

GRACE (in) FOCUS

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MARCH / APRIL 2022

Is Perseverance Guaranteed, at Least a Little?

Romans 15 ♦ Authority and Children ♦ Review of *Eternal Life* ♦ Ambassadors
Guidelines for Guidance ♦ Blessings and Cursings ♦ Q&A ♦ Guilt

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GRACE (in) FOCUS

Founder and Editor-in-Chief: Robert N. Wilkin, Ph.D. Editor: Shawn Lazar. Office Manager: Bethany Taylor. Order Fulfillment: Mark "Mando" Gray. Director of GES Missions: Ken Yates. GES Missions Assistant: Kathryn Wright. International translators: Kelley Johnson Easley, Alla Kristina Lozenko, Manuela Mazzei, Dante B. Nieto, and Oscar Pellus.

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Editor's Letter

I started GES in the summer of 1986. We've been sending out materials for over thirty-five years. At first, it was a two-page newsletter (1986-1987). Then it was a four-page newsletter (1988-2011). Kyle Kaumeyer had the idea of expanding it to a 16-page magazine, which we did in 2012. Then in 2014, Shawn Lazar expanded the magazine further, to 32 pages. In the middle of 2015, he expanded it again to its current 48-page length.


As the publication grew, so did the need for quality authors. God has blessed us with many gifted writers who proclaim clearly the free gift of everlasting life by faith alone in Christ alone.

In recent years, the magazine has been united with our daily blogs and podcasts and books.

I'd like to be able to say that I envisioned all of this thirty-five years ago. But I did not. I just had the idea of a networking and educational organization that would assist local churches in promoting the faith-alone message. God brought along gifted and creative people that have caused us to become a ministry that ministers in so many more ways than I ever imagined.

My thanks to all of you who pray and give in support of this ministry. Together we are having an amazing impact, not just in the U.S., but around the world. The need is great. But our God is greater than the need.

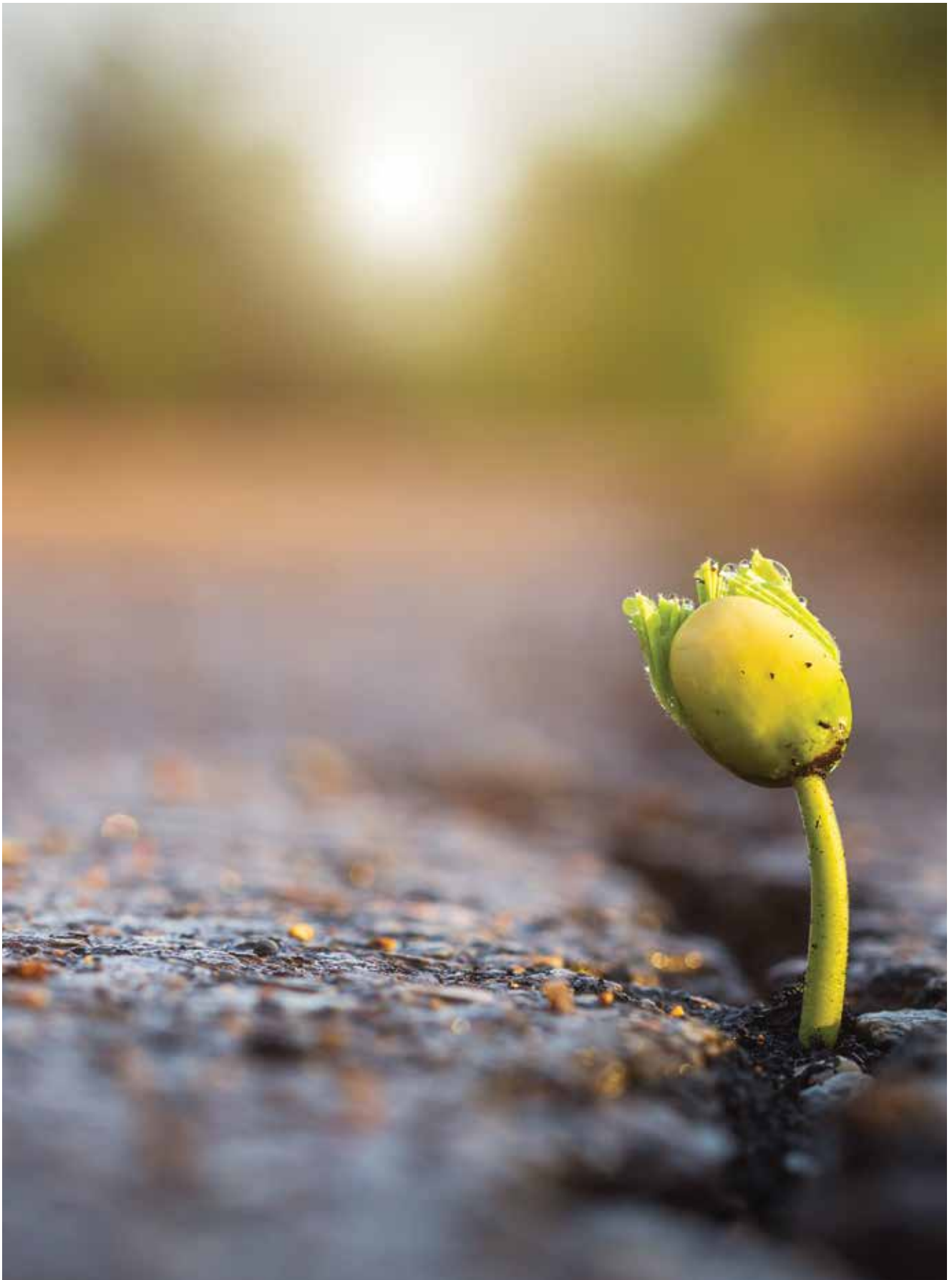
Shawn, Bethany, Mark, Ken, Kathryn, the GES Board members, and Sharon and I hope to see you at our upcoming May 23-26 annual conference at beautiful Camp Copass in Denton, TX.

Peace like a river, brothers and sisters. 



Unanticipated Growth

Robert N. Wilkin, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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Is Perseverance Guaranteed, at Least a Little?

BY BOB WILKIN

J. H. asks a great question about whether all believers at least in some sense persevere in faith and good works until death:

As far as I know, you (in GES) are the only people in Christendom who don't hold to the perseverance of the saints in any capacity, even teaching that a believer can stop believing and still go to heaven. It seems to me that 2 Tim 2:13 supports the idea that a believer can stop believing, but there are other verses that seem to say a Christian will (or must) have certain characteristics. In addition, there are other verses that seem to suggest there are sins which a Christian is incapable of committing.

I'm on the fence as far as complete apostasy is concerned, but I do believe a believer could stray from the tenets of the faith and become a Catholic, Orthodox, even a Mormon, etc.

Here are the verses [from John's Gospel] that make me hesitant: John 3:18, 36; 8:47; 10:4; 14. [Also] Mark 3:29 and Rev 22:19.¹

Essentially, J. H. has asked eight questions, the general one about perseverance and then seven questions about specific passages.

WHAT MOST BELIEVE

It is true that most people in Christianity, including most Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Calvinists, Arminians, and the cults, all believe that perseverance is *required* to get into Christ's kingdom (often called *final salvation*). However, it is not true that most believe that perseverance is *guaranteed*. Since most people in Christianity believe that everlasting life can be lost, they

believe that perseverance is required to keep your salvation. Arminians believe that failure to persevere is quite possible.

Oddly enough, most Calvinists also believe that perseverance is not guaranteed. While most Calvinists say that no *true believer* will fail to persevere, they say (with rare exceptions) that we cannot be sure that we truly believe. Hence most Calvinists teach that you must persevere in order to get what they call *final salvation*.

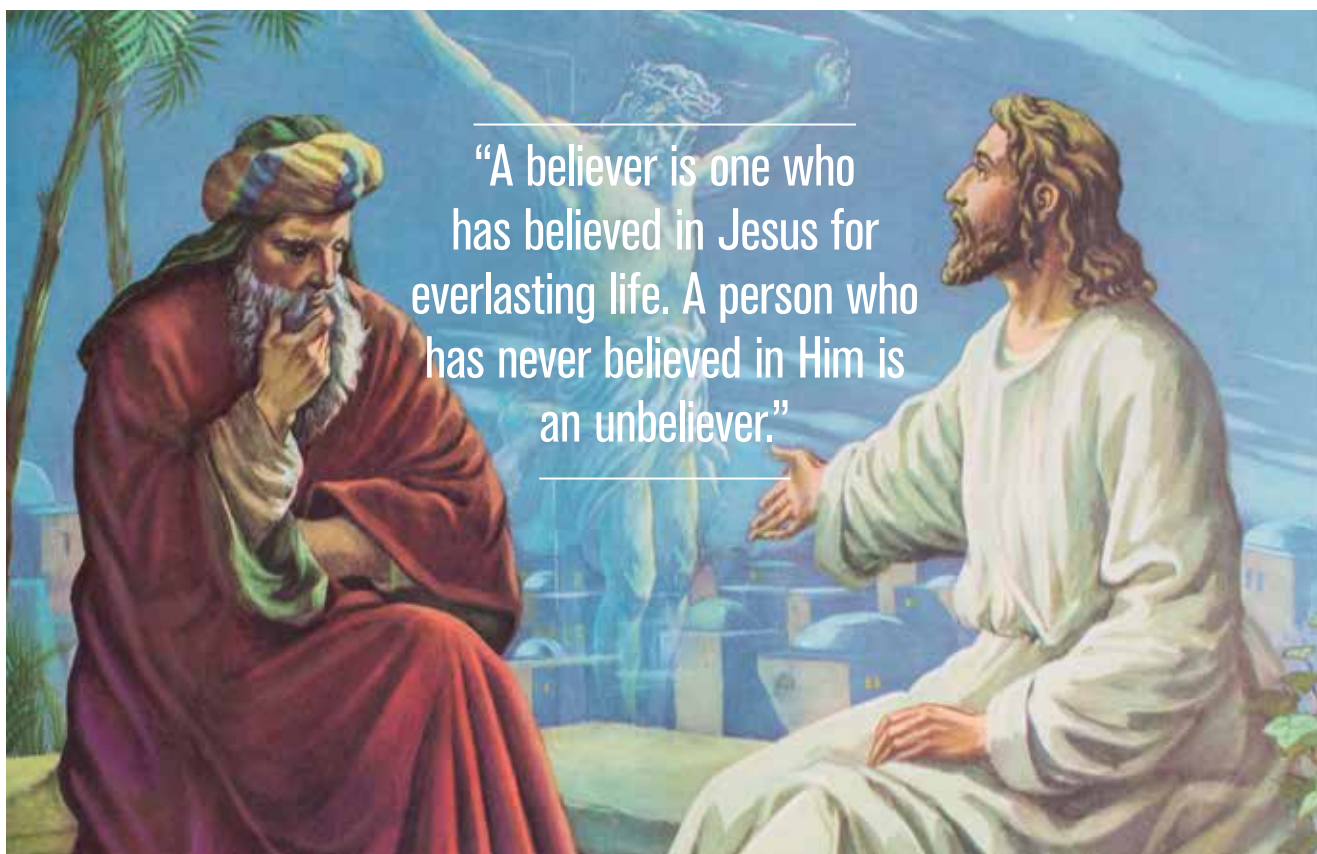
PERSEVERANCE AND ASSURANCE

It is extremely rare to find someone claiming to be a Christian who says that he knows he will persevere in faith and good works until death. After all, if Paul himself could not say that (cf. 1 Cor 9:27) until he knew he was about to be martyred (2 Tim 4:6-8), then neither can we. That is why, by the way, very few people in Christianity claim to be certain that they have everlasting life that can never be lost. We can only be sure of our salvation if we recognize that perseverance is not required to retain everlasting life or to prove that we have it.

