

Bible Study Guide

No. 38

(January 2007)



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Prayer: *Does it make any difference?*

A discussion with Philip Yancey
And John Halford
(Editor of *Christian Odyssey*)

Multi-award winning writer Philip Yancey has written books that have explored many of the mysteries and wonders of spiritual life. *Christian Odyssey's* Editor John Halford recently met with Yancey in London to discuss his latest book, *Prayer: Does it make any difference?*

Christian Odyssey: This new book on prayer seems different in tone to your previous ones. It seems more—well, pastoral. *Am I right?*

Philip Yancey: My natural instinct is to be a pilgrim, wandering around and seeing what I can honestly say about a subject. But I learned so much that I became more than just a pilgrim. I became someone who wanted to share, and so there are parts that are more pastoral than anything I have written before. I felt different as I was writing this.

CO: The book seems not so much about how to pray as why to pray.

Yancey: Right. I do talk about various techniques, but what I am not trying to do is to put forth a formula that everyone should buy into and follow my rules. Some of them I find quite helpful, but not everybody will. The important thing about prayer is to lower the uptightness about it and encourage people to be straightforward and honest and to cultivate a relationship with God. The more I set forth some sort of formula the more I encourage the feeling of “I am inferior and I am not doing it right.”

CO: This is quite a long and comprehensive book. If there is one thing you would want the

reader to learn from reading it, what would it be?

Yancey: To see prayer not so much as a discipline and more of a privilege. It is for our benefit in every way. So much of what we are asked to do as Christians is often presented as a legalistic works-oriented way—do this and God will like you more. But I can't think of anything in a Christian life that is not meant to enhance our lives. God is not trying to make us small. He is trying to encourage us to be larger than we are. And we can't really do that without a deep connection with God, and that connection is prayer.

So I would want my reader to emerge from the book not feeling guilty, but that prayer makes me feel good. Someone has told me, “Finally we have a book on prayer that does not make me feel guilty.” I like that comment. The more we feel guilty about something, the less we are going to do it. God is not forcing us to do something onerous. He is inviting us to do something that is good for us.

CO: How would you help someone who said “That is OK for religious people, but I am not the sort of person God wants to listen to?”

Yancey: Jesus told a story about two people who prayed. One was a religious professional, theologically trained, and the other was a person who said, “I am not the kind of person God wants to hear from. Have mercy on me, a sinner.” God listened to him, and not the other. The one had words but not the heart, and the other had nothing but his heart. He simply said, “God, I need help.” Often the only prayer we have is “help,” and I think God listens to those

prayers more than the “Thee’s” and “Thou’s,” and all the eloquent things we say.

CO: Many of our readers come from a legalistic background, similar to yours. This can have a negative effect on prayer. Have you any advice for people struggling with this?

Yancey: I am actually grateful for my [legalistic] background even though it is not something I would want to repeat. I once wrote an article called, “What I learned from Fundamentalism.” One of the things I learned was a built-in discipline. I learned all the books of the Bible, and all the kings of the Bible, and I am grateful for that.

I have a friend who talks about the Harlem Globetrotters team. She says you have to be really good to be that bad! The way they play, they must really know what they are doing. You have to be disciplined to be free. Not only that, you have to have been a legalist to really appreciate what it means to be free.

Even God started with law and brought us to grace. The apostle Paul prayed every day for 30 years, “Thank you that I am not a woman, a Gentile or a slave.” When he later said, “In Christ there is no male or female, no gentile or slave,” it was a radical change, and it takes someone who had prayed that way for 30 years to truly appreciate what a dramatic freedom—a leveling—it was.

So I am sure I missed out on a lot of fun things because I lived in a very rule-oriented environment. Although it probably stopped me doing a lot of things I should not have been doing anyway.

I do things now that the church I grew up in would certainly frown on. It is freedom won the hard way. I wrote a book called “*What’s So Amazing about Grace?*” It is amazing.

CO: You have written a very practical and positive book. While researching it, did you come up with anything that is so toxic to effective prayer that you could say, “Whatever else you do, you must not do that”?

Yancey: Don’t fake it. A lot of us are like children playing “peek-a-boo,” hiding their faces in their hands so you can’t see them. They

are the only ones being fooled. But a lot of us do that in prayer. We come to God, put on a smile and make ourselves look good, but we aren’t fooling God. God knows the secrets.

