

# GRACE IN FOCUS

The Essential  
Condition of  
Saving Belief

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# THE THIEF

Do You  
Believe  
This?

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How Can You  
Lay Hold on  
Eternal Life?

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# AND BELIEF

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Abraham Believed in the  
Lord for Everlasting Life

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*Bob Wilkin*

In Gal 3:6-14 and Rom 4:1-8, Paul cited Gen 15:6 to prove justification by faith in Christ, apart from works. But Gen 15:6 does not mention Jesus' name or that He is the Christ. This article shows that Paul got it right. Abraham believed in the Messiah for everlasting life.

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Does gratitude come naturally? It certainly comes easy when life is going as planned. But when things fall apart, gratitude becomes a challenge. Living a grateful life affects the believer and those around them.

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When questioned, Martha affirmed that she believed Jesus was the Christ. This statement of faith was not just a matter-of-fact confirmation of her salvation. Her dialogue with Jesus in this passage displays a great deal about Christ's character and the promises He made.

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Overseas missions sound distant, even intimidating. But in Uganda, we found struggles that look uncomfortably familiar—abuse of power, doctrinal darkness, and hearts desperate for hope. Step inside a trip that proves the battle for clarity is closer than you think.

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Believers are to worship God in spirit and in truth. This comes in the form of sacrifice; sacrificing our time, money, and even ourselves to God. We are only able to offer these pleasing sacrifices to the Lord because of the foundation His Son laid for us.

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A higher standard.  
A higher purpose.



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*Hayden Bray*

Everlasting life is free gift given to all who believe in Jesus Christ for it. There is debate as to how much one must believe about Jesus or His promise or everlasting life. Can someone believe anything about Jesus and still receive everlasting life, or must His promise be the target?

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## 45 Blinded by Tradition (Luke 9:45)

*Ken Yates*

The disciples heard Jesus predict His death—but tradition kept them blind to His words. Could the same be true for us? Cherished religious assumptions can block the truth, but God's Word performs the surgery we need in order to see clearly.

# Letter from the Editor



This issue of the magazine covers the last two months of the year, which are arguably the slowest months in many industries. That isn't the case in Christianity. As we approach

Thanksgiving and Christmas, we come to a vibrant time for churches and parachurch ministries like GES.

I know I'm biased. But I really like this issue of the magazine. Sam and his sister, Anneliese, have been helping with designing the cover and back cover and revising the first two pages (In This Issue and Letter from the Editor). We've added abstracts for each article that I find very helpful.

Debbie continues to do a great job typesetting the articles and selecting graphics to support them. She also keeps all our photos for the What's Been Happening at GES pages.

My thanks to all the authors. GES Seminary Professor Dave Wyant has written a very insightful article on the readers of the Epistle of James. New in this issue is Hayden Bray, one of our Seminary students. He has written about following the pattern of evangelism set forth by Jesus.

Next year marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of GES in 1986. Time flies.

Thank you, Lord, for your many blessings on this ministry!

Keep grace in focus. ■

Robert N. Wilkin

A handwritten signature of Robert N. Wilkin in dark ink. The signature is stylized and cursive, appearing to read "Bob Wilkin".



# Abraham Believed in the Lord for Everlasting Life<sup>i</sup>

By Bob Wilkin

*And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Gen 15:6).*

*For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (Rom 4:3-4).*

*Therefore, He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Gal 3:5-6).*

*“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).*

*By faith he [Abraham] dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:9-10).*



Remember that the Lord Jesus said, “Abraham rejoiced to see My day”.

My parents had given up hope. Though their first child, a daughter, came after just a few years of trying, the second child, another daughter, did not come until nearly eight years later. Seven years after that, when my Mom was thirty-nine and well past hope, they found out they were expecting. When I was born, they learned they finally had a boy. I imagine that is what Abraham felt when Isaac was born. But unlike my parents, Abraham had a promise from God Almighty that he and Sarah would indeed have a son. That promise from God came long after it was reasonable for them to have a child.





**ABRAHAM BEING ACCOUNTED  
AS RIGHTEOUS REFERS TO  
JUSTIFICATION BEFORE GOD  
(ROMANS 4; GALATIANS 3)**

Paul quotes Gen 15:6 in Rom 4:3 and Gal 3:6. In those contexts, Paul is clearly defending justification before God by faith in Christ, apart from works (see Rom 4:1-8; Gal 3:6-14, esp. verses 8, 11). Genesis 15:6 tells us that God declared Abraham righteous because he had faith in the Lord. But was Paul stretching things to suggest that Abraham is an example of one who believed in the Messiah for his justification before God?

**ABRAHAM BELIEVED IN THE LORD  
JESUS CHRIST FOR EVERLASTING  
LIFE (JOHN 8:56; HEBREWS 11:10)**

If all we had was the Book of Genesis, we would have to do some guesswork about what Moses meant when he said, “And he believed in the Lord.” Without other Old Testament and New Testament books, we would not know that he believed in the Lord Jesus Christ *for everlasting life*.

But it is clear from Gen 15:1-6 that Abraham believed the Lord was going to provide an heir who would be from him and Sarah. Considering Gen 12:1-3, we know that Abraham believed this coming heir would be the source of worldwide blessing. As Ross puts it, the promises given in Genesis 12 were primarily for the benefit of Abra-

We know that Abraham believed this coming heir would be the source of worldwide blessing.

ham but would “ultimately benefit all the families of the world.”<sup>ii</sup> In light of the land promises of the Lord to Abraham, we also know that Abraham believed this coming heir would rule in the Promised Land, and Abraham believed that he himself would be resurrected and would gain the land which was promised to him.

If we go outside Genesis, we know that the Lord in whom Abraham believed is the Messiah, the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Lord Jesus Himself said, “Abraham rejoiced to see My day” (John 8:56). That is, Abraham was happy to realize that the Lord Jesus was coming to establish His kingdom in the Promised Land. Compare Heb 11:10, which says that Abraham was looking for the New Jerusalem.

In both Romans 4 and Galatians 3, Paul uses Gen 15:6 to prove that justification is by faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ. Moo maintains that Paul sees a “Christological focus” in Gen 15:6 and that this focus is both “fair and appropriate.”<sup>iii</sup> If Gen 15:6 is not about justification by faith in Christ, then Paul has deceived us. But that is impossible, for God’s Word is true.

**ABRAHAM ACTUALLY MET THE  
LORD JESUS CHRIST AND SPOKE  
WITH HIM ON MANY OCCASIONS  
(GENESIS 12-18, 21-22)**

We tend to think of Abraham as someone who knew little or nothing about the Lord Jesus. But that is not true. He met the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ on many occasions. Face to face. See especially the dialogue Abraham had with the Lord Jesus in Genesis 18 as Abraham comically tried to negotiate for the saving of Sodom (50...45...40...30...20...10). You and I have never seen Him. But Abraham met with Him often. Neyrey takes this position. While God the

*If Gen 15:6 is not  
about justification  
by faith in Christ,  
then Paul has  
deceived us.*

Father is invisible, Christ is the visible God that appeared to Abraham.<sup>iv</sup>

Remember that the Lord Jesus said, “Abraham rejoiced to see My day.” He saw, that is, anticipated, Jesus’ day, His coming kingdom, while he was meeting with Him. Now, we do not know if Abraham knew that His name is Jesus. He probably did not know that. But He knew that He was the Lord. And He believed that by faith in Him he would spend eternity in His coming kingdom in the Promised Land. ■



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

<sup>i</sup> This article is a slightly edited version of Chapter 1 of *Faith Alone in 100 Verses* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2020), pp. 11-13.

<sup>ii</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), p. 262.

<sup>iii</sup> Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1991), p. 265.

<sup>iv</sup> Jerome Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 442-43.



# WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?



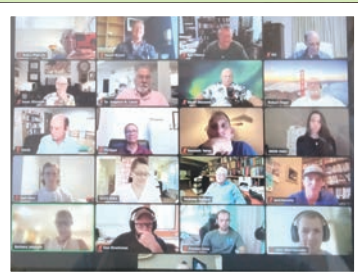
Micaela Manley with John Bayless and Janet Rockey at Bayside Tampa



Kathryn and the Ritchie family at Worldwide Healing Church in Kampala with Pastor Wisdom and his family



Ken, Kathryn, and Marsha Hultgren in front of Amish Amos in PA



GES Seminary Professors, TAs, and Administrators July 24



Ken, Buzzy and Patsy Tippins, Lou and Doyle Young in Tampa



Ken, and Sharon and Steve Hiller, old friends who were stationed with me in Hawaii



The online attendees of Bob's Sunday School class, July 20



Bob and Leon recording radio



Ken and Kathryn eating an Amish meal with Christian chiropractors' association in PA

# Learning to Be Grateful

## (Even When Life Hurts)

By Georgiana Paleanu

I used to think gratitude came naturally. When life was good, it did. But when life fell apart? That's when I realized: Real gratitude isn't simple at all.

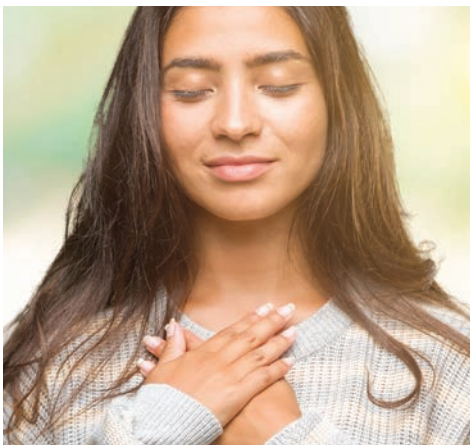
When life feels steady—when the people we love are close, when our health holds up, when prayers seem to be answered—saying, “Thank You,” comes naturally. It slips into our conversations, our prayers, even the small routines of daily life. We breathe a little easier. We notice the little blessings.

But what about the seasons when life falls apart? When your body feels weak, or your heart feels heavy? When disappointment lingers, and the future feels uncertain? That's when gratitude feels distant—sometimes impossible.

I've been there. The hard days pile up. The prayers seem to go unanswered. And instead of feeling grateful, you start to drift—pulling away from God, maybe even feeling resentful. You wouldn't be the first person to wonder, “*How am I supposed to be grateful for this?*”

It's an honest question. Here's what I've been learning: God doesn't expect us to be grateful for the hard things. But even in the midst of them, *He invites us to notice the good*. To see His love, His nearness, His faithfulness—even when life hurts.

The past few years haven't been the way I had pictured. My energy has faded in ways I didn't expect. Disappointments, strained relationships, unanswered prayers—none of it was part of the



plan. But here I am, still learning to notice God's goodness—even when life doesn't look the way I'd hoped—and finding that gratitude often comes softly, tucked into quiet moments, even when everything else feels loud and uncertain.