TWO ARGUMENTS

So how do I know that perseverance is neither guaranteed nor required to maintain everlasting life?

First, all of the warning passages in the NT show that perseverance is not guaranteed. See, for example, Matt 24:45-51; 25:1-13, 14-30; Luke



“A believer is one who has believed in Jesus for everlasting life. A person who has never believed in Him is an unbeliever.”

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19:16-26; 1 Cor 9:24-27; Gal 5:4; Col 1:21-23; 2 Tim 2:12; 4:9-10; Heb 2:1-4; 3:1-4:16; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29; Jas 5:19-20; 2 Pet 2:18-22; 1 John 2:28; 4:17-19; 2 John 7-11; 3 John 9-12; Rev 2:5-6, 10, 16, 25-29; 3:3-5, 11-12, 19-21. These all warn against falling away because falling away is possible.

Second, all of the over 100 faith-alone verses in the Bible show that perseverance is not required (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:25-27; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Eph 2:8-9; Rev 22:17). None of those verses say that the one who perseveres in faith will have everlasting life when he dies. Instead, they all say that whoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life *right now* that cannot be lost. So, if J. H. or I or anyone else believes in Jesus for everlasting life today, then he is secure forever. In fact, anyone who *ever* believed in Jesus is secure forever because John 3:16 is true the moment one believes.

Since Scripture cannot contradict Scripture, then we know that none of the warning passages are warning believers that if they fail to persevere then they will end up being eternally condemned.

I don't know if I will persevere or not. I pray that I will. But I do know that I have everlasting life that can never be lost. And I thank God for that often! In fact, my certainty of my eternal destiny is a crucial motivation for me to persevere.

HE WHO BELIEVES

J. H. is wondering whether perseverance is guaranteed for all believers, at least to some degree. Next, we will consider three verses from John's Gospel he asks about.

John 3:18. The Lord told Nicodemus, “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” J. H. comments, “Perhaps if apostasy is possible, He might have said, ‘he that has never believed is condemned already...’ but Jesus doesn't seem to consider the point. My understanding is that Jesus is saying the person who does not believe is condemned because he has not believed.”

Exactly. Look at the verse and then at J. H.'s last sentence. A believer is *one who has believed*

in Jesus for everlasting life. Once a person has believed, he retains that status as a believer forever. A person who has *never* believed in Him is an unbeliever.

J. H. mistakenly thinks that the words “he has not believed” have a different meaning from “he has never believed.” But the meaning is the same. If a person *hasn’t* believed in Jesus, then he has *never* believed in Him. If a person *has* believed in Jesus, then *he has believed* in Him. There is no hint of perseverance in John 3:18.²

John 3:36. Here John the Baptist (some think these are the words of the Apostle John) says, “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” J. H. writes, “Additionally, John 3:36 is worded in the same way, contrasting believers with unbelievers, not believers with people who have never believed.”

Once again, an unbeliever is one who has never believed. A believer is one who has believed. John the Baptist was contrasting those who have believed in Jesus with those who have not.

SOME EFFECTS ARE PERMANENT

Maybe an illustration would help. In many nations (e.g., Spain, Sweden, South Korea, Taiwan, Netherlands, Norway), if you were born in that country, once you are old enough to vote, then you retain the right to vote your entire life. Even if you are 65 and have never voted in your life, you are and remain a qualified voter due to being on the population rolls.

If you were born in the United States, then you are an American your whole life. You don’t need to persevere in lawful behavior or even in believing in democracy³ to retain your citizenship. There are millions of Americans in prison today. Even if they die in prison, they die as Americans, not as non-Americans.

Some things in life are permanent. Everlasting life is like that and then some. It is not only permanent *during this entire life*, but it is permanent *in the life to come as well*.

BEING OF GOD VS BORN OF GOD

John 8:47. The Lord Jesus said, “He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore, you do not hear, because you are not of God.” J. H. writes, “My understanding of this verse is that a believer will always recognize the voice of the Shepherd even if he’s a backslider.”

To be *of God* is not the same as being *born of God*. All who believe in Jesus are *born of God* (John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:1). But to be *of God* requires that we obey His words. To hear His words does not mean that we believe in Jesus. It means that we obey Him, as is evident in the context. John 8:47 hearkens back to John 8:30-32ff. The believer is no longer a slave of sin. If he abides in Christ’s words, then the truth will set him free from sin’s bondage in his experience. However, unbelievers are slaves of sin (John 8:33-36). Ed Blum comments, “To hear God is not a matter of being able to discern audible sounds *but of obeying the heavenly commands*. Jesus’ hearers’ absolute rejection of the heavenly Word was a clear reflection that they did not belong to God (lit., “are not of God”)” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 306, italics added).

In his first epistle, the Apostle John picks up the same idea, that being “of God” is being obedient to His Word. See, for example, 1 John 4:4-9 and 5:19. Commenting on the expression “of God” in 1 John 4:6, Zane Hodges wrote in his commentary:

As has been frequently pointed out in this Commentary (e.g., under 3:8, 10b, and 19), expressions such as **of God** (or, “of the devil,” “of the truth,” etc.) signal concepts whose meaning is determined by context. Here it may be suggested that John is thinking of anyone out of touch with God (not under His influence or that of His Spirit) as the kind of person who rejects apostolic authority and teaching. Such a person could be a believer or an unbeliever (*The Epistles of John*, p. 165).

There is no guarantee in Scripture that all born-again people persevere either in obedience or in faith.

HIS SHEEP KNOW HIS VOICE

John 10:4. The Lord said, “And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” J. H. comments, “My understanding of this verse is that the Lord’s sheep are saved Christians, characterized by recognizing his voice.”

At the time the Lord wrote, there were no Christians. The Church did not begin until after Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, appearances, and ascension to the third heaven. The term *Christian* was not used until Acts 11:26. But I get the point. J. H. is right that the people the Lord is talking about are born again. They will be in His coming kingdom. But J. H. seems to think that the words *they follow him* refer to perseverance in a life of obedience.

That hardly could be the Lord’s point in John 10:4 or John 10:27, where the same expression is found. Peter was one of Jesus’ sheep. And when the Lord told him that He was going to the cross, he tried to correct the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 16:21-23). At that point the Lord rebuked Peter and said that all who wish to come after Him must deny themselves, take up their crosses, *and follow Him* (Matt 16:24). The reference to following in Matt 16:24 is clearly a discipleship idea. And it is not guaranteed, either.

In the Gospels, following Christ most often literally meant physically traveling with Him (Matt 16:24 is an exception). In the Epistles, the expression *follow Him* is rare. How rare? *It is never found in the Epistles.*

In a few cases *the concept is present* in the Epistles. See 1 Thess 1:6 and 1 Pet 2:21. In a handful of verses Paul indicated that his followers should follow him, that is, his example (Phil 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7, 9; 2 Tim 3:10; see also Heb 13:7). Once he said that they imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1). But again, this following (and imitating) is not guaranteed.

The reference in John 10:4 and 10:27 to following the Good Shepherd either is a picture of believing in Him (the view of Zane Hodges) or a picture of going where He goes (my view). In other words, if a believer dies, he goes to be with the Lord in the third heaven. At the time of the Rapture, all believers from the church age, living and dead, will follow Him to the clouds, and later to earth at the end of the Tribulation. After Jesus destroys the current heavens and earth, all believers will follow Him to the new earth. My view is that John 10:4 and 10:27 refer to the promise that Jesus’ sheep will be with Him forever.

**“I know with certainty
that apostasy is possible
because that is what the
Scriptures often warn
against. Every Bible
teacher knows this.”**

KNOWN BY HIS OWN

John 10:14. The Lord Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.” J. H. comments, “It’s hard to understand this verse if apostasy is possible. Why would He identify His sheep (saved believers) as those who know Him if some of His sheep no longer know Him?”

All believers know Christ in a positional sense. The author of Hebrews said, “For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people’” (Heb 10:30). However, most references to knowing the Lord in the NT refer to knowing Him in our experience (e.g., 1 John 2: 3, 4, 5).

It is likely that the Lord has in mind the inner self, the *born of God* part of us. We are told in Rom 8:15-16 that whenever we pray, our human spirit is crying out, “Abba, Father.” We are not aware of this occurring. But it does. Our inner self is agreeing with the Holy Spirit that we are children of God. Our inner self always knows that we are children of God. Even if a believer became an atheist, he would still have God’s Spirit in Him, and he would still know God in his inner self.

The words, “I am known by My own,” do not mean that every believer is walking in fellowship with God all the time. They do not even mean that every believer walks with God most of the

time. The issue here is not walking with God, but that God knows those who are His, and they know Him in a positional sense (i.e., in the inner man).

I know with certainty that apostasy is possible because that is what the Scriptures often warn against. Every Bible teacher knows this. However, many Bible teachers say that if someone apostatizes, then he proves that he was never a *true believer* in the first place. The problem with that view is that the very verses they cite regarding the possibility of apostasy concern believers, not unbelievers. See, for example, Luke 8:13; 2 Tim 2:12-13; Heb 3:12; 6:4-8; 2 Pet 2:18-22. God warns believers, not unbelievers, of the danger of falling away. Unbelievers cannot fall away since they are not in the faith in the first place.

BLASPHEMY

Mark 3:29. Some of the Jews had been saying that Jesus was doing miracles by Satan's power, not by God's power. That led the Lord Jesus to warn them: "Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is subject to eternal condemnation"—because they said, "He has an unclean spirit" (Mark 3:28-30).

J. H. writes,

My understanding of this verse is that blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is impossible for saved believers. The sin is something unbelievers can commit and once they do, they are sadly beyond the possibility of redemption. My belief is that this particular sin is impossible to commit in this day and age since it requires seeing manifest miracles and decrying the healing of God as the works of the devil.

I agree with J. H., and I do not see why he finds this verse as indicating perseverance is guaranteed to some degree. I think he may mean that

perseverance was guaranteed during the ministry of Jesus so that anyone who came to faith would never later fall away. But even in his view, there is no such guarantee today, since he does not believe that this sin can be committed unless Jesus is physically present on earth performing miracles, which He is not during the church age.

J. H. seems to assume that those who had attributed Jesus' works to the devil had already committed this blasphemy and were already "beyond the possibility of redemption." But the Lord never said that. He just warned that some

were on a path that could lead to their sin being unforgiven. He also does not say that anyone ever gets to the point while still alive where he is beyond the possibility of regeneration. There is simply not enough in these verses in Mark, or the two parallel texts, to prove that perseverance was, or is, guaranteed.

But whatever these three texts are saying, they cannot (and do not) contradict John 3:16 or all of the faith-alone verses. One is not required to believe and persevere in order to have everlasting life. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.



TAKE AWAY HIS PART

Revelation 22:19. "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

J. H. writes,

Again, this seems to reflect a sin which only an unbeliever can commit because the punishment is so severe. My understanding is that this particular sin is abridging or altering the book of Revelation intentionally to deceive people, and that once this sin is committed, this person becomes beyond the possibility of redemption.

There is a textual problem in Rev 22:19. The majority of manuscripts read *tree of life*, not *book of life*. J. H. is quoting from one of the few

translations that follows the Textus Receptus, which was based on a small number of Greek manuscripts that typically follow the Majority Text, but not here.


