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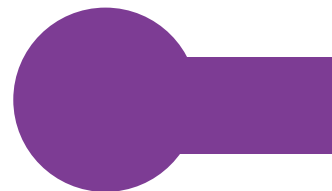
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Assistant Editor: Sam Marr
Cover Design: Anto Marr

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*A higher standard.
A higher purpose.*



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Letter from the Editor

We continue to make small changes to the magazine. For example, Sam Marr, who heads our publications, has decided to reduce the number of pull quotes and introduce boxes that provide insights into what the author was saying. You'll notice some of those content boxes in this issue.



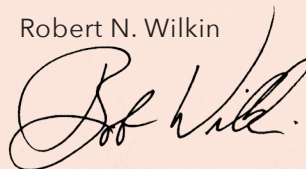
Sam has also decided to experiment with eliminating reply envelopes that until now have been inserted in the middle of each issue. These are costly, and few use them. Many people find them annoying and promptly throw them away. And they aren't needed since it's easy to order online or call in your order (or, for the old-school approach, hand-address an envelope).

The September-October issue heralds the end of the summer and the start of the fall. This has been a very hot summer all over the U.S. and in Europe as well. Cooler temperatures will be much appreciated. I'm looking forward to moving back outside to do my power walking. In the summer, I walk on the treadmill and cover only about twelve miles a week. In the fall, winter, and spring, I walk outside and cover twenty or more miles weekly. I hope to complete three or more half marathons in the next six months.

Grace in Focus is an educational magazine. We want our magazine to be very edifying to those who read it. Approximately 8,000 people receive each issue via hard copy, and nearly 4,000 more receive it electronically. Untold thousands of people read selected articles online.

Keep grace in focus so that you remain sure of your salvation and watchful for the Lord's soon return and the Judgment Seat of Christ. ■

Robert N. Wilkin



Why Is It Necessary to Defend the Faith Inside the Church?

By Austin Smith

INTRODUCTION

Most Evangelicals assume that defending the faith applies to people who have never attended church or perhaps have never heard the promise of everlasting life to the believer. Some may also apply defending the faith to the more extreme groups within Christianity, such as the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses.

But how often do we think of our friends or family members who are active church members yet do not believe the very words of Jesus: "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47; see also John 3:16, 5:24, 11:25–27)? Some of them may have believed in the past. But many of them have never believed in Jesus' promise, even though they've believed many true things about Him.

Do any of these phrases ring a bell?

- You are saved by confessing you are a sinner who can't save yourself.
- You must turn from all your sins and believe in Christ to be saved.
- If you are in a pattern of sin, you are not born again.
- You must abide in Christ to stay saved.
- You must persevere to the end to gain final salvation.

Each of these ideas bases assurance on our good works, rather than on Jesus' promise of life: "Believe in Me for eternal life." We should be concerned for those who have never believed the faith-alone message and who have been led into a false gospel.

WHY DEFEND THE FAITH INSIDE THE CHURCH?

The easy answer to this question comes from the words of 1 Pet 3:15: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." The phrase "be ready to give a defense" derives from the Greek word *apologia*, which is equivalent to the English term *defense*. This is an imperative command to born-again believers! This is not an option.

What is the difference between apologetics and evangelism?

Evangelism is sharing the message of life. Apologetics is the defense of that truth when there is resistance to the message. In modern churches, you most likely will not encounter common churchgoers who struggle with the deity of Christ, the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, or other facts about Jesus. The most prominent struggle you may find is their not understanding the simplicity

of the message of life in the Gospel of John. The main goal when defending the faith with churchgoers is always to encourage them with the message of life found in the Bible's only evangelistic book.

THREE TYPES OF CHURCHGOERS

There are three types of churchgoers: 1. born again, but no longer believing the promise of life; 2. not born again, but hopeful they are (i.e., faith + works); and 3. born again, sure of it, and pursuing discipleship.

I want to focus on group 2, those who think they are born again but are not. Matthew 7:21-23 describes people who have convinced themselves that their works should result in their entrance into the kingdom. However, Jesus says, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt 7:23). Why? Because they did not do "the will of My Father." In John's Gospel, "the will of the Father" is expressed as "the will of Him who sent Me" and "the works of God," technical terms for believing in Jesus for the gift of eternal life (see John 6:40; 6:28-29).



APPROACHES TO DEFENDING THE FAITH INSIDE THE CHURCH

When sharing the truth with people, how can you determine whether they are open to it or closed off? From my experience, I can usually tell if a person is open based on a few things. After hearing me share the message of life, they ask questions. This is where you may have to defend the faith. If they are not quick to refute the things you are saying and want to know more, I would say they are open to the truth. In Acts 17:32, some among Paul's listeners heard him and wanted to know more, and some even followed him and believed (Acts 17:34).

How should we approach someone when defending the faith? Here are a few Biblical principles that may help: speak with gentleness (Prov 15:1), be gentle, peaceful, and humble (Titus 3:2), speak truthfully (Prov 12:17), share the message of life by walking through the Book

Koine Keeper:

We get the English word *apology* from the Greek word *apologia*. However, that is a bit misleading. A better connection is the English word *apologetics*, which refers to the defense of the Christian faith. Believers, even new ones, should be ready, willing, and able to explain to others why they believe in Jesus for the promise of everlasting life.

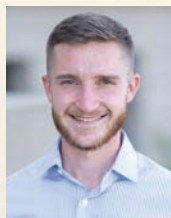
of John, and encourage them to find a church that teaches the Bible truthfully.

If a person shows indications of being closed off, stop the conversation. Proverbs 22:10 gives us Biblical wisdom to end conversations so that contention doesn't arise. In my experience, it does more harm than good to continue entertaining a scoffer. We ultimately need to pray for them. Remember, we do not save a person; we only plant a seed and pray that God will soften their heart to the truth. Matthew 5 tells us to pray for those who persecute us.

I have come to recognize this challenge: There will be people out there who have believed a false gospel for many decades, and they may adamantly hold to their view. They may well seek to evangelize you with their false gospel. In such situations, believers can only share the truth and pray that God softens their hearts.

When we defend the faith, even within the church, God sees and will reward us justly at the Bema.

When defending the faith within the church, we should not quarrel but be gentle and patient and speak with humility to all men (2 Tim 2:24-26). I encourage each of us to stand for truth and be ready to give a defense to those who ask about the hope that is in us. ■



Austin Smith is a 6th-grade science and social studies teacher who lives in Lindale, Texas. He and his wife have two young daughters. Austin is currently a student at Grace Evangelical Theological Seminary (GETS) and has a passion for biblical studies with a desire to serve in pastoral ministry.



The Lord Opened Her Heart

(Acts 16:14)ⁱ

By Bob Wilkin

THE ISSUE: GOD'S PART AND OUR PART IN SALVATION

What is God's part and what is our part in regeneration?

One extreme is to so emphasize God's sovereignty as to eliminate any human role in salvation at all. Calvinism does this. If God did not elect you, then you are doomed to eternal condemnation. Christ didn't die for everyone. He died for only the elect.

The opposite extreme is to so emphasize our role in salvation as to undercut God's sovereignty. Arminian theology does this. It suggests that an unbeliever can be born again by turning from his sins, committing his life to Christ, and following Christ. He can remain saved if he continues to follow Christ.

The proper Biblical position is somewhere in between. Unbelievers are capable of responding to God. However, no unbeliever would seek God on his own initiative (Rom 3:11, "There is none who seeks after God"). God is drawing all people



to Himself (John 12:32, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself”). Because of that, they can respond. All of this can be seen in Acts 16:14: “Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.”

First, let’s consider God’s sovereign role in the salvation of Lydia.

GOD’S ROLE: HE DREW LYDIA TO HIMSELF AND HE OPENED HER HEART

God sent Paul, Timothy, and Luke to the city where Lydia was living and doing business (Acts 16:9). If no one had come to share the promise of life with her, Lydia would not have come to faith in Christ.

God had been drawing Lydia to Himself since she was old enough to consider the general revelation of nature (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:20-21). At the time recorded in Acts 16, He sent Paul to bring the promise of life to her. When Paul shared the message with her, “The Lord opened (*dianoigō*) her heart so that she might heed the things

spoken by Paul” (16:14). If He had not opened her heart, whatever that means, she wouldn’t have been able to believe the saving message that Paul preached.

So what, exactly, does the expression *the Lord opened her heart* mean? Symbolic language is being used. This has nothing to do with Lydia’s literal heart. In Scripture, the word *heart* (*kardia*) is normally used to refer to the inner person. It is the seat of intellect and emotion. The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Vol 2, s.v., “Heart,” p. 182) says,

A striking feature of the NT is the essential closeness of *kardia* to the concept of *nous*, mind... Heart and mind can be used in parallel (2 Cor 3:14f.) or synonymously (Phil 4:7)... Thus it is the person, the thinking, feeling, willing ego of man, with particular regard to his responsibility to God, that the NT denotes by the use of *kardia*.

Imagine a person who has a mental block. No matter how hard you try, you can’t convince them that what you are saying is true. For example,



people who have very strong political convictions are not usually open to opposing viewpoints. Someone involved with Antifa is unlikely to be open to discussing the virtues of capitalism.

Similarly, Satan snatches away the saving message when unbelievers hear it so that they will not believe (Luke 8:12). Compare 2 Cor 4:3-4.

When God opened Lydia's heart, He removed that mental block against the truth of the promise of life.

This is the only place in the Bible where the expression *opened [the] heart* is found. Calvinists assume this means that *God sovereignly caused Lydia to believe*, apart from her seeking God. While God opened her heart, allowing her to believe, He did so because she had been seeking Him. She was at the place of prayer. Luke said that she "worshiped God" (v 14). God removed that which was hindering her from believing in Christ.

A similar verse is Luke 24:45: "And He opened [*dianoigō*] their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures." Luke 24:45 and Acts 16:14 are the only two uses of *dianoigō* in the NT. Even though this is the only verse that directly speaks of opening the heart, it is evident that this is something God does for everyone who believes immediately before they believe (cf. Luke 8:12-13 and 2 Cor 4:3-4).

This doesn't mean, however, that unbelievers can't *understand* the saving message before God opens their hearts. You've probably had the same experience I've had: You explained the promise of life to someone, and he or she was able to explain it back to you clearly, yet they didn't perceive it to be true.

Every year, GES is audited (or reviewed) as part of our fiscal accountability. A few years back, I gave some of our materials to the woman who was doing our audit. Later, we spoke briefly on the phone, and I was able to talk with her about the gift of everlasting life. She was a practicing Catholic and found what I was saying to be different from what she believed and had been taught.

Another auditor from the same firm came for the next year's audit. He mentioned in passing that the previous auditor had commented at the time that we at GES believed some strange doctrine—that all you have to do to be saved is believe in Christ and Him alone for eternal life! She had understood what I said, but she didn't believe it. The Lord had not yet opened her heart. Interestingly, the young man to whom she confided this is a believer, and he had a chance to tell her that what we are teaching is true!

It may sound like I'm advocating the first position I described above. I am not. Unbelievers, as we shall soon see, are not incapable of seeking God. And, as we have already seen, God's work in the life of unbelievers does not wait until He opens their hearts. He is continually drawing people everywhere to Himself.

