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New and Old: The Parables of Matthew 9:15-17

By Joe McKeever

No one knows exactly how many parables Jesus used. We don’t even know how many we have in the Gospels for the simple reason that everyone can’t seem to agree on what a parable actually is.

The stories—“*a certain man had two sons,*” and that sort of thing—are clear enough and no one argues that they fit the genre. But how about Matthew 9:15-17? Is this a parable? Is it three parables?

Bear in mind that in the famous 15th chapter of Luke where we have Jesus’ parables on the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost boy (i.e., the prodigal son), Luke introduces them with, “*Jesus told them this parable.*” He says it like all these are just one story.

So, let’s approach the three illustrations of Matthew 9:15-17 as one entity. After all, the Lord gave them all in answer to one question.

When we begin to look at a parable, bear in mind that unless we establish what question the Lord is answering, it will be meaningless.

In this case, there are two questions. One is from the disciples of John the Baptist and the other is the broader question behind it, one with meaning for us.

Two Questions

1) “*Then the disciples of John came to Him saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’*” (Matt. 9:14).

No one enjoys fasting. It’s easier to eat and better to keep one’s strength up. The Pharisees had made a career of fasting. They did it on Mondays and Thursdays, refraining from food but not drink. And if they are the hypocrites Jesus mentioned in Matthew 6:16, they made sure everyone knew they were fasting by their facial expressions. These guys were proud of their humility!

John’s disciples fasted too. We’re not told how often. Doubtless, if they took their lead from their master, they were fasting in anticipation of the coming ministry of the Messiah.

On the surface, the question from John’s disciples carries a little irritation (envy?) with it. “Why do we have to do all this hard stuff and your disciples get off easy?”

2) The question behind the question. Judging by the three-fold answer our Lord gave, the larger question—not that the disciples of John realized it at the time—was, “Why don’t the old rules apply to this new thing God is doing?” Or, put another way: “Why isn’t Jesus obeying the established order? Why aren’t you staying with our program?”

That was an issue the Pharisees and also the early church contended with for a long time. The Pharisees and the ruling Sanhedrin were in the catbird seat, calling the shots, establishing how faithful Jews would be conducting themselves. So long as Jesus played by their rules, they would give Him no trouble. Alas, He didn’t. He healed people on the Sabbath, fasted only when He chose to and did not require it at all of His disciples, and received worship. In His preaching, He said, “*You have heard...but I say to you.*” He cited Himself as the authority, something bound to set off fireworks among the guardians of orthodoxy.

In the early Church, the matter of whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be saved (and thus become Christians) was critical. Those who answered, “Yes,” are called “Judaizers.” The implications were enormous. Imagine going to someone’s house to witness and informing the seeker that to be saved, he would have to be circumcised and start keeping the entire law. Good news of the Gospel? Hardly.

The first Church council, reported in Acts 15, was convened to settle that issue. Since the Lord had made clear both to Peter in Acts 10 and to Paul and Barnabas on their initial missionary journey that the answer was “absolutely not!” the church leaders made this official doctrine. (Give ‘em credit; they got it right.)

The Gospel of Christ was a new thing from Heaven. It was built on the teachings and prophecies of the law and the prophets, it had its correlations in the sacrificial system, its insights could be found in the typology of the

Tabernacle and the Temple, and this New Testament (i.e., New Covenant) would fit securely atop the Old Testament as its foundation, but this was a brand new thing God was up to. Make no mistake.

It would not be bound by the laws and rules which were all shadows, for which the Gospel is the substance. They were the rituals, for which the Gospel is the reality.

Three Answers

1) *“The members of the wedding party don’t mourn while the bridegroom is with them, do they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they can fast”* (Matt. 9:15).

Wedding parties gathered at the home of the bride. When the groom and his attendants arrived, the festivities began. In those days, these things seem to have lasted for days. No one fasted during this time. It was party time! Time to eat and enjoy themselves.

Finally, it was all over, the bride and groom left for their new home, and everyone quit eating and went to their own homes. That’s all He’s saying. You don’t mourn and fast when you ought to be rejoicing and feasting.

Can we pause here long enough to make the point that “Jesus thought He was someone special”? He did. He knew exactly who He was. Anyone doubting that should drop over to Matthew 11 and read verse 27: *“All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.”*

Once in a while we’ll find people dismissing Jesus’ claims of deity as the concoctions of the Apostle John, since his Gospel is so saturated with statements such as in 14:6, *“No one comes to the Father but through me.”* However, such critics are guilty of not reading the text they are criticizing. Matthew 11:27 is as strong as it gets.

Jesus is the bridegroom of this parable and it’s feasting time! (See John 3:29 where John the Baptist himself uses the analogy of the Messiah as the bridegroom.)

Interestingly, concerning fasting, the Lord seems to have assumed His disciples would be fasting at various times. However, He did not command it, but laid down a few principles on how it was to be done (See Matthew 6). We assume therefore it was strictly up to the individual. In my own life, the times when I have found fasting to be beneficial was when I was seeking direction from the Spirit in some matter and needed an answer.

2) *“But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results”* (Matt. 9:16).

It’s fun going over this with senior adults, because they remember. A couple of generations ago—we’re talking the 1950s now—so many magazine and newspaper ads for clothing would boast that “It’s Sanforized!” All that meant was that the material was pre-shrunk and one could

purchase the clothing in the size needed. Mothers were so used to buying clothing a size larger than needed since it would be shrinking with the first wash.

The point here is to simply say, “Combining these two—the old order and this new thing God is doing—will not work.” They are not compatible.

Our generation knows about compatibility. A new computer program comes out, and the first thing techies want to know is whether it’s compatible—whether it will fit and work—with the old system, or whether they’ll have to buy something entirely new.

The Gospel is not an add-on to the old system. It is a new order, a new way of life. This was the realization that engulfed every faithful Jew who turned to Christ in humility and faith. *“Old things are passed away; all things are made new”* (II Corinthians 5:17).

When Paul came to Christ—or to be more exact, when Christ came to Paul!—on the Damascus Road, over the next few days and weeks the reality of what this meant settled in on him. That’s why he tells us in Galatians 1 that he spent the better part of the next 3 years in the Arabian Desert with the Lord, presumably assimilating God’s new message and seeing how it grew out of the old one.

3) *“Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins and both are preserved”* (Matt. 9:17).

A friend of mine has formed a quartet in his church, with all four singers being senior adult men. When he said they needed a name, I suggested “Fine Wine” because it is “aged to perfection.” I liked the name, thought it rather clever, and it might have stuck, but his pastor shot it down in a heartbeat. “We’re Baptists,” he smiled. “We don’t drink wine.”

I understand that. I don’t drink it either. But it’s all through Scripture.

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that if we were allowed, many in our denomination would scissor out Jesus’ references to wine of any kind, old or new.

Some years ago, I wrote a pamphlet for a denominational agency, a facetious piece on “How to Justify Social Drinking from the Bible.” Not to belabor the point here—originally, I planned to make only a passing reference to this—but the end result of the article was that in those days, the worst that could happen to a fellow who had over-imbibed was to fall off his camel and break an arm. These days, a man drinks too much, gets behind the wheel of a high-powered automobile and takes out a family of five on the highway. There are good reasons aplenty for choosing to avoid all intoxicating beverages, and that includes beer and wine.

That said, the point of the parable is that new wine is still fermenting. It bubbles and expands and so its container must have some give and take.

Sheep bladders were sometimes used as bottles, we're told, but a wineskin would be a goatskin (and thus leather) that was tanned and sewn back together, leaving one opening. A new wineskin is soft and pliable.

An old wineskin has grown stiff and inflexible. There is no longer any give and take. Pour new fermenting wine into such a container and it would soon burst at the seams.

Flexibility has to be built into all kinds of systems. Skyscrapers must be able to sway with the wind, we're told. Likewise, bridges are built in sections with flexible joints so as they freeze or heat up, they can expand or contract as needed without compromising the integrity of the bridge. The implications of this particular parable (or one-third of a parable, if you prefer) for God's children are enormous.

