



Bible Study Guide

No. 31

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In His Name

By Joseph Tkach

"Whatever you ask in my name," Jesus said, "I will do it" (John 14:13).

Some people seem to think that Jesus is giving us a blank check—we can ask for anything at all, and he will sign his name to it and pass it along to the Father, and it will be done—guaranteed.

We all know that this doesn't work—and it's a good thing it doesn't! Some people pray for rain at the same time as their neighbours pray for sunshine. The home seller prays for a high price, the homebuyer prays for a low one. If God had to answer every request he was given in the name of Jesus, the world would be chaotic, driven by the whims of well-meaning but foolish people. Even if humans could all agree, we simply don't have the wisdom to be telling God how to run the universe.

So what did Jesus mean?

Whatever we ask

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said, "my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.... Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:23-24). Does this mean that we fill out the request form, and Jesus signs it and sends it to his dad? "Hey, Dad, I've got a buddy here who wants a million dollars. How about doing it as a favour for me?"

No, that is not the way it works. Jesus is not a middleman who stamps his signature on our request, pretending that our request is really his. He says: "I am *not* saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you" (verses 26-27). We have permission to go to the Father directly, because God loves us just as much as he loves his own Son. (Does that thought astonish you as much as it does me?)

Hebrews tells us that Jesus gives us permission to go to God directly. We do not need a middleman. So what does it mean to ask in the name of Jesus?

Let's imagine that we are in an ancient palace. The king is sitting on his throne, his prince at his right hand, dozens of guards at attention, hundreds of loyal servants waiting for orders so

that every decree will be carried out immediately.

And now imagine that we go into the palace, and the guards immediately make way for us, knowing that we have permission to approach the king. They swing aside, snap to attention and give us the royal treatment. We walk into the throne room, bow before the king, bow before the prince, and then tell the king: "In the name of the prince, I ask you for a better job and a nicer home."

Maybe my palace protocol is a little rusty, but it seems a little odd for me to speak "in the name of the prince" when the prince is sitting right there. Maybe this is not what it means to ask "in the name of Jesus."

More than pronunciation

Some people think that Jesus was talking about pronouncing his name in a certain way. They believe we have to get his name right—like a secret password—before the request will get through the heavenly filters. But when ancient peoples talked about someone's "name," they were not worried about the right pronunciation—they were referring to a person's status or importance.

We can see that in the book of Hebrews. It begins by telling us that Jesus has inherited a better name than the angels have. The name in that context seems to be "Son," but the precise word isn't really important—the point being made is that Jesus is superior to the angels. He has a higher status, a greater glory.

When we talk about the superior name of Jesus, we are really talking about his superior importance. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are not dealing with a special word—we are dealing with a special person. When we pray in his name, we are praying according to the way that he is—according to his nature. Our praise and requests should be something that fits his character.

Let's use another analogy. Suppose that a police officer says, "Stop in the name of the law"—it means that the officer has the force of law behind the command. But suppose that same

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officer asks for a bribe: "Give me \$20,000 cash in the name of the law." Using the words "in the name of the law" does not automatically give the officer legal support, does it? When the officer says "in the name of the law," he is supposed to be acting within the rules of the law.

In the same way, when we use Jesus' name, we are not obligating him to support our own whims and desires. Rather, we are saying that we are already in accord with what he wants. We are saying something that he has authorized us to say.

Rather than forcing him to conform to our wishes, "in his name" means exactly the opposite: We are conforming to his wishes, we are acting within his will. When we speak on his behalf, we need to make sure that we are saying something that he would agree with.

When we say "in Jesus' name," we are conforming to the words of the Lord's prayer: Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let it be done in my life. If my request is not according to your will, then feel free to change it to what it needs to be. "In Jesus' name" is our affirmation that, as best we know, our request is within his will.

Let your requests be known

However, if we have to pray according to God's will, what's the point of praying? Isn't he going to do his will whether we ask for it or not? Doesn't it go without saying that if we ask God to do what he already wants to, that he will do it?

But God is the one who is telling us to pray. In his wisdom, God has decided to do certain things only in answer to prayer. Sometimes this

is so that we will learn, in the process of prayer, what his will is, and whether our request is for selfish purposes. We don't always understand what God's will is, and praying can sometimes help us come to a better understanding.

