

GRACE **IN** FOCUS

CHRIST

IN THE

PSALMS

The Sin of Unbelief

**You Are to Be
That Friend**

Showing God's Love Through Our Lives

I Want to Be Rich!

Do We Need to Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ FOR Something?

Plus many more!

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Letter from the Editor

I bought a “pre-owned” car, that is, a used car, on December 26th. I got a 2020 Nissan Rogue. Since it had 118,300 miles on it, I got what I think was a good deal.

I have never had a car with a backup camera. I also never had one with keyless entry, push button starting (if the fob is in the car), blind spot warnings, and the ability to talk on the phone over the car radio. I find I really like these new features.

Our ministry has new features as well. We used to blog occasionally. Now we blog five days a week without fail. Thousands of people read our blogs each day.

We added in translations of our blogs. At first, we translated two blogs a week. We cut that down to one a week so that we could start translating books into other languages. Currently our blogs are in ten different languages. That is better than a backup camera, for sure!

When we started our podcasts, we were on a few radio stations. Now we are on sixteen stations from all over the U.S. People listen to these podcasts on our website, on various internet sites, and even on our YouTube channel.

Our YouTube channel did not start cooking until about five years ago. We used to have a few thousand subscribers. I remember the day about three years ago when we hit 6,660 subscribers. On YouTube that read “6.66k subscribers.” I remember one person commenting, “Let’s add some people right away so we get off the 666 number!” Just a few years later



and we are at 14,000 subscribers. Many of our videos get over a thousand views in the first week, with some getting a lot more than that.

We decided to try to produce a commentary on the Old Testament. I hoped we could get the first draft done by August 2025, which was about five years after we started. Now we are on track to do just that.

All of that and more has happened because God has raised up dedicated donors, writers, editors, and speakers. My thanks to the part each of you plays in this ministry.

Keep grace in focus! ■

Robert N. Wilkin

A stylized, handwritten signature of Robert N. Wilkin in black ink.

Christ in the Psalms

By Philippe R. Sterling

Finding Christ in
the Psalms from
Pre-incarnation
to Glory!



CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

Luke 24:44-45

About Christ	Psalm Reference	NT Citation
His Pre-Existence	Ps 102:25-27	Heb 1:10-12
His Incarnation	Ps 8:4-6 Ps 40:6-8	Heb 2:6-8 Heb 10:5-7
His Rejection	Ps 118:22-23	Matt 21:42 et al.
His Betrayal	Ps 41:9	Luke 22:48
His Death	Ps 22:1, 7-8, 15, 18 Ps 34:20 Ps 69:21	Matt 27:35, 39, 46 John 19:36 Matt 27:48
His Resurrection	Ps 16:10	Acts 2:25-31; 13:35
His Ascension	Ps 68:18	Eph 4:8
His Return, Reign, Royal Priesthood	Ps 2:7 Ps 45:6-7 Ps 110:1, 4	Heb 1:5; 5:5 Heb 1:8-9 Heb 5:6; 7:17

The NT writers correlated a number of passages in the Book of Psalms to matters associated with the First and Second Advent of Christ. These citations were in keeping with the references that Jesus had made to the Psalms concerning Himself. In one of His post-resurrection appearances to the eleven apostles and those gathered with them, He had said: “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses, and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44). He then opened up

their minds to understand the Scriptures (v 45). The chart above sets out in a chronological order some of the references in the Psalms the NT writers associated with the life of Christ. ■



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.

The Sin of Unbelief

By Zane Hodges

*This article first ran in the November-December 2007 issue of *Grace in Focus*.

The Judge will not bring up an issue that He Himself has dealt with on the cross. This Judge will condemn no human being whatsoever for any sin whatsoever.

Sometimes grace people do not think as clearly as they need to on important issues. The sin of unbelief—not believing in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life—is one of these issues. Let me address some questions that have, or might, arise on this subject.

Question: Did Christ die for the sin of unbelief?

Answer: Of course. He died for all the sins of all mankind (1 John 2:2).

Question: Then why *does* God send people to hell for not believing?

Answer: He doesn't. The Bible nowhere says that.

Question: Then what does He send them to hell for?

Answer: For not having their names in the Book of Life (Rev 20:15).





Question: But isn't that because they didn't believe?

Answer: Yes. But it's still not the reason they are condemned to hell.

Question: Isn't that double-talk?

Answer: Not at all. A *cause* and a *reason* are not the same thing. Unbelief is the *cause* for the unsaved not having eternal life. Not having eternal life is the *reason* they are condemned to hell.

Let's say a man on parole is required to be in his home by 11 PM. One night he is visiting his aunt and stays there until 12 AM. His violation is discovered and he is sent back to prison. Why? Was it because he had a long visit with his aunt? No, not really. It was because he fell below the required standard for his parole. The visit with the aunt was the effective *cause* of the violation, but the violation of parole itself was the legal *reason* he is returned to prison.



When this man returns to prison the legal decision on which this fact is based will not require the state to make reference to his visit to his aunt! He simply violated parole.

At the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15) people are temporarily released (paroled!) from hell (Hades) and the issue of their permanent eternal abode becomes a legal matter in the presence of their Judge (Jesus Christ: John 5:22). They are first judged according to their works to see if these works justify their permanent release from eternal judgment (Rev 20:13). As we know, there will be no justification based on works (Rom 3:20). Next, search is made in the Book of Life to see if they qualify for release because they have eternal life. They do not and are therefore placed in an eternal abode (the Lake of Fire) in separation from their Judge forever.

Although the outcome of this whole process is a foregone conclusion, the justice of God requires the process to take place. Even in our own society, a man caught red-handed in the act of murder (or some other crime) must have his day in court. Every unsaved person will have his or her day in God's court.

Sometimes grace people do not think as clearly as they need to on important issues. The sin of unbelief—not believing in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life—is one of these issues.

In this whole process, the Scripture text makes *no reference at all to sin as such*, but instead refers first to *works* (Rev 20:13), and next to *life* (Rev 20:15). Sin, as such, has no place as a determining factor at this judgment.

Why is that? It is because the Judge (Jesus Christ) is also the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Judge will not bring up an issue that He Himself has dealt with on the cross. This Judge will condemn no human being whatsoever for any sin whatsoever.

He has taken all that away. ■■■



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.



You Are to Be That Friend

By Ken Yates

INTRODUCTION

Almost all of us have heard a story or two about “Johnny in Sunday school.” Such stories usually involve the teacher’s asking little Johnny a Bible question, which he answers innocently and incorrectly. His answer is the punchline of a joke.

One such story relates the teacher’s asking Johnny, “What is a small gray animal that lives in a tree, has a bushy tail, and hides nuts for the winter?” Johnny answers, “I know the answer is Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel to me.”

This anecdote is funny because *Jesus* is often the answer to questions we hear in church. When my kids were younger, I would even joke with them sometimes. I told them that if they were asked a

question in Sunday school and didn't know the answer, they should say "Jesus."

But as the story of Johnny demonstrates, sometimes Christ is not the answer to a question. The answer is something or someone else.

Solomon is
telling his son
and us: Don't be
like that. You are
to be the friend
who sticks closer
than a brother.

A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE

The belief that *Jesus* is the answer to every question will cause us to see Him in places where He is not found. I recently found an example of that in Prov 18:24. The verse reads:

A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

The first part of that verse means that if we are friendly towards others, we will have a lot of friends. But, as anybody who has lived long enough knows, there are fair-weather friends. In Prov 18:24, Solomon tells us that some "friends" will abandon us when times get tough.

Some people who know Hebrew better than I do say that the first part of the verse should be translated differently. The NASB does. It says, "A person of too many friends comes to ruin..."

Perhaps Solomon means that you will count on them when you go through difficult times, but they will let you down when you expect them to come through. The support you hope to obtain will not be there. You would be better off if you had not count-



ed on that support. You could have spent that time looking elsewhere.

Or perhaps they are your friends because they hope to use the relationship to their advantage. Whatever Solomon has in mind, such friends can lead to your ruin. At best, we can call such people *acquaintances*. They aren't your friends.

However we translate the first part of the verse; the second part is clear. We might have many casual "friends," but another kind of friend exists. He is one that "sticks closer than a brother." We would call such a person a true friend.

Such a companion does not abandon you in difficult times. He sticks with you. We are fortunate if we find a friend like that. He or she may be more faithful than a literal brother. In the previous chapter, Solomon spoke of a friend who "loves at all times."

But who is the person that Solomon has in mind in Prov 18:24?

IS JESUS THE ANSWER?

Imagine being in a Sunday school class when the teacher asks: "Who is the friend that sticks



closer than a brother in Prov 18:24?” At least some (many?) in the class would say, “Jesus.” Jesus is indeed the greatest Friend we have. He will never abandon us, even if our flesh and blood do. A person answering that way would have the attitude of little Johnny in the joke.

Such a person could even point to some verses in the NT. In John 15:15, the Lord tells His disciples that they are His friends. In Heb 2:11, the author says that Jesus is not ashamed to call believers His brothers. The author adds that Jesus is there to help His brethren and to be faithful and merciful to them. He will help them in whatever trial they go through (Heb 2:16-18). Here is a Friend and Brother who is closer than an earthly brother.