How many people do you know who call themselves followers of Jesus are set in their ways? They want the same songs they grew up on and resist new ones (in clear violation of commands throughout Scripture to "*sing unto the Lord a new song*"!). They want the same organizations, the same methodology, and the same terminology. They resist new musical instruments, screens and projectors, and choruses. We facetiously say they are trying to recapture 1955.

As a senior adult myself—70 on my next birthday—I frequently remind my peers that the 1950s were not the Golden Age of the church some seem to remember. The pastors then were decrying the ungodly lives of church members, liberal doctrines in the denominational offices, and worldliness among leaders. In the meantime, racism was rampant even in our churches and the number of missionaries being sent across the world was a small fraction of the number going today.

As someone has said, "Nostalgia is not what it used to be. It never was."

When Luke gives his account of Jesus' teachings on wine and wineskins, he adds a word that needs to be said.

"And no one, after drinking old wine, wishes for new, for he says, 'The old is good enough'" (Luke 5:39).

Got that? It's an admission from our Lord of something we already knew: people like the old stuff, the

old ways, the familiar, the comfortable. We like our routines and treasure our ruts. My dad was angry when Mom and my siblings tossed out his old chair and replaced it with a new recliner. In fact, he resisted sitting in it for months before finally giving in. These days, we look at that chair and remember that wonderful old gentleman sitting in it, watching a ball-game on television, and get teary-eyed. We miss him so much. He came to love that chair.

This poses a challenge for God's pastors and other spiritual leaders. We are asking people to move out of their comfort zone and participate in the new thing God has for them. They're going to resist. Get used to the idea.

But we must not give in and go along to get along. Those who are leaders of the Lord's Church and preachers of the Word must keep the pressure on. Keep calling people to look up, to rise up, to stand up, to obey the Father and to stay alert for change.

Change—bad word, isn't it. But that's the point of new wineskins. They have to be flexible, changeable, and adaptable, otherwise they are worthless. That's why a lot of churches I know have died over the years. They resisted the Holy Spirit, they reacted against the changes coming into their world and they erected barriers that would protect their church. But it didn't work. Instead of protecting Truth, they resisted the Spirit, and God let them die.

"His mercies are new every morning," says Lamentations 3:22-23. Not only His mercies, His compassions, but also everything else about the Lord seems to be fresh and unspoiled with each new sunrise. God loves variety. He seems to have an innate dislike for doing the same thing twice, whether it's creating a fingerprint, a voiceprint, or the stripes on a zebra or tiger. There seems to be no limit to His creativity.

So you are a disciple of Jesus Christ? Good. Buckle your seatbelt, friend. It's going to be a great ride. Boring? Ha. You've got to be kidding. This is the adventure of a lifetime.

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Exegetically Speaking—More Parables of the Kingdom

(Matthew 13:24-33)

By Spiros Zodhiates

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The Wheat and the Tares

[24] Jesus gave this parable to teach us that we, "*the children of the kingdom*" (v. 38), cannot regulate all that is sown in the world. Our duty now is to scatter the

good seed, but the Lord will separate the good from the evil in His own time.

[25–29] Nevertheless, while we sow the good seed, "*enemies*" (*echthroí* [2190]) will sow "*tares*" (*zizánia* [2215], darnel or false grain) in our work. These plants, looking like corn or wheat with similar stalks and color, do not produce fruit. We may not discern the difference

between the wheat and tares now, but the angels can tell the difference during the harvest at the end of the age, since the tares have not produced fruit.

[30] Instead, the householder wisely commands: “Permit both to grow together (*sunauxánesthai*, the present passive infinitive of *sunauxánō* [4885]; derived from *sún* [4862], together; and the basic verb *auxánō* [837], to increase) until the harvest” (a.t.).

The passive-voiced “permit” does not detract from the householder’s sovereignty because the context defines it as the active decree (command), “Do not root up!” Additionally, the harvest is at an “appointed time” (a.t.; *kairō*, the dative of *kairós* [2540], season) that will disclose the tares’ barrenness and their illusory similarity to wheat. This will be evident to reaper angels commissioned by the Lord Jesus (v. 41).

On the day of judgment, the Lord will tell these angels to gather the tares first and “bind them in bundles to burn them.” It is the only time this expression occurs in the New Testament, concerning judgment on the enemies of the gospel. They will be bound together in “bundles” (*désmas* [1197]), so classified according to the degree of harm they have done, that they may receive their appropriate punishment (Matt. 11:20–24).

“Bundles” (plural) perhaps indicates that unbelievers will not be punished equally but according to their hindrances to spiritual awakening and their attempts to corrupt and destroy the church of Jesus Christ. The punishment is designated by the infinitive “to burn” (*katakaúsai*, the aorist active infinitive of *katakaíō* [2618], to burn up, consume with fire; see also Luke 3:17; Acts 19:19; et al.). Since tares are material, the fire must be material. In Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17, the fire is characterized as unquenchable (*asbéstō* [762], meaning inextinguishable, from which we derive the English word “asbestos”; derived from the privative *a* [1] and the verb *sbénnumi* [4570], to quench, put out, extinguish).

The verb translated “gather” in the phrase, “Gather ye together first the tares...but gather the wheat into my barn,” are two different compound Greek verbs. The first is *sulléxate* (the aorist imperative of *sullégō* [4816] from *sún* and *légō* [3004], to gather). This means to gather similar things together. The second verb is *sunágō* ([4863] from *sún* and *ágō* [71], to lead by going before).

The first action (*sullégō*) pertains to gathering evil people by binding them in bundles to be burned by fire, implying that these people are grouped by degrees of depravity. The second event (*sunágō*) pertains to believers who follow God. The angels lead them together to the place where the Lord is, that is, heaven (John 14:1–5).

Unbelievers are cast into the fire “to burn.” In contrast, believers are placed “into my [the Lord’s] barn (*apothēkē* [596], a repository, granary),” a place of

preservation for further consideration and reward (see Matt. 3:12; 6:26; Luke 3:17; 12:18, 24).

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Jesus now used two examples from the common horticulture surrounding His hearers.

[31] The first, a “grain (*kókkos* [2848], a kernel, a single seed) of mustard seed,” is a good example of the fallacy of attaching insignificance to small things. Indeed, at the time, the proverbial phrase, “as small as a grain of mustard seed,” was in frequent use. Yet the undistinguished beginning of this seed serves as a powerful lesson for faith.

[32] In spite of its diminutive size, the seed yields a mustard plant (*sinapi* [4615], a plant often growing to a considerable size; v. 31; Matt. 17:20; Luke 17:6) which eventually becomes (the size of) a “tree” (*déndron* [1186]).

Similarly, the kingdom (*basileía* [932], reign) of God starts in a person’s heart as a small seed and is “made to grow” (*auxēthē*, the aorist passive subjunctive of *auxánō* [837], to increase) by God’s power (1 Cor. 3:6). This growth presupposes the germ of life (*zōē* [2222]) put there by God. A dried splinter will not grow into a tree like a seed. The verb *auxánō* presupposes the God-given potential possessed by a seed. For all their scientific ingenuity, people cannot create the tiniest seeds because they cannot infuse life (*zōē*). In one sense, God has restricted humans to lifeless inventions.

The birds find shelter in the branches of this tree. Without God (John 1:4), life is inexplicable and depressing chaos. With God, the most feeble soul grows and produces meaningful fruit for a kingdom destined to glorify the earth with the Lord’s presence as it already does in heaven. The faith of Christ automatically blossoms forth in good works and becomes a tree in which “to lodge” (a.t.; *kataskēnōin*, the present infinitive of *kataskēnōō* [2681], to find shelter as under a tent; derived from *kátō* [2736], down; and *skēnōō* [4637], tent) from the burning heat of the day to the larger storms of life.

[33] “Leaven” or yeast (*zímē* [2219]) is a symbol used in the Bible for both good and evil. In this verse, it causes “three measures of meal (*áleuron* [224], flour)” to ferment and raise the “whole” (*hólon* [3650]; here, implicitly, the “whole dough [*phúrama* {5445}]”); 1 Cor. 5:6).