The point in Rev 22:19 concerns the forfeiture of eternal rewards, not of everlasting life. Here are the comments by Bob Vacendak in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*:

22:18-19. As the Book of Revelation closes, John forbids tampering with its text. He warns that anyone who adds to these things, God will add to him (MT: may God add to him) the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away (MT: may God take away) his part from the Book of Life (MT: tree of life), from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. As reflected in the MT, this is not so much a prediction as it is an imprecation (a wish of judgment and difficulty on another). This is an expression of holy desire that the seriousness of these acts be met with severe divine judgment. John is not making an exact prediction about what will happen to people who add to or subtract from the Book of Revelation; the imprecations express judgments John believes such people deserve. He wants the retribution to be commensurate with the guilt. Throughout history, God has sent plagues on people who were disobedient to Him that resemble the plagues of the Tribulation (e.g., the plagues of Egypt). And as He sees fit, He can still bring similar troubles, diseases, and so forth, on those who deliberately revise Scripture today. He can “add to” and “take away” from them as He desires (including eternal rewards like the tree of life).

PERSEVERANCE IS NOT GUARANTEED

There are no verses that show that perseverance is guaranteed, whether just the supposed promise that a believer would never commit apostasy or the supposed promise that believers will never fall into major sin. Paul was not sure he would persevere (1 Cor 9:27) until the Lord revealed to him while in prison in Rome that he would be martyred very soon and that he had finished the race and fought the good fight and kept the faith (2 Tim 4:6-8). If Paul was not sure that he would

persevere until the end of his life, then neither can we be.

But—and here is the point—we can and will remain sure that we have everlasting life that can never be lost as long as we continue to believe the promise of John 3:16. If we ever change “whoever believes in Him” into “whoever really believes in him [as evidenced by his perseverance in faith and good works],” then we cease to believe in Jesus and we lose assurance. Our focus must remain on Him and His promise, not on us and our hoped-for perseverance. Ironically, by turning perseverance into a guarantee, one strips believers of assurance and thereby makes their perseverance less likely! For assurance is the foundation of a victorious Christian life. 



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 45 years, Sharon. He is an avid bridge player and marathon runner.

Endnotes

1. J. H. wrote a few sentences about each verse explaining why he thought it taught perseverance to a degree. I will put in his questions about each verse as I discuss them.
2. I realize that some grammarians (e.g., Dan Wallace) argue that *ho pisteuōn*, “he who believes,” refers to faith that never stops. However, that argument is impossible. Consider, for example, John 11:26, where two present articular participles are connected: “He who lives and believes in Me shall never die.” If “he who believes in Me” refers to faith that never stops, then “he who lives” (*ho zōn*) refers to people who will never stop living. However, in context, John is saying that any living human being who believes in Jesus will never die spiritually. He had just said in the previous verse that believers do die physically. Consider also the expression John the Baptizer (*ho baptizōn*) in Mark 6:14. King Herod calls John “the baptizing one,” knowing well that he had killed him. John had not baptized anyone since then. Yet he is still called “the baptizing one.”
3. Many Americans are anarchists and even Communists.

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Romans 15

A Concise Commentary

From *The Grace New Testament Commentary*
(Revised Edition)

BY ZANE HODGES

BY ACCEPTING OTHERS AS CHRIST ACCEPTED US (15:1-7)

1 5:1. Paul contrasts **we** [including himself] **who are strong** with **the weak**. Strong believers are enjoined **not to please** themselves. While there is nothing wrong with believers enjoying the things that God has given us to enjoy (cf. 1 Tim 6:17), we must not stubbornly do so while knowingly injuring other believers in our church. The Lord Jesus does not want us using our freedom to hurt fellow believers.

The way we use our freedom properly is by freely giving up rights we have in order not to injure weaker brothers.

15:2. Rather than pleasing oneself, **each of us** is to **please his neighbor in what is good**. Note that Paul does not say *let each of us please the Lord*.

The *good* here probably refers to what is good for the whole body. Selfless action results in the **edification** of the church body.

It is instructive that what Paul has in mind are situations where the weaker brother is directly present. We are not enjoined to live in fear that our *private actions* will hurt the weaker brother. We should simply make sure that we do not flaunt our liberty.

15:3. The Lord Jesus Christ is Paul's prime example of one who **did not please Himself**. He lived, died, and rose again to please God the Father.

On the cross He bore "the insults" [or reproaches] of men who were, in reality, angry with God the Father.

This quote from Ps 69:9 illustrate the fact that our aim in life is to please God, not ourselves. If pleasing the weaker brother pleases God, then we must please the weaker brother.

15:4. The OT Scriptures are in view in the expression **whatever was written beforehand to give us teaching**. Of course, this applies to the NT as well (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 3:14-16). The **hope** (or, *expectation*) of which Paul speaks is the certain expectation of the Second Coming of Christ and of the establishment of His kingdom. That *hope* can and should engender in the believer, who is focused on it, **endurance and encouragement derived from the Scriptures**. Of course, the Judgment Seat of Christ is not far from Paul's mind in what he is saying here (cf. Rom 14:10-12).

15:5-6. Paul launches into a prayer. He desires that **the God of endurance and encouragement** (cf. v 4) would **grant** the believers in Rome a common mindset (**the same aspirations for one another**), one that was **in harmony with Christ Jesus**. That in turn would result in a corporate glorification of **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. This occurs when believers are unified inwardly and outwardly.

15:7. This is the only place in the NT which specifically refers to **Christ** having **accepted** (or

received) **us**. This probably refers to the fact that He has died for us and given us everlasting life.

It is important to distinguish between Christ's *acceptance* and His *approval*. He *accepts* all believers. But He only *approves* of those believers who are walking in the truth (cf. Rom 16:10; 1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 10:18; 13:6-7; 2 Tim 2:15).

Here Paul extends the call to all believers to **accept one another**. This applies to all non-essential matters. When we *accept one another* we glorify God.

BY WORSHIPPING GOD (15:8-11)

15:8-9. Christ Jesus has become a minister to the circumcised in the sense that He taught and helped the house of Israel during His earthly ministry, and His apostles continued that ministry. He and His apostles shared the truth of God with Israel for two reasons: so that He might confirm the OT promises made to the fathers and so that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.

The reference to *the Gentiles* (or nations) *glorifying God for His mercy* as a result of Jesus' ministry is Paul's recognition that Jesus' ministry had a secondary purpose. It was to prepare the way for the birth and development of the Church, comprised of Jews and Gentiles together in one body.

The OT quotation is found in two separate texts, 2 Sam 22:50 and Ps 18:49. Paul and the other apostles confessed the Messiah among the Gentiles and sang praises to His name wherever they went.

15:10. This quotation is from Deut 32:43. The rejoicing the Gentiles should and will do "along with His people [Israel]" will be during the eternal reign of Jesus, starting with the Millennium (Revelation 20) and continuing forever on the new earth (Revelation 21-22).

Paul applies this verse to the present. If Gentiles will one day rejoice with Jews in the kingdom,

believing Gentiles should also rejoice with believing Jews today within the Church.

15:11. Paul quotes from Psalm 117 to show that Gentiles and Jews were to **praise the Lord**. While the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 117 looks ahead to the Millennium and the new earth, it was applicable in the Mosaic economy and it is applicable in the church age.

BY ABOUNDING IN HOPE (15:12-13)

15:12. Paul cites Isa 11:10 in order to remind his readers that Jesus is "a [or the] root from Jesse" and that He "will arise to rule the Gentiles." The *hope* of the Gentiles spoken of here is the "expectation" of the establishment

by Messiah of His righteous kingdom when He soon returns. The Gentile believers in Rome had that expectation.

15:13. The God of hope probably refers to God the Father. He is the object of our *hope*. We are to have great *expectation* for God's promise that Jesus will return soon.

Paul's prayer is that God would fill the readers with **joy and peace** as they believe this.

The Holy Spirit can give us

the same *hope* as we regularly hear about Jesus' soon return and the Judgment Seat of Christ from the Word of God.

PAUL'S ROLE IN THE GENTILE WORLD (15:14-21)

15:14. Paul is **personally persuaded** that the believers (**my brothers**) in Rome are **full of goodness**. What he has written in 12:1-15:13 in no way was meant to discourage the readers or to give the impression that he doubted their intentions or even their spiritual maturity. It is spiritual believers who are **competent also to admonish others**.

That they have been **filled with all knowledge** further suggests that Paul knows they are well grounded in the Word and in sound doctrine.

"It is important to distinguish between Christ's acceptance and His approval. He accepts all believers. But He only approves of those believers who are walking in the truth."

15:15-16. Paul knows he has **written** very **boldly**, or **daringly**, on some points (**in part**), to the **brothers** in Rome, to **refresh** their **memories** about the theme of the letter (1:16-17).

Paul does so **because of the grace** [or favor] that **has been given to him by God**, that he **should be a priestly minister of Jesus Christ for the Gentiles**.

In the OT the priests handled the sacrifices. Paul applies these things to himself as *a priestly minister* who handles the **gospel of God**. The good news is that those who faithfully serve God are delivered from His temporal wrath.

The **offering** of the readers was their very lives (Rom 12:1-2). Paul's reminder is designed to ensure that their *offering* would **be acceptable, sanctified** (or set apart) **by the Holy Spirit**.

15:17. Paul's ground for **exaltation** was not based on something inherently praiseworthy in him. It was based on **things** pertaining or **related to God**. Paul saw his ministry as God working through him.

It is an error for believers to speak as though all they have done for Christ is solely their own labor, with no help from the Lord. But it is also wrong to act super spiritual and to claim that we had nothing to do with it. If we were not to take any credit for our ministries, then Paul could not boast about his ministry (vv 18-19).

15:18-19. Paul would write *daringly* about the work of God, but he would **not dare to speak about** anything other than the things **that Christ** had worked through him. This includes both **word and deed**. They had been used by God to **produce obedience by the Gentiles** (see 1:5), but Paul dared not claim this as something he did independently of Christ.

This obedience was facilitated **by the power of signs and wonders** which Paul did **by the power of the Spirit of God**. They validated his preaching.

The result of the *signs and wonders* Christ accomplished through Paul is that he **completed** the spread of the **gospel of Christ**. Paul means

that he spread the message far and wide. His ministry extended **from Jerusalem**, the heart of Judaism, **and all around** as far as Illyricum.

15:20-21. Paul's **ambition** was to **proclaim the gospel**, but he had a specific aim in terms of the sphere of his evangelistic efforts. He wanted to *proclaim the gospel* in places **where Christ was not named**. That expression probably refers to areas where Jesus Christ was unknown, as the quote from Isa 52:15 indicates.

Paul considered this important **so that he might not build on another person's foundation**. Paul often evangelized where no man had gone before. His task, as Apostle to the Gentiles, was to move from place to place among the nations, evangelizing and planting churches.

While Paul did visit and minister to churches that he did not plant (Acts 13:1-2), his *modus operandi* was to evangelize where the locals had not yet heard about Christ.

PAUL'S PLAN TO VISIT ROME (15:22-33)

15:22. Here Paul takes the time to give more details about his planned visit to Rome.

A major reason **why** Paul had **been hindered many times from coming to Rome** was because of his missionary efforts thus far. It is likely that he intends the reader to understand that since there already was a strong gospel presence in Rome, he first went to places where there was no such presence (cf. vv 23-24).

15:23-24. Because of his work **in these regions**, Paul now believes that the Lord will open the way for him to visit them when he journeys **to Spain**. He has fulfilled his calling of planting churches in Greece and Asia Minor.