But I suspect that on many things, God's will is not set in stone. God may not have decided, for example, which person we should marry—but he has already decided how we should treat the person we marry. He requires that we choose the person, and choose each day how we will interact with that person. Prayer can help us here, too.

Prayer changes us—but it also affects what God does. Since he has decided to do certain things only in answer to prayer, he decides what to do based in part on what we do, on what we need in the situations we have chosen, and on what we ask him to do. He has the power to carry it out, the compassion to help us in our needs, and the wisdom to know what is really best for us.

"In everything," Paul says, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). Whatever is on your heart, whatever it is that you want, ask God for it.

Jesus has given us the authority to ask—but it is a request, not a command. We can trust God to answer in the best possible way, at the best possible time. But whatever we do (prayer included), we are to do it for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). When we do that, we can be confident that we are praying in Jesus' name.

Joseph Tkach
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Moving Mountains And Cursing Fig Trees

By James R. Henderson

Have you ever wondered why Jesus said some of the things he said?

For example, Mark 11:22-24 suggests that if, in faith, we want to tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea, it can happen. However, why would I *want* to tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea? What would it accomplish other than making me feel more than a little powerful, creating a blot on the landscape, and upsetting conservationists? Did Jesus really mean that we should use faith whimsically, to accomplish whatever takes our fancy?

Sometimes I think Jesus used ideas for their shock value in order to get the attention of his listeners. Remember when he said that if your right hand offends you, you should cut it off? Or if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out? If these passages were to be taken literally, there would be a lot of one-eyed, one-handed Christians walking around. Christ was making a point through exaggeration. The point was that we should deal decisively with our sin before it takes over our life.

Jesus compared prayer to a child asking his father for something and believing that the father would respond. So great is our heavenly Father's desire to give to us that he knows the things we have need of before we ask him (Matthew 6:8).

So what is Mark 11:22-24 all about? There is a context. There are powerful lessons to do with faith and prayer. The day before, Jesus, by his divine power, had caused a leafy but fruitless fig tree to wither. This was to teach his disciples that it is possible to seem spiritual and yet to not produce the fruit God seeks from us. He had also cleansed the temple of those who exploited the house of prayer for personal profit.

In remembering the fig tree, Jesus tells his followers to "have faith in God." Was he saying to them that they too, if only they really believed, could curse fig trees? I don't think so. Or was he stressing that the religious life without faith is of no use to God and that it may as well wither up and die?

The context also shows in verses 25 and 26 that prayer made without forgiving those who may

have wronged us, just as we want God to forgive us, will not be heard and fulfilled.

Therefore this passage explains that we don't automatically get everything we request in prayer—there are conditions of faith toward God, of bearing the fruit he requires of us, and of mercy shown to others.

It is not wise to let one passage of Scripture dictate the totality of doctrine on a particular subject. Mark 11:22-24 is one of many references to praying in faith. A prayer of faith reaffirms God's sovereignty, not ours—that his will be done, not our own will (Matthew 6:10). This touches on one of the problems with the "name it and claim it" prayer styles—the implication that faith gives us the ability to coerce God to give us what we demand. Such thinking implies wrongly that God's sovereignty is subservient to ours.

Matthew 7:7-11 says that we can ask the Father, and he will give us "good things." Does that mean that God gives us what is good for our long-term development, just as a parent gives a child what the parent thinks is best? If we desire something in prayer that is not for our good, should God honour that request?

James, the brother of Jesus, exhorted Christians to "ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind" (James 1:3). Don't suppose, he says, that you will receive any answer from prayer if you are double-minded and uncommitted in your own request.

We need to be convinced about the value of prayer. The reference Jesus made to believing we can move mountains affirms this. It is impossible to make an impression on God without faith that God is who he says he is, and also that he rewards those who seek him diligently (Hebrews 11:6).

