

GRACE (in) FOCUS

IS JOHN 3:16 OUT OF WARRANTY?



Being Grateful
Are You Dressed for the Coming King?
Saved by Bowing and Repenting?

Serving Those with Special Needs
Purple Water Is Not Good
and much more!

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Letter from the Editor

As we come to the last two months of another year, I am reminded of how quickly things change. I was born 70 years ago. It was not long ago when very few people had TVs in their homes. And no one had a color TV. There were only four or five channels too. We obtained a small black and white set when I was five years old.

I do not think that the rapid growth of entertainment has been good for humanity. We would be better off without hundreds of channels to choose from, personal computers, and cell phones that are computers, TVs, and phones all in one.

I am listening to a book on tape about a future in which planet earth was destroyed, and humanity moved to a planet called Harmony. A computer named Oversoul controlled the thinking of all the subjects of the planet so that they would not make weapons or even things like cars and airplanes. The computer did so by means of thousands of satellites. But 40 million years later, Oversoul was losing its grip on the minds of people.

I wonder if part of the point of the book is that mass media has a grip on the minds of most people today. Instead of people being taught to think for themselves, we are taught groupthink. The current humanistic mindset is widespread. Cultural relativism reigns. It reminds me of the key line from the book of Judges: *everyone did what was right in his own eyes*. The idea that God has a wonderful plan for His creatures and that



Robert N. Wilkin

we do best to follow His teachings is considered right-wing nuttury.

In this magazine we seek to help people do what is right in God's eyes. We teach that the only way to have everlasting life that can never be lost is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for that wonderful gift of God. We also write about the wonderful promise of eternal rewards for faithfulness on our part.

God is not seeking to ruin our lives. He wants to give us true life, everlasting life, and then to teach us how to experience that life more abundantly (John 10:10b).

We hope this issue of *Grace in Focus* Magazine helps you in your walk of faith. ■

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Rob Wilkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.



Are We Grateful?

by Ken Yates

INTRODUCTION

For nine days in August, I had the opportunity to conduct a pastors' conference in Kenya. On the weekends, I was able to speak in three different churches. On one Saturday, I led a Bible study in which various smaller studies came together to discuss the parables of Christ.

As you might expect, all these activities were learning experiences. When you speak in a new place, in a different culture, and with people in different spiritual conditions, you never know how things will turn out. At the pastors' conference, those in attendance were in positions of authority in their churches. They had strong traditional beliefs. It is safe to say that pretty much all of them were opposed to a message of grace. These pastors were convinced that eternal salvation could only be obtained with much effort and by continuing in that effort until death. Since I was teaching that eternal salvation was completely free through faith in Christ alone and could not be lost, I was challenging their long-held beliefs. Adopting what I was saying would also be risky on their part. To do so may cost them their positions in their churches.

The Bible study was a completely different group. They were people who had been exposed to grace teaching. They were laymen, and they understood that eternal salvation was by God's grace through faith. They had broken free from the bondage of trying to earn eternal life. They wanted more teaching and wanted to examine what the Lord had to say about following Him after they knew they had eternal life.

Speaking at new churches involves addressing an unknown audience. Where were they in their spiritual lives? Maybe some had heard and believed in the message of grace. Based upon my experience in Kenya, however, it was almost a certainty that most had not. This was confirmed by my conversations with a Free Grace couple who are from that country. The view of the gospel reflected in the beliefs of the pastors at the conference was almost universally held by those in the pews.

What lessons were learned in these various situations? Certainly, I could look at each group and conclude there were lessons unique to each one. If the Lord gives me another opportunity to take another trip, it is likely that I would do some things differently and some things the same in each case.

But there was one overarching lesson I learned in dealing with the pastors, new believers wanting to study the Bible more in depth, and the laymen in the pew: many of us need to be much more grateful than we are.

PASTORS

It is safe to say that I was most frustrated with those at the pastors' conference, at least at first. To observe how legalistic they were and to know that they taught their people such things could easily make a person angry. They made it clear that if a person did not tithe, the person was not saved. Anyone who committed suicide would go to hell. Many taught those in the pew that if they had high blood pressure or diabetes,

it was because they had opened themselves up to demon possession. They constantly instilled fear in their people about the prospect of going to hell if they didn't follow a long, arbitrary list of things they needed to do or avoid.

My first reaction was to scream, "What is wrong with you?!" After much reflection, however, my attitude changed dramatically. At the end of the week, many in attendance professed that they had been teaching horrible theology and now understood the gospel of grace.

Looking at the group, I found it impossible not to feel gratitude toward God. These leaders were bound by a religious tradition that had enslaved them. They knew no other option. Yes, they had the Scriptures and could have searched them out and seen that they were wrong. But how many of us have had wonderful Bible teachers who helped us when we struggled with legalism and the constant fear of going to hell? They did not have such benefits in their lives. Most of us did not grow up in a culture that supported such things at every turn. I am so grateful to the Free Grace community for all the help they have given me through the years. I know almost all the readers can say the same.

NEW BELIEVERS

It was even easier to feel gratitude when I considered the new believers who traveled to the Bible study. Almost everyone who travels any distance in Kenya does so by public transportation. This usually involves taking a seat on a very crowded bus. To get to the study, some traveled for hours. The study lasted for four hours. Then they would reverse the trip and travel for hours to get back home. For some, then, hearing teachings on the parables of the Lord involved an eight-to-ten-hour commitment.

We met in a church in the countryside. It had no heat or air conditioning. There was no running water. The floor was a dirt one. The church had no windows. There were openings near the roof,

where the metal walls did not reach all the way to the top. That is where most of the light came from. As I recall, there was a single light bulb in the front of the church. The people used out-houses that were located about 30 yards from the building. As you might guess, the seats were not the comfortable padded pews we are used to in the United States. They consisted of plastic chairs, like the ones we buy at Walmart.

It was hard to relate to what these people were doing. They had been exposed to the Free Grace message before I arrived. They knew it was different from what they were hearing in the churches in their country. But these people did not have the vast number of resources we have to learn from great Free Grace teachers from the past and present through their books or online. They had never attended a GES conference. They made a commitment to come hear me, not knowing anything about me, other than that they had heard I would tell them more about grace. You really have to be impressed with their attitude.

Would I have made that commitment? Would you? It is impossible to tell, because none of us have ever found ourselves in their situation. My wife assures me I am a spoiled baby, so maybe I wouldn't have. I admit, I like my comfort. I like the hot coffee and donuts provided to those who attend church. I like the comfortable seating I am used to, and the thought of riding a cramped bus seated next to a bunch of strangers for a couple of hours each way to attend a Bible study is not appealing at all. I really like flushing toilets as well.

I am really going to ask the Lord to make me much more grateful for all the comforts He has given me.

LAYMEN IN THE PEW

All three of the churches in which I spoke would be unacceptable by American standards. I can't imagine anyone attending any of them because of their primitive nature. Two were basically the same as the building in which I conducted

the Bible study. The third, however, made the other two almost look like cathedrals.

It was in the slums of the capital city. A river of open sewage ran in front of the door. The building was a little bigger than a large lawnmower shed. It had no windows at all, even at the top. Most of the light came from the open door in which we entered. There was a communal bathroom in an adjacent shed, but it was not usable.

Based upon the pastors I had met in the conference earlier that week, I knew what kind of teaching they had been exposed to their whole lives. They lived in abject poverty. Each week they returned, hoping to earn their way to heaven somehow. If they could just work hard enough and expel the demons that were prevalent in their lives, maybe they would have a better existence in the world to come.

The pastor of this small church had attended the conference and asked me to teach on grace, even though he had not taught such doctrine to his congregation in the past. I spoke for roughly an hour and then sat down. The people understood English, but we also had a translator who spoke Swahili, since they were more comfortable with that language. It was hard to judge how they received the message.

After the sermon, the pastor got up and spoke in Swahili to the congregation. He then turned to me and asked if I would preach another sermon on this topic. The people wanted to hear more and would stay.

That was weird. I had not prepared another message. But more to the point, I am pretty sure I had never been asked to give a second sermon in a church after preaching for an hour. In my culture, we would be wondering what the line would be like at our favorite restaurants if we didn't start moving that way. I am also confident that if I tried to speak for a second hour, somebody would pull me aside and point out that it would not be a good idea.

Why did this small group of 30 or 40 people ask me to speak again? Maybe they had nothing else to do. They were not going back home to watch the NFL on TV. They couldn't afford to go out to a restaurant. Maybe I was the only entertainment they had.

But I like to think it was something else. I am pretty sure it was, at least for some of them. They were new to the message of grace. The Spirit of God was using the Scriptures to drive home a message that would set them free. They could have assurance of eternal life. That is why they would sit for another hour in that stuffy shed and listen to what a stranger from America was telling them.

Once again, it was impossible for me to relate to their situation. But I hope that I am a little less inclined to complain about things that inconvenience me and be much more grateful for what I have.