And sometimes church can actually make this harder. I still remember one Sunday at a church that my husband, Oscar, and I visited several times here in Spain. The preacher stood up and told the congregation—firmly—that if we didn't feel cheerful and grateful, maybe we weren't truly saved. I could feel the weight of his words settle over the room. Maybe he meant it as encouragement—but honestly, it felt more like a warning. Like an invitation to doubt.

But here's the truth: Salvation never depends on how we feel. It doesn't depend on our emotions. And it certainly doesn't depend on our behavior—grateful or otherwise. It rests entirely on Jesus—on His finished work, His promise of everlasting life, His grace.

I sat there quietly, my heart heavy. I wasn't doubting my salvation, but I could almost feel the uncertainty creeping through the room. I looked around at people carrying quiet grief. Illness. Disappointments. People

who showed up with worn-out hearts and fragile faith, even when thankfulness felt far away. And I couldn't help but wonder how many of them were silently asking, “*If I don't always feel grateful... does that mean I'm not really saved?*”

I'm still learning that even reaching for gratitude matters. It's quiet proof that I haven't let go.



## You wouldn't be the first person to wonder, "*How am I supposed to be grateful for this?*"

That moment stayed with me. It made me realize how easily we confuse real gratitude with forced cheerfulness or constant smiles. That's not what God expects of us, and it's certainly not how we know we belong to Him.

Gratitude matters, but it's not proof of salvation. It grows slowly, often right in the midst of weakness. And when it feels far away? God's promises remain the same. The moment we believed Jesus for eternal life, we were saved forever.

The Christian life isn't about pretending everything's fine. It's about learning to rest in His faithfulness, even when life feels shaky. It's about noticing His kindness in small, ordinary ways: the warmth of sunlight, the sound of rain, the quiet strength to face another day. And choosing to be thankful, not because everything feels easy, but because God is still near.

Thankfulness isn't a feeling we sit around waiting for. It's a quiet choice—sometimes a shaky one—that we make, even when life feels heavy (1 Thess 5:18). And somehow, those small, imperfect choices soften the edges of our hearts. They make space for gratitude to settle in, even when life hurts.

That shift has also changed how I talk to God. My prayers have become simpler. More honest. Some days, all I can say is, "Thank You for today." Other days, it's more like, "God, I don't understand... but I'm thankful You're still here."

The Psalms remind me that I'm not alone in this. David poured out his grief and questions with raw honesty, yet time and again, he returned to gratitude—not because life got easy, but because God never left.

The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit (Ps 34:18).

That verse has sustained me more times than I can count. And just to be clear: The word saves in the verse isn't talking about eternal salvation. We

always need to pause and ask, "Saved from what?" In the Bible, the word save often means that God steps in to help. Sometimes He rescues us physically. Sometimes He holds us together when life feels like it's falling apart.

In this verse, David is describing how God draws near to those who are hurting. How He steps in to strengthen and lift up those who feel crushed. It's about Gods stepping into the mess, not about securing eternal salvation. That, according to Scripture, comes only through believing in Jesus for everlasting life (John 3:16; 6:47).

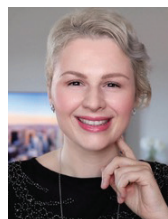
And the kind of rescue David describes? That nearness? I've needed it more than I ever expected. It hasn't taken away the grief or the questions. But it's changed the way I see the hard days.

It doesn't fix what's broken overnight. But gratitude has a quiet way of softening our hearts, of reminding us that God is still near. His love holds steady, even when life feels heavy. And His promise of eternal life? That never changes. It was never based on how grateful or strong we feel. It's all because of His grace.

I'm still learning that even reaching for gratitude matters. It's quiet proof that I haven't let go. I'm still holding on—even when it feels uncertain, even when it feels hard.

For a long time, I thought struggling meant I was doing something wrong. But I'm starting to see it differently. The hard days don't mean that God has abandoned me. They just remind me that I'm human—still walking, still learning, still His.

And maybe that's how gratitude grows—not all at once, but quietly, one small step at a time. ■



Georgiana is a content creator and podcaster who specializes in teaching English as a second language. She translates GES materials into Romanian. Based in Spain, she and her husband, Óscar Pellús—the Spanish-language translator for GES—take joy in making GES content accessible to an international audience.



# Do You Believe This?

By Zane C. Hodges

\*This article is drawn from Chapter 3 of the book *Absolutely Free*.

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

*She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (John 11:25-27).*

**L**et there be no mistaking that indeed we are talking about "believing facts." Jesus said, "Do you believe this?" And Martha replied, "I believe that You are..." John wants his readers to "believe that Jesus is..." The content of the faith under discussion is unmistakably factual.

But there is more than this to the exchange between Jesus and Martha. The facts the Lord pre-

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The truth that He  
is the Giver of  
eternal life to every  
believer—is  
saving truth.

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sented to her are more than just great facts. They are saving facts. That is, they are divinely revealed facts that are to be believed for salvation. Thus, Jesus' words to Martha are John's way of telling us what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Naturally, there are many people in the modern world who would claim to believe that Jesus is God's Son. To such people it goes almost without saying that He is also "the Christ." "After all," they might say, "isn't that His name?" But if they were asked whether Jesus guarantees resurrection and



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## If she was wrong about who He was, then her faith was sadly misplaced.

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eternal life to people on the simple basis of faith, their reply might very well be negative. “Of course not,” they might say. “You also have to live right to get eternal life!” And in so saying, they would plainly disclose that they did not believe what the Savior asked Martha to believe.

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### Jesus’ words to Martha are John’s way of telling us what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

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Not all facts about God are saving facts. To believe, for example, in the unity of God (that God is One) saves no one. Every orthodox Jew in the Roman world believed that. In fact, claims an opponent of James, so do the demons (Jas 2:19). To be sure, the unity of God is glorious Christian truth. But it does not contain within itself the truth of the gospel.

To believe that Jesus is the Christ—in John’s sense of that term—is to believe saving truth. It is, in fact, to believe the very truth that Martha of Bethany believed. To put it as simply as possible, Jesus was asking Martha whether she believed that He fully guaranteed the eternal destiny of every believer. That was the same as asking if this great truth applied to her as well! And Martha affirmed that it did by affirming her conviction about who He was. Therefore, by believing the amazing facts about the person of Christ, Martha was trusting Him. She was placing her eternal des-

tiny in His hands. If she was wrong about who He was, then her faith was sadly misplaced. But if she was right about this—and she was—then resurrection and eternal life were a certainty for her. She had Jesus’ own word on it.

Everything depended on the truth of what she believed. It was not at all a question of what kind of faith she had. She either believed this or she didn’t. It was as simple as that.

In the closing chapter of his first epistle, the Apostle John wrote as follows: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1). This is as plain as it could possibly be. It is also completely harmonious with what we have just seen in John’s Gospel. The truth that Jesus is the Christ—the truth that He is the Giver of eternal life to every believer—is saving truth. Belief in this truth produces immediate—and permanent—new birth. It follows, therefore, that there is no such thing as believing the saving message without simultaneously possessing eternal life. “Everyone ...”—not just some or many—“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” There are no exceptions at all. So states the Apostle. But the superb simplicity of all this is lost on many modern Evangelicals. Indeed, they are frightened by it, and they are tempted to evade it by invoking some special definition of *saving faith*. In the process, they cloud beyond hope the Biblical doctrine of faith and tragically distort the Biblical message of grace.

In fact, in a very real sense, they are trying to do God’s work for Him. Whenever we do that, it is always a serious mistake and most often it is also disastrous. In this case, it is certainly disastrous. ■



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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.



LEFT: The whole team

RIGHT: The church at Kakiri holding up their new bibles

# GES Missions: Triumph and Challenge in UGANDA

By Kathryn Wright

## INTRODUCTION

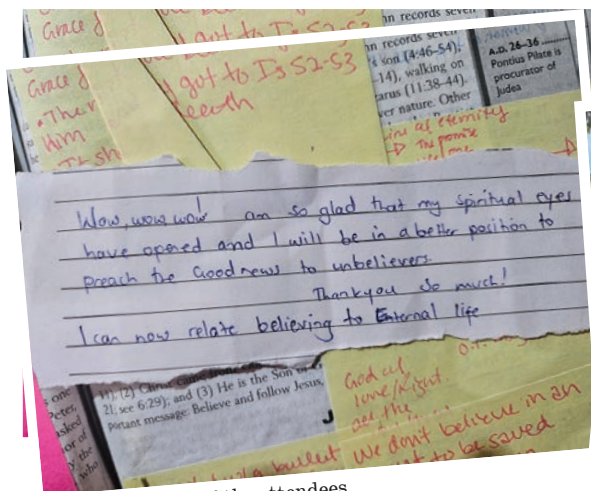
This past June, I had the privilege of traveling to Uganda with the Ritchie family on a mission trip. For many, overseas missions can seem distant or even intimidating, so I want to give you a glimpse of what it's like on the ground in Africa as well as what GES is doing overseas.

There are countless opportunities to share the message of eternal life with people in Africa, and these bring immeasurable joy! However, there are also many obstacles that any missionary must be prepared to face. In Uganda, we encountered everything from tribal traditions to Islamic influence and, most significantly, a corrupt and



Stacks of bibles that were given out to the churches





A note from one of the attendees



Ken being gifted a few GES books for further study



Brian holding up a gift box



Kathryn and the Ritchie family at the Worldwide Healing church in Kampala with Pastor Wisdom and his family



Kathryn, Carissa, and Keala with some of the GES resources that were handed out in Jinja

doctrinally dark church culture. Yet even amid that darkness, we saw the light of the message of grace going out to these churches.

## OUR TRIP AND LOGISTICS

I left for Uganda on June 17th and returned July 1st. The Ritchie's and I landed in Kampala, then made our way to Kakiri, where we held the first conference. In our second week, we moved to Jinja and held a pastors' conference, then concluded with a third conference in Kampala. At each stop, we partnered with local churches for conferences, Q&A sessions, and Sunday services. Our teaching focused on the gift of eternal life and the believer's eternal security. Brian and I taught through passages in John, including John 3 and Nicodemus, the woman at the well in John 4, the "never" statements in John, and the purpose of the book itself. We emphasized eternal life as a

free gift that can never be lost. Attendance was strong; our first day at Kakiri drew 100, but by the next day the crowd had doubled, including lots of children.