Some commentators answer the question that way. One writer comments on Prov 18:24:

It is impossible for Christians not to recognize the application of the picture to Jesus Christ. His friendship is in all senses truly brotherly. He became a brother Man in order that he might enter into closest relations of love and sympathy with us, and he proves his

friendship by doing more than any man ever did for his brother (Spence-Jones, *Proverbs*, 357).

Another maintains:

Christ is a friend to all believers that *sticks closer than a brother*; to Him therefore let them show themselves friendly (Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 996).

Thomas Constable also says that many Christians have applied Prov 18:24 to Jesus Christ (Constable Bible Notes, *Sonic Light*, Prov 18:24).

Jesus Christ is undoubtedly the greatest Friend we could have. But while this may sound almost sacrilegious to some, I am positive that He is not the person Solomon had in mind in Prov 18:24. Christ is not the answer to the question asked in our imaginary Sunday school class.

The belief that
Jesus is the
answer to
every question
will cause us to
see Him in places
where He is not
found.

WE ARE THE ANSWER

It may not sound spiritual, but Solomon is not talking about Christ in Prov 18:24. He is speaking to his son and telling him that *he* should be a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Solomon tells everyone who will listen that they should beware of fair-weather friends. At the same time, they should themselves be true friends. They should not be the

kind of acquaintance who looks only for what he or she can get from a relationship.

Other Christian writers have said the same thing. Constable says that while there is a temptation to read Christ into Prov 18:24, that was not Solomon's point. His point was much more mundane and straightforward. In contrast to false friends, some friends are true treasures. They are more faithful than our closest relatives (Constable, *Sonic Light*).

Goldingay says that Solomon is clear. One close friend is better than many mere acquaintances. He can be better than a brother, especially if that brother is far away (Goldingay, *Proverbs*, 600). Ross agrees. Solomon tells his son that he should look for and value friends like that. They are rare and hard to find (Ross, "Proverbs," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 166).

While we should look for such friends, it is clear that we should also be such a friend. To call somebody a friend and then abandon them when they are in need makes one a hypocrite. Solomon is telling his son and us: Don't be like that. You are to be the friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Country music star Tracy Lawrence wrote a song, *Find Out Who Your Friends Are*, that describes the true friend in Prov 18:24. The song speaks of a man who goes through hard times. The chorus goes like this:

You'll find out who your friends are.
Somebody's gonna drop everything,
Run out and crank up their car,
Hit the gas, get there fast,
Never stop to think, "What's in it for me?"
Or "It's way too far."
They just show on up
With their big old heart.
You'll find out who your friends are.

Solomon is not telling us that Jesus is that kind of friend, even though He is. He is telling us to be that kind of friend.

We might have many casual "friends," but another kind of friend exists. He is one that "sticks closer than a brother." We would call such a person a true friend.

CONCLUSION

The story about Johnny and the squirrel is funny. But if we give Johnny's answer to the teacher's question about Prov 18:24, it's not funny at all. If we say Jesus is a Friend who sticks closer than a brother, we can use it as a cop-out. We might say that He will take care of a brother or sister in need, so I don't need to. I can use Him as an excuse to shirk my responsibilities.

There are not enough adjectives to describe how great our Savior is. But He is not the answer to every question. Sometimes, we are. We are to be true friends to others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is hard to find a true friend. He is a rare treasure. When my friends are asked if they have a friend who sticks closer than a brother, I hope they can answer that I am that kind of friend. ■



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, *Mark: Lessons in Discipleship*, is a wonderful explanation of Christ's call to discipleship. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC.

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?



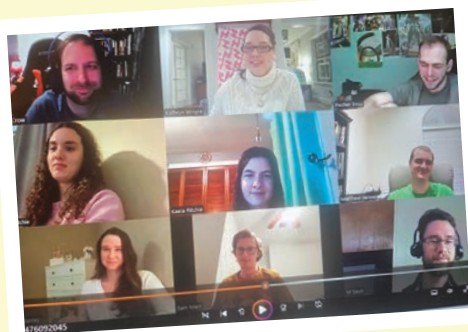
Ken at the CEM Winter Youth Retreat in December



Board and Spouses at Supper



GES Board at the Jan 17-18 Board Meeting



GES Young Adult Bible Study



Ken (Not Woke) and Bob (California) before recording podcasts



GES ladies Bible study



To keep grace in focus, you have got to be clear that Jesus' promise of everlasting life is the bullseye

Do We Need to Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ **FOR** Something?

By Bob Wilkin

The only evangelistic book in the Bible, John's Gospel, is clear that we must believe in Jesus' promise of everlasting life to have that life.

GES promotes the view that to be born again a person must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ *for everlasting life that cannot be lost*, or the equivalent (e.g., everlasting salvation, guaranteed home forever in Christ's kingdom, permanent justification).

Recently I've been seeing a lot of pushbacks from people within Free Grace circles. I've been confronted with this objection many times. In each case, someone was firmly asserting that there is no place in John's Gospel or in the NT that says we need to believe in Jesus *for everlasting life* to have that life. They argue that everlasting life is *the result* of believing in Jesus, not the condition.

John 3:16 is a promise, and we cannot believe that verse unless we believe the promise.

Those who disagree say that the essential part of John 3:16 is just the first part: "For God so loved the word that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him..." They think the rest is helpful but need not be believed in order for one to be born again.

But that is an incomplete thought. What is the Lord Jesus promising the person who believes in

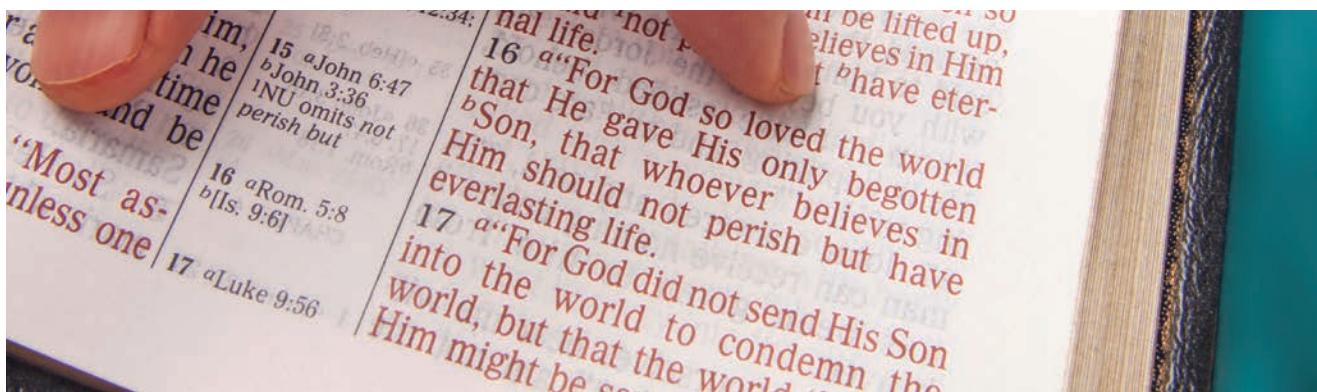
Him? If you leave out the last part of John 3:16, you no longer have John 3:16.

If we don't need to believe in Him **FOR** the promised result, then we don't need to believe in Him **FOR** anything. We don't need to believe in Him for forgiveness of sins, salvation, heaven, etc. We just need to believe in Him. We don't need to be convinced that we get anything due to believing. Learning about the benefits of believing in Him is a sanctification issue, they say.

And what would it mean to "believe in Him" if it didn't mean believing in Him for what He promises? Well, that's another article. Devoid of believing in Him **FOR** something, believing in Him is nebulous.

By the way, there are verses in the NT that do say we must believe in Jesus for everlasting life. I'll give you three to meditate on:

1. John 11:25-27. The Lord states two propositions. First, the one who believes in Him, though he may die, will be raised, glorified, and delivered to His eternal kingdom. Second, he who lives and believes in Him will never die spiritually. Those are two promises of eternal security. He then asks



Martha, “Do you believe this?” Her response is word for word what John 20:31 says we must believe in order to have everlasting life. The object of saving faith is Jesus’ promise of everlasting life that can’t be lost.

2. 1 Timothy 1:16. Paul said that he is an example of those who “are going to believe in Him **for everlasting life**.” The expression *believing in Him for everlasting life* is there. The Greek reads πιστεύειν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον. The preposition εἰς means *for*.

3. The expression *promise of life* is found in 2 Tim 1:1. Variations of that expression occur in Acts 5:20, “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people *all the words of this life*,” and in Phil 2:16, “holding fast *the word of life*...” You cannot accurately evangelize anyone without proclaiming the promise of life or the equivalent.

When people say we don’t need to believe in Him **FOR** anything—we just need to believe in Him—they are saying that people who do not believe in life after death are saved if they “believe in Him.” People who don’t believe Jesus is coming again to establish His kingdom are born again if they “believe in Him.” People who do not think they receive anything for believing in Jesus are eternally secure.

Now, someone may object. “You do have to believe in Him for something. But that something doesn’t need to be permanent. It can be salvation

John 3:16 is a promise, and we cannot believe that verse unless we believe the promise.

for now. It can be forgiveness of my sins *committed up until now*. It could be the reception of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing wrong with believing in Him for everlasting life. But there are other benefits we can believe in Him for.”