CONCLUSION

It is impossible, of course, to know how each pastor, Bible study attendee, and church member responded to what he heard. But there is certainly a lesson here for all of us.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica that they were to give thanks in everything (1 Thess 5:18). I cannot think of a group of people who should be more thankful than Free Grace folks in our country. We have heard the truth of grace. Sound Biblical teaching is at our fingertips. We can access it with all the comforts that most people in history could not even imagine. Most people in the world today cannot either. May we realize this is the case and be the most grateful people on earth. ■

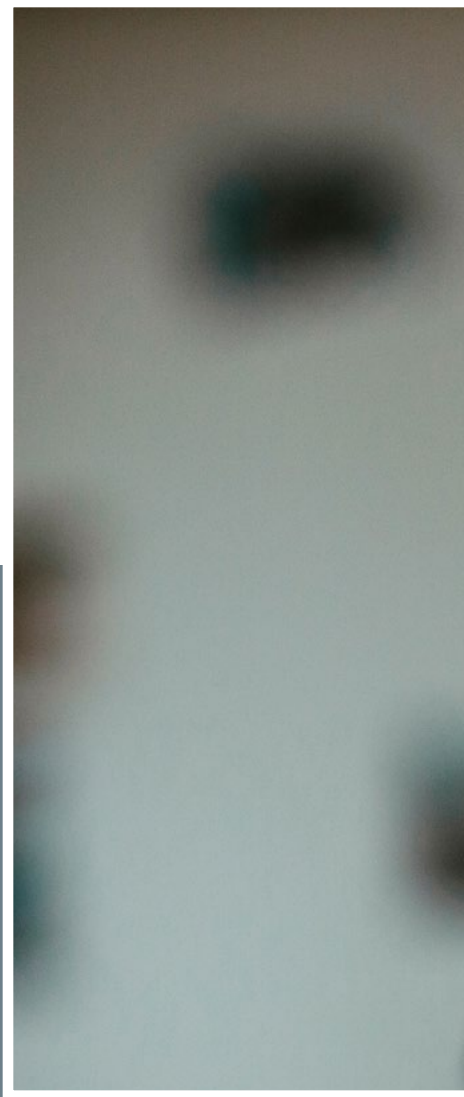


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WHAT WOULD JESUS SAY?

The Seven Churches of Revelation: The Letter to Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11)

by Philippe Sterling





PERSECUTED AND POOR, BUT RICH

Have you ever been persecuted for your faith? Have you ever been put at a disadvantage because of your faith? Have others ever hated or shunned you because you were a believer?

The example of the church at Smyrna alerts us to the possibility of being persecuted for our faith and encourages us to remain faithful to Christ. Smyrna derives from the word for *bitter*, an appropriate description for the experience of the believers who lived there. They experienced persecution and the hardships that accompanied it.

Smyrna was a city about 40 miles north of Ephesus, but not as big. It was a busy seaport and

a center of wealth. It still exists today as the city of Izmir in Turkey. One third of its community is nominally Christian. The church has had a continuous Christian presence in spite of persecution.

Smyrna was cozy with Rome. Many Roman citizens lived there. While Ephesus was a center of worship for the local goddess, Smyrna was a center of emperor worship. In AD 25, a temple to the emperor Tiberius was built there. Emperor worship became a matter of pride to the people of Smyrna. Emperor Domitian would later declare himself a god and require all citizens to perform a sacrifice to him, saying, “Caesar is Lord.” This was mostly a political commitment in religious trappings, but believers saw it as idolatry. Once

you performed the sacrifice, you would get a certificate. Without that certificate, you were a subject of discrimination and possibly punishment.

There was also a large Jewish community in Smyrna. Although Jews and Christians coexisted peaceably in some areas, this was not the case in Smyrna. Well into the second century, the Jews were strong opponents of the Smyrna church. They repeatedly informed against believers and incited the local governor against them.

*Jesus encouraged them
by saying that though
materially poor, they were
spiritually rich.*

Smyrna received its name from its commerce in myrrh, a fragrant herb. The name symbolizes the experience of the church in persecution. Myrrh is associated with suffering, death, and embalming. For example, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus used myrrh for embalming the body of Jesus (John 19:39). It also was one of the gifts the wise men gave Jesus at His birth (Matt 2:11).

Jesus described Himself as *the First and the Last, who died and came to life again*. Christ, who is eternal, was around before the emperor and would be around long afterward. He had conquered death. As Jesus experienced death and rose in triumph over it, so would the martyrs of Smyrna.

Jesus knew of their affliction, their poverty, and the slander against them. He encouraged them by saying that though materially poor, they were spiritually rich.

The believers had experienced economic persecution. They had lost their jobs, their businesses, and their lands because of their loyalty to Christ. The economic and social life of the city was organized around the religious and imperial cults. When a believer refused to participate in some of their practices, he was marked off. His faith cut him off from the job that he held and from social life.

There was also a pocket of Jewish troublemakers causing problems for the church. By birth and religion these may have been Jews, but this was only in an outward sense. Inwardly, they were not believing and did not have circumcised hearts (see Rom 2:28-29). They were not of the faith of Abraham.

They were rather of *the synagogue of Satan*. This is not a synagogue building dedicated to Satan, of course, but the people who gathered there planned their assault on the church, putting themselves at the disposal of the adversary (Satan). They circulated false ideas concerning the believers in Christ. They accused them of cannibalism, eating flesh and drinking blood at the Lord's Supper, incest (love between "brothers and sisters"), and treason—meeting in secret to promote the kingdom of Christ.

Believers are slandered today as well. Believers are accused of hate speech for upholding Biblical values. Believers are accused of being anti-science for holding creation views.

Jesus gave no reproof to this church. He issued no call to repentance. Their trials purified their faith.

The church at Smyrna had suffered at the hands of the Romans and Jews and would suffer even more in the years to come. They would pay dearly for their faithfulness to Jesus. Jesus simply exhorted them not to be afraid and to remain faithful.

One of the most famous martyrdoms happened in the city of Smyrna circa AD 167. A Christian

leader there at the time was Polycarp. On a festival day, when the crowds were excitable, a cry against Polycarp went out from the mob, and they brought him before the Roman governor.

Polycarp was given the choice of saying, “Caesar is Lord” or “Jesus is Lord.” He refused to say, “Caesar is Lord.” The governor urged him, “Swear! I will set you free. Reproach Christ.” Polycarp answered with this famous phrase, “Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” The proconsul said, “I will burn you with fire if you will not change.” Polycarp said, “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and after a little while is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. Why do you wait? Do what you will!” Soon after, the people gathered the wood and burned Polycarp.

Jesus referred to “ten days” of tribulation. It could be a literal prediction of some ten-day reign of terror. Or it may have symbolic meaning of ten periods of persecution from Nero to Diocletian. Most likely, however, it may simply stand for “a short time.” The church at Smyrna grew into one of the most influential churches of its time because its leaders and believers were willing to lay down their lives for Christ.

Jesus promised a crown of life to those who were faithful to the point of death. A crown of laurel was given to those who won races. The believers at Smyrna were winning the race of life. Also, their persecutor, the Roman emperor, wore a crown. In the life to come, the believers would reign with Christ if they remained faithful. The crown is a special reward that is over and above the eternal life that all believers have as a free gift.

Jesus promised that the one who overcame would in no way be hurt by the second death. The second death is being cast into the lake of fire, separation from God forever (Rev 20:14).

Jesus employed a figure of speech called *litotes*. Litotes is an assertion that understates the reality referenced. Jesus was saying that He would abundantly repay the faithful believer for the sacrifice he made. His eternal experience would be as far beyond the reach of the second death as can be imagined.

The glories of the life to come contrast sharply with the dark shadows of persecution and death.

What would Jesus say (WWJS) to the church experiencing persecution? “Don’t be afraid. Remain faithful.”

Jesus assured the Smyrnan believers that they were rich in His sight because of their faithful service.

Persecutors in our culture may mock you, lie about you, or make you lose your job. There is now a name for that: “the cancel culture.” Our culture supposedly tolerates any belief. However, Biblical faith consistently applied is considered shocking and unacceptable.

Let us ask God for strength to persevere when our faith puts us at a disadvantage in today’s world. Also, let us pray for those believers around the world who may be suffering for their faith to an even greater extent than we are. ■



Philippe Sterling is the pastor of Vista Ridge Bible Fellowship in Lewisville, TX. He and his wife, Brenda, have a son and daughter and several grandkids.



Believers
Need to Dress
Well Because
the King Is
Coming Soon

BY LUCAS KITCHEN

I was in ministry in West Texas several years ago. We were about to begin a night worship service called *Paradigm* for college students when a man, probably homeless, walked into the church and sat down on the back pew. That was not that uncommon; what was uncommon was his attire... or his lack thereof. He was a big man, and from where he sat in the pew, it looked as if he were wearing no clothes at all. I hopped off the stage and rushed over to him, relieved to find out that he had shorts on at least. I sat down next to him and removed my shirt. This was a big fan-

cy church, so my going shirtless was not really a long-term solution. I gave him the shirt I had taken off. I believe I had an undershirt on, so everything balanced out okay. He was a big guy, so my shirt didn't fit him well, but at least it covered his hairy chest.

It makes us uncomfortable when someone shows up for an event or social function inappropriately dressed, or worse—naked. Jesus tells a story of a man who shows up at a place in that very state. Take a look at this parable from Matthew:

“The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come!

“So he sent other servants to tell them, ‘The feast has been prepared. The bulls and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the banquet!’ But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business. Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them.