Yet there is some truth in the Reformed position. God is indeed sovereign. No one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him (John 6:44).

There is a second aspect of Lydia's salvation that we need to consider: the part Lydia played.

LYDIA'S ROLE: SHE SOUGHT GOD AND BELIEVED IN CHRIST

Like Cornelius in Acts 10, Lydia was responsive to God before He opened her eyes and she believed.

She was seeking God before He opened her heart. Of course, as mentioned above, she was able to seek God only because He had been drawing her to Himself.

Paul and his company went to the riverside on the Sabbath day to find people with whom they might share the message of Christ (v 13). The reason they weren't in a synagogue is that there wasn't one in Philippi. Jewish synagogues required the attendance of at least ten men. There weren't ten men in Philippi who were God-fearing Gentiles or devout Jews. There were, however, some God-fearing Gentile women. Lydia was one of these: "And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there."

Lydia was not even from Philippi. She was from Thyatira (v 14). Evidently, she was in Philippi to sell her purple dye. Yet she went out of her way to find a prayer meeting that was held by the riverside. The fact that only women were present did not deter her. Neither did the fact that the meeting was outside the city.

Lydia must have regularly attended synagogues and prayer meetings. This is suggested by Luke's remark that she "worshiped God." That most likely refers to the fact that she was a God-fearing Gentile (compare Acts 17:17). Her attitude may well have been the one expressed by the man in Paul's Macedonian vision: "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (v 9).

God has determined that anyone who diligently seeks Him will ultimately find Him: "He has made from one blood every nation ...so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26-27); "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb 11:6); "In every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:35).

Lydia was not uninvolved in the matter of her coming to faith. She was not like a rock, which has no spiritual sensitivity whatsoever. She had been responding to the light God gave her. She was seeking God and was worshiping Him. And when

He opened her heart, she believed the promise of life and was born again.

CONCLUSION

Let's see if we can put all this together. On the one hand, God was drawing Lydia to Himself. He sent someone to bring her the saving message. And He opened her eyes so that she could believe the message and be saved. If any of those had not occurred, Lydia would not have been born again. On the other hand, Lydia was a God-fearing Gentile who responded to the light she received, and when God opened her heart, she believed.

This explains how an unbeliever can hear the promise of life and explain it back to you, yet not believe it. God has not yet opened his eyes to see that the message is true, that "whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). That message appears as foolishness to him.

This also explains how people's eyes can light up when you explain the promise of life to them. Just before their eyes lit up, they believed and knew they were born again. That happened because the Lord had just opened their eyes. They got it! The gift of God, which had eluded them, now made perfect sense.

No one is born again apart from God's drawing him and opening his heart. Yet God doesn't force anyone to be saved. All who are born again have freely responded to God's drawing and have believed in Christ and Him alone for eternal life.

Keep grace in focus, and you will be able to convey the promise of everlasting life to those who are open. 



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

¹ This article first appeared in the Sept-Oct 1995 issue of *Grace in Focus*. It has been edited and slightly expanded.



Believers and the Bema

By Earl Radmacher

**This article first appeared in the May-June 1995 issue of Grace in Focus. It has been slightly edited.*

Many people today are rightfully distressed by the level of living of many of their fellow Christians, at least those who *profess* life in Christ. Those concerned see people who come to the Lord Jesus and claim Him as Savior, but who show little or no subsequent change in their lives. That is not only the observation of fellow Christians. That is also the observation of the Gallup Poll. When the Gallup Poll evaluates the lifestyles of all people, religious and nonreligious, it frankly sees little difference between the lifestyle and

ethical system of those who profess to be born again and those who do not. That is disconcerting, to say the least!

PROPPING UP THE GOSPEL

Consequently, I think that many people today are in danger of corrupting the gospel of grace because they want to add to what is necessary for one to be a Christian. They talk about the fruits that are necessary, or that must be evident if you are *really* a child of God.

Many wise pastors have insisted that the basis for knowing that I am a Christian is not what *I* do but what God's Word says about what *Christ*



has done and continues to do for those who have believed (John 1:12; 1 John 5:13). I know I belong to Christ because I have believed in Jesus Christ as my only Savior and Redeemer from eternal destruction. It's not the evidence of my life that is my basis for knowing that. It's the Word of God. God said it. That settles it. I am fearful of those today who—because of a genuine, valid concern about the lack of growth and an evident Christian lifestyle—are willing to prop up the gospel by adding to it.

Having said that, am I less concerned than others about the failure of believers to move on to maturity in Christ? No, I share that concern. I am

desperately concerned about it, for I believe that America probably has the largest spiritual nursery in its history, and that can be a real drain on our spiritual resources. We desperately need to move people out of the nursery and into the infantry. I believe there is a missing note in evangelism that can serve as a legitimate corrective and a powerful motivator, in place of what is being used in the compromise of the gospel today. And that is to move on in our thinking from initial justification, to sanctification, and then to glorification. What is going to happen to me in the life to come?

TRAINING TIME FOR REIGNING TIME

In 1 Cor 4:2, Paul tells us that “it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” What is a *steward*? A steward is a manager of somebody else's property or equipment. When I came into the family of God, He gave me a sovereign deposit and said, in effect, “Now take it and trade with it. Use it. Show Me what kind of commitment you have got. If you *do* nothing with it, you will get nothing.” That's the gist of 1 Cor 3:12-15: wood, hay, and stubble versus gold, silver, and precious stones. Everyone's work will be tried of what *sort*, right? Not how much, but of what sort it is. The wood, hay, and stubble will be burned up, but the believer will be saved “yet so as through fire” (v 15). Why? Grace! Not by what the believer did. He will be in heaven because of what Jesus Christ did.

As I write these words, I stand in God's sight faultless and perfect because God Almighty sees me through Jesus Christ. There is no compromise to that. No one who knows Jesus Christ will ever appear at the Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20. Believers shall appear, however, at the Judgment Seat of Christ (*the Bema*) and will be judged by their works (2 Cor 5:10).

It is significant to note that both the unregenerate and the regenerate will be judged by their works. The *unregenerate* will be judged by their works at the Great White Throne Judgment, and the result of that judgment will be degrees of eternal punishment in hell. The *regenerate* will be judged by their works at the Bema, and the result



of that judgment will either be reward or a lack of reward.

The Lord Jesus Christ became sin for me. I owed a debt I couldn't pay. He paid a debt He didn't owe. Christ, who knew no sin, became the epitome of sin for me in order that I, who knew no righteousness, might become the righteousness of God in Christ. What a transaction that was! What an exchange! All my sins were traded in for His righteousness.

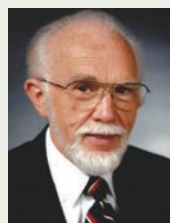
Don't compromise that. Don't try to shore that up by changing the gospel. No, the motivation for good works is the Judgment Seat of Christ. And if we help people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ to focus more on the Judgment Seat of Christ, on their glorification, on their manifestation in the life to come, they will be able to agree with Paul that these light momentary afflictions are producing for them an eternal and exceedingly heavy weight of glory (see 2 Cor 4:17).

GETTING READY FOR THE BEMA

Today I am becoming what I will be in the life to come, and that motivates me. I don't feel like holding back. I want to give it my all. I don't need to live a *long time*. What I *do* need to do is live *qualitatively*, because a *short life* of that kind on earth will have a long effect through all eternity—a weight of glory, a kind of manifestation through

which I shall reflect the glory of Jesus Christ forever and ever. If you don't know Christ, come drink of the water free of charge (Rev 22:17). Don't start talking about what you will have to do; you haven't got the grace to do it. He doesn't come asking you to bring something. God comes saying, "I have something for you. Come and receive it. Come and get it." Then, when you have received it, and you've been given life, you will recognize that it's not only your privilege to have life, but it's your possibility to faithfully use the resources He gave you to help set up your position of service with Christ in the life to come.

Reader, if you know Him as your Savior, do a progress check. Where are you in the process of becoming? Do you like what you see? If you don't, you have time to make some changes that will affect you in your position and privilege with Christ in the life to come. Become a believer who's ready for the Bema. ■



Dr. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014) was a beloved seminary professor and president (WCBTS), author of *Salvation in the Swindoll Leadership Library Series*, editor of *The Nelson Study Bible*, and frequent speaker and writer for GES.

¹ *Bēma* is the Greek word for the tribunal judge's bench, or judgment seat.

Crippling Your Walk and Sabotaging Your Reward

an Exposition of 2 John 6-9

By Jack Stevens

In 1959, Solomon Asch conducted a social experiment that took the educational world by storm. Participants were asked to match the lengths of lines in a simple visual task. The correct answer was obvious. Remarkably, when placed in a group in which others deliberately gave incorrect answers, most participants conformed to the group's judgment. When faced with the pressure of what the rest of the group thought, some people didn't respond correctly even once!

Follow-up experiments have shown similar results: People tend to conform to everyone else. In one example, people in a waiting room stood up when a tone sounded simply because others did. You may have experienced this yourself. Have you ever been in a group setting where everyone started clapping, and without knowing why, you joined in? This is called *social conformity*, a phenomenon in which we adjust our behavior or beliefs to fit in with those around us. We do this

because no one wants to be an oddball. In real life, this enormous pressure to conform to popular opinion is seen at work regarding issues like transgenderism, politics, or morality in general.

Most concerning of all, the desire to fit in with the crowd affects churches today. You've probably felt that pressure yourself. However, while conforming is certainly easier, doing so comes at a catastrophic cost. In his second epistle, John refutes two common attacks that threaten to force believers into conformity (vv 6-9).

ATTACK #1: "TRUE BELIEVERS CAN'T BE DECEIVED"

John begins his second epistle by exhorting believers to walk in what they have heard from the beginning. He wants his audience to hold fast to the apostle's teachings and make them a high priority in their lives. He also warns them that "many deceivers have gone out into

Koine Keeper:

The expression *antichrists* (Greek: *antichristoi*) only occurs four times in the NT, all in John's epistles (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), though only once in the plural (1 John 2:18). The prefix *anti* refers, in this case, to those who are against Christ. However, these teachers presented themselves as being for Christ. They peddled false doctrine about Jesus that caused John to label them as antichrists. Synonymous NT expressions to antichrists include false prophets, false teachers, and deceivers.

the world" (v 6-7). The doctrine these deceivers attack concerns Jesus *as* the Christ "coming in the flesh." The impact of denying Jesus as the Christ, the Guarantor of eternal life to every believer, is that the faith-alone message, eternal security, and assurance as the essence of saving faith are all undermined. These false teachers attack the message of the truly free gift of eternal life. Because of the danger posed by these false teachers, John commands his readers, "Look to yourselves." Or, in other words, "Watch out so that you don't get deceived!" This warning is not aimed at the unsaved or "false professors," but at believers who are presently "walking in the truth" (v 4). John is writing this because he worries that these believers might be led astray by *antichrists*.

Free Grace people often get blasted by Lordship Salvation proponents for rejecting the idea that if someone falls away from the faith, it proves they were never saved. A "true believer," it is said, cannot fall away, and if a person is deceived, it shows that they made a false profession. But this argument is false and would make John's warning meaningless. Dr. John Niemelä illustrates the falseness of this claim as follows: A 100-mile-per-hour speed limit would make no sense if cars did not exist and everyone rode horses. The very existence of the command assumes the possibility—and the likelihood—of violation.

