority of Christians do not believe that believers will live on the new earth? Their concept of eternity is based upon living in the clouds somewhere.


Now I know that many of these folks have never been told otherwise. But what is interesting is that even when you point it out, the majority of believers will not change their view. Sometimes it is because the Bible also teaches that one reason we will live in a new earth is because there will be differences and rewards in that kingdom. Most people don't believe that, and it is easier to believe there will be no rewards if we are just floating around in the clouds somewhere.

Even when you point out that the "popular" concept of eternity is based upon pagan (especially Greek philosophical) views, people are usually not willing to set aside their traditional beliefs.

What we see is that people are often inconsistent. They say that they believe in one thing (i.e., that the Bible is always true), but are not willing to reject what they hold as a traditional view (i.e., believers are going to live in the clouds forever) when the Bible contradicts it. When we see things like that, it makes us say, "hmmmmm."

This is informative for us for a couple of reasons. In the Free Grace movement, sometimes people say that our beliefs cannot be correct

because so few people believe what we believe. But we see from the example above that sometimes the majority view clearly goes against what the Bible says. Even if comparatively few people believe something, it can still be the right view. Even though a small minority of Christians believe that we will live on the new earth, that is exactly where we will spend eternity.

The other lesson we can learn is that we can be guilty of the same thing. We need to search to see what the Scriptures say. We need to be willing to accept what the Bible says even if it goes against cherished beliefs. If we don't, people can look at us and say, "hmmmmm." 

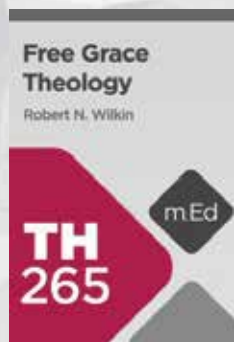


Ken Yates is Editor of The Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society and GES's East Coast and International speaker. He has a DMin from Erskine Theological Seminary and a PhD in New Testament from Dallas Theological Seminary.

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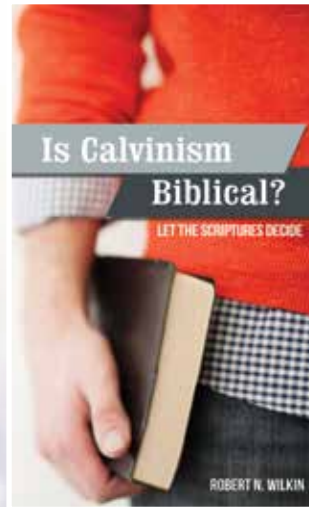


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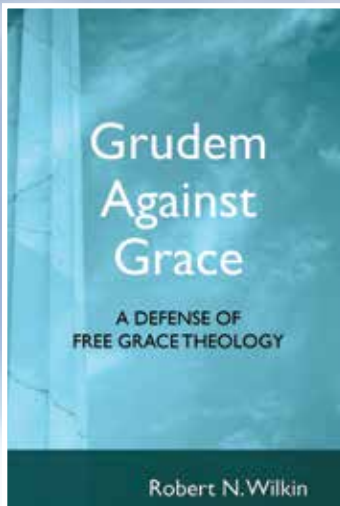


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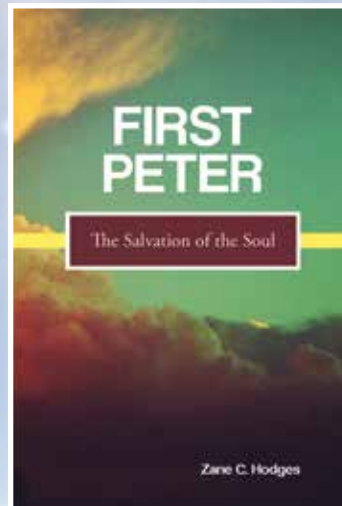


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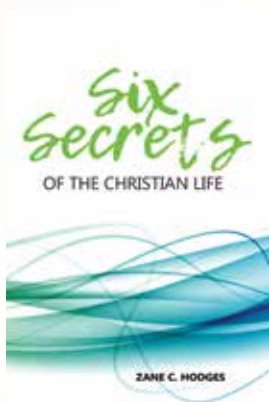
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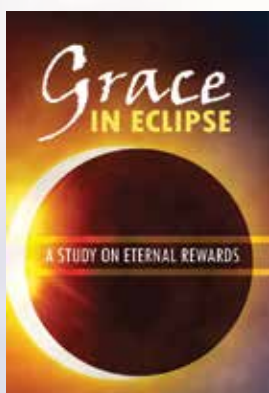


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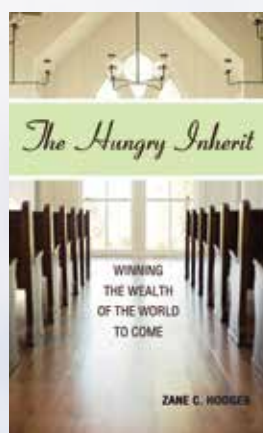


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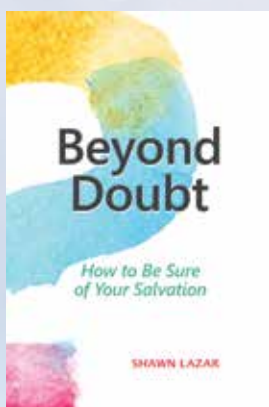