The more we put on a mask, the more we misrepresent ourselves. I heard a great sermon about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. You don’t hear much about them, except in sermons on Stewardship Sunday. But this preacher asked what it was that they did wrong. It was not that they did not give their money away. Peter said they didn’t have to. But they misrepresented themselves to God.

The whole Bible is full of what God puts up with from us—complaints, anger, remorse, repentance. But if you pretend to be something you are not, he can’t work with you.

Quotes from...

Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?

- *Like the people who write me letters, Jesus knows the heartbreak of unanswered prayers. His longest prayer, after all, centers in a request for unity, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” The slightest acquaintance with church history (at recent count 34,000 distinct denominations and sects) shows how far that prayer remains from being answered. (p. 81)*
- *A lot of us are like children playing “peek-a-boo,” hiding their faces in their hands so you can’t see them. But we aren’t fooling God. God knows the secrets.*
- *Prayer is cooperation with God, a consent that opens the way for grace to work. Most of the time the Counselor communicates subtly: feeding ideas into my mind, bringing to awareness a caustic comment I just made, inspiring me to choose better than I would have done otherwise, shedding light on the hidden dangers of temptation, sensitizing me to another’s needs. God’s Spirit whispers rather than shouts, and brings peace not turmoil. (p. 103)*
- *The question that obsesses modern thinkers, “Why do bad things happen?” gets little systematic treatment in the Bible because Bible writers believed they knew why bad*

things happen: we live on a planet ruled by powers intent on blocking and perverting the will of God. The New Testament openly describes Satan as “the god of this age” and “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” On a planet ruled by the Evil One we should expect to see violence, deception, disease, and all manner of opposition to the reign of God. (pp. 117-118)

- *Real power rests in those who perceive history as God’s own drama, who tap into a power accessible only to those who ask and*

seek and knock. Prayer sets God loose. As we revolt against the world’s disorder in our actions and in our prayers, refusing to resign ourselves to evil, we demonstrate that there remains, in Jesus’ phrase, “faith on the earth.” (p. 150)

- *Jesus did not waste miracles; I doubt he would have provided food for the five thousand if food stalls had been readily available nearby. (p. 256).*

John Halford
Christian Odyssey 2007

Seeking Us Out, Bringing Us Home

We have been looking at the 23rd Psalm, and today we come to the final verse:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
(v. 6)

In addition to the psalm, and in addition to the gospels, I have been reading and rereading another seminal book in this past week. This is how that book begins:

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I am running away.”

“If you run away,” said his mother, “I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.”

Do you recognize those lines? This particular story, the children’s classic, *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown, has accompanied me—no, it has pursued me—in the past week, and I think you’ll see why.

Often when people like us speak of spiritual matters, we say that we are seeking God in our lives. We describe ourselves as searching. We may say that we are on a journey of faith. We talk about it as one would talk about a pilgrimage, a journey to a holy place. And there

is something wonderfully fitting about that, because, to be sure, there is movement in the spiritual life and none of us can say that he or she has fully arrived. But, you see, the problem with talking about how we are seeking God is that it makes us the hero of our own story. It makes us the active ones, as if we are engaged in a game of hide-and-seek, and as if God is the one who is merely hiding and we are the ones who are actively seeking. Even the language of journey or pilgrimage has its dangers if in some way it conjures an image of God always before us, awaiting us at some distant place, or at least a place we have yet to reach.

How different that is from the understanding reflected in the psalm. The psalm makes it clear that God is not waiting to be found. No, it is God who seeks us out. The psalmist writes, “Surely, goodness and mercy shall *follow me* all the days of my life.” That statement, as powerful as it may be, does not even carry the full impact of what is in the original Hebrew. To say that God’s goodness, God’s mercy—that is, God’s steadfast love—will follow me, is to affirm something powerful. But, to me at least, the word “follow” conjures an image of something that trails along after. A puppy dog

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may follow me. My shadow may follow me. And there may be some comfort in picturing God's goodness and steadfast love following that close. But, in Hebrew, the word implies something more active and persistent and determined than that. The word often translated as "follow," is more accurately translated, "pursue," or "chase down." And that sounds quite different, doesn't it? "Surely God's goodness will pursue me, God's mercy will chase me down."