The funny thing is, they do not have a verse in the

Bible that speaks of believing in Him **FOR** any of these temporary benefits. And the Lord Jesus did not give the option of believing in Him for probation.

The only evangelistic book in the Bible, John’s Gospel, is clear that we must believe in Jesus’ promise of everlasting life to have that life. Dozens of times in evangelistic contexts the Lord Jesus said that the one who believes in Him will never hunger, thirst, die spiritually, perish, be cast out, or be plucked from His hand. Never. Never. Never. Never. Never. Never. He repeatedly promised *everlasting life* to those who believe in Him.

To keep grace in focus, you have got to be clear that Jesus’ promise of everlasting life is the bulls-eye. It is what we believe Him **FOR**. ■



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

Showing God's Love Through Our Lives

By Anneka Mullerⁱ



In 1 John 3:16-17, John calls believers to follow the example of Christ's sacrificial love. He gives two ways to do this: laying down one's physical life (*psychē*) and giving of one's material life (*bios*).

In 1 John 3:16-17, John uses *psychē* and *bios*, two Greek words that can mean “life.” John writes:

By this we know love, because He laid down His life (*psychē*) for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives (*psychē*) for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods (*bios*), and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

Both *psychē* and *bios* are used in reference to sacrifices Christians are called to make for other believers. Understanding John's usage of these words is important to properly interpreting Johannine passages where the words occur.

PSYCHĒ

In 1 John 3:16, John uses two forms of the root word *psychē*—the singular form in reference to Jesus and the plural form in reference to believers.ⁱⁱ The word is translated as “life” and “lives.” There is a physical aspect in view, given that Jesus laid down His life by physically dying for believers. Likewise, believers are called to be willing to make this sacrifice for fellowⁱⁱⁱ believers. Hodges says, “This is obviously the direct opposite of Cain who *took* (emphasis his) his brother's life (cf. v 12). Cain and Christ, therefore, stand as Johannine polarities.^{iv} John calls believers to be like Christ by giving up their physical lives for others, rather than taking another's physical life as Cain did.

Words formed from the root *psychē* occur ten other times in John's writings. Only one other occurrence is in John's epistles. In his third epis-

tle, John tells Gaius: “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul (*psychē*) prospers” (v 2). Here he does not refer to Gaius's physical life, but to his spiritual condition in his inner man.

Psychē is used nine times in the Gospel of John. Six of these refer to physically laying down one's life for another. A unique translation—“to doubt”—is used when the Jews ask Jesus: “How long do You keep us in doubt (*psychē*)? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly” (John 10:24). Under the definition “keep us in suspense,” Brown comments, “The idea would then be that, although Jesus lays down his own life for those who follow him (10:11, 15), he also provokes judgment and thus *takes away the life* of those who reject him” (11:48).^v In John 12:27, Jesus says that His soul (*psychē*)—that is, His inward self—“is troubled.”

In the book of Revelation, John uses the word *psychē* in 6:9 and 20:4 to talk about the souls of martyrs. Likewise, in Rev 18:14 John uses it in reference to the inward self of the merchant whose expectation of riches has been dashed. In the remainder of the verses in Revelation that include *psychē*, John uses it to describe physical life (Rev 8:9, 12:11, 16:3, 18:13).

John most commonly uses words from the root *psychē* to refer to one's physical life, but he sometimes uses it to refer to one's soul, the inward self. And there is one outlier where the word is translated “to doubt.”

BIOS

In 1 John 3:17, John discusses an aspect of sacrificing oneself for fellow believers. Here, he uses



another Greek word—*bion*, from the root *bios*—that can mean “life,” typically in reference to “life in its earthly and/or material aspects.”^{vi} In 1 John 3:17 *bion* is translated as “goods.” According to Hodges, “The connection of thought suggested by this is that sharing with other Christians the material things which *sustain* (emphasis his) life is, at heart, a way of laying down ‘our lives’ for them.”^{vii} John closes this verse with a rhetorical question: “...how does the love of God abide in him?” (John 3:17). Giving one’s worldly goods to help sustain other believers is a mark of one who is abiding in God. This, of course, is not speaking of believers in general; as described throughout 1 John, the believer who is *abiding* is the overcoming believer who is walking in the light. John’s only other NT use of the root word *bios* is found in 1 John 2:16, where he talks about the things of the world, the last being “the pride of life” (*biou*), once again referring to the material world “in its outward features and manifestations.”^{viii}

CONCLUSION

In 1 John 3:16-17, John calls believers to follow the example of Christ’s sacrificial love. He gives two ways to do this: laying down one’s physical life (*psychē*) and giving of one’s material life (*bios*). All believers are called to follow Christ’s example of

giving up His life for others rather than the example of selfish Cain who took his brother Abel’s life (Genesis 4). Likewise, in order to show God’s love, believers are called to sacrifice their worldly goods to help sustain other believers. Understanding John’s usage of *psychē* and *bios* will help believers properly apply these commands to love their Christian brothers with their lives. ■



Anneka Muller is a pediatric nurse practitioner and homeschool mom of four. She and her husband, Greg, enjoy studying NT Greek and theology together in GES’s online seminary.

ⁱ This paper is a slightly edited version of a paper that Anneka wrote for GES Seminary’s Fall 2024 Greek 103 class.

ⁱⁱ Editor’s note: That Jesus laid down his *psychē*, His life, for us, helps us understand His words in Matt 16:24-26. If we cling to our lives (*psychē*), then we lose our lives (*psychē*). The issue is not one’s eternal destiny, but his fullness of life now and in the life to come. This also helps us understand Jas 1:21 and 5:19-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 160.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Raymond Brown, *John I-XIII*, p. 403, italics his.

^{vi} Hodges, 161.

^{vii} Ibid.

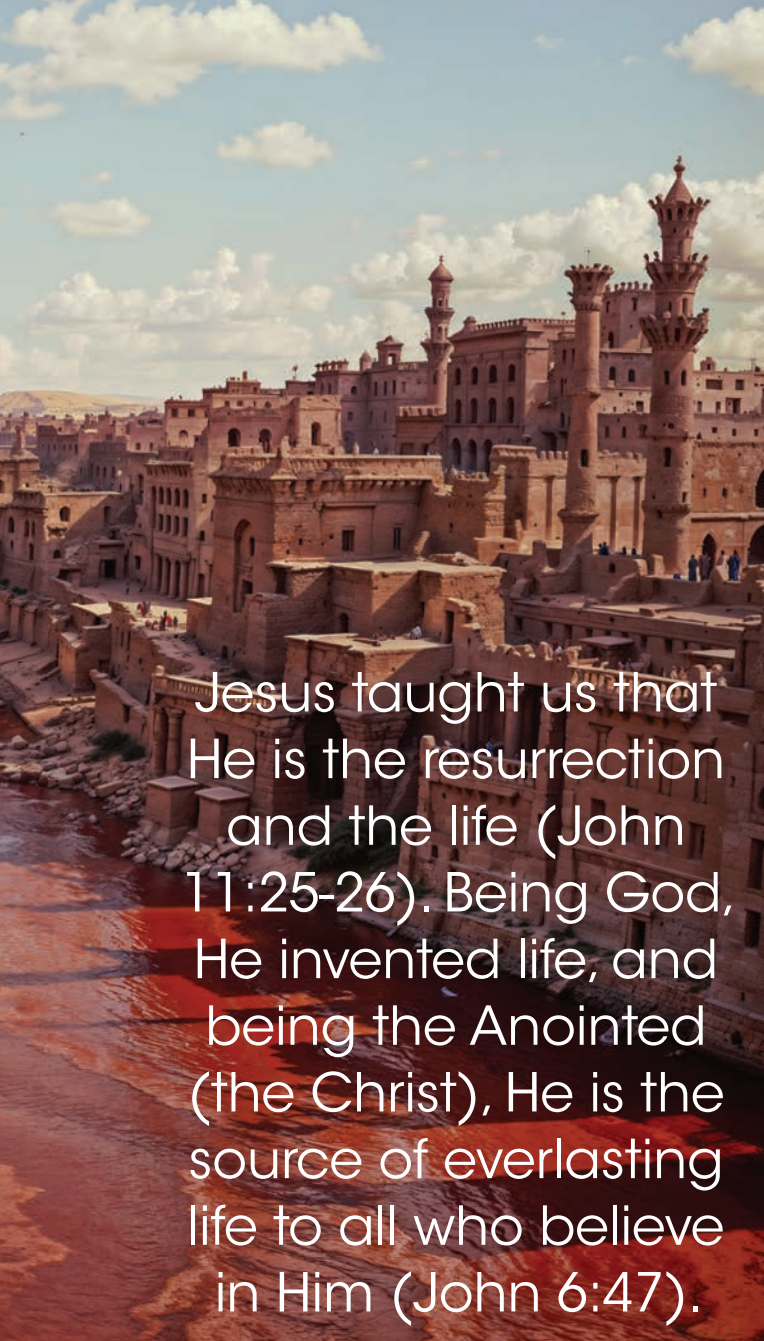
^{viii} Hodges, 103.