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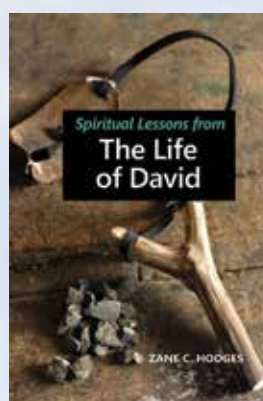


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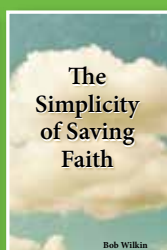


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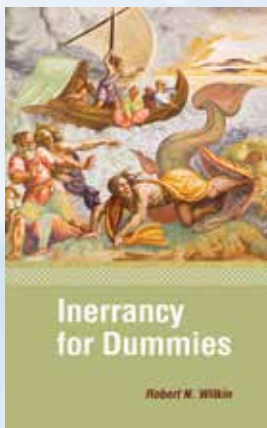
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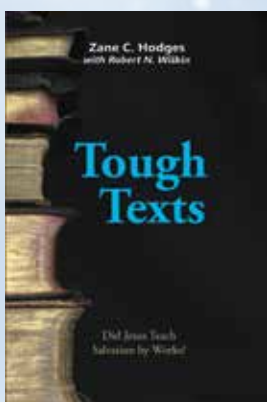


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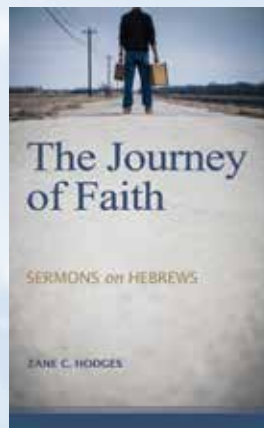


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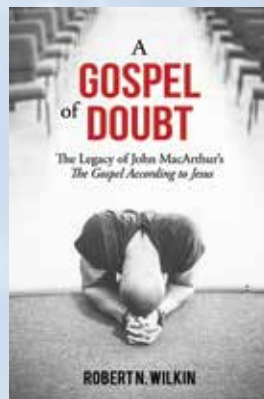


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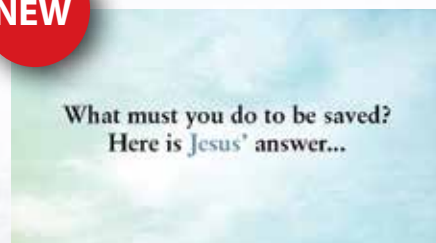
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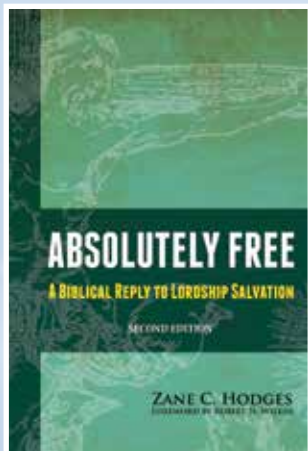


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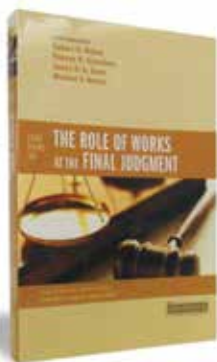
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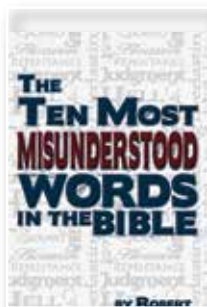
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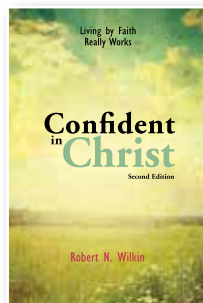
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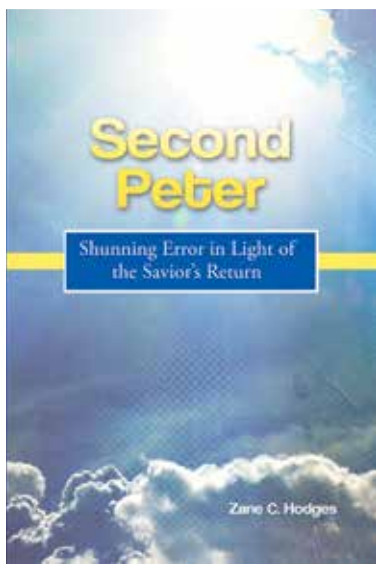
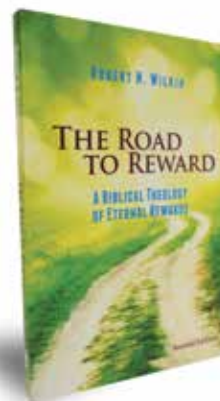
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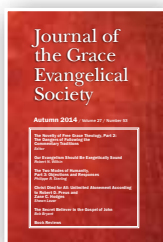
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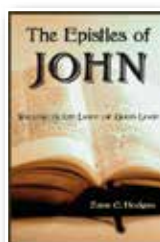




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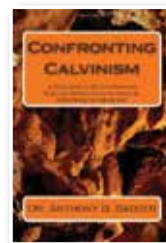


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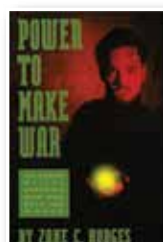


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Are Believers Under Law Today?