A major problem that the readers of James' epistle had was that they let their own selfish desires dominate their prayer life. "You ask and do not receive because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

What did they want God to give them? Various ideas are suggested—success by the world's standards (4:4); God to be on their side and to

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win their battles for them (4:1-2); their self-seeking positions to be realized (3:14). Righteousness, argues James, is about faith and Faith is believing that God will do what he says he will do (2:23). A life of faith involves making peace with others (3:18), not causing dissention by pushing our own cause or point of view. The effective prayer of the righteous person, which avails much, is a prayer for others, for those who are sick, for those in distress, not a prayer that is overcome by selfishness (4:16). Faithful prayer does not always play out according to our plans. Prayer is about trusting God and leaving situations in his hands. It is about showing love by petitioning God on behalf of others. Sometimes, when we pray, we present both the problem and our favourite solution to God, instead of leaving him to choose an answer for us. Not that it is wrong to think things through and offer ideas in prayer, but do we limit God's answers in our mind to only what we think

should happen? We need to open our minds to the infinite wonder of God—"to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). We all need and value the intervention of God. In his sovereignty God can and does choose to supply what is good for us according to the abundance of his grace. He seeks to give us gifts and blessings. However, those blessings are not provided on demand. We share in suffering, as we are part of humanity. Jesus taught that prayer is more about what we can give than about what we can receive. God is not a lucky charm or a winning lottery ticket. From the viewpoint of Jesus, prayer is a special relationship to be cherished, a relationship that brings us comfort and hope that the great God of the universe has taken a special interest in each of us. May he express through us that same interest toward others.

James R. Henderson
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A closer look

Has Africa really been redeemed?

By James R Henderson

Africa needs Christianity more than ever before. But, some might say, has Africa not been evangelized more than any other continent and is now exporting missionaries to the West?

Can the Africans not take care of their own redemptive needs?

Good questions. There are, however some underlying assumptions - that the Gospel has indeed been preached extensively in modern Africa, and that quality indigenous training programs exist for the balanced spiritual formation of pastors and church leaders.

In Africa there are so many false gospels. This is a growing concern in evangelical circles. The impressive statistics about the growth of Christianity in Africa may not reflect the depth of understanding of converts. In fact many may not be converted to Christ at all, but rather to fragments of the Christian message.

Authentic Christianity?

Go into any central church in an African town or city suburb on a Sunday morning and it will probably be teeming with people, 'a heaving mass of bodies caught in an ecstatic evangelistically-charged atmosphere', according to Christine Otieno, a BBC correspondent in Kampala, Uganda. She is referring to the steady defection of many Protestant and Catholic believers to the increasingly numerous 'talking-

in-tongues, gospel singing, all night-praying, born-again churches' that promise instant physical healing, deliverance from demons, and personal prosperity. What is happening in Uganda is indicative of what is happening throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The question has to be asked: 'Is this a movement of authentic Christianity?'

Another typical example comes from the Cameroon. Anatole Dlordon is a Christian worker who has been there. Note the words of his recent report published in the August 2005 edition of the UK-based *Evangelical Times*: "Since the 1960s and 70s Pentecostal and Charismatic groups have made great advances in the Cameroon, resulting in a multitude of "lively" churches that lack teaching in the fundamental truths of the Bible. Added to the above problems, the churches have absorbed Cameroonian society's tribalism, paganism and low moral standards. Little wonder that extreme sects abound under the banner of Christianity." I have been working in Africa since 1992, and this reflects my own experience - 'extreme sects abound'! Sadly, the worst of the western self-styled evangelists seem to have taken Africa by storm, and have, irresponsibly in my opinion, led hundreds of thousands captive into whipped-up emotionalism and false hope. They, together with men and women from various nations who, albeit sincere in their beliefs, are often inexperienced, fresh from seminaries, their minds full of badly-constructed theologies, have assaulted African spirituality with misinformation and garbled gospels that distort the grace of Christ.

The health and wealth gospel

Tite Tiénou, a theologian born in Burkina Faso, adds his voice to the growing number of Christian thinkers who express concern over what is regarded as a deep crisis in African Christianity. He refers to the 'health and wealth' gospel exponents who feature so heavily on television, radio and through other media. 'Numerous preachers have convinced multitudes of Africans that prosperity awaits them if they join the Christian faith. No wonder there is little by way of serious reflection on suffering. Telling Africans they deserve to be rich is. The proclamation of a truncated gospel.'

