

GRACE *in* FOCUS

BEWARE

OF THE
DANGER
OF

LEGALISM

Also in this issue...

*Why Tithing Is Not a Big Deal | Are You a Sandemanian?
The Mystery of Godliness | Did John the Baptist Lose His Faith?
Introduction to the Plagues of Egypt | The Powerless Gospel
What Is the Filling of the Holy Spirit? | Plus many more!*

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it would be greatly a



Letter from the Editor

At the end of this year, we will be one-fourth of the way through the twenty-first century. We are just eight years from the 2,000 year anniversary of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Time flies.

Our recent election in America should remind all believers that the coming kingdom is not here. We await the return of the King of kings. Whether you liked the outcome or not, human government is not the answer to the world's problems. We need the reign of the Lion of Judah.

In this issue of the magazine, we cover lots of very practical issues and passages. Our hope is that these articles will help you grow in the faith and remain steadfast in the midst of turbulent times. We desire you to hear, "Well done, good servant. Enter into the joy of your Master."

Our annual conference is just around the corner. Sign up now to get an early bird discount (ends 2/28).

If you aren't a regular on our YouTube channel, we hope you will check it out. We release short videos by me on Mondays and Ken on Fridays. We release conference videos on



Wednesdays. Daily we release our 13-minute radio podcast.

Grace in Focus is the name of the magazine and it is what every believer should do. Keep *grace in focus*.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Wilkin". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Robert N. Wilkin



Why Tithing Is Not a Big Deal

By Bill Fiess

Recently, a friend from Zambia (a young student studying to be a pastor) asked me about tithing. In the Zambian churches, tithing is considered by many to be a condition for keeping your salvation. He stated (in an email):

Some do question someone's salvation if they can't give the tithe. I can say it is a common teaching here. Others say if you don't tithe, then your life will not progress, and many tell those who don't give to be robbers for they rob God. This has discouraged a lot of Christians who can't give the tithe, and some have ended up stopping going to church. One of the reasons preachers preach tithing is to enrich themselves, buy extravagant things in church, or build outstanding church buildings.

Tithing is never commanded in the New Testament.

In my reply to him, I said that tithing [giving 10 percent of your income] is hardly mentioned¹ and is never commanded in the NT. So we should certainly not make it a big deal.

WHAT DID JESUS SAY?

However, Jesus Christ does have much to say about money and financial giving. For example, the words translated “riches” (*ploutos*) and “wealth” (*mamōnas*) are found twenty-three times in the words of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus makes very powerful statements about financial giving. For example,

“Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure

that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38).

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:32–34).

Even from these two short statements, we can make some significant observations:

- Sacrificial giving brings *eternal reward*.
- The more I give, the more my reward will be.

Further, Jesus makes it very clear that *all* of my money and resources belong to God. He says, “And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?” (Luke 16:12).

WHO REALLY OWNS MY MONEY?

In the parable about money recorded in Luke 16:1–12, the rich man is God the Father, and *what is your own* in verse 12 refers to eternal reward. So, I am just a steward of what God has given me in this life. All I have belongs to God.

An example of a man who lived out this teaching is German-born George Müller, a nineteenth-century pioneering philanthropist who relied solely on faith and the provision of donors to fund the orphanages he built in Bristol, England. Also, on a purely faith basis, he founded 117 biblically focused day schools across England. Over the course of nearly sixty-three years, beginning with the operation of his first home for orphans in Bristol, Müller recorded that unmistakable answers to prayers allowed him to take in nearly 10,000 orphaned children, educate 120,000 in the day schools, and distribute over 300,000 Bibles – all without asking anyone for money.

Müller literally followed Jesus' command to “sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Matt 19:21). He started out with just a few shillings and never owned property, a house, or signifi-

cant belongings. Müller was able to house, feed, clothe, and educate orphans through God's abundant supply to those who trust and depend on divine provision. His life gloriously modeled Jesus' teachings on radical generosity and trust in God.ⁱⁱ

What, therefore, does this mean about how I should be using my money and how I should be giving to my local church? Paul said, "Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches. Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life" (Gal 6:6–8).

Sacrificial giving brings eternal reward.

To summarize, we can say...

- I should be giving to support those who are teaching the Word of God in my local assembly (though an amount is not specified).
- I will be eternally rewarded for this type of giving in proportion to how sacrificially I give.

Another passage amplifies this last principle: "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:6–7).

IT'S ULTIMATELY UP TO ME

So, Jesus leaves the choice up to me. How much of my income do I want to give? He will reward me accordingly at His Judgment Seat.

In the twentieth century, the inventor R.G. Letourneau became a multi-millionaire. But he chose to give 90 percent of his income to the work of Christ and use 10 percent for his family's needs.ⁱⁱⁱ



He understood (and practiced) what Jesus Christ had taught about sacrificial giving and eternal reward. He knew that everything he owned belonged to God and that ultimately, he would be eternally compensated for his sharing.

Recently, one of my friends made a huge sacrifice to help a prisoner who was being released and needed help getting started. He had become a believer in Jesus Christ while in prison. One year later, this sacrifice has brought great dividends. The transformed life of this ex-prisoner is eternally influencing many people.

What about you, believer? Are you acting on the basis that everything you own is the Lord's and that you are eternally accountable for how you use it? The churches in Zambia employ wrong motivations to move their members to give. But the Biblical "big deal" is clear: *Sacrificial giving brings eternal reward.* ■



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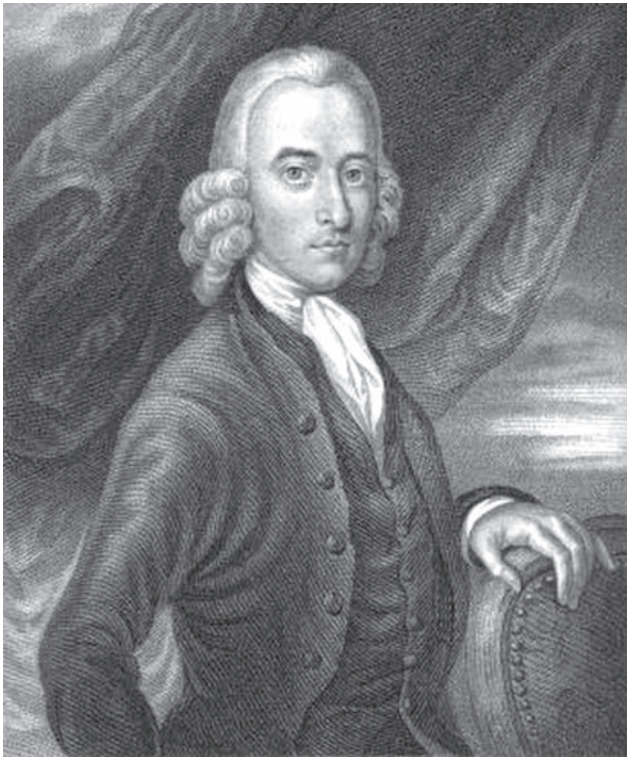
ⁱ Only four times in Hebrews chapter 7.

ⁱⁱ See "Giving it all away: seven Christians live out radical generosity" (stewardship.org.uk).

ⁱⁱⁱ See article on R. G. Letourneau in Wikipedia.

Are You a Sandemanian?

By Bob Wilkin



Robert Sandeman

Most Focused Free Grace advocates have never heard of Robert Sandeman (1718-1771). He was born in Scotland and planted churches there. In 1760, he came to America and planted churches here, dying in Danbury, CT, in 1771. He was just fifty-three.

His father-in-law was John Glas, a Scottish minister who profoundly influenced him. Christianstudylibrary.org has an article entitled “The Dangers of Sandemanianism” by Michael Roberts.ⁱ Concerning Glas, Roberts writes, “Indeed, [Glas] came to ask the question: Was it right to impose the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms on Christian ministers and office-bearers? Surely, God’s Word is enough.” Surely, God’s Word is enough! Well said. Yet how many rely on various councils and confessions?

Sandeman famously said that “justification comes from *bare faith*.”ⁱⁱ

GotQuestions.org, a Calvinist website, says this about Sandemanianism:

Sandemanianism’s true divergence from orthodoxy concerned the concept of faith. Sandemanians equated faith with mere intellectual assent to the facts of the Bible. Defined as a “simple faith” or “bare faith,” the faith promoted by Sandeman required no emotion or even an act of the will to produce salvation. It was an extreme version of easy believism. Sandemanians did not look for spiritual changes as the Holy Spirit interacted with them because that was a too subjective measure and unnecessary. Sandemanians thus opened themselves up to charges of antinomianism. In his epitaph, Sandeman said “that the bare death of Jesus Christ without a thought or deed on the part of man is sufficient to present the chief of sinners spotless before God” (www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Sandeman, accessed 2/8/22).

Sandeman famously said that “justification comes from *bare faith*.”

As Sandemanianism spread around England and to America, so did the censure. Critics said that Sandemanianism produced a cold orthodoxy, an authoritarian church, and too much of a focus

on the local church over the universal church. Sandemanians strayed from the Westminster definition of faith, and some said that they had the faith of devils because it was absurd to propose that God justified any person through a faith unaccompanied by love (see James 2:19). Sandemanians were missing the important trust aspect of faith—actual reliance on God’s Word instead of only rational acceptance.

Even with such harsh criticism, it took a long time for Sandemanianism to completely die out. The last of the Sandemanian churches in America closed in 1890. Their London meeting house did not close until 1984, and the last elder of the church started by Glas and Sandeman died in Edinburgh in 1999.

Did Sandeman believe that assurance is of the essence of saving faith? I think he might have, but I could not find a quote. He seemed to point to Christ’s shed blood and His finished work as the object of saving faith, not His promise of everlasting life that can never be lost.

Roberts implied that Sandeman believed that assurance is the essence of saving faith: “The Sandemanian view was that men should not be encouraged to search themselves for evidences of grace for that is too subjective and is not necessary.” Sandemanianism finds assurance solely in God’s objective promise to the believer.

I’m also not sure whether he taught about eternal rewards.

But his view that all that is required to be born again and eternally secure is “bare faith” is outstanding. In that regard, I’m a Sandemanian.ⁱⁱⁱ However, Flexible Free Grace advocates explicitly reject Sandeman’s understanding of faith.^{iv}

Mike Makidon wrote an excellent *JOTGES* article on Sandeman.^v However, he focused on Sandeman’s understanding of faith, not his understanding of the object of saving faith. A study of Sandeman’s fuller views on soteriology and eschatology would make an excellent topic for a thesis or dissertation.

Robert Sandeman is buried at Wooster Street Cemetery in Danbury, CT. His headstone is quite remarkable. It reads:

Here lies until the resurrection the body of Robert Sandeman, a native of Perth, North Britain; who in the face of continual opposition from all sorts of men long and boldly contended for the ancient faith that the bare work of Jesus Christ, without a deed or thought on the part of man, is sufficient to present the chief of sinners spotless before God; to declare this blessed Truth as testified in the Holy Scriptures, he left his country - he left his friends; and after much patient suffering, finished his labors at Danbury, April 2, 1771, AE (Age): 53 years. ■■



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ⁱ See <https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/dangers-sandemanianism>.