By Bob Wilkin

I received an email question today. A person wrote, “Galatians 2:19 and Rom 6:14 seem to be saying that believers are no longer under the Law of Moses, or any law. When we become believers, we are set free from law. Have I missed the boat?”

I think the questioner has one leg in the boat and one leg in the water. Let’s see if we can get him fully back into the boat.

He is correct that believers are no longer under the Law of Moses (Rom 6:14; 7:4-6; 8:2; 10:4; Gal 2:19; etc.).

However, believers in the church age are under law. The Greek word is *nomos*. If we do a concordance study, we will find that the law which we are under is variously called “the law of liberty” (Jas 2:12), “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2), “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2), and “the royal law” (Jas 2:8).

What is this law we are under? It is the commands of the NT. Nine of the Ten Commandments are part of both the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. Only the fourth commandment, to remember the Sabbath (the seventh day, Saturday), is not part of the Law of Christ. The commands



we find in the teachings of the Lord Jesus and His Apostles are our law today.

Of course, we are not born again by keeping the Law of Christ or any law. But the Law of Christ is part of our sanctification.

Though the questioner did not ask, I think Romans 7 makes it clear that a fixation on the commandments, even the commandments for us today, will not result in godliness, but in defeat. Our focus must be on the Commander, not the commands. As we focus on Jesus, we fall more in love with Him, and we long to please Him, and we are transformed (2 Cor 3:18). Of course, we are to study the commands we are under and to pray for the Spirit of God to empower us to keep them. When we confess our sins (1 John 1:9), we are admitting that we broke one of the commands and that we desire to keep it.

It is going too far to say that believers today are not under law at all. ■



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 42 years, Sharon. One of his most popular books is The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible.

GENUINE DISAGREEMENTS IN THE FREE GRACE MOVEMENT

By Shawn Lazar

Are you familiar with the term “fake news”? I’m sad to say there is a lot of fake news about GES online, often centering around what is known as the “crossless gospel controversy.” People have made the most outlandish claims about us and what we believe—so much so, I think much of it counts as bearing false witness against GES.

However, despite the fake news, there are some areas of genuine disagreement between GES and our critics in the Free Grace movement. In this blog I summarize some of those disagreements, as I see it.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF FAITH?

GES: We believe that faith is propositional. To believe a proposition means that you understand it and you are persuaded that it is true. Put technically, we take faith to include *notitia* and *assensus*. Faith does not

include trust as a separate, non-propositional element. To trust in Christ is simply to believe the proposition, “Jesus will do as He promises,” or “Jesus always keeps His word,” or “Jesus is trustworthy.”

Critics: Various. Critics say that belief includes: trust, and trust means more than being persuaded; a personal encounter; an emotional sorrow for sin; a volitional desire to change your life. Other critics deny that faith is “knowing facts.” More often, critics do not define what faith means to them.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF SAVING FAITH?

GES: We believe that what makes faith “saving” is believing the saving proposition, i.e., Jesus’ promise of eternal life.

The difference between faith and saving faith is not in *how* you believe (since all faith is

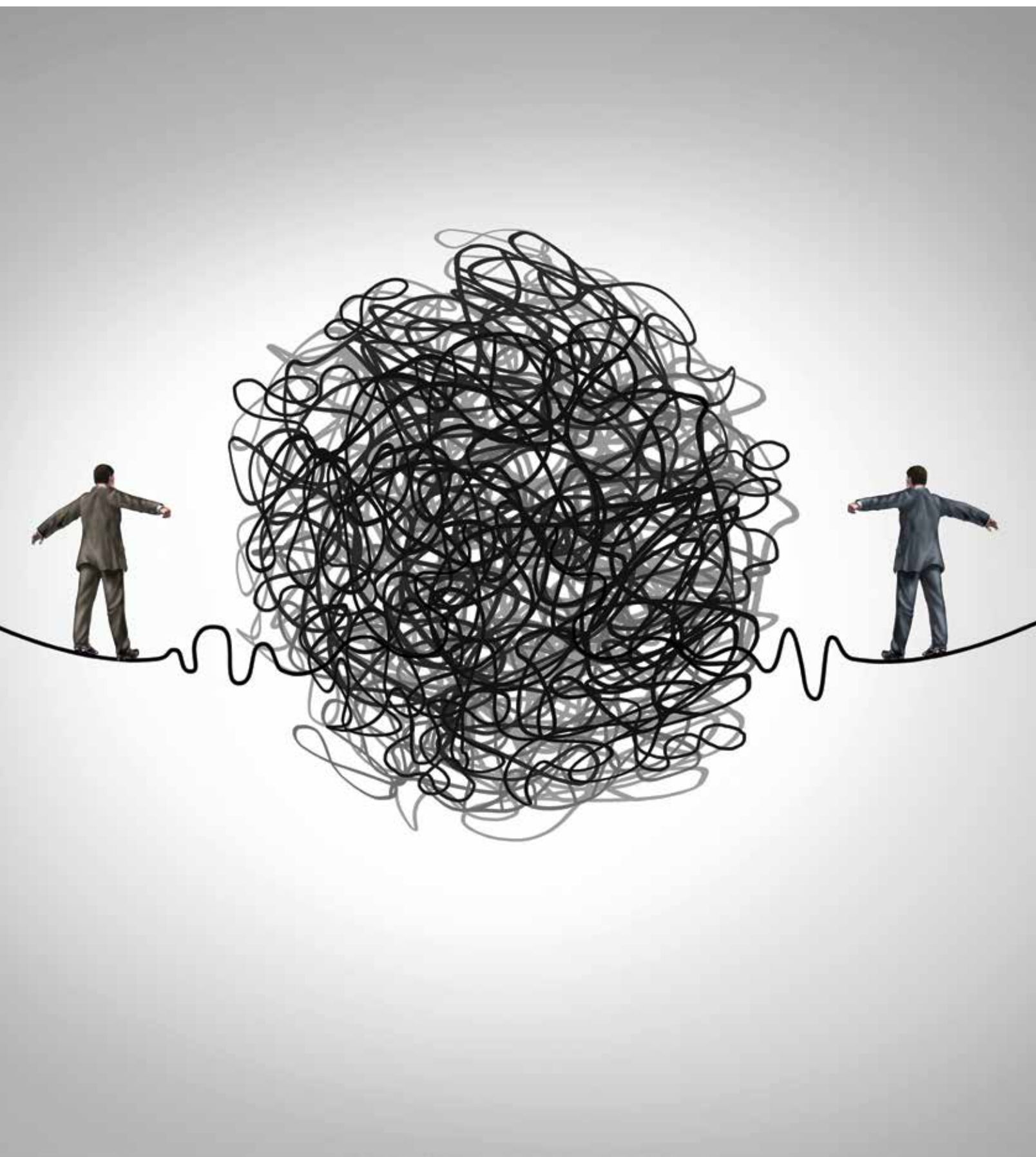
propositional), but in *what* you believe (i.e., the saving message).