The First Cycle of Plagues

By David M. Renfro

As discussed in the Introduction to the Plagues in the January-February 2025 issue, the first nine plagues can be viewed as three cycles of three plagues each. The plagues in each cycle become increasingly severe and life-threatening. These first three plagues caused much irritation and disruption in the lives of the Egyptians, but they did not cause bodily injury or death.



Jesus taught us that He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26). Being God, He invented life, and being the Anointed (the Christ), He is the source of everlasting life to all who believe in Him (John 6:47).

THE FIRST PLAGUE: WATER TO BLOOD (EXODUS 7:14-25)

THE PLAN

Despite the earlier amazing demonstrations of the LORD's power, Pharaoh stubbornly continued to refuse to free the Israelites. Even the miracle of Moses' staff transforming from staff to serpent then back to staff did not convince Pharaoh that the God of Israel (Yahweh) was sovereign (Exod 7:1-13). Yahweh therefore visited the first plague on Pharaoh's realm both to judge it and to demonstrate His superiority over all of Egypt's gods and goddesses.

The first plague involved a crucial necessity of Egyptian life—water.

THE PLOT

Pharaoh's heart was *hard* (stubborn), so the LORD commanded Moses to confront Pharaoh when he *went out to the water* of the Nile River (vv14-15). Pharaoh would have gone to the Nile both to bathe and to worship the god of the Nile. Moses was to tell Pharaoh that Yahweh commanded him to let the Israelites leave so that they could worship Him (v 16).

Yahweh (through Moses) warned Pharaoh that He would strike Egypt's bodies of water and turn them into pools and rivers of blood. The life in these waters would die (v 18), the river would stink, and the people would suffer because the water was undrinkable. It was hoped that Pharaoh, upon seeing this, would *know* (or experience) that Yahweh was the Sovereign of the universe, and that he would therefore obey Him.

Aaron was then commanded to lift up his rod (v 20) over the Nile and other water sources so that they would turn to blood. This occurred when Aaron "struck the waters." Pharaoh and his servants were eyewitnesses of this (v 20). As predicted, all the creatures living in the waters died, making the water even more repulsive (v 21).

The Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate this using their pagan practices (v 22). The LORD probably allowed this so that Pharaoh would remain stubborn and again refuse to free the Israelites.

THE PURPOSE

Egyptians believed the Nile River to be a god that was the source and sustainer of life. The first plague was designed to educate the Egyptians and the Israelites to the fact that Yahweh, not the Nile, is the source and sustainer of life.

Jesus taught us that He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26). Being God, He invented life, and being the Anointed (the Christ), He is the source of everlasting life to all who believe in Him (John 6:47).



The God of Israel, Yahweh, is the only One who has the power to create and destroy life at His bidding.

**THE SECOND PLAGUE:
AN ARMY OF FROGS
(EXODUS 8:1-15)**

THE PLAN

The second plague involved covering the land of Egypt with frogs. This was significant because frogs were repulsive to the Egyptian people; being overrun by them would make their lives miserable.

THE PLOT

The LORD commanded Moses to *go to Pharaoh* (not at the Nile) and again demand the liberation of the Israelites. If Pharaoh did not comply, then Moses warned that a second plague would come *on* (lit. “against”) him and his people. This one would involve *frogs*—a lot of them.

Moses warned Pharaoh that the frogs that normally lived near the Nile River would overrun his people’s homes (including his palace). In fact, they would come into bedrooms, kitchens, and even the ovens (v 3). Since Pharaoh believed himself to be a god, one would think that he thought he could have prevented this.

Aaron then held his rod over the bodies of water, and the frogs appeared and covered the land (v 6). Since there would not have been enough frogs in the Nile to cover the land, Yahweh probably created most of them at that moment.

As with the first plague, the Egyptian sorcerers were able to duplicate the plague (v 7), bringing more frogs onto the land. This was not a good thing, because they just added to the problem! The lives of the Egyptians became even more miserable instead of better. Interestingly, the



sorcerers could create the frogs but not make them go away!

Yahweh, the
Sovereign Ruler of
the natural world,
is the standard of
purity
(1 John 3:3).

Things got so bad that Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron into his presence. He asked them to persuade the LORD to get rid of the frogs (v 8). This is the first time that Pharaoh spoke as if Yahweh existed. This time he did not call upon his sorcerers and magicians to get rid of the frogs.

To entice Moses and Aaron to do so, he promised to let the Israelites go so that they could worship

Yahweh. It was an insincere promise that he never intended to keep.

Interestingly, Moses let Pharaoh decide when he should intercede with Yahweh (v 9). He used the phrase *accept the honor* (lit. “honor yourself”). Moses seems to be giving Pharaoh the ability (or the illusion of having the ability) to control things, at least in part. This would also demonstrate that Moses was not manipulating things.

Pharaoh responded that he wanted the frogs gone by the next day (v 10). Moses agreed to this because the purpose of letting Pharaoh choose the time was to demonstrate that the God of Moses—Yahweh—unlike Pharaoh’s ineffectual gods was truly sovereign over the world. The frogs would once again be allowed to live only in and around the Nile River.

Yahweh did as Moses asked (v 13). The frogs died. They were then taken out of the people’s houses (including Pharaoh’s) and placed in large piles. Of course, the piles of dead frogs stank, making life in Egypt miserable. But, as predicted, Pharaoh hardened his heart and disobeyed Yahweh’s command by going back on his promise to release the Israelites.

THE PURPOSE

The target of this plague was the Egyptian goddess Heqet. She was worshipped as the goddess of birth and was pictured with the head of a frog. This plague demonstrated that she was not in control of the birth of countless frogs or of anything else.

It also showed that the God of Israel, Yahweh, is the only One who has the power to create and destroy life at His bidding.

THE THIRD PLAGUE: A COLONY OF LICE (EXODUS 8:16-19)

THE PLAN

Pharaoh had gone back on his word and did not let the Israelites go (see v 15). The second plague did not change his mind, so another plague was needed.

The third plague was not announced to Pharaoh.

THE PLOT

Yahweh, through Moses, commanded Aaron to take his *rod* (the one in 7:10-12), and *strike the dust* (v. 16), turning it into *lice*. The exact meaning of the Hebrew word translated “lice” in the NKJV is unknown. Most English versions translate it “gnats,” but no one is certain. In any case, it refers to some insect that was extremely irritating.

Aaron obeyed Yahweh, and the dust *became* lice. It is possible that Yahweh infused life into dust particles, causing them to turn into lice (Gen 2:7). These lice covered everyone and everything in Egypt. Imagine being covered by stinging insects everywhere you go! In the second plague, frogs had covered people’s homes. Now, lice covered people’s bodies, making life exceedingly miserable.

Because the lice covered all of Egypt, it is likely that the Israelites were afflicted with this plague as well. Later, plagues will affect all of Egypt but not Goshen, where the Israelites lived (vv 22-23; 9:4, 6, 26).

Pharaoh’s magicians were called into action. Using their mystical *enchantments* (v 18), they tried to *bring forth lice*, but they failed. The Hebrew verb

for *bring forth* can mean either “produce” or “cause to go out” (get rid of).

Either way, they failed in their mission. They reported back to Pharaoh that the *finger of God* was the creator of the plague, implying that they could do nothing. The *finger of God* was also used to write the Ten Commandments on stone tablets (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10) and to cast out demons (Luke 11:20). In all cases, it is a reference to God’s incomparable power.

The Egyptian magicians recognized that the power of Israel’s God could not be overcome by any power they possessed.

THE PURPOSE

This plague probably targeted two Egyptian gods.

- The first is Set, god of the desert, storms, and violence. For a time, Set was the protector of Ra, the Egyptian sun god.
- The second god was Geb, god of the earth or dust of the earth. Geb was sometimes pictured with the head of a snake (Gen 3:1-14; Rev 12:9).

This plague proved that neither of these deities could control the outbreak of lice over the land of Egypt. The fact that the lice came and went in spite of Egypt’s efforts demonstrated that Israel’s God was in complete control. After all, only God could command lice to do His bidding.

It was also an attack on the Egyptian priests, who had a reputation for maintaining physical immaculacy. These lice contaminated their purity, and they could do nothing about it.

The third plague also shows both the Egyptians and the Israelites (and us as well) that Yahweh, the Sovereign Ruler of the natural world, is the standard of purity (1 John 3:3). ■



David Renfro and his wife Linda live in Highland Village, TX. He is a native Dallasite and has a Th. M. degree from D.T.S. in Old Testament Semitics. He is currently busy with writing projects as well as occasionally filling the pulpit in the Dallas area.



Green-Tinted Traditions

By Kathryn Wright

When contradicted by
the truth, the faithful
disciple should be willing
to set aside their
beloved green-tinted
traditions to see the true
technicolor of God's
Word.



The *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a well-known novel by L. Frank Baum. Published on May 17, 1900, it follows the adventures of a girl from Kansas named Dorothy Gale, who is swept away by a tornado to a magical land called Oz and is trying to find her way back home.

In 1939, the book was adapted into a musical film starring Judy Garland in the lead role. The film became iconic, not only for its lead actress and music but also because it was one of the first films to use the three-strip Technicolor process.