“The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town. And he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren’t worthy of the honor. Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.’ So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

“For many are called, but few are chosen.” - Matthew 22:1-14, NLT

Notice the section that talks about the man who was in the feast but didn't have wedding garments. Many have thought that this parable is teaching that that man is unsaved because he's tossed out. I'd like to offer a different interpretation.

The man represents one who has eternal life (i.e., a believer), but who has not lived in a godly way. He is saved, but he did not prepare for Christ's return. Instead, he insulted the King by doing nothing in preparation for this feast. Either

he is wearing dirty clothes, or even worse—he's naked. The clothes represent his walk with Christ: "And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev 19:8).

The man was tossed out of something. But what? The kingdom? No. He was sent out of the wedding feast. He was obviously in the kingdom because he accepted the King's invitation. All who are in the kingdom have eternal life. He simply was not allowed to be in on the feast. I'm an American, but I've never had the privilege of sitting down to the President's dining table.

Another interesting thing is what the King calls him—*friend*. If he was unsaved, like those who appear earlier in the story, the King would have lumped him in with the *murderers*. However, He uses a somewhat affectionate term here. I believe this is because this man represents a child of God (a believer), but it's inappropriate for him to be in this privileged place—the feast.

The lesson of this parable is this: For those who will enter the kingdom (all believers) there is still an expectation on you (discipleship). All believers have eternal life as a result of their faith in Christ. However, believers will be rewarded for the way they live.

The man in this parable represents someone who is a believer and has eternal life, but ignored discipleship, disobeyed Christ, or did not live a godly life.

The gift of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven comes by faith in Christ. Reward, privilege, and closeness to Christ in the kingdom of heaven comes by good works.

So what does it mean when it says, "Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"?

The outer darkness is often interpreted as the lake of fire. However, there are many scholars who have a different interpretation. The outer

darkness probably means the darkness outside the place of the feast.

Imagine this: You're standing at night at a window looking in. Inside there are many who are having a feast and enjoying each other's company. Light pours out from the window, but it's dark where you are.

Those who are looking in from the outer darkness gnash their teeth because they realize that they too could have been allowed in if they had lived their lives differently. Be sure not to misunderstand. These people are in the kingdom of heaven. They have eternal life, but they are not allowed into the feast because they weren't committed to living a Christ-like life.

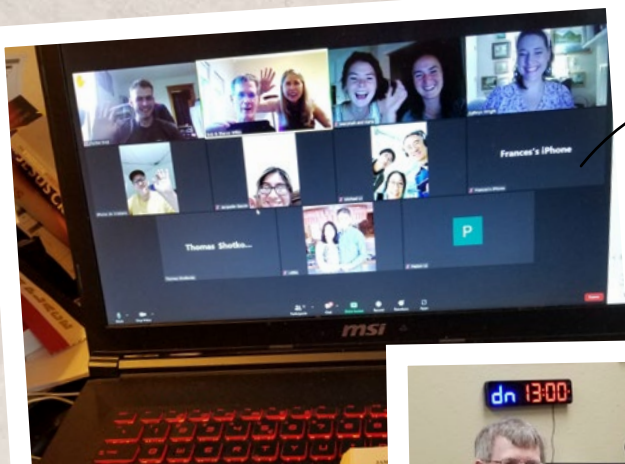
In this interpretation, this is a temporary situation. Those who are left out of the feast will be comforted shortly thereafter. Since they will be in glorified bodies, they will get over any grief they experience at the Bema.

One thing is sure. Those who have placed their faith in Christ will be in His kingdom forever. Those who also commit to a life of good works will not only be in the kingdom but will also be rewarded with closeness to Christ and privilege in the kingdom.

Will you be privileged enough to sit at the feasting table of the King? Those who have believed and have eternal life need to prepare their wedding garment. Your garment is your good works. Don't be found dressed inappropriately. ■



Lucas Kitchen is an American author of both Christian fiction and nonfiction, and the Director of Free Grace International. He lives in Longview, TX, with his wife and three kids.



Internet gamers? Not so fast. This is the Friday Night Zoom crew

Steve and Danny join Bob in the new studio space



Colin, Mark, Bob, Ken, and Bethany—the starting five for GES



The GES Board, in person and in pixels

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT GES?



We shipped some of our books overseas. May the Lord bless those who read them!



Bob Wilkin and Ken Gates with Ken and Ana Marie Pierce at the Tallahassee Regional



Pastor Marino demonstrates a bear attack from a Free Grace perspective in Tallahassee



Fantastic group from Berean Memorial Church



BY BOB WILKIN

Is the Free Gift of Salvation for Those Who Bow Their Knees and Repent?

My sister, Pam, sent me a very interesting message by Dr. Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis. It is called “Divided Nation: Cultures in Chaos.” I believe that Genesis 1-11 reports literal history, not poetic history, and not a mix of what actually happened and things that did not happen. I believe in a young earth and that Noah’s flood was a worldwide flood. So, I agree with Ken Ham and Answers in Genesis on these points.

However, Ham has long been known to hold to Lordship Salvation. I accept the fact that he is wrong about the saving message, even though he is right about the Creation and the Flood and inerrancy. I rejoice in the former and lament the latter.

But in the message Pam sent me, Ham slipped up. It was what theologians call *an unguarded statement*. This is when a pastor or theologian is speaking off the cuff and says something that either was a mistake that he failed to correct or else his actual opinion without the normal qualifiers that he would add to make it sound better. I found a jarring comment by Ham that falls into that second category.

Ham was saying that when asked what our race is, we should not say, “African American,” “Hispanic,” “Caucasian,” “Asian,” or “Native American.” Instead, he suggested that we say, “Adam’s race.” I thought that was very clever and a great point. We are all children of Adam and Eve. He then said that we should use that as an opportunity to evangelize. Here is a transcript of what he said at that point:

You [the unbeliever being witnessed to] are going to die. That’s why God sent His Son to die on the cross and be raised from the dead. He offers us the free gift of salvation. You can get on your knees and repent right now.

See, you [Ham’s believing audience] can present the gospel.¹

I rejoiced when he spoke of “the free gift of salvation.” I recoiled when his very next words were, “You can get on your knees and repent right now.”

Notice that he said nothing about believing in Jesus. Lordship Salvation people, including Ken Ham, normally say that if you *truly believe in Jesus, then you are saved*. They then go on to explain what *true faith in Jesus* supposedly looks like. Here, however, Ham says nothing about faith in Christ. The condition of gaining the free gift of salvation, he says, is bowing in submission before God and repenting. Is that what he really believes? I think it is. As he understands it, the condition to receive the gift of salvation is submission to God and turning from one’s sins, not believing in Jesus.

Do you know what the audience did when Ham said that about getting on your knees and repenting right now? They clapped. Hundreds of people clapped. They loved what he said.

I’m a fan of Answers in Genesis and of Ken Ham, at least in terms of his teachings on Creation and the Flood. But I’m not a fan of his evangelistic message.

Would you have clapped? Or, like me, would you have grieved over this false gospel being proclaimed? ■



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 46 years, Sharon. He is an avid race walker and marathon walker.

1 This occurred between 44:20-44:33. Visit <https://uni4m.org/2022/03/02/divided-nation-cultures-in-chaos-a-conflicted-church-ken-ham/> for entire message.

The Bible Is Reliable, Part 2

BY DIX WINSTON

In part 1, we saw that the Bible accurately records the words and events in the life of Christ. This is important since the Gospels are the primary source document on the words and works of Christ. If they did not accurately record what He said and did, we lose our message. How can we know if He said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)? We know He said this because the Bible is good history, accurately recording the words and works of Jesus.

But the second question is whether what was said and done is *true*. If Jesus actually said the

words known as John 3:16, but He was lying, then John 3:16 is good history, but it is not true.

There are four reasons we can be confident in the veracity of John 3:16, as well as everything else Jesus spoke and did: the early dates of the manuscripts, the eyewitness accounts, the exceptional nature of information, and the extra-Biblical corroboration. Let’s look at each one of these.

THE EARLY DATES OF THE MANUSCRIPTS

Three early church fathers (Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp) quote 25 of the 27 books of the NT. Now it goes without saying that for some-



thing to be quoted, it has to have already been written. “Since Clement was in Rome, and Ignatius and Polycarp were hundreds of miles away in Smyrna, the original New Testament documents had to have been written significantly earlier, otherwise they could not have circulated across the ancient world by that time. Therefore, it’s safe to say that all of the New Testament was written by AD 100...”¹ This, of course, is the *latest* they could have been written.

Many scholars believe them to have been written much earlier. Colin Hemer convincingly argues that the book of Acts was written between AD 60 and 62.² The most convincing argument

for this date is that the destruction of the Jewish temple, which occurred in AD 70, is never mentioned in the New Testament. (Luke does mention 84 historically confirmed details.)

The significance of this can be illustrated this way. Say you picked up a *Complete History of the United States*, and it did not mention 9/11. You would rightly conclude that it must have been published before the collapse of the Twin Towers. So, if Luke did not mention “Jerusalem’s 9/11,” you would rightly conclude that the book was written before AD 70. Indeed, since no NT book mentions Jerusalem’s 9/11, the entire NT was likely written before AD 70.

These early dates for the NT documents give weight to the next truth test, the eyewitness accounts.

THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

The NT writers claimed to be eyewitnesses of the events about which they wrote. Peter claimed to be an eyewitness before a hostile crowd of Jews, “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32).