Critics: Various. Since different critics have different definitions of *faith*, they also have different ideas about the nature of *saving faith*.

Some critics say that saving faith is simply faith “in Christ” (without explaining what that actually means—does that faith have content or not?).

Others clarify that in order for faith to be saving, you must believe in certain facts about the person of Christ (e.g., His deity, sinlessness, virgin birth, etc.), as well as facts about the provision of Christ (e.g., that He died, rose again, post-resurrection appearances, coming again, penal substitution).

Other critics say you must believe in the person, provision, and the promise of Christ (though often without insisting on believing in the eternity of salvation).



DO YOU NEED TO BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS GOD TO BE SAVED?

GES: We believe that Jesus is God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Furthermore, we understand that claim in light of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Consequently, we believe that Jesus' deity is a powerful reason to believe in Him for eternal life. We also believe it is essential for spiritual maturity.

However—and this is controversial—we deny that you must believe that Jesus is God, or that you must believe in the Trinity, at the point of faith, to be born again.

Why do we say that?

Because during Jesus' ministry, many people believed in Jesus for eternal life and were born again without believing that He is God. And they certainly did not believe He was the Second Person of the Trinity. We think that still happens today—people come to faith in Jesus for eternal life and only learn about the Trinity later on.

Critics: Critics say you must believe that Jesus is “God” to be born again. However, they seldom define what that means.

Some take the traditional position that in order to believe that Jesus is “God” you must be *fully Trinitarian* (accepting both Nicaea and Chalcedon) at the point of faith to be saved.

Others allow for sub-Trinitarian beliefs at the point of faith.

Still others allow for heretical views of deity to be saved (e.g., modalism, binitarianism), so long as Jesus is recognized to be God in some sense.

IS JESUS' EVANGELISM OBSOLETE?

GES: We believe that John's Gospel was written with an evangelistic purpose (cf. 20:30-31). The Gospel was written during, and for, the church age.

That Gospel describes how Jesus evangelized people by talking about Himself and inviting them to believe in Him for eternal life (e.g., John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-26). Notably, Jesus did not call people to repent, to believe in the cross

**“We believe
that Jesus
promised eternal
salvation, not
probationary
salvation, at the
point of faith.
Hence, you must
believe in eternal
salvation to be
saved.”**

and resurrection, or to believe in His deity to be born again—*although John uses those as apologetic evidence to persuade people to believe in Christ for eternal life*. We believe that Jesus' and John's model of doing evangelism is how we should evangelize today.

Critics: Critics imply that Jesus' evangelism is obsolete. They say that believing what Jesus promised during His earthly ministry is not enough to be born again today because there has been a Dispensational

change. Today there are additional things one must believe about Christ at the point of faith to be born again.

Critics disagree over the details of those other requirements.

Oddly, although they require more things to believe to be saved, critics usually deny that you must believe that salvation is eternal. So in that sense, they require less than what Jesus required.

DO YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN JESUS “FOR” SALVATION?

GES: We believe that, to be saved, you must believe in Jesus for the salvation that He promises, i.e., everlasting life (or the equivalent).

Many people believe that Jesus existed, died, and rose again, but they also believe in a false gospel of salvation by works.

Others believe in Jesus, but they believe in Him for material things like a new Cadillac, a job, or a husband, without believing in Him for salvation. Those people are not born again.

There is no Biblical justification for thinking you can be saved by believing *a false gospel* or by believing *no gospel*. You must believe in Jesus for eternal salvation to be saved.

Critics: Some critics deny you need to believe in Jesus “for” anything. They say it is enough to believe “in” Jesus without believing in Him for salvation. Unfortunately, they often fail to define what believing “in” Jesus means. What is the content of that faith? That is seldom explained.