We also brought many resources: over 1,000 *Living Water* booklets, Bibles provided by the Ritchies' church, and Free Grace materials for pastors. Jennifer, Carissa, and Kaela ran VBS programs with local children, including several Muslim students. Along the way, we also shared the message of life in unexpected places, from a bakery staff who heard about the Bread of Life





Brian speaking to the university students on our last day

(John 6), to a regional bishop whose influence may open more doors for training in the future.

Two of our most important partners on this trip were Umar Mugabe and Ken Mingo, both native Ugandans we first met at a special-needs orphanage during our 2024 mission trip. After hearing the Free Grace message last year, they asked us to return and teach in their churches. Umar worked with his local church and pastor to host the first conference in Kakiri. At the same time, Ken

organized the pastors' conference in Jinja and later arranged our conference in Kampala, as well as a session with university students. Their efforts went far beyond logistics. They ensured that we were meeting with pastors who were genuinely hungry for truth, rather than those seeking hand-outs or exploiting foreign missionaries. From the very first day, Umar and Ken warned us about the corruption we would face among church leaders.



The Lord truly used these men to open the right doors.

## CULTURAL AND DOCTRINAL CHALLENGES

Uganda is a spiritually diverse country. There is a strong Islamic influence. During our stay in Kakiri, we were close to a mosque with a loudspeaker that filled the air with chants throughout the day and late into the night.

There are also ancestral beliefs. I got the opportunity to ask Umar and others about the Ugandans' tribal beliefs, which include many superstitions and rituals. At one point, we passed a funeral, and I asked about burial traditions. I found out that those who commit suicide are treated as cursed. Those who die without children are also treat-



Ken introducing the speakers at the third conference



Brian holding up a trophy

ed with disdain. For example, they are denied a front-door exit at the time of burial. These traditions have a strong hold within the churches and often play a role in Ugandans' understanding of doctrines, especially eternal security.

But the heaviest burden we encountered was within the churches themselves. Uganda is an honor culture, which is demonstrated by the way they view their leaders. Many pastors hold unchecked authority, declaring themselves prophets, apostles, or healers and demanding money from their people. They misuse Scripture to present themselves as untouchable and threaten hell for those who do not comply. Ironically, it was pastors who were our most significant obstacles.



Carissa, Kathryn, Jennifer, and Kaela

One heartbreaking example shared by Umar illustrates the corruption. The mother of a child with cerebral palsy sought healing from a pastor who claimed to have miraculous power. He charged her an outrageous fee, then rescheduled. When she returned, he demanded a second payment. After collecting her money, he never rescheduled again, and the child later died from complications. When I asked Umar if the mother ever got her money back, he laughed because in Uganda there is no recourse for such abuse. This is the kind of exploitation that devastates families and destroys trust.

Doctrinally, the churches in Uganda are largely Arminian. Charismatic practices are common, and a widespread lack of assurance is the norm.

One interesting thing I found out while there is that the phrase “born again” is simply a denominational label. While in the West it is common to understand that phrase as a reference to the new birth introduced in John 3, Ugandans simply use it to distinguish themselves from the Anglican or Catholic churches. This makes the term a large umbrella that covers many theological views but rarely includes those who hold to a form of eternal security. Most did not know the phrase’s connection to John 3, nor its Biblical significance. There was therefore a need for clarification, since we were using the same phrase, but with an entirely different meaning.

Worst of all, it became clear during our sessions with the pastors that American missionaries have compounded the problem by exporting confusion. Calvinism, with its version of the doctrine of election, has begun to infiltrate Ugandan churches. In every Q&A, issues of eternal security, faith, and works arose. Though there are many missionaries in the region, it was clear that there is a profound need for Free Grace teaching. These churches not only wrestle with cultural issues but also suffer from imported false teaching.

## TESTIMONIES AND FRUIT OF THE TRIP

Despite these obstacles, the fruit was undeniable. People often stayed long after sessions for extended Q&A, eager to learn more about eternal security. Over the course of the conferences, we



worked through parables such as The Four Soils, The Minas in Luke 19, and passages such as Mark 8 and 2 Tim 2:11–14, always circling back to the promises of John 3:16, 5:24, 6:47, etc. On the last day of our first conference, about thirty pastors and leaders gathered at the invitation of the host pastor. Because of cultural norms, Umar himself could not invite them. When they realized what they had missed earlier in the week, many were in tears. One pastor admitted, “We usually only teach judgment, but this is different.” Another said he wished we could stay for a month to teach them more.

One of the most impactful moments for me came during a Q&A. A man spoke up and said he finally understood that salvation doesn’t come by obeying or making Jesus Lord and Savior, but by believing in Him for eternal life. But then he asked if I could “lead him” into this belief. He was expecting an altar call, which is a common ritual in Ugandan churches. I explained that he didn’t need me or any pastor or ceremony, but that if he had believed, he already possessed eternal life. We discussed the example in Acts 10 of Cornelius and his household, who, while sitting and listening to Peter’s message, received the Spirit. The man wept as the truth sank in.

A Catholic woman then stood up and shared how different our approach was. She discussed how “born-again” pastors usually use altar calls to puff themselves up, and she had kept waiting for us to make them walk forward. The fact that we never did that surprised her, and she noted that our focus was solely on Christ and the gift of eternal life. While it was not done intentionally, Brian and I stood out because we didn’t have an altar call. That difference did not go unnoticed, and it convinced many people of the truth because we weren’t seeking anything from them.

Something unexpected happened at another point, during the closing of the conference. Our driver, John Fischer, who hadn’t spoken up much until then, stood up and explained The Four Soils to the pastors who had missed that teaching earlier in the week. He then gave the saving message with stunning clarity. While helping with the VBS, he heard the saving message from the

Ritchie girls and believed! Now he is taking classes through the GES Seminary along with Umar.

During the conferences, there were many questions. We discussed passages such as James 2, Romans 10, Ephesians 5, and the concept of “inheriting the kingdom.” When I explained the difference between entering and inheriting, the pastors audibly gasped, then broke into applause. Although some pastors and attendees did not return for the second day, the overall response was overwhelmingly positive.

## CONCLUSION AND THANKS

Though Uganda faces deep spiritual challenges, the opportunities for clarity are abundant. The confusion we witnessed underscored the fact that Free Grace teaching is urgently needed worldwide. We are deeply grateful for those who partner with Grace Evangelical Society. I want to personally thank the Ritchie family for their love for Uganda and their willingness to be fellow laborers. And to our readers and supporters, your prayers and gifts made it possible for us to bring the message of life to pastors, churches, and communities in Uganda. Thank you.

While overseas missions may seem intimidating, the reality is that their struggles are also our own. Free Grace is not the norm in the United States, either, and church leadership and corruption are just as real in the United States. We may not share all of Uganda’s cultural challenges, but the battle is the same everywhere: The truth of eternal life by faith alone in Jesus is under constant attack. Sadly, some of our greatest obstacles are also the leaders and teachers in our churches. Whether for a quiet driver in Uganda or a church-goer in America, the need for clarity is urgent and universal. The opportunity to bring light into confusion belongs to all of us, no matter where we live. ■



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



# The Essence of Worship

By Philippe Sterling

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God sought worshipers who would worship Him *in spirit and truth* (John 4:23-24). How can believers today express such worship?

The essence of worship is sacrifice. In the OT, worshipers offered up animals for the restoration of fellowship with God when that fellowship was affected by sin, and as an expression of gratitude for His benefits. Christ is the full and final sacrifice for sin, but believers today can offer up spiritual sacrifices of gratitude to God through Christ.

We should now offer up to God the spiritual sacrifices of ourselves, our substance, and our service.

## CHRIST OFFERED UP HIMSELF TO GOD AS A SACRIFICE FOR US

The foundation of worship is the sacrifice of Christ. He gave His life so that believers might become worshipers in spirit and truth.

The Apostle Paul compared the sacrifice of Christ on the cross to the “sweet savor” sacrifices

presented at the altar of the temple (Eph 5:1-2; Lev 1:9, 13, 17). The death of Christ satisfied the holiness of God and was acceptable and pleasing to the Father.

Jesus put away sin once and for all by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb 9:26). His offering was unlike those of OT worship; being eternally effective, it needed no repetition.

Because of His sacrifice, we can freely worship God. His sacrifice inspires our spiritual sacrifices.

## WE CAN NOW OFFER UP TO GOD SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES THROUGH CHRIST

We have been redeemed so that we may worship God and offer up spiritual sacrifices. Peter affirmed this when he wrote:

Coming to Him *as to* a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God *and* precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up *spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (1 Pet 2:4, emphasis added).

Through Christ, we have access to God as priests. A priest brings offerings to God. Our offerings are not animal sacrifices. They are spiritual



sacrifices. What are some of the spiritual offerings that we can offer as priests?

**We can offer the sacrifice of ourselves  
(Rom 12:1)**

The first spiritual sacrifice we can offer is the sacrifice of ourselves. In light of all that God has done in redeeming us, we can now offer ourselves as sacrifices to Him. The sacrifice of ourselves involves the surrender of our bodies. We yield the members of our bodies as “instruments of righteousness” (Rom 6:13).

**We can offer the sacrifice of our substance  
(Phil 4:18)**

The second spiritual sacrifice we can offer is the sacrifice of our substance. The Apostle Paul looked upon the financial gift of the Philippians as a spiritual sacrifice laid upon the altar to God (Phil 4:18-19). Paul did not look upon this gift as simply coming from them. He saw it as God’s provision, through them, of his need.

Paul went on to say that because of God’s meeting his need through them, He would also abundantly supply their need. This promise occurred in the context of the Philippians’ joint participation with Paul in the spread of the good news concerning Christ (Phil 1:3-7). It would be God’s response to the sacrificial giving of believers for the spreading of the life message and the making of disciples.

**We can offer the sacrifice of our service  
(Heb 13:15-16; Rom 15:16)**

The third spiritual sacrifice we can offer is that of our service. This sacrifice has a Godward aspect and a manward aspect.

The Godward aspect of our service is the sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15). Why is praise called a *sacrifice*? Because it is like the OT todah sacrifice (thank offering). Tanner writes concerning the sacrifice of praise in Heb 13:15:

So, to offer praise to God is to capture the heart of real sacrifice. The phrase **giving thanks to His name** is literally “confessing His name” (cf. 3:1; 4:14; 10:23). The first aspect of our “sacrifice

of praise” is the willingness to confess His name...openly to confess Jesus as Messiah and Savior (“Hebrews” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 1095).

A believer can offer thanks and praise to God in whatever circumstance he finds himself. Such a sacrifice of praise irrespective of circumstance is costly and valuable to God.

The manward aspect of our service is the sacrifice of doing good works and declaring the good news.

We can do good works, which the author of Hebrews mentioned immediately after the sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:16). Those works might include the hospitality mentioned in Heb 13:2 and the care of mistreated believers, as cited in Heb 13:3.