Paul claimed to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve...and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also” (1 Cor 15:3-8).

John told us that Thomas was also an eyewitness (John 20:24-30).

John claimed to be an eyewitness to all that Jesus did (1 John 1:1-2).

Luke, although not an eyewitness, interviewed eyewitnesses for his writing (Luke 1:1-2).

Truly this is not hearsay testimony or second-hand rumors. These men had personal and first-hand knowledge of the NT events.

As mentioned earlier, Colin Hemer documents 84 confirmed historical facts from the Book of Acts:³ the proper location of Lycaonia (14:6), the presence of a synagogue in Thessalonica (17:1), the proper title of honor, *neōkoros*, authorized by the Romans (19:35), the common way to obtain Roman citizenship at this time (22:28), the correct legal formulae (25:18), the principle port to find a ship sailing to Italy (27:5-6), the local people and the superstitions of the day (28:4-6).

And in a similar vein Craig Blomberg documents 54 similar historically accurate details from the Gospel of John.⁴

These details give credence to the Gospel writers.

Suppose someone in 1980 wrote a book describing your hometown as it was that year. In the book, the author correctly described your town’s politicians, its unique laws and penal codes, the local industry, the local weather patterns, local slang, the town’s roads and geography, its unusual topography, local houses of worship, area hotels, town statues and sculptures, the depth of the water in the town harbor, and numerous other unique details about your town that year. If the author claimed he had visited your town that year, or said he had gotten good information from people who had been there, would you think he was telling the truth? Of course you would, because he provided details that only an eyewitness could provide.⁵

THE EXCEPTIONAL NATURE OF INFORMATION

Demeaning Details

The third truth test has to do with what those eyewitnesses wrote. Most people would gladly exclude demeaning personal details from their own experiences, if given the opportunity to do so. But the writers of the Gospels did not leave out personally demeaning incidents. They are dumb (Mark 9:32; Luke 18:34; John 16:18), disloyal (Matt 26:33-35, 69-72), and doubting (Matt 28:17).

Difficult Sayings of Jesus

It would have been easy to exclude the difficult-to-understand sayings of Jesus, to employ the K.I.S.S. (keep it simple, stupid) method of reporting. But the writers, wanting to be truthful, were compelled to write such things as Jesus’ declaring the Father is greater than Him (John 14:28), Jesus’ seemingly denying His deity (Luke 18:19), and His seeming inability to do miracles in His hometown (Mark 6:5).

Demanding Sayings of Jesus

The disciples could have appealed to a wider audience if they would have watered down the demanding sayings of Jesus. But again, if your mission is to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, you must include them as well. Jesus said that looking at a woman lustfully is sin (Matt 5:28). He told his followers to not resist evil but to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39-42). He said to love your enemies (Matt 5:44-45). These go against human nature and certainly raise the moral standards of anyone.

Death, Not Denial, Verified Their Words as True

All the apostles, with the exception of John (he was boiled in oil and exiled to Patmos), died a martyr's death. They sealed their writings with their blood. They could have easily recanted their testimony and gone on with their lives. But, no, they would rather have died for the truth than to have lived with a lie.


Now you might be saying that people die for a lie all the time. That may be the case, but they die for a lie, believing it is the truth. No one in his right mind would die for a lie, knowing it is a lie. These men were well aware of what they were saying and were still willing to die for it.

THE EXTRA-BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

The final truth test asks if any of this is confirmed by extra-Biblical documents. And although the Bible is the primary historical document detailing the life of Christ, there is in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman literature abundant testimony to His life and ministry outside the Bible. Dr. Norman L. Geisler succinctly sums up this evidence. He says,

The primary sources for the life of Christ are the four Gospels... However there are considerable reports from non-Christian

sources that supplement and confirm the Gospel accounts. These come largely from Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Samaritan writings of the first century. In brief, they inform us that: (1) Jesus was from Nazareth; (2) he lived a wise and virtuous life; (3) he was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish King; (4) he was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later; (5) his enemies acknowledged he performed unusual feats they called "sorcery"; (6) his small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading even as far as Rome; (7) his disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives, and worshiped Christ as Divine. This picture confirms the view of Christ presented in the NT Gospels.⁶

Based upon these four lines of evidence, you can be assured that Jesus said that God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but has everlasting life (John 3:16). And you can be sure that He was telling the truth. The Message of Life is true! 



Dix is the senior pastor of Crosspoint Community Church in Centennial, CO. This past September, he and Cynthia had their first grandson, Gunnar Titus. Dix is unashamedly Dispensational and Free Grace!

- 1 Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 236.
- 2 See Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 408-410.
- 3 Ibid., 101-158.
- 4 Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 69-281.
- 5 Geisler and Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be An Atheist*, 255-56.
- 6 Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 384-85.



Everybody Can Serve

by Kathryn Wright

Recently I participated in a podcast interview with Broken Vessels, Hidden Treasures Ministries in Idaho. I was asked how churches can best demonstrate the love of Christ to people with disabilities and their families. Even though I have two sisters with disabilities and have been attending church all my life, I don't think I have ever been asked this question. I had never considered how I would respond. After some thought, I have two suggestions that I hope will help churches and individuals with their interactions with those who have special needs.

SERVING THOSE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

My suggestions spring from Rom 1:11-12. As Paul begins his letter to the church at Rome, he writes:

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

In verse 11, Paul tells the church at Rome that he longs to see them. He desires to serve them and “impart some spiritual gift.” Ultimately, the question I was asked was, “How can I serve someone with special needs?” This is a godly question. As the body of Christ, we are called to serve one another. Like Paul, I think people often genuinely desire to serve others, especially those with special needs.

However, this question implies something that I think is a common misconception. We assume that in order to demonstrate Christ to a *special* needs person, it requires a *special* kind of service.

When it comes to serving those with special needs, it can seem overwhelming. In our churches, there is a sense in which people don’t know how they can help. It’s one thing to serve a church member during a difficult situation like losing a job or the death of a family member. We have a list of things we know to do when those things happen. However, to serve those with lifelong disabilities seems to require more.

A few years ago, there was a TV show called “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.” The basic premise was that a team would find a family, often with a special needs member, and they would build them a million-dollar home with all kinds of fancy equipment. This is what people often have

in mind when they want to help those with special needs. Because the disabilities are “extreme,” the service needs to be extreme too. We want to build ramps or make a GoFundMe page to raise a bunch of money. While that’s all lovely, I would like to suggest a shift in thinking.

SIMPLE SERVICE

I would like to change the question and simply ask, “How can we demonstrate Christ to people?”

Paul wanted to go to Rome because he wanted to use his spiritual gifts to build up the church. That’s pretty simple and not very exciting. You probably won’t be put on national television for exercising your spiritual gift. However, demonstrating Christ to someone (anyone!) doesn’t have to be a grand gesture. In fact, I would argue it rarely is. I strongly encourage others to serve those with special needs just as you would anyone else at church. If you have the gift of prayer, pray for them. If you have the gift of encouragement, exercise that gift to your special needs members just as you would with your able-bodied members.

One of the greatest ways you can serve a person with disabilities is to be his or her friend. Sit next to the person during the service. Talk with him or her. You would be amazed how often people with special needs are just outright ignored. I can’t begin to tell you how often people would bypass my sisters and ask my parents how old they are or if they are still in school, even though my sisters were right there and could speak for themselves. Just talking to a special needs person can be a huge encouragement, not only to the person but also to the families. As the body of Christ, we are called to use our spiritual gifts to edify one another. As Paul desired to go to Rome and share his gifts with the church, we should do the same.

You don't have to build the special needs person a house. You can simply have a role in building up the church. Those with special needs are a part of the church.

LET THEM SERVE YOU

Paul is an example of a believer who longed to serve the church by using his spiritual gifts. In Rom 1:12, we are given more insight into the thinking of the apostle. He goes on to say that he wants to be encouraged by those in Rome.

Zane Hodges writes regarding this passage:

Paul is not so proud, however, as to imagine that only the Romans will benefit from mutual interactions with him. On the contrary he anticipated that he and they would **be encouraged together** by means of their mutually shared **faith**. The Christian teacher who thinks that other believers can no longer bring him spiritual enhancement is a teacher in urgent need of additional wisdom (*Romans*, pp. 32-33, emphases his).

There is a spiritual trap that we all can fall into when it comes to serving those with special needs. Just as a teacher, or anyone with a leadership position, can start to think that he alone can offer edification, able-bodied people can have the same mindset. We can lose sight of the profound truth and example found in this verse. We need each other.

Disabled people are often treated as second-class church members. They are rarely given the opportunity to exercise *their* spiritual gifts. In this verse, however, Paul gives us a principle that we can certainly apply to our interactions with those with special needs. Those with special needs can also serve you! As we long to serve, consider that those with disabilities often long to serve too.

As I mentioned, I have two sisters with disabilities. One could not walk until 2020 when she went to be with the Lord. She couldn't dress herself or

feed herself or even go to the bathroom without aid. She was constantly being served. However, one of the greatest joys she had was when she was given the opportunity to serve someone else. She loved to pray for others. She spent hours every day praying for people. If you talked to her for more than five minutes, she would start talking about Jesus. The week before she passed, she was evangelizing one of her nurses. I could go on, but time does not permit me to write of all the ways she demonstrated Christ to me.