DO YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN ETERNAL SECURITY TO BE SAVED?

GES: We believe that Jesus promised *eternal* salvation, not *probationary* salvation, at the point of faith. Hence, you must believe in *eternal* salvation to be saved.

Moreover, denying the eternality of salvation, and affirming that salvation can be lost, indicates a failure to understand both the one condition of salvation (i.e., by an act of faith apart from works), and the nature of the salvation itself (i.e., everlasting life). If you deny eternal security, you deny the gospel promise.

Critics: Some critics deny that you need to believe in Jesus “for” anything, let alone for eternal salvation.

Others say you must believe in Jesus for salvation, but you do not need to believe it is eternal.

Still others say you must believe in Jesus for salvation, without needing to believe it is eternal, but you cannot deny that it is eternal.

Still others say you can be saved even if you conscientiously deny that salvation is eternal.

DO YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST TO BE SAVED?

GES: We believe the death and resurrection of Christ are two of the most powerful *signs* to lead one to faith in Christ for eternal life and two of the most important truths to grow to spiritual maturity. Hence, *GES holds it is crucial to preach Christ and Him crucified.*

However, since many people during Jesus’ ministry believed in Him for eternal life without believing in the cross and resurrection (cf. John 2:11; Matt 16:21-23), we say it is *hypothetically possible* for people to still be saved in that way today. To say that something is “hypothetically possible” means *it might never happen*, but since it *has happened* before, and since God is sovereign, it *could* happen again.

Furthermore, since many people believe in the death and resurrection of Christ, yet reject salvation by faith alone (e.g., Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Church of Christ), we say those beliefs are insufficient for salvation. You must believe in Jesus for eternal life (or the equivalent).

Critics: Critics say it is *no longer hypothetically possible* to be saved without believing in the death and resurrection of Christ. Those beliefs are absolutely necessary to be saved today.

WHAT IS THE BASIS OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION?

GES: We believe that assurance is based entirely on believing Jesus’ promise of everlasting life. Jesus promised that believers have that life as a present possession. Therefore, if you believe His promise, you believe you have everlasting life. Assurance is of the essence of saving faith, based on Christ’s promise, not on our behavior.

Critics: Various. For example, many critics will say they were born again before believing that salvation was eternal. How do they know? They base it on

seeing positive changes in their behavior. They will say they knew they were born again at such and such a time because they gave up smoking or drinking or swearing, and adopted some good behaviors like reading the Bible and telling the truth. Consequently, they reason in this way: “I stopped swearing and started reading the Bible. That proves I was born again at that time. But I was born again before I believed that salvation was eternal. Therefore, believing in the eternality of salvation is not necessary to be born again.” But that kind of reasoning makes subjective experience a higher authority than Scripture.

SUMMARY

There are other areas of disagreement I could have discussed. I think these give you a good idea of the kinds of conversations and debates that have been going on.

I have tried to be fair to what our critics believe. Please realize we have many critics, and they do not agree among themselves. They hold a wide range of contradictory views. To know what any one particular critic believes—whether an individual or a ministry—you will have to ask him directly. ■



Shawn Lazar is the Editor of Grace in Focus magazine. He is married to Abby, and they have three children and a parade of cats.

Has My Evangelistic Message Changed?

By Bob Wilkin

One of the dangers of writing articles and books for over thirty years is that people notice if you contradict yourself. I plead guilty. I have not always been as clear as I wish I had been.

Here is an email with a genuine concern about what I believe:

I am fairly new to GES and I have introduced some of my friends and acquaintances to your organization and the Free Grace Theology teachings. Some are very open and receptive and want to learn more. Some have actually been turned as they are seeing the light of God's truth in Scripture supporting FG assertions. However, some have flatly and outrightly rejected the FG views in a polite and irenic way, while some are vehemently angered and judgmental about it.

I have a friend who has asked me to pose a question to you. He has been studying old articles from the GES data bank and is confused (as I am) about what we think are conflicting messages from you about what believing in Jesus exactly means in order to be saved. The question specifically is this: What is it that a person has to believe Him for?

As we understand it, a person, in order to be saved, needs to believe that Jesus can impart and guarantee everlasting (eternal) life that is permanent and irrevocable, to those who believe in Him for it. (From your blog titled "What Does It Mean to Believe in Jesus?" July 2018). In that same article, you also said that by believing all or any of the other wonderful, marvelous and glorious truths

CHANGE?

YES

NO

“Believing in the finished work of Christ should lead people to believe in Him for what He promises, everlasting life. But the finished work of Christ is not the promise of life. It is sadly possible to believe the former and not the latter.”

about Him, His virgin birth, His deity, His death on the cross, burial and resurrection does not save anyone. It should lead them to believe in Him for everlasting life. (I believe this to be God's truth as it is revealed in Scripture.)

However, he has pointed me to two articles authored by you, in which you say something contrary (or appears like it) to the assertions stated above. I've italicized the perceived contradictions in both articles for emphasis. Your statements seem to indicate that “believing that Jesus died and paid the penalty for our sins is necessary to be believed for salvation.”