We can share the message of life and make disciples (Rom 15:16). Paul looked upon himself as a priest at the altar offering up to God the Gentiles he had introduced to Christ. They were a spiritual sacrifice to God. His sharing of the life message and the making of disciples was a priestly service.

## CONCLUSION

One of the great truths of the Bible is that every believer is a priest who can offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. We are all to be in priestly service because we have experienced the mercy of God in Christ. Considering the supreme sacrifice of our Savior, we should now offer up to God the spiritual sacrifices of ourselves, our substance, and our service. Our spiritual sacrifices will please God, enrich our lives, and benefit the Church. Because we have known the mercy of God in Christ, let us now bring spiritual sacrifices to God through 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 Difference Motives Make

By Ken Yates

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If we want to hear Him say, "Well done!"  
our motives must be good ones.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every believer will live in the kingdom forever. Our works will be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ to determine our rewards and the positions we will hold in the Lord's kingdom. But good works are not the only criteria. Paul says that our motives when doing those works will determine whether they will be rewarded (1 Cor 4:5).

Some might say that a good work is a good work, and that the motive for doing it is not a big deal. Arthur Nebe provides a graphic illustration of the importance of motive. Without considering his reasons for acting as he did in conspiring to kill Hitler, some would say he was a hero. However, when

those reasons are factored in, people conclude that he was a monster.

## WAS ARTHUR NEBE A HERO?

Towards the end of World War II, a large group within the Nazi military attempted to assassinate Adolf Hitler. These men were disgusted by what Hitler was doing to the Jews and to prisoners of war. They wanted to end the





war and the slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians that was happening every day.

The plot to kill Hitler failed. Hitler ruthlessly executed all involved. Leaders such as Stauffenberg, Tresckow, Olbricht, and Witzleben lost their lives. These men are universally considered heroes for their efforts and are honored as such, even in Germany.

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## Every believer should make motives a matter of prayer.

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Arthur Nebe belonged to that group of conspirators. He was to lead a group of twelve policemen to assassinate Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and the man most responsible for the killing of six million Jews. Poor communication prevented Nebe from carrying out his assignment. He fled and went into hiding. When he was found, Hitler hanged him with piano wire. For years, Nebe was regarded as a national hero and a friend of the Jewish people.

### TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

At the end of the war, Nebe appeared to be a brave humanitarian. But his earlier service in the German army paints a very different picture. He was in charge of a unit that killed Jews and other civilians. He reported that they had killed 45,000 and he seemed to relish his job.

Killing all these people with bullets proved more difficult than the Nazis had thought. It was slow, and the soldiers who shot women and children were experiencing some psychological issues. Nebe suggested quicker and more efficient methods. He experimented with explosives and poisonous gas. The executioners would not have to look their victims in the face.

What a contradiction! The man at the beginning of the war and the one at the end of it were opposites. How can this contradiction be explained?

His motives.

### NEBE'S MOTIVES

Some who plotted to kill Hitler knew of Nebe's earlier treatment of Jews and civilians. They excused his atrocious actions by saying that it was all an act. They maintained that Nebe was fooling the Nazi leadership. He wanted them to *think* he hated the Jews, when in reality, he loved them. He knew the Jews would need a man on the inside of German power to put an end to all the killing by assassinating Hitler. Nebe needed to gain the trust of Himmler and Hitler. In his job, he had to kill a few thousand to save millions. Saving the largest number of Jews possible was what motivated him. The enthusiasm he showed for killing children was nothing more than an act in an attempt to fool the Nazis.

I am way too cynical to believe that. The vast majority of historians agree with me. You must be blindly naïve to think that Nebe killed 45,000 people in hopes of eventually having an opportunity to kill Hitler.

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## You must be blindly naïve to think that Nebe killed 45,000 people in hopes of eventually having an opportunity to kill Hitler.

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Instead, Nebe came to realize that Germany was going to lose the war. He knew he would have to answer for his war crimes. If he helped kill Hitler and Himmler, the Allies would look upon him much more favorably. He could either argue that he had a change of heart or that he was previously pretending to be a dedicated Nazi while looking for a chance to put an end to the carnage.

Nebe lost his life because of his association with heroes like Stauffenberg and Tresckow. A few will say that his love for humanity motivated him

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# Some might say that a good work is a good work, and that the motive for doing it is not a big deal.

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and that his name belongs on the plaques placed around Berlin to remind people of what these men did. It is obvious, though, that he was, in reality, a monster motivated by careerism and opportunism.

Those motives will determine how we see the man hanging by piano wire.

## OUR MOTIVES

None of us will impact the lives of others by our actions as profoundly as Arthur Nebe did. But the value of our actions, like his, will be determined by our motives.

The Lord will look at *why* we did the things we did. As with Nebe, people may look at how we act and be impressed. If they knew our motives, however, they might not feel that way. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, He will know what those motives were.


As believers, we can appear to be doing what is holy and pleasing to the Lord, but that may not be the case. Maybe we are seeking the applause of men or the opportunity for a financially successful ministry. Like Nebe, we can be opportunists looking for what we want. Perhaps we are trying to impress someone we want to date. Many people within our churches perform good works to prove to themselves that they are children of God. They are denying the good news of eternal life through faith alone. There are thousands of motives that are not pleasing to the Lord, and the works that spring from such motives are not pleasing to Him, either.

Nebe knew his motives. Sometimes we, as well, know our motives. At times, they please the Lord, and at times they don't. We can have impure motives but convince ourselves that they are pure. Motives can be very tricky!

Every believer should make motives a matter of prayer. We should ask the Spirit who lives within



us to conform us to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Part of that transformation will be the Spirit's giving us godly motivations.

Nebe evidently fooled men such as Stauffenberg. We can fool others. We can't fool the King. If we want to hear Him say, "Well done!" our motives must be good ones. May the Lord guide us to be properly motivated and to aim to please Him in all we say and do. 



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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.



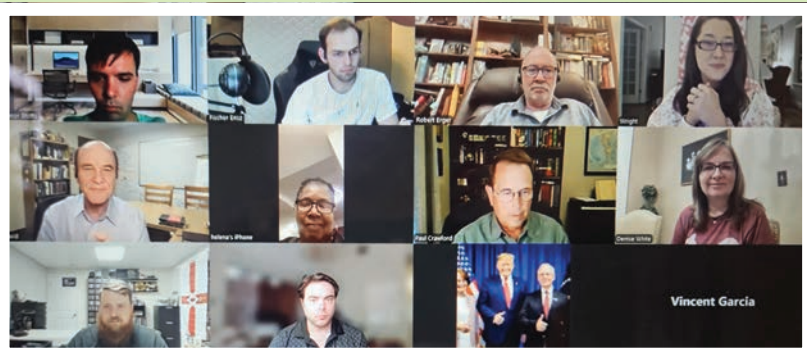
# More of WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?



All the board members and their spouses at Saltgrass Steak House after day one of the August board meeting



Board wives Mary, Rosy, Sharon, and Connie while spouses were meeting



Pastoral Ministry class discussion on Zoom



Berean Memorial Church

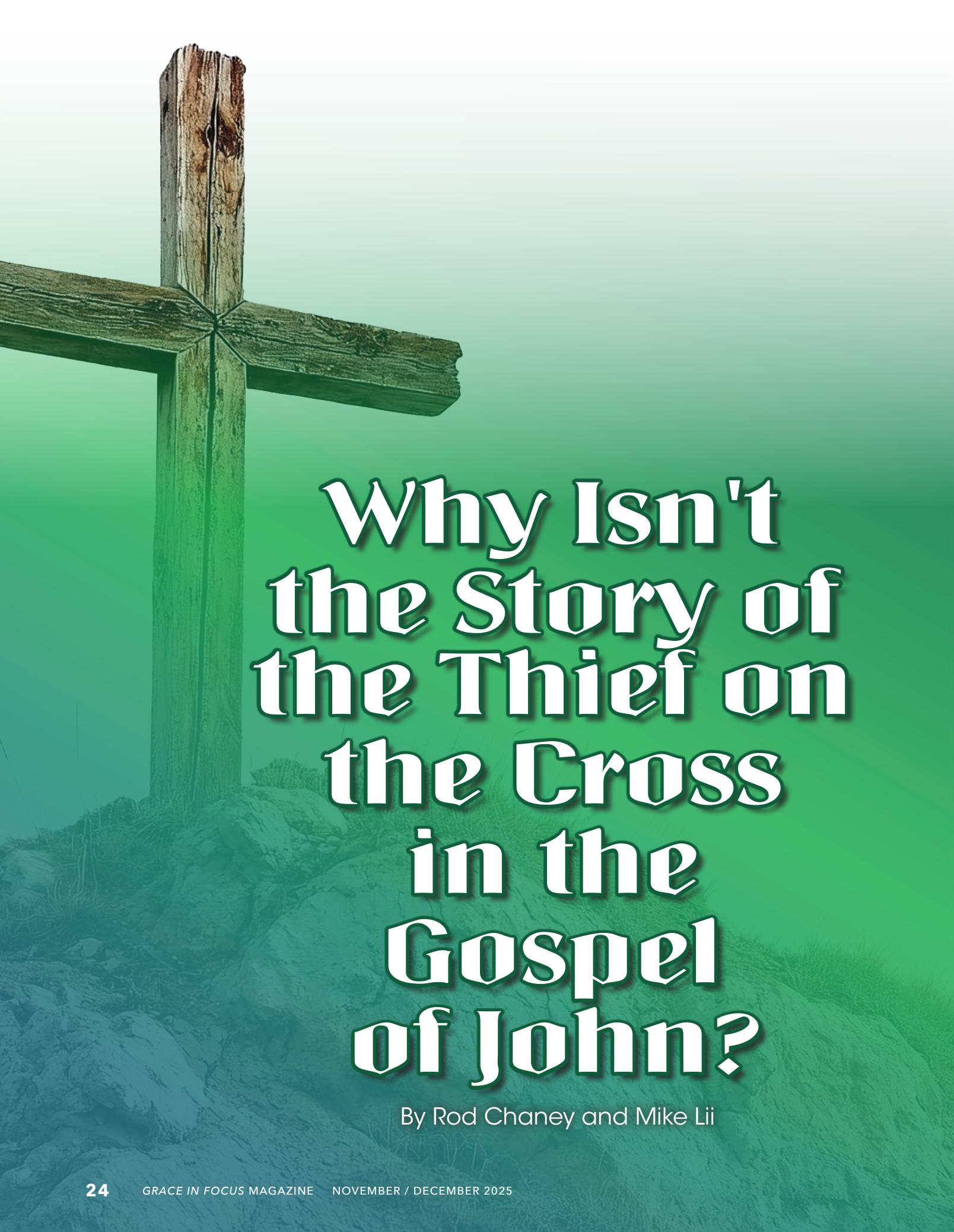


Bob & Sharon with Bob's sister Pam, nephew John, niece Michelle, great nephew Liam, and cousin Michael in So Cal (Aug 19-21)



Ken, Kathryn, and the PA Christian chiropractors' association outside the Sights and Sounds theater





# Why Isn't the Story of the Thief on the Cross in the Gospel of John?

By Rod Chaney and Mike Lii



## INTRODUCTION

Is there a perfect evangelistic book? Since the Bible is the only perfect book ever written, then logically, that is where we should look to find the perfect evangelistic book. Is there a book in the Bible specifically written to lead people to believe in Jesus for the absolutely free gift of everlasting life?