The plight of Africans is often seen as an entry point for the Christian message. Some consider healing as a ripe mission field, an integral part of evangelism, having eschatological relevance, a special end-time outpouring of the gift of miracles. The theory goes that as in the New Testament 'divine healing was an essential part of evangelism', and has 'literal and present significance', so today 'administering for church growth in part means preparing the stage so that divine healing can take place'. This 'proclamation by *sign* must continue and intensify' according to church growth pundits. Such ideas have a questionable theological heritage. Although miracles caught their attention, Paul did not attract people to Christianity by offering healing. Career missionaries are worried about wrong messages being sent to potential converts at rallies using unconventional healing models. 'All the evangelist can do is appeal to the power of Jesus Christ to heal. To tell people to come so they can be healed is putting the cart before the horse.' The danger is that people become converted to the healing event more than to the message, and fall into the trap of constantly seeking further manifestations of healing and spiritual experience. The call to personal repentance of wrong lifestyles is not heeded if even present.

Western Christianity

There is doubt whether sufficient consideration has been given consistently to the grounding of believers in the faith. Perhaps for many who received the missionary messages it was just an outward transfer of religious allegiance for reasons other than personal conviction of sin and acceptance of Christ's sacrifice. Cultural, economic and safety factors were relevant. In a pluralist society, such as Africa and also such as is now dominant in the West, it is easy to add appealing titbits from Christianity to one's personal faith mix while ignoring the challenge of inner and outward transformation that Christ demands of the believer.

Africans have been right in speaking out against the hypocrisy of Western Christianity, but the time has come for African Christianity, and its offshoots in the UK and elsewhere, to take a serious look at itself. Eugene Nida remarked that 'all religions resemble patched wineskins

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with mixed wine. Most religions however have no objection to additions', but how far should this go when it comes to monotheistic biblical Christianity?

Lamin Sanneh from Gambia laments the negative impact of syncretistic faith. 'Syncretism represents the unresolved, unassimilated, and tension-filled mixing of Christian ideas with local custom and ritual, and that scarcely results in the kind of fulfilling change signalled by conversion and church membership'.

'Africa has many problems, but God is working. One of the problems in Africa is that many church leaders are really pagan at heart. I'm not afraid to preach this to members, pastors or bishops. The great Commission also says to make disciples', writes Tchadian theologian René Daidanso ma Djongwe. He highlights the issue. The fact that little concerted effort was made to instruct new believers has made African Christians more susceptible to every wind of doctrine that blows in from the north Atlantic and to its own home-grown heresies

preached in crusades where attendance is sometimes in the hundreds of thousands.

I suspect that, not only throughout Africa, but also in many other places throughout the world, the 'doctrines of grace are little understood and are ignored by most churches, in spite of such doctrines being in their traditional creeds.

Charismatic practices and Catholic dogma contrary to Scripture remain unchallenged. The most urgent need - and the key to the future health of the church - remains in establishing proper theological training for those leading the churches. The task facing us here is enormous. What Africa needs now is the preaching of the simple, biblical message of Christ, and also a call to sound doctrine among those who profess Christianity.

The remaining task for this generation of Christians is to address the unfinished agenda. I consider the deepening and the nourishing of faith of those who identify themselves as Christians to be of the utmost urgency. This is crucial for the integrity of the gospel.

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Heaven's above - or is it?

By John Halford

Shortly after you die, you will find yourself in a queue outside the pearly gates, waiting for an interview with St Peter. If you pass muster, you will be invited in, issued with a white robe and a regulation harp, and assigned your own cloud. As you begin to strum, you may recognise a few (perhaps not as many as you'd hoped for) of your friends, and probably many people you tried to avoid in your lifetime. And so begins your eternal life.

You don't really believe that, do you? Mercifully you don't need to, because it isn't true. But what *do* you think heaven will be like?

Most of us who believe in God also believe there is some kind of afterlife, in which we will be rewarded for our faithfulness or punished for our sins. That much is true - it is why Jesus came for us, died for us and lives for us. The so-called 'Golden verse' reminds us that 'God so

loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

But what does that mean? If the reward of the righteous is anything at all like the popular images, well, we may hate to admit it, but the other place sounds like it will be more fun.

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Thinking about heaven

In this article we'd like to get you thinking about heaven, perhaps in ways you never have before. Please understand that we are not being dogmatic. That would be foolish and arrogant. Our only reliable source of information is the Bible, and that is surprisingly vague about what comes next. But the Bible does promise that if we choose to obey God, we will receive many benefits in this life (along with challenges) and we can expect this to continue forever in a world to come. Jesus was quite clear about that. But he was not so forthcoming about what that world to come will be like.