Now, I am aware, from my work as a pastor and from my own life, that we are a people who feel pursued by many things. As the old baseball player, Satchel Paige famously put it, "Don't look back, something may be gaining on you." Particularly in the dark times, in our own valleys of the shadow, it can seem as if something is pursuing us, hounding us, chasing us down, refusing to leave us alone. It might be the sense of the swift and inexorable passage of time. After all, as Dylan Thomas said in a poem, "Time, like a running grave, tracks you down."

It could be anxiety about the direction of our lives, or the lack of direction, wondering how it all adds up or if it all adds up. I think many of us feel pursued by a compulsion to make something of our lives. We run, as if for dear life, like hamsters on a wheel, as if something were chasing us, when, in reality, it is we ourselves who are propelling the wheel's perpetual movement.

And sometimes we feel pursued by something within us, a certain restlessness of spirit, as if we are homesick for a place we have never seen, and yet a place and a way of being that has traced our hearts with longing.

But what if that which is pursuing us, chasing us down the dark alleys of our lives, were something more than the sum of our anxieties and longings? What if it is God who is actively pursuing us? That is, what if God is chasing you down, and chasing me down, to give us a blessing? "Surely goodness and mercy shall chase me down all the days of my life."

That would be much more consistent with the biblical witness. The Bible isn't filled with people who spend their lives seeking God. Rather, it is filled with stories of the seeking, pursuing God, who tracks people down—many of whom try to run away as fast as they can. And isn't that

something like the story in that other book? This, if I read it correctly, is all a way of saying, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me—chase me down—all the days of my life?"

Jesus tells the story of a woman who loses a coin. It's a drachma, the smallest of all coins. It would be like our penny. But, you see, a drachma was more than just a piece of currency. The drachma had a hole in it. And when a woman got married, she would be given drachmas and they would be made into a necklace to hang around her neck, much as today a bride will wear a wedding ring.

Somehow the woman's necklace got broken and the coins simply rolled away in every direction. She found nine of them but she couldn't find one. Oh well, no matter. You've got nine. What's just one penny. Let it go. It's only money. You'll get another one.

But no, no it's not like that. It has sentimental value. It can't be replaced. So she lights a lamp and she sweeps and sweeps and sweeps. The parable says she sweeps until she finds the coin. And how long is that? ...As long as it takes. "Surely God's goodness and mercy shall sweep for me all the days of my life."

In a twin parable to the Parable of the Sweeping Woman, Jesus compares God to a shepherd—"The Lord is my shepherd"—and says that if just one sheep is lost, just one out of a hundred, the shepherd will seek out, chase down, pursue that one sheep until he finds it. Until he finds it! How long is that? ...As long as it takes.

And what does the shepherd do once the sheep is found? He drapes that sheep over his shoulders and brings him home—literally. The parable says that the shepherd brings that sheep right into the house, that wherever the shepherd is the sheep might be also. "Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

The good news is that, when all we had to offer God were our betrayals and our denials, our violence and our self-concern—that is, when we turned our backs on Jesus and ran—Jesus came back and tracked us down and offered us God's goodness and God's mercy.

When we demonstrate just how far we can wander—the depth of our disobedience, the lengths to which we go to ignore God—in the

death and resurrection of Jesus, God shows the lengths to which God will go to give us a blessing and to bring us home. God doesn't merely follow us. God pursues us down all of the misguided byways of our lives, all the dead ends, all the dark detours, to extend a blessing of goodness and mercy.

In anticipation of his own death, Jesus said to his followers, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come

again and will take you to myself that where I am you may be also."

And, sure enough, in the resurrection of Jesus God chased us down—like a lost sheep, like a runaway bunny, like the wayward wanderers we often are—and brought us home that we might dwell there for ever.

This is an edited version of a presentation given by Martin B. Copenhaver Senior Pastor of the Wellesley Congregational Church. USA March 14, 2004

For the full version go to Web address: Wellesleyvillagechurch.org/sermons/2004

Making friends with the disabled

By April Hottle

We all have things we want to say and ideas we'd like to share, and we love it when someone listens to us.

With that in mind, I'd like to help you meet some new acquaintances—people who are all around you, but whom you may have been overlooking. They are the deaf, the blind, people with speech problems, those confined to a wheelchair or disabled in some other way. Most of us are always polite to disabled people, but we may be reluctant or fearful to take the time to really talk to them.

Disabled people are often starved for conversation. Behind their disabilities are interesting personalities with valuable experiences to share. But many of them are trapped behind the social barriers that we unconsciously tend to erect around them. I want to encourage you to break down those barriers, to learn to talk—really talk—with people who are in some way disabled. You may find it a little awkward at first, but I promise you it is worth the effort to get past the initial reservation.