The first article was titled “Are There False Professors? If So, How can We Identify Them?” August 1989. Here's the excerpt:

[When] I talk to people about the gospel, I ask them questions. Do they believe in eternal security? Are they sure they have eternal life? Why should God let them into heaven? How would they share the gospel with someone else? If they indicate that they are sinners who are eternally secure by grace because Jesus died and paid the penalty for all of their sins, I conclude that they are saved. If not, I am unsure as to whether they are a confused believer or whether they never were saved in the first place. In any case I then attempt to make sure that they now understand the gospel and accept it.

The second article was titled (“Is Following Christ a Condition of Eternal Life?”, April 1990). Here's the excerpt: “Once we come to trust in Christ alone as the One who paid the full and complete payment for all our sins, we have ETERNAL life. We will never perish.”

Are we misreading and misunderstanding these statements? Or are these your old views that now have evolved and changed to the

current ones shown in the July 2018 article? It would be greatly appreciated if you could clarify this for us. Thank you and keep up the great work of this ministry. I continually lift you and GES up in prayer.

I founded GES in 1986. The first newsletters went out that summer. A year later I left my teaching position at Multnomah School of the Bible (now University) and went full time with GES.

From the start I believed that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. That is, I was convinced back in 1986 that one had to believe in Jesus *for everlasting life* in order to be born again. Back then I probably would have said that believing in *the finished work of Christ on the cross* meant that you were believing in Him for everlasting life, since He paid it all. I thought then that a person might believe that Jesus died for him and rose again and yet still not be born again because he believed in some form of works salvation. But once a person believed that Jesus' work is *finished*, then he could not believe in works salvation.

Notice that in the August 1989 article I ask two questions about assurance of everlasting life. That shows my belief even then that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. I do mention that they are sure “because Jesus died and paid the penalty for all of their sins.” I do not think that was incorrect. The cross of Christ is the ultimate proof that the promise of life for the believer is true.

However, in the April 1990 article your friend found, I say something different, something I do not agree with today: “Once we come to trust in Christ alone as the one who paid the full and complete payment for all our sins, we have ETERNAL life. We will never perish.”

First, I should have spoken of *believing in* Christ alone, not *trusting in* Christ alone. There is potential confusion in speaking of *trust*.


Second, I should have referred to everlasting life as what we believe in Jesus for. Third, I make it appear that the object of saving faith is the finished work of Christ.

Over the years I've come to see that it is possible to believe in the finished work of Christ on the cross and at the same time to believe in Lordship Salvation or even straight-up works salvation.

What it means to believe in Jesus is to believe in Him for everlasting life. See John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27; 20:31; Acts 16:31; 1 Tim 1:16. Believing in the finished work of Christ should lead people to believe in Him for what He promises, everlasting life. But the finished work of Christ is not the promise of life. It is sadly possible to believe the former and not the latter.

I should mention in closing that there are probably many other statements I've made over the years that I no longer think are crystal clear. So

has my evangelistic message changed? Yes and no. Yes, I am clearer now than I used to be. No, my basic message has always been that if we believe in Jesus, we have everlasting life which can never be lost. I've always stressed assurance of everlasting life.

Thanks for the great question. 



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 42 years, Sharon. He has written several books including Secure and Sure, Road to Reward, Confident in Christ, and Is Calvinism Biblical? Let the Scriptures Decide.

BAD QUOTE

“There is not one case in the New Testament in which the Apostles urged souls to believe, or in which a soul is narrated as believing, in which we have not good grounds to believe that these preparatory steps of conviction and repentance had been taken.”

~Catherine Booth
Papers on Godliness



Reflections on Hebrews

By Ken Yates

FUTURE SALVATION IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Recently I was doing some studying in the Book of Hebrews. The book has always interested me because it is often used by people to say that a believer can lose his eternal salvation. Others say the book focuses on the fact that if you are “really” saved, you would never commit really bad sins. The main reason people teach either one of these views is because Hebrews has some very strong passages that warn the readers about sinning.

In the next few blogs I don’t want to go into the warning passages themselves. Instead, I would just like to look at the flavor of the book in general. To me it seems very clear that when we simply glance at the book, we find that the author is not talking about a person losing his salvation. Neither is he talking about people who aren’t “really” saved because of the way they live their lives.

First of all, the author knows that his readers are believers. He calls them “holy brethren” in 3:1. He tells them that they should remember the “former days” after they had been enlightened (10:32). After they had received this “enlightenment,” they had faithfully served the Lord. They had even suffered because of their Christian faith. They ministered to their fellow Christians who were imprisoned for their faith. They did these things because they knew they would receive “great rewards” in the coming Kingdom of God (10:34-35). In this context, being “enlightened”

is certainly best understood as seeing the truth of the gospel and believing in Jesus Christ. Coming to faith in Christ can certainly be described as going from darkness to the light of the truth (Col 1:13; 2 Cor 4:4-7). These readers were believers.

The author encourages his readers to let brotherly love continue (13:1). In other words, the readers had exhibited love towards other Christians in the past and he wants them to keep on doing that. Unbelievers cannot continue in brotherly love because other Christians were not their “brothers” to begin with.

But the author of Hebrews also knew that a believer could never lose his salvation. In Heb 10:10 he says that through the sacrifice of Christ, “we” have been made holy once for all. He includes himself in that statement. He aligns himself with the readers. In 10:14, he repeats this statement and says that the believer is not only holy, but has been made perfect forever. In the context of chap. 10, being made perfect means that one’s sins are taken care of forever—God remembers those sins no more (10:17). This means that the believer can boldly come into God’s presence through Jesus Christ, his or her High Priest.