The answer is, yes. The Gospel of John is the perfect evangelistic book—the greatest evangelistic book ever written. How do we know that the Gospel of John is evangelistic? The Apostle John tells us that it is! John 20:30–31 states the specific purpose of John’s Gospel:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

The events in the Gospel of John were written to lead people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. By believing this saving truth, that Jesus is the Guarantor of everlasting life to every believer in Him (the meaning of “the Christ, the Son of God”), a person instantaneously receives everlasting life that can never be lost.<sup>i</sup>

Jesus’ conversation with the thief on the cross (hereafter, *the thief*), recorded in Luke 23:32–43, is popularly used to illustrate the truth that one does not need to be baptized or go to church in order to be saved. The thief is used to make the point that salvation is not by works, but by faith alone. However, is it true that the thief was devoid of good works? Is Jesus promising the thief nothing more than entrance into His kingdom, or is He promising something even greater?<sup>ii</sup>

Though many preachers and teachers use the story of the thief when they evangelize, it is sig-

nificant that the Gospel of John omits the story, other than mentioning that Jesus was crucified between *two others* (John 19:18). All four Gospels include the two thieves in the crucifixion account (Matt 27:38; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:33; John 19:18), but John’s Gospel gives them the least attention. If Jesus’ interchange with the thief is such a powerful evangelistic tool, why did John omit this dialogue from his Gospel? If the thief is an

example of conversion through faith in Jesus for everlasting life, why did John not say more about this incident? Do the preachers and teachers who use the story of the thief in their evangelistic presentations know something the Apostle John did not?

The thief would not only be in Paradise, but he would be with Jesus in a position of closeness.

## ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE

Sometimes, the absence of evidence is crucial for proper understanding and interpretation. In Conan Doyle’s mystery, *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*, a watchdog—contrary to the typical behavior of watchdogs—did not bark at the yet-to-be-identified thief. The absence of the dog barking is crucial in leading Sherlock Holmes to deduce that the thief was no stranger to the dog. The absence of *repentance* in the Gospel of John is crucial to our understanding that in order to receive the gift of everlasting life, one need only believe in Jesus for it.<sup>iii</sup> Why are the thief’s words absent from the Gospel of John, but included in the Gospel of Luke? How does this impact our understanding of the dialogue between Jesus and the thief?

## PROBLEMS WITH EVANGELISTIC USE OF THE THIEF ON THE CROSS<sup>iv</sup>

There are several problems with using this incident in evangelism. Luke’s record of the interchange between the thief and the Lord Jesus (23:32–43) never mentions *faith*, *believe*, *belief*, *everlasting life*, or *life*. Furthermore, the notion that the thief lacked good works is untrue. The thief confessed Jesus as Lord and publicly acknowledged His coming kingdom, even when some of Jesus’ closest disciples had aban-

doned Him. In the presence of extreme hostility, the thief gave a powerful vocal testimony to the innocence as well as the true identity and position of Jesus. Confessing Christ, especially when others are silent because of fear, is a good work.<sup>v</sup> As the Gospel of John makes abundantly clear, we receive everlasting life by believing in Jesus for it (John 3:16, 5:24, 6:47 and 11:25-27), not by confessing Him or asking Him for everlasting life.

### WOULD THE APOSTLE JOHN HAVE KNOWN ABOUT JESUS' CONVERSATION WITH THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?

One might argue that John failed to include this dialogue in his Gospel simply because he was not present when it took place. However, John 19:26–27 gives evidence that John was, in fact, present:

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!”

The “disciple whom He loved” is understood to be the Apostle John, author of the Gospel of John. The Apostle John did not abandon Jesus while He was on the cross. John was there with Jesus’ mother. Given the proximity needed in order to hear Jesus’ words to His mother and to him, John, in all likelihood, also heard the conversation between Jesus and the thief. Therefore, instead of omitting the dialogue with the thief out of ignorance, John’s omission of the conversation was purposeful.

Where did Luke get his information regarding the conversation between the thieves and Jesus? While there is no evidence that Luke was an eyewitness to the Crucifixion, his Gospel was based

on eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:2). Who provided Luke with the account of the dialogue with the thief? The account must have come from someone whom Luke considered authoritative and who was close enough to the cross to have heard the interchange. John seems the most likely candidate. He was near enough to take the charge from Jesus to care for His mother, and, as one of the Eleven, would have had gravitas that Luke would consider authoritative.

### PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN VERSUS THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The purpose of the Gospel of John is evangelism. By the time the thief asked, “Lord, remember me *when You come into Your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42), he already knew he had everlasting life and would be with Jesus in His kingdom. He had come to believe that Jesus is the Christ—a belief also evidenced earlier when he rebuked

his fellow thief for blaspheming Jesus regarding His identity as the Christ (Luke 23:39-41).<sup>vi</sup> We do not know how much earlier the thief believed in Jesus, but by the time of his rebuke of the other thief, he believed. Jesus did not promise the thief eternal life; the thief already knew he had that.

Jesus did not  
promise the thief  
eternal life; the thief  
already knew  
he had that.

Instead, Jesus promised the thief closeness to Him that very day: “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The thief would not only be in Paradise, but he would be *with Jesus* in a position of closeness.

Jesus granted the thief’s request: “Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). The thief asked Jesus to remember him for his good work, just as Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember him for his good deed of interpreting the man’s dream (Genesis 40:14). The thief’s public confession of Jesus and subsequent request for the eternal reward of ruling and reigning in His kingdom (Luke 23:39-42) was granted, and the thief’s



experience of eternal reward began that very day (Luke 23:43).

Although this interchange could be misunderstood as an evangelistic encounter, the Apostle John had no such misunderstanding. John knew what the thief was asking for and what Jesus promised to give him. The men chosen by God to be the authors of Scripture recorded absolute truth under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They would never have misrepresented an event or conversation in a misguided effort to teach a doctrinal truth.

In the Gospel of Luke, discipleship/eternal rewards is a constant theme. Luke includes a number of Jesus' parables (e.g. Luke 8:4-15, 12:13-21, 19:11-27) and teachings on the cost of discipleship and the receipt of eternal rewards (Luke 9:23-26). Luke's Gospel includes Jesus' dialogue with the thief because the truths of this encounter fit the theme of following and confessing Jesus in discipleship and the subsequent receipt of eternal rewards in the kingdom. We know that Luke's audience had been sitting under Christian instruction (Luke 1:4). His audience, therefore, consisted of believers who were already clear on the truth that eternal life is an absolutely free gift received through faith in Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

Almost 2,000 years later, many misuse Luke's narrative of the thief on the cross as one of the clearest examples of *faith alone in Christ alone* as the way to receive everlasting life. These same people would never tell someone to be saved by "asking Jesus to remember them." By misusing the example of the thief, misguided evangelists eclipse most of the Gospel of John's solid teaching about receiving everlasting life. While John almost certainly heard Jesus' interchange with the thief, he chose not to include it in his perfect evangelistic book. It seems likely that John thought including this account would confuse, rather than clarify, how one obtains eternal life.

In the presence of extreme hostility—hostility that he had at first been a part of—the thief gave a powerful vocal testimony to Jesus' innocence and true identity. Jesus promised the thief that

he would have not only the gift of everlasting life, but also the honor of being remembered by Jesus and being with Him, in His entourage, when He entered Paradise that very day. Furthermore, the thief is, to this day, remembered in Scripture—and therefore by countless millions—because of his public confession. Let us use the narrative of the thief on the cross in the way Luke intended: to teach discipleship and eternal rewards. Let us avoid using it in a way it was never intended: to teach one how to receive eternal life. ■



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After graduating from Dallas Theological Seminary over 35 years ago, Rod and his wife Gayle moved to North Carolina with a desire to cultivate a faith community. In 1989, he planted Sunrise Church and has been the pastor ever since. He and Gayle have five children.



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Mike Lii is a finance attorney. He and his wife, Letitia, a member of the GES board, live in Dallas. Their son, Payton, is a medical student at UT Rio Grande Valley. Mike and Letitia run the Zane Hodges Library online ([zanehodges.org](http://zanehodges.org)).

<sup>i</sup> See John 11:25-27 for the meaning of the "Christ, the Son of God".

<sup>ii</sup> Editor's note: Of course, the kingdom will not come until after the Tribulation. But the thief was *with Jesus* in Paradise, the good part of Hades (Luke 16:19-31), *that very day*, before sundown. And he was guaranteed, as all believers are, that when Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom, he will be in the kingdom. And because he confessed Christ at the cross until he died, he will also rule with Christ in the kingdom (Matt 10:32-33; 2 Tim 2:12).

<sup>iii</sup> See YouTube video, *Repentance Unfound in John: Direct Evidence*, by John Niemelä. <https://youtu.be/flvsQ38ShxU>

<sup>iv</sup> For a more complete discussion of problems with using the narrative of the thief on the cross evangelistically, see YouTube video, *Asking Is Not Believing: The Thief on the Cross Asked for Eternal Reward Not Salvation*, by Mike Lii. <https://youtu.be/9qtQrhd5Xa4>

<sup>v</sup> Even Roman Catholic apologists cite the thief on the cross as an example of good works being performed for salvation. See YouTube video, *Catholic View of the Thief on the Cross on Salvation and Discipleship*, by Bob Wilkin. <https://youtu.be/YpVkg54RzsQ>

<sup>vi</sup> At the start of their time on the cross, both thieves were mocking Jesus and denying that He was the Christ (Mark 15:32, Matt 27:44). Something happened during the thief's time on the cross to move him from unbelief to belief.