ⁱⁱ Robert Sandeman, *Letters on Theron and Aspasio*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Sands, Donaldson, Murray, and Conchran, 1759), 330.

ⁱⁱⁱ In an article on Sandemanianism at Theopedia.com, the author implies that all who hold to Focused Free Grace are Sandemanian: “Those who hold to the concept of Lordship salvation argue that the view espoused by proponents of Non-Lordship salvation is essentially the errant view of the 18th century Sandemanians” (see <https://www.theopedia.com/sandemanianism>).

^{iv} Flexible Free Grace advocates are not Sandemanian. They reject faith as mere intellectual assent. For example, in the book *A Defense of Free Grace Theology*, Anderson wrote, “Why can’t we put this false charge of ‘mental assent’ to rest? Hodges didn’t believe it; Dillow doesn’t believe it; I don’t believe it. The only Free Grace theologian that has written much on the subject and does believe in the ‘mental assent’ view, as far as I know, is Bob Wilkin” (p. 81). See this article by me for more details: <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/saving-faith-and-intellectual-assent-an-on-going-debate/>.

^v See <https://faithalone.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/makidon.pdf>.



The Mystery of Godliness

By Ken Pierce

*And without controversy great is
the mystery of godliness:*

- (1) God was manifested in the
flesh,*
- (2) Justified in the Spirit,*
- (3) Seen by angels,*
- (4) Preached among the Gentiles,*
- (5) Believed on in the world,*
- (6) Received up in glory*
(1 Tim 3:16, numbers added).

Not long after the demise of the Soviet Union, a US Navy ship on which I served made a port visit to Odessa, Ukraine. The Ukrainian people were very happy to see us. They were euphoric about the end of communism and looked forward to a brighter future. In their eyes, our visit affirmed the end of their fifty-year nightmare under communism.

The area near the pier was lined with vendors, eager to sell all manner of souvenirs. One offered items from uniforms previously worn by sailors in the then-defunct Soviet Navy. Another sold flags of the former USSR alongside Russian crosses and Orthodox icons. In addition to a couple of wooden boxes engraved with scenes from the Ukrainian countryside, I bought several matryoshka dolls—hollow wooden characters stacked one inside the other. Removing the head of the first doll exposed



another nested inside, and so on, until the prize at the center could be reached.

The Bible contains several passages like those matryoshka dolls. Each successive point depends on the ones before it, forging a sequential chain of dependency. A well-known example is found in Paul's letter to the church in Rome:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14-15a).

God the Father has seated the Lord Jesus in the most coveted position in the universe.

The act of sending logically serves as the first link. Preaching depends upon sending, followed by hearing, believing, and calling on the name of the Lord. Much like a matryoshka doll, getting to the prize doll (calling on the name of the Lord) requires opening the other dolls in sequence.

In 1 Tim 3:16, Paul presents Timothy with another matryoshka doll.

His instruction to Timothy on the *mystery of godliness* concerns the surprising union of Jews and Gentiles in one Body, the Church. Timothy, a man with a foot in

both camps (Gentile by his father, Jewish by his mother) was well-positioned to help Paul explain the union of the two communities—Jew and Gentile—in Christ and in the local assembly. It made very good sense, then, for Paul to invest time and

effort in discussing the mystery of godliness with his protégé.

Paul traced a chain of six sequential dependencies. Each event had been fulfilled in the rather recent past, and the order in which they occurred is of incalculable importance.

First, “God was manifested in the flesh.” That simple statement remains as astonishing today as when Paul wrote it. It represented the outermost shell of the matryoshka doll. Without it, nothing else that followed could be possible. Because it did occur, the rest of the chain has also become eternally true. Jesus’ incarnation stands forever as the paramount essential reality, the *sine qua non*. God was manifested in the flesh. Without that, nothing else matters.

Second, He “was justified [vindicated]ⁱ in the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit vindicated the Lord Jesus Christ. His validation of Christ cannot be overstated.

Third, He was “seen by angels.” Together, the entire angelic host—every member of the *bene ha Elohim* assembly, the elect and the fallen alike—witnessed the shocking spectacle of the God-Man walking on the face of the earth in human flesh. For the first time, they beheld a Man thoroughly pleasing to the Father. They saw that God has forever pitched His tent with mankind (John 1:14), not with angels. He is on our side. He has taken up our cause. The elect angels rejoiced (Luke 2:13-14), while the fallen cringed, howled and cursed (Ps 22:12-13). The deed is forever done. The immeasurable expression of God’s love and grace for humankind can never be undone (John 3:16).

Fourth, He was “preached among the Gentiles.” The Lord Jesus sent His apostles “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16; 2:10). The astonishment and amazement attached to that truth must not be diminished by its familiar-

ity. The Goyim, born far from Israel, aliens of God and children of wrath, have seen a great light (Isa 9:2; Matt 4:16). Through the efforts of faithful servants like Paul and Timothy, and countless Jewish evangelists after them, Jesus Christ has also been preached to the Gentiles. As the character

Tevye (or Tevyah: “Yah is Good”) might have exclaimed in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “Unheard of! Unthinkable!” But it is so!

Fifth, the Lord Jesus Christ “was believed on in the world.” Again, the seismic magnitude of that statement must not be missed. He was believed on in Israel, though the

majority of His own had not (and have not) yet received Him (John 1:11). Still, many Jewish people have believed in Him (John 10:25-27), accompanied by an inestimable number of Gentiles.

Towner makes this great comment:

The real clue that this hymn is about Christian existence, and not just about Christ’s existence—that it truly does explicate “the mystery of godliness” and provide a christological foundation for “conduct in God’s household”—can be seen in lines 4–5. These lines fully implicate human beings in the salvation plan of God, not just as undeserving recipients of God’s grace (line 5), but firstly as messengers who announce the truth enfleshed in the Messiah. The aorist tenses are not to be read as signaling completion, but rather fact. In God’s salvation drama, Paul (and the church) has proclaimed the gospel, and the mission has produced results. But the ministry and results are characteristic of the church’s present age—as the age continues towards the end, so must the activity (*Letters to Timothy and Titus*, p. 285).

Sixth, He was “received up in glory.” With the penultimate matryoshka doll opened, the innermost treasure came into view. Authentically craft-

The Holy Spirit
vindicated the Lord
Jesus Christ. His
validation of Christ
cannot be overstated.



ed, the innermost prize of a matryoshka doll is usually intricately adorned with tiny, delicate features, well worth the effort required to open each of the nested dolls in succession. So it is with the final link in Paul's discussion of the mystery of godliness. He reminded Timothy that God the Father has seated the Lord Jesus in the most coveted position in the universe—at the Father's right hand. A human being with breath, a pulse, and a body temperature just like ours now sits exalted far above every angelic creature, regardless of rank.

Because of these six spectacular substantives, believers uniquely enjoy the potential to experience genuine godliness here and now—a possibility otherwise unimaginable and unobtainable.

Concerning the expression the *mystery of godliness*, Towner comments: "Consequently, the 'mystery of godliness' means the revelation of Jesus Christ in which Christian existence has its origin" (*Letters to Timothy and Titus*, p. 277).

As Timothy read this letter, one may imagine his being overwhelmed anew at the magnitude of Messiah's grace and truth. Timothy must have found Paul's words extraordinarily motivating, strengthening, and encouraging. Great is the mystery of godliness! Timothy had important work to accomplish: communicating this edifying message

to believers in his charge. Because of who Jesus Christ is and what He has accomplished, all who have been permanently united to Him by faith alone now enjoy the power to walk in righteousness and, much more, to experience genuine godliness—all for His name's sake.

No wonder Paul was so proud of the good news of Messiah. It still holds the power of God unto deliverance for everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and—brace yourself!—also for the Gentile (Rom 1:16-17). ■

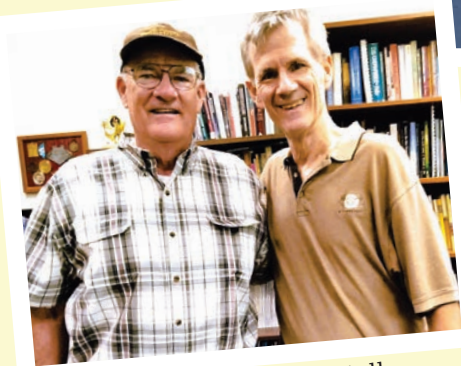


Ken Pierce is a retired Navy intelligence officer with combat service in Panama, the former Yugoslavia, and Iraq. Ken studied Biblical Hebrew and Archaeology at the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies. Now retired, he leads a lively men's Bible Study using Zane Hodges' commentary on Romans, occasionally fills the pulpit for his and other pastors in NE Florida, and is contributing to a forthcoming GES commentary on the Tanakh (Old Testament). He and his wife Ana Maria recently celebrated thirty-eight years of marriage.

¹ Towner writes, "The verb of line 2 is correctly translated 'was vindicated' (Titus 3:7), against the OT background of the term, and indicates God's demonstration of Jesus' innocence" (*Letters to Timothy and Titus*, p. 280).

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?

Vista Ridge Bible
Fellowship Sunday
School class - Oct
13 (with 15 more
online via Zoom)



Joe Moore stopped by GES to talk
theology with Bob on October 2nd



Ken speaking at the Christian Chiropractors Association Conference



Ken's October 17 video "Have You Heard the Sad Story of Paul Washer's Wife" had over 10,000 views in the first twenty-four hours!



Bob and Warren Wilke Oct 16 lunch visit



Watch Out for Legalism

By Ken Yates

Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?" (Mark 7:5)...[Jesus said] "There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man" (Mark 7:15).

INTRODUCTION

In the Gospels, Jesus often spoke to large crowds. Like any group, these crowds would have been comprised of different types of people. Some would have been believers. These knew He was the Christ and that they had eternal life in Him. Among these believers, some had decided to follow Him in disci-

pleship. They were willing to pay the price to obey His teachings and become more like Him. Other believers listened to Him and decided whether to follow Him in discipleship.

But there would also have been unbelievers in the crowds. They had heard about His power and teaching. They wanted to know what this mira-

cle-working rabbi from Galilee was saying. They had grown up in a religious environment that taught that good works would allow them to enter the kingdom of God. Most considered the Pharisees as examples to follow. These men emphasized good works. Did Jesus support what these men taught? The believers in the group would have wondered the same thing.

The Lord was the greatest Teacher who ever lived. Mark 7:14-23 gives us an example of why that was the case. He speaks to one of these large crowds. He talks about a very important topic. Would He address His words to the believers in the crowd, or the unbelievers?

He loved both groups. That should not surprise us, since He was the perfect Son of God. He reached out to the spiritual needs of everybody in the crowd.

LEGALISM: A MESSAGE FOR ALL

The Pharisees followed many religious rules and taught that others should do the same. These rules covered every area of life. Some dealt with what a person must do before eating food. How one cleaned his house, kitchen, and bed were also covered.

If a Jew went to the marketplace, the Pharisees had rules for what he should or should not do. The day of the week these activities took place was also important. If a person was sick on Saturday, the Pharisees said he should not seek any kind of medical care on that day.