John's command to watch out for deceivers shows the basic fact that believers *can* be deceived! True believers can wander from the truth, fail to abide in the doctrine of Christ, and thus fail to have God in terms of fellowship (v 9). While tragic, falling into heresy or away from the faith entirely does not mean a believer made a false profession or was never saved. Therefore, this common attack on Free Grace falls flat.

ATTACK #2: "WE'RE ALL SAYING THE SAME THING, SO DON'T MAKE WAVES"

But just because a believer's eternal destiny isn't in doubt if they fall away does not advocate for some kind of laissez-faire attitude towards the truth of God's Word. Another attempt to get Free Grace folks to acquiesce to the majority stems from the idea that doctrine does not matter so long as someone goes to church and behaves like a Christian. Church of Christ, Methodist, Pentecostal, and even Catholic churches are all viewed as legitimate by many. They have a soteriology that denies faith alone, yet many view their work-salvation "gospels" as genuine saving messages. Free Grace folks that say otherwise can be viewed as "troublemakers." There can be unbelievable pressure to not make waves, to get in line, and to just go along with other churches because "we're all saying the same thing." John, however, refutes this and makes clear that what we believe is critically important for our spiritual lives. The reason doctrinal compromise, especially on issues of salvation, is so serious is that God's greatest blessing to faithful believers—eternal reward—is at stake. If a believer is deceived (for instance, loses assurance, starts working to earn, keep, or prove their salvation, or gets pulled away into believing things that violate the clear teaching of the Word), 2 John 8 says that they will not receive a full reward. Zane Hodges points out that, "No statement in the Scriptures makes clearer the integral connection between maintaining the truth and gaining eternal reward" (*The Epistles of John*, 259).

However, this concern is not unique to 2 John. Of the twenty-seven books of the New

Testament, at least twenty-three directly combat false teaching. If doctrine were insignificant, Scripture would not emphasize it so heavily. Colossians 1:22–23 teaches that being presented blameless and rewardable at the Judgment Seat of Christ is not automatic, but conditional: “...if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast.” Paul similarly warns against being deceived, pleading that believers “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception” (Col 2:8), and Hebrews cautions believers who are considering a return to the Law: “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (Heb 3:12). John reinforces this truth in 2 John 9: “Whoever...does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God,” that is, does not enjoy fellowship or approval from Him. If we don’t hold to what the Lord teaches, we detract from our reward and we cripple our walk with our Savior in one fell swoop. This is sobering indeed.

Furthermore, doctrinal deviation affects more than the individual believer. John explains that falling into deception also undermines the labor of teachers, pastors, and fellow believers who have invested in presenting someone mature before Christ. He highlights this by using the first-person plural, expressing his desire that *we* all “receive a full reward” (v 8). While some translations read *you*, Hodges notes that the majority of manuscripts read *we*, outnumbering *you* by more than two to one (p. 260). The point is clear: we are not all saying the same thing, and doctrinal compromise *is* a big deal. It impacts the rewards of both the believer and those who poured into them spiritually. Because the stakes are so high, John commands believers in vv 10–11 to not even welcome or entertain false teachers, much less tolerate their influence.

RESIST THE PRESSURE; KEEP THE REWARD

Second John 6-9 stands as a witness to the fact that the majority is not always right. Despite what people may say with these two popular attacks on Free Grace, this passage shows that doctrinal fidelity is neither automatic nor optional

for believers. Our eternal destiny is not at stake if we fall away from the truth of the Word or get deceived. But if we do, the consequences are still devastating: we won’t receive the fullest reward at the Judgment Seat or enjoy fellowship with Jesus.

Believers today need to hold fast to the truth and make sound Biblical teaching a priority in our lives. Free Grace people need to know that due to social conformity, our knee-jerk reaction is to go with the flow, dodge hardship, and conform to popular opinion. However, this passage shows us that doing so is the quickest way to ensure that we don’t hear “well done.” Therefore, we *must* resist the pressure so that we can keep our reward and our closeness with the Lord. It is essential to continue to walk in the Bible’s teachings that eternal life is gained by simply believing in Jesus for it. We need to cling to the fact that believers are eternally secure and need to maintain assurance of their salvation, especially since these truths are under such attack. Because it can be so easy to gradually change so we can fit in, we should surround ourselves with like-minded believers. If you feel overwhelmed by the pressure to conform or are tired of being called a heretic or a troublemaker, be encouraged. Walk in what you have heard from the beginning. The Word is on your side, you have wonderful rewards coming, and closeness with Christ is surely worth whatever the cost. ■



Jack is a proud second-generation member of GES. He serves as the associate pastor at Grace Bible Church in wild and beautiful Kamiah, Idaho. Jack has a bachelor's degree in political science and is working on his final year at the Grace Evangelical Theological Seminary.

Georgia Regional Conference

The Grace Evangelical Society is excited to announce a Southeast Regional Conference taking place November 13–15, 2026, in Dallas, Georgia. Legacy Baptist Church graciously offered to host this conference. We invite believers from throughout the Southeast to join us for a weekend of biblical teaching, fellowship, and encouragement.

The theme is "What's Coming Next?" and will focus on one of the most important and frequently discussed topics in Scripture: God's plan for the future. With Israel regularly making headlines around the world, many Christians are asking questions about biblical prophecy and the end times. What role does Israel play in God's future program? How does the Church fit into



God's plan? What events does the Bible say are still to come?

Throughout the weekend, conference speakers will explore these questions directly from Scripture, examining God's promises to Israel, His purposes for the Church, and the prophetic events that shape our understanding of the future. Whether you are new to the study of prophecy or have spent years studying these subjects, the sessions will provide biblical insight, practical application, and opportunities for thoughtful discussion.

The conference begins Friday evening, November 13, and continues through the Sunday morning worship service on November 15. Mark your calendar now and make plans to join us in Dallas, Georgia, for this exciting weekend as we seek to understand what God's Word reveals about what's coming next. For more details, check out our events page on Faithalone.org. 



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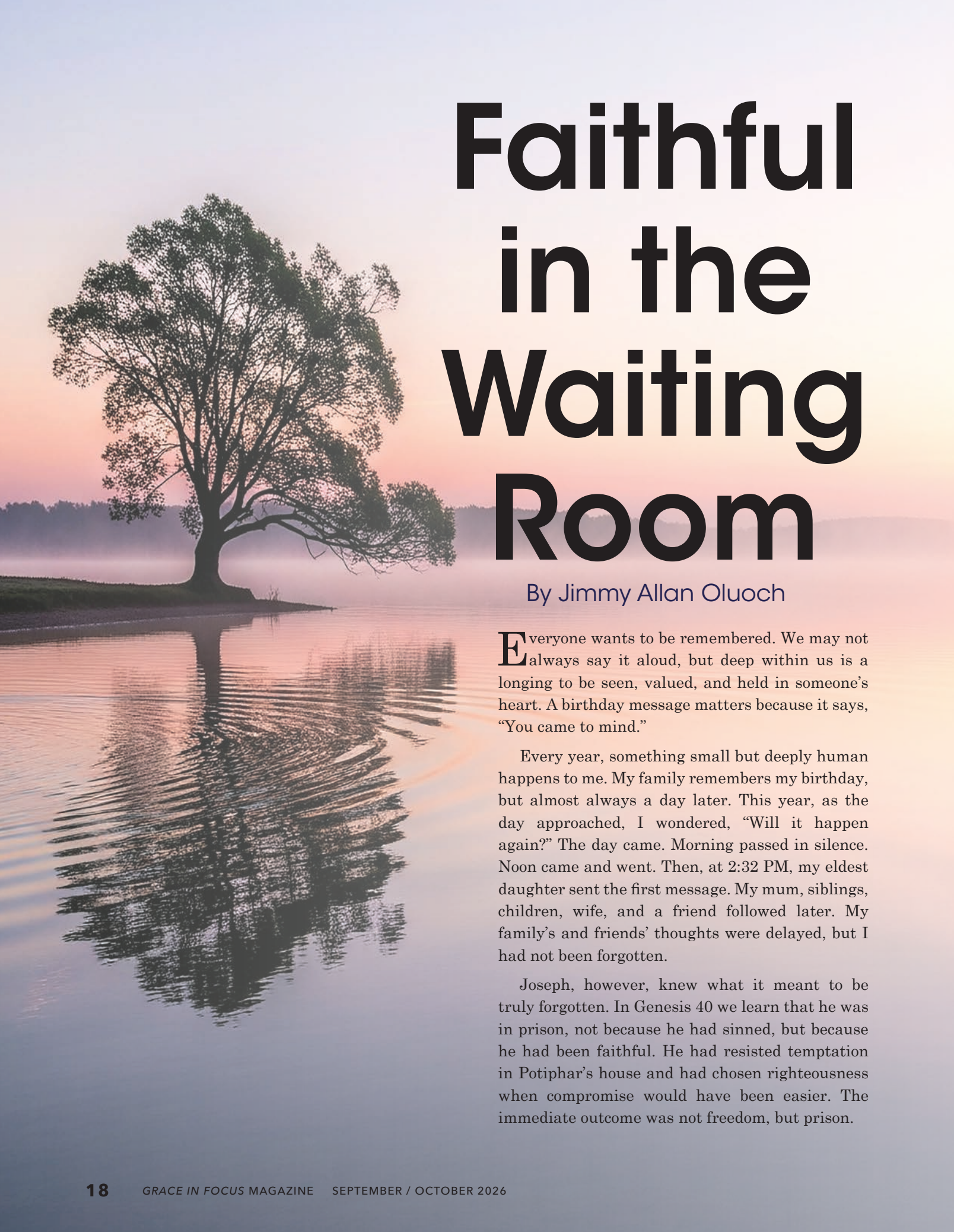
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WHAT?

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plan? **What's Coming
Next?**



Faithful in the Waiting Room

By Jimmy Allan Oluoch

Everyone wants to be remembered. We may not always say it aloud, but deep within us is a longing to be seen, valued, and held in someone's heart. A birthday message matters because it says, "You came to mind."

Every year, something small but deeply human happens to me. My family remembers my birthday, but almost always a day later. This year, as the day approached, I wondered, "Will it happen again?" The day came. Morning passed in silence. Noon came and went. Then, at 2:32 PM, my eldest daughter sent the first message. My mum, siblings, children, wife, and a friend followed later. My family's and friends' thoughts were delayed, but I had not been forgotten.

Joseph, however, knew what it meant to be truly forgotten. In Genesis 40 we learn that he was in prison, not because he had sinned, but because he had been faithful. He had resisted temptation in Potiphar's house and had chosen righteousness when compromise would have been easier. The immediate outcome was not freedom, but prison.



In that prison, Joseph served Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Both had troubling dreams. Joseph listened, interpreted their dreams by God's help, and spoke the truth. To the cupbearer, whose dream pointed to restoration, Joseph made one request: "Remember me." But Genesis 40:23 closes with painful simplicity: "Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him."