St Paul wrote, "We don't yet see things clearly". We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. Paul was one of the very few human beings to be given a 'visitors pass' to heaven, and he found it hard to describe what happened. But whatever it was, it was real enough to change his priorities for the rest of his life. Death held no fears for Paul. He had seen enough of what came next to actually look forward to it. But most of us are not like that.

More of the same?

When we think about heaven, we have no alternative but to imagine it in terms of what we know. For example, medieval artists painted an earthly paradise, filled with details of their contemporary ideas of physical beauty and perfection. (Although where on earth did they get the idea that cherubs resembled aerodynamically improbable naked babies?) Styles, technology and tastes change, and these ideas of paradise don't really help us imagine a utopia today.

Modern writers use more up-to-date imagery. C S Lewis's imaginative classic, *The Great Divorce* describes an imaginary bus-trip from hell (which he pictured as a vast and dreary suburb) to heaven. The purpose of the trip was to give those in 'hell' a chance to change their minds. Lewis' heaven takes some getting used to, and many of the sinners don't like it, preferring the hell they are used to. Lewis stresses that he has no special insights into the nature of eternal life, and intended that his book should be read strictly as an allegory.

Mitch Albom's fascinating; "*The five people you meet in heaven*" also makes no pretence to theological accuracy. He sets heaven in the

context of a seaside fair ground, where the main character had worked all his life. But Albom and Lewis and others like them may be on to something. Heaven may not be quite so different from the environment we experience here below.

Jesus, when describing the Kingdom of God, often said it was 'like' aspects of life, as we know it. Not *exactly* the same, but sufficiently similar to draw an analogy.

Then and now

For most of human history we had very little scientific understanding of the nature of the cosmos. If they thought about such things at all, people believed the earth was flat, and the sun and moon went around it. Heaven was somewhere above, and hell was below. The traditional ideas of pearly gates, harps, white robes, wings and an interminable praise and worship service are what you'd expect from sincere people trying to interpret what little the Bible says about heaven in terms of the world as they knew it.

Today we know so much more about the nature of the physical cosmos. We know that the earth is a micro-speck in an enormous and apparently expanding universe. We know that what seems like solid reality is, at a fundamental level, a wispy web of energy, bound together by forces so strong that for most of history we did not even suspect that they existed. We know that perhaps as much as 90% of the universe is made up of 'dark matter' - about which we can theorise with mathematics, but cannot see or measure. We know that even such apparently indisputable ideas like the passing of time are relative. Even the dimensions that define our ideas of space (length, width, height and time) are just visible and comprehensible aspects of a much more involved and intricate reality. Although it is impossible to imagine how they work, we know that there are at least seven more dimensions. Scientists assure us that those extra dimensions are as much a part of reality as height, length and breadth and time. They operate at a level that our finest instruments cannot measure, and even our minds can wander but briefly before becoming bewildered and disoriented.

The scientific breakthroughs of the last few decades have shattered traditional understanding

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of just about everything. So what about heaven? Do we need to look again at our ideas of what life might be like hereafter?

Here. After

That's an interesting word. *Here* -after. Not *there* -after or *where* -after. Is it possible that eternal life could be spent in a rather familiar environment, doing things we have learned to enjoy, with people we know and with bodies that we recognize? Could it be that what comes next will be an extension of the best of life as we know it, but without any negative stress, anxiety or suffering? Well - and read this carefully - the Bible does not say it will not be like that. (I'd better run that by you again - *the Bible does not say it will not be like that.*) American theologian Dr. Randy Alcorn, has spent years studying the concept of heaven. In his book, *Heaven*, Alcorn while carefully avoiding sensationalism and fantasy, subjects every Biblical reference that alludes to heaven to careful scrutiny. The result is a fascinating portrait of what the afterlife may be like. He writes: "We get tired of ourselves, of others, of sin and suffering and crime and death. Yet we love the earth, don't we? I love the spaciousness of the night sky over the desert. I love the cosiness of sitting next to Nancy on the couch in front of the fire a blanket over us and dog snuggled next to us. These experiences are not heaven - but they are *foretastes* of heaven. What we love about this life are the things that resonate with the life we are made for. The things we love are not merely the best this life has to offer - they are previews of the greater life to come."