This is a continuation of the previous parable, illustrating not just growth but the full permeation of the Word of God through the “whole” dough. In both, it seems that Christ’s point is that the kingdom of heaven was starting small but would spread. The mustard seed represents growth in size; the leaven represents the spread of the kingdom through the whole earth.

Leaven or yeast is used also, elsewhere in Scripture, as a symbol of evil, which is why the week beginning with the Passover was called “the feast of unleavened bread” (Matt. 26:17, et al.). Because evil

spreads so quickly and easily, the Lord warned against “*the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees*,” that is, their contagious and corrupt teaching (Matt. 16:6, 11; Mark 8:15), something Luke equates with hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). In line with this use, Mark refers to “*the leaven of Herod*” demonstrated, among other places, at his party (Mark 8:15). In context here, however, Jesus is speaking of the kingdom, and leaven is a metaphor for the steady spread of the kingdom.

Each of these three parables shows that the

kingdom’s arrival and growth will be slow and subtle, a stark contrast to what the Jews of the day (including Jesus’ disciples) expected—a political Messiah coming to throw out the Romans and re-establish the physical kingdom of Israel.

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How to Study the Bible: A Primer

By Bob Gerow

Editor’s Note: This helpful overview of the principles of faithful study, interpretation, and application of God’s Word is adapted from Bob’s notes for the “Introduction to the Bible” module he teaches for Bryan College’s Aspire Program. It is, in many ways a distillation of “The Interpretive Journey” from the book Grasping God’s Word: 2nd Edition by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Zondervan 2005).

Biblical interpretation is the art, skill, or theory of discovering and understanding the biblical author’s intended meaning in the text. The technical term for this process is **hermeneutics**.

Preliminaries

1) Meaning is not up for grabs. The author wrote with a particular purpose in mind. The author’s intended meaning is to be **discovered** in the text, **not imposed** on the text. You have to find out what a passage means before you can understand what it means to you.

2) Bible Study is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. The proper outcome of Bible study is to know God better (John 17:3), and the resulting change in conduct.

3) Approach the “Interpretive Journey” as a set of elements in a process rather than as discrete steps that must be followed in rigid sequence. The general order is important, but some overlapping may be necessary as the discovery of meaning and of application develops.

4) Cross references, responsible commentaries, and reference works or sources will complement Bible study, but should never trump careful exploration of the Text itself.

With those guiding principles, you can begin a four-step process of interpretation that can be applied to any passage of Scripture.

Step One: How was the author communicating his message to and for the text’s first audience?

Examine the **grammar & terminology**. Look for sentence structure, unusual words or phrases, etc., that

provide clues as to the author’s purpose in writing and the way he chooses to get the message across.

Study the **case structure & style**. Be mindful of literary devices (such as poetry, proverbs, parables, history, figures of speech, etc), repetition, or themes employed to make “the main point” clear. The Bible is filled with different genres, and reading them all with the same mindset leads to misinterpretation (i.e. don’t read a poem with grandiose imagery as a technical manual).

Pay attention to context. Find out how a passage fits into and relates to the larger textual context(s) in which it appears. Context can be textual (e.g. the meaning of 1 Corinthians 13 in the context of Paul’s arguments in chapters 12-14) or historical (e.g. the meaning of Psalm 51 in the context of David’s sin and Nathan’s rebuke recorded in 2 Samuel 11-12).

In one or two sentences, **summarize** what is going on in the passage. Ask what the substance of the author’s message is. How was the message “heard” or “read” by its first audience? Into what personal, religious, social, historical, or other contexts was the message first delivered?

Step Two: Then and Now—Similarities & differences between that first audience and today’s

Identify all the ways in which your situation today **differs from** that of the first audience. How might those differences help or hinder you as you try to correctly grasp the author’s main point? Are you likely to “read” or “hear” the message differently because of differing priorities, lifestyles, contexts, cultures, history, or even our familiarity with the Bible itself?

Identify any **similarities between** the situation faced by the first audience, and what we face. How might those similarities influence how we read or hear the author’s message?

Step Three: The Main Thing—What is the central principle stated in the text?

There is generally only one central theme or message (“principle”) in a given passage—its “punch line.” **What is the central principle, theme, or message** in the passage you are considering? Why do you think so?

How does your exploration in Step One support your conclusion? What (if any) discoveries made in Step Two need to be factored into how we hear the message? How can we make sure we have correctly understood the author’s main point?

Step Four: Application—What difference does it make? So What?

Bible study without application misses the point. If I have correctly grasped the main point, what difference **must** it make in how I am to live my life? “*Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves*” (James 1:22).

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Who Am I? (And Who Are You?)

By Ted Kyle

Did you ever wonder what a caterpillar thinks about as it is morphing into a butterfly? All right, that’s a stretch, for we don’t expect caterpillars to think at all. But caterpillars in the pupa or cocoon stage are works-in-progress, and we are also works-in-progress, if we are being made over in the image of Christ. Pupal caterpillars and Christians are not what they once were, but neither are they yet what they will be. We could, for the sake of comparison, say that we are in our cocoon stage.

So, as a “pupal” Christian myself, I’d like for us to explore a bit into what goes on in one’s mind, as we go through this metamorphosis. Mostly, I know, the re-ordering of our inner being goes on without our being aware of it. But have you never found yourself wondering: “Who am I?” I have.

There are not a lot of guidelines for our in-between stage in Scripture, and the guidelines we do find can be confusing. Generally they refer to what we were—hopeless sinners, dead to spiritual qualities—or to what we shall be: dead to sin but vibrantly alive in Christ spiritually.

So far as I am aware, only Paul—and then only in one passage—deals with this transitory stage at all. In Romans 7:24 he very aptly describes his condition: “*O, wretched man that I am!*” In this passage (7:15-25) Paul confesses that he does not do the things he very much wants to do; and conversely, he does the very things he abhors (v. 19, etc.).

As Paul describes his situation, there is a protracted battle going on inside him: his old nature fights like a wounded bear to keep on doing what it has always done, even as his new nature strives with might and main to obey the Lord.

“*O, wretched man that I am!*” he cries at that point. “*Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?*” But of course, that’s not the end of Paul’s story. You can read about that in 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

Meanwhile, here’s the current report card on where I am (you can check your own report card). God commands us:

To be holy—“*But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, ‘Be ye holy; for I am holy’*” (1 Pet. 1:15-16; see also Lev. 20:7)—but I fear my holiness is full of holes! I have so far to go!

To show love to all—“*A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another*” (John 13:34); “*love your enemies*” (Matt. 5:44, etc.)—but I fear my love toward others is often hit-and-miss.

To live in faith—“*The just shall live by faith*” (Rom. 1:17); “*For whatsoever is not of faith is sin*” (Rom. 14:23)—yet sometimes my faith fails to measure up.

To have hope—“*For we are saved by hope*” (Rom. 8:24); “*the hope of salvation*” (1 Thess. 5:8)—but sometimes hope flickers like a sputtering candle.

Do I, then, fall into the well of despair that brought that agonizing cry from the depths of Paul’s soul? Yes, sometimes. But these times turn out to be occasions when I am trying to “get there” on my own. When I am driven back into God’s grace, I feel unburdened, relieved, and grateful—and ashamed. When, oh when, will I begin to consistently live the life of the child of God? When will I cease this slipping back into the old pattern of the old nature?

It would be so easy to simply quit trying to live godly before Christ Jesus. We could tell ourselves that the Holy Spirit within us will take care of this without any effort on our part. But Scripture catches us up short if we seek to excuse our lack of involvement. We cannot shirk our responsibility, which Ephesians 4:22,24 squarely lays upon us: “*That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts....and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.*”

So, if language means anything, we have a real responsibility in this matter of putting off and putting on. Speaking personally again, it’s taken me years of trying and failing, of prayer and disappointment, to finally get it

through my thick skull that I cannot do it by myself. In fact I found that the harder I tried the more badly I stumbled.