That sentence carries the ache of many faithful people. You helped others, but no one helped you. You served quietly, but no one noticed. You spoke truth, but no reward came. You sacrificed for family, work, church, ministry, organization, school, or country, but recognition never came. You are still awaiting this recognition. So what do you do in the waiting room?

GOD IS WORKING WHEN NOTHING SEEMS TO BE HAPPENING

Joseph's prison looked like a dead end, but it was actually a place of divine arrangement. The

cupbearer and baker did not simply stumble into Joseph's life. They were officers of Pharaoh, and their imprisonment created a connection between Joseph and the palace. Joseph saw only injustice, delay, and confinement. But God was arranging people, timing, and opportunity.

This is often how providence works. God's hand is only seen as events providentially unfold. Sometimes He moves quietly, preparing the room before the door opens. Proverbs 16:4 says, "The Lord has made all for Himself." Even the prison. Even the delay. Even the season of being forgotten.

Think of a teacher arranging a classroom before learners arrive. The learners may see only the room, but the teacher knows it has been arranged for a purpose. Joseph was in the room; God was doing the arranging.

God's silence is not the same as God's inactivity. A seed underground appears buried, but it is actually becoming the plant it was intended to be.

Joseph was not merely waiting for a position; he was being prepared for responsibility.

FAITHFULNESS LOOKS DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Faithfulness is not a one-size-fits-all expression. The heart remains the same: obedience to God, integrity before people, perseverance in duty, and trust in God's timing. But the shape changes with context.

The faithfulness of a rural teacher in Kenya may look different from that of an urban teacher in the United States. The rural teacher may work with limited books, crowded classrooms, long distances, and families carrying heavy economic burdens. Faithfulness there may mean arriving early despite difficulties, preparing lessons with scarce resources, visiting homes, encouraging forgotten learners, and teaching with dignity when the system feels stretched.

An urban teacher in the United States may face digital distractions, parental expectations, mental health concerns, and culturally diverse classrooms. Faithfulness there may mean protecting each learner's dignity, refusing to give in to cynicism, communicating wisely with parents, and maintaining moral clarity in a complex environment. Both teachers are called to faithfulness, but faithfulness wears different clothing in each place.

The same is true in the workplace. For one person, faithfulness may mean refusing to go along with corruption when everyone says, "This is how things are done." For another, it may mean treating junior staff with dignity, refusing to gossip, meeting deadlines, telling the truth in reports, or declining to manipulate figures.

In family life, faithfulness also takes different forms. For mothers, it may be the unseen labor of nurturing, praying, correcting, feeding, listening, and carrying emotional burdens others may never fully appreciate. For fathers, it may mean presence, protection, provision, spiritual leadership, emotional availability, and the humility to apologize when wrong.

For uncles and aunts, faithfulness may mean being a steady moral voice in the lives of nieces and nephews: stepping in when parents are overwhelmed, modeling generosity, speaking wisdom without taking over, and reminding children that family love extends beyond the nuclear home.

Faithfulness is always obedience, but obedience is embodied in context. Joseph's context was prison. His faithfulness did not yet look like being a powerful leader in Egypt. It looked like noticing troubled men in a dark place.

FAITHFUL PEOPLE STILL NOTICE THE PAIN OF OTHERS

One of the most remarkable details in Genesis 40 is that Joseph notices the sadness of the cupbearer and baker while he himself is suffering. He has been betrayed, sold, falsely accused, and imprisoned unjustly. Still, he has enough tenderness to see pain in others.

Suffering can make people self-absorbed. Pain can narrow our vision until all we see is our own disappointment. We may say, "No one helped me, so why should I help anyone?" But Joseph shows another way. A faithful person does not wait for perfect conditions before serving. Joseph ministered in the midst of his pain, not after his pain.

Some people postpone obedience until life becomes easier. "When I am healed, I will serve. When I am financially stable, I will give. When I am recognized, I will mentor." But the waiting room is often where God teaches us to serve without applause.

A teacher may be underpaid and overwhelmed, yet still prepare lessons with excellence. A mother may be tired, yet still pray over her children. A father may carry pressure silently, yet still return home with gentleness. A believer at work may be discouraged, yet still refuse dishonesty. Faithfulness says, "I will serve because God is faithful, not because my circumstances are easy."

Joseph also speaks truth. He does not flatter the baker with false hope or manipulate the cupbearer for advantage. He gives each man the interpretation

God reveals. Faithfulness is not merely kindness; it is truthfulness joined to love.

GOD'S REVELATION BELONGS TO GOD

When the men say they have no interpreter, Joseph replies, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" He does not present himself as the source of wisdom. Whatever insight he has is received, not manufactured.

Parents, teachers, leaders, professionals, and pastors often feel pressure to have every answer. But Joseph reminds us that we are vessels, not the source. A mirror does not produce light; it reflects it. Joseph could interpret dreams because prison had not disconnected him from God. His environment changed, but his dependence did not.

Can we be faithful when promoted and faithful when hidden? Faithful when thanked and faithful when ignored? Joseph's faith was not circumstantial. It was anchored.

DELAYED RECOGNITION IS NOT FAILED FULFILLMENT

After Joseph serves the cupbearer, the story appears ready for a breakthrough. Surely the restored cupbearer will speak to Pharaoh. Surely Joseph will be released. But the text says the cupbearer forgot him.

That is often the hardest part of waiting: Hope rises, and then nothing happens. Delayed recognition tests the soul. It exposes whether we were serving God or merely serving for reward. We often imagine that faithfulness should produce quick outcomes: promotion, appreciation, answered prayer, visible fruit.

But God works with longer timelines than we prefer. Genesis 15:16 shows a God who speaks in generations. His timing is not careless; it is precise. The delay was not denial. It was preparation.

Had Joseph been released immediately, perhaps he would have returned to an ordinary life and never stood before Pharaoh at the appointed time. The cupbearer's forgetfulness was painful, but even that delay was under God's sovereign control. When Pharaoh later had troubling dreams,

the cupbearer remembered Joseph at exactly the right moment. Human forgetfulness did not cancel divine remembrance.

You may be in a Genesis 40 season. You may be serving in a rural school with little recognition, working where integrity feels costly, raising children who do not yet understand your sacrifices, or pouring into nieces and nephews who may not thank you until years later. Be faithful in the waiting room.

God sees the lesson prepared, the prayer whispered, the temptation resisted, the child comforted, the report written honestly, the truth spoken, the tears hidden, and the service rendered without applause. People may forget. Systems may overlook. Families may delay appreciation. Institutions may fail to recognize sacrifice. But God does not forget. Joseph was forgotten by the cupbearer, but he was never forgotten by God. And neither are you. 



Jimmy Allan Oluoch leads Acres of Mercy Kenya, advancing education, community discipleship, and family ministry while pursuing an M.Div. at Grace Evangelical Theological Seminary.



GES National Conference



2026 VBS VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

One of the highlights of this year's national conference was our Vacation Bible School, where children explored one of Scripture's most exciting promises—the rewards awaiting faithful believers in Christ's coming Kingdom. With a medieval theme of castles, crowns, knights, and kingdoms, the week immersed children in the five crowns mentioned in the New Testament while emphasizing the biblical doctrine of eternal rewards.

Each lesson focused on one of the crowns believers can receive, helping children understand what faithful overcomers can look forward to when Christ returns to establish His Kingdom. Through engaging Bible lessons, themed crafts, exciting games, music, and activities, the children discovered that while eternal life is God's free gift received by faith in Jesus, faithful service to Christ today has lasting significance in His future Kingdom.

Providing a VBS during our national conference is about much more than children's programming.

It allows young families to attend the conference who otherwise might not be able to participate, giving parents the opportunity to enjoy sound biblical teaching while knowing their children are learning God's Word in a fun, Christ-centered way. We believe investing in the next generation is an essential part of our ministry, and this year's VBS was a wonderful example of that commitment.

We are especially grateful to Katie Walker for coordinating this year's VBS. Her countless hours of planning, organizing volunteers, and preparing activities made the week a tremendous success. We also want to thank everyone who volunteered their time and talents to serve our conference families.

We're already looking forward to next year! Our 2027 National Conference will focus on the prophets, and our VBS will complement that theme as children journey through the lives and ministries of six different prophets, discovering God's faithfulness throughout Scripture. Stay tuned for more! 





IT'S NOT ALWAYS ABOUT US

By Ken Yates



INTRODUCTION

In our church's Sunday School class, we were recently reminded that when we study the Bible, we must determine the audience. Whom is the speaker addressing? Whether it is our culture or our pride, we tend to think that every word in the Scriptures is addressed to us personally. That is not the case.

There are many examples in which someone gives instructions to a specific group of people. If we are not a part of that group, we have to be careful of how we handle the teaching. When John the Baptist says, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance..." (Matt 3:11), he was talking to the nation of Israel. Today, new believers are baptized to proclaim their faith in Christ for eternal life. We do not baptize them to bring them to repentance so that the kingdom will come for Israel.

The Lord often said things to the original disciples that were only for them. He told them that they would sit on thrones judging Israel in His kingdom (Matt 19:28). He told them they would preach the good news to "every creature," cast out demons, and heal the sick (Mark 16:15-18). On the

night He was betrayed, He told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all the things He had taught them while He was with them (John 14:26). Christ has not promised any of these things to us. We did not live with Him for three years during His earthly ministry! He promised these things to the men who did. They were a unique group.

Peter understood that the Lord sometimes addressed things to this group. On one occasion when the Lord was teaching, he wanted some clarification. To whom was He speaking?

DIFFICULT COMMANDS, WONDERFUL PROMISES

Luke 12 contains many of the Lord's commandments. They were not easy to obey. He said that the hearers should not be afraid of those who could kill them (v 4). He told them not to worry

when they were dragged into the synagogues or before magistrates to be tried. They should not even fret about what they were to say to defend themselves, because the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say (v 11). The Lord challenged them to reject laying up earthly treasures (v 21). What they were going to eat, drink, or wear should not be a concern. God would take care of such menial things (vv 22-28). Instead, they should sell what they had and give it to the poor (v 33).

The Lord hinted that He would be leaving them, although it is very doubtful that they understood. He said that while He was gone, they were to do what He had commanded them. They were to be diligently watching for His return, which could occur at any time (vv 35-40).

Although these instructions would be difficult to follow, Christ gave them marvelous promises to encourage them. If they were faithful, they would have treasures in heaven. They would be rich in the kingdom (v 33). Those hearers who were obedient would actually possess the kingdom of God, not just enter it (v 32). This refers to those who will rule with Christ. Such co-rulers will be served by the Lord Himself at a glorious banquet when He returns (v 37). They served Him and His people while He was gone, so He will serve them.

As Peter listened to these words, he wondered how they might apply to everyone who heard them. In Luke 12:1, we are told that a large crowd was listening. The inner circle of disciples was also there. In verse 22, Luke says the Lord was speaking to the disciples. When Christ talked about being arrested and possibly being put to death, was that something believers in the crowd might face, or just those closest to the Lord? Were all believers told to sell what they had and give the proceeds to the poor?