While the movie begins in black and white tones, the world magically transforms into bright colors when Dorothy enters the land of Oz. This was a considerable development in cinematography. Due to this shift, the film's creators decided to make a significant change. Dorothy Gale's shoes were silver in the book, but to make them pop on the big screen, the filmmakers changed them to sequined ruby-red slippers.

Her shoes would become a symbol of the film and a pivotal piece of movie history. Today, whenever Dorothy is portrayed in pop culture, merchandise, art, and costumes, she is seen in her classic ruby-red slippers. MGM's studio later claimed copyrights to the shoes, meaning other studios could not use them in spin-off adaptations. The original pair that Judy Garland wore can be found at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

The shoes have become a beloved artifact of film and American history, yet they are a total fabrication not found in the book. The tradition has become more well-known and precious than the truth of Baum's novel.

Traditions often do this. They can take precedence over the original, especially if we don't take the time to read the original text.

Changing what an author originally wrote is not a new issue. Mankind has always tended to embellish great books. It has even happened to the Word of God. Men trade the riches of the Scriptures for sequined lies. However, unlike Baum's novel, the consequences of adding to the Scriptures are catastrophic (John 21:22-23; Gal 3:15-16; Rev 22:18-19; Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:5-6). This is made evident in both the New and Old Testaments.

THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN: ISAIAH 29:13

In Isa 29:13, the Lord speaks to the nation of Israel:

Therefore, the Lord said:

"Inasmuch as these people draw near
with their mouths

And honor Me with their lips,

But have removed their hearts far from
Me,

And their fear toward Me is taught by *the commandment of men*" (emphasis added).

The prophet is addressing the city of Jerusalem (v 1). This honored city where David once dwelt, known for its temple and worship of the one true God, was no longer in fellowship with Him. Instead, they were in rebellion, participating in idolatry and partnering with Gentile neighbors (2:6-9). However, the city of David kept up appearances by maintaining their sacrifices year-to-year and participating in their feasts.

The sin of hypocrisy is a common theme throughout Isaiah. The book opens with the Lord's rebuke of religious rituals. While they went to the temple and prayed, He refused to listen and called their sacrifices futile. They thought such activities were proof of their holiness, but the Lord hated their hypocritical piety (1:11-15). Later, the Israelites are described as swearing by the name of the Lord, but not in truth (48:1-2). They claimed the Lord as their God but refused to follow His word, speaking out of both sides of their mouth. The book also ends with a rebuke of their hypocrisy, for all their works of pretense were like filthy rags to the Lord (64:6).

Sadly, the nation had become spiritually blind, for their traditions allowed them to mask the true state of their spiritual degradation. The result was that like a sealed book (v 11), which cannot be opened, or a book in the hands of the illiterate (v 12), the Word of God became useless to them.

While the people appeared to be holy, it was all in their mouths and not in their hearts (v 13). They had moved away from the Lord and began to follow men's commandments. In other words, tradition was elevated over knowing and obeying the Lord.

This undoubtedly included both believing and unbelieving Judeans, for even believers can fall away and offer lip service (1 John 1:8, 10; 2:4, 9).

Fruchtenbaum comments:

By Yeshua's day, the rabbinic law, called the Mishnah, had become of equal authority with Scripture, sometimes even surpassing God's Word...the words of the sages were compared to the best of wines. Therefore, they were not only "relative [in importance] to the words of Torah" but also "more beloved than the words of Torah and more cherished than words of Torah." *Consequently, studying the Mishnah took precedence over the study of Scripture, as it was thought to be more meritorious* (A. G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Isaiah*, Ariel Bible Commentary, pp. 315-16, emphasis added).

The
comfort and
protection of
tradition is a
tempting
alternative to
the Word of
God, even for
believers.

THE TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS: MARK 7:5-8

This problem didn't end with Isaiah's generation. It persisted during the Lord's earthly ministry. In Mark 7, the Lord quotes Isa 29:13 when addressing the religious leaders of His day. They were complaining about the disciples, who were not following the traditions of the elders (v 5) in how they ate their food. These were oral traditions created by men and not found in the Law.

Due to their traditions, they were blind to the Lord's teachings and ultimately rejected Him. Like their forefathers, the religious leaders looked to their traditions as protection from spiritual defilement. They did not look to the Word of God. They rejected the teachings of the Lord to keep their

elders' commandments (Mark 7:9). They searched the Scriptures (John 5:39), but failed to hear the truth when God spoke. Like their forefathers before them, their traditions eclipsed His word. Yates comments:

Jesus compared the pretenders of Isaiah's day to the pretenders of His day. Their heart was far from God. Their worship was in vain. It was empty because it did not come from heartfelt devotion to God. These leaders wanted others to think they loved God. But in reality, they loved their traditions. These traditions allowed them to judge others who did not meet their standards. They judged the common people, the Lord, and His disciples. These leaders did not obey what God had told them to do. Their piety only involved outward observances, as they obeyed their own set of rules" (Ken Yates, *Mark: Lessons in Discipleship*, pp. 257-58).

It is tempting to look at this account and assume believers are immune to such problems. However, as the passage continues, the Lord turns to the disciples and warns them about following the commandments of the religious leaders (vv 14-23). The Lord exposed the disciples to new things that went against their traditions (2:21-22), most notably the cross. This also included things about holiness, godly living, and servanthood. The authority of the religious leaders would have been seductive, much like the Catholic church today, which draws people by its rich history and ordinances. The comfort and protection of tradition is a tempting alternative to the Word of God, even for believers.

TECHNICOLORED TRUTH

In the story of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her friends go to the capital city to meet the Wizard in the hope that he could help the heroine get back

home. The capital is called the Emerald City, and it is noted for being a bright green town. The movie shows the capital shining in the distance as the group heads towards its gates.

Once again, the movie fails to reflect the truth of the novel. In the book, when Dorothy and her friends make it to the Emerald City, they are told they must wear glasses. They are told the city's brightness will harm their eyes, but it is all a ruse. The Wizard of Oz was actually a con man with no magical powers to deliver Dorothy. He made the people of Oz wear glasses, for a green tint was embedded in the lens, which made the city appear emerald. The people blindly followed their leader under the guise of being protected, and in the end, their whole world was distorted.

Baum's book reflects Isaiah's similar warning for his generation and, ultimately, the Lord's message for all generations. Like the glasses in Oz, our traditions often appear safe, especially when the elders and leaders of the day tout them. They are meant to protect, but they distort and warp reality. Even for believers, the temptation to elevate traditions over the text is profound and should be taken seriously. When contradicted by the truth, the faithful disciple should be willing to set aside their beloved green-tinted traditions to see the true technicolor of God's Word. ■

Men trade the riches of the Scriptures for sequined lies. This is made evident in both the New and Old Testaments.



Kathryn Wright and her husband, Dewey, live in Columbia, SC. She is the GES missions coordinator, women's conference speaker, writer, and Zoom teacher.

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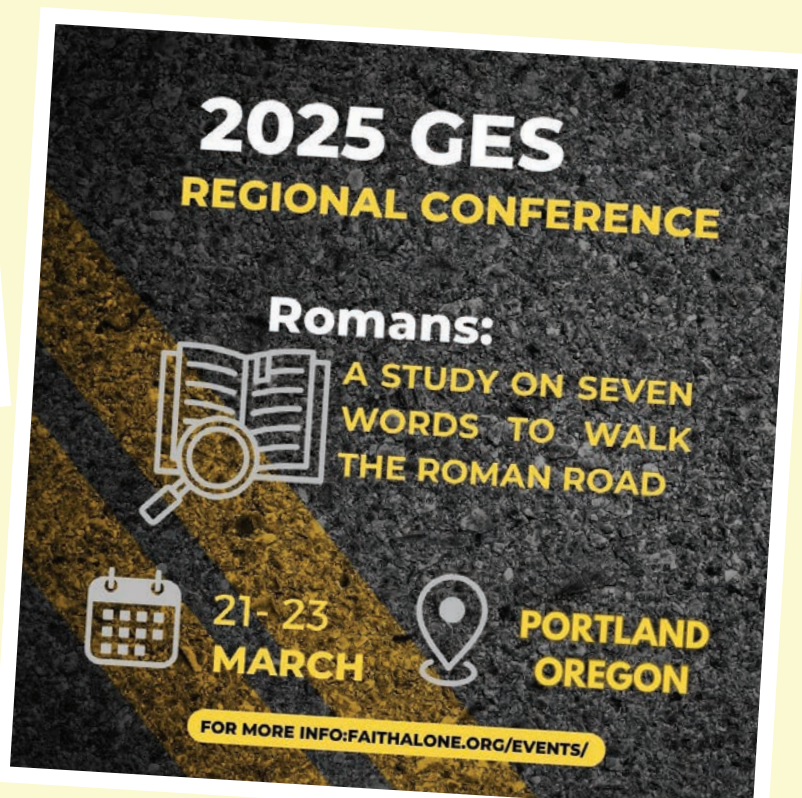
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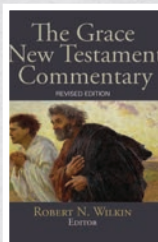


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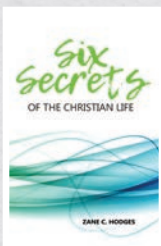