Paul's **desire** to minister in Rome has lasted **for many years**. He expresses here a desire for their material support (**and to be assisted by you on my trip there**). He expects to enjoy his time with them (i.e., to be **filled up**). Paul found great

"It is an error for believers to speak as though all they have done for Christ is solely their own labor, with no help from the Lord. But it is also wrong to act super spiritual and to claim that we had nothing to do with it."

joy in teaching and having fellowship with other believers.

15:25. Paul informs them that first he is **going to Jerusalem to serve saints** there. Though his ministry was primarily to Gentiles, he wished to maintain good ties with the Jerusalem church as well. For Paul *all believers* are **saints** in their position (cf. Rom 1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 15:26, 31; 16:2, 15).

15:26. Paul is going to serve the believers in Jerusalem by bringing a financial gift from the churches in **Macedonia and Achaia**.

The Gentile believers in *Macedonia and Achaia* had **been pleased to make a certain contribution to the poor among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem**.

15:27. The believers in the churches of Macedonia and Achaia were mainly **Gentiles**. The believers in the churches of Jerusalem were mainly Jews. Since the Christian message went forth from Jerusalem, all the Gentile churches in a sense owed their very lives and growth (**spiritual benefits**) to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Physical concerns here refer to material possessions. When Gentile believers materially aided the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, they strengthened the unity in the Body of Christ.

15:28. After Paul goes to Jerusalem with the gift, he plans to head out for Rome and then to **Spain**. The **fruit** that Paul expects to **have sealed to them**, that is *to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia*, refers to the sealing of future eternal reward for those believers for what they will have done for the saints in Jerusalem. There is a clear allusion to the Judgment Seat of Christ here (cf. Phil 1:22; 4:17; see also Matt 6:19-21).

15:29. On his trip to Jerusalem, Paul would be bearing material blessings to the believers there. When he comes to Rome, he **will come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ**.

The gospel is a rich spiritual blessing capable of providing *fullness* of blessings to believers. If believers take *the gospel of Christ* to heart and live each day in light of it, then they will be delivered from God's temporal wrath; they will be fulfilling their purpose on earth of glorifying God; and they will be well prepared for the Lord's soon return and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

15:30-32. When Paul urges the readers to **contend along with me in your prayers**, he is talking about *mutual work*. Prayer, according to Paul, is not a passive activity. It is work.

Paul wishes prayer for four things.

First, he asks for prayer so that he **might be delivered from unbelieving Jews in Judea**. Most likely in view is his health, his freedom from imprisonment, and his life itself.

Second, he desires prayer that his **ministry to Jerusalem might be acceptable to the saints**. Paul wants the believers in Rome to pray that his ministry in Jerusalem will be maximally effective in building up the saints in the churches of Jerusalem.

Third, he also wishes them to strive in their **prayers** concerning his proposed trip to Rome. He asks them to pray that he **may come to them with joy by the will of God**. He knows that his visit depends on *the will of God* (cf. Jas 4:13). His life is in God's hands. And he can only come *with joy* if his ministry in Jerusalem is effective.

Fourth, he asks for prayer that he might **find rest with them**. In other words, he wants them to pray that his visit to Rome results in mutual refreshment, encouragement, and edification (cf. Rom 1:11-12).

15:33. Paul ends with a prayer of his own, a prayer that **the God of peace might be with them all**. He wants the blessing of God to be upon the churches in Rome. ■



Zane Hodges was a pastor, author, and professor of Greek at Dallas Theological Seminary. He was promoted to glory in 2008.

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A Review of *Eternal Life: Believe to Be Alive*

BY SHAWN WILLSON

How closely are you paying attention when someone else shares the gospel?

Thanks to my move into the Free Grace community, I pay far greater attention to how the saving message is presented today. The more closely I look, the more of a mess I see.

I was at a funeral about two years ago where the pastor had everyone stand and repeat a prayer line by line following his lead. In the prayer, we confessed in unison our sin and our need for salvation. At the conclusion of the prayer, the pastor declared, “All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved, so everyone in this room who repeated after me and called on the name of the Lord is saved!” Now I am all about salvation by grace through faith, but not salvation by repetition.

This year I was at another church where the gospel was presented. Jesus’ death and resurrection were discussed. Our sin and need of salvation were also covered. The solution of bringing Jesus’ salvation to our sin was to dedicate your life to Christ. Faith was never mentioned. Giving your life was the key. At one church, you only

needed to repeat a prayer to be saved. And at the other, you needed to sacrifice your entire life.

Salvation presentations in America are a mess. This makes me wonder if the Free Grace movement is any better. We would like to think that those in our movement would clearly present a faith-alone gospel with Jesus Christ as the object of our faith. We would expect to hear of a gospel free of the clutter of works and religious jargon. However, I think the reality would most likely be worse than we would hope.

For this reason, *Eternal Life: Believe to Be Alive* by Lucas Kitchen might be one of the most important books in the Free Grace community. In this book, Lucas seeks to clear up the confusion in the American church regarding the gospel, i.e., how to be saved to eternal life. How to go from dead in sin to alive in God.

Our knee-jerk reaction may be to assume this book is beneath us. We say, “I know the gospel, and I never mix works with grace!” But as Lucas shows in *Eternal Life*, there is a lot of confusion regarding gospel presentations. We need a plan to present the gospel with clarity or we will only end up adding to the mess and confusion.

This is what Lucas gives to the church in *Eternal Life*—a basic and reproduceable presentation of the gospel. In the majority of *Eternal Life*, Lucas walks the reader through the evangelistic presentations in the Gospel of John. He shows us the clear and consistent message given to us by Jesus Himself. For Jesus, the saving message is always so simple. Jesus is not building hoops for men to jump through for salvation, but He is offering a gift to save people in need.

Through his simple illustrations or charts, Lucas helps us to see how consistent Jesus was to offer eternal life through faith.

The seven salvation statements chart on p. 152 of the book reveals how consistent Jesus was to say—“He who believes in Me has eternal life.” Once you see Jesus’ claims and promises in chart form, it allows you to clearly see how repetitive Jesus was when He shared the gospel; so we should be just as consistent when we share the gospel today.

This is really where Lucas shines—in simple charts and illustrations. I usually skip right past illustrations and graphs in books, but Lucas's were some of the best I have seen.

It is easy to read the Bible without tying together themes from one chapter to another or to see Jesus' repetition. Or we follow the mistake of seeing this as nothing more than needless repetition. I spoke with a life-long Catholic recently who read the Gospel of John for the first time, and he described it as needlessly repetitious. I responded with, "Maybe Jesus wants to be absolutely clear to you on how He wants you to receive His life."


After reading *Eternal Life*, I believe those of us in the Free Grace movement should follow a consistent plan and pattern when presenting the saving message. We need to follow Jesus' example and craft our own prepared, simple presentation of the gospel. One that is relatable, engaging, and repeatable. The only way this will happen is if pastors and Bible study leaders in the Free Grace movement regularly offer a template for those in their church to share. In *Eternal Life*, Lucas Kitchen presents such a template for the church.

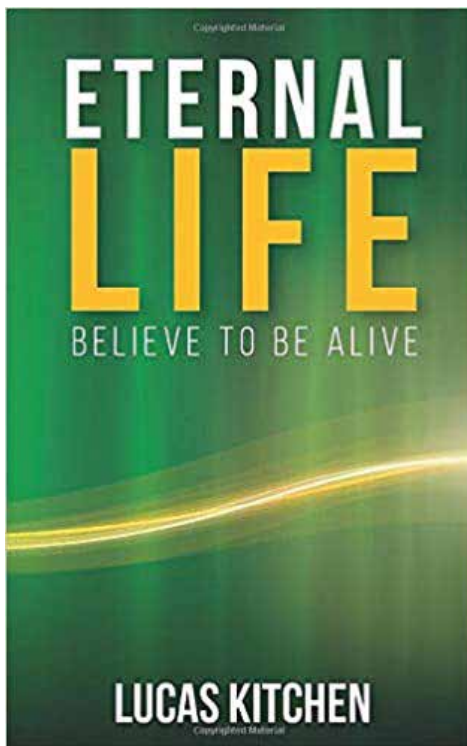
The final section of the book is a 14-page chapter instructing the reader how to draw his or her own chart to present the gospel based on John 3:16. I am just about the worst artist of all time, so I assumed this can't be for me. By the end of the book, thanks to all of Lucas' illustrations that came before, he had convinced me to hold out hope and check out his plan for sharing the gospel. The result of holding out and reading his plan is that I concluded that I need to internalize this, practice this, and share this illustration.

One month after I finished reading and practicing Lucas' method for presenting the gospel, I needed to share it with my church. I stopped

mid-series on Daniel and gave a stand-alone sermon on how to present John 3:16 with a simple picture anyone could draw. After presenting it once, I will continue to share Lucas's method at least once a year to help my church own a consistent and clear strategy to present the faith-alone message.

The Free Grace movement needs a consistent model of presenting the good news free of the works and efforts of man which so easily mix into the clear water of life. Thanks to *Eternal Life: Believe to Be Alive*, we already hold the plan we need to help our people share the gospel in an engaging, quick picture with a world who needs to know of God's love in sending His Son.

Now we just need to share this plan with each other, practice it in our churches, so we can be ready. Armed with nothing but a scrap of paper, a pencil, the one verse we have all memorized, and the filling of the Spirit, we can be an army of evangelists ready to share the simple message of belief in Jesus Christ for eternal life. This is my call to pastors, Sunday school teachers, and small group leaders to take pp. 264-277 in *Eternal Life* and share it with others. 



Shawn Willson is pastor of Grace Community Bible Church in River Ridge, LA, near New Orleans. Follow his YouTube channel: Rev Reads by Shawn Willson.

Top 5 Facts about Authority & Children

BY SUMMER STEVENS

About ten years ago, a dear friend tenderly mentioned to me that she thought my boys, then only toddlers, were allowed to walk all over me. “They’re not very nice to you,” she said simply. It stung a little bit, as parenting corrections always do, especially the ones that are true.

Over the years, I heard similar statements of correction from my mom, predictably on about day seven of a ten-day visit. She’d been there long enough to get a sense of the house and my parenting. Her critiques were always done in love and with concern for me and my kids—things like their bad behavior in grocery stores or how they touched everything or how they weren’t very respectful to me. Many times I felt helpless. My husband helped when he was there, and the kids listened to him, but mostly it was me home with them all day.

Now, I don’t have terrible kids. In fact, I have pretty fantastic kids. But what changed was me. About five years ago, I developed a very strong sense of authority in my parenting or, as my own mother told me, “my *mom* voice.”



I’ve become convinced that what separates pleasant children that you actually enjoy being around from those you can barely tolerate is the child’s understanding of authority. And of course, that starts with the parent.

I’ve compiled a list of five facts about authority, and why it is absolutely critical for raising godly children.

1. Everyone is under authority. Jesus was under the authority of the Father. The Church is under the authority of Jesus. Wives are under the authority of their husbands. Communities are under the authority of the law. Employees are under the authority of their supervisors. Students are under the authority of their teachers. *And children are under the authority of their parents.* Authority is not insignificant! It means “the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.” The child is not in charge; the parent is. The child does not make the decision when to leave a dinner party or when to go to bed or what church the family attends. The parent makes those decisions because that’s what it means to be in authority.