Such rules are often called *legalism*. Legalism focuses on outward things. A legalist thinks he is pleasing to God because of what he eats, what he wears, how he washes his hands, and what days he celebrates.

In Jesus' day, such rules dominated the culture. The scribes and Pharisees were walking around as the supposed examples par excellence of a life lived that way. They were well-respected and seen as the men in the nation who were most pleasing to God.

Some of the most important rules in their system dealt with eating food. In their minds, food made somebody either holy or defiled. If you ate the right food in the right way, you were obedient to God. If you ate the wrong food or ate food in the wrong way, you were cursed by God.

Jesus took this teaching to task. He first addressed whether eating with washed hands made a person holy. He spoke to the crowd and said:

"Hear Me, everyone, and understand: There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can

defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"
(Mark 7:14-16).

Jesus said that eating with dirty hands did not impact a person's spiritual life. But it was not just eating with dirt on your fingers. The food held by those unwashed fingers did not impact one's relationship with God, either. That food would soon exit the body. Mark adds that the Lord declared all foods clean (7:19).

The Lord taught these things to both believers and unbelievers. What value would this teaching have for each group?

A MESSAGE FOR BELIEVERS

There were those in the crowd who had believed that Jesus was the Christ. They knew that He had given them eternal life. He would bring in an eternal kingdom, and they would be citizens in that kingdom.

But these new believers wondered how they were to live now. They had, throughout their lives, seen the Pharisees with their clean hands and their holy-looking clothing. What the Pharisees ate seemed to be the right food.

Is that the way the Lord wanted believers in Him to live? Should Christians wash their hands and couches in a prescribed way? Should they

Legalism will not save anybody from the lake of fire.

avoid certain foods? Are these practices what made a person who had eternal life pleasing to God?

The Lord made it clear that the answer to all those questions was “no.” Jesus explained that the believer’s heart was the important thing (Mark 7:19-21). A believer who didn’t love the Lord was not pleasing to Him, no matter what he ate or how clean his kitchen was.

In other words, legalism is not the answer for a believer. He should ask the Lord to change his heart through His Word. The Holy Spirit can take Christ’s teachings and transform the believer from the inside out.

This was a radical idea for the believers in the crowd. But they needed to hear it.

A MESSAGE FOR UNBELIEVERS

What about the unbelievers who were listening to the Lord discuss these things? The Pharisees, as well as many unbelievers in the crowd, thought that they would enter the kingdom of God if they did all these outward works.

The Lord, in no uncertain terms, taught that no outward thing can make somebody acceptable to God. We cannot receive eternal life through good works (Eph 2:8-9). Legalism will not save anybody from the lake of fire.

This went against everything these Jews had been taught. They would have thought that if anybody was going to be in the kingdom, it was the Pharisees. The Pharisees would have agreed with that thinking!

But Jesus said that all their efforts were useless. They were clean on the outside, but their hearts were far from God.

This would have caused some unbelievers to ask: “If my good works cannot get me into the kingdom, what can?” As they listened to the Lord, they would have found out: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47).

Legalism is not the answer for a believer.

CONCLUSION

Anybody who has spoken to a crowd of any size knows that it can be a challenge. What can you say that will be beneficial for everybody? If you talk about a certain topic, some may have no idea what you’re talking about. Or, you may address a theme that has no bearing whatsoever on some of the people, and they will get bored.

The Lord, of course, was the perfect Teacher. In a confrontation with the Pharisees, He had to address an important subject. It was legalism. The Pharisees had long taught that cleaning up our outward lives with outward things was the way to receive eternal life and please God.

If we could summarize what He said, it would be that legalism is not the answer—for anybody.

As the unbeliever in the crowd heard Him, he would conclude that works could not save him. He would have to look for another way to enter the kingdom of God. I am sure some later believed in Christ for eternal life.

For the believers in the crowd, Christ’s words would challenge them to lay aside the traditions they held dear. Did they want to please the Lord? Then, they needed to reject the legalistic practices of the Pharisees. They needed to listen to the words of the Lord and ask the Spirit to fill their hearts—their inward man—with His teachings. That was the way to be His disciple.

Jesus told them all to flee from legalism. All could benefit from what He said. The same is true for the crowds who read His words today. ■



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Did John the Baptist Lose His Faith While in Prison? Matthew 11:2-3

By John H. Niemelä

Did imprisonment cause John the Baptist to doubt? Did this courageous herald of the Messiah fail to finish strong?

Over 99 percent of Christians would assert something like the following: “Matthew 11:2–3 is clear about John’s struggle at the end of his life. He developed an Elijah complex as he collapsed into deep despair shortly before his execution. It is so sad, because he had started out so strong in the faith.”

Those who make such an assertion would probably cite as support the following two Scriptures:

Now when John had heard in prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for another?” (Matt 11:2–3).ⁱ

And John, summoning a pair of his disciples, sent *them* to Jesus, saying, “Are You the Coming One, or should we look for another” (Luke 7:19).

Contrary to overwhelming popular opinion, these verses do not say that the Baptist doubted. All they affirm is that he sent disciples to ask Jesus a question. His motivation and state of mind are not expressed. Interpreters have *assumed* that John was depressed; Jesus had not vanquished His enemies, and he (John) was still in prison. Although despair would be an understandable human reaction in his situation, the text points in a different direction.

The phrase “come and see” occurs more than once in John’s Gospel (John 1:39, 46; 11:34; see also “Come, see” in John 4:29). It suggests another

Christianity has misread Matt 11:2-3 and Luke 7:19.

approach—one fitting better within the argument of Matthew 11:2-19 and Luke 7:18-35. The issue is whether the sender's motive arises from faith or from unbelief. After considering the passages in John, a careful examination of Matthew 11 and Luke 7 will be in order.

SENDING SOMEONE TO ASK A QUESTION

"Come and see" appears in John 1:39, while "Come, see" is in 4:29. Both passages display a speaker's noble motives.

John 1:39 in Context

Philip told Nathanael, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Nathanael reacted negatively to the mention of Nazareth, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46a).

Philip could have argued, but a better alternative existed. Jesus could answer Nathanael. Philip said, "Come and see" (John 1:46b). In essence, Philip invited his friend to ask that very question of Jesus. Actually, Nathanael did not need to ask that; Jesus' supernatural knowledge of him was sufficiently persuasive. Even so, "Come and see" invited Nathanael to ask Jesus the question, because He (unlike Philip) could answer it. Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus to ask a question. Clearly, Philip had noble motives.

John 4:29 in Context

When the Samaritan woman left her waterpot and brought town folk to Jesus, she wanted them to believe in Him: "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John 4:29). Her expectation was that the Messiah (in keeping with Deuteronomy 18) would be the Prophet who would reveal all. Her point here is that they could ask Jesus anything. He could answer, because He is the Messiah. The woman brought

townspeople to Jesus to ask questions. Her motives were noble. She wanted them to be persuaded.

Matthew 11 and Luke 7

The Baptist's situation differed from that of Philip or the Samaritan woman. Philip could bring Nathanael to Jesus to ask a question, and the Samaritan woman could bring the people of Sychar to inquire of Jesus. However, John's imprisonment prevented him from bringing his disciples to Jesus.

Thus, Philip *invited* Nathanael and *brought* him to Jesus. The Samaritan woman *invited* townspeople and *brought* them to Him. John "*outvited*" his disciples and *sent* them to Jesus.

Was there any reason for John to imagine that some of his disciples needed to be persuaded by Jesus? Yes, indeed. John 3:26 shows that some of them harbored jealousy and ill-will toward Jesus:

"Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" (John 3:26).

Their animosity toward Jesus is especially troubling because it was voiced shortly before John's arrest. Soon, they would no longer have daily interaction with John. If they had a grudge against Jesus while John was a free man, their resentment likely grew during his imprisonment. John's praises of Jesus in John 3:27-36 fell on deaf ears.

What was John to do? How could he persuade those of his disciples who (in misguided loyalty to one who was only Jesus' herald) shunned the very One whom John exalted?

John arranged for them to hear Jesus' answer to the very question they had (essentially) asked him: "Is Jesus truly the Coming One?" As much as they might wish to avoid Jesus, they would certainly carry out John's command. It was not the Baptist who needed Jesus' answer; his disciples were the beneficiaries. John provided them with a chance to hear the answer from Jesus' own lips.

Over a century ago, George H. Trench said, as he commented on John 3:36, “He [the Baptist] will yet make from prison a last effort (Matt. xi. 2, 3: Luke vii. 19) to transfer his own disciples to Jesus: for this is the true meaning of that incident which has been misrepresented by the later commentators [as John doubting that Jesus is Messiah].”ⁱⁱ In other words, John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus a question so that His answer might persuade them. John was already convinced. Jesus could do what John could not.

PROOF THAT JOHN FINISHED STRONG

Every time the Gospels record the Baptist’s words, he minimizes himself and magnifies Jesus. However, it appears that his own disciples needed him to point to Jesus repeatedly. For example, in John 1:29 he proclaims about Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” The verse is silent about anyone’s turning and following Jesus. However, the next day, when he again said, “Behold, the Lamb of God” (1:36), two of his disciples left and followed Jesus. The second time was the charm.

Some may object that Matt 11:6 and Luke 7:23 convey a rebuke: “And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.” However, the question remains: Is Jesus reproving John, or is He reprimanding the Baptist’s disciples? The grammar of the verse leaves that question open, but the context (Matt 11:11a and Luke 7:28a) lavishes praise upon John: “Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (Matt 11:11a). “Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28a).

Would one expect such a commendation if the Baptist’s faith had just crashed? Would Jesus praise him publicly at this very moment? I think

not. Jesus praised John, who (despite imprisonment) ceaselessly sought to direct people to Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Christianity has misread Matt 11:2-3 and Luke 7:19. John “outvited” two of his disciples to query Jesus so His word would stabilize them. John’s intentions were noble; his imprisonment did not give him an Elijah complex. However, this pair of his disciples had balked at John’s praise of Jesus in John 3:27-31. Time was running out for John. If he did not send them to Jesus now, they might find themselves greatly ashamed at the Bēma.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, Matt 11:11a and Luke 7:28a suggest that

John sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus a question so that His answer might persuade them. John was already convinced.