Finally, years later, I think I am on the right track: putting the old nature to death is a partnership, in which the Holy Spirit does the work and my part is to unremittably yearn and pray for this transformation, at the same time praising God for working this miracle within me. He does not do this instantaneously, but rather “*from glory to glory*” (gradually) in accord with 2 Corinthians 3:18. In other words, the Holy Spirit and I both keep chipping away at this mountain, and it will take time—very likely the rest of my life—to utterly obliterate it.

So thank God for the hope we have—His precious promise that the time will come when we shall be made over in the image of Christ. We shall indeed have “put on Christ.” Sometimes I can hardly wait! Perhaps that is what

the caterpillar thinks as its old body slowly dissolves and its new body forms within the cocoon.

Who am I? I’m a child of the King, a sheep of His pasture! His Word assures me He loves me, not only the way I will be someday but right now, today. I am a work-in-progress, but I’m on the way!

Perhaps your experience has been very different from mine, but if you love God and have been called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28), surely you are a work-in-progress also, and I say to you: Hallelujah! Let us praise God together. Truly, His Name is Wonderful!

Ted Kyle served as managing editor of *Pulpit Helps* Magazine from 1993-2008. He is now retired and lives in Newberg, Oregon with his wife Marga.

The Desolation of Disobedience

By Shea Oakley

Human beings were originally created to experience submission to God as pure joy. How great was our fall that today so many of us tend to hate the very idea of submission? How far have we departed from what we were intended to be that “obedience” has become such a dirty word, even in the Church?

The stubborn drive for personal autonomy is, of course, nothing new to the human race. What does seem new is the tendency for contemporary believers to embrace the idea that it is possible to adopt the trappings of our culture’s radical individualism while at the same time presuming to conform ourselves to the image of Christ. To imagine that we can be good Christians and also abhor being in submission to anyone is to indulge in a particularly dangerous form of self-deception. How can we expect to be like our Master and come to have the heart of a servant when we hate the very term “servant”?

It is through a sincere desire to become obedient to God and, to a lesser extent, also to those people He has seen fit to put over us in various capacities that we progress in the Christian life. This is a tough nut for many of us to swallow. There are, of course, sometimes reasons for this that go beyond sinful willfulness on our part. If we grew up with parents or other authority figures, including religious ones, who demanded unquestioning loyalty from us while being lovelessly abusive at the same time, we will find it more difficult to trust God enough to submit to both Him and His proxies. It is not helpful to assume that the wounds of our past have no bearing on answering the call to obedience we are faced with today.

Taking this into consideration, the fact remains that too much of the 21st Century Western Church appears to have been taken captive by the attitude that living in a

liberal democracy means never having to bend the knee to anyone, including those in the congregational hierarchy.

Ask any number of pastors who have lovingly confronted erring church members only to be angrily rebuked and then watch those members walk out the door, and the reality of this trend becomes apparent. A large percentage of “church hoppers” are those who simply will not put themselves into submission to anyone. These people may stand on the idea that they are “responsible only to God” for their actions, but they forget that God has appointed shepherds to watch over His flock in His physical absence.

Submission to godly authority should trump our surrounding secular society’s philosophy of unlimited personal freedom. That it often doesn’t shows that postmodern Christians apparently spend more time immersing themselves in the culture than seriously reading their Bibles.

The sad thing is that authentic freedom and real joy only come through trusting in God enough to forsake the false freedom of radical personal autonomy. Becoming obedient to the One who loves us perfectly, and thus perfectly has our best interests at heart, is the only thing that will give us the abundant life that the world falsely promises to those who are “captains of their own souls.”

If we instead persist in the kind of pride that informs us that no one should ever be in any kind of authority over us, even divinely-assigned authority, then we ultimately condemn ourselves to relational desolation. Unrepentant, willful independence from God and those He has sent to guide and love us is, in the end, self-defeating in the worst sense of the term. It leaves us isolated and unable to dwell in the love we need to truly live. Such “freedom” is not freedom at all, but bondage.

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Points to Ponder—Giving to God

By David & Stephen Olford

Text: “*Now concerning the collection for the saints...*” (1 Cor. 16:1).

Thought: The occasion of this instruction on stewardship was a crisis in the church of Jerusalem, and enshrined in the teaching are principles that abide for all time. Consider this grace of giving in three aspects:

1) The Purposeful Regularity of Giving to God

“*On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come*” (1 Cor. 16:2). In the Old Testament, the tithe, generally speaking, was an annual tax, but here in the New Testament we find that giving to God is to be a weekly contribution. “*The first day of the week*” is the opportunity for Christians to give as an act of worship.

The Apostle insists that giving is not only a holy habit but a high honor. All giving to God should be a matter of theological conviction, leading to a practical expression. Too often we have dishonored this holy habit by using high pressure methods in order to extract money from uninstructed and undisciplined Christians.

2) The Personal Responsibility of Giving to God

“*...let each one of you lay something aside....*” Let us remember that though these words are addressed to the whole church throughout time, they also have a particular relevance to the local assembly. Old and young, rich and poor, must all be involved in this matter of Christian stewardship.

Money has inclusiveness about it because God always associates the gift with the giver. Money has no

value unless it is the expression of life, labor, and love. To lay something aside suggests an activity of stewardship which takes place before the money is brought to the central treasury of the church and obviates any hastiness or untidiness in the matter of giving. Thus it is clear that all giving represents personal responsibility to God. No one is excluded and no one can act without thoughtfulness or deliberateness. Oh that the Spirit of God would write these vital principles upon the tables of our hearts!

3) The Practical Reciprocity of Giving to God

“*...lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper....*” Reciprocity is the principle of taking and giving; and if there is a genuine consideration of what we receive of God, there will be a genuine calculation of what we return to Him. Paul does not state the exact amount that we are to give to God, but leaves the matter open to the practical reasonableness of every yielded believer. Whether tithe or additional offering of any kind, all giving must be dedicated to the Lord and for His glory! To take this truth seriously will make great demands upon us, but let us remember that this is the price of keeping our church alive in order that the Savior may be glorified and the world evangelized.

Thrust: Lord, we ask for grace and for discipline to give according to Your Word.

David Olford teaches expository preaching at
Union University’s Stephen Olford Center
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Counselor’s Corner—Truth in Love at Christmas

By James Rudy Gray

All of our kids are grown now, but every Christmas season I am reminded of what we did not teach them while they were growing up. Our children

never believed in Santa Claus. I know some Christian psychologists believe it does no harm to let our children believe in Santa. I agree that there may be no

devastating harm in playing that game. However, it is always the best policy to speak the truth in love—even (or perhaps, especially) to our children.

We, like many Christians, taught our children that the meaning of Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birthday. As a matter of fact, we taught them that Christ was probably not born on December 25, but since the Bible does not give us a precise date, we can follow the same traditional date as people over much of the world. We taught them that Santa Claus was a myth. Our purpose was to avoid lying to our children. Later on, when they figured out there really wasn't a Santa, would they trust us about other things, like the message of the Gospel? One of our important emphases during the developing years of our children was to stress the importance of speaking the truth. Our kids got in more trouble over lying than they did about whatever it was they were lying about. I am so pleased that as adults they are all honest Christians.

Another thing that concerned us was the confusion that could easily cloud a child's mind over the Santa—Jesus question. The mythical figure does have so many God-like qualities. We did not want our children confused over myth and reality. The grace of God is powerful and real. He is omnipotent and omniscient, and omnipresent. God should have no peers in our minds. In reality, He doesn't, but it is easy to influence children to believe in things that simply do not exist. Our culture may sing of Santa, "He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been good or bad so be good for goodness sake." There is a positive moral tone to the tune, but it can also influence a child to embrace a works mentality toward the Christian life instead of a biblical grace orientation toward salvation.

Finally, we wanted our kids to know that mom and dad worked to provide gifts for them at Christmas time. We did not want them to think some benevolent mythical elf magically delivered them. We told our kids not to tell other kids about Santa if they believed

in him. In fact, our kids played the "Santa" game. We enjoyed laughing together.