2. Scripture is our authority. We are used to hearing those words, but read that again through the lens of parenting. One of the most important lessons parents teach is a respect for the authority of Scripture—by that I mean that God’s words can and do affect the way I live, the decisions I

make, the way I treat people, the things I value, the things I do, and the things I don't do. If I like it or if I don't—God's word has authority over me. I can choose to submit to that authority or be in rebellion to it. Children will only have respect for the authority of Scripture if they see this modeled by parents. Sunday school teachers are wonderful, but they cannot replace mom and dad. If a child reads "do not lie" in the Bible, and he sees his mother lie, he will naturally conclude that "Mom doesn't really believe the Bible so I don't have to either." The very best way to teach your children to respect God's Word is to read it out loud to them every day. Talk about it for a couple minutes, ask questions. And then, make every effort, as James says, to not be merely hearers of the Word, but doers.

3. Children must be taught to obey. Did you twinge at that word "obey?" Many parents think it sounds too harsh, too totalitarian. If Scripture is our authority, then the clearest verse for your children is: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph 6:1). Paul tells us it is right for children to obey their parents. It's not oppressive or stifling, but right. Kids don't want to obey; nobody does! We are rebels born with a sin nature. Paul tells Timothy in his first letter that the law is good if you use it right, "knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate..." (1 Tim 1:8-9). For parents, this means that we apply the law with its godly principles as we train our children to be kind, respectful, considerate, truthful, and hard-working. We don't just suggest these behaviors; we teach our children to obey them as God's word instructs.

4. Discipline is love. "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Prov 13:24). Solomon doesn't mince words here. Failing to discipline means you hate your child! I've often equated the failure to discipline with laziness (in myself); but I don't know any parent who lets bad behavior slide that would admit that he or she hates his son. But remember, Proverbs are simple statements—we're contrasting love with hate. If you love him, you

discipline; if you don't, you hate him. I love how Solomon includes the word *diligent*—he is diligent to discipline him. Because it's true—proper discipline takes an enormous amount of diligence because it's exhausting! It is much easier just to give in and let your daughter stay longer at the park because you want to avoid a fit in public—but what you are doing is costly to the character and development of your child and your future relationship with her.

5. The result is delight. A friend of mine has shared her joy in entering into new relationships with her grown children. "Parenting adult children is such a delight," she said of her 20-somethings. She and her husband faithfully raised kids with a strong sense of authority in parents, God, and His Word. The children are now confident, down-to-earth, kind, and full of personality. They're certainly not stifled or oppressed! They have strong marriages, a strong work ethic, and they're active in the church. Proverbs 29:17 says, "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; Yes, he will give delight to your soul." Delight can only come after the hard work of teaching your child to respect and obey authority. 



Summer Stevens is married to Nathanael (Pastor of Nags Head Church, NC), and they have five children. She has a Master's in Biblical Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary and enjoys running (but mostly talking) with friends and reading good books to her kids.

Partners in Grace



The best looking GES board in years (Brad is on TV)

WINTER GES BOARD MEETING

Irving, TX / January 7-8

December giving was up \$10,000 over last December, and it was our best December in the last five years! We are on pace right now to end the year just about on budget. Thank you for your partnership!

We learned just before the board meeting that Brad Daskocil, board chairman, had Covid. As a result, he stayed home and with the help of Mike Lii, he was able to lead the entire meeting from the 40-inch TV screen in the boardroom via Zoom.

We welcomed new board member Letitia Lii, who gave lots of good input.

An exciting new writing project was also approved by the board. I will be writing a sequel to Zane Hodges's 1981 book, *The Gospel Under Siege*. We tentatively plan to call it *The Gospel Is Still Under Siege*.

BEREAN MEMORIAL CHURCH

Irving, TX / January 16

This year I plan to speak once a quarter at this historic Free Grace church. I plan to work my way through Genesis. This time I spoke on Genesis 4 in the first hour ("From Cain to Seth") and Genesis 5 ("The Temporary Reign of Death") in the second. The messages were well received, and we had good interaction.

FREE GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

Forney, TX / January 23

John Brumett asked me to speak on the vital issue of eternal rewards. I covered several passages, including 2 Cor 5:9-11; Matt 6:19-21; 2 Tim 2:12; and Luke 19:11-



BBQ Board Dinner



At home at Free Grace Bible Church



Exercising their minds at Berean Memorial Church

27. It was a very encouraging message. We had a good time of Q & A afterwards.

VISTA RIDGE BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Lewisville, TX /
January 30

In the first hour I spoke on the temporary reign of death in Genesis 5. In the worship service I spoke on the doctrine of eternal rewards. Both were well received.



Visiting with Vista Ridge

GES'S 26TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE:

Denton, TX / May 23-26

The theme this year is *last days judgments*. But don't let that scare you! This will be an edifying time of studying God's Word as it relates to His plans for bringing human history to a close in preparation for the eternal kingdom. Studying the last days judgments also touches upon the character of God and the implication of God's evaluation for living the Christian life.

The conference will be held at Camp Copass, a beautiful camp on Lake Lewisville, with multiple activities for kids, space for RV hookups, and on-site hotel, motel, and cafeteria to help encourage after-hours fellowship. There will be a VBS for kids.

REVIEW OUR BOOKS AND PODCAST

If you want a very effective way to share your faith with lots of people, then writing reviews of our books on amazon.com is a great idea. As you explain our views on assurance, faith, and salvation, you are effectively sharing your faith with all who will read your review. If each of our partners took the time to review all of our books, the spiritual impact could be great.

Likewise, a practical way of helping the ministry is to also review our podcast on whatever platform you listen on. Writing a review can mean the difference between someone not listening and giving the show a try.

GES MISSIONS

During January I (Ken) and my family got Covid. Fortunately, none of us needed to go to the hospital.

Covid also put a halt to some of our plans. We were going to go to Kenya in March; however, the government stopped all "non-essential" travel. We are hoping to do it in July, Lord willing. At this time, we are both still scheduled to teach in Zambia at a Bible college there.

The GES board has asked that Kathryn and I start a podcast. We are hoping to start in February.

A church in London has asked us to come conduct a conference there in June.

Additionally, the College of Biblical Studies in Indianapolis has confirmed that I will teach a course on the Gospels in April and May.

Throwing an Ambassador into Jail? (Ephesians 6:20)

BY KEN YATES

My dad was a career Army man, so while growing up I lived in some foreign countries. I remember in one country I was given a special ID card because of where my dad worked. The ID card stated that I could not be arrested in that country. If I violated the law, police authorities could only take my name. Afterwards, they had to release me.

I was only 12 years old but I thought that was the coolest thing in the world. Looking back, I am sure that if I had committed a serious crime, the US authorities would have turned me over to the local authorities. But it was kind of like being a mini ambassador.

An ambassador of a country lives in a foreign country and represents the government of his homeland. We have all heard stories about their privileges. If an ambassador commits a crime, even a very serious one, the host country will not prosecute him. The ambassador will be sent home but will not face the consequences of his actions in the land where he committed his crime. Ambassadors even have special license plates on their cars to let police know they have a get-out-of-jail-free card. They can't even get speeding tickets. Occasionally we hear about ambassadors who get away with murder. The ambassador of Burma in Sri Lanka actually killed his wife and burned her body in the back yard. He was never prosecuted.



The people in the host country, when they hear of such outrageous things, understandably get upset. They wonder how a visitor to their country can have immunity when the citizens themselves do not. The reason is that the host country values the relationship it has with the home country of the ambassador. The actions of one man are not as important as the advantages of diplomatic ties between countries. To arrest and punish an ambassador would be like attacking his native land.

The only time I have ever heard of a US ambassador getting into serious trouble (even though I am sure there are others) was in 2012. Terrorists killed the US ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi, Libya. Even in this situation, the murderers were acting outside of government approval. In fact, the Libyan government condemned what happened.

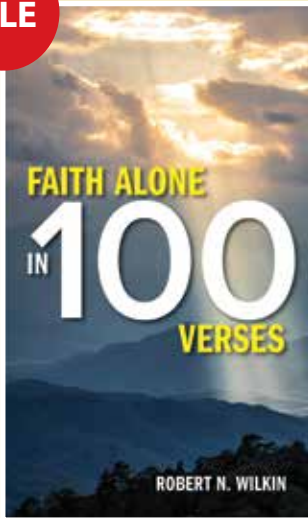
In light of all this, Paul in Eph 6:20 uses what could be called a shocking description of himself when he says that he is “an ambassador in chains.” Paul was in a Roman prison, which explains the chains. But whoever heard of an ambassador being arrested and thrown in jail by the governing authorities? To make matters worse, Paul had not committed any crime at all.

When one considers that Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, this description of Paul is even more unusual. Jesus is seated at the right hand of God

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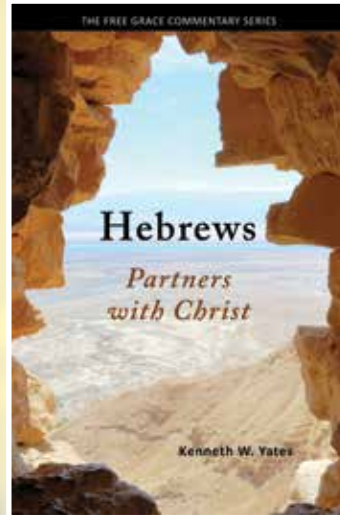
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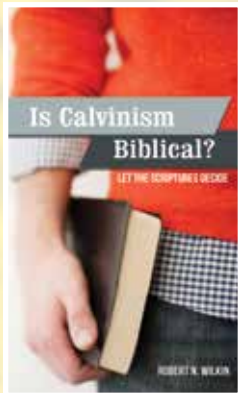
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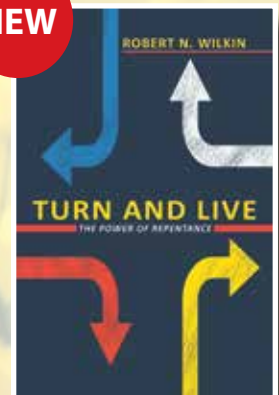
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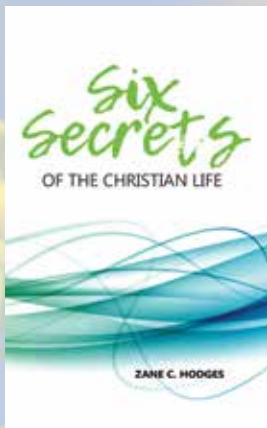
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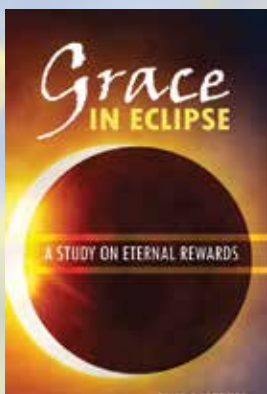


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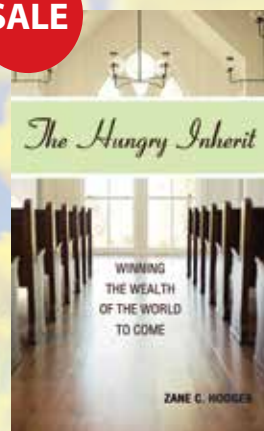
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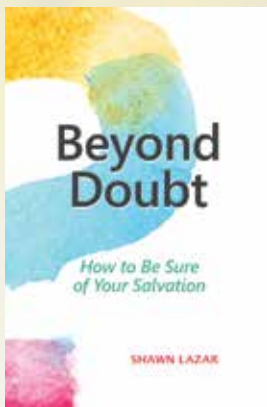