The author tells them to do just that in 10:19 and once again calls them “brethren.” Their status as holy and forgiven children of God is permanent. It is interesting that the author makes these statements in chap. 10 immediately before he gives the strongest warning in the book (10:26-32).

In Hebrews 1:14-2:3, the author shows that Christians can experience a drifting away in their spiritual lives. He says that they can “slip” away from what they have heard (2:1). If they do, they will be justly punished for such transgression (2:2). The author includes himself in this possibility (2:3).

But all of this involves a salvation that is in the future (1:14). When a person becomes a believer, he receives eternal life/salvation at that moment. Whatever the author is talking about involves something that will occur in the future. There is also a future salvation (deliverance) that the believer can experience, but only if he is faithful to the Lord and holds fast to what he has heard. Free Grace Theology recognizes that there is more than one type of salvation in the NT. The Book of Hebrews speaks of rewards in the future that the faithful believer will receive. A Christian can either lose or obtain those rewards when Christ returns.

In the next few blogs I would like to look at a few of the other verses in the book that show the author is talking to believers. The point I want to make is that when we come to the Book of Hebrews, if we say that the author does not know if the readers are spiritually saved or not, or if we say he is warning his readers that they might lose their salvation, we are reading our theology into the book.

The Book of Hebrews is a great book to teach us an important lesson about studying the Bible. As hard as it is, we must let the text determine what the text is saying. In the Book of Hebrews, we must accept that God can give stern warnings to His children. That is the case even though their status as the children of God can never be lost. We must also accept the fact that Christians are capable of even the most serious of sins. This will involve great loss, but never the loss of eternal salvation.

ESAU: AN EXAMPLE OF A BELIEVER (HEBREWS 12:15-17)

In Hebrews 12:15-17, the author gives Esau as an example to his readers. Here is what he says:

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness

springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;

Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.

For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

Many people think that the author uses Esau as an example in one of two ways. Esau is either an illustration of somebody who was a believer but lost his salvation, or somebody who claims to be a believer, but really isn't.

In either case, it is held that Esau is an example of somebody who will be in hell. This is said because the author says that Esau was a “profane” person who did not experience “repentance.”

But as I also stated in my previous blog, this is an example of reading one's theology into the text. If we look at what the author of Hebrews says, the view that Esau is an illustration of somebody who is not a child of God must be rejected.

First of all, as we saw in the previous blog, the author of Hebrews is speaking to people he knows are Christians. He is warning them to look out (v. 15). He tells them they might fall from the grace of God. This certainly indicates that they currently find themselves in the grace of God.

In addition, in 10:10, 14, he says that the believer is made perfect forever. For the author of Hebrews, a believer cannot lose his salvation.

The warning is that one of them, that is, the group of believers, might become a “fornicator or profane” person. A fornicator is an immoral person, especially in the area of sexual sins. A profane person is a person who does not care of spiritual matters. It is certainly possible that a “true” believer can commit sexual sins. It is also certainly possible that a believer can focus upon this world and its pleasures and lose sight of the importance of spiritual matters.

It is also strange that some people say that Esau represents a person who goes to hell because Esau didn't repent. Of course, this is held by people who say that repentance is necessary to be eternally saved. But when we look at the text we see the exact opposite. Esau did repent. He regretted what he had done and even did so “with tears.”

The best way to understand what the author is saying is that Esau's father, Isaac, would not repent. When Esau sold his birthright, and Isaac gave that birthright to Esau's brother Jacob, Isaac would not reverse that decision.

The point is that Esau lost the birthright of being the firstborn and could not get it back. He lost all of the benefits of that birthright. Even though he regretted it and wanted it back, it was not to be.

Esau is simply a lousy illustration of an unbeliever. He was still the son of Isaac, even after he made his terrible decision. In fact, when you look at the account in Genesis, you see that Esau received other blessings from his father, but not the blessing of being the firstborn son.

Esau's problem was not that he wasn't a son. It was that he did not value spiritual things. He was a "profane" person. It is interesting that in the Genesis account there is no indication that he was a "fornicator." He desired the temporary things of this world—a bowl of soup—more than all the spiritual blessings that went with being the firstborn son of Isaac, the heir of the promises.

That is the warning for Christians. Value the rewards that God has for those believers who are faithful to Him. We must beware, lest the things of this world take our eyes off the things that are truly valuable. But to read into these verses the idea that all "true" believers will value such things is to read our own theology into them.

THE BELIEVER WHO DRAWS BACK (HEBREWS 10:38-39)

In the last two blogs, I have argued that in the Book of Hebrews we see that a Christian cannot lose his eternal salvation. However, even though that is the case, a believer can sin against the Lord, even in a very serious way. Esau is an example of such spiritual failure.

In 10:38-39, we see the same thing. These verses state:

Now the just shall live by faith: but if *any man* draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.

But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.

As we saw in the example of Esau, many think that the author is saying that if a person claims to be a Christian but "draws back," he was either not saved to begin with, or he loses his salvation. Since the author of Hebrews knows a person cannot lose his salvation (10:10, 14), we know that he is not talking about such a situation.