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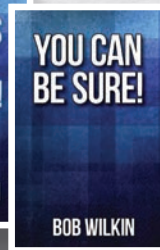
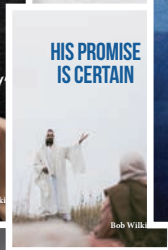
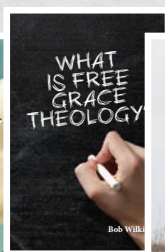
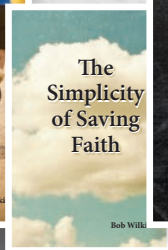
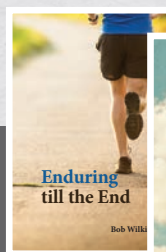


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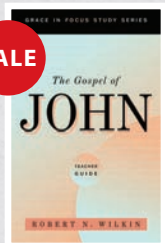
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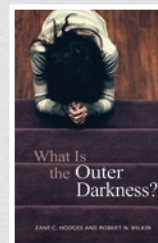


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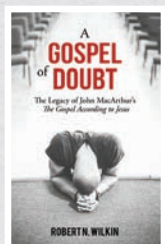


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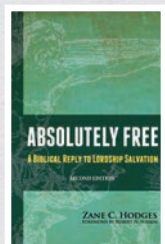


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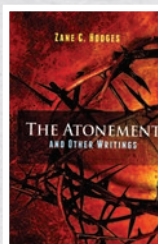


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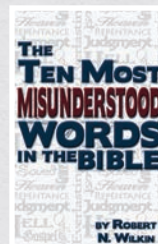


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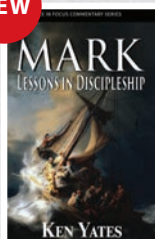
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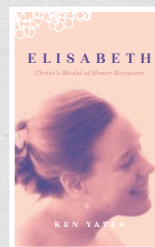


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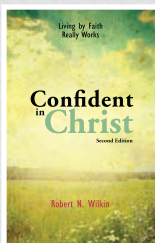


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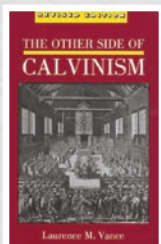


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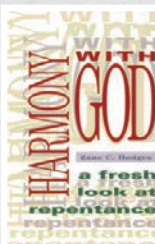


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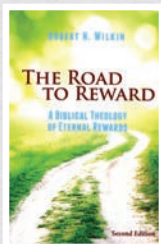


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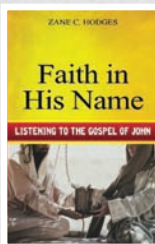


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He Has Forgiven All Our Trespasses

(Colossians 2:13)

By Ken Yates

INTRODUCTION

It is common to hear believers say that Jesus has forgiven them of all their sins. They will often explain that this means their past, present, and future sins were washed away when they believed in Christ for eternal life. Those well-read in Christian literature will describe this as “positional” forgiveness.

However, it can become confusing when Christians then speak of the need to confess their sins after becoming believers. If all their future sins have been forgiven, why must they confess them? Confession, we are told, will result in “experiential” forgiveness. While a believer is positionally forgiven, which means that he is a child of God,

experiential forgiveness is needed in order to have a close relationship with his heavenly Father.

For years, I accepted that distinction. While it’s not a battle I’m willing to die for, I’ve recently wondered whether that is really what the Bible teaches about the forgiveness of sins. Does it really say that all the believer’s future sins are forgiven at the moment of faith?

I suspect that many believe the Bible says this because they think the unbeliever will spend eternity in the lake of fire because of his sins. If all our sins are not forgiven, we will go to hell. That is not correct. The unbeliever will go to hell because he has not believed in Jesus for eternal life (Rev 20:15). The unbeliever does not have eternal life.

John is the only book in the NT that tells the unbeliever how to receive eternal life. Not once in John's Gospel do we read of the Lord's linking everlasting life with the forgiveness of sins. He never said, for example, "Whoever believes in Me has the forgiveness of sins." He spoke of the forgiveness of sins only once, and then only to the Eleven (minus Thomas) after He rose from the dead. In speaking about church discipline, He said that any sins they forgave would be forgiven and that any sins they retained would be retained (John 20:23).

Forgiveness of sins impacts Christian living and intimacy with the Lord, but it is not the Biblical explanation of our salvation from the lake of fire.

It would be impossible, in a short magazine article, to discuss all the issues involved with the forgiveness of sins. Instead, I will address one verse commonly cited in support of the idea of positional forgiveness.

Colossians 2:13 is often used to show that when a person believes in Jesus for eternal life, all his past, present, and future sins are forgiven.

COLOSSIANS 2:13

Paul writes to the believers at Colossae: "And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses..."

The key words for our discussion are *all trespasses*. Is Paul saying that when the Christians at Colossae believed, *all their past and future sins* were forgiven? Or was he saying that *all their past sins* were forgiven?

Does this verse teach positional forgiveness (option 1) or fellowship forgiveness (option 2)?

If Paul is talking about positional forgiveness in Col 2:13, we would expect the emphasis to be on the believer's eternal security. But Paul instead stresses Christian living in this passage. This is not surprising, since Paul is writing to Christians.

In Col 2:6, Paul tells them to *walk* in Christ. They are to be *built up in Him*, just as they *have been taught*. Paul warns them about false teachers who would rob them of this growth (vv 7-8).

In Christ, these believers have *[put] off the body of the sins of the flesh*. In Him, they no longer have to serve the lusts of the flesh. Christ has set them free from that slavery. This happened when they *were buried with Him* (vv 11-12), a reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit lives within the believer, he can walk (or live) by that power.

Paul reminds them that before they believed, they were *dead in their trespasses*. They had no choice but to walk according to the flesh. But when they believed, God forgave them *all their trespasses*. He does not say that all their future trespasses are forgiven. He has just mentioned the trespasses they lived in as unbelievers. The most natural way to understand what Paul says is that it was *those* trespasses that were forgiven when they believed.

In other words, all *past* sins are forgiven at the moment of faith. Those sins were committed as the unbeliever walked according to the lusts of the flesh. But Christ's death and resurrection have broken that power. Paul says nothing about the future sins the believer will commit.

The new believer does not have to confess his past sins—those he committed as an unbeliever. At the moment of faith, he is in fellowship with the Lord. He can also walk with Him through the power of the Spirit.

The broader context of Colossians supports the view that Col 2:13 addresses Christian living. In 1:10, Paul says that he wants the believers at Colossae to *walk worthy* of the Lord, to please Him, and to bear spiritual fruit. This is possible as they are *strengthened* by His *glorious power*.

While a believer is positionally forgiven, which means that he is a child of God, experiential forgiveness is needed in order to have a close relationship with his heavenly Father.

Then, in 1:13-14, Paul describes how that is possible. In Christ, the believer has been “delivered from the power of darkness.” Through the power of the Spirit, he no longer has to *walk* the way he did as an unbeliever. The Lord has provided *redemption* through His blood. *Redemption* means that a person has been bought out of slavery. The unbeliever is a slave to sin because of his sinful flesh. The believer no longer has to be a slave to his flesh. Along with that, Paul says the believer receives the *forgiveness of sins*.

The forgiveness of the new believer’s past sins makes fellowship with God possible. He has the power to enjoy that fellowship.

ROMANS 6:2-7

In Rom 6:2-7, Paul uses very similar phrases to discuss these truths. He says that the believer has *died* to sin. The Christian was baptized into Christ and buried with Him. This was done through the Spirit. In that death and burial, *the body of sin* was put away. The believer no longer has to be a slave of sin and the flesh. He can now walk in newness of life (v 4).

Paul says nothing about permanent positional forgiveness in either Romans 6 or Colossians 2. He says nothing about the believer’s sins being placed upon Christ or that this forgiveness saves him from hell. He is explaining why the believer can live a life that pleases God.

Once again, Paul does not say that all future sins have been forgiven. Instead, all the believer’s past sins are forgiven at the moment of faith. He is in harmony with the Lord. He can walk in a manner that pleases Him. If that fellowship is to continue, he must confess his future sins (1 John 1:9).

CONCLUSION

Many people say that the believer will be in the kingdom because all his sins were forgiven when he believed. This forgiveness of sins is what saves us from hell. Colossians 2:13 is often used to support this doctrine.

Colossians 2:13 does not teach that. The Bible does not teach that one’s sins will send him to hell. The unbeliever lacks eternal life. He receives that gift when He believes in Jesus for it.

The forgiveness of sins allows us to have *fellowship* with God. Fellowship with God and salvation from hell are not the same thing. When we believed, all our *past* sins were forgiven. We have access to God through His Son. His Spirit lives within us, and we can live in a way that pleases Him through His power. We can grow in our intimacy with Him. That is what fellowship with Him will do.

But when we sin after becoming believers, we need to be forgiven if we want that fellowship to continue. We must confess those sins to obtain that forgiveness.

It is common to explain Col 2:13 by making a distinction between positional and experiential forgiveness. This is confusing and, more importantly, does not seem Biblical. *Forgiveness of sins* impacts Christian living and intimacy with the Lord, but it is not the Biblical explanation of our salvation from the lake of fire. ■



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, *Mark: Lessons in Discipleship*, is a wonderful explanation of Christ’s call to discipleship. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC.