What about those promises? Were positions of authority and great wealth in the kingdom available to anybody in the crowd who believed in Jesus for eternal life, or were such

things reserved for the Twelve? A king, after all, shares his authority with those closest to Him. There is a difference between a ruler's inner circle and the common citizenry.

Today, we might ask if these words are for us. None of us will be dragged before leaders in the synagogue. Few of us will be put on trial before a magistrate. If we are questioned about our faith, should we not worry about how we will defend ourselves? Will the Holy Spirit give us the words to say? Should we sell what we have and give the money to the beggar on the street corner? Can believers today be on the same level as the original disciples when it comes to rewards in Christ's kingdom?

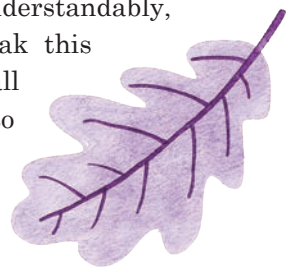
Peter did not yet know about the Church, so he was not thinking about us. But he did wonder about the believers in the large crowd who were listening to the Lord. Understandably, he asked, "Lord, do You speak this parable only to us, or to all people?" (v 41). Peter wanted to know to whom the Lord was speaking. That is always a great question.

NOT A STRAIGHTFORWARD ANSWER

If we wanted the Lord to say, "I was speaking to only you," or "I was speaking to the whole crowd," we will be disappointed. Instead of answering directly, He spoke another parable.

In the parable, there is a steward (v 42). A steward was a servant who was made an administrator in the master's house. He was given responsibility over other servants in the house. The disciples were stewards. They were given elevated responsibilities in the ministry of Christ. They would be given even more authority after Christ left. It seems that the Lord had the Twelve in mind when He used the word *steward*.

The faithful steward will be greatly rewarded by the master when he returns. The Lord had





already spoken to the disciples about faithfulness and rewards (vv 37-38).

But in the rest of the parable, Christ speaks about servants (vv 43-48).

An ordinary servant could also show himself to be faithful. At the end of the parable, Jesus speaks about servants who knew, in detail, what He had taught and those who did not. At the Judgment Seat of Christ they will be judged by different standards.

It seems to me that the Lord is saying He was speaking to the original disciples. They would be leaders among the believers after He left. They would be held to a higher standard when He examined their faithfulness and rewarded His servants. Because they were in His inner circle, they would know a great deal about what He demanded of them.

But what He was teaching had an application for all believers in the crowd. They could all be servants of His while He was gone. They might not be stewards of the Master, but they could all be faithful to Him. They would have different opportunities and different levels of understanding. When the Lord evaluates all His servants, these issues will be taken into consideration. His servants will be rewarded according to their faithfulness.



CONCLUSION

When studying the Bible, we need to be aware of the audience. We should not assume, for example, that all the words of the Lord were directed towards us. It's not always about us.

When He told the disciples that they would be arrested and that they were to sell all they had and give it to the poor, He was speaking to the original Twelve.

But we cannot say that such words are completely irrelevant to us. All Scripture is inspired, and we can all learn from what is written (2 Tim 3:16).

Even when the Lord's teachings are focused on a specific group, they contain universal truths.

In Luke 12, the original disciples were given commandments that would be difficult to obey. They were given great responsibilities as stewards of the Lord, but they were also given the promise of great rewards.

Believers in the crowd probably wondered how all these words applied to them. They did not belong to the inner circle. They did not know as much about the Lord and His commandments as the Twelve. We might ask the same question.

We might conclude that this is a case of "It's not always about me." But that's not completely true. The words of the Lord apply to every believer. We are His servants. We have our own responsibilities. We know many of the things He requires of us.

When He comes, He will judge us based upon the knowledge we had and how faithful we were to what we knew He wanted us to do. ■



Ken Yates is a retired Army chaplain (Lt. Col). He has many theological degrees, including a Ph.D. from D.T.S. in New Testament. He leads the GES international ministry, cohosts the daily podcast, and assists Bob in all aspects of the GES ministry. His new book, *Mark: Lessons in Discipleship*, is a wonderful explanation of Christ's call to discipleship. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC.



WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?



David Renfro and Bob



Lunch with Buzzy and Patsy, along with Lou and Doyle



Bob and Sharon celebrate their fiftieth at the Don CeSar hotel in St. Pete, FL



GOTC meeting with authors and editors

Ken and Isabella at Bayside Community Church. Isabella is a homeschooled young lady who told Ken that she never had assurance of her salvation until she found GES. GES has "changed her life forever."



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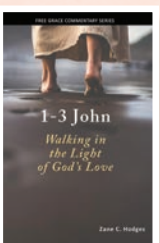
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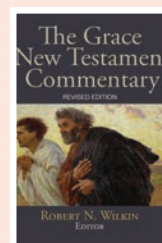
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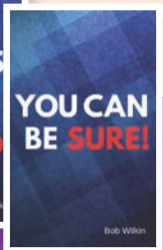
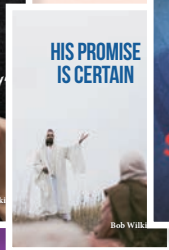
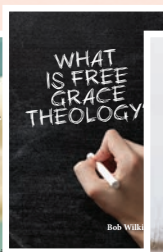
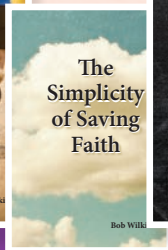
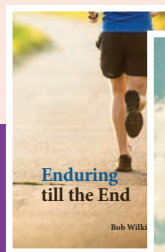
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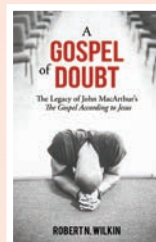
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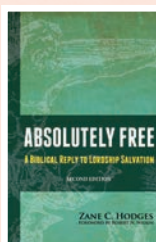
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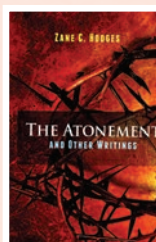
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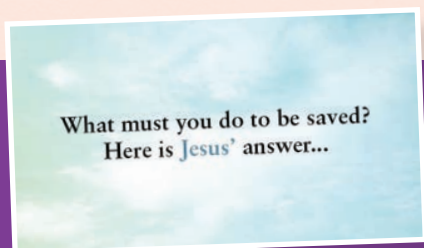
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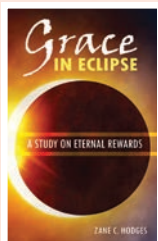
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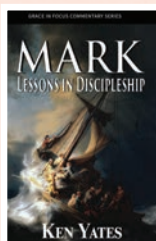


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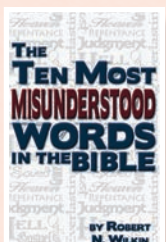


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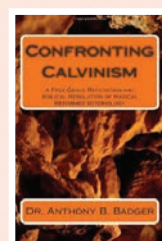


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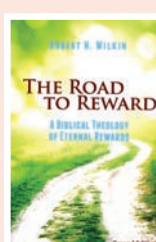


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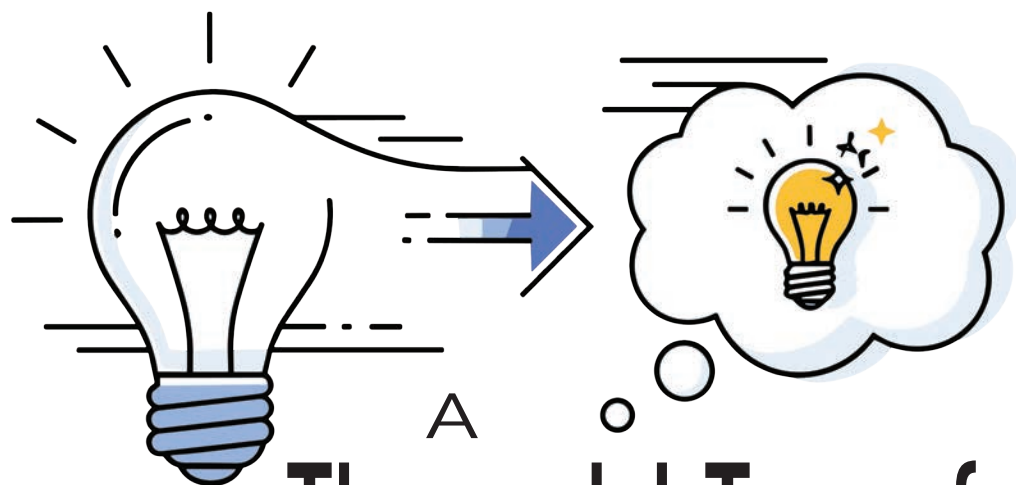
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Thought-Transforming Phrase

By Kathryn Wright

INTRODUCTION

Some phrases are designed not to answer questions, but to end them. Psychologists refer to these expressions as “thought-terminating phrases.” For example, a parent may retort, “Because I said so,” or “You’ll understand when you’re older,” to end a discussion with their child. Or one of these phrases may be used in moments of distress, such as “That’s just the way life is,” or simply “Let go, and let God,” to relieve mental discomfort.

Unfortunately, Bible verses are sometimes used as thought-terminating phrases. Rather than inviting further questions, verses are quoted to quash further discussion, allowing one to avoid the work of rightly dividing the Word of Truth (2 Tim 2:15) or answering the hard questions. Often, these verses are cherry-picked out of their context and repeated as religious slogans. Sayings such as, “Touch not the Lord’s anointed,” or, “Even the demons believe,” are used as catch-all answers. Rather than inviting careful study, they are deployed to end discussion and even to assert unquestionable authority.

HIS WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

Perhaps one of the most popular thought-terminating verses is found in Isa 55:8-9:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

These verses are often used in Christian discussions or sermons about trusting the Lord during difficult seasons. For example, they may be quoted following an unexpected death or health crisis. The passage is used to alleviate the mental stress of the unknown and to encourage trust in God. Additionally, scholars often appeal to these verses to emphasize God’s infinite wisdom and sovereignty. These verses are used to support the notion that since God’s ways are higher, they are therefore *beyond human reasoning*. In short, these verses become a catch-all explanation for seeming theological mysteries. Wayne Grudem writes:

We can tolerate a paradox, or mystery, in Christian theology (such as “God is three persons and one God”), because we have confidence that ultimately God knows fully the truth about Himself and about the nature of reality, and that in his understanding, the different elements of a paradox are fully reconciled, *even though at this point God’s thoughts*

are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9,ⁱ (emphasis added).

Certainly, there are mysteries in Scripture. However, the appeal to Isa 55:8-9 is problematic, as it is often invoked to justify so-called mysteries, even unbiblical ones. In practice, the passage functions as a theological conversation-stopper. If doctrines such as election, predestination, or limited atonement appear contradictory, unjust, or difficult to reconcile with other Biblical statements, the response becomes, “God's ways are higher than our ways.” Thus, Isa 55:8-9 has been used to cover a multitude of theological contradictions. These factors invite the obvious question: Is that what Isaiah is talking about?

THE CONTEXT OF ISAIAH 55

Throughout the chapter, the Lord repeatedly calls people to come to Him, listen, and receive His blessing. The emphasis is not on trusting God in trials or on God's ineffability; rather (and ironically), it's on His *accessibility*. For example, in v 1, the readers are invited to come and drink. In v 3, they are admonished to “Incline your ear and come to Me.” Then again, in vv 6-7, the readers are encouraged to:

Seek the LORD while He may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the **wicked forsake his way**,

And the **unrighteous man his thoughts**;
Let him **return** to the LORD,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon (emphasis added).