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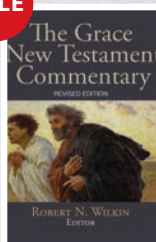
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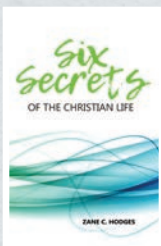


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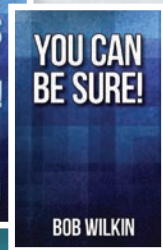
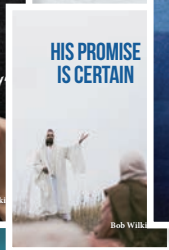
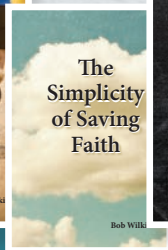
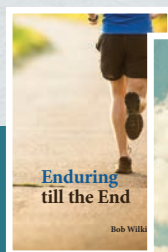


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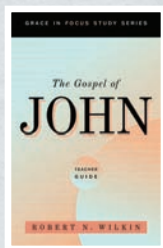
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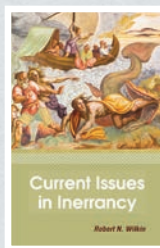
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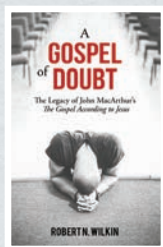
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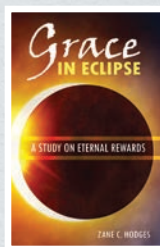
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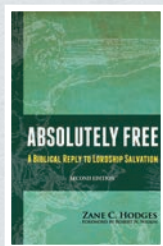
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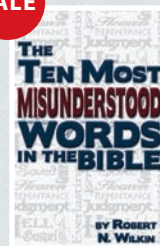
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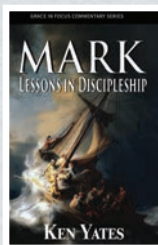




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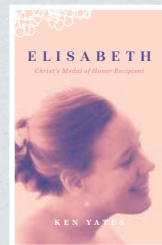


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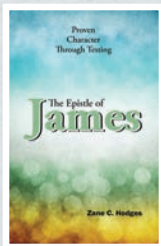


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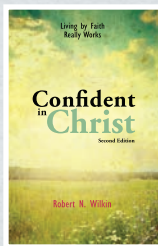


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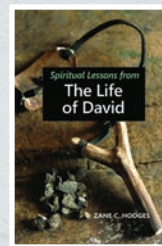


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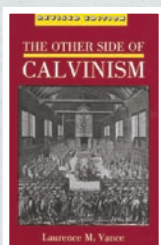


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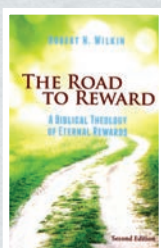


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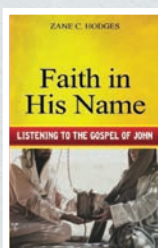


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We would like to introduce Don Reiher, our new Head Administrator of the GES Seminary. Don lives in Aston, PA with his wife, Kim. He retired from a Cyber Charter school that he helped start 18 years ago (*PA Leadership Charter School*), where his two sons are presently employed. Don is a graduate of Moody Bible Institute (*Diploma 1982*), Washington Bible College (*BA 1984*), Capital Bible Seminary (*MDiv 1986*), and Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, (*ThM 1991*). Don's articles have been published in the GES journal and Grace in Focus. For 18 years he has been involved with various aspects of the live streaming, recording and publishing of GES audio & video materials. We are looking forward to the leadership he will provide, and we are so thankful for all of our donors who allow us to expand our team.

# Does the Bible Really Mean What It Says!

By Hershall (Wes) Spradley

\* "With a heart anchored in faith and a life devoted to service, Hershall Wesley "Wes" Spradley, II, entered his heavenly home on August 23, 2025, at the age of 79. Born in Fort Worth, Texas, on September 14, 1945, Wes was the son of Dollie Blanche and Hershall Wesley Spradley, and brother to Clarcee Mahan—all of whom preceded him in death" (Harrell Funeral Homes website).

*Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed [episteusan] in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit [episteuen] Himself to them, because He knew all men (John 2:23-24).*

A few years ago, one of the teachers of the Sunday School class I attend began his class with this Scripture. Almost immediately a woman sitting toward the back of the class said—in a stage whisper loud enough to be heard by most of the thirty to forty people present—"Yes, but did they really believe?"

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## They are teaching us mere mortals that we cannot trust the Word of God to mean what it says.

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Christian teachers have, no doubt unwittingly, taught us to question the truthfulness of God's Word. We have been taught to doubt that God's Word means what it says.

Let me give you a few examples. Alvah Hovey, in an 1885 commentary on the Gospel of John, wrote that John 2:24 "affords proof...that the Evangelist did not mean to ascribe saving faith



to the **many** spoken of in verse 23" (p. 93). Verse 24 is, Hovey said, the evidence that though they believed, their faith was not "saving faith," and they were therefore not saved. He wrote: "Their faith was mere belief on the ground of evidence, implying no radical change of character" (p. 93). According to Hovey, there was something deficient in the faith of those John mentions in verse 23. But Hovey, like too many others, was confusing things that differ. A "radical change of character" is a part of the discipleship process. Therefore, though the verse says that "many believed in His name," and though the wording of 2:23 is identical to the wording of John 1:12, their faith, according to Hovey, was not saving faith. Hovey thereby planted the seed of doubt in our minds: God's Word does not actually mean what it says.

A second example of a writer's failing to distinguish things that differ comes from Ed Blum in his commentary on the Gospel of John in the DTS *Bible Knowledge Commentary*. He writes regarding verse 23: "The effect of these miracles...was to elicit faith on the part of many people. They believed in His name, that is, they trusted in Him. This was not necessarily saving faith as the next verse implies...Jesus knew that a temporary excitement or a faith based on signs was not sufficient"<sup>i</sup> (p. 280).

It is presumptuous to claim to know what was in John's mind since the Scripture gives us no indication that John had in mind anything other than exactly what he said.

Blum calls the peoples' response a "temporary excitement," but this idea is found nowhere in the passage. The Scripture plainly calls the response *belief*.<sup>ii</sup>



Blum writes: “Until His death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the foundation for faith was not fully laid” (p. 280). That statement suggests that there was something deficient about the faith of all the people of God prior to the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

One further example should be cited. F. F. Bruce, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, wrote regarding these verses: “There are two levels of believing in Jesus’s name—that spoken of in John 1:12, which carried with it the authority to become God’s children, and that spoken of here” (p. 78).

Though the language of John 2:23 is identical to the language of John 1:12, Bruce said that those in 2:23 who believed were only “superficially impressed because they saw the bare signs” (p. 77). In other words, there was something deficient in their faith.

With virtually no textual support, Bruce, Blum, and Hovey conclude that in verse 23, the faith of those who believed was not saving faith. All three indicate that a faith based on signs is deficient.

In other words, these three commentators say that those in verse 23 did not *really* believe.

Have they not put themselves in the rather awkward position of disagreeing with God? Are they not calling God a liar?

These three writers illustrate the all-too-common phenomenon of teachers saying that what the Scripture calls *faith* is deficient in some way. Hovey wrote that the faith of those who saw Jesus perform signs “was *mere* belief on the ground of evidence.” Blum, appealing to special knowledge of what John (and Jesus) knew—a special knowledge that he does not possess—writes that though many people who were in Jerusalem for the Passover believed in Jesus’ name, their belief was not genuine and thus not salvific. Bruce even writes that what the Scripture calls *faith* in John 2:23 was deficient and “superficial” because it lacked commitment.

What are these evangelical teachers doing? What are they teaching us? They are teaching us mere mortals that we cannot trust the Word of God to mean what it says. Rather, in order to under-

stand what the Bible is saying, we’ll have to read their commentaries.

What happened? These writers rightly felt a tension between John 2:23 and John 2:24. The people at the Passover believed in Jesus’s name, but He did not believe in (entrust Himself to) them. Rightly, we want to know how to resolve the tension between the two verses. So did Hovey, Blum, and Bruce. However, they erred in their methodology. Assuming that they knew what verse 24 meant, they started there, then went back to verse 23 and explained it in light of the way they understood verse 24. In doing so, they made verse 23 mean the opposite of what it plainly says. A second mistake is that they attempted to interpret a very clear verse in light of their interpretation of a difficult verse.

The Bible, especially the Gospel of John, has much to say about our believing in Jesus. It does not have much to say about Jesus’ believing in (entrusting Himself to) us.<sup>iii</sup>



Wes had a BS from UT Arlington, Th.M. from DTS, and MLitt from UTSA. His love of language carried him through a lifelong journey of study. After the passing of his beloved wife, Donnie, in 2014, Wes continued their shared call to ministry, traveling to South Africa where he taught the Gospel of John at Union Bible Institute, and nurturing local Bible study groups in San Antonio.

<sup>i</sup> Note that Blum feels the tension between verse 23 and verse 24 as did Hovey, but the explanation of that tension is found in the distinction between salvation and discipleship, not in redefining faith.

<sup>ii</sup> Editor’s note: Dr. Blum also calls the faith of the people of verse 23 “a faith based on signs.” Yet the reason why Jesus did signs and why John recorded the signs was to lead people to believe in Him (John 20:30-31). John indicated that there is nothing wrong with faith in Christ which results from people seeing signs.

<sup>iii</sup> Editor’s note: John 2:23 is the only place in John’s Gospel where the Lord Jesus is the subject of the verb *pisteuō*. *Pisteuō* occurs 246 times in the NT and 100 times in John’s Gospel. It is translated as *believe* in all but eight of those uses. In those eight verses it is translated as *entrust* (or *commit*). John 2:24 says that Jesus did not *entrust* Himself to them, that is, He did not give them further instruction. Paul says that Christ *entrusted* him with a stewardship (1 Cor 9:17), with the gospel (Gal 2:7; 1 Thess 2:4; 1 Tim 2:11), and with preaching His word (Titus 1:3). The Lord Jesus said that God will *entrust* believers with true riches if we are faithful with unrighteous mammon (Luke 16:11). Paul said that God *entrusted* His oracles to the Jewish people (Rom 3:2).



# The Essential Condition of Saving Belief

By Hayden Bray

Recently I have been trying to better understand the viewpoints of grace people who oppose the Focused Free Grace position. I have been reading the material of, and sometimes interacting with, a couple of these individuals in an online Free Grace discussion group. These men were once bona fide, card-carrying members of GES. Now they disagree. They are not united in their understanding of what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ. However, they are united in their contention that one need not believe in Jesus Christ *for* anything, much less His promise of everlasting life. I have found our interactions unconvincing. However, the experience has prompted me to better refine my own understanding of what I believe and why.

We should be careful to follow the pattern of evangelism that is set for us by Jesus, the perfect Evangelist.