So why allow our view of heaven to be limited to yesterday's worldviews? Let's speculate about what our enhanced understanding of our environment might tell us about life in heaven.

Heavenly bodies

The Apostles Creed, the most popular Christian Statement of Belief, affirms the 'resurrection of the body'. You have probably repeated it hundreds of times. Have you ever thought about what it means?

It is popular to think of the resurrection in terms of a 'spirit' body, a wispy, ethereal, unreal, ghostlike sort of form. But that is not a Biblical idea. The Bible indicates that a resurrected

human being will have a real body. But that body will not be physical as we understand physical.

The four dimensions with which we experience reality bind our concept of physical or 'real'. But if indeed there are many more dimensions, then our definition of what is 'real' is woefully inadequate.

After he had been resurrected, Jesus had a real body. He could eat, walk, and appeared quite normal. He could be touched. Yet he was able to step in and out of our 'reality' at will, appearing to walk through a wall like Harry Potter at King's Cross. We interpret that as unreal, but perhaps it is quite normal for a body that can experience the full spectrum of reality.

So can you look forward to living forever in a form that is recognizably *you*, with a real body that is not subject to death, sickness and decay, and is not dependent on air, food, water and the circulation of blood for its existence? It certainly seems so. Imagine life with your mind - it would still be *your* mind - with the junk cleaned out and the priorities reordered, free forever to plan, dream and create. Imagine an eternity reunited with old friends and the limitless potential to make more. Imagine relationships with others, and with God, without anxiety, tension or upset. Imagine never having to say 'good bye' to people you love.

'Who knows how we'll end up!' says the Bible.

'What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we'll see him - and in seeing him, become like him.'

Not so far

Far from being trapped forever in an interminable church service, eternal life seems to be a greatly enhanced version of the best of what we know now.

There is much more 'out there' than we can discern with our limited senses. Occasionally, God opens the door just a crack to show us a glimpse of a greater reality.

St. Paul told the superstitious people of Athens that God was 'not far from them'. Heaven is certainly not close in any ways we can measure. But it may not be 'a happy land, far, far away'? Could it indeed be all around us in ways we don't have the words to describe?

Let your imagination run free for a while.

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When Jesus was born, angels suddenly appeared to the shepherds in the hills. It was as if they stepped into our world from the realm that they inhabited. Is that also what happened when Elisha's frightened servant suddenly saw legions of angels appear? Stephen, about to be stoned by an angry mob, was given a glimpse of sights and sounds that are normally beyond human experience? Is that how John saw the visions of the book of Revelation?

Theologian Dallas Willard writes, "We can be sure that heaven, in the sense of our afterlife, is just our future in the universe. There is not another universe besides this one. God created the heavens and the earth. That's it. And much of the difficulty in having a believable picture of heaven and hell today comes from the centuries-long tendency to 'locate' them in "another reality" outside the created universe."

Randy Alcorn points out that "just as blind people cannot see the world, even though it exists all around them, we are unable to see heaven in our fallen condition. Is it possible that before sin and the Curse, Adam and Eve saw clearly what is now invisible to us? Is it possible that Heaven itself is but inches from us?"

These are fascinating speculations. But they are not fantastic. Science has shown us there is much, much more to the Creation than we can observe and experience with our present physical limitations. It seems that God has created in 'safe mode'.

Safe mode.

If you have a computer, you can do something that might help you grasp these ideas. Start it up in what is called 'safe mode'. What you will get is a very much-subdued version of what you are used to. Graphics are grainy. Many programs don't work at all. Only the essential systems will function. The computer is just a pale shadow of its normal self.

You usually do this after a malfunction, to give the machine a chance to sort itself out without damaging its entire system.

I find putting my computer in 'safe mode' a rather depressing experience. Gone is the flexibility, the speed, the richness of the colours and the energy and potential that the machine usually has. Normally it is way ahead of me, as it explores its (for me) unfathomable cyber-environment. It zips and zaps its way around cyber-space, offering hints, correcting mistakes, reminding me of things that I have forgotten, bringing me messages from all over the world, and, unless I tell it to cease and desist, presenting me with an endless selection of not-to-be-resisted bargains.