Here are some tips to help you get started:

- When having a conversation with a deaf person who uses sign language, remember that they "hear" you by watching their interpreter. It is tempting to talk back to the interpreter. Don't do this. Talk directly to the deaf person even though he or she is not looking at you.
- Don't feel you have to "dumb things down." Sign language is a very sophisticated form of communication and it is possible to communicate everything you want to say. Relax and let the interpreter convey your meaning.
- If there is no interpreter, use a pen and paper. This might seem laborious, but it can be a lot of fun. Just relax and be patient.
- If the deaf person can lip-read, speak clearly and make sure they can see your lips move. You'd be surprised how often we obscure their view with gestures in the course of a normal conversation.
- Don't let a wheelchair get between you and a new friend. But remember it is tiring for

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them to have to look up all the time. Pull up a chair or sit on a nearby step so you can be on the same eye level. (Have you ever noticed that children often feel quite natural talking to people in wheelchairs?)

- Most blind people can hear perfectly well. So there is no need to speak loudly or... v-e-r-y d-i-s-t-i-n-c-t-l-y to them.
- Don't pet a guide dog. It has a job to do.
- It can be difficult communicating with people who have speech impediments (like stammering). But remember—they have dealt with this for years. They don't mind being asked to repeat themselves. Again, be patient. Don't be too quick to give up on a conversation. They are pleased that someone is interested, and you may help them develop more confidence in their ability to express themselves. Their feelings of self-worth will grow.

Lawrence Siegel, Founder and Director of the National Deaf Education Project, states, "The need and right to communicate is the most

fundamental of human rights". To foster communication is to reveal all the possibilities of life."

Remember—people with disabilities are only *disabled*—not unable. Most people with disabilities are quite capable of—and want to—carry on a normal conversation with you. So why not gather up your nerve, think of a good conversation starter and approach the next blind, deaf or otherwise disabled person with a smile? It could change both your lives.

April Hottle

April Hottle, a NAD III, EIPA 4.2 certified interpreter, has worked in the mainstream elementary, middle and high school settings since 1994 . She is the wife of Scott Hottle, who is both a mainstream Deaf and Hard of Hearing teacher and an ASL Instructor on the college level. She has two children: a daughter, Laken, who is 15, and a son, Luke, who is 12. Both Scott and Luke are deaf.

A little alphabet of **BIG WORDS**

By Roy Lawrence

Readers of The Plain Truth sometimes tell us that in these days when so many people know so little about the Christian Faith it is good to read articles which contain simple, factual information in an easy-to-read format about the Bible, the Church and basic Christianity. So here is a little alphabet, just one word for each of the 26 letters. It will start in this issue and conclude in the next. If you find it helpful, please let us know. Also, if you would like any of the items in it to be expanded into a full article, please let us know that too.

ANGEL

This is a word which in the original Greek just means 'messenger'. You and I can be 'angels' for God any time we deliver his message in the world. So in this sense the editorial staff and writers of The Plain Truth are attempting to be 'angels'! However there is a more mysterious meaning of this word. The Bible says there is an

order of spiritual beings, created to glorify God and to be his messengers. These too are known as 'angels'. Normally they are not visible to human eyes, but on certain occasions they can appear to us either in human form or as huge shining creatures. It may surprise readers to know that in our own age it is still possible to find ordinary people like you and me who are

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firmly convinced they have had an encounter with an angel.

BIBLE

For Christians this is the most holy of books, although strictly speaking it is more like a library than a single book. In the Old Testament there are 39 books – and 27 in the New Testament. Together they tell the story of God's purpose for humankind. They can be divided into five main sections, preceded by a prologue and ending with an epilogue.

- (1) The first runs from Genesis to Esther, and, after a prologue set against the background of the dawn of history, these books tell the story of how the Israelites came to be God's chosen people with a mission to discover God's purposes and to share them with the whole world.
- (2) From Job to the Song of Solomon, dealing with some of life's major themes and experiences.
- (3) From Isaiah to Malachi, books in which a series of prophets comment on the meaning of history and point ahead to the coming of one who will bring an even greater revelation.
- (4) From Matthew to Acts, telling the story of Jesus and his early followers.
- (5) From Romans to Revelation, letters from St Paul and others, dealing with matters of practical Christianity and ending with an epilogue set against the background of the end of this world as we know it.