What distinguishes Free Grace theology from other Christian schools of theological thought is the belief (1) that everlasting life is a free gift that cannot be lost, received by belief alone in Jesus Christ alone for that life, apart from works of any kind (e.g., repentance [turning] from sin), (2)

that assurance of salvation is based upon Jesus' promise to the believer and not upon the believer's works, behaviour, or experiences, and (3) that believers are accountable before God for the way they spend their lives and will receive rewards or shame at the Judgement Seat of Christ and blessings or chastisement in this current life.

However, there is a debate within the broader Free Grace movement over the content one must necessarily believe in order to be born again. On one end of the spectrum it is argued that an individual need not believe in



## As Biblicists, we must yield to what Scripture, properly understood, teaches us on the subject.

Jesus Christ for anything at all. On the other end, one must believe in Jesus for something other than everlasting life (initial forgiveness, initial salvation, initial justification), and one must believe a shopping list of essential truths. The Focused Free Grace position is that it is essential that one believe in Jesus Christ *for* His promise of everlasting life.

As Biblicists, we must yield to what Scripture, properly understood, teaches us on the subject. When it comes to soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, it is prudent to go to the only book of the Bible specifically written to save unbelievers. The purpose statement of John's Gospel tells us that John's reason for recording Jesus' ministry and teachings is to persuade the unbelieving reader to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing (that Jesus is the Christ), the reader will have everlasting life in His name (John 20:30-31). This raises the question: What does it mean to believe that Jesus is the Christ? Fortunately, Jesus gives us the exact definition in John 11:25-27:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, **he shall live**. And whoever lives and believes in Me **shall never die**. **Do you believe this?**"

She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, **I have come to believe that You are the Christ**, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (NASB, emphasis mine).

The Christ is the One who guarantees everlasting life to whoever believes in Him. Therefore, to believe that Jesus is the Christ is to believe in Him for everlasting life and to be assured that you possess the life that Jesus promises believers.

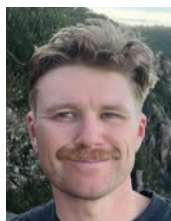
The Gospel of John is abundantly clear that the individual who believes in the Gift-Giver *for* the gift, that is, in Jesus Christ *for* everlasting life, has that life as a present possession that can never be

lost (John 4:10; see also John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47). It is foreign to John's Gospel that one must understand substitutionary atonement or believe a list of historical facts (cf. 1 Cor 15:1-11) to receive the gift.<sup>i</sup>

The motivation to broaden or dilute the content that must be believed in order to be born again is well-meaning. For if the Focused Free Grace position is correct, which it is, most confessing Christians (including Catholics, Orthodox, many Protestants, and the Cults) presently lack assurance of everlasting life and therefore are not currently believing that Jesus is the Christ. If they have never had assurance of everlasting life in Jesus, then, sadly, they have never been born again. This should come as no surprise, for Jesus said, "...narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life and there are few who find it" (Matt 7:14). Most people, even in Christianity, find it difficult to believe that God's incredible gift to humanity is absolutely free and that the only way to obtain it is to simply take Jesus at His word.

We, as grace believers, should be careful to follow the pattern of evangelism that is set for us by Jesus, the perfect Evangelist. We must take care not to come up with our own formulas and verbiage, lest our message differ from His.

Do you, reader, believe that Jesus is the Christ? That is, are you persuaded that whoever believes in Jesus for everlasting life has that life, which can never end and can never be lost? If you do, then, like Martha, you have the joy of knowing that you have His life now and forever. I've found that knowledge to be highly encouraging and motivating. ■■



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# How Can You Lay Hold on **Eternal Life?**

1 Timothy 6:12

By Bob Wilkin



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# We are in great danger of being so earthly minded that we will be of no heavenly good

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In 1 Timothy 6:12 Paul charged Timothy with these words:

Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Timothy, like all believers, already had everlasting life (1 Tim 1:2, “my true son in the faith,” and 1 Tim 6:11, “But you, O man of God”; see also 1 Cor 4:17; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 3:2; 2 Tim 1:2). So why would Paul command Timothy to lay hold on everlasting life? And what would that even mean?

Paul was calling upon him to *grasp the potential fullness of eternal life* that is possible. Compare verse 19, where Timothy was instructed to tell rich believers to “[store] up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.” The *good foundation for the time to come* refers to an abundant eternal experience.

This teaching came from the Lord Himself. He said,

“Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” (Luke 16:11).

Dollars, pesos, yen, euros, dinars, yuan, rubles, and rands are all *unrighteous mammon*. They are not *true riches*. Those riches will be given out at the Judgment Seat of Christ (cf. Matt 6:19–21).

We must cling to the promise of eternal rewards if we want to receive true riches.

In their commentary on Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, Arichea and Hatton write:

Winning the contest is described in terms of “taking hold” of the reward that is eternal life (for which see 1:16). The picture here is that of the victor in a contest who is handed the champion’s trophy. To take hold of eternal life may simply be one way of saying “win eternal life as the prize of your victory” (p. 154).

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## Perseverance is required to reap everlasting life as a reward.

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I do not know whether they understand the reward to be abundance of life forever or simply being in the kingdom forever. But the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul clearly believed that the present possession of everlasting life is simply

and solely by faith in Christ for everlasting life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25–27; Eph 2:8–9; 1 Tim 1:16) *and* that fullness of eternal life is a reward (Matt 16:24–27; 19:29; Luke 19:16–26; Gal 6:7–9; 2 Tim 2:12; 4:6–8).

Litfin comments:

Timothy was to give his best effort to this most worthwhile of struggles, the struggle to further the faith. This would involve the complete appropriation (cf. “take hold” in v. 19) at all times of the fact that he possessed eternal life. (Paul’s words, Take hold of...eternal life in no way suggest that Timothy could gain eternal life by his own efforts)

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## Zane Hodges said it must be borne in mind that eternal life in Scripture is presented both as a gift and as a prize

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(“1 Timothy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 747).<sup>i</sup>

Larson’s comment is helpful as well:

The eternal life which believers enter is not simply a future hope; it is also a present reality. We take hold of this eternal life when we live in the power and values of God’s eternal kingdom. We will not experience the fullness of Christ’s dominion until the future when he reigns over all the earth. But the eternal kind of life is still accessible at the present time. We touch upon it when we order our daily lives in harmony with God and his Spirit (*1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, & Philemon*, p. 247).

In his unpublished class notes on 1-2 Timothy—which we hope to publish in the next year—Zane Hodges said this about 1 Tim 6:12:

It must be borne in mind that eternal life in Scripture is presented both as a gift and as a prize (Mark 10:29-30; Luke 18:29-30). Eternal life is by no means a static item, but an expanding and enlarging experience throughout eternity itself. Christ came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly (John 10:10). As a gift, life eternal may be had, but it may only be had more abundantly as a prize.

Note that **fight** (*agōnizōu*) is present tense, while **take hold** (*epilabou*) is aorist tense. A lifetime of conflict secures a single momentous result: a real and firm grip on the experience of life eternal. All Christians possess eternal life, but only the victorious seize it!

This is one of a handful of passages that specifically mention the expression *everlasting life* (or *eternal life*)<sup>ii</sup> as a possible future reward for perseverance in faithful service. For example, the Lord Jesus told Peter and the other disciples:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:29).

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. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart (Gal 6:7–9).

Notice that perseverance is required (“we shall reap if we do not lose heart”) to reap everlasting life as a reward.<sup>iii</sup>

How full our experience of eternal life is now and will be forever is conditioned upon our laying hold on eternal life, which means living in a manner consistent with the values of the life to come (1 Tim 6:19).

I’ve never quite understood the saying, attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and later popularized by Johnny Cash in the song *No Earthly Good*: “He’s so heavenly minded, he’s no earthly good.” The reality, according to the Lord Jesus Himself, is just the opposite. We are in great danger of being so earthly minded that we will be of no heavenly good:






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## Why would Paul command Timothy to *lay hold* on everlasting life?

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“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 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).

Lay hold on eternal life by keeping grace in focus. ■




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<sup>i</sup>While I understand Litfin’s desire to defend the message of John 3:16, Paul’s words in 1 Tim 6:12 do suggest that Timothy could gain eternal life by his efforts, but not in the sense of the mere possession of that life. Paul was speaking of the need to take hold of eternal life in order to have it more abundantly.

<sup>ii</sup>The Greek is the same in both cases. For some reasons the NKJV and other translations sometimes translate *zōēn aiōnion* as *everlasting life* and sometimes as *eternal life*.

<sup>iii</sup>I recommend when you teach Gal 6:7-9 you compare it to Eph 2:8-9 and similar faith-alone verses (e.g., John 3:16; 5:39-40; 6:28-29; Rom 4:4-5; Rev 22:17). Sowing and reaping are not *faith-alone* apart from works language. Ask any farmer!



# How Do We Know that James Wrote Exclusively to Believers?

By David Wyant

**T**he accuracy of the interpretation of any Biblical text is greatly increased by the correct identification of the author's audience. Misrepresentation of the author's audience virtually guarantees the misinterpretation of his text because the author's audience influences his purpose for writing. The characterization of the spiritual status of the recipients of the Epistle of James has major implications for its interpretation. Determining whether James wrote to an audience that consisted exclusively of

believers or to a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers is a crucial interpretive decision. This article will argue that the titles James used to address his audience, particularly the epithet "brethren," indicate that his readership consisted exclusively of born-again believers.

One of the major problems with contemporary popular and scholarly interpretations of the Epistle of James is the misrepresentation of James's



## MacArthur outlines the Book of James "around a series of tests by which the genuineness of a person's faith may be measured."

audience as a mixed multitude of regenerate and unregenerate people. Princeton Theological Seminary professor Dale C. Allison Jr. claims "James does not speak to an exclusively Christian audience."<sup>vi</sup> His view is that the epistle was written to a spiritually mixed audience comprising those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah and those who did not. This conclusion opens the door to an interpretation of James that views it as a collection of tests of salvation.

This is exactly what popular pastor John MacArthur does by outlining the Book of James "around a series of tests by which the genuineness of a person's faith may be measured".<sup>ii</sup> According to MacArthur, the Book of James contains twelve tests that determine whether a professing Christian has genuine saving faith or is a false convert. The members of James's audience must examine themselves against the bar of these twelve tests of saving faith in order to determine whether their conversion was genuine. Despite MacArthur's explicit statement in the introduction to his commentary that James was written to Jewish believers, he makes several statements in the main body of his commentary that clearly accuse members of James's audience of being false converts.<sup>iii</sup>

However, Zane Hodges counterclaims that James was written to an audience consisting exclusively of born-again believers. He rejects both the notion that James wrote to question the authenticity of his readers' conversions and the accusation that those who fail these highly subjective tests are unbelievers. He acknowledges the significance of correctly characterizing the spiritual status of James's audience as born-again believers:

Even a superficial reading of James 1:2-18 shows that the author regards his readers as Christians. It may be said

that nowhere in the letter—not even in 2:14-26!—does he betray the slightest doubt that those in his audience are truly his brothers and sisters in the Lord. If we do not observe this simple and obvious fact, we may fall into a quagmire of skewed interpretations, just as so many expositors of James have actually done.<sup>iv</sup>

There are various ways to substantiate Hodges's view that James wrote exclusively to believers. One method of demonstrating the truth of this important conclusion is by examining the titles that James himself used to describe his readers.