My other sister loves to read the Scriptures for church and do special music. It brings her joy to have a role in the service. In turn, our church lovingly gives her those opportunities as they minister to her and my family.

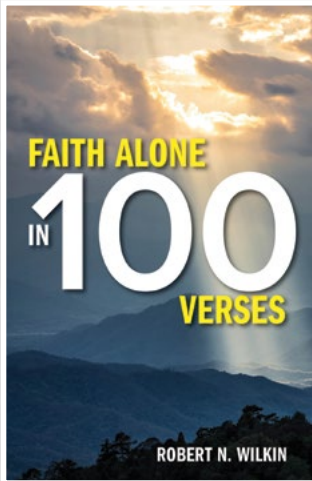
CONCLUSION

It is a wonderful thing to serve and be served by those with special needs. I would encourage everyone to adopt the attitude of Paul in this passage. Look for opportunities to serve them. Long for those opportunities, and act upon them when you see them arise. In addition, be reminded that we need them too. None of us are above learning and being served. Disabled people often feel like a burden. Look for opportunities for them not just to be served but to join in the service. Remind them of their value, that they have equal membership in the body of Christ. Tell them how they have helped you. Just as the Lord gave you a spiritual gift and role in the body of Christ, He also did the same for the disabled believer. Don't become so misguided as to think you don't need them to edify and build you up as well. This too is a way of demonstrating Christ to those in your churches. ■



Kathryn Wright is the GES Missions Coordinator and does far more work than that title suggests.

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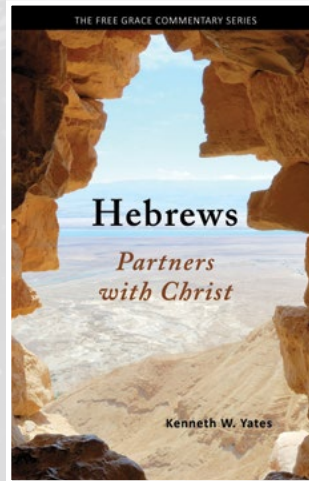


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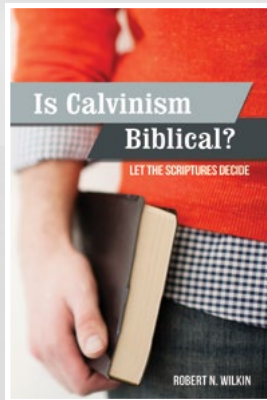


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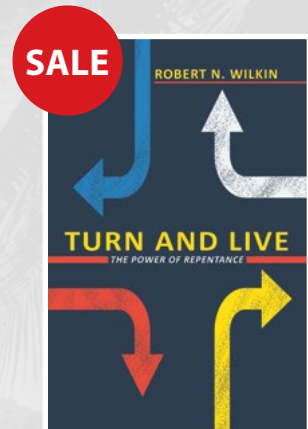


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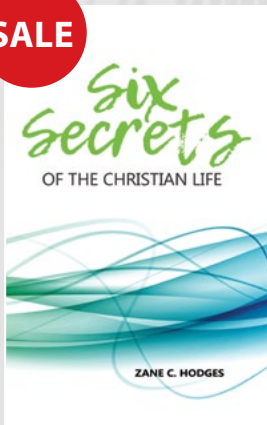
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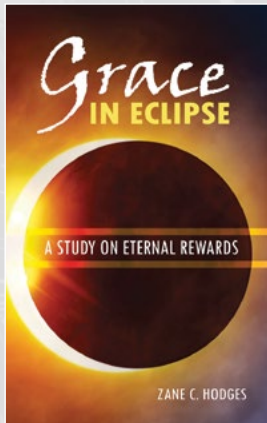


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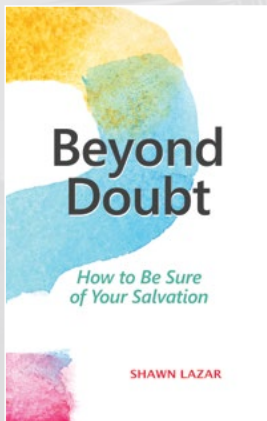


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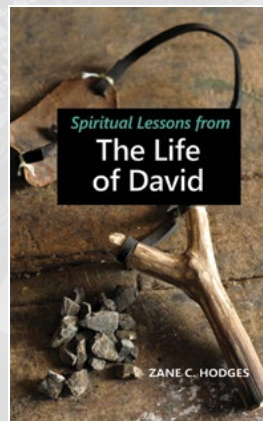


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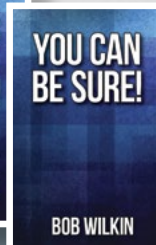
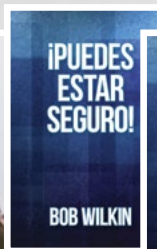
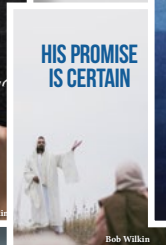
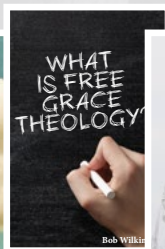
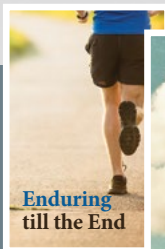


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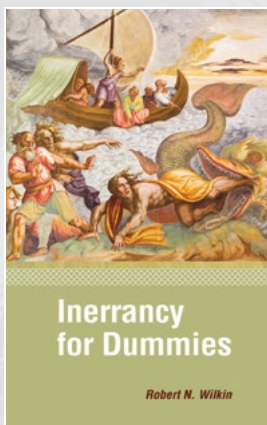
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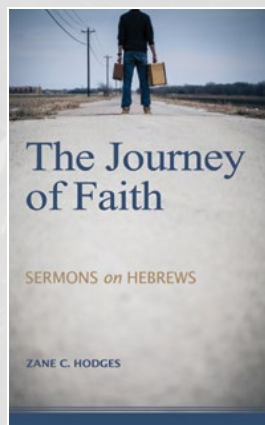


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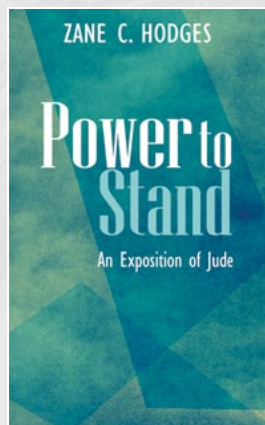


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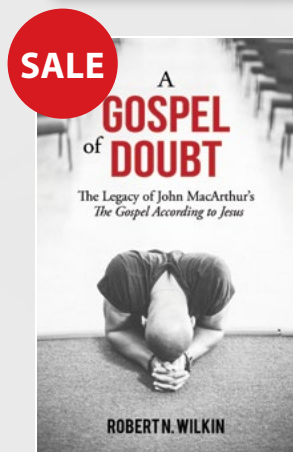


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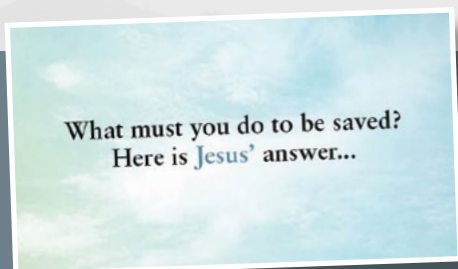


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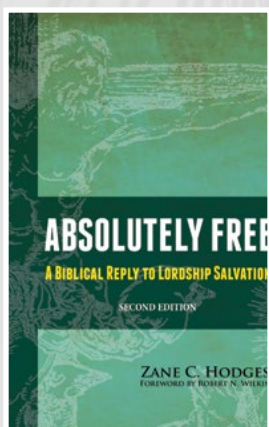
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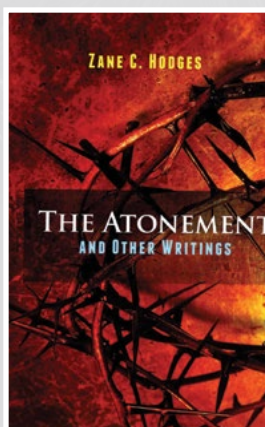
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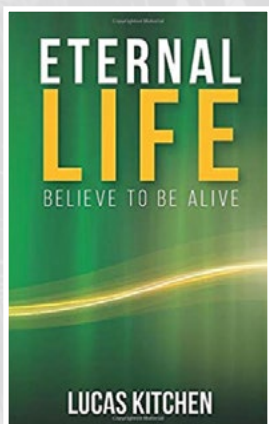
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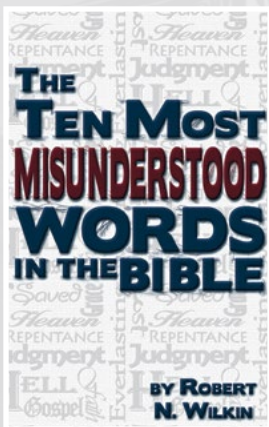
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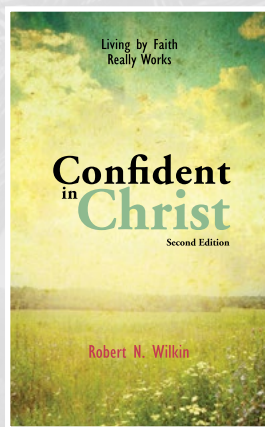
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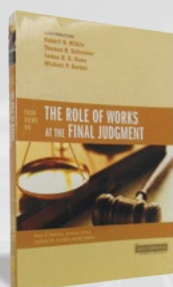
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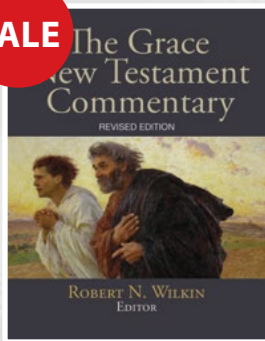
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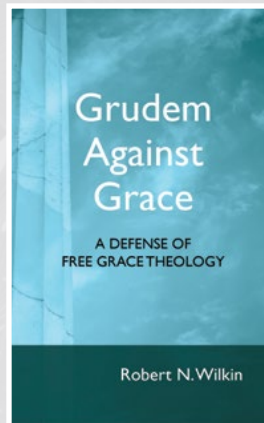