John finished strong and will hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”^{iv} ■



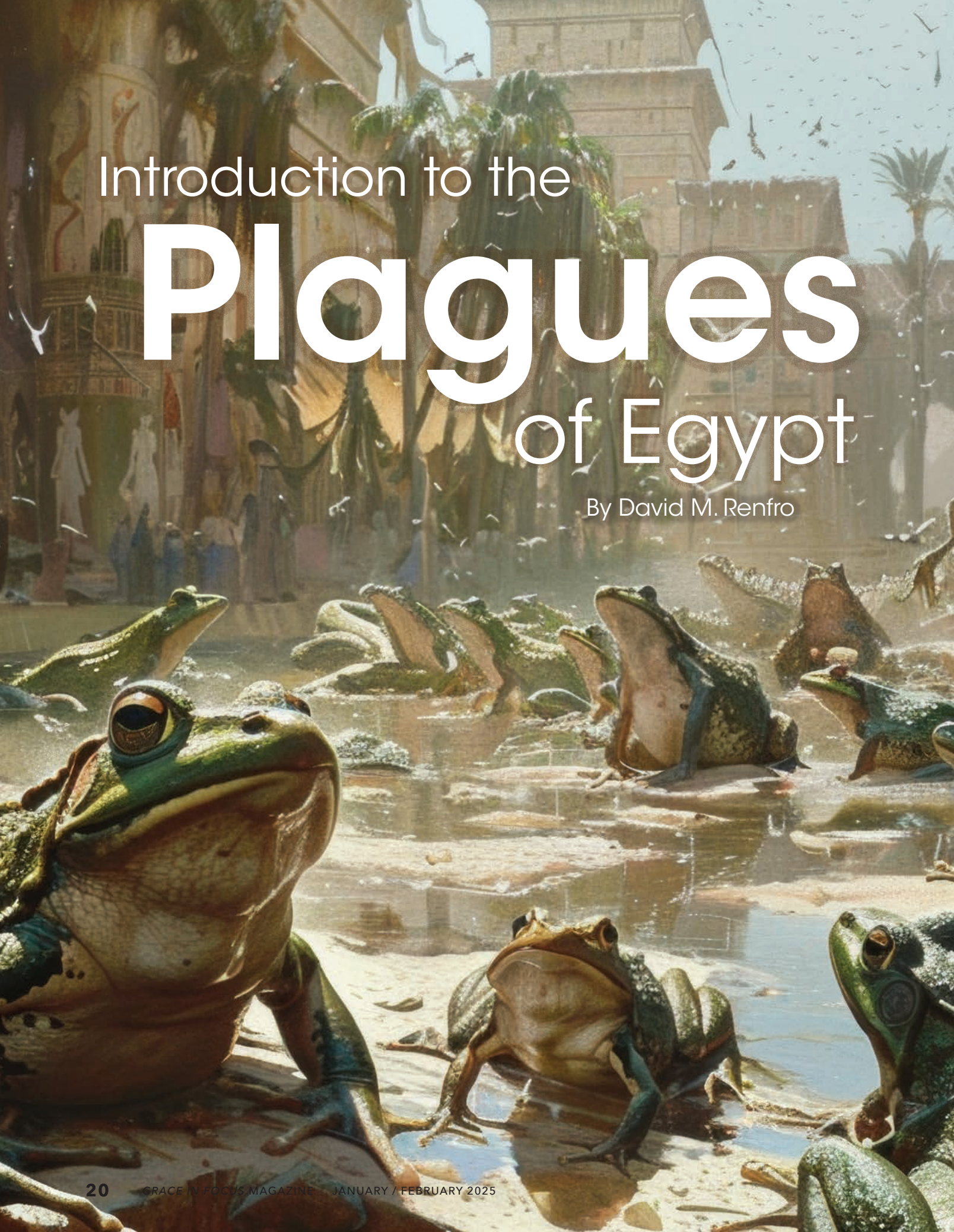
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ⁱ All Scripture translations are by the author.

ⁱⁱ G. H. Trench, *A Study of St John’s Gospel* (London, ENG: Murray, 1918), 93. The comments on John 3:36 contains the following sentence, “So ends the last recorded witness of the Baptist.”

ⁱⁱⁱ I cannot imagine John’s inner circle disciples (who clung to him even during his imprisonment) as unbelievers. However, bitterness put them in danger of losing their reward at the Bēma.

^{iv} Editor’s note: I find this interpretation to be quite plausible. If true, it radically changes how we view this incident of John’s sending his disciples to Jesus. While it is possible that John the Baptist was going through doubts, as Jesus’ disciples did after He died (cf. Luke 24:21), Niemelä’s suggestion is reasonable in light of Jesus’ glowing remarks about John after He answered the question. Contrast Matt 11:11a and Luke 7:28a with Luke 24:25, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken...”

An ancient Egyptian cityscape with a massive plague of frogs. In the foreground, several large green and brown frogs are visible, some with their mouths open as if croaking. The background shows a city with hieroglyphs on the walls, palm trees, and a large pyramid in the distance. The sky is filled with many small birds flying. The overall scene is a dramatic illustration of the biblical plague of frogs in Egypt.

Introduction to the **Plagues** of Egypt

By David M. Renfro



It is probably the most famous story in the Old Testament. It involves God’s miraculous and gracious deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt.

Yahweh¹ had spoken of the plagues earlier in the book of Exodus. When He commissioned Moses to be His spokesman before Pharaoh Amenhotep II (1450-1425 B.C.), He told him that He would “strike Egypt with all My wonders ...” (Exod 3:20).

PURPOSE OF THE PLAGUES

There are two groups of people directly involved in the story of the plagues—the Egyptians and the Israelites. There were likely several other enslaved peoples that also witnessed them.

The reasons for the plagues were to:

- Convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt.
- Teach all people (especially the Egyptians and the Israelites) about the sovereignty of the God of Israel and the incompetence of Egypt’s pagan deities.

Each group discussed below needed to learn some important things about the Person and work of Yahweh.

THE EGYPTIANS

The plagues’ main purpose for the Egyptians is clearly stated in Exod 7:5: “And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” The Egyptians, like almost all the other peoples in the Ancient Near East (ANE), worshipped many gods and goddesses derived from natural forces surrounding them (the sun, the moon, etc.). Because these elements were more powerful than humans, to the peoples’ minds they were sovereign forces worthy of worship.

The plagues demonstrated that these Egyptian deities were nothing compared to the omnipotence and absolute sovereignty of Yahweh. They were so powerless that it was as if they did not exist. Of course, in fact, they did not (and do not) exist.

What the plagues were not designed to be was to be a kind of punishment. Yahweh was not “paying them back” for the way they treated the Israelites. The plagues’ purpose was to show the Egyptians that He, not Egypt’s deities, was the God who controlled nature.

THE ISRAELITES

Likewise, the Israelites needed to learn that their God who was going to deliver them was the Sovereign LORD of the entire universe. No natural force was superior to Yahweh.

It is also interesting to notice that the pagan gods were sovereign only within the boundaries of the nations that worshipped them. The Egyptian gods had power only within the borders of the Egyptian Empire. It is possible that the Israelites thought the same about their God, Yahweh. They needed to learn that His sovereignty knows no bounds or limits.

Because they had lived in Egypt for over 400 years, the surrounding paganism had polluted their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Furthermore, all the surrounding civilizations with which they were going to have contact during the exodus were pagan. The idea that there was one invisible God was unheard-of in the ANE, especially if He had the power to deliver Israel from the most powerful kingdom in the world at that time.

Unfortunately, this lesson needed to be impressed upon Israel time and time again. They repeatedly slid back into paganism, as can be seen in the golden calf episode (Exodus 32). There were numerous lapses in the books of Numbers, Judges, and even until the Babylonian captivity (2 Chron 36:17-21).

THE CHURCH

Though not involved in the story itself, there is a third group—New Testament Christians—that needs to learn what the account of the plagues is meant to teach! This story is inspired Scripture and thus is valuable for us to learn as well (2 Tim 3:16).

We are as prone to lose our way spiritually as the Israelites were. One need only read the many NT passages relating to Christians who fall away from the faith (see Heb 6:4-6 for one example). New Testament believers need to be constantly reminded about the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, His sovereign power over the universe (physical and spiritual), and how important it is to remain faithful to His Word (2 Pet 1:12-15).

PRELUDE TO THE PLAGUES

Planned Failure (Exodus 5)

Instead of freeing the Israelites, Pharaoh made their lives even more miserable by increasing their workload (vv 6-9). He wanted to discourage the Israelites from thinking about freedom and to make them see Moses as incompetent and ineffective. Moses then complained to Yahweh about His apparent failure with Pharaoh (vv 22-23).

Planned Deliverance (Exodus 6)

Ignoring his complaint, Yahweh told Moses that He had the Egyptians where He wanted them. What Moses saw as failure, Yahweh viewed as part of His plan.

Yahweh then declared His intention to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and take them to the Promised Land (vv 6-8).

Moses, still thinking that he failed to communicate effectively with Pharaoh, wanted Yahweh to replace him. Moses needed to learn that if Yahweh could make Balaam's donkey speak (Num 22:28ff), He could overcome Moses' supposed speech impediment.

The rest of the chapter (vv 14-30) describes Yahweh's preparation of Moses and Aaron for the task at hand.

Planned Leadership (Chapter 7)

Verses 1-13 describe Yahweh's commissioning of Moses and Aaron to be His representatives. They would be His mouthpiece to a stubborn and unresponsive Pharaoh.

Pharaoh asked for a miracle, so Aaron threw down his staff and it became a serpent (v 10). Yahweh allowed the Egyptian sorcerers to perform the same miracle (v 11). This made Pharaoh even more stubborn concerning the superiority of Israel's God, even when he saw Aaron's staff consume the sorcerers' staffs (v 12).

All of this was done to assure Moses and Aaron that Yahweh was in control and that He would

The
account of
the plagues on
Egypt relates
a watershed
event in the
history of
Israel.

accomplish what He promised. This act of grace allowed His servants to rest and have confidence in Yahweh’s sovereignty.

PATTERN OF THE PLAGUES

The plagues occurred in the following order:

1. Water turned to blood	7:14-25
2. Frogs	8:1-15
3. Gnats	8:16-19
4. Flies	8:20-32
5. Cattle	9:1-7
6. Boils	9:8-12
7. Hail	9:13-35
8. Locusts	10:1-20
9. Darkness	10:21-29
10. Death of firstborn	11:1-10; 12:29-32

At first glance, it might appear that there is no apparent logic or plan to the order of the plagues. However, it has also been suggested that the first nine plagues be organized as three cycles of three plagues each, culminating in the single last plague—the death of the firstborn (Exod 12:29).ⁱⁱ

First Cycle	Second Cycle	Third Cycle
1. Water turned to blood	4. Flies	7. Hail
2. Frogs	5. Cattle	8. Locusts
3. Gnats	6. Boils	9. Darkness

Each cycle has the following characteristics:

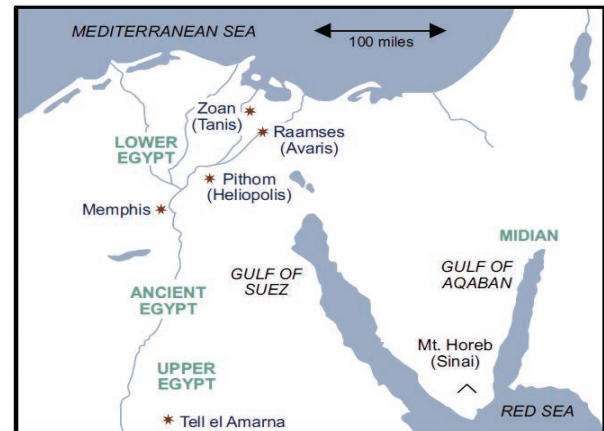
- In the first plague of each cycle, Yahweh commands Moses to warn Pharaoh “in the morning” (Exod 7:14-25; 8:20-32; 9:13-35).
- The second plague in each cycle has Moses warning Pharaoh at an unspecified time (Exod 8:1-15; 9:1-7; 10:1-20).
- The third plague in each cycle strikes without any warning (Exod 8:16-19; 9:8-12; 10:21-29).