CHRIST

This is not the surname of Jesus, but a word which describes his role within the history of the world. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word 'Messiah'. Both words mean 'anointed'. In the Old Testament those who had a special mission for God were often anointed for that work. Priests were anointed. Kings were anointed. British monarchs are still anointed before they are crowned. Towards the end of Old Testament times the Israelites came to believe that one was to come into the world who would not just be an anointed one, a 'Christ', but supremely and uniquely the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ, and that this special person would have the power to save errant humanity. Jesus claimed this title for himself.²

The Christian Church still claims the same title for him.

DEVIL

Like human beings, angels were given freewill and some of them used this gift to rebel against God. Scripture teaches that chief amongst these fallen spirits is Satan, also known as the devil. Some Christians think that this is no more than a picturesque way of speaking about the power of evil in the world. However, Jesus seems to have taken a much more literal view of Satan. The good news is that we need not be obsessed with the devil, literal or otherwise, because Jesus, who offers himself as our companion upon life's way, is immeasurably stronger than the devil.

ETERNITY

This does not mean time without end. It is not a state of being in which life goes on for ever and ever and ever. It means going beyond time and entering into unity with the God who created time and is therefore greater than time. Whilst we live in this world the concept of eternity is bound to be beyond the grasp of our time-bound minds, but those who put their trust in Christ are invited to accept in faith that God has prepared for those who love him an eternal life which involves 'things that no eye has seen, no ear has heard and no mind has conceived'.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiving is not forgetting. It is remembering but going on loving just the same. When God looks at you and me, he knows perfectly well that we are sinners. We do not love him with our whole heart. We do not love our neighbour as ourselves. We bear the marks of a species, which though wonderfully designed has gone wrong. There is a dark side to our human nature, and this is all too evident in the things we do and the things we fail to do. But God goes on loving, and it is the message of scripture that mysteriously this forgiveness has been made possible by the death of Jesus upon the cross. Christians are called both to accept this forgiveness and in turn to extend forgiveness to others.

GRACE

This is a common word, but not easy to define. We often use it as a girl's name or to describe

an elegant movement or as a term to describe a prayer before a meal, but the Bible does not use it in these ways. In scripture it means the unconditional and undeserved love of God which, if we recognise and accept it, will work upon us from the inside and gradually make us into better people.

HOLY SPIRIT

God at work in you and me. It is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that not only does God show himself in the wonders of Our Father's creation and in the life and work of Jesus but, because of the workings of his grace (see 'G'), it is possible for him to be seen in people around us and even in ourselves. Jesus has promised, 'the Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him'.

IDOLATRY

We sometimes think we are immune to this sin, because not many of us are tempted to keep a golden calf or any other sort of idol in our back garden. However, the sin of idolatry is very

much 'alive and well' in the Western world today. It just means treating that which is not God as if it were so. It is all-too-easy to treat money, power or glamour as our 'god'. If we put any thing, any person or any pursuit in the place of God, then we are guilty of the sin of idolatry and our souls are in real danger.

JUSTIFICATION

This is a word which is much loved by protestant theologians. It simply means being put right with God. The dark side of our nature has alienated us from God and this is a serious situation because apart from God there is no fullness of life here and now and no prospect of eternal life at all. However, it is the amazing claim of the Christian gospel that Jesus has lived and died and risen again to restore our relationship with God. It is this process which is called 'Justification'.

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Church History Corner

The Great Awakening... A "Work of God"

By Paul Kroll

In 1734, Northampton village in the colony of Massachusetts experienced a remarkable revival that became the catalyst for revivals throughout the Colonies and in England, Scotland and Germany. By the early 1740s, revival events dominated Colonial newspaper headlines from Boston to Charleston. They reported on itinerant preachers thundering out messages of eternal damnation and salvation to frightened, wailing and repentant crowds on city streets, in parks and at meetinghouses.

This series of revivals was later dubbed the "Great Awakening." Pro-revivalists considered it a rare but "mighty work of God" equal to the Holy Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost and an echo of the Protestant Reformation.

Edwards and Whitefield

Northampton's pastor was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), one of Colonial America's best-known Christian theologians. Deeply involved in the Great Awakening from beginning to end,

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he preached, promoted and defended revival events through his many writings and contacts with other evangelicals. In 1736 he wrote "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God." This article soon became a popular book relating how hundreds of Northampton citizens and people in surrounding communities had been converted and saved. It became a script for spotting, staging and reporting revivals throughout Colonial America.