In the seven verses preceding our primary text, Isaiah 55 repeatedly invites the audience into closer intimacy with the Lord. Notably, many understand these verses as referring to eternal salvation. John Oswalt, for example, writes:

A person's ways are one's patterns or behavior, and those must be changed *if one is ever to live with the God of the*

Bible. He makes it plain that faith in him without a life like his is not faith at all... genuine *change of behavior* without an accompanying change of values and perceptions is impossible. Sin is ultimately a matter of attitude. However superficially ‘righteous’ a person may be, if one persists in imagining that one can live independently from God, then that person is profoundly unrighteousⁱⁱ emphasis added.

Making repentance and transformed behavior part of the saving message is a common way of understanding the chapter. Of course, this is incorrect, as it contradicts the free offer of eternal life by faith alone in Jesus (John 3:16; 4:10, 14; 5:24; 6:40). The unbeliever is not called to change their behavior in order to receive the gift of eternal life. That must be received by faith, and faith alone. Rather than being salvific, Isaiah 55 should be understood in its national context. Bob Wilkin writes:

Because Isa 55:7 mentions God pardoning and having mercy on those who forsake their wicked ways, some see in this verse a suggestion that repentance is required for salvation from eternal condemnation. However, two factors call that conclusion into question. First, the idea of receiving pardon is associated with temporal blessings and curses...Second, this text is primarily corporate, not individual. It fits within the Old Testament motif that God curses disobedience and blesses obedience in His people, Israel. This is a call for everyone in the nation of Israel to repent and to be blessed.ⁱⁱⁱ

In short, this is not a passage about eternal salvation, but about the nation's fellowship with the Lord. The nation of Israel was being called back into an abiding relationship with their God. For reconciliation to occur, the wicked—those not living righteously—needed to forsake their evil ways and thoughts. Thus, the Lord's

thoughts and ways in vv 8-9 are understood to contrast with the *wicked* man's thoughts and ways in v 7. This is key to understanding and properly applying vv 8-9. Isaiah is not making a universal statement that human beings are incapable of understanding God. In addition, he is not addressing God's sovereignty, how mankind should respond to theological mysteries, or even how to face trials. Rather, he is confronting rebellious people whose thinking was out of step with the Lord. The contrast is not mankind vs. God. Rather, it is the wicked man's ways and thoughts in contrast to the Lord's ways and thoughts.

The parallelism is that Israel's ways and thoughts at that time were not in line with God's ways. That is precisely why they are being called to repentance. The Lord is not inaccessible, nor does the chapter portray God as distant, unknowable, or beyond discovery. The repeated invitations throughout Isaiah 55 assume the opposite. Far from telling the nation to stop thinking, the Lord is calling them to walk and think differently.

CONCLUSION

The God of the Bible does not call people to intellectual termination. Rather, Scripture consistently calls believers to grow in their understanding. Believers are urged to have minds that are renewed and transformed (Rom 12:1-2). They are commended for examining what they hear (Acts 17:11), for rightly dividing the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15), and for pressing beyond milk to the meat of Scripture (Heb 5:12-14). Peter instructs believers to add knowledge to their faith (2 Pet 1:5), and the psalmist repeatedly speaks of his desire to learn and know the *ways* of the Lord (Ps 119:15, 27, 33-40, 98-104, 144, 155). Our Savior does not seek brainless drones but invites us to come and learn from Him.

Yet tragically, Scripture itself is sometimes used as a thought-terminating tool. That is not the intent of Scripture, nor the desire of its Author.



The God of the Bible invites examination, rewards diligent study, and calls His people to know Him. Isaiah 55 was an invitation to restore intimacy, to seek, to hear, and to return. The point is not that God is some mystical, unknowable deity, aloof from His creation like the pagan gods of Isaiah's day. In fact, that is one of the misperceptions that Isaiah was trying to refute. The Holy One of Israel was and is knowable. He desires His people to come to Him, hear His words, learn His ways, and have their minds transformed. It is a sad irony that while Isa 55:8-9 is often treated as a thought-terminating phrase, it was originally meant as a thought-transforming phrase. ■



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

ⁱ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 13.

ⁱⁱ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 444.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert N. Wilkin, "Repentance and Salvation in the Old Testament," Grace Evangelical Society accessed June 10, 2026.



Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield, Ohio, where the movie *"The Shawshank Redemption"* was filmed

Lovable but Tragic Brooksie

By Ken Yates

INTRODUCTION

The movie *The Shawshank Redemption* centers around a prison in Maine. One of the convicts is an elderly man named Brooks. Everyone likes him, and he is affectionately called Brooksie. He will spend approximately fifty years in Shawshank.

While he is in prison, Brooksie is very content. He runs the library and delivers books to the other inmates. He cares for abandoned birds found within its walls, feeding them worms he can scrounge. When others have questions about life in Shawshank, they ask Brooksie. He is respected and is an elder statesman among the prisoners.

WHERE ARE THE BARS?

The director wants the moviegoer to see Brooksie in an unusual light. Brooksie is lovable and acts like a man who doesn't even realize he's in prison. We see the other prisoners in their cells, behind bars, but never Brooksie. He is seen pushing his library cart full of books, feeding birds, working in the library, or eating dinner. He tells humorous stories about the prison guards that make other

prisoners laugh, giving them a brief respite from their imprisonment. It is as if Brooksie is not a prisoner at all.

When Brooksie is told he will be released, he responds in a very surprising way. He does everything in his power to remain in prison. He does not want to be free. When his friends try to figure out why, one of his closest friends explains Brooksie's response.

The friend says that Brooksie has become institutionalized. After fifty years behind the prison walls, Brooksie has come to love them. He feels comfortable there and does not want to live anywhere else. In prison, Brooksie does not see himself as a prisoner behind bars.

SET FREE

Despite his best efforts, Brooksie is released and departs through Shawshank's main gate. He catches a bus to a nearby town where he is given a job at a supermarket bagging groceries. He wants to please his boss but feels like a fish out of water. The world has changed during the fifty years he was

in prison, and he doesn't know how to act. He comments that before he went to prison, he had seen a car "once." Now, they're everywhere, and everybody is in such a big hurry.

At night, Brooksie has nightmares and can't sleep. He dreams he is back in Shawshank. During the day, he goes to a local park and feeds the birds, hoping to see one he cared for while in prison. He writes his friends at Shawshank and tells them he is afraid all the time. He jokingly says he's thinking of killing his boss at work so they'll send him back to where he belongs.

The stress is too much. Before Brooksie takes his own life, the moviegoer sees his face through a lattice. It is the only time in the movie that Brooksie appears behind bars.

It is a dramatic statement. The man who had been set free wanted to return to prison. He was still behind bars and wanted to die that way.

A BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATION

Brooksie's story in *The Shawshank Redemption* is like a parable that teaches Biblical truths. His life in prison is a picture of the life of an unbeliever.

An unbeliever is someone who has never believed in Jesus for eternal life. Not only does he lack eternal life, but he also lacks the Holy Spirit living within him (Rom 8:9). He is very much like a prisoner. As an unbeliever, the Bible says he is a slave to sin. He is imprisoned, even though he does not know or act like it. He likes the situation he finds himself in (John 3:19; 8:34).

When a person believes in Jesus Christ for eternal life, he not only receives that gift but is now also able to walk according to the Spirit. Paul refers to it as being set free from slavery. It is like a prisoner walking out of prison (Rom 6:18).

The unbeliever can serve only the power of sin. Sin leads to death. The unbeliever is a slave to sin and death (Rom 6:17). But the believer who



walks according to the Spirit experiences freedom from the power of sin. Paul says, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2). The Lord, speaking to a group of new believers, told them that if they obeyed Him, they would live like those who had been set free (John 8:31-32).

While in Shawshank, Brooksie was a picture of the unbeliever. He was imprisoned, even though he acted like he was free. He enjoyed the bondage he was in. He did not even want to be released.

But Brooksie also becomes a picture of a new believer. He is set free from the walls and bars that imprisoned him. But what will he do with that freedom?

WE HAVE A CHOICE

The new believer has eternal life that he can never lose. But he can choose not to walk in the freedom he has in Christ. He can decide to walk according to the flesh and live the way he did as an imprisoned unbeliever.

Both Paul and Peter warn believers of this possibility. Peter says that the believer will be a slave to sin if he lets it master him (2 Pet 2:19). Paul says the believer is a slave to whomever he presents himself as such. If he obeys sin, he is a slave to sin (Rom 6:14-16). He warns believers not to set their minds on the things of the flesh (Rom 8:5).



Brooksie set his mind on the bondage he left behind. Even though he had been set free from Shawshank, he preferred the life of captivity behind bars to the freedom he was offered. He was a free man, but did not live like it. In an ironic twist, a free man preferred to be behind bars. The director of the movie communicates that by showing Brooksie's face behind the lattice bars just before he dies.



A believer can be just like that. Even though he has been set free, he may not understand the wondrous freedom he has been given. He should love that freedom and live in light of it by asking the Spirit to set him free from the bars behind which he formerly lived. That kind of life leads to a life transformed into the image of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Brooksie is the most lovable character in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Everybody likes him. But he is a tragic figure. Set free after fifty years of imprisonment, he did not take advantage of his freedom. The last image of him shows that virtually, he was still behind bars. This attitude led to his death.

The believer can be like Brooksie. Christ broke the power of sin for us. He set us free from having to serve it, giving us the power to do so by the Holy Spirit who lives within us. But we can reject that freedom and place ourselves behind bars. We can live by the flesh instead of by the Spirit.

Believers can never lose eternal life. But if they allow themselves to live behind the bars of the power of sin, they will be like Brooksie. It might even kill them. ■

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.

Was John MacArthur Ever Free Grace?ⁱ

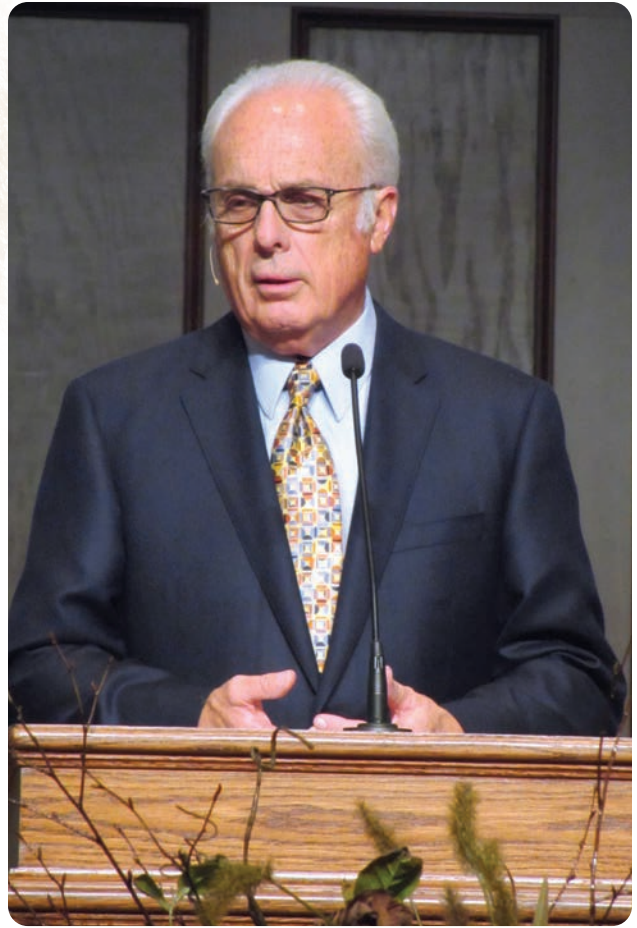
By Bob Wilkin

Dr. John MacArthur, author of *The Gospel According to Jesus*, founder and for many years president of both The Master's Seminary and The Master's University, famed radio speaker on *Grace to You*, and pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, died last summer. He was eighty-six.