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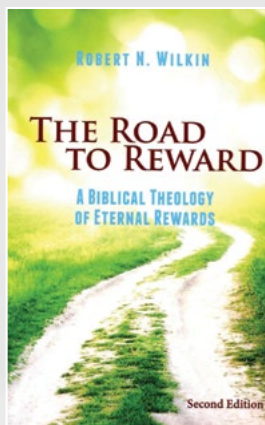


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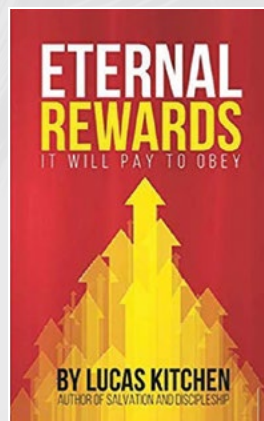


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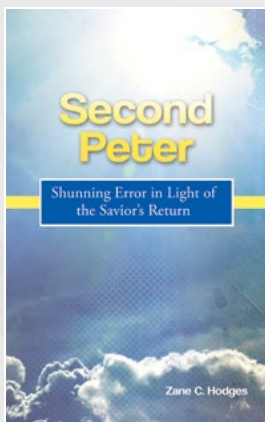


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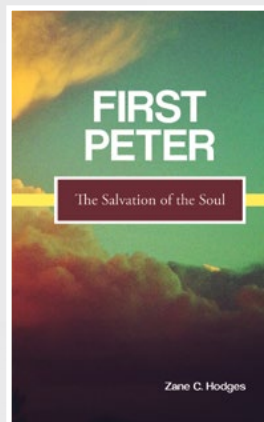


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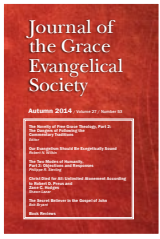


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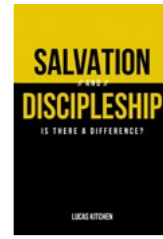


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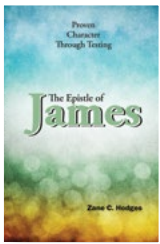
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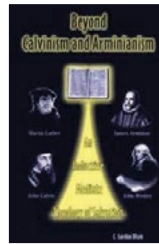


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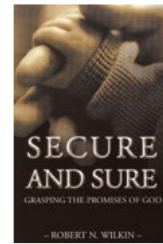


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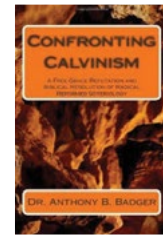


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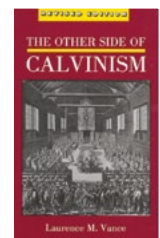


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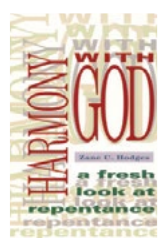


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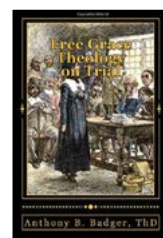


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*Ken led a conference in Nairobi
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GES INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

KEN'S TRIP TO KENYA





Ken toured the city and met with several individuals while in Nairobi



One of their church buildings

IS JOHN 3:16 OUT OF WARRANTY?



I. J. asks an important question:

Hi. I appreciate reading many of your articles online, and I am trying to study the Lordship Salvation debate for myself. I know that John 3:16 is used to support the idea that only belief is necessary for salvation. From what I understand, how is it possible to use John 3:16 when those words are stated before Jesus died on the cross, still not *the age of grace*? Before Jesus took our punishment on the cross, the Jews had to do many things to be saved, the main one being sacrifices and such. That would imply that since John 3:16 was before Jesus' death and resurrection, belief actually means performing the actions that the Jews had previously done in order to be saved.

First, the Apostle John was writing to people during the church age to tell unbelievers what they must do to have everlasting life (John 20:31). Hence, John 3:16 is still valid today. That promise is not out of warranty.

When you buy a new car, it has a warranty that is good for three years or 36,000 miles, whichever comes first. After a time, the promise about the dealer fixing the major components of the car for free no longer applies. But that is not true with the promise of life in John 3:16. That warranty is eternal.

Second, the message that Jesus preached during the Law of Moses was the same saving message that Abraham believed *before* the Law of Moses (Gen 15:6; John 8:58; Rom 4:1-5). The saving message never changed. Old Testament people were not saved by works. No one on either side of the cross can be.

Third, the shed blood of Christ on the cross applied to people before the cross (Rom 3:25-26). If it did not, then no one could have been saved before Calvary. No one could have eternal salvation unless Jesus had removed the sin barrier (John 1:29).

In one sense, it does not matter what we believe regarding how people were saved in the OT. After all, we don't live then. But in another sense,

it matters greatly. Here's why. If you think OT people were saved by faith plus works, then you logically think that NT people are saved by faith plus works. That is the way many Lordship Salvation people think. They think that the works required are different. And they think that the works of the post-cross person are works that God does through us, not works we do apart from God. (Of course, they could think the same about the works of pre-cross people as well.) But the bottom line is that a person who has a faulty view of pre-cross salvation often has a faulty view of post-cross salvation.

I. J., I'm not sure from your question whether you believe that everlasting life is received by faith alone, apart from works. I hope you do. As you study Lordship Salvation, keep in mind that the message of John 3:16 is also the message of Gen 3:15; 15:6; Acts 16:31; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9; 1 Tim 1:16; Jas 1:18; 1 John 5:9-13; and Rev 22:17. Eternal salvation has always been by grace through faith and apart from works. ■



Bob Wilkin is Executive Director of Grace Evangelical Society. He lives in Highland Village, TX, with his wife of 46 years, Sharon. He is an avid race walker and marathon walker.

A REVIEW OF



by
Kathryn
Wright

*Mom, I'm a Girl*¹ tells the story and lessons learned by a mother who lost her son to suicide at the age of 19. The son struggled with what is called transgenderism, though his counselors questioned that diagnosis.

Glenney and her husband have been involved in Christian ministry their entire adult lives, with him serving as pastor of various churches. It is clear that they placed a large emphasis on the Bible in their lives. Their son, Scott, attended church and Sunday school classes all the years he was growing up, even attending Christian schools until high school.

The presentation of the gospel is a mixed bag in the book. Glenney told Scott that he could be with Jesus forever if he

would ask Him to be his Savior and “take away your bad things.” At a young age, Scott prayed with his mom, saying he knew that Jesus died for his sins. At that point, Glenney writes, he became a child of God, and they had complete assurance that no matter what happened, he would be with Jesus forever (pp. 15-16). Throughout the book, the author describes salvation as a “decision.” At the end of the book, even after Scott’s sexual sins, rebellion, and suicide, Glenney says she knows her son is with the Lord (p. 182). Scott said the same thing towards the end of his life. Glenney speaks of her conversion as a young girl, commenting that God gives eternal life as a free gift, if we accept that Christ died for our sins.

John 3:16 caused her to believe in that promise (p. 44).

Glenney expresses her guilt because she at one time felt that perhaps she had passed this gender confusion on to her son. He asked her at a young age if she ever thought she should have been a boy (p. 38). Glenney has a section in the book describing how she was a tomboy and was not into feminine things, even becoming a weightlifter.

As Scott was entering his teen years, he told his mom that he was a girl (p. 56). His parents wanted to take him to a counselor, but he insisted it not be a Christian one. He had other mental issues as well, as he became involved in the “furry” community, assuming the personality of a female cat (p. 59).

The book tells the heartbreak of Scott's parents trying to get him help. They prayed. They searched the Scriptures. They looked for counseling but could not find anyone who could help. Scott changed his hair, used make-up and nail polish, and began to dress in feminine clothes. His parents said they loved him, and he lived in their home until he turned 18, but they would not buy anything for him that supported such changes.

In his sophomore year in high school, he asked if he could go to the public school to be closer to his friends, but Glenney also knew it was because they had an LGBT club. Scott began changing in more and more ways, including in his beliefs (p. 75). He had his name legally changed to Sydney Royal. Then he asked his parents to refer to him as "she" and their daughter. They refused to do so (p. 80). Scott eventually started going on dates with boys. The author and her husband were at a loss as to what they should do.