But can we say that these verses are saying that if one draws back he was never saved to begin with? After all, the author says that such a person is one in whom God has "no pleasure." In addition, he also says that such a person experiences "perdition" and does not experience the "saving of the soul." Maybe the author is thinking of people who only claimed to be Christians but by their actions prove they really aren't.

As we saw in the previous blog, however, we know that the author realizes that a "true" believer can be like Esau and indeed draw away from the things of God. But even here in these verses we see that the author recognizes that a Christian can indeed do that.

In these verses, the author is talking about the person who is "just." The word means to be righteous. In the original, it says "My" just one. In other words, the author is talking about somebody who is God's righteous one. Unless we read our theology into this verse, we must conclude that the author is talking about a believer. How could an unbeliever be called God's righteous one?

But such a righteous one can "draw back." Unfortunately, the King James Version adds the words "any man." These words are in italics because they do not appear in the Greek. The point of all this is that the author is only talking about one person—God's righteous one.

God's righteous one has two options. He can either live by faith, or he can draw back. Regardless of which he does, he is still God's righteous one.

The believer can indeed draw away from God. He can love the things of this world and be like Esau. He can decide not to care for spiritual things or even consider the value of them.

If he does, God will not have pleasure in such a life. This does not mean such a person is not a child of God. It simply means that God does not approve of such a life. We see the same thing in our earthly families. A disobedient child lives



a life that his parents do not approve of, but he remains a child.

If a child of God lives such a life, he winds up experiencing “perdition” and the loss of his soul. The word *perdition* can describe loss of many different kinds. The word for “soul” in the NT often means “life.”

What the author is saying is that the righteous one who draws away from God will experience great loss. His life will be wasted. The works of that life will have no eternal value and will thus in the end be lost. As we see in the Book of Hebrews and the rest of the NT, such a drawing back will result in the loss of eternal rewards (1 Cor 3:10-15). In addition, such a believer can experience the severe discipline of God in this life and any of the loss such discipline can bring. All of these things are descriptions of the “perdition” the unfaithful believer experiences.

No doubt, many will disagree with the idea that in these verses the author is talking about the loss of rewards, the loss of one’s life, or the discipline of God. However one sees these verses, if we are honest with the text we will recognize that the

one who experiences these things is the righteous one of God.

DIFFERENT GROUPS IN THE KINGDOM?

In my previous three posts, it was pointed out that the author of Hebrews believed in the eternal security of the believer. A believer cannot lose or forfeit eternal life. But the author also recognized that a Christian is also capable of committing serious sins. The warning passages in Hebrews are therefore addressed to believers, but they do not deal with going to hell. Yet the unfaithful believer will experience great loss.

We see these things in the example of Esau. He was still the son of Isaac even though he loved the temporary things of this world more than spiritual things. In chap. 10 we saw that a righteous child of God can “fall away” and earn God’s disapproval. In 2:1-3 we saw that a believer can also experience another kind of “salvation” in the future. This salvation deals with living a life that pleases God and will result in rewards in the kingdom of God.

When we understand these principles, and they are understood when we allow the text to speak

for itself, it causes us to look at Scriptures in a fresh way. This happens when we accept what the text says, and not necessarily what a theological tradition might instruct us.

An example of this is found in Hebrews 12:22-23. Here, the author states:

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels,

To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect...

In these verses, the author is comparing the earthly Mount Sinai of the Old Covenant to the heavenly mountain involved in the New Covenant. Christ is seated in the heavens as our High Priest (4:14-16).

The author also speaks of people involved in the New Covenant. He refers to the “general assembly and church of the firstborn.” The names of such people are “written in heaven.” It is certainly possible that the author is describing all Christians with these words.

However, it is also possible that another group of people is being described. When we recall that Esau gave away his firstborn rights and is given in the same chapter as an example of what these Christian readers should not do (12:16-17), we can see this description in another light.

The words “general assembly” are only one word in the Greek. It means a joyful party. The word “church” can simply mean an assembly of people. It is used that way in both the NT and the Greek translation of the OT.


In light of the example of Esau, the author may very well be talking about those believers who remain faithful to the Lord during times of difficulties. In the kingdom they will form a separate group. They will be like “firstborn” sons and will rule with Christ. On that day they will have a joyous celebration as they receive the approval of the Lord in how they lived their lives.

If so, such Christians have their names “written” in heaven in a special sense. The word is a rare one in the NT and means to *be enrolled*. It can refer to a list of names given a special honor. In the Pentagon in Washington, DC, we see an example of that. There is a Hall of Honor. In this

Hall there is a list of names of the greatest heroes in our nation’s military history. Not all soldiers, past and present, are on that wall. It is reserved for those who have faithfully served our nation in the most extreme of circumstances.

The evidence favors the idea that this is what the author is saying. Those believers who remain faithful to the Lord will be honored in a special way in the kingdom of God. Christ will reward such believers.

Many Christians recoil at such thoughts. They simply cannot accept the idea that there will be “differences” in honor and positions in the kingdom of God. But as we have seen throughout these last few blogs on the Book of Hebrews, this is only because there are traditions with long histories that deny such differences will exist. The Book of Hebrews, if we allow the words to teach us, tells us that God will indeed reward faithfulness. Unfaithfulness on the part of His children will result in the loss of those rewards.

The application is clear. As Christians we have eternal life. We cannot lose that, no matter what. However, we should desire that when we are with the Lord, He will be honored by honoring us if we have been faithful to Him. 



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