He was so well known that *USA Today* published a major online article detailing the failing health that led to his death. His death was big news around the world.

Although I strongly disagree with Lordship Salvation, I greatly appreciate MacArthur's conservative views on things such as inerrancy, verse-by-verse Bible exposition, young-earth creationism, the worldwide Flood, marriage and the family, etc.

For years, I prayed for John MacArthur and his various ministries. My desire had been for him to return to the Free Grace position (and for the Lord to use MacArthur's sound teachings). Before



1980, he held a Free Grace view of salvation. Then he went on a sabbatical during which he studied the writings of the Puritans, who were English Calvinists. He became a Calvinist, though he did not advertise that for a long time. He and Dr. John Piper discussed this during a panel discussion in 2022.ⁱⁱ MacArthur confirmed that he was a five-point Calvinist but that he had kept that to himself for a long time.

At the 1989 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Diego, I met five people who had been members of MacArthur's church for over twenty years. They said that before his 1980 sabbatical, he preached the simple faith-alone message. After returning, he preached a five-year series on Matthew in which he introduced Calvinist Lordship Salvation.

The result was his 1988 book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

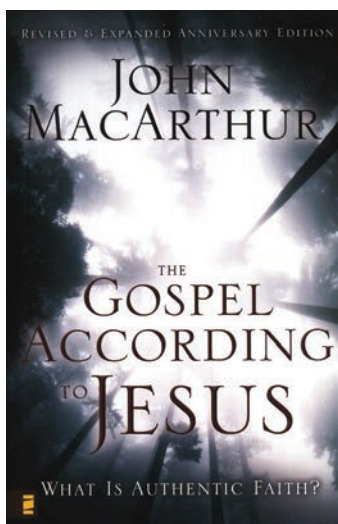
If he ever believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for the gift of everlasting life—and I’m convinced by his own words and those of others that he didⁱⁱⁱ—then he is with the Lord now. Nothing can cause a believer to lose everlasting life. Perseverance is not a requirement for guaranteed future access to Christ’s kingdom.^{iv} That is good news for John MacArthur and for all. The Calvinist doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is a lie. But believing and even teaching that lie cannot cancel the glorious promise of everlasting life to all who have ever simply believed in the Lord Jesus Christ!

It is ironic that Lordship Salvation people denounce the very theology that is the only way they can be saved. If Lordship Salvation were true, then no one would enter heaven when they died. We all sin every day, if not every hour (Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8, 10). Believing in Jesus is not turning from sins, committing, obeying, and persevering. It is simply being persuaded that He guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him (John 11:25-27).

According to Lordship Salvation, Free Grace people will likely not make it to heaven because they don’t believe the true saving message (i.e., the Lordship Salvation gospel), and they lack sufficient good works to show they have persevered.

According to the Lord Jesus Christ, anyone who ever believed in Him for everlasting life has that life forever, even if he later becomes a Catholic or Calvinist—or even an agnostic or atheist. Once a person is saved, he is saved forever.

Every believer will be evaluated at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-10). We will all have to give an account. Those who were teaching elders will incur “a stricter judgment” (Jas 3:1) because



they did more teaching than others in the Body of Christ. That is especially true of people like John MacArthur, who taught millions worldwide.

But accountability is not the same as eternal destiny. Because John 3:16 is true, everyone at the Judgment Seat of Christ will spend eternity with the Lord in His kingdom. Once people believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, they are guaranteed never to perish but instead to have everlasting life that can never be lost. That is truly good news.

I don’t know how much fellowship goes on in heaven. I bet a lot. We aren’t told in Scripture what believers are doing there. We know that “to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8). It is possible that sometime this past year, Zane Hodges and John MacArthur had a chance to talk. Any differences they had in this life are gone now. ■



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

ⁱ I don’t discuss MacArthur’s morality in this article because that isn’t an issue in regeneration. He seemed to have been a very moral person throughout his ministry. But even if he was a secret scoundrel, he’d be with the Lord if he ever believed in Jesus for everlasting life.

ⁱⁱ This discussion occurs around the 10:30 mark of this video: A Conversation with John Piper & John MacArthur: 2022: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHdb1kdSIN4>.

ⁱⁱⁱ I remember several messages by Dr. MacArthur in which he said that when he was a student at Biola and later at Talbot, and early in his ministry at Grace Community Church, he did not hold to Lordship Salvation. He did not believe that those who fell away proved they were never saved in the first place. And I met people who confirmed that. As mentioned earlier in this article, I met people in 1989 who’d been in his church for over twenty years, and they said he once believed and taught the faith-alone message.

^{iv} Calvinism teaches that only those who persevere in faith and good works will enter Christ’s kingdom. Perseverance in faith includes continuing to believe the saving message. According to Calvinism, if someone departs from the faith regarding salvation, then he will not go to heaven when he dies.

The Sent Witness:

A Drama in Three Acts

By Barbara E. Johnson



The purpose of a witness is to establish truth. To support the evangelist's mission—that the reader "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing...may have life in His name" (20:31) John uses credible witnesses to prove his claim. In his book, *Jesus the Evangelist*, Richard Phillips lists eight witnesses:

1. The Father (8:18).
2. Jesus Himself (8:14).
3. The Holy Spirit (15:26).
4. Jesus' works (10:25).
5. The Hebrew Scripture (5:39).
6. John the Baptist (1:6-7).
7. Jesus' disciples (15:27).
8. The men and women who encountered Jesus (4:29; 9:25).

Looking for key words used by the men who authored the books of the Bible is a crucial step in Bible study. Repeated words or phrases are often used to draw attention to the main idea of a passage or book. A favorite statistic in Free Grace circles is the number of times the word *believe* occurs in the Gospel of John—one hundred times in the Majority Text, and ninety-nine in the Critical Text.

Do you know what John's second most frequently used word is? *Witness*. The verb *martureō*, translated "to bear witness" or "to testify," and

the noun *marturia*, translated *witness* or *testimony*, are used forty-seven times by John. The apostle was shining a spotlight on this concept.

Koine Keeper:

We get the English word *martyr* from *martureō*.

A martyr is a person who sealed his testimony with his life.

The Samaritan woman in John 4 is well known as a witness. She excitedly went throughout her city asking all who would listen, "Could this be the Christ?" (4:29). The man born blind (John 9) is rarely mentioned as a witness to Jesus' identity. More attention is paid to his miraculous healing than to the events that follow, but it can be argued that his healing is not the only focus of the account.

THE CONTEXT

John 9 is better understood in light of chapter 8. While teaching in the temple, Jesus identified

Himself as “the light of the world” (8:12), and told His listeners that those who followed, i.e., believed in Him, would “not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” (8:12). A group of Pharisees rejected the witness of both Jesus and the Father who sent Him, asking Him two crucial questions: “Where is Your Father?” (8:19) and, “Who are You?” (8:25).

Though “many believed in Him” (8:30), these Pharisees did not. When Jesus told them, “You are of your father the devil” (8:44), they responded that He had a demon. Finally, after Jesus clearly identified Himself, saying, “before Abraham was, I AM” (8:58), they came close to stoning Him. The Pharisees knew who He said He was, but they did not believe in Him.

ACT I: ANOINTING AND HEALING

Jesus’ encounter with the blind man in chapter 9 occurred immediately after He left the temple. Spying the blind man by the roadside, the Lord seized the opportunity to use another method to reveal who He was to the Jewish leaders. As with the Samaritan woman, the Lord initiated the interaction with the blind man. The blind man had not asked Jesus to heal him. But since His time as “the light of the world” was short, Jesus saw the blind man’s condition as an opportunity to reveal the “works of God.”

Why did Jesus heal the blind man by smearing the mixture of saliva and dirt on his eyes? Was it for medicinal purposes? Was He purposely violating Sabbath traditions? There is another option.

John uses the word *epichriō*, which is often translated “smear” or “rub,” but is translated “anoint” in the KJV and NKJV. The word is found only here in John’s Gospel. Its cognate, *chriō* (anoint), occurs sixty times in the Septuagint and five times in the NT, and means “to assign a person to a task, with the implication of supernatural sanctions, blessing, and endowment” (Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 483-484). Jesus used *chriō* when He described His messianic mission: “to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18). In choosing *epichriō*, John may have deliberately employed a literary device known as “double meaning.” Jesus was not only healing

the blind man but was also “anointing” the man for a special task.

The author uses words with two meanings, both of which may be applicable. He probably did not intend to present an either/or situation wherein commentators and Christians must make a choice of one meaning. Rather, he employs a distinctive device, where both meanings of the word apply (Wead, *Literary Devices*, 38).

Consider, too, John’s comment that “Siloam... is translated, Sent” (9:7). Jesus referred to being *sent* by His Father in 9:4,ⁱ then appointed this blind man as His proxy. He anointed the eyes of the blind man and sent him forth on a special mission via the pool of Siloam: to testify about who Jesus is to his neighbors and to the Jewish leaders themselves.

As the blind beggar made his way to the pool, whom did he encounter? Did he enlist anyone’s help in finding the pool? Did he tell them about Jesus’ instructions? We don’t know; John simply reports, “So he went and washed, and came back seeing” (9:7).

ACT II: THE WITNESS OF THE FORMERLY BLIND MAN

The protagonist in Act II, John 9:8-34, is the man who has been healed. Jesus has moved from center stage. As in chapter 8, the various encounters are composed of a series of questions, but the only question that really matters is the one asked by the Pharisees in 8:25: “Who are You?”

His neighbors and the other onlookers quiz the formerly blind man, asking *how* and *where*. Still early in his mission, he describes Jesus as “a Man.” Physically healed, he has cloudy spiritual sight.

The Pharisees are also confused, arguing amongst themselves. Despite what Jesus had testified about Himself in chapter 8—that He “came from God”—some continue to accuse Him of being a sinner. They too ask *how* and *what*—the wrong questions. Ironically, they turn to the healed man for enlightenment. His answer: “He is

a prophet.” The formerly blind man is beginning to see spiritual matters more clearly.

Fearful of being put out of the synagogue, the man’s parents ask no questions at all, showing no desire to know the identity of their son’s healer. But their son boldly reminds the leaders of the uniquely messianic nature of his healing. Incensed and perhaps ashamed that the formerly blind beggar is schooling them, they cast him out. They reject his witness.