Did our kids enjoy Christmas while growing up? If you were to ask them today (I have discussed this with them), they would all tell you that Christmas is one of their favorite times of the year. Our tree was always decorated and presents adorned a place around base of the tree. We got up very early on Christmas and opened presents. It was great fun.

On Christmas Eve, we would typically attend a Christmas Eve service and come home to our "traditional" meal of beef stew. Each child was allowed to open one present. I would read the story of Jesus' birth from the Bible. Sometimes we would enact our own Christmas play. At other times we would sing. Sometimes we would have other people over to our house to share either our Christmas Eve dinner or Christmas Day lunch. We always prayed and most of the time my wife got a Christmas-type movie for us to watch. It was a warm and fulfilling time of family love.

Christmas is a season that is filled with materialistic and commercial influences. What can Christians do during Christmas? The same thing we have been called to do all year: glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). Christmas just gives us so many more opportunities to do it! Christmas is a season to enjoy. It is about Jesus. The great thing about Christmas is that we are reminded Jesus was born. Greater still is that He lived a perfect, sinless life. Greatest of all is that He died on the cross for sin, rose from dead, and is coming again. I don't want that powerful truth to be confused with any myth—regardless of how benign.

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Story Behind the Song—Glory at the End of A Difficult Road

Song: "Angels From the Realms of Glory"

By Lindsay Terry

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:1-14).

In 1778, there lived in Scotland a small lad, James Montgomery, whose father and mother were called as missionaries to the West Indies. They deemed it best to leave young James in the care of a Moravian community in County Antrim, Ireland. He later was sent to a school in

England, which proved to be an unhappy experience. To add to his dejection, his parents died when he was only 12 years of age, and James was left with nothing.

A short time later, because of bad marks in school, he was taken out of classes and given a job in a grocery establishment. This also was short lived and he soon became little more than a vagabond.

During his early teenage years he began to write poetry. When things got really tough, in order to survive, he would sell his poems on the streets of London. His wandering took him to Sheffield where he gained employment in the office of a newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*. The opportunity to help run the business of the newspaper and to write for its pages soon proved to be tremendously useful. When he was only 23 years of age the owner of the newspaper, after having been jailed several times, was driven out of town for his open stand in favor of Ireland's freedom from Great Britain.

Young Montgomery took over the newspaper and changed the name to *Sheffield Iris*. He, too, took a strong stand against civil problems of the day and on more than one occasion found himself in jail because of things he wrote. It was not easy being Irish under English rule.

The *Sheffield Iris* began to prosper and Montgomery became a wealthy man. At last, he had a place to publish his poems. He was also a great help to the community in that he became a supporter of the British Bible Society. Through the following years he rose to be

one of the most respected and honored men in that town. His newspaper was widely read by the citizens of Sheffield.

On Christmas Eve in 1816, after reading of the heralding of the angels in Luke chapter two, he began to write. At day's end he had written a poem that appeared in his newspaper the following day.

“Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth.
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.
Come and worship, come and worship,
Worship Christ, the newborn King.”

A blind songwriter and organist, Henry Smart, wrote a melody that was later used as a musical setting for Montgomery's poem. The song was first sung in a Moravian Church in England, on Christmas day in 1821, and from that day on the world would have the wonderful carol, often heard at Christmastime, “Angels From the Realms of Glory.”

Reflection: God will mightily use those who are determined to go forward in His name, even the face of great odds.

Lindsay Terry has been a song historian for more than 40 years, and has written widely on the background of great hymns and worship songs including the books *I Could Sing of Your Love Forever* (2008) and *The Sacrifice of Praise* (2002).

Living Out the Living Word—1 Peter: Introduction

1 Peter 1:1-12

By Justin Lonas

Our desire is for the content of *Disciple Magazine* to have one consistent theme: that Scripture should be our only authority and that we should carefully study it, apply it to our lives, and teach it to others.

In writing for *Pulpit Helps*, I tended to approach that theme from the angle of various subjects, seeking the Lord's will from what His Word had to say about obedience, love, ministry, art, etc. Topical studies are beneficial because they remind us of the prescience of the Word to every situation we may face—rather like “asking God's advice” on a troubling matter. However, as we begin crafting a voice for *Disciple*, I want to take a step toward exposition—that is, opening the Word and letting it speak for itself.

My goal for this column is the faithful study of Scripture and exhortation to application. If we aren't

“giving legs” to the Word, letting it shape our attitudes and actions, then our study is not only fruitless, but is a distortion of the very purpose of God's revelation (see Rom. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:17; James 1:22; etc.). With that in mind, we'll dig deeply into the Bible together in the second issue of each month.

The first book we will open is 1 Peter, the apostle's letter of encouragement and exhortation to beleaguered Christians. I chose to start here because 1) The Lord has used this book mightily in my life over the years, 2) its message of holy living in spite of circumstances is ever relevant, and 3) it is relatively short and straightforward, which makes it a great place to begin this column. We'll try to break it down in “bite-size” chunks without distorting the natural flow of the letter. This first column will introduce the book and cover Peter's greeting in 1:1-2

Peter's epistle, like most other NT letters from Church leaders, contains theological exposition from the OT (he quotes from the Septuagint at least once per chapter), reassurance of the completed work of Christ, and exhortation to righteousness (i.e. completed action in the past that fixes our hope for the future, lived out in the present). He most likely wrote the letter during the persecution of Nero around 64 A.D., and it is addressed to believers suffering through this adversity. He writes to shore up their faith, and to remind them that persecution is a reason to strive harder after holiness, not to give up.

Peter opens his letter with an introduction of five sentences and a host of prepositions and clauses retracing the power of God for salvation with layers upon layers of definition, each leading up to "therefore" in verse 13 that marks a transition from description to exhortation.

The first sentence, his greeting, reads, "*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure*" (1 Pet. 1:1-2).

Peter comes out of the gate stating his authority as an apostle and identifying himself with Jesus—this simple phrase established the letter's accuracy and value, and would've been read by the recipients as, "listen up!" Over the years, many scholars have questioned whether Peter actually wrote the two epistles that carry his name; it is beyond the scope of this article to address those claims (for that, I can heartily recommend Wayne Grudem's defense of Peter's authorship from his commentary on the book), and we will assume from the text that this letter really came from Peter.

He then addresses the intended recipients of the letter, identifying them first and foremost as "*aliens.*" The Greek word behind this is *parepidēmos*, literally something like "beside yet among the people," and sets the tone for the letter that believers are truly passing through earthly life as foreigners on a journey. These sojourners were scattered throughout the region today known as Turkey, in those days, the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and the heart of early Christianity, home to such cities as Ephesus, Pergamum, Laodicea, Colossae, Smyrna, Lystra,

Derbe and others. In the first century, the believers in this region were undergoing severe persecution, likely both from the Jews (the "*synagogue of Satan*" in Rev. 2:9; 3:9) and the Romans under Nero.

Peter describes his audience further as those "*chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.*" This is consistent with the themes of the New Testament—*eklektos*, the same Greek word translated "chosen" here, is used by Christ to describe His followers in Matthew 24:22, and Luke 18:7, and by Paul in Romans 8:33, Colossians 3:12, and elsewhere as a synonym for believers.

The concept of God choosing the faithful shouldn't scare us, but should be a source of joy—it is a reminder that He is the author of our salvation from the foundation of the world, that we cannot earn our way to heaven. Still, as the bulk of Peter's letter makes clear, the chosen are called to a high road, and God's election does not constitute the elimination of personal responsibility. Much as God chose the nation of Israel in order that they would be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:2-3, Ps. 67, etc.), He has chosen the Church to be His instrument of drawing the nations to himself (Matt. 24:14, Acts 1:8, etc.).

Peter goes on to describe the mechanism of God's choice, "*by the sanctifying work of the Spirit.*" God draws men to repentance by the conviction of sin and works righteousness in the hearts of believers through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

He further states the purpose of God's choice, for believers "*to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood.*" "Obey" in Greek, *hupakoē*, is a compound word meaning "to hear under." Obedience in the New Testament, then, is much more than simply "doing the right thing;" to obey Christ is to listen attentively to His voice and submit wholly to His authority and care. Sprinkling with His blood recalls the Old Testament sacrificial system, in which the priests sprinkled the blood of animals on the altar to atone for the sins of Israel. Peter reminds his readers that the blood of Christ is the complete atonement, and the means of their salvation.