But when I start it up in safe mode it mutters and splutters about, responding lugubriously to my commands. My computer doesn't seem to like safe mode. It is not its natural way of operating, and it quickly springs back to its hyper-self as soon as I lift the restrictions. Has God started us in 'safe mode'? This earth-bound human life is a greatly limited expression of what we will eventually be. Jesus came to us in 'safe mode' - subjecting himself to the limitations of a human being, including the ultimate fate of all merely physical life forms - death? Just before his crucifixion, he prayed, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began"? And remember, he also prayed, "Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendour you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world."

Wait. There's more!

There is much more we could talk about. Providing we keep a sense of balance and don't go off on tangents, to explore the possibilities of our lives after death is an exciting study. But my computer's word count and the Managing Editor's memos are reminding me that this article is still subject to the limitations of time and space.

So we will continue to explore the promises and potential of heaven in the next issue.

John Halford

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The Superior Ministry of Jesus

A study of Hebrews 7:26 to 8:13

The New Testament tells us that Jesus is our intercessor, our mediator, our Saviour and King. But only the book of Hebrews tells us that he is our priest.

This unique concept is the central message of Hebrews, the main idea from which the others flow. Priesthood is the purpose for which Jesus was made human (2:17); his priesthood is the reason we should hold fast to our faith (4:14); and the proof that the old covenant has been set aside (7:12).

Jesus guarantees a better covenant, a better relationship with God. And because he lives forever at God's right hand, "he is able to save completely those who come to God through him" (7:25).

The old covenant priests could not save anyone, but Jesus is fully effective at what they could only picture. Jesus does it not by adding himself to the old covenant, but by fulfilling the old so thoroughly that the old becomes unnecessary. He supersedes the old covenant, replacing it with a better covenant (7:22).

When we have Jesus, we do not need the old covenant. The practices commanded in the Old Covenant (circumcision, various rituals, Sabbaths and festivals) have no spiritual merit for the Christian. All we need is Jesus.

Exactly what we need

"Such a high priest meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (7:26-27).

The Old Testament priests had to make sin sacrifices every day, showing that the final solution had not yet arrived. But Jesus was so effective that once was enough. It did not have to be repeated.

The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus did not, because he had no sin. When he offered himself, it was not for himself, but for everyone else. He was the kind

of sacrifice we really needed--without blemish, fit even for the holiest place in heaven.

The old covenant appointed imperfect men as priests (7:28), but God promised to appoint another priest, a permanent priest--which implies someone who is perfect in himself and perfect in his work (Psalm 110:4).

"The point of what we are saying is this," the letter says (8:1), drawing attention to its main point. After seven chapters, here is what we should have firmly in mind: "We do have such a high priest." What humans' need, what God has promised, has finally come. We have the priest who is able to save us completely. We need to focus our thoughts on him, hold fast to him and have confidence in him.

He is our priest not only because he lives forever, but because he has been exalted to a position of royal and spiritual power: He "sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and ... serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (8:1-2).

What earthly tabernacles and priests could only picture, Jesus Christ is. He is the reality forever, not a temporary imitation.

A superior ministry

The author has capped off seven chapters with a simple summary: Jesus is our high priest. What then? The letter begins to move forward from this by discussing the work of a priest.

"Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer" (8:3).

What did Jesus offer? The author has already told us in 7:27, and he will develop it more fully in chapter 9, but here he mentions it only briefly. First, he wants to set the scene for chapter 9 by discussing the tabernacle.

If Jesus were on earth, he observes, "he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law" (8:4). The earthly rituals were being taken care of. The temple work was being done by Levitical priests, as the law required. That is not where Jesus is doing his work. But the earthly temple

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does teach us something about the priestly work of Jesus.

The tabernacle of Moses, and later the temple, was "a copy and shadow of what is in heaven." It is therefore important, and "this is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain'" (8:5).

The author is quoting Exodus 25:40 to show that the earthly tabernacle was a copy, not the real thing. The Levitical priests served at a copy, and the rituals they performed were copies, not the spiritual realities.

"But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises" (8:6). Just as the heavenly sanctuary is better than the earthly one, so also is Jesus' priestly ministry better than the Levitical ministry, and so also is the new covenant better than the old.

How much better? The tabernacle was merely a copy, a cheap imitation, in comparison to the heavenly reality. In the same way, the Levitical priesthood, although divinely ordained, was merely an imitation of a heavenly reality fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

How exact is the copy? The Levitical rituals came in great variety: water rituals, grain rituals, special clothing, hand motions, killing of animals and releasing of animals. All these rituals were fulfilled by and superseded by the work of Jesus Christ.