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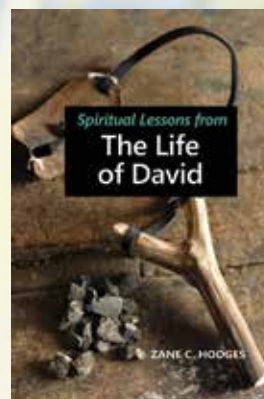


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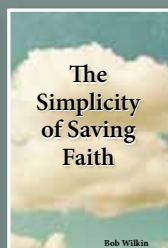
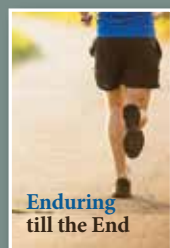


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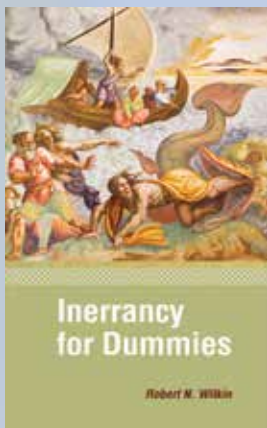
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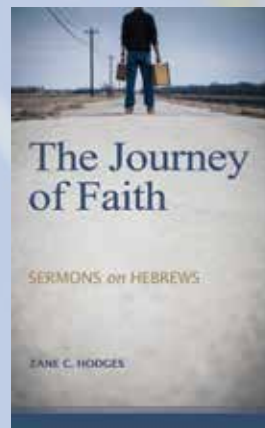


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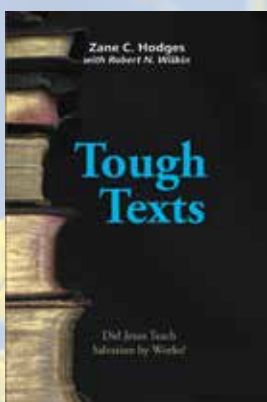


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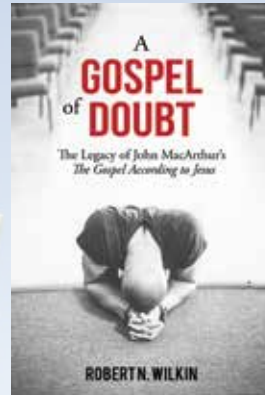


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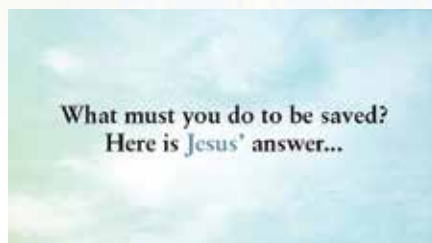


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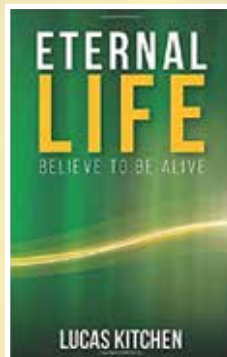


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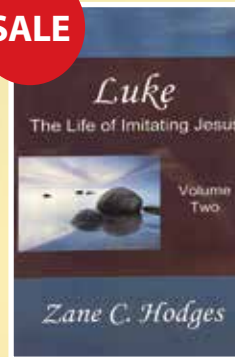
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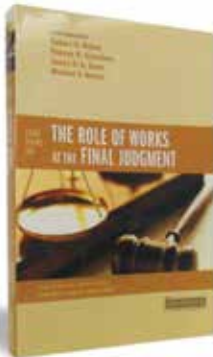


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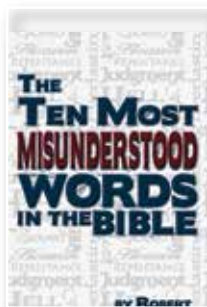


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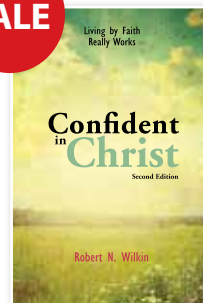
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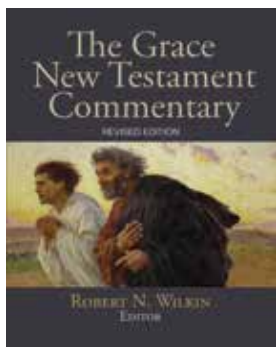


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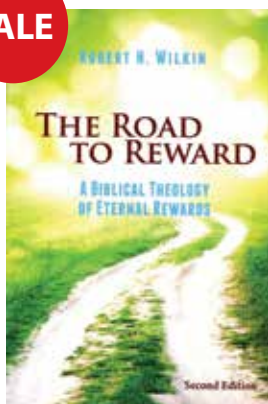
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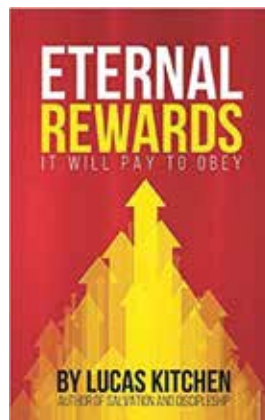
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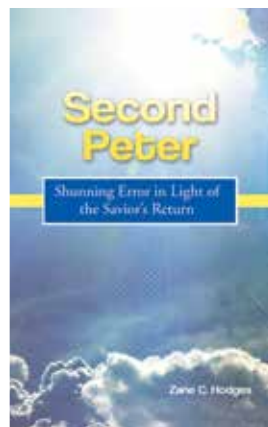
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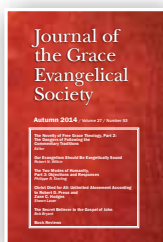
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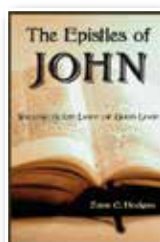
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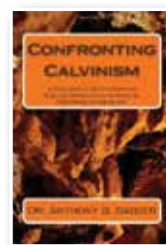
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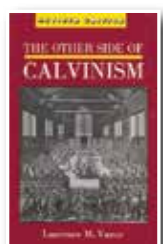


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“We do not have immunity from opposition in the country in which we live. In fact, the opposite is true.”

His Father. Jesus will one day rule over all of creation and will do so forever. He was the One who had commissioned Paul for his work. Paul was the representative of the most powerful Man in history. He was an ambassador for the kingdom of God. If anybody should have been granted a get-out-of-jail-free card and special license plates, it was Paul.

Of course, the reason Paul was an ambassador sitting in a jail was that the country he was serving in did not recognize the authority that had sent him. Jewish leaders had convinced the Roman government to imprison and try him. Paul's very life was at stake.

The world does not recognize the coming kingdom of God. But that is the future home of everyone who has ever believed in the coming King for eternal life. In a very real sense, every believer is called to be an ambassador in this world for Jesus Christ.

But the world does not give us a special ID card with special privileges. We do not have immunity from opposition in the country in which we live. In fact, the opposite is true. We may or may not ever experience literal chains, like Paul did for his service as an ambassador. But we are still called to be our King's representatives. We may not get any benefits from the country where we serve as His representatives, but think about the rewards the King will give us at His Judgment Seat if we serve Him well in the posts He has assigned us to.

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Ken Yates is GES's international speaker and fashion advisor. Check out his commentary on Hebrews.

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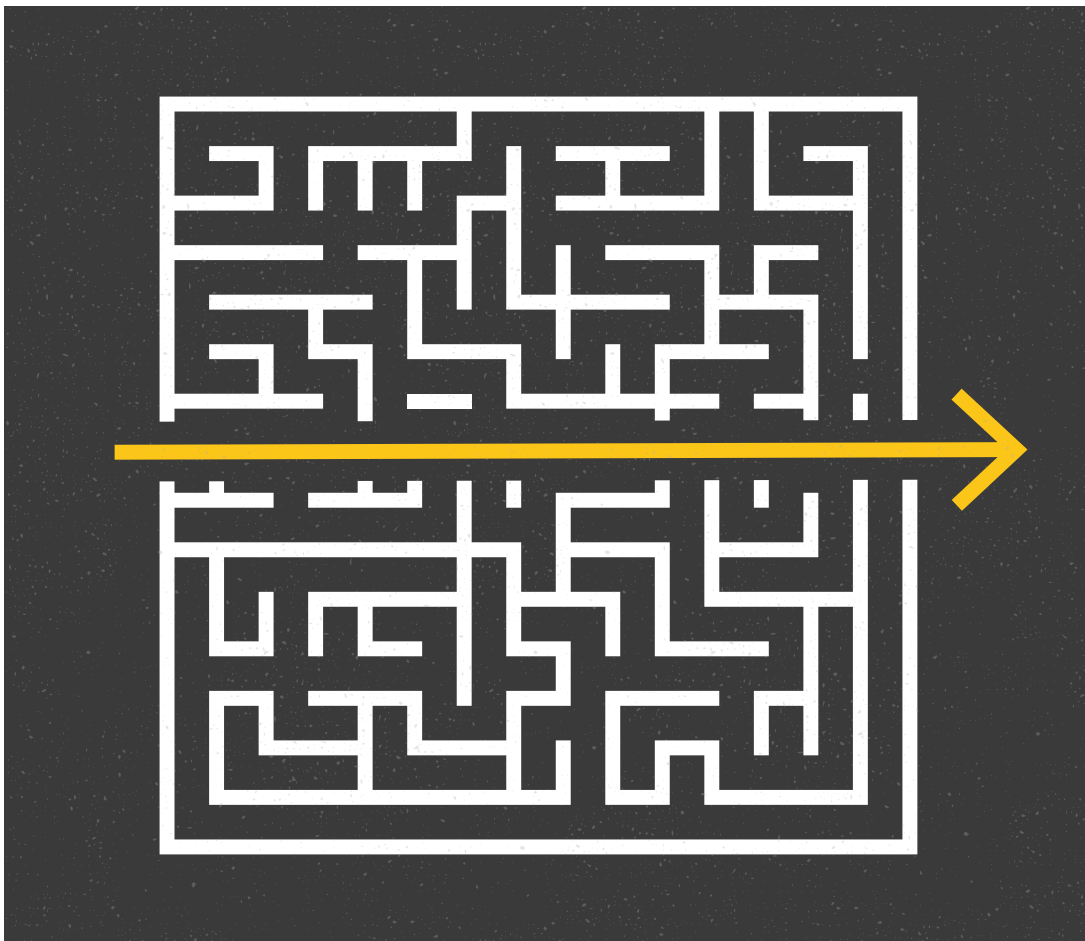
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Five Guidelines for Guidance

BY MARCIA HORNOK



God has a wonderful plan for your life,” states a popular evangelistic appeal.¹ This leads many Christians to conclude they must discern God’s pre-determined plan and carry it out. But how does He reveal His perfect will for us? What happens if we miss out on God’s best?

Bill and his wife, classmates of ours in Bible college, completed their lifelong goal of becoming missionaries and moved to South America in the 1970s. Learning a tribal language overwhelmed them; health issues developed; and Bill soon realized the mission field wasn’t his niche after all. He returned home with his young family and began working for a farmer.

As if his struggles on the field weren’t enough, now he faced the emotional strain of being a “missionary flunkie,” and his Christian peers would not let him forget it. Some criticized him for putting his hand to the plow and turning back. One colleague said he should apologize to his home church for disobeying God. The mission board even discussed making him reimburse his supporters. People saw Bill as a failure in ministry, but what was God’s assessment? Five principles from 1 Corinthians 16 give the answer.