He concludes his greeting, "*may grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.*" This is not just a trite saying, but represents the words of life to these persecuted believers. Peter reminds them of the hope that is theirs because of the great mercy of God through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus and the "*peace of God that passes all comprehension*" (Phil. 4:7). God is

the source of life and comfort, and He bestows these gifts abundantly upon His chosen.

It is easy to gloss over greetings such as Peter's as we read through the Epistles, but in doing so we miss important elements of truth. In these two short verses, Peter establishes his authority, reminds persecuted believers of their status as strangers to this world and as those called by God, reaffirms the completed work of salvation, and invokes the security of God's grace and peace for those who suffer.

The lesson for us is twofold. First, we shouldn't ever write off passages of Scripture—even the smallest, least remembered segments (like greetings) are inspired by God and there for a purpose.

Second, God is always at work in our salvation and our circumstances. He has called us to follow Him, and made us citizens of heaven and given us the full measure of grace and peace for the journey—our allegiance is not to this world or to anyone in it. We are to be about His business wherever He has placed us. A kingdom-focused life is one that is daily consecrated to Christ and strives after obedience.

Powerful as this greeting is, it is only the beginning. As we unpack the rest of Peter's epistle in the coming months, we will see more clearly what true obedience looks like and explore God's vision for His people.

Justin Lonas is the editor of *Disciple Magazine*

Church Builders—Perseverant Preacher: Christmas Evans

By Bernard R. DeRemer

Christmas Evans (1766-1838) was a Welsh Nonconformist minister, regarded as one of the greatest preachers in the history of his country. Evans was born, appropriately, on Christmas Day in Wales, “a land of wild scenery and fiery preaching.” His early life was not memorable—after his father died, his mother sent him to live with her brother, a cruel drunkard.

He endured six miserable years with his uncle. He received no education, and at 17 was still illiterate, working as a farm laborer. Further, he lacked any moral or religious training. He fought often; only the providence of God kept him from being killed. Once he nearly drowned; in another brawl he lost his right eye. For the rest of his life, he had to treat the empty socket with laudanum (an opiate ointment) to ease the pain.

At 17, he went to work as the servant of a Presbyterian minister, and things begin to improve for him. He came to know the Lord in a church revival, and soon learned to read and write. He began ministering in small ways, occasionally preaching or praying in cottage meetings.

After studying the Bible, he was influenced greatly by both Calvinist Methodists and Baptists, eventually joining the Baptist Church, where he was ordained in 1790 and sent to a small, struggling work in the north of Wales. He “trusted God and saw a time of rich blessing,” and even met and married his wife, Catherine, in the church there.

Evans first came to prominence at a Baptist association preaching festival, becoming the talk of the gathering, “the newest preaching sensation in Wales.” His preaching style was very imaginative, and he was renowned as a humorous and passionate minister.

In 1792, Evans and his wife moved to Anglesey Island in northwest Wales where he served for 30 years. When he arrived, there were 10 small Baptist societies. Evans rode his horse from one to another and eventually developed 20 meeting places where people eagerly assembled to hear his preaching. His ministry there saw over 600 people come to faith in Christ.

Evans taught himself Hebrew and Greek, and read the works of John Owen and others. “He often preached daily, and twice on Sunday,” and meditated and wrote his eloquent sermons while riding from village to village.

After Catherine died in 1823 and the churches in Anglesey left Evan's leadership, he accepted the call to a small Baptist church in Tonyvelin in 1826. There he remarried to his housekeeper, Mary. He had a new experience of faith and power, though the enemy opposed the preaching of the Word. His final move in 1832 took him to a dying church in Caernarfon, “where 30 members were struggling with a debt they could not pay.”

God prospered his efforts. Great crowds heard him preach, and when the meeting house was filled, people stood outside and listened. The undertaking sapped much of his waning strength, and he was called

home to glory on July 20, 1838 while raising funds in Swansea.

Often, Evans had counseled younger pastors. He wrote to one, “consider...the great importance to a preacher of a blameless life...I remember the words of Luther that reading, prayer, and temptation are necessary to strengthen and purify the talents of ministers.” He also urged, “always have a good book to read, instead of indulging in vain conversation...you cannot commit some loved sin in private and perform the work of ministry in public with facility and acceptance.”

With all his reputation for pulpit eloquence, “Evans should perhaps be remembered most as a man of prayer...He had three stated times for prayer during

the day, and he regularly rose at midnight to seek the face of God.”

Evans was “a man of God who gave himself unsparingly to the work of the ministry.” God used him in a wonderful way to the blessing of many.

Bernard R. DeRemer chronicled the lives of dozens of heroes of the faith in more than a decade of writing for *Pulpit Helps Magazine*. He continues to serve in this capacity as a volunteer contributor to *Disciple*. He lives in West Liberty, Ohio.

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Victorious Christians You Should Know, by Warren W. Wiersbe; excerpts used by permission. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Ed. (1911)

Yesterday, Today, and Forever

By Charles Haddon Spurgeon

“He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed. His ways are everlasting” (Habakkuk 3:6).

What He hath done at one time, He will do yet again. Man’s ways are variable, but God’s ways are everlasting. There are many reasons for this most comforting truth: among them are the following:

1) The Lord’s ways are the result of wise deliberation; He orders all things according to the counsel of His own will. Human action is frequently the hasty result of passion, or fear, and is followed by regret and alteration; but nothing can take the Almighty by surprise, or happen otherwise than He has foreseen.

2) His ways are the outgrowth of an immutable character, and in them the fixed and settled attributes of God are clearly to be seen. Unless the Eternal One Himself can undergo change, His ways, which are Himself in action, must remain forever the same. Is He eternally just, gracious, faithful, wise, tender?—then His ways must ever be distinguished for the same excellences.

Beings act according to their nature: when those natures change, their conduct varies also; but since God

cannot know the shadow of a turning, His ways will abide everlastingly the same. Moreover there is no reason from without which could reverse the divine ways, since they are the embodiment of irresistible might. The earth is said, by the prophet, to be cleft with rivers, mountains tremble, the deep lifts up its hands, and sun and moon stand still, when Jehovah marches forth for the salvation of His people. Who can stay His hand, or say unto Him, “What doest Thou?” But it is not might alone which gives stability;

3) God’s ways are the manifestation of the eternal principles of right, and therefore can never pass away. Wrong breeds decay and involves ruin, but the true and the good have about them a vitality which ages cannot diminish. Today let us go to our heavenly Father with confidence, remembering that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in Him the Lord is ever gracious to His people.

From *Morning and Evening*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), “the Prince of Preachers,” was a renowned pastor and author who served as pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle for 38 years. His works are still widely read today.

Book Reviews

The Challenge of Easter, N.T. Wright, InterVarsity Press, 2009, ISBN 9780830838486, 62 pages, \$6.00, softcover.

The resurrection is absolutely central to the Christian faith. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19, “*and if Christ is not raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped*

in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” Understandably then, both Christ’s historical resurrection and the resurrection hope of all believers are routinely targeted by Satan and the powers of this world.

In *The Challenge of Easter* (excerpted from the 1999 book *The Challenge of Jesus*), N.T. Wright, Anglican Bishop of Durham, U.K., offers a succinct rebuttal of popular attacks on the resurrection and articulates an apology of its primacy and power from biblical, historical, and cultural contexts and exhorts believers to live out the hope of the living Christ.

Wright points out that the Church from its earliest days was a “resurrection movement,” and that the recurring biblical phrases “the kingdom of God” and “the resurrection of the dead” were key components of the first century Jewish worldview which would never have been understood by that audience to mean a merely “spiritual” experience. He shows that Christ’s resurrection inaugurated the reality of the kingdom in time and space, something the apostles clearly understood as the starting point for their entire ministry.