We do not see exact correspondence for every detail, nor do we need to. We cannot insist that the spiritual is just like the physical. We do not expect that the heavenly sanctuary has wool and linen curtains, bronze basins, acacia framing and red ram skins. Indeed, it does not need curtains, frames and skins at all. Those are merely physical things corresponding to a spiritual reality.

Jesus' priestly work is much better than the old priesthood--in quality, not quantity. The work he did once was better than millions of rituals done by Levites. Christ's work was so much superior that it did not have to be repeated. It was a different kind of priesthood. We should expect major differences between spiritual realities and earthly copies.

In the same way, we should expect the new covenant to be different in quality from the obsolete covenant. Just as every ritual has been superseded, so also is every detail of the law. In some cases we can see how the new covenant modifies or clarifies an old law, but in other cases we see laws disappear without any particular replacement.

The new is better than the old, as far as heaven is from earth. The old covenant promised a long life in the land of Israel; the new covenant promises eternal life with God. It is a very different kind of covenant.

Predicted in the Scriptures

The author of Hebrews likes to show that the Old Testament Scriptures contain hints of the dramatic change brought by Christ. There are hints of a "rest" to come, hints of a priesthood to come, hints of a spiritual reality that supersedes the rituals.

Now he shows that a change in covenants was also predicted, "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (8:7). The fact that a new covenant was predicted, implied that something was wrong with the Sinai covenant. "God found fault with the people" (8:8), but it is also correct to say that there was something wrong with the covenant. The author has already said that the old covenant could not make anyone perfect (7:11, 19). It could point toward perfection, but it could not bring it. Many Jews thought it was good enough, but it was not, and that is why God predicted a new covenant:

"The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (8:8). This is quoted from Jeremiah 31:31, which is one of many prophecies of a new relationship between God and humans. The prophets described it as a new spirit, a new heart, a covenant of peace, and an everlasting covenant. This covenant would be made with Israelites, but also open to gentiles.

"It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord" (8:9).

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Because the Israelites broke the old covenant, the new covenant will be different.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (8:10). Obviously, the Israelites had some of God's laws in their minds, and they often wanted to obey them. But this prophecy implies that the new covenant will have a different level of internalization. The relationship will be characterized by attitude, not rituals.

"No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (8:11). All humans will have equal access to God; no longer will one tribe have special status. Jeremiah's prophecy does not spell out all the details, but the germ is here of a very different covenant.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (8:12). The covenant does not predict perfect people--it predicts perfect forgiveness, a forgiveness available to everyone based on God's grace, without any priests or rituals.

This prophecy implied that the old covenant was ineffective and soon to be replaced. "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (8:13).

Even in Jeremiah's day, the old covenant was doomed. Israel's history had already shown that this covenant could not bring the people toward perfection. God's plan required a new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness, a more spiritual covenant, a covenant with a perfect priest, who made a perfect offering for all sin. That is the subject of chapter 9.

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Lessons from Mark Lesson 23 - Mark 4:16-20 A lesson about seeds

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.

When sower's in Jesus' day would sow their seeds, some of the seeds would naturally wind up in places unfavourable to growth, while most of the seeds wound up in good soil. Jesus used the result of the seeds in the various kinds of terrain to illustrate the behaviour of people with the gospel. He speaks of rocky places, thorny places and good soil.

It is important to note that the parable does not say that God sows people on rocky places; it

says that the way some people receive the gospel is like seed sown on rocky places. It is a comparison, an illustration of how some people deal with the gospel. It is not a justification for viewing God as deliberately making it impossible for some people to embrace the gospel.

People who abandon the word of God in the face of persecution are like seeds that grow on rocky places and therefore have little root. In a similar manner, people who let the word of God

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take a back seat to the worries of life and the pursuit of wealth are like seeds that get choked among thorns and shrivel.

In contrast, people who hear the word of God and accept it and produce the fruit of it are like seeds that germinate in good soil where there are no impediments to healthy growth.

Listening to Jesus

People, however, are not actually seeds, and God does not actually cast people into situations that prevent them from accepting the gospel.

Jesus' parables should not be pushed beyond the point that Jesus intended them to make.

Seeds don't think. They don