1. DO WHAT YOU WISH IF GOD ALLOWS

Paul told the Corinthians that he would come to them when he passed through Macedonia, and perhaps winter with them “if the Lord permits” (16:5-7). Like Paul, we can make our plans and proceed with them unless something interferes. We rest in the confidence that God sovereignly oversees all circumstances, but He allows us to choose our own course. Why did God give us intellect and free will if He does not expect us to use them?

James 4:15 affirms that we ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” Zane Hodges said, *If the Lord wills* should be on our lips, “not as a mere formula, but as a genuine expression of [our] dependence on God.”²

2. LIVE WHERE YOU CAN HAVE AN EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

Although we have the responsibility to make our own choices, including vocation and location, we often face competing options. Verses 8-9 indicate a decision can be based on the potential for ministry we might have. Paul planned to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, “for a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” I tend to think adversaries should be avoided as a detriment to ministry. Not in God’s design. Opposition may slam a door shut, but it should not hinder us from entering a door of opportunity. If you have two possibilities for using your spiritual gifts, choose the harder one, because that is where you need God most, and He will do the work. The glory will be His.

3. RESPECT THE DECISIONS OTHERS MAKE FOR THEMSELVES

Even though the “Great Apostle Paul”³ wanted Apollos to do something, Apollos had freedom to do what he preferred according to his own timeline. Paul “strongly urged” Apollos to go to Corinth, “but he was quite unwilling to come at this time; however, he will come when he has a convenient time” (16:12). Imagine that—God’s will can be a matter of convenience. And we can turn down the plans others have for us, even if they are our superiors. Based on this verse alone, Bill’s colleagues should have supported, not shamed him.

Another instance of people making their own decisions is Silas in Acts 15:34, where “it seemed good to Silas to remain there.” In the context of the Jerusalem Council, there were things that “seemed good to” the church leaders (Acts 15:25) and what “seemed good to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 15:28).⁴ Sometimes we need to do what “seems good” rather than expect clear direction. Sounds like common sense, doesn’t it?

4. EVALUATE YOUR MOTIVES

“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love” (16:13-14). Our decisions must not compromise

God's standards and truths or our Christian walk. If we make a "no" decision, discern the reason—is it because of fear? Or feeling inadequate? We may have forgotten that God uses our weaknesses more than our strengths.

Additionally, are we motivated by our love for God, which will enable us to love the people we serve? The precedent for ministering in love had already been set in chapter 13, which affirms that our efforts profit nothing without love, and love never fails.

5. STAY ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD-APPOINTED AUTHORITIES

Paul urged the Corinthians to submit to the household of Stephanas and "to everyone who works and labors with us" (16:15-16). There are no Lone-Ranger Christians. Some church planters prize independence and do not unite their churches with any organization, even though doing so would protect them from future doctrinal deviations, tax liability, and civil lawsuits. In contrast, missionaries appreciate the value of staying under the umbrella of protection their mission boards provide.

We Christians also need to submit to our local church leaders and surround ourselves with accountability partners. They keep us on track, encourage us, and help us with problems. Additionally, they can evaluate our options objectively when we face significant decisions.

I'm happy to report the rest of the story about Bill, occasioned by an unusual circumstance. Our daughter and her husband moved to the city where Bill lives and visited the church he attends. Bill and his wife greeted them after the service and asked where they were from. Our daughter said, "We live here now, but originally I'm from Utah."

Bill's wife replied, "We know only one person in all of Utah, but you probably don't know him. His name is Ken Hornok."

This led us to reconnect with our classmates after 48 years. Recounting his life story to us was painful for Bill at first; however, we could not view him as a wipe-out. We also thought at one time that we had "missed God's perfect will,"

until we read *Decision Making and the Will of God*.⁵ Bill had read it too and felt its liberating message. He recalled Dr. Homer Heater saying, "God gave you a watch; you don't need to keep asking Him the time."

Bill had loved and nurtured his wife, raised his children to live for God, helped his neighbors, witnessed to unbelievers, and faithfully served in his local church while supporting his family with manual labor jobs. Recently, we have been consulting with him about a personal problem, and he is giving us excellent counsel. No matter where his decisions took him, Bill is a "good and faithful servant."

In conclusion, 1 Corinthians 16 exhorts us to do the work of the Lord where we are (16:10) and devote ourselves to service (16:15). St. Augustine is credited with saying, "Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved."

Although Paul had the benefit of direct revelations from God, he observed five practical guidelines to wisely consider his opportunities and circumstances. We may do the same, as well as accept the choices others make for themselves. Let's give up the misguided notion that we can find or miss God's will. Instead of pleading for a special word from God in making decisions, we should follow those He already gave in 1 Corinthians 16. ■



Marcia Hornok writes from Salt Lake City where her husband pastored Midvalley Bible Church for 39 years. For a free digital copy of her illustrated book of 40 Brief Evangelistic Analogies, email her at marcia.hornok@gmail.com.

1. From "Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?" by Bill Bright, 1965.

2. Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 101.

3. Don't you think Paul would hate this moniker that many preachers ascribe to him?

4. How they knew what seemed good to the Holy Spirit is a mystery, probably unique to the book of Acts.

5. "God's will" is not something we must find. *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson (Colorado Springs, CO:Multnomah 1980, 2004).

The Mailbag

BY YOU

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Q&A

BY ANTHONY BADGER

QUESTION

The Bible tells us that God is a rewarder of those that diligently seek Him. With [the false teachings of] “lordship” and “works” salvation so prominent today, how have so many people who appear to be diligent seekers missed the mark? What caused this promise from the Scriptures to be short-circuited? There definitely isn’t any reward in promoting false saving messages.

ANSWER

To answer your question as to *why* the very important teaching of rewards has been short-circuited in our churches today, it would seem that there are two reasons.

I think the *first* and *most basic reason* is groupthink. Most teach that practically every Biblical reference to future rewards and seeking God are the means by which one receives everlasting life. Probably the majority of Bible teachers are simply not astute enough to recognize what the text actually says and/or are not equipped to do precise exegetical work. Unfortunately it is much easier to obtain one’s theology from commentaries than it is to do so from the Bible itself. So, the teaching of “works salvation” is included in the majority of mainstream Christianity, which doctrine has been passed down practically since the apostolic age in some form or

another. Admittedly, receiving rewards will be the result of a believer’s works and faithfulness. But if working for rewards should be perceived as a way of entering heaven, one would naturally tend to mingle or amalgam works and faith together. Doing so leads to the idea that both faith and works are necessary conditions for receiving everlasting life. This, of course, leads to legalism and is a blatant contradiction of what the Bible

teaches. But it seems that most folks have no way of resolving it.

Now, for the *second* reason. It seems to be innate in our *fallen human nature*, perhaps from a degree of inbred pride, that we shrink from the idea of someone giving us anything for free (such as God tendering everlasting life as a free gift apart from works or merit).

Receiving something for free inspires a feeling (subconscious, at least) of obligation toward the giver. If someone gives me a Christmas gift one year, I will feel obligated to return the favor next year. The problem is that even if we should feel obligated to pay God back for everlasting life, such debt would be impossible to satisfy. Regardless, this all theologically shakes out into the feeling that I must pay God back for His gift; and how best to return the favor but by working it out as an obligation for receiving the gift in the first place? And so, we hear statements

“Unfortunately it is much easier to obtain one’s theology from commentaries than it is to do so from the Bible itself.”



coming from “lordship” preachers such as, “Works and obedience are not optional.” That might seem like a pious and spiritual response, but the astute believer must then ask, “Not optional for what? Not optional *to please the Lord*, or not optional *to receive everlasting life*?”

If someone believes that faith in Christ *plus works* are necessary for everlasting life, then he is not believing the faith-alone message. If he has never believed, then he is not yet born again.

Thank you very much for your question. I hope my input has helped.

QUESTION

I have read Bob’s book on Calvinism as well as numerous other books on the subject. I concur wholeheartedly with you guys that Calvinism/Lordship Salvation corrupts the gospel and makes it impossible to have assurance of salvation. However, sometimes when I look back at some of the great preachers and missionaries of the past few centuries (e.g. Edwards, Whitefield, Judson, Spurgeon, etc.), I’m struck by how many of them were 5-point Calvinists. Do you think that God still greatly used these men (in spite of their faulty teachings) to lead others to Christ?

ANSWER

I was once asked whether a Lordship Salvation preacher could be a great preacher. I responded by asking, “Great in whose eyes?”

Of course the person who asked that question considered those ministers that you named in your question to be great preachers—greatly used by God. However, my question still applies. Does greatness or being greatly used by God depend upon a preacher’s fame?

If a famous 5-point Calvinist preacher should happen to introduce an unsaved person to the Bible, to Christ, and the message of life, such a person (by virtue of his position and notoriety) may indeed be used by God, albeit through the back door, so to speak.

If a person was to believe in Christ alone for eternal life as a result of reading the Bible or thinking it through, I suppose that such a person might be used by God in that respect. The Apostle Paul told the Philippian believers that he rejoiced when, “whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached” (Phil 1:18). He was probably referring to those who would preach Christ with wrong motives rather than who would preach a false gospel, because in the verse just prior he said that he was “appointed for the defense of the gospel” (1:17).

“The simple fact of the matter is that the Lordship Salvation aspect of Reformed theology is a false gospel.”

In Galatians 1, Paul was very hard on those who would preach a false gospel. The simple fact of the matter is that the Lordship Salvation aspect of Reformed theology is a false gospel.

Essentially, Calvinism is often preached (and Reformed theology is often taught) by famous people who seem to have, from

our perspective, made an impact in the Christian world. One would be hesitant to question the sincerity of their motives. What must be questioned is the means or the message they used to try to bring people to a saving knowledge of Christ.

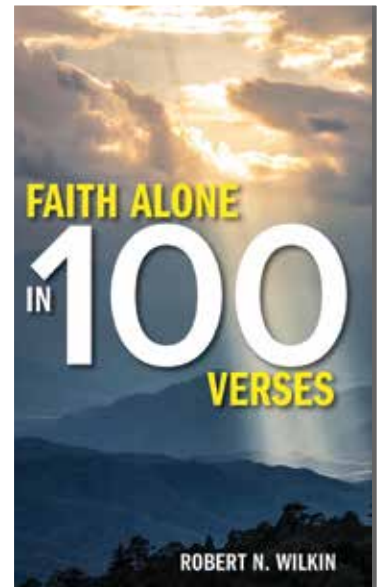
Nor does 5-point Calvinism encourage discipleship, because it undermines or denies the assurance that one possesses eternal life by simple faith in Christ alone.

And so, a relevant question is this: Is becoming a better Calvinist the same as growing in the faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ? I think not. ■



Anthony Badger has a ThD from Dallas Seminary and is the author of *Confronting Calvinism*, available in the bookstore.

Book Spotlight



Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, famously said that there were over one hundred verses in the Bible which say that the sole condition of everlasting life is believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, he did not list the hundred verses. In fact, it has been hard to find anyone who even lists the hundred verses, let alone explains all of them.

In this book, Wilkin shows that these hundred verses all teach that faith alone is the condition of everlasting life / justification / kingdom entrance and quotes leading scholars who agree that these verses are indeed teaching that, many of whom are not Free Grace advocates.


This book makes a great gift for pastors, Sunday school teachers, Bible study leaders, new believers, mature believers, and even open unbelievers.

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Blessings and Cursings

BY LUCAS KITCHEN

There are two kinds of miracles in the Bible. Blessings and cursings. Everyone wants the one, while avoiding the other like the plague...because, well, the other is literally the plague.