ACT III: THE FORMERLY BLIND MAN HAS SPIRITUAL SIGHT

It is safe to assume that the crowds, along with some of the Pharisees who had been present during His temple inquisition, were still milling around the man, witnessing this interaction with Jesus in verses 35-41.

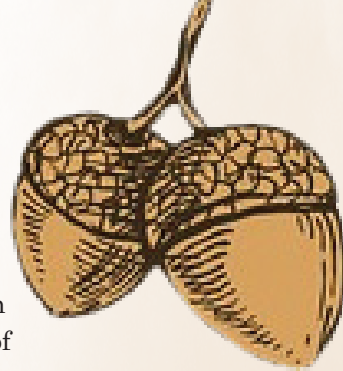
Jesus did not abandon the man after the Jewish leaders rejected him. Reentering the narrative and recognizing the man’s open heart, Jesus fills it with more truth. The Pharisees had asked His identity, and Jesus had responded cryptically. Now, He answers plainly and identifies Himself as the Messiah. Unlike the Jewish leaders, the man responds properly. He believes and worships Jesus, a witness to all who watch; he has truly seen the Light.

Was this an offer of eternal salvation? The evidence points to a regenerated OT believer who had already believed in the coming Messiah for everlasting life, especially when compared to Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well:

- The healed man was alone as his spiritual sight moved from seeing Jesus as a Man, to seeing Him as a prophet, to seeing Him as being sent from God.
- Though identifying Himself as the Son of God (or Son of Man as in the Critical Text), Jesus did not mention everlasting life in His question. This would be a serious omission on His part if this was an evangelistic encounter.

The doctrine of illumination does not receive much attention today, but it was on display in the life of the healed man if he was an OT believer. If so,

he experienced the privilege of having the Holy Spirit work in his life to bring him the light of more understanding. If a new believer, he received both life and light in the presence of many witnesses.



Editors would probably advise their writers to end the account on a high note here, but the antagonists have not yet been dealt with. In this epilogue, Jesus interpreted the narrative, contrasting the healed man’s response with that of the Pharisees who had overheard. The judgment in this case is not something Jesus imposed but was the result of their unbelief. Blindness was no longer physical, but spiritual. Recognizing themselves in Jesus’ statement, the Pharisees’ consciences were pricked. Jesus recognized that in their hearts, they denied the truth and refused to see the evidence in the healed man’s witness. The guilt of their sin of unbelief remains.

CONCLUSION

As amazing as it was, the blind man’s healing was only the beginning of his transformation. Jesus anointed him for a task: to testify to His identity. He is an example for all church-age believers who are called to be lights of the world (Matt 5:16; cf. Phil 2:15). John’s Gospel presents the man as courageous and outspoken, resulting in persecution. But the author ultimately points not to the former blind man, but to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, who promises everlasting life to all who believe in Him. Jesus is the hero of every Gospel narrative. ■



Barbara Johnson is a Grace Evangelical Theological Seminary student, Bible teacher and grandmother of five. She resides in Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin.

¹ Greek has several verbs that are used for the idea of *sending*. Jesus used *pempō* when He spoke of the One who *sent* Him. John used *apostellō* when he wrote that Siloam means *sent*.



Present Sacrifice for Future Reward

By Dan Strathman

INTRODUCTION

Jesus taught His disciples that those who seek to save their *lives* will lose their *lives*, and those who lose their *lives* will save their *lives* (Matt 16:24-27).ⁱ Though this paradoxical statement seems simple enough on the surface, interpreting the passage becomes a bit more challenging if we ask, *Saved in what way?* or What does Jesus mean by "life" (*psychē*)?

One of these challenges is determining the intended meaning of the word *psychē*. Popular translations such as the NKJV, NASB, KJV, NIV, and ESV render *psychē* as *life* in v 25 and *soul* in v 26, though half of all translations render *psychē* as *life* in both verses (e.g., RSV, NET, HCSB, ASV, LEB, WEB).ⁱⁱ Translating *psychē* as "soul" tends to evoke a transcendent or spiritual sense that

the context does not appear to support. Indeed, this example of a single word's semantic flexibility reinforces our appreciation of the need to examine the finer details of the context in which a word occurs. Regarding *psychē*, BDAG notes: "[it] is often impossible to draw hard and fast lines in the use of this multivalent word."ⁱⁱⁱ

Therefore, the immediate context of the passage is essential to discerning the meaning of Jesus' words. In fact, nothing in the immediate context supports the notion that possible outcomes of saving or losing one's life have anything to do with a positional matter; that is, with one's eternal destiny. Instead, in this passage, the term relates to the believer's *experience of life*, both present (Matt 16:25) and future (Matt 16:26). This article examines the common positional view before presenting a more consistent experiential view.

THE POSITIONAL VIEW: EVERLASTING LIFE

Three popular commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew exemplify the common perspective that the matter referred to here is positional rather than experiential.

Charles Quarles notes:

...though discipleship was free, it was still very costly. Discipleship required more than a casual desire to follow Jesus. Following Jesus required self-denial.^{iv}

This initial exposition of the passage is on the right track, as the pattern of self-denial modeled by Christ is indeed a point of emphasis. However, Quarles's further explanation veers off the mark. He continues by stating of the disciples: "[in] their effort to save their physical lives [from martyrdom], they will forfeit *eternal life*."^v So, in Quarles's view, saving one's life—in other words, failing to achieve a sufficient standard of self-denial—results in a forfeiture of *everlasting life*.

Though somewhat more subtle, Richard France takes a similar position, inferring that the *true* life referred to here deals with one's eternal destiny. He explains:

Koine Keeper:

The expression *everlasting life* (*zōēn aiōnion*) occurs 17 times in John's Gospel, but only three times in Matthew, once in reference to fullness of eternal life in the life to come (Matt 19:29). The unmodified term *life* is used by the Lord in Matthew to refer to physical life (e.g., Matt 6:25, 27), eternal life (e.g., Matt 7:14; 18:8, 9; 19:17; 25:46), and to fullness of life in the life to come.

[the] loss of that person's true *psychē* is described as "forfeit," a term...perhaps intended to make the reader think of the judgment of God which determines the person's ultimate destiny.^{vi}

Ulrich Luz, in another popular commentary on Matthew, plainly explains that "[life] will be given to the follower of Jesus on the other side of death."^{vii} This, of course, is correct, and is a natural conclusion to draw from a plain reading of this passage, but this statement alone does not clarify precisely the exact nature of the *life* that is given. Luz's further explanation shows that he, like the previously mentioned commentators, frames the passage as addressing the positional matter of everlasting life. This is shown in his basing his argument on a claim that Matt 7:21 is a parallel passage. He explains that both passages teach "the principle that simply saying 'Lord, Lord' will not help in the judgment of the Son of Man (7:21)."^{viii} The problem with this view is that there is nothing in the immediate context of Matt 16:24-27 to suggest that Matt 7:21 is a parallel. The only supposed linkage would come from a theological presupposition. Despite its popularity, this positional interpretation faces significant logical difficulties.

ERRORS WITH THE POSITIONAL VIEW

The problem with all three perspectives is that they overlook some of the finer details of the immediate context in favor of an assumed theological conclusion that a positional matter is at issue. This is a confirmation bias whose conclusion cannot harmonize with *all* the details in the passage. But if we assume—for the sake of argument—that the passage does deal with a positional matter, we will see that this interpretation breaks down.



If *life* is taken to be *everlasting life*, then v 26 could be understood as dealing with one who “gains the whole world” but “loses his own [everlasting] life” (Matt 16:26a), also implying that much must be given in exchange for “his [everlasting] life” (Matt 16:26b).

However, that view of v 26 contradicts the faith-alone message in the Gospel of John and the entire Bible.

Additionally, if we apply this reasoning to the preceding verse, it becomes logically strained. Verse 25 would then mean that “whoever desires to save his [everlasting] life will lose [everlasting life],” and the one who “loses his [everlasting] life ... will find [everlasting life]” (Matt 16:25). So, to find everlasting life, one must lose it first? That would be logically impossible.

Another problem with the positional view is that it commits a category error^{ix} regarding Matt 16:25b, as shown by another subtle, but crucial, detail. Jesus says, “... but whoever loses his *life* for My sake will find *it*.” So, the *same* life that a follower of Jesus loses for His sake is then later found. The life found belongs to the same category as the life lost. To say one loses one’s physical and earthly life (experiential) to find a spiritual and everlasting life (positional) does not fit. They are not in the same category of life. Therefore, both logically and categorically, the *life* discussed in Matt 16:25-26 cannot be everlasting life. If it is not, what kind of *life* is it?

THE EXPERIENTIAL VIEW: ETERNAL REWARD

Instead, an experiential sense of *life* is evident in these passages, though the temporal context differs. The contrast is drawn between the present experience and a future experience of life. The eschatological shift is evident in v 27. Jesus employs a paradoxical use of *psychē* for rhetorical effect, expressing a contrast through a shift in temporal context.^x Those disciples seeking to *save* their present experience of *life* will lose at least some aspect of the experience of *life* in the future. Conversely, those disciples who lose some aspect of their present experience of life in service to Christ will save themselves from a loss of such experience in the future.



Hal Haller's explanation maintains a consistent understanding of *life* potentially lost or found (Matt 16:25b). To save one's life in this context "refers to deliverance from a wasted life to a life of heightened satisfaction ... in the coming millennial kingdom."^{xi}

Stuart Weber also recognizes this as a rewards passage, rightly noting: "**Each person** does not mean only those disciples who will be rewarded, but also those who seek the world and end up forfeiting their lives."^{xii} This is appropriate because, if the experiential view is correct, when the Lord returns in His glory, both those who lose and those who find their lives will be present and will be paid commensurate with their works.

Therefore, this is a rewards passage connected to Christ's return in His glory. There are *future* consequences because of *present choices*. A believer has the choice of whether or not to follow Christ's example of self-denial. The believer who does not follow His example by denying oneself, taking up one's (metaphorical) cross, and following Him, will forfeit the reward of a fuller experience of life when He returns in glory. ■



Dan Strathman is the Chief of Staff for the Grace Evangelical Society. He is also a GETS M.Div student and pursuing a Ph.D at Liberty University. He and his wife, Ellie, have two daughters, Zoe and Isabelle.

ⁱ See also Mark 8:34-38 for Mark's parallel account of this interaction.

ⁱⁱ See BibleGateway.com, which shows thirty-one translations as rendering *psychē* as *life* in both vv 25 and 26 and thirty-two as rendering *psychē* as *life* in v 25 and *soul* in v 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ BDAG, s.v. *psychē*.

^{iv} Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 423.

^v *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

^{vi} Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 458.

^{vii} Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 383.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} A *category error*—a term used in formal logic—occurs when something is assigned to the wrong conceptual category.

^x Specifically, this appears to be an example of *antanaclasis* where a "repetition of a word or phrase whose meaning changes in the second instance." See *Silva Rhetoricae* at <https://rhetoric.byu.edu/>.

^{xi} Hal M. Haller Jr., "Matthew," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin, vol. 1 (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 76.

^{xii} Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, ed. Max Anders, vol. 1, *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 257.

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