The young evangelical preacher, George Whitefield (1714-1770), known as the "Great Itinerant," provided the Great Awakening with its strongest momentum. The most notable of his three evangelistic tours through the Colonies lasted between November 1739 and January 1741. During one month crowds of 8,000 or more heard Whitefield speak nearly every day. An estimated 20,000 listened to his sermons in Philadelphia and Boston. "That tour may have been the most sensational event in the history of American religion," observed Mark A. Noll, professor of history at Wheaton College.

Jonathan Edwards' July 8, 1741, sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," was a quintessential example of Great Awakening hell-fire and brimstone preaching. "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire," Edwards warned his frightened congregation.

Hell-fire message

He defended this kind of typical "scare tactic" as necessary to wake up unconverted

people from their spiritual lethargy. Edwards' grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, in a 1713 sermon had said: "The misery of many Men is that they do not fear Hell... so they take a great liberty to Sin.... If they were afraid of Hell, they would be afraid of Sin."

Revival sermons caused people in the audience to weep and scream in a frenzy of spiritual ecstasy. This rampant emotionalism was at the heart of a bitter dispute between "Old Lights" and "New Lights." Charles Chauncy, pastor of the First Church in Boston, Massachusetts, was one of the revival's most ardent critics. His sermon title, "Enthusiasm Described and Cautioned Against," an attack on the revivalists' manipulation of listeners' emotions, speaks for itself.

To counter Anti-revivalist arguments and to defend the authenticity of conversions, Edwards wrote his "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" in 1741. He sincerely believed that the Great Awakening was a "work of God" and had resulted in many genuine conversions. While admitting that excesses had occurred, he defended the Colonies-wide revival as a special outpouring of the Spirit.

Then as suddenly as it began, the Great Awakening began to weaken. In a December 12, 1743, letter, Jonathan Edwards complained to Thomas Prince that a "very lamentable decay of religious affections" was beginning to creep back into Colonial society. By 1749, the Church had returned to "its ordinary State" and according to Gilbert Tennent, another well-known revivalist, the Great Awakening was dead.

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Bible Study

A Mountain of Joy

A study of Hebrews 12:18 to 13:6

By Michael Morrison

After exhorting readers to continue in the Christian faith, Hebrews gives further encouragement by painting a picture of the choice set before them. On one side is fear and death, but the readers have chosen a life of joy with Christ.

The mountain of fear

“You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear’ ” (Heb. 12:18-21, referring to Ex. 19:13).

The mountain does not need to be named, for the readers know it well: Mount Sinai, where the old covenant was made with Israel. The mountain stands for the old covenant—a covenant they once participated in, but a covenant they have left behind in order to embrace a life with Christ.

If we read between the lines, we see that the readers were being pressured by neighbours to return to the old covenant. The author, by describing the results of the choice they have made, is encouraging them to remain faithful to Jesus. Don’t look back, he says. That is a covenant of gloom and doom. It has condemnation, not salvation.

Moses did not fear for his own life—he said, “I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you” (Deut. 9:19). Moses knew that the people had rebelled against God and deserved to die. He asked God to spare them, and God did, but his fear shows the serious

penalties involved in breaking the Sinai covenant.

A joyful assembly

In contrast, the new covenant is a place of joy and fellowship with God: *“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:22-24).*

The new covenant is a place with happy people, where angels rejoice. This is the reward of the saved, those who are the firstborn children of God, who have been welcomed by the Judge of the universe. They were not perfect, but they have been made perfect by the blood of Christ, which promises forgiveness rather than vengeance.

The readers have not come to this place yet, but the author describes it as if they have. When they accepted Jesus as the Messiah, this joyful place became their new destination, and the author wants to make sure that they do not turn aside.

“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?” (v.25).

The readers probably had Jewish neighbours who said, “If you turn away from the old covenant, you will be punished.” And so the author responds with threats of his own: “It is true that people were punished for turning away from Moses, but now, we will be punished if we turn away from what he is saying in Jesus Christ.”

The unshakable kingdom

The author makes a smooth transition from this warning into a reminder of the reward God has promised: *“At that time his voice shook the earth,*

but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain" (vv. 26-27, quoting Haggai 2:6).