I Want to Be Rich!

By Bill Fiess

Recent research suggests that a significant number of Americans both want and plan to be wealthy. Americans, on average, feel they need to make over \$186,000 per year just to live comfortably. A 2022 survey by Charles Schwab found that Americans' expectations of what they would need to consider themselves or others "wealthy" are on the rise.ⁱ It's seemingly part of the "American Dream."

It's interesting that Jesus Christ makes it plain that He too wants us to become rich, for He says, "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, *that you may be rich* [italics added]" (Revelation 3:18a).

But what does this mean, and in what sense is He speaking?



WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

Certainly, Jesus is not urging believers to be rich *in this present world*, for He says:

“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).

He was telling them to use their earthly possessions to gain wealth in the coming kingdom of God.

Jesus talks about *riches* when He states: “Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” (Luke 16:11). A few verses later, He derides the Pharisees for being lovers of money (Luke 16:14-15). Thus, Jesus makes a significant contrast between earthly riches and kingdom wealth.

RICHES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The NT records Jesus Christ’s using the Greek word *ploutos* (= *wealth, riches*) nineteen times—and the last time is found in Revelation 3:18. I think it is significant that the authors of the New Testament epistles also use this word to describe the riches of the future kingdom of God and the eternal inheritance that is possible for believers to obtain. For example,

the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints (Ephesians 1:18).

for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:11).

Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (James 2:5).

This, therefore, appears to be what Jesus Christ is referring to in Revelation 3:18: the riches of His future eternal kingdom. He wants us to pursue that. He wants us to reign with Him. This is consistent with what Jesus says just a few verses later: “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21).

WHAT IS THE GOLD?

In Revelation 3:18, Jesus tells us to buy from Him “*gold refined in the fire*.” What is He

referring to? We get a clue from 1 Peter 1:7, where gold tested by fire equates to future glory:

that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Jesus—in His prayer to the Father—refers to the requirement necessary to share His eternal glory. He prays:

“And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:22-23).

Jesus prayed that believers might be “perfected” to share His eternal glory. This word *perfected* (*teleioō*) does not mean sinless perfection but represents a *maturity* achieved by a believer’s continuing to the end of his life in fellowship with God (see Revelation 2:26; Hebrews 3:14). This maturity would be accomplished by their abiding in Him [note “*I in them*”], which would undoubtedly require refining and trials.

Why does Jesus say, “buy from Me gold refined in the fire”? Because it is costly to obtain this heavenly wealth. But I think it is worth the cost.

We also read, “and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:17).

The writer of Hebrews also speaks of the perfection needed to reign with Christ:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn [ones](= the co-rulers) who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12:22–23).


And Jesus Himself, in speaking of rewards,ⁱⁱ said: “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Gold, therefore refers to the perfection required to reign with Jesus Christ. But it comes only through refining.ⁱⁱⁱ

SOME EXAMPLES

Think of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus Christ (Luke 9:28-31). These men had lived difficult lives and had suffered many trials. But they will rule with Jesus Christ and enjoying the riches of eternal life when He establishes His kingdom.

Think of Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States. Lincoln was born into poverty in a log cabin in Kentucky and was raised on the frontier. Self-educated, he became a lawyer, Whig Party leader, Illinois state legislator, and U.S. representative. He served as president of the U.S. from 1861 until his assassination in 1865. He is a prime example of someone who rose from poverty, became the leader of an earthly nation, and experienced the glory of that rule.^{iv}

What about you, believer? Do you believe what Jesus is promising in Revelation 3:18? Do you want to be rich forever? Do you want to reign with Jesus Christ forever? Are you willing to allow Him to sanctify you now? The gold He offers includes testing and suffering. But the gold He offers is infinitely better, I think, than the “American Dream.” 



Bill Fiess teaches mathematics at Southwest Virginia Community College.

ⁱ Internet AI.

ⁱⁱ Note the context: Matt 5:46-48.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Zech 13:8-9, where believing Israel, during the Millennium, needs to be refined in the fire to rule with the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln.

Did Paul Condemn People to Hell in Galatians 1:8-9?

By Dave Wyant

The apostle Paul makes a shocking statement in Gal 1:8: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” Paul pronounces a curse on anyone who preaches a gospel different from his. For emphasis, he repeats this curse again in the very next verse. The Greek noun translated as “accursed” is ἀνάθεμα. Our English word *anathema* is simply a transliteration of this Greek word. English versions of the Bible are almost unanimous in translating this term as “cursed” or “accursed.” However, the NIV84 translates the phrase *anathema estō* as “let him be eternally condemned!” The NET Bible renders it, “let him be condemned to hell!” The NET Translator’s Note states: “The translation gives the outcome which is implied by this dreadful curse.”¹ A brief look at the Greek noun *anathema* will demonstrate that this is an unwarranted implication and an incorrect translation.

The term *anathema* occurs six times in the Greek NT. Luke uses it once in Acts 23:14. There, more than forty men placed themselves under an oath, *anathema*. They would either kill Paul or die trying. The context of this verse clearly indicates that physical death, not spiritual destiny, is in view. The other five occurrences of this term are in the Pauline Epistles: once in Romans and twice in both 1 Corinthians and Galatians. In Rom 9:3, Paul wishes that he, himself, could be *anathema* for the sake of his fellow Israelites. In 1 Cor 12:3, he asserts that no one speaking by the Spirit says that Jesus is *anathema*. In 1 Cor 16:22, he also pronounces an *anathema* on Corinthian believers who do not love the Lord. The other two occurrences are in Galatians, where Paul also includes himself under the conditions of the *anathema* (Gal 1:8, 9). What is the nature of this *anathema*?

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

Translating the Greek noun *anathema* as “eternally condemned” or “condemned to hell” presumes a spiritualized connotation with a soteriological implication that is unwarranted. It is crucial to observe that in 1 Corinthians, Paul is speaking to born-again believers who are eternally secure. He is also speaking *about* born-again believers who are eternally secure. Furthermore, Paul is himself an eternally secure believer when, in Rom 9:3, he wishes that he could be *anathema* on behalf of his fellow Israelites. From a theological perspective, Paul has neither the ability nor the authority to consign anyone to hell, especially not an angel from heaven, or even himself, for that matter. The NIV84’s and the NET Bible’s translation of *anathema* as “eternally condemned!” or “condemned to hell!” is gratuitous. It assumes a salvific sense of this term that is not justified. But if the Greek noun *anathema* should not be interpreted soteriologically, how should it be understood?

The Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the OT, provides the historical and theological context for the Jewish concept of the Greek term *anathema*. In this literature, it occurs twenty-two times to translate the Hebrew noun, חֵרֶם, *hērem*. This word describes people and things that

were set apart by and to the LORD for temporal, physical destruction (Lev 27:28–29).ⁱⁱⁱ The Israelites were commanded to separate themselves completely from anyone or anything that had been set apart by and to the LORD for destruction. It was banned. Association with anyone or anything that had been banned placed one under the same *anathema*, physical destruction (Deut 7:26).

The account of Achan provides a good example of the concept of *anathema*. The LORD revealed to Joshua that someone within the camp had taken items that were banned. As a result, the Israelites were also cursed (Josh 7:13). This *anathema* entailed the loss of the LORD's presence with them and, consequentially, defeat in battle. Joshua explains this curse as the LORD's temporal wrath on the Israelites and on Achan by means of physical death (Josh 22:20). Both verses use the Hebrew term *hērem*, which is translated by the Greek noun *anathema* in the LXX. The principle is that those who associate with that which has been anathematized become *anathema* themselves.

Paul picks up this meaning from the LXX in his use of the word *anathema* in Gal 1:8 and 9. Here, he uses his apostolic authority to anathematize the Judaizers and anyone who proclaims a false gospel. This proclamation involves two things. First, he assigns the Judaizers the designation of *anathema*. This is their status. They have been set apart by and to the Lord for temporal, physical destruction. Second, he implicitly commands the believers of the Galatian churches to separate themselves from the Judaizers. The Greek verb *estō* in the phrase “let him be *anathema*” is an imperative. The implication of this command is that the believers of the Galatian churches must separate themselves from the Judaizers because Paul had designated them as *anathema*. Failure to do so would result in their incurring the same status and fate. The Galatian believers had been influenced by their association with the Judaizers and their false gospel. If they continued to remain under the influence of the Judaizers, they risked the same fate: temporal, physical destruction.

The correct translation of the Greek noun *anathema* is “cursed” or “accursed.” The correct interpretation of Gal 1:8 and 9 is that the Judaizers

had been set apart by and to the Lord for temporal, physical destruction.^{iv} The Galatians must avoid them lest they incur the same consequence. The correct application for today is that believers must be careful with whom they associate, especially in their weekly assemblies at the Lord's Table. Assembling with those who require good works to obtain justification or good fruit to prove justification places one at risk of temporal, physical destruction. Paul's *anathema* of the Judaizers in Gal 1:8-9 is temporal and physical destruction, not spiritual and eternal damnation. ■



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ⁱBiblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), tn13.

ⁱⁱ In Galatians 3:13, Paul states that Jesus became “a curse for us.” However, here, as well as in Galatians 3:10, he uses a different Greek noun, κατάρα.