Though at times a controversial figure (a discussion beyond the scope of this review), Wright demonstrates a passion for this truth that all believers should take to heart. He reminds the reader that the fact of the resurrection undercuts both the false hope of realizing the kingdom of God through human effort alone and the misdirection of simply waiting for God to someday return and take care of it all on His own. In his words, Christ laid the foundation of the coming kingdom through the resurrection, commissioned us to build on that as we follow Him in proclaiming the victory to a fallen world, and will return in glory to complete the work.

Challenge of Easter is an accessible yet scholarly take on this key issue that is ideal for solidifying this fundamental truth for new believers, expositing it for skeptical seekers, or devotional meditation to recall it to our hearts and minds and challenge us again to living it out boldly.

Justin Lonas

Target: All

Type: Apologetics/Christology

Take: Highly Recommended

Look What God is Doing: True Stories of People around the World Changed by the Gospel, Dick Eastman, Chosen Books, Grand Rapids, Mich., 2009, ISBN 9780800794743, 205 pages, \$13.99, softcover.

In a day and age where the latest and greatest technology is rampant and treated as a “necessity” for virtually everything, *Look What God is Doing* offers a refreshing look at how the simplicity of God’s message is at work among those who are faithful in sharing His message—no gadgets required. Dick Eastman, international president of Every Home for Christ (EHC), shares a wonderful testimony of how God is dramatically changing the hearts and lives of people all over the globe.

The book’s overriding theme is “much from little”; Eastman recalls story after story of how God has used just one faithful person in a village or a city to bring literally thousands to Christ. He assures readers that these conversions (which are tracked by response cards sent into their various home bases) are genuine and are followed up by a Bible study course and further discipleship.

The goal of EHC, according to Eastman, is to simply bring the Gospel to every household in a town or a village. This usually takes the form of an indigenous believer giving a pamphlet and a response card to each family in his village or region (one for the adults and different one for the children) and seeing the fruit multiply from there. Through these stories from EHC, readers will recall the same themes of stories they’ve heard from friends and family on the mission field and the work of the various agencies and organizations striving for the same goals.

Because this book is written by the president of the organization, the information is obviously presented with a bias toward EHC’s work and is at times painted in broad strokes to show an overview of EHC’s ministry, leaving some of the nitty-gritty logistics unaddressed. Still, it offers snapshots of the powerful movement of the Gospel in the 21st century, offering encouragement to Christians in America who tend to see the spiritual climate in this country as the primary indicator of the success or failure of the Church around the world.

Rachel Lonas

Target: All

Type: Missions, Encouragement

Take: Recommended**News Update****News Update: The Church in Culture and Around the World****Christians in Britain Wondering Why “Equality and Diversity” Don’t Apply to Them**

Christians in the U.K. are continuing to warn that their government’s planned “equality” legislation will drive Christian believers out of public life.

The Christian Institute, Britain’s leading evangelical Christian lobby group, has issued a report titled “Marginalising Christians,” detailing the many recent cases of Christians who have been disciplined or lost work because of conflicts between faith and the government-sponsored and increasingly aggressive secularism.

The government’s recent equality and diversity laws, the group says, leave Christians “the first to be punished and the last to be protected.”

The report cites a poll taken in January 2009 that found that 84 per cent of Britons felt that freedoms of religion and of speech are at risk in the UK and said that this “growing sense of intolerance felt by Christians is made all the worse when they face hostility in the name of ‘equality and diversity’.”

“Christians wonder why they are not being treated equally and why diversity does not include them. They feel that a hierarchy of rights has sprung up which leaves them bottom of the pile. This has led to a growing feeling that ‘equality and diversity’ is code for marginalising Christian beliefs.”

George Pitcher wrote Monday in *The Daily Telegraph* that the Labour government’s Equality bill, currently working through the House of Lords, was being used by “parliamentary secularists to drive religion from the public sphere.”

Meanwhile, the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey shows 50 per cent of people say they are Christians, down from 66 per cent in 1983. The Survey said that the proportion of Britons who say they have “no religion” has increased from 31 per cent to 43 per cent.

LifeSiteNews

Sudan on Brink of New War, Diplomat Warns

Baptist Press reports that Sudan may again face war between northern Muslims and southern Christians and animists unless the international

community pressures the government of President Omar al-Bashir.

According to South Sudan’s top diplomat in the United States, Ezekiel Lol Gatkuoth, an estimated 400,000 civilians have died in the ongoing genocide in Darfur and more are threatened by a scheduled referendum in April. That referendum on secession could derail the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended a war in which about 2.5 million southern Sudanese people died.

International Christian Concern’s regional manager for Africa, Jonathan Racho, said, “We are very concerned about the possibility of another jihad against Christians and animists in South Sudan as well as the ongoing genocide in Darfur.”

Religion Today Summaries

Prosperity Gospel Teachings ‘Distort’ Bible, Says Group

Christian Today reports that a group of theologians spoke out against the influence of prosperity gospel theology, just before one of its greatest proponents, evangelist Oral Roberts, passed away this month.

While recognizing that “there are some dimensions of prosperity teaching that have roots in the Bible,” the Lausanne Theology Working Group says its overall view is that “the teachings of those who most vigorously promote the ‘prosperity gospel’ are false and gravely distorting of the Bible.”

The group called prosperity gospel’s influence particularly misleading in Africa. “We ... request the Lausanne movement to be willing to make a very clear statement rejecting the excesses of prosperity teaching as incompatible with evangelical biblical Christianity,” the statement reads.

Religion Today Summaries

CCC Media Ministry Records Over 10M Decisions in 2009

Internet ministry Global Media Outreach (GMO) on Dec. 21 announced a milestone in reaching people with the Gospel online. On Dec. 7, GMO saw

the 10 millionth person this year indicate a decision for Christ through their Web sites.

Over 1.8 million people have initiated follow-up for more information, guidance and discipleship during this same time period. In 2009, GMO presented the Gospel to over 55 million people through its more than 90 different web sites globally.

“It is humbling to be a part of the Great Commission and watching millions of people coming to Christ,” said Walt Wilson, GMO founder and chair. “We have responders all over the world, connecting to people through e-mail for prayer, discipleship and church connections.” GMO is an Internet outreach of Campus Crusade for Christ.

Religion Today Summaries

Judge: N.C. Law Barring Sex Offenders from Church Unconstitutional

The *Christian Post* reports that a Superior Court judge has found a North Carolina law barring convicted some sex offenders from churches is unconstitutional.

While Judge Allen Baddour acknowledged the need to protect children, he said “there are less drastic means for achieving the same purpose....There are a host of protected religious activities abridged by this statute.” The law, put in place last year, bars some offenders from congregating within 300 feet of “any place where minors gather for regularly scheduled educational, recreational or social programs,” which includes churches.

Two registered offenders, James Nichols and Frank DeMaio, challenged the state law because it denied them the right to attend their choice of church. “I believe wholeheartedly if it wasn’t for God, I don’t

know where I’d be today,” Nichols told The Associated Press.

Religion Today Summaries

Vatican Newspaper Slams the Copenhagen Summit over Population Control, “Nihilism”

In a front-page commentary in the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* yesterday, the President of the Vatican Bank took the recent Copenhagen climate summit to task over its “nihilism,” and consequent emphasis on population control and de-industrialization.

“Nihilistic thought, with its rejection of any objective truth and values causes serious damage when applied to economics,” wrote Ettore Gotti Tedeschi. He recalled as an example the “disastrous consequences” of Malthus’ argument that population growth causes poverty.

However, he said that, when applied to environmental issues, nihilism produces “even more serious damage.” In this case it leads to the attempt “to solve climate problems—where much confusion reigns—through lowering the birth rate and de-industrialization, rather than through the promotion of values that lead the individual to his original dignity.”

Tedeschi said that the lack of a “strategic vision of the problem” has come about “precisely because of widespread nihilism that leads to the notion that there is no value in human life compared to the supposed centrality of nature.” He concludes, “The environmentalists do well to urge greater attention to nature,” but that they need to “understand why— but above all for whom—the environment must be respected.”