At Mount Sinai, God's voice shook the earth, but he has also promised to shake the earth again, and the author of Hebrews focuses our attention on the word *once*. He will do it only once—never again will the heavens and earth need to be shaken, because the shaking will be so severe that only the permanent will remain.

Haggai 2:7 promises that God "will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord Almighty."

The eternal kingdom will come, so how should we respond? "*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'*" (vv. 28-29, quoting Deut. 4:24).

Since God has promised us a great reward, we should be thankful and worship him—and as the letter makes plain, we must come to him through Jesus. But the threat still exists for those who turn away, for God is still a consuming fire to those who refuse him. God will consume everyone who disobeys, so we all need the intercession that Jesus offers in the new covenant.

Concluding exhortations

In chapter 13, the writing style changes abruptly, and the author gives some short reminders: "*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it*" (13:1-2).

The chance of entertaining angels is incredibly small, but the author is reminding the readers to do something that they already know they should.

He gets more serious in verse 3: "*Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*"

Some members of the congregation were in jail, and the author encourages the readers to continue to visit them. Ancient prisons did not give prisoners any food, so visits from friends were essential, even though the officers might suspect that the visitors had the same illegal beliefs. Why should we risk our safety to visit prisoners? Because we might be in prison tomorrow and then *we* will need people to visit us.

"*Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral*" (v. 4). The author does not emphasize this point, and it was probably not a problem for the readers. This ethical exhortation was common advice among Jews.

"*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'*" (v. 5, quoting Deut. 31:6).

Although enemies may steal our possessions (see 10:34), we can be content with the greatest treasure of all: a promise of life eternal with God.

"So we say with confidence, '*The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can human beings do to me?*'" (Heb. 13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6-7). What can people do to us when we have faith in Christ?

As the author has already noted, they can ridicule us, take our possessions, put us in jail, and even kill us. But they can never take away the reward that God will give us. We can be confident because he gives us an eternal perspective on the things of this world.

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Questions for discussion

- Why does the author characterize Mount Sinai so negatively? (12:18-21)
- Do I feel like I have come to a joyful assembly in heaven? (12:23)
- Do I worship God with thanksgiving, or with fear? (12:28-29)
- Am I commanded to visit prisoners today? (13:3)
- Am I completely unafraid of what people can do to me? (13:6)

Lessons from Mark

A lesson about guilty consciences

Lesson 31 - Mark 6:14-29

When King Herod heard this, he said, “John, the man whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!”

Herod Antipas was a man with blood on his hands. Of all his accomplishments, great and small, during his 33-year reign as tetrarch (he was not actually a king); he is best remembered for his murder of John the Baptist.

Maybe it's only when past deeds come back to haunt us that our consciences truly come to life. Most people spend their lives covering up their dark side, keeping their skeletons securely locked away in hidden closets under the back stairs of their minds.

Hiding from our sins

It's a sin management thing. Keeping the shame and horror of our sins out of sight and out of mind allows us to function in the light as normal, decent human beings.

It allows us to live with ourselves. But there's always that nagging fear that we have to keep pushing back into the shadows—the fear that somehow, some day, one of those skeletons is going to come to life, crash its way out of the closet, walk up to us in the middle of a crowd and wag its boney finger accusingly in our face.

That's what King Herod thought had happened. He had never successfully managed to keep the memory of John's murder chained silently beyond the boundaries of his struggling conscience. Of all the people he had executed, certainly most of them enemies and criminals, this was the one he actually regretted.

It wasn't a political assassination or an act of revenge or even retribution. It was a simple act of cowardice, of embarrassment. He had made a boast in front of two women and was ashamed to take it back. So he murdered the one bright spot in his otherwise decadent, self-indulgent life. Why not? He had bowed to the ruthless demands of his wife, Herodias, before. It was easier that way. One more time shouldn't matter so much. But it did.

Clean conscience

What Herod didn't know was that the man he feared was John the Baptist raised from the dead was actually Jesus the Messiah, the King of the Jews whom his father had tried to murder 30 years earlier in the massacre of the babies in Bethlehem.

But you and I do know. And we know that Jesus can clean out all the skeletons in all our closets—if we want him to.

When we trust our lives to Jesus, we no longer have to manage our sins by hiding from our consciences. Jesus cleans our guilty consciences (see Hebrews 10:22), and God erases our sins from his memory.

Why suffer the misery of a guilty conscience when we don't have to? Isn't it time to unlock the closets for our Saviour?

By Mike Feazell

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