In his senior year in high school, Scott began taking female hormones without their knowledge. They were still hoping that he would repent of what he was doing and that God would answer their prayers (p. 97). A counselor Scott trusted said he was "gender neutral" and not transgender, so Scott would no longer see her. Scott spoke of committing suicide and was hospitalized. The doctors

blamed the parents for his mental condition because they did not fully support him (p. 112).

After high school, Scott wanted to have surgery to complete what he saw as a transition. He was going to do it in Thailand and asked his parents for money. They refused. They also told him that because of the tension in the home, he would need to move out of their home at that time. He then lived on the streets of Portland and in halfway homes. They would see him on occasion, and he kept in touch through social media.

Scott asked to borrow his parents' van. He used it to commit suicide by breathing helium (p. 176). He was their only child.

This is a heart-wrenching story. Scott's parents obviously loved him and would have done anything they thought would have helped him. They constantly asked how to love him without supporting his sin and mental illness. Glenney and her husband struggled with guilt over whether they did what was right in all the different situations but rested on 1 John 1:9 and that God had forgiven them when they had failed (p. 188).

Glenney states that the death of her son still brings pain. She feels sadness when her friends enjoy their grandchildren, and she knows she will never have any. Through it all, she has learned to rely on God for everything. She has turned to prayer

and the Scriptures to find the spiritual strength she needs. She rests in the sovereignty of the Lord, even concerning the death of her son (p. 213). She finds great comfort knowing she will see Scott in the kingdom.

Christian parents reading this story cannot help but feel for Glenney. She does not fall into the trap of accepting the world's standards on the issue of transgenderism. She sees it as a disorder and warns against society's promotion of the transgender agenda (p. 244). In many cases, these children are doing it as a way to rebel against their parents (p. 149). Most people reading this would have responded in a way very similar to how Glenney and her husband dealt with their son.

It has been 13 years since Scott's suicide. This has become an even bigger issue. Churches are facing this and will face it. Everyone reading this story should be moved to compassion for those who must face what Glenney faced. She felt the church offered her little help. If nothing else, her story should cause us to be merciful towards those involved in such a terrible situation. I recommend the book. ■



Kathryn Wright is the GES Missions Coordinator and does far more work than that title suggests.

1 Enumclaw, WA: Redemption Press, 2017. 246 pp. Paper, \$16.99.



Purple Water Is Not Good

by KEN YATES



INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, I attended a summer camp for Boy Scouts near an Army post. It had a large swimming pool. The Army provided soldiers as lifeguards. These soldiers warned us about what would happen if we misused the pool water. They told us that the Army had put a chemical in the water, and if we mistook the pool for a bathroom, the water around us would turn a dark shade of purple. Anybody making the water turn purple would no longer be able to swim in the pool for the rest of the camp. These guys walked around in military uniforms when they were not working as our lifeguards. What they said sounded very official to us.

For 11- and 12-year-old boys, it would have been devastating to be embarrassed in this way. Plus, we all wanted to swim. So, for the first few days, anybody watching the pool would have seen all us boys constantly running out of the pool and taking a shower in the stalls that were along the pool. Everyone knew what we all were doing. We went to the showers and stayed there long enough to make sure no residue would be left on our trunks to turn any water around us purple. Even a little bit of purple color in the water would have resulted in a great deal of laughter from our friends. And who knows what else the Army soldiers would have done?

But after those first few days, these numerous visits to the showers ceased. I don't know who first figured out the scam. Perhaps it was a boy who took a chance on being embarrassed, or who didn't take a long enough shower, and nothing happened. He spread the word around. In my case, I do remember my best friend telling me when we were swimming around the pool, "You don't need to go to the showers; there ain't no special chemical in this water."

I am sure those soldiers did it for a laugh. For two days they saw boys running out of the water and taking needless showers. But, at least in some way, the soldiers had good intentions. The

thought of two hundred boys swimming around in that pool, without going to those showers, was pretty nasty. The alternative was not good. I am sure the soldiers used the pool when we were not there. They wanted the water clean. In their minds, what they told us was for our own well-being, as well as theirs, even if it wasn't the truth.

But it didn't work. Boys will be boys, and there was going to be that one kid who drank a lot before he got into the pool and didn't have time to make it to the showers on one occasion. It was inevitable that one of us was going to be too lazy to get out of the pool, get cold, and take a two-minute shower. One of us was going to hear the soldiers laughing at us and figure it out. Whatever happened, the cat was out of the bag. The soldiers had threatened us with public humiliation. It may have worked for a short period of time, but ultimately the whole thing was doomed to fail.

AN ILLUSTRATION

I think my experience that summer is a great illustration of how many people look at the Christian life. They think the best way to get people to live godly lives is to threaten them. The soldiers wanted to stop us from misusing the pool water, so they threatened us with the worst punishment we could imagine. So, it is maintained, the best way to get people to do the right thing, to do what is in their best interest, is to threaten them with an even worse punishment. What could be worse than an eternity in hell?

This threat can be worded in different ways. We could tell people that if they keep sinning, it just shows they were never believers in the first place. We could tell them they will lose their eternal salvation if they sin too much. That would be great motivation to try to live righteously. Such a terrible prospect would be like an 11-year-old-boy losing the right to swim during his summer camp as he gets out of the pool, surrounded by purple water, hearing the laughter of his friends.

We can even make it sound official. We can take certain verses from the Bible, use them out of context, and say that these verses teach such things. We can use people who look like they have authority in these matters, kind of like the lifeguards who wore Army uniforms at the camp, to threaten us with these things. Such people can appear in pulpits in large churches or occupy seats of professorships in Christian seminaries. Such warnings can also be placed in scholarly Christian commentaries. Like an 11-year-old-boy at a camp near an Army post, who could argue with such warnings?

A COUPLE OF WARNINGS

I certainly heard such things when I was a new believer. The warnings sounded convincing. For example, in 1 Cor 6:9, Paul warns that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. So, if you are unrighteous, you have no hope. "You had better live righteously. If you don't, you will suffer in hell forever." That should be enough to get us to do the right thing.

But these verses are taken out of context. In 1 Cor 6:9, there is a difference between entering into the kingdom of God and inheriting it. All believers will enter the kingdom. Those who live righteously will also inherit it. They will be greatly rewarded in it.

Probably the most famous threat of all, when discussing this matter, is found in James 2:17. There, it says faith without works is dead. This threat is found on t-shirts, coffee mugs, church bulletins, and everywhere else Christians meet. If you don't have good works, you are dead spiritually. Hell will be your home forever. So, you better do good works.

Once again, such a threat has no merit. James is saying that if we don't do good works, our Christian faith will be of no use to us in our everyday lives. In that regard, our faith will become dead. It won't grow. If you want a strong faith,

you must do good works. But James is not threatening children of God with hell.

Doing good works is a good thing. But the bottom line is that there is not a single verse in the NT that teaches we must do them to enter into the kingdom of God.

Oftentimes, however, the threats work. Just as we boys worked to make sure we didn't turn the water purple, many in our churches do righteous deeds in order to attempt to prove to themselves, and others, that they are children of God. But fortunately, many see what a scam these threats are.

THE GIG IS UP

There are many reasons why these threats quit having an impact on those who hear them. Perhaps they recognize that all of us sin. We sin all the time. How much sin is sinning too much? They see that the very teachers who have threatened them to live righteously, or else, struggle with sin themselves. Or it might dawn on them that if living righteously is a requirement for entering into the kingdom, we better have a pretty low standard of righteousness, or we are all in trouble. Plus, didn't Christ pay for all my sins? Some people may just give up. Like a boy in the pool who got tired of getting out of the pool to take a shower every 20 minutes, some people find the threats are too hard to live by.

For many, thankfully, they discover in God's word that eternal salvation is indeed free. Works play no part in it whatsoever. They can't lose it. They are like us boys in the pool who realized there "ain't no special chemical in this water that will turn the water purple." Salvation is a gift by God's grace through faith in Christ alone. Your threats do not worry me anymore.

SPIRITUAL SWIMMING POOL

That summer camp many years ago is also an illustration of something else. We could say that

as believers, we are in a swimming pool of sorts. We certainly would like to swim in clean water.

It would be better if we didn't misuse the pool water. If we compare that to sinning, what is the best way to deal with it? Well, it is a fact that it won't stop completely. Just as some of the boys at that camp were going to do what they shouldn't do, we are all sinners and will remain so.

But it is wrong to lie. The lie didn't work in that pool all those years ago. The motivation was good. The soldiers wanted the boys to keep the water clean. But it didn't work. In fact, it probably got worse. I hate to think what I was swimming in for the rest of those two weeks after we figured it out.

Telling us the truth would have been better. What if they had said, "Boys, if you have to go, get out of the pool. That is what those showers are for. The water will be gross if you don't! Do what is best for all of us."

There is no doubt that we misused the pool much more as a result of their deceptive rule than we would have without that lying law.

I am sure that in the spiritual pool we swim in, the truth is the better option as well. Yes, sin pollutes our lives. But it is wrong to tell people the lie that if they swim around in it, then they will go to hell. How about teaching the truth?

First, the way to escape hell is by believing in Jesus for the gift of everlasting life. Turning from our sins won't save anyone.