The plagues in each cycle get harsher and more destructive than those of the previous cycle(s).

That they were done in a particular order emphasizes the fact that the plagues were not a random, disorganized series of natural phenomena. They were controlled by Yahweh Himself, which

was what the Egyptians, the Israelites, and all people need to learn—He is the sovereign LORD of all.


Where did the plagues occur? According to Psalm 78:43, they happened in a place called *Zoan*. The map below (provided by Tom Constable’s notes on Exodus) shows that Zoan was located in northern Egypt.



CONCLUSION

The account of the plagues on Egypt relates a watershed event in the history of Israel. Over 400 years earlier, God had made a promise to Abraham: He would give a specific land to his descendants (Gen 12:5-7). It was Yahweh’s timing to bring His people to this Promised Land during Moses’ time.

In future articles, we will study each plague to see what our LORD wants us to learn from it. We will see His matchless grace in His deliverance of the Israelites from slavery.

There is much to learn about Him in this account of His dealings with Egypt. It is my hope and prayer that we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). 



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ⁱ This article will use the covenant name of God, Yahweh (“I AM”, Exod 3:14). The NKJV translates this as ‘LORD.’

ⁱⁱ One example is G. Henton Davies, *Exodus*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1967), p. 90.



We can only connect to it when we say, “I got nothing,” when we are poor in Spirit. When I say, “I have nothing to contribute to my salvation. I am a poor sinner; I have nothing to contribute; I need absolute grace and charity.” So we can only be saved through the powerlessness of Jesus, and we can only connect to that salvation through our own powerlessness. The powerlessness of repentance and faith.

THE POWERLESS GOSPEL

At first glance, this appears to be the true message of grace, which says that mankind is powerless to save itself and that a person is delivered from the lake of fire, not by his own power or works, but by faith alone in Jesus for the gift of eternal life (Eph 2:8-9). However, Keller is not making that argument.

Keller argues that it is not enough to believe in Jesus for the free gift of eternal life. The unbeliever must first be humbled, beaten down, and *made* powerless. According to his theology, the nation

of Israel is a picture of the gospel in that it was first subjected to years of oppression. It had to go through seventy years of captivity before it could submit to the Lord and be saved. In other words, the unbeliever must first reach rock bottom and repent before he can be saved.

Keller represents a popular view of the gospel. Many agree that repentance, contrition, and an acknowledgment of one’s sinful state are required before eternal salvation can occur. This teaching was a hallmark of the Great Awakening movement of the 1730s. During the revivals of that era, it was commonly taught that conviction of sin is a necessary step to a person’s receiving eternal life. Unbelievers must first go through a period of deep sorrow to prepare themselves to be saved.

As with Keller’s view of the seventy years in Babylon, proponents of this teaching have argued that this stage could take days or even months. Revival services centered around altar calls in which unbelievers were to remain in tears for hours in order to reach the point of total powerlessness. It was not until they reached this breaking point that they were ready to be saved. The evangelist’s job, therefore, became more about subjecting the unbeliever to a regimen of guilt and shame and less about sharing John 3:16. This evangelistic posture continues today in the teachings of Calvinists like Keller.

EZRA’S PURPOSE IS NOT EVANGELISTIC

There are two major problems with Keller’s take on the gospel and the book of Ezra.

First, Ezra does not have an evangelistic purpose. It should be noted that key evangelistic words like *faith*, *believe*, *Messiah*, or *everlasting life* are not mentioned. Neither are the words *save*, *salvation*, *deliver*, or *deliverance* (words that, in the OT, would refer to temporal deliverance from enemies, death, and disease rather than to eternal life). Ezra makes no mention of anyone’s becoming “another man” (1 Sam 10:6) or getting “another heart” (1 Sam 10:9).

Second, Ezra’s purpose is clearly Israel’s national repentance and deliverance from divine chastise-

ment. Ezra is directed toward God's disciplinary work on His chosen nation. It is first and foremost a historical record for the Israelites so that they will be motivated to obey the Law as they return to the land.

Then, as now, the Lord's discipline is distinct from His saving message. The Babylonian captivity was a result of national Israel's disobedience to the covenant it was already under. God told the nation that if they obeyed Him, He would bless them; if they were disobedient, He would curse them (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28).

Keller argues that it is not enough to believe in Jesus for the free gift of eternal life.

Babylonian captivity was not an evangelistic tool. It was a disciplinary one. God wanted the nation to return to abiding with Him and fulfilling its purpose (Gen 12:1-3). The book is primarily dealing with the nation's fellowship with God. It regained this fellowship by repenting and returning to the Law and the temple practices. In other words, it is a book about the return to the Law and works. It is not about the gift of eternal life.

After returning from exile, the nation was weak, but it was also obedient and responsive to instruction. This is the purpose of God's discipline. It is meant to draw the people of Israel from the ruin of sin and back into a fruitful walk with their Lord. However, none of this speaks of God's requiring that the unbeliever first be beaten into contrition before He will give him eternal life.

Ezra is primarily dealing with the national deliverance of Israel from exile, not with individual salvation from the lake of fire. Ezra operates within the context of the nation's covenantal relationship with the Lord under the Law of Moses. It emphasizes the corporate identity of the nation of Israel. For example, the book highlights the importance

of the Israelites' maintaining their unique identity by not marrying Gentile women (Chapters 9-10). Individual believers today are not under that mandate. Therefore, rather than being about the regeneration of individual unbelievers, the book of Ezra speaks of the collective purpose of the Israelites. In short, rather than looking to the individual's salvation from the lake of fire, the book of Ezra looks to the Lord's promise to deliver the nation of Israel from oppression, sin, and physical death through obedience.

CONCLUSION

The saving message does not require the unbeliever to spend hours or days in contrition and submission. While the unbeliever may first go through a period of remorse before coming to faith in the Lord, this was never a prerequisite to receiving eternal life. The woman at the well never lamented or repented (John 4). Those who came to faith in the home of Cornelius were saved while listening to Peter preach, without hours of sorrow (Acts 10:44). When speaking to the unbelievers at Mars Hill, Paul first commended their religious zeal rather than belittling them for their adultery (Acts 17:22-23). The Gospel of John, on the other hand, repeatedly points to the Lord and the good news of eternal life by faith in Him. While Keller rightfully acknowledges the powerlessness and inability of unbelievers to save themselves, he mistakenly makes that—rather than belief in Jesus—his saving message. An emphasis on first breaking the unbeliever down eclipses the wonder of the good news of eternal life by faith in Jesus. Sadly, by adding this requirement, Keller's gospel is indeed made powerless. ■



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¹ "Discovering the Gospel in Ezra & Nehemiah—Tim Keller" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmNWGLgz1Fo>.

What Is the Filling of the Holy Spirit

& How Do We Get It?

By Bob Wilkin

I came to faith and was discipled through the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. We had a booklet about how to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Four Spiritual Laws booklet was our essential evangelistic resource. The Holy Spirit booklet was our key discipleship resource.

I served as a staff member with Cru for four years. While I shared the Four Spiritual Laws booklet with hundreds of students each year, I shared the Holy Spirit booklet with only a handful of students yearly, and then only because I was strongly encouraged to use it (and report its use).

While on staff, I felt that Cru's concept of the filling of the Spirit was confusing and even misleading. Yet Cru's explanation is the dominant understanding among non-charismatic Evangelicals.

WHAT IS IT AND HOW DO WE GET IT?

There are two questions regarding the filling of the Holy Spirit: 1) What is it? and 2) How do I get it?

The popular view is that He takes control of your life. The Holy Spirit controls your life by empowering your thoughts, words, and actions.

Cru.Org says, "To be filled with His presence means that you allow Him to fill every part of you...[so] that you experience the presence of His transforming grace."

GotQuestions.Org says that the filling of the Spirit is "allowing Him to guide, influence, and govern our behavior."

DesiringGod.Org (Dr. John Piper) says, "Nobody stays full of the Spirit all the time — no one is always totally joyful and...empowered for service."

BillyGraham.Org says, "To be Spirit-filled according to Scripture is to be *controlled or dominated* by the Spirit of God's presence and power (see Ephesians 5:18)" (emphasis added).

The popular view on how you get the filling is that you ask Him to take control of your life. This is sometimes expressed as submitting all areas of our lives to Him and being submissive to Him.

Cru.Org says, "So you submit yourself to him when you ask to be filled with the Spirit by faith, confident that He will answer according to His will."

GotQuestions.Org says, "We are filled with the Holy Spirit when we cautiously consider our actions and yield ourselves to the Spirit's power... Only as we submit to Him and are filled with the Holy Spirit can we experience a harmonious relationship with God and one another."

DesiringGod.Org (Dr. John Piper) says that to gain the filling of the Spirit requires us to be "submissive to God."

BillyGraham.Org says that we are filled with the Spirit if we "constantly draw on the direction and energy of the Spirit."

THE POPULAR VIEW IS IMPRACTICAL AND UNBIBLICAL

The popular view of the filling of the Holy Spirit and how one gets it is impractical and unbiblical.

First, if the Holy Spirit ever took control of our lives, we would never sin again. How could we sin with the Holy Spirit in control? It doesn't make any sense.

Second, where in Scripture are we told to invite the Holy Spirit to take control of our lives?

Third, why don't the examples of the filling of the Holy Spirit in Acts correspond with the popular view? To hold to the popular view, you must avoid searching the Scriptures. You must listen to what people tell you and ask no questions.

TWO TYPES OF THE FILLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS

What I will call *Type One filling* is being spiritual (or Spiritual). We find this in Acts 6:3, 5; 11:24; 13:52. The first deacons were full of the Spirit and wisdom. That is, they were spiritual and wise.

This first type of filling means that the person was what Paul calls a *spiritual* man (1 Cor 2:15-16). *Spirit-filled* is another name for being spiritually mature. It does not refer to His controlling or empowering you. He empowers all believers. But He does not control believers. We are not puppets.

We get Type One filling by growing in faith as we absorb God's Word (John 17:17; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Heb 4:12). We maintain this type of filling by continuing to welcome solid Bible teaching.

Hodges wrote, "But as we have already seen, God's Word is also the instrument by which the Holy Spirit transforms us more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 3:18)" (*Six Secrets of the Christian Life*, p. 42). He added, "The work of the Holy Spirit in us produces a spiritual way of looking at things" (*Six Secrets*, p. 85).

Interestingly, though Hodges mentions the Holy Spirit twenty-six times in his short book on sanctification (*Six Secrets*), he doesn't mention the Holy Spirit's filling.¹ That is because he understood the filling as I describe it here.

Type Two filling is gaining special enablement for tasks. We find this in Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 7:55; 13:9. In none of these cases did anyone ask for it, pray for it, submit to get it, or anything else. God did it. He sovereignly did it.

These were times when people received extraordinary power for special circumstances.