LifeSiteNews

Sermon Helps

Reminder: After this issue, all our sermon helps (plus decades of previously published outlines, illustrations, and quotes from Pulpit Helps) will be posted to www.sermonhall.com instead of being included in Disciple.

Illustration Detail Work

On Dec. 28, 1969, Paul Ford passed from this life to meet his savior face to face. He was the founder

of the Island Missionary Society, a group that still shares the Gospel in Jamaica and the Bahamas.

His missionary journey had an unusual beginning. In 1941, when Paul and his wife Ollie felt God’s call to minister in Jamaica, their family obeyed without any promised financial support or knowing anyone on the island—totally by faith.

As they went ashore, an elderly gentleman approached them and asked if they were missionaries. “Budding missionaries,” they replied. The stranger told them that he and his terminally ill wife were

forced to return to the United States on that same ship. But then he blew away the Fords when he related that he was also a missionary and had been fervently praying for a replacement! The Fords instantly inherited a parsonage and an established congregation. They were the answer to his prayers, and he to theirs!

The Bible tells us that “*By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance and he went out, not knowing where he was going*” (Heb. 11:8).

Are you at a crossroads in your life, not knowing how to proceed? Remember that when you walk by faith, it is God, not the devil, who is in the details!

J. Kenneth Bassett
Timeless Signatures

Sermon Outline “Real Christians”

2 Corinthians 13:5

Intro.: Are you “the real thing?” Real Christians are:

I. Dedicated

A. Like the Apostle Paul.

1. Immediate response (Acts 9:20).
2. Consuming passion (Phil. 3:7-8, 13).

B. We dedicate everything (buildings, statues, etc.) except ourselves!

1. What about our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20; Rom. 12:1)?

2. What about our children (1 Sam. 1:28, 3:1)?

3. What about our hearts (Rom. 2:29)?

II. Educated

A. Paul’s prayer for the Church (Col. 1:9-10).

B. Through diligent study (2 Tim. 2:7).

C. An area for perpetual growth (2 Pet. 3:18).

D. Ignorance leads to destruction (Hos. 4:6).

E. For the sake of others (1 Pet. 3:15).

III. Motivated

A. By fear (2 Cor. 5:11; Jude 23).

B. By love (2 Cor. 5:13-14; Mark 12:30).

IV. Separated

A. From the world (1 Pet. 4:3-4; Rom. 12:2).

B. Pilgrims and Strangers (1 Pet. 2:11).

C. From sins (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1).

1. Sins of the flesh.

2. Sins of the spirit.

D. Avoiding both isolation and imitation.

Victor Knowles

Bulletin Inserts

On Theology

All my theology is reduced to this narrow compass,
“Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.”

Archibald Alexander

Any theology which attempts to speak to an age in its own language runs the danger of compromising the eternal message of the Gospel with the temporarily plausible conviction of the time.

Kenneth Cauthen

None but a theology that came out of eternity can carry you and me safely to and through eternity.

Theodore L. Cuyler

The reason why the churches are discredited today is not that they are too bigoted about theology, but that they have run away from theology.

Dorothy L. Sayers

The publican stood afar off and beat his breast and said, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” I tell you that man had the finest theology of any man.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

On Understanding and Wisdom

Understanding is the reward of faith.

Augustine of Hippo

What is most necessary for understanding divine things is prayer.

Origen

I believe in order that I may understand.

Tertullian

Knowledge is horizontal. Wisdom is vertical—it comes down from above.

Billy Graham

There can be no wisdom disjoined from goodness.

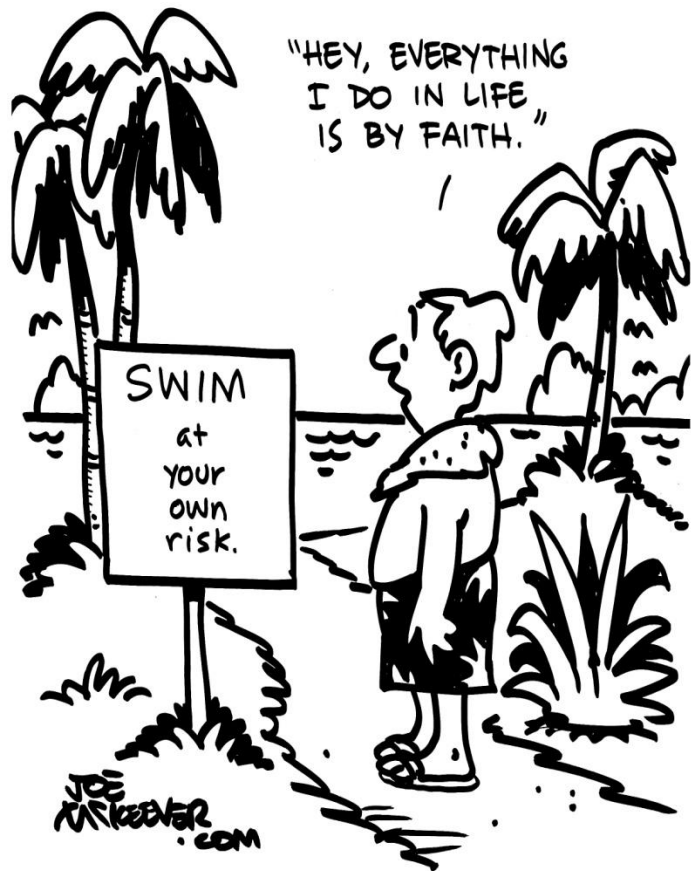
Richard Trench

These 10 via *The Encyclopedia of Living Quotations*

Puzzles and 'Toons

Church 'Toons

By Joe McKeever



HIDDEN WISDOM: BIBLE ACROSTIC # 40

BY MARK A. OSHMAN

Solve the acrostic by using the clues listed below to guess the words and by transferring the letter above each number to its appropriate place in the diagram. The result will be a Scripture verse of admonition, comfort, or instruction. Further, the initial letters of the answers will contain the name of the book from which the verse was taken. Happy hunting!

HAPPY SOLVING!!

1N	2B	3I		4E	5C	6M	7G		8D	9Q	10P	11H	12A	13F	14K	15E	16B	
	17L	18C	19F		20G	21B	22I	23J	24H	25M	26A		27E	28P	29K	30D		
31G	32C	33H		34N	35E	36F	37A	38H		39Q	40D	41B		42G	43F	44L	45H	
46A	47M	48E		49G	50C	51P		52K	53L	54A	55J		56I	57F	58G	59E	60P	
	61H	62B	63N	64E	65C	66A		67H	68F		69E	70J	71D	72G		73K	74Q	
	75I	76L	77A		78H	79M	80F	81B	82P			83D	84K	85E	86J			
87G	88L		89I		90N	91H	92E	93B	94K	95A	96D	97F				98P	99E	100J
	101N	102C		103L	104H	105K	106I	107E	108B	109Q	110D	111G	112A					

- A. Floated in air 37 77 95 12 66 54 112 46 26
- B. A river in NW Wyoming 81 108 2 16 62 41 21 93
- C. "I am the rose of _____" 65 32 5 18 50 102
- D. Bone at the base of the cranium 96 83 40 71 30 110 8
- E. All Jewish men must experience this 69 85 15 92 59 4 107 27 48 64 35 99
- F. According to Prov. 6, ants don't have one! .. 43 13 80 36 68 57 19 97
- G. Indispensability 49 20 42 72 58 111 87 31 7
- H. "Of some, have compassion, making a _____". .. 38 67 78 45 91 24 11 104 61 33
- I. A city of Judah (Josh. 15) 56 89 22 75 106 3
- J. Amer. dramatist (1906-1963) 70 100 23 55 86
- K. Ephron, among others 84 94 52 105 73 29 14
- L. Hanun's father 44 17 53 103 88 76
- M. Crystalline body focusing light rays in the eye . 79 25 6 47
- N. Under Mosaic law, he couldn't eat showbread . 90 34 101 63 1
- O. English architect (1632-1723) 39 109 9 74
- P. Grab 60 28 98 51 10 82