After the letter's salutation, James began the body of his letter by affectionately addressing his audience as "My brethren" (James 1:2, NKJV). The Greek word *adelphos*, meaning "brother," conveys a close, familial relationship. Within the five chapters of his letter, James used this term of endearment a grand total of nineteen times to describe his readership (1:2, 9, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14, 15; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). Reading each and every one of these nineteen references reveals the significance of this word in James. In the first occurrence of the term "brethren" (1:2), he prefaced it with the first-person possessive personal pronoun "my." James used this expanded epithet "my brethren" five times in four of the five chapters of his letter (1:2; 2:14; 3:1; 3:12; 5:12). To this expanded epithet, James appended another appellation, "beloved", identifying the recipients of his letter as "my beloved brethren" three times (1:16, 19; 2:5). James addressed his audience as "brethren," "my brethren," and "my beloved brethren" to affectionately and definitively identify himself with his audience. James addressed his readers as brethren because they shared a common spiritual identity that united them as a family.

# Zane Hodges counterclaims that James was written to an audience consisting exclusively of born-again believers.

James identified their common spiritual identity in 1:1,8 “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” The English clause “He brought us forth” translates the Greek word *apokueō*, which means “to give birth to.” This is the language of regeneration (John 3:3). James believed that Jesus was the Messiah, placing him in the family of God as a child of God (John 1:12-13). In James 1:18, James affirmed that his readers were also children of God in the family of God by using the first-person plural personal pronouns us and we. These plural pronouns convey the fact that James knew that his readers had also believed that Jesus was the Messiah and had, in fact, been born again (John 3:3,16). Since they were members of the same spiritual family, James referred to them as brothers. In other words, James wrote exclusively to those who were born-again believers.

James used the phrase “my brethren” in a verse that clearly indicates that his readers were regenerate. He implored his readers: “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory with partiality,” (James 2:1, NKJV). This verse conveys the fact that James’s readers had placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8-9). As believers and “brethren,” they were not to show partiality amongst one another. James used the singular pronoun my and the plural pronoun our to affirm that all his readers, like himself, were children in God’s family, making them, by nature of their new birth, brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>v</sup> Therefore, James wrote exclusively to an audience of believers.

James used the title “brethren” in another verse that confirms that his readers were believers. He exhorted his audience to “be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord” (James 5:7a, NKJV). In this verse, James used the Greek word *parousia*, meaning “coming, presence, advent,” to describe the return of the Savior. The return of our glorious

Lord Jesus Christ is the blessed hope of all believers (Titus 2:13). Although it does not come through in translation, the command that James issued to his readers to “be patient” is a second-person plural imperative. If James had been a southerner, he would have said, “All y’all be patient!” James used the second-person plural imperative to address his entire audience as believers. As his brethren, they, too, were waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ to return. James wrote exclusively to an audience of people who possessed this blessed hope (John 14:2-3).

The evidence is overwhelming. James’s readers were regenerate. ■



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<sup>i</sup> Dale C. Allison, Jr., “The Fiction of James and Its ‘Sitz Im Leben,’” *Revue Biblique* 108, no. 4 (2001): 569.

<sup>ii</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary: Unleashing God’s Truth, One Verse at a Time* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1880.

<sup>iii</sup> “The recipients of this book were Jewish believers who had been dispersed...” (MacArthur, 1879). “James has in view professing Christians, outwardly associated with the church, but holding a deep affection for the evil world system.... Those with a deep and intimate longing for the things of the world give evidence that they are not redeemed.” (MacArthur, 1892-3). “...those who live in worldly lusts give evidence that their faith is not genuine.” (MacArthur, 1893). “...and sinners (a term used only for unbelievers; see note on 5:20) who would approach Him must recognize and confess their sin.” (MacArthur, 1893). “The ‘death’ in view is not physical death, but eternal death—eternal separation from God and eternal punishment in hell.” (MacArthur, 1898).

<sup>iv</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing*, ed. Arthur L. Farstad and Robert N. Wilkin, *The Grace New Testament Commentary* (1994; Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2015), 18.

<sup>v</sup> In James 2:1, rather than “the faith,” the NASB translates the Greek article as a possessive pronoun, “your faith.” This is a legitimate translation of the Greek article that further solidifies the regenerate status of James’s audience.





# Blinded by Tradition

## (Luke 9:45)

By Ken Yates

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Though we may  
love our traditions,  
let us allow the  
Word of God to do  
its work.

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### INTRODUCTION

**I**n Luke 9:44, the Lord tells the disciples that He is going “to be betrayed into the hands of men.” Earlier, He had told them that the religious leaders were going to kill Him (Luke 9:21). Both these statements look forward to the crucifixion of Christ. Mark tells us that the disciples did not believe Him when He said He would die (Mark 8:32-33). Luke adds that the disciples did not understand what He was saying. The reason they did not understand

was that Christ's words were "hidden from them" (9:45).

Who, or what, was hiding these things from the disciples? Why couldn't the disciples understand what Christ was teaching them?

### WAS IT THE LORD'S INTENT?

Some might conclude that Christ was deliberately hiding the meaning of His words from the disciples. He did not want them to understand what He was saying because they were not ready for it. This would be like waiting to tell children about the facts of life until they are mature enough to handle the information.

Christians sometimes feel that God holds back knowledge from us. He wants us to work to obtain it. Perhaps they even believe the Bible contains hidden meanings that we are not intended to understand. This was a central tenet of the early heresy of Gnosticism. It taught that there are profound spiritual truths that can be known only by a person who undergoes an elaborate initiation process.

But it was not the Lord who was hiding the truth of His upcoming death from the disciples. Mark says that Jesus told them openly (Mark 8:32). He was not speaking in riddles or wanting them kept in the dark.

Something else prevented the disciples from believing that what the Lord said was true.

### IT WAS MOMMY AND DADDY'S FAULT

The reason the disciples did not believe the Lord when He told them He was going to die was their background. Their parents had taught them religious traditions. These traditions were in direct opposition to what Jesus was saying.

Their parents had told them that the Christ would come one day and that when He did, the nation would accept Him as its king. He would then

set the nation free from its enemies. Israel would become the center of a worldwide government.

Every Jewish religious leader told them the same thing. When the disciples went to the synagogue, that is the message they heard. The temple in Jerusalem, the center of their national life, looked forward to that glorious day.

Every aspect of their religious upbringing pointed toward this future powerful Jewish ruler. The disciples were convinced that Jesus was the Christ.

Jesus said that He was the One. They had seen His miracles, which demonstrated that He was who He claimed to be. Some of the disciples had even seen His glory on a mountaintop (Luke 9:2–10). The disciples knew the OT prophecies that spoke of His coming glorious kingdom.

The nation couldn't kill the King. The Jews could not turn Him over to the Gentiles, for He was going to be their conqueror. The religious traditions of the disciples would not allow them to believe that the Christ could be killed at the hands of Gentiles. Their traditions blinded them to the truth.

In my experience, the most common example of this blindness among believers is the view they have of the kingdom.

### WHAT DID THEY THINK?

What did the disciples think when Jesus told them He would die and be turned over to the Gentiles? We only know that they didn't believe Him. However, we can speculate on a few ways that they might have been thinking.

Perhaps they thought that He was a little discouraged because most of the religious leaders opposed Him. He just needed a little encouragement. It wasn't as bad as He thought.

Perhaps they thought that He wasn't feeling well. He'd had a rough night's sleep. Once He felt better, He would drive such negative thoughts from His mind.



Most likely, however, they simply refused to believe what He said. We can all filter out what we don't want to hear. The disciples, like all of us, could have walked away and said they didn't understand what He was saying (Luke 9:45). Whatever He meant, it could not contradict their traditions. There was no need to lose sleep over any possible misunderstanding. It never occurred to them that their traditions might be wrong—that their traditions might be blinding them to truth.

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## Why couldn't the disciples understand what Christ was teaching them?

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### WE HAVE OUR TRADITIONS

Most of those reading this article, as well as the author, grew up with some form of religious instruction. The people we looked up to for that instruction confirmed certain traditions. Our parents and church cultures did the same.

If you have believed in Jesus for eternal life, you have that life, and it can never be lost. But when you became a believer, you may have brought some traditions along with you. It is probable that, like the disciples, most believers have learned some traditional theology that is not based on a correct interpretation of Scripture. These traditions can make us blind to certain truths that the Lord teaches in His Word.

In my experience, the most common example of this blindness among believers is the view they have of the kingdom. Most people who believe in Christ for eternal life have been told that "heaven" will be way off in the clouds somewhere. We will all be equal and float around in some mystical, spiritual existence.

That is the traditional baggage I brought into the Christian life. What the Bible actually teaches is that in eternity future, believers will live on

the new earth, not in the clouds. Christ will reward believers according to their faithfulness. On the new earth, some believers will be greater and have more authority than others.


When I first heard this, I didn't believe it. My traditions kept me from seeing the truth. Just as the disciples ignored what Jesus told them, I ignored what others were telling me. I felt that either I misunderstood what they were saying or they didn't mean what they said. Surely they mis-spoke.

Fortunately, I was eventually able to see the truth in this area. There is hope for our blindness. We can be cured, just as the disciples were delivered from their confusion.

### THE NEEDED EYE SURGERY

The Lord knew that the disciples' religious traditions had blinded them. The cure for their ailment was a simple one. He told them to, "Let these words sink down into your ears..." (Luke 9:44). Peter's rebuke of the Lord and the failure of the disciples to believe what He was telling them revealed their blindness. But if they would compare their traditions with the words of the Lord, they could reject those traditions and see the truth.

Everyone needs such eye surgery. God's Word can remove the blinding cataracts of our religious traditions. New believers come to faith with all kinds of blindness. Even those of us who have been believers for a long time will find we have certain blind spots.

Though we may love our traditions, let us allow the Word of God to do its work. When it becomes clear that we have been blind, may we discard our false traditions. They are the reason we cannot see. 



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is a Free Gift