ⁱⁱⁱ The first clause of the Hebrew text of Leviticus 27:28 could be translated, “Nevertheless, any **devoted** thing which a man **devotes** to the LORD” (author's translation). This is because the Hebrew noun *hērem*, “devoted,” is a cognate of the Hebrew verb, *hrm*, “to devote.” There is also an interesting word play in the Greek translation of this clause, which reads, “Any ‘set apart thing,’ *anathema*, which a man ‘sets apart,’ *anathē*, to the Lord” (author's translation). Again, this is because the Greek noun *anathema* is a cognate of the Greek verb *anatithēmi*, which is a compound verb from the root *tithēmi*. Interestingly, Paul uses this same compound verb in Gal 2:2, which states that Paul “set forth, *anethemēn*, his gospel to them” (author's translation). Paul uses another compound verb with the root *tithēmi* in Gal 1:16 and 2:6, *prosanatithēmi*. In Gal 1:16, Paul asserts that after his conversion, he did not “consult with, *prosanathemēn*, anyone.” In Gal 2:6, Paul states that after he “set forth,” *anethemēn*, his gospel to the apostles, they “added,” *prosanethento*, nothing. Adding, *prosanatithēmi*, anything to the gospel of grace places one under a curse, *anathema*.

^{iv} Many commentators understand the *anathema* in Gal 1:8-9 to refer to eternal condemnation. See, for example, Campbell, “Galatians” in TBKC (p. 591); George, *Galatians*, p. 99; and Meyer, *Galatians*, p. 26.



Jesus urged
Mary to let go
of her physical
embrace, so she
could go out
with a vital
message.

Did Jesus Warn Mary Magdalene Not to Touch Him?

By John H. Niemelä

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her (John 20:17-18, KJV).

Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene have troubled many. "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father" seems a harsh response to her overjoyed greeting. By contrast, a week after supposedly warning Mary, "Touch me not," He urged Thomas to touch Him (John 20:27).

Adele Reinhartz expresses the quandary: "It is not clear whether Jesus is asking Mary to let go

of him [Option 1] or warning her not to touch him [Option 2]."ⁱ

This article argues for Option 1. Contrary to the way most see John 20:17a, Jesus was treating Mary with tenderness.

Thomas did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead even after the other disciples reported seeing Him alive. The Lord urged Thomas to touch Him so that he would believe in His resurrection.ⁱⁱ By contrast, when Mary Magdalene saw Him and heard His voice, she eagerly embraced the truth that Jesus had risen. That led her to embrace Him.

Did Jesus seek to *dampen her enthusiasm*? No. He sought to *redirect her enthusiasm* in order to

impact others. Previously, she had run to inform Peter and John that Jesus' body was missing (John 20:1-3). Now, He directed her to tell the disciples the real reason the tomb was empty: He has risen! Essentially, He was saying, "Thank you for your embrace, but here is a message to share."ⁱⁱⁱ Note three imperatives in John 20:17: "**Stop holding onto Me..., go..., and tell.**" Jesus commissioned a woman to deliver a message of utmost gravity to the Eleven.

Few appreciate the tremendous honor the Lord was bestowing upon Mary Magdalene. This is no wet blanket. Rather, Jesus entrusted her to help His disciples view life and ministry in light of His resurrection. Previously, Mary's word to Peter and John is what brought them to the empty tomb, where John^{iv} (and possibly Peter^v) then believed that Jesus had risen. Now, her announcement prepared the disciples for three attested post-resurrection appearances of Jesus: John 20:19-23, 24-29; and 21:1-13. John 21:14 highlights this trio of appearances.

After recording one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, John writes, "This is the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead" (John 21:14). Those three appearances were: (1) when He appeared to ten of the disciples, but not Thomas (John 20:19-23), (2) to all eleven, Thomas included (John 20:26-29), and (3) to seven disciples who had fished all night (John 21:1-13).

Some might think that John slights Mary Magdalene by not including Jesus' appearance to her (John 20:11-17) as one of the times that He "showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead." John could have written, "This is the *fourth* time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples..."


No. John did not slight her. By *His disciples*, John meant the Eleven. John did report her role in Jesus' resurrection appearances twice in John 20. He reported that Jesus gave her the vital commission to go and tell him and the other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20:17). Her faithfulness to that commission was the harbinger of the subsequent three attested appearances. Her role remains significant.

The inclusio formed by the opening and closing sections of the body of John's Gospel highlights her function.^{vi} Specifically, Mary Magdalene's role corresponds to that of John the Baptist. The Baptist and the Magdalene form an inclusio.^{vii}

The record of the Baptist's commissioned attestation (1:15-34) introduces three attestations by disciples (1:35-42, 43-46, and 47-51).

The record of the Magdalene's commissioned testimony (20:11-18) introduces three attested appearances of the Lord to disciples (20:19-23, 24-29; 21:1-13).

Jesus did not distance Himself from Mary. He did not rebuke her. He did not say that it was wrong for her to touch Him. Rather, He urged Mary *to let go of her physical embrace, so she could go out with a vital message.*

Might we also channel our love for Him into sharing the message of life clearly with others. 



John is president of Message of Life Ministries. He and Diane recently moved to rural Knox County, TN to be near their son, George. John is working diligently on his forthcoming commentary on John's Gospel.

ⁱ Annotation on John 20:17 by Adele Reinhartz in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford, ENG: University Press, 2011), 194.

ⁱⁱ Once again, Thomas was already a believer. John 13:10-11 and 15:3 demonstrate that all the Eleven were believers by that time. John 20:27-28 is not when Thomas received eternal life. Instead, it was when he believed that Jesus rose.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert N. Wilkin, "John," in the *Grace New Testament Commentary*, rev. ed. (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2019), 232, perceives the true sense of this verse.

^{iv} John 20:8 is John's self-testimony that he (at that point) believed that Jesus had risen.

^v John 20:8 does not say that Peter believed the resurrection at that moment. The verse only reveals John's thinking, not Peter's. Asserting that silence reveals what Peter believed (or disbelieved) is unwise, an argument from silence.

^{vi} My forthcoming commentary will argue (as did Zane Hodges) that the body of John begins at John 1:15, not at 1:19. See Zane C. Hodges, *Faith in His Name: Listening to the Gospel of John* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2015), 17. Additionally, the body extends through John 21:14. See the next note.

^{vii} This inclusio shows that the book's body extends through John 21:14. John 1:15-51 is part of the body, so the inclusio's conclusion (20:11-21:14) must also be part of the body. John 21:14 welds the three appearances (20:11-21:13) into a unit. A literary unit cannot lie partly in the body and partly in the epilogue. The unit indicates the body's start and finish (1:15-21:14).

"Students Are Less Interested in 'Beliefs' Than in Faith That Works"

By Bob Wilkin



We are born again by faith in Christ for everlasting life.

In the March 2024 issue of *Christianity Today*, Kevin Brown, President of Asbury University in Wilmore, KY, wrote: “What the Asbury Revival Taught Me about Gen Z.” The subtitle is, “A year ago, I saw the cure for casual Christianity.”

Two sentences in particular grabbed my attention:

Students are less interested in ‘beliefs’ than in a faith that works. There is a trenchant meaning vacuum in our country fostering a sweeping spiritual hunger (p. 24).

While the notion of valuing behavior over beliefs may seem appealing, it can lead to a significant misunderstanding of the essence of Christianity.

The condition of everlasting life is not behavior. We are born again by believing in Jesus for what He promises: everlasting life (John 3:16).

We also live the Christian life by faith, not dedication, determination, and social involvement.

Salvation is by faith alone, apart from works. And sanctification is by the faith walk.

What Brown is saying strikes me as a way to keep people from seeing the need to believe Jesus’ promise of irrevocable salvation. Brown seems to believe in Lordship Salvation. He isn’t concerned about believing “a set of propositions” (p. 25). His concern is about commitment and counting the cost of following Christ.

He cited the Barna group as saying that Gen Z “prioritize behavior over words as a strategy for sharing faith” (p. 25).

Brown said that Asbury students “embody resilient, committed, costly faith in Jesus Christ as an antidote to the casual Christianity that has emptied church pews in recent decades” (p. 25).

I’m not sure what Brown means by “casual Christianity.” I think he means people who enjoy the church services but are not socially engaged in improving our society. He wrote, “A casual exit from church is a function of a casual faith” (p. 25). In other words, behavior, not beliefs, keeps people coming to church.

He went on,

As theologian and author Stanley Hauerwas has suggested, pockets of contemporary Christianity have become domesticated into a set of propositions that we mentally carry but that have little bearing on our day-to-day life. Casual faith produces a belief system that demands little and utters pale statements like ‘I believe Jesus is Lord but that is just my personal opinion’ (p. 25).

There is, of course, some truth in what Brown is saying. Behavior matters. However, beliefs matter, too. Our beliefs determine our behavior, not the other way around. Paul said that we are to be transformed “by the renewing of our minds” (Rom 12:2; cf. 2 Cor 3:18). We are born again by faith in Christ for everlasting life. And we grow and mature and produce good works by having our minds renewed by the Word of God.

Keep grace in focus. ■



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