Does this second type of filling occur today? I'd say yes, but I can't be sure because the Epistles do not tell us one way or the other. Nothing tells us that it no longer occurs today.

Ephesians 5:18 calls for this type of filling.

I can tell you that I've had many experiences of looking back on an article I wrote or a sermon I gave and feeling that something extraordinary had happened. Maybe I was just "in the zone." Or maybe being in the zone is being especially enabled by the Holy Spirit at that time.

If this Type Two filling occurs today, it is a sovereign act of God that might be brought on by our being prayerful, humble, and dependent on God's strength.

WHAT ARE GRIEVING AND QUENCHING THE SPIRIT?

Most people think these are the same thing. They are not.

Grieving the Holy Spirit is what we do when we rebel against God (Eph 4:29-31). It shows that the Holy Spirit has emotions. He can experience grief. And He does when we rebel.

Quenching the Spirit is what we do when we forbid other believers from serving God (1 Thess 5:19-21). We are quenching His work in the church body by not allowing others to use their spiritual gifts.

The popular view is that the Holy Spirit takes control of your life.

THE PROPER FOCUS SHOULD BE ON WALKING ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT

We err by presenting the Holy Spirit's filling as a key to sanctification. In the Type One sense, the filling of the Spirit is sanctification. It is another name for spiritual maturity.

We should instead focus on *walking in the Spirit* and *walking according to the Spirit*. The former expression occurs in Galatians 5:16, 25. The latter expression is found in Rom 8:1, 4.

In Galatians, walking in the Spirit is the opposite of walking in the flesh. Walking in the flesh is legalism, not licentiousness. To walk in the Spirit is to walk in liberty, as Gal 5:1 makes clear.

Zane Hodges explains walking according to the Spirit in this way: "A paraphrase might be: 'those who walk Spirit-wise,' that is... with a spiritual orientation" (*Romans*, p. 209). He continues, "Simply put, if one lives with a fleshly orientation—even if it is the result of a vigorous effort to keep the law—they are going to fail because it is the wrong mindset" (p. 214). The right mindset, he suggests, is found in Rom 8:6, "to be spiritually minded is life and peace." Hodges writes,

The trap into which a Christian falls when he is principally concerned with the law itself is that he cannot escape a preoccupation with the spiritual deadness within and around him. The mindset of the Spirit, however, lifts his preoccupations to the level of supernatural *life and peace* (*Romans*, p. 209, italics his).

Most professing Christians who are interested in spiritual matters live with a fleshly orientation toward spiritual victory. They think that victory comes from focusing on God's commands and from dedication, commitment, surrender, and various spiritual disciplines.

We are changed by welcoming solid Bible teaching and having the Holy Spirit renew our minds

(Rom 12:2). That is walking in the Spirit and walking according to the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

The popular understanding of the Holy Spirit's filling is confusing and misleading because it is unbiblical and impractical.

The Holy Spirit does not take control of our lives. If He did, we'd never sin again. He'd never let go.

To be filled with the Spirit is to be spiritually mature. It is to be spiritually minded (Rom 8:6). It is to walk according to the Spirit or in the Spirit.

You are not a cup; the Holy Spirit is not some liquid filling your cup. What the Holy Spirit is seeking to do is brainwash us. He is seeking to give us "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). He renews our minds, resulting in

transformed lives.

Most people concerned about being filled with the Spirit get it backwards. They think they will be holy if they focus on transforming their lives by legalistic methods. But they cannot be holy if their minds are set on legalism. Life transformation comes when the Holy Spirit renews our minds (Rom 12:2).

Only by focusing on grace can we be filled with the Holy Spirit (in the Type One sense). ■



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He and Sharon live in Highland Village, TX. He has racewalked eleven marathons.

¹ He also doesn't mention the filling of the Holy Spirit in his Roman's commentary, *The Gospel Under Siege*, *Grace in Eclipse*, *Harmony with God*, or *The Hungry Inherit*. The only places I could find his discussing it were one reference in *Absolutely Free* to what I call Type One filling (p. 217) and several references in his unpublished class notes on Acts. He considered Acts 2 to be referring to what I call Type Two filling: "Though supernatural and sovereignly bestowed, it nevertheless comes to prepared vessels." His view of the filling of the Spirit seems to be consistent with what I've described.

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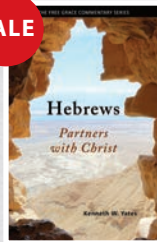
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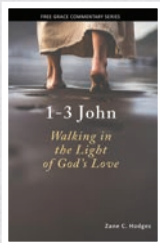


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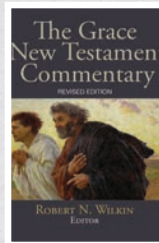


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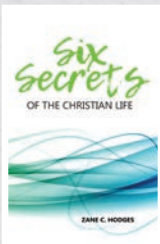


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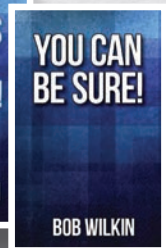
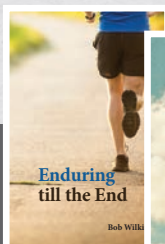


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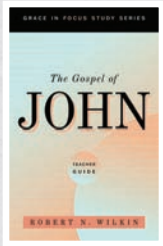
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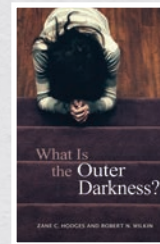
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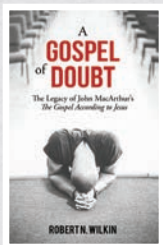
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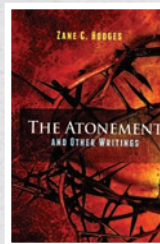
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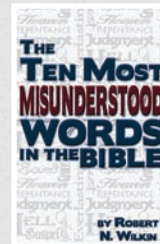
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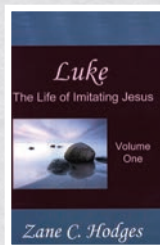
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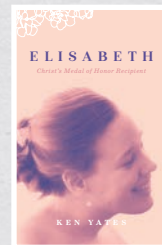


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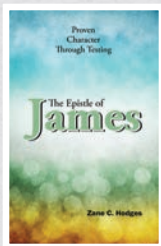


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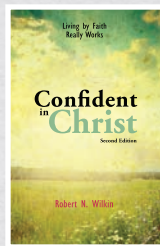


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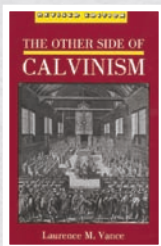


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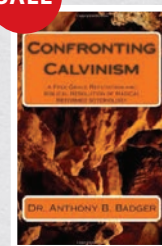
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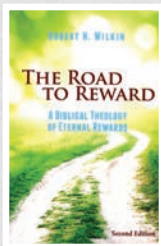


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SAD SAGA OF SAUL

Part 2

A Believer Who Lost His Crown

By Philippe R. Sterling

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Armstrong lost his title as a result of dishonesty. Much more seriously, Saul was rejected as Israel's king by Yahweh in response to his unfaithfulness. Sin has serious consequences.

REJECTION OF SAUL

Disobeyed Samuel (1 Samuel 13:1-23)

In the year following his victory over the Ammonites, Saul formed a standing army of

three thousand men of Israel (13:1-4). He kept two thousand with him and put one thousand under the command of his son Jonathan. Jonathan then raided a garrison of the Philistines. Anticipating a response from the Philistines, Saul sounded a ram's horn to summon the army to Gilgal.

After Saul failed to follow Samuel's instructions in preparation for conflict with the Philistines, Samuel told him that the kingship would be taken away from him (13:5-14). At his anointing, Samuel had instructed Saul to wait for him for seven days at Gilgal until he came to offer the sacrifices (10:8). The Philistines assembled a large military force, which terrified the Hebrews, who began to scatter and hide. After waiting seven days for Samuel, an anxious Saul assumed Samuel's priestly prerogative (Lev 6:8-13) and offered the sacrifices himself. Samuel's delay may have been a test of Saul's obedience.

A lack of consistent concern for God's guidance characterized Saul's leadership.

Samuel soon appeared and asked Saul, "What have you done?" Yahweh had posed a similar question to Eve (Gen 3:14). Saul sought to justify his deed to Samuel: The army was scattering; Samuel was late; the Philistines were set to attack; he felt compelled to act since he wanted God's favor. These were excuses and not valid reasons. Samuel informed Saul that his foolish act in disobeying Yahweh would result in the loss of his dynastic line. Yahweh would establish a new dynastic line "with a man after His own heart." David would be that man with a spirit sensitive to Yahweh's will (Acts 13:21-22).

Believers should acknowledge sins instead of making excuses (e.g., Luke 15:11-24; 1 John 1:9).

In the face of Philistine aggression, Israel was helpless and in need of a deliverer (13:15-23). Saul's army dwindled down to six hundred men. The Philistines sent out raiders to harass Israel. The Philistines were forgers of iron. While Israel would later develop iron technology under David (1 Chron 22:3), at the time of Saul's reign, Israel was dependent upon the Philistines for agricultural iron implements, for which they were charged exorbitant prices for sharpening. Only Saul and Jonathan had weapons of iron; the warriors with them would have had bows and arrows, slings, and perhaps bronze weapons. The Philistine army gathered at the pass of Michmash.

Acted Rashly (1 Samuel 14:1-52)

As Saul acted rashly, Jonathan emerged as a deliverer of Israel (14:1-15). Jonathan decided to try a daring raid against the Philistines without telling his father. Saul was at Gibeah with the six hundred remaining men of his army and Ahijah—a member of the rejected priestly line of Eli—who was wearing an ephod that contained the Urim and Thummim which was used in a yes or no manner to determine God's will (Exod 28:30; 1 Sam 23:9-12). Jonathan proposed to his armorbearer that they cross the pass to attack "these uncircumcised" Philistines who did not share the distinctive mark of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:10-14) and who were attacking the army of God. An armorbearer worked in tandem with a warrior in battle, using a shield defensively as the warrior wielded a sword or spear. Jonathan said, "It may be that the LORD will work for us."

Today believers can, in the strength of Christ, engage together in their spiritual struggle, putting on the full spiritual armor of God, using the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and praying for each other (Eph 6:10-20).

With confidence in Yahweh and with the fulfillment of a sign of His work on their behalf, Jonathan and his armorbearer attacked and killed twenty Philistines in a small field. Their plan succeeded as they submitted each step to the outworking of

God's will. Their victory, along with a providential earthquake, put the Philistines in a state of panic.

The Philistines scattered (14:16-23). Saul became aware of the scattering and realized that Jonathan may have been the cause. He rightly summoned the priest to seek Yahweh's guidance through the Urim and Thummim, but upon hearing the sound of the fleeing enemy, he told the priest, "Withdraw your hand." He decided there was no time to consult God. A lack of consistent concern for God's guidance characterized Saul's leadership. Saul and all Israel joined the battle, and Yahweh saved Israel that day.