Second, sin is not good for you. Walking in obedience is good for you and those around you. It is what is best. Sin is gross. You don't want to swim around in it. ■



Ken Yates (Lt. Col. Retired; Ph.D.) is "El Jefe" of the GES international ministry. He and his wife, Pam, live in Columbia, SC.



VOICE FROM THE PAST

Man's Role in Conversion

By Zane Hodges*

*This article originally appeared in the September-October 1993 issue of what was then the *Grace in Focus* newsletter.

The answer to the jailer's classic question, "Sirs, what must I *do* to be saved?" is still the same: "*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31, italics added).

What must man *do*? He must *believe*.

But *can* he believe? Today, many give a negative answer to this question. Man, they say, is constitutionally incapable of faith since he is totally dead in sins. This answer, however, overplays the metaphor of deadness.

In addressing the Ephesian Christians, Paul reminds them that they were once "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). But Paul pushes beyond the limits of the metaphor in the very next verse. He writes: "in which you once *walked*" (Eph 2:2, italics added). Can a dead man *walk*? On a literal level, obviously not! On a literal level, if I say, "That man is *dead* in the mud and filth of his own back yard," I cannot go on to say, "He is *walking* in the mud and filth of his own back yard." That would be a transparent contradiction.

The expression "dead in trespasses and sins" can be explained by a parallel statement in Eph 4:18 where Paul describes unsaved people as "alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." Unsaved men are dead in the sense

that they do not have God's kind of life (eternal life) and thus do not know God on a personal level. This is certainly confirmed by John 17:3, "and this is eternal life; that they may *know* You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (italics added). Eternal life brings the *knowledge* of God (see the discussion of 2 Cor 4:4, 6 in the previous issue [the July-August 1993 *Grace in Focus* newsletter]). Those who have never *known* God at all are *dead* toward God.

But it is wrong to push this metaphor to an unbiblical extent. Deadness towards God signals one's need of God's life (eternal life). But, like all figures of speech, this figure cannot be pressed beyond its basic Biblical application. In other words, the fact that man is "dead in trespasses and sins" tells us nothing about such issues as "free will" or man's "capacity to believe." Those who think that it does are guilty of forcing the metaphor into a framework it was never intended to fit.

In fact, God holds man responsible for *not believing*. The Lord Jesus said, "He who believes in Him [the Son] is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, *because he has not believed* in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18, italics added).

If God condemns men for *not believing*, and men have *no capacity* whatsoever to believe, then

the justice of God is called into question. How can a man be held responsible for what he is incapable of doing? On that basis, why could not God cast into hell babies who die in infancy? Why not also the mentally impaired? When man's capacity to believe is totally denied, what is left behind is a horrible, even monstrous, conception of God.

Such is the penalty for wrongly pressing a metaphor beyond its proper parameters!

Of course, we are *not* saying that men can come to God without *any* divine assistance *at all*. As we pointed out in the July-August [1993] issue, God has a revelatory role in conversion (2 Cor 4:6). No conversion occurs until God breaks through the blindness induced by Satan and enlightens the heart with His truth. But where this enlightenment has occurred, it may be said to the believer that "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:17).

Thus, the Bible does not say that man is *constitutionally incapable* of faith, only that faith cannot occur without divine illumination. In every realm of life, man cannot believe in what he regards as untrue. Only when he realizes the truth of any matter, only then does he believe it. The ability to believe things, we should say, is a capacity that man possesses, just as he possesses the ability to think or to speak. Only "ignorance of the truth" or "deception about the truth" stands in the way of man's believing the Gospel. (As pointed out last time, Satan knows this and acts accordingly: 2 Cor 4:4.) But once a man realizes the truth of any matter, at the moment of realization, he has believed it.

Consequently, saving faith occurs when it dawns on our hearts that Jesus Christ saves us forever the moment we believe that He does. (See John 11:25-27; John 20:30-31; 1 John 5:1.)

What then is the bottom line? Two things. (1) Man has the capacity to believe and is held responsible if he does not do so. (2) Man's faith can only occur in response to divine illumination.

Therefore, what should unsaved men be doing? They should be seeking the God who is revealed in creation (Rom 1:20-21). Since God rewards those who diligently seek Him (Heb 11:6), the search for God will lead to an examination of the claims of Christ. This, in turn, will lead to salvation truth since Jesus affirmed, "If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (John 7:17).

Paul's statement that "there is none who seeks after God" (Rom 3:11) may seem to contradict this, but it doesn't. This famous text does not say that man *cannot* seek God! He can and should seek God (Acts 17:26-27)! But he *doesn't* (unprompted by the Spirit) and, therefore, is responsible for not doing so.

Man's failure to believe, therefore, is something for which he can be held accountable by his Judge. If he had sought the truth, he would have found the truth!

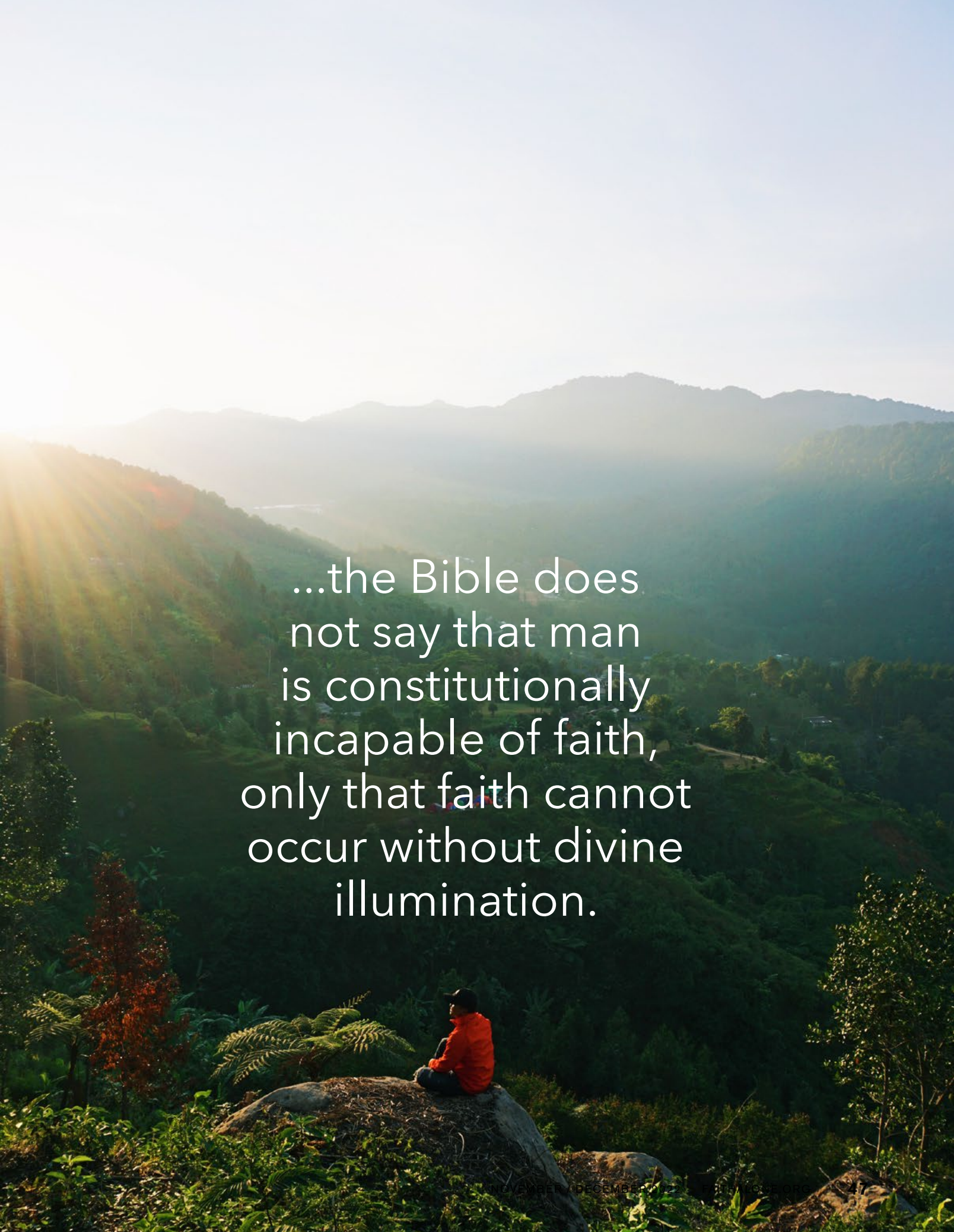
But those who *do* find the truth are *drawn* to it, and thus *taught*, by God. The Savior declared:

"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be *taught by God*.' Therefore everyone who has heard *and learned* from the Father comes to Me (John 6:44-46, italics added).

As we evangelize men, we can become part of this drawing/teaching process until God illuminates the unsaved heart so that a response of faith results. But let us remember, even though God uses us in this process, it is still God—not us—who commands the light to shine into man's darkness (2 Cor 4:6). It is *God* who saves the lost! ■



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

A person wearing an orange jacket and a dark cap is sitting on a large, dark rock in the foreground, looking out over a vast, hazy mountain landscape. The sun is low on the left side of the frame, creating a bright glow and lens flare that illuminates the scene. The mountains in the background are layered and shrouded in a light mist or haze. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

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