Blessing miracles are constructive events like healing, restoring sight, or bringing someone back from the dead. These are the ones that make it into the Sunday school curriculum. Remember when Elijah resurrected the widow's son? Good example. Very constructive! There are lots of those in the OT, but if you think of miracles as only constructive, then you're missing an entire facet of God's supernatural input into the world.

CURSING MIRACLES

Don't forget the cursing miracles. If Darth Vader were leading a Bible study, I suspect he'd have a particular interest in these. Cursings are destructive miracles, like bringing blindness, inflicting disease, or cutting someone's life short. Don't make the mistake of thinking that cursing miracles are evil or wrong. They may include destruction, illness, and death, but they come from God. Remember Samson bringing down the temple on thousands of Philistines? Pretty deadly and destructive, right? Still, God gave him the power to do it. The OT is packed with both blessing and cursing miracles.

The OT predicted that when the Messiah comes, He would do both kinds of miracles, blessings and cursings. He would grant the blessing of supernatural long life and health to his faithful ones (Isa 65:20), and miraculously curse with plague and famine those who oppose Him (Zech 14:16-17). The OT prophesied a Messiah who would employ the full spectrum of miraculous options.

Everyone seems familiar with the blessing miracles in the NT, like feeding a not-socially-distanced crowd of thousands, healing people of awful ailments, even making booze so the party could go way past midnight. However, the NT has its fair share of cursing miracles as well. Remember Paul being blinded? That's pretty destructive. Apparently, blindness was a favorite because Elymas the sorcerer got hit with a sudden case too. Maybe the biggest was Ananias and Sapphira, who dropped stone-cold dead at the feet of one of the apostles? (Acts 5:1-11). Cursing miracles are not just an OT thing.

So both Old and New Testaments have blessing and cursing miracles. But there is a set of books in the Bible in which there are blessings but no cursing miracles. If you were to chart out the kinds of miracles used in the Bible, you'd notice an entire section that does not include a single cursing miracle. Darth Vader would be so disappointed.

NO CURSES FROM JESUS

It's the Gospels. Jesus didn't use cursing miracles. During His time on earth, He didn't make anyone blind, inflict a disease, or miraculously end anyone's life. The prophets before Him and the apostles after Him would both engage in these kinds of miracles, but Jesus didn't during His earthly ministry.

Why didn't Jesus curse anyone? He had the ability,¹ but didn't use it. Why? If it were me—well, we'd all be in trouble if it were me—but if it were me, I know whom I'd use the curses on. The Pharisees were a royal nuisance, with their unbelief and super-duper-uber-legalistic-self-important-pride and weird hats. I don't know if

own disciples for suggesting that He use a cursing miracle to turn the Samaritan village into flaming rubble. Even His disciples expected Him to use destructive miracles, but He didn't do it.

Think about how different the Sermon on the Mount would be if He were open to the option of cursing miracles. "I tell you, if you look at a woman with lust in your heart, I'll give you heartburn so bad you'll be breathing fire, and I'll delay the invention of antacid for another two thousand years." Imagine how people would have obeyed if they knew He would bring down a miraculous case of halitosis, nose bleeds, or hemorrhoids. No one would play the lightning round with Jesus, and everyone would sit on the bench at the mention of sudden death.

"Jesus didn't use cursing miracles. During His time on earth, He didn't make anyone blind, inflict a disease, or miraculously end anyone's life. The prophets before Him, and the apostles after him would both engage in these kinds of miracles, but Jesus didn't during His earthly ministry."

they really wore weird hats, but they always have those five-gallon-bucket-looking hats on in the Jesus movies. Drives me nuts.

Anyway. They opposed Jesus at every turn. They resisted Him. They refused to believe. It would have been easier just to wave His hand. Poof! "And...ya blind." Or, boom! "Now you got bunions. Boils for you. Bubonic for the whole back row. Should have sat up front." It would have proved He was in charge, and it would have made people line up for miles to obey Him. And yet, He didn't use cursing miracles.

His disciples expected Him to, and seemed confused that He wasn't blasting anyone with the holy water cannon. Remember that time when a Samaritan village rejected Jesus because He was heading to Jerusalem? James and John pulled Jesus aside and said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" Obviously, Jesus didn't agree to make the village a smoldering ruin. Instead, He rebuked His

He could have used miraculous curses; you know He could have. So I'll repeat my question. Why did He only use blessing miracles? Why didn't Jesus curse anyone?

I think John 5:40 has a hint. Do you remember it? He says to a group of know-it-all-unbeliever-Pharisees, "you refuse to come to Me to have life." It was the perfect time to call down a heavenly hernia upon them all, but He didn't. Instead, He allowed them to refuse His offer of free eternal life. He could have cowed them into submission, frightened them into belief, and sent them quaking into the gates of heaven, but He resisted the urge.

Why? I think it's because He wanted people to be able to resist His offer if they so chose. He gave people enough evidence to believe, but not so much they were coerced or obligated to enter the Kingdom against their will. Essentially, He didn't use cursing miracles because He wanted to leave everyone's free will intact.

It says something about God and Jesus' character that He revealed enough of His glory to bring open-minded people into the fold, while veiling His wrath enough so those who wanted to resist Him could continue to do so. He came to offer, not occupy; to appeal, not appropriate; to invite, not inflict. That gentle, dignity-preserving invitation was extended to the people of the time, and it brought a certain kind of person in. Many open-minded listeners believed in Him and received everlasting life.

Many more took advantage of the free-will privilege He gave them and refused to believe. Jesus' gentle approach sent another kind of person away searching for the next militant revolutionary, battle-beating warlord or the power-wielding dictator. Basically, they would have voted for Darth Vader; at least that dude knew how to force choke. Jesus didn't provide enough plagues or pestilence for the power-hungry Pharisees' taste. Their own evil motives made them miss the God of the universe, because He came to them meekly.

NO DESIRE TO OVERWHELM

Sometimes I have unbelievers ask, "Why doesn't Jesus just show up and prove once-and-for-all that He's real?" I think it's because the kind of overwhelming "proof" an obstinate unbeliever would need might just override his free will. It might just remove his eternal prerogative to refuse belief. Or it might just make him pee his pants. Most of the time, these unbelievers suggest Jesus should do some blessing miracle as proof. I've never heard unbelievers say, "If Jesus would just strike me with macular degeneration, relentless malaria, and a violent case of dysentery, then I'd finally believe." No, they want the blessings, and the curses never cross their mind. Although, for God, He's got both options, even if He doesn't always use them.

Even in Jesus' day, people would see Him do a miracle and then a moment later ask, "What sign will you give to show you're really the guy?" (my paraphrase). I think what they were asking was, "When are you going to do some serious damage on our enemies?" Even after His resurrection, the apostles were asking something kind of similar


when they said, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They wanted to know when He was going to start the fireworks. Jesus, when are you going to start dropping the H bombs on the Romans?

They weren't exactly wrong to ask. Their timing was a little off. Of course, there will be a day when Jesus returns, blood-covered, on a war-horse, with a sword. Those Messiah-powered cursing miracles the OT forecast will arrive when He shows up for seconds.

AN OPEN INVITATION

As for now, He is holding the door open, inviting as many to come in as they will, before He shifts into a battle strategy after the Rapture. The thing is, He could show up at any time with that new strategy in play. He told His disciples, "It's not for you to know the times or dates." He's held off this long, but we really don't know for how much longer.

As far as His first coming, He could have miracle-cursed us until we were so gunflustered that we said, "Ok, we'll believe whatever you want us to; just quit it with all this athlete's foot stuff." I'm joking around because it's really frightening to think about what He could have done. It's awe-inspiring to realize that despite His immeasurable power to melt our flesh from our bones, (yes that's actually in the Bible), He chose to thaw our hearts with a gentle display of blessing miracles.

It's a sign that He loves you, and it's incredible. 



Lucas Kitchen is a Christian author and filmmaker. Check out his work with Free Grace International (<https://freegrace.in>).

1. There was that time He cursed the fig tree, which proves He had some serious cursing power, but chose not to use it on the people He came to offer salvation to (Matt 21:19-20).

Do You Obsess Over Your Guilt?

BY SHAWN LAZAR

Guilt is universal,” wrote Paul Tournier, a Christian psychiatrist (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 152). And according to him, you can do one of two things with that guilt: you can either *repress* it or *recognize* it.

Repressing your guilt “leads to anger, rebellion, fear and anxiety, a deadening of conscience, an increasing inability to recognize one’s faults, and a growing dominance of aggressive tendencies” (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 152). In other words, repressing your guilt only leads to behavior that increases it!

On the other hand, *recognizing* your guilt “leads to repentance, to the peace and security of divine pardon, and in that way to a progressive refinement of conscience and a steady weakening of aggressive impulses” (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 152).

TWO KINDS OF RELIGION

Whether you repress or recognize your guilt may be influenced by the type of religion you practice. Tournier says there are religions of moralism and religions of grace.

Tournier adds that moralistic religions make the guilt problem worse. “A moralistic religion, a deformation of religion saturated with the idea of taboos and picturing God as a threatening being, awakens fear, and sets in motion the sinister mechanism of obduracy, revolt, and wickedness” (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 152). In other words, by emphasizing rules and regulations, moralistic religion produces exactly what Paul warned that law-based religions produce, i.e., *even more sin!* (Rom 7:7-11).



The alternative is a religion of grace that can break into “this vicious circle and leads to repentance and thus to freedom from guilt” (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 152).

MISAPPLYING THE BIBLE

When you read the Bible, you can find both kinds of verses—frightening verses that speak about judgment and comforting verses that speak to God’s grace. Ironically, in his psychiatric practice, Tournier found that people were adept at picking out the passages in Scripture *that did not apply to them*.

What he means is that Tournier found that people who were smugly self-righteous, who “flaunt their self-satisfaction, at the cost of a repression of their guilt, who scorn and pass judgment upon other people and flatter themselves on their virtues” were the ones who noticed passages that spoke about “the assurances of grace” and



ignored the passages about judgment (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 153).

Meanwhile, the people who were most aware of their own sins, and the most wracked by guilt, overlooked the grace passages and occupied themselves with verses that spoke about God's judgment. As Tournier says, "instead of drawing from the Bible the marvelous consolation which is there precisely for them, they have a morbid passion for hunting out texts on the severity of God, His wrath, curses and punishments" (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 153). For example, Tournier explains how many clients obsessively worried about committing the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29) or of reaching the point of being impossible to be restored to repentance (Heb 6:4-6).

I can say that in our podcast, we receive numerous questions about those very same passages!

So what's to be done?

LEARN WHEN TO FOCUS ON GRACE

Following a long line of theologians who distinguish between law and gospel, Tournier says we need both passages, but at different times, for different people. "We need the assurance of grace to meet our conviction of guilt, and we need the severity of God to drive us back upon ourselves, to the recognition of our guilt and misery, and to make us entrust ourselves still more ardently to the divine grace" (Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 158).

If you are highly sensitive to your sins and focus all your Bible reading on the passages that list all the reasons why you should be condemned, then I would urge you to stop and turn your attention elsewhere. You have heard one side of the Biblical story—the law side, and now it's time for you to listen to the other side—the grace side.

Let me help.

Yes, you are a sinner, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

Yes, you are ungodly, "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom 4:5).

Yes, you deserve wrath, but "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Rom 5:9).

However great your sins, Jesus' love and work for you are greater. ■



Shawn Lazar is Director of Publications for Grace Evangelical Society. He is happily married to Abby, and looks much older than in his last picture, thanks to his three children.

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