Saul acted rashly (14:24-46). Unfortunately, Saul had distressed Israel by foolishly placing the warriors under oath, forbidding them, on pain of death, to eat until evening before he had taken vengeance on his enemies. He viewed the battle as his instead of Yahweh's. Jonathan, unaware of Saul's foolish order, ate honey from a honeycomb that had dripped onto the ground. Informed of his father's curse, he perceived that Saul had troubled the land.

The people drove back the Philistines but were faint from lack of food. They began to eat captured livestock without first draining the blood in accordance with God's Law (Lev 17:10-14). Saul understood the serious violation and called for a large stone upon which the animals could be slaughtered and properly drained of blood. He then built his first altar to Yahweh to atone for the wrong.

Saul, wanting to complete the victory over the Philistines, sought the guidance of Yahweh. Yahweh did not answer him and Saul, by the use of the Urim and Thummim, discovered that Jonathan had broken the oath not to eat. He compounded his first foolish oath with a second oath calling for Jonathan's death. The people refused to allow Jona-

than's execution. Saul ceased to pursue the Philistines and they went back to their cities.

In summary, Saul ruled over Israel and delivered the nation from enemies on every side, adding valiant men to his staff (14:47-52). Saul established his rule over Israel and gained victories over Moab and Ammon to the east, Edom to the south, the Arameans to the north, the Philistines to the west, and the nomadic Amalekites south of the hill country.

Disobeyed Yahweh (1 Samuel 15:1-35)

Through Samuel, Yahweh commanded Saul to destroy Amalek (15:1-3). God said, "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel." The Amalekites were descendants of Esau (Gen 36:12) who lived south of Judah. They had attacked Isra-

el from the rear as the tribes were making their way from the land of Egypt (Ex 17:8-16). For that reason, they had incurred God's divine judgment (Deut 25:17-19). They were under *cherem*, a ban in which every person and possession was devoted to complete destruction (Josh 6:15-21). The *cherem*, if carried out, would protect Israel from an inveterate enemy. Disobedience to God in the matter would be disloyalty to God.

Saul defeated the Amalekites but spared its king and the best of its livestock in contradiction to Yahweh's instructions (15:4-9). Saul gathered the fighting men of the northern tribes of Israel and the southern tribe of Judah. He also told the Kenites to separate from the Amalekites. The Kenites were a tribal offshoot of the Midianites and were continuously supportive of Israel. Moses had married the daughter of Jethro, a Kenite. Saul attacked and defeated the Amalekites. He put to death all captives *but spared the life of Agag their king and the best of their livestock.* He may have

Believers should
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kept Agag alive as a trophy of his victory (v 12). All of this violated Yahweh's clear command.

Yahweh told Samuel that He regretted making Saul king (15:10-11a). The Lord explained, "he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments."

A grieved Samuel prayed all night, then confronted Saul, telling him that Yahweh had taken the kingship from him because of his disobedience (15:11b-23). Samuel's first response was to cry out to Yahweh through the night. Our disobedience grieves God and the people in our lives.

Samuel got up early to meet Saul. Saul had gone to Carmel in the Negev, which was near his route home, and there had set up a monument for himself. From Carmel he went down to Gilgal.

Saul greeted Samuel and said, "I have performed the commandment of the LORD." This was the exact opposite of Yahweh's evaluation of him. Samuel sarcastically asked Saul concerning the bleating and lowing of the livestock. Saul passed the blame on to the people. He also justified his sparing the best of the livestock to offer as sacrifices to Yahweh. Samuel told Saul, "Be quiet!" so that he could relay what Yahweh had told him when he prayed through the night. Saul said to Samuel, "Speak on." When confronted with our sin, the best response is to be quiet and listen. Samuel reviewed both Saul's anointing as king when he was little in his own eyes and his recent assignment from Yahweh to destroy the Amalekites. He then asked him why he had disobeyed. Saul continued to assert his innocence and blame others. When confronted with their sin, believers should acknowledge the sin and accept the consequences (2 Sam 12:1-23).

Samuel explained to Saul that worship that pleases God must include obedience and that disobedience is tantamount to witchcraft and idolatry. No act of worship can substitute for obedience to God.

Samuel declared to Saul that because he had rejected the command of Yahweh, Yahweh had "rejected you from being king." A sin may be so serious that the most severe consequence has to follow (1 John 5:16-17). Believers can disqualify

themselves from ruling with Christ (1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Tim 2:11-13).

Saul belatedly confessed his transgression, but it was too late to keep his position (15:24-31). He said to Samuel, "I have sinned," and asked Samuel to pardon his sin and worship Yahweh with him. Samuel refused since Saul had rejected the word of Yahweh and Yahweh had rejected him from being king. As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. This accidental tearing symbolized the kingdom of Israel's being taken away from Saul and given to a neighbor who would be better than he. That neighbor would be David (16:11-13). Yahweh's decision was irrevocable. Saul again confessed, "I have sinned," and asked Samuel to go with him to worship Yahweh. Samuel acquiesced, and Saul worshiped the LORD. Saul was a believer who, in spite of all his failings, worshiped Yahweh.

Samuel killed Agag as Yahweh had commanded (15:32-33). Samuel did what Saul had failed to do. He executed Agag in accordance with God's judgment.

A grieved Samuel separated from Saul, whom Yahweh regretted making king over Israel (15:34-35). Samuel went to his home in Ramah and Saul to his in Gibeah. Samuel never took the initiative to go see Saul again.

Saul could have been a great king, but his self-focus obstructed this. He exalted himself. He sinned and made excuses. He was a believer who followed his own heart. His disobedience disqualified him and his line from ruling over the nation. Yahweh will choose David and his line, ultimately leading to Jesus, the Son of David. ■



Philippe Sterling is the pastor of Vista Ridge Bible Fellowship in Lewisville, TX. He and his wife of 45 years, Brenda, live in Denton, TX, near their daughter, Sarah, son-in-law, Ben, and grandkids.

More of

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?



Sharon and Bob with Diane and Jeff Spencer and Mike and Letitia Lii after Dallas Regional



Bob Vacendak speaking at the Dallas Regional Conference



Mike Lii, Costya (from Moldova), Bob & Sherry Bryant, and Letitia Lii at the Dallas Regional



Payton Lii, Sharon, and Lauren Vacendak Tunnell at Dallas Regional Conference



Bob with Auzi (pronounced Ozzy)



Ken with church leaders, Pastor Marco, and Julie & Bernie in Costa Rica after a session



A Hero Like Me

By Ken Yates

*Then he [Peter] began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!"
(Mark 14:71).*

INTRODUCTION

When I was in the military, I had the privilege of meeting some POWs (Prisoners of War) from the Vietnam War. I had the same reaction whenever I heard one of their stories. I thought that I could never do what these men did. I would have given up. They were better men than I am.

Not surprisingly, such men were put forward as heroes. They would speak to large groups and motivate us to love our country. We all looked up to them, realizing they were made of sterner stuff than we were.

When I recently heard the story of another of these heroes, all I could do was wonder how he did it.

A REAL-LIFE RAMBO

His name was Dieter Dengler. I am sure you will have the same reaction I did when you hear his story. You will say, “I would have died in that jungle.” It is the stuff of legend, especially among those who have served in the military. He was like Sylvester Stallone in one of the old Rambo movies. The whole account of what he did seems like fiction.

Dengler is one of only two US prisoners of war who successfully escaped from captivity during the Vietnam War. His background prepared him for what he endured. He grew up in Germany during WWII and had a very difficult childhood. He related that he had to scrounge for food, even eating the paste on the back of wall-paper to survive.

After WWII, he immigrated to the United States. He became a Navy pilot and was sent to fight in Vietnam. In 1966, he was shot down over Laos. He survived, but the attempt to rescue him failed, and enemy soldiers captured him.

He was taken to a small camp in the jungle. Chained to a group of seven fellow prisoners in a cage, he endured six months of intense torture. The men were given very little food and became emaciated and racked with disease. Then, the prisoners found out the guards were going to kill them.

In his weakened physical condition, Dengler led the men in a daring escape. They overpowered the guards, split into groups of two, and fled into the jungle.

A NIGHTMARE IN THE JUNGLE

Sick and weak, Dengler and his partner’s only hope was to signal a friendly aircraft to rescue them. It seemed impossible. To make matters worse, they were not properly dressed for life in that environment. They were barefoot and had to walk through thick underbrush while being pursued by an enemy bent on revenge.

They had no food. Using his experiences from WWII, Dengler scrounged for things to eat. His fellow POW became practically incapacitated, but Dengler kept both of them alive. He would collect water in the leaves of trees to keep them both hydrated.

After almost three weeks, some natives from a jungle village saw them. Dengler and his partner were hoping for help and mercy. Instead, a villager decapitated Dengler’s partner with a machete. Dengler managed to escape, running deeper into the jungle as the natives sought to kill him.

Now alone in the jungle, Dengler wandered for several more days. He found some material in a cabin that he hoped could be seen from the air. He was near the point of death when he finally saw a plane flying overhead and set the material out. An American pilot saw Dengler’s signal and sent in a rescue helicopter.

The helicopter extracted him. He was disease-ridden and a shell of his old self when they pulled him into the aircraft. The doctor who later examined him said that if he had not been rescued on that day, he would have died. He had spent twenty-three days in the jungle after the escape. Of the seven prisoners in the cage, none survived except Dengler and a POW from Thailand.

A HERO IS WELCOMED HOME

When Dengler returned to the United States, people were amazed at his story. Military personnel and civilians alike were eager to hear it. Thousands came to hear him speak. The account was retold in the media. The nation looked up to him. He was a real-life hero.

I never met Dengler. He accomplished his feats when I was very young, years before I joined the military. But when I heard his story, even decades after the events, I had the same response as all those people in the 1960s. Even now, he is rightly considered a military hero.

When I see that Peter
had feet of clay, I
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A JARRING CONCLUSION

I first heard Dengler's story on a podcast. It was so impressive that I was shocked by the narrator's last words. He simply said, "In 2001, Dieter Dengler died."

How could you end this man's story on that note? He was still reasonably young (age sixty-two). I wanted to know what killed a man who seemed indestructible. I looked it up. I was surprised by what I read. Dengler had been diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, in 2000. In 2001, he lost the ability to walk, eat, or speak clearly. He rolled his wheelchair to a local fire station and committed suicide.

That ending did not match his story of heroism. I realized why people were reluctant to say how he died. Even though nobody could judge Dengler's will to live, some would say that his manner of death might tarnish his reputation as a hero. There is a natural tendency to guard that reputation.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HERO STORY

One of the things I like about the Bible is that it doesn't treat its heroes like that. It gives us their stories of heroism. But it also speaks of their warts.

We might think, for example, of Solomon and David. Their foibles are well-known. Throughout the book of Acts, Peter, the leader of the apostles and the early church, is an example of bravery and dedication to the Lord. He died as a martyr.

But we also know of his failures. In the Gospels, we find that at times he did things that caused the Lord to rebuke him. Paul pointed out that Peter was a hypocrite in the way he treated Gentile believers in Galatia.

Even worse, when the Lord was on trial for His life, Peter was a coward. Standing only a few yards away from Jesus, Peter repeatedly told a large group of people that he did not even know Him (Mark 14:71). Peter had adamantly declared that he would never dishonor Christ. But a young girl caused him to deny the One who had given him eternal life. He was not the picture of bravery and strength.

Peter is a hero for all believers. But the Bible says he was also a man. He was like the rest of us. The Bible tells the whole story.

The podcast about Dengler shows how the world often treats its heroes. It wants us to see them as otherworldly. Nothing negative can be said about them.

The Bible doesn't do that.

Peter will be great in the kingdom of God. Deservedly so. Throughout eternity he will be seen as a hero of the faith. But he had his warts. He made mistakes. He could be weak on certain occasions.

He is like us.

CONCLUSION

I'm glad the Bible gives the whole picture when it describes the heroes within its pages. When the world paints only a rosy picture of those it wants others to admire, we conclude that we could never be like them. That is how I felt when I heard the podcast about Dengler.

Peter is somebody we should admire. We should desire to be like him. It's a tall order, but when we learn that he made many mistakes and showed signs of weakness but still went on to serve the Lord, we realize that being like Peter is possible for us.

Every believer will live in Christ's kingdom forever. We can never lose eternal life. But just as Dengler returned to the United States as a hero, the believer can enter into Christ's kingdom as one. Peter himself wrote about that privilege (2 Pet 1:11).

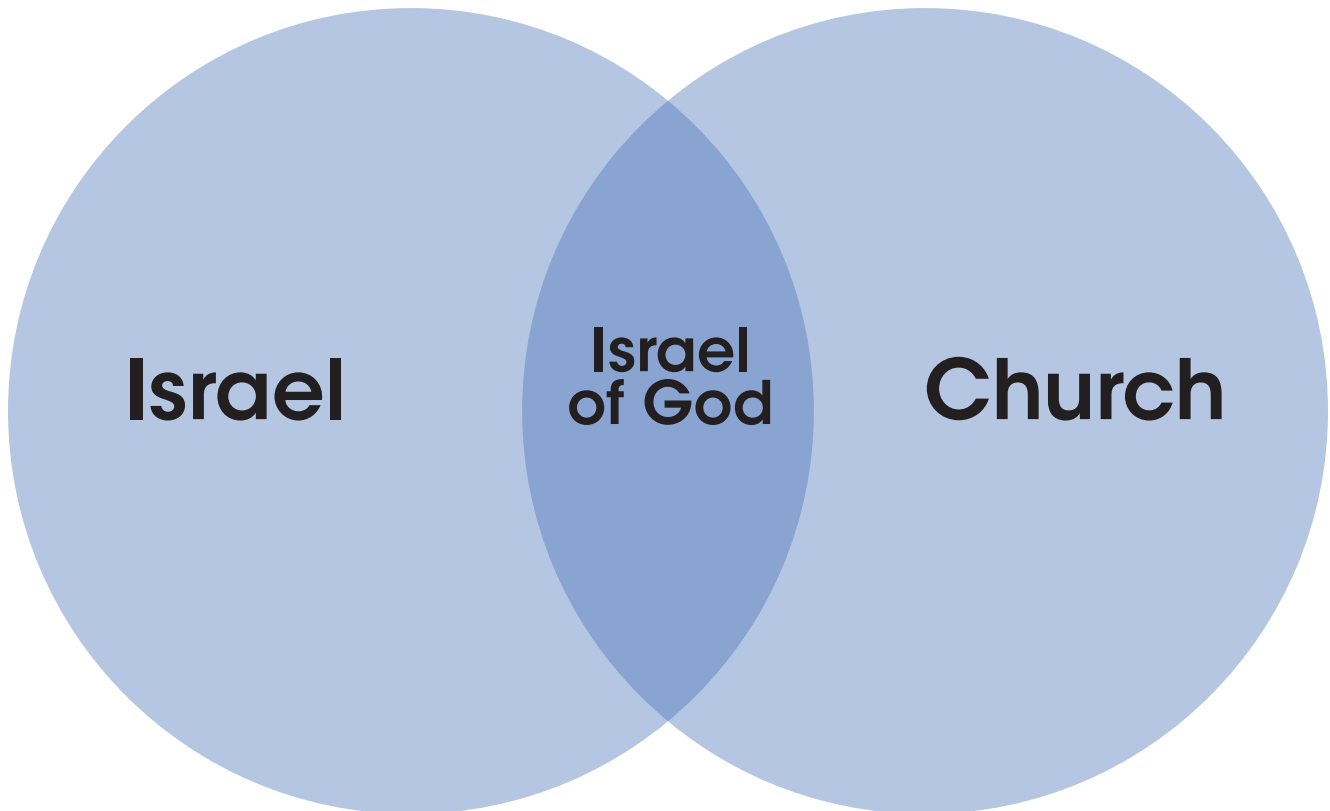
When I see that Peter had feet of clay, I realize there is hope for somebody like me. ■■



Ken Yates is a retired Army chaplain (Lt. Col). He has many theological degrees, including a Ph.D. from D.T.S. in New Testament. He leads the GES international ministry, cohosts the daily podcast, and assists Bob in all aspects of the GES ministry. His new book, *Elisabeth*, is a powerful testimony to the power of God manifested in a Christ-centered family. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC.


What Is *the Israel of God* in Galatians 6:16?

By Philippe R. Sterling



Believing Jewish individuals are "the Israel of God" in the Church age (Rom 9:6-8; 11:1-6; Gal 6:16). They are part of the Church and of ethnic Israel (Eph 2:11-22). Non-Jewish believers are part of the Church and of their respective ethnic groups and nations (Acts 17:26; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Cor 10:32). The Church is not a national entity. It is a multiethnic spiritual body bound to Christ, the Head (1 Cor 12:12-13; Col 1:18). The Church does not replace Israel.

Israel was prophesied to exist once again as a nation to enter into a covenant with the nations and to rebuild the temple (Dan 9:27; 12:11; 2 Thess 2:4). That signing of the covenant marks the start of Daniel's seventieth week, the Tribulation (Dan 9:27). This suggests that a gathering

of the nation in a state of unbelief would happen sometime before the beginning of the Tribulation. Ezekiel 37:7-10 and Zeph 2:1-3 may point to this. The return of Jews to the land of Israel since 1948 may be a part of the regathering. There will be another gathering of the Jewish people, this time of the surviving believing Jews of the Tribulation, before the blessings of the messianic kingdom (Isa 11:11-12; Mark 13:27). 



Philippe Sterling is the pastor of Vista Ridge Bible Fellowship in Lewisville, TX. He and his wife of 45 years, Brenda, live in Denton, TX, near their daughter, Sarah, son-in-law, Ben, and grandkids.



Voice from the Past

The Doctrine of Rewards, Part 2

This article originally appeared in the November-December 1994 issue of *Grace in Focus*.

By Zane Hodges

INTRODUCTION

In the previous issue, we discussed a problem some Christians have with the subject of rewards. Some are troubled by the doctrine of rewards because it seems to suggest “merit” instead of “grace.” We saw that this point of view confuses the doctrine of *divine grace* with the truth of *human responsibility*. Salvation is a gift, and it is absolutely free. Rewards are earned and are not free. God *gives* us His salvation, but He *pays* us for our good works.

REWARDS AND SELFISHNESS

Another problem some Christians have with the doctrine of rewards is that it seems to appeal to our “selfishness.” Such Christians may go on to say that we should not be motivated this way. Instead, we ought to do all we do for God out of love and gratitude.

This point of view, however, confronts a serious problem of its own. Not only is a doctrine of rewards taught in Scripture, but we are actually *commanded* to pursue them. Thus Jesus said:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:19-21).

We may observe here that our Lord does not present the pursuit of heavenly treasure as though it were optional. On the contrary, He wants every disciple of His to lay up this celestial wealth.

The reason for this is also stated. Wherever our *treasure* happens to be, that’s where our hearts will be focused. God wants our hearts to be focused on heaven, and that is why we are commanded to invest in heavenly rewards.

God knows better than we do what will captivate our hearts for Him. Evidently, rewards play a significant role in this.

It may sound pious for someone to say: “I am not interested in rewards! I serve God out of love and gratitude alone!” But such a person claims to be more loftily motivated than even the apostle Paul himself! He wrote:

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor 9:24-27).

Paul was not “running” to obtain his justification or eternal salvation! Those things were already his by *grace alone*. It follows then that Paul is talking about the “reward”—the prize—that could be won by a person who ran a winning race.

Paul was also *highly motivated* by the thought of winning this prize. He dedicated himself to obtaining it with the same intense self-discipline that characterizes the superior athlete.

Those who disparage rewards as a powerful Christian motivation ought to reread their NT—this time, with their eyes open!

But is this motivation selfish? We believe that no motivation encouraged by the Lord Jesus and His apostles could ever be termed “selfish”!

What is wrong is our own incorrect view of “selfishness.” Scripture does not teach us to be *uninterested* in our own happiness or well-being. The very desire to escape eternal damnation is a legitimate

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and urgent self-interest. The instinct to preserve our lives is the same. Nor are pleasure and enjoyment illegitimate experiences.

When God put Adam and Eve in the garden, He furnished them with “every tree...that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9). They could enjoy themselves freely provided they abstained from eating from the one forbidden tree. Similarly, Paul tells rich people that “God...gives us richly all things to *enjoy*” (1 Tim 6:17, italics added).

Selfishness should not be defined simply as pursuing our own self-interest. Instead, it should be defined as pursuing our self-interest *in our own way* rather than in God’s way. Since “love” is a preeminent virtue in Christianity, true selfishness often involves a pursuit of self-interest that violates the law of love.

But no one who seriously pursues heavenly treasure can afford to be unloving. As Paul pointed out in his great chapter on love, all seemingly spiritual and sacrificial activities are reduced to nothing without love (1 Cor 13:1-3). Loveless activity will undoubtedly go up in billows of smoke at the Judgment Seat of Christ as though it were so much wood, hay, or stubble (1 Cor 3:11-15).

No indeed! It is not selfish to obey God by pursuing eternal rewards. Still less can someone who does so afford to be selfish in nature. For if he is, he is forfeiting the very rewards he professes to seek.

No wonder that James censures his Christian readers for showing partiality toward the rich and neglecting the poor. In doing so they violate the “royal law” of Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Jas 2:8).

A couple of verses later, James gives his fellow Christians the bottom line: “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has

shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (Jas 2:12-13).

The doctrine of the Judgment Seat of Christ and eternal rewards is not selfish. It is one of the strongest Scriptural motivations for an unselfish, loving, and merciful lifestyle!

CONCLUSION

Let us get ourselves back on track. Let us give the doctrine of rewards the same high visibility it has in the NT.

Let us sense anew the dynamic power of this truth in the lives of great spiritual men, like Paul himself. Let us listen again to the famous words he penned prior to his approaching death. Can anyone fail to see in them that the apostle was inspired right to the end of his earthly career by the prospect of reward? He wrote thus:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Clearly, the apostle Paul believed in rewards. This is a belief we should all heartily share. ■

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Zane Hodges taught New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary for 27 years, authored over a dozen books, and was passionate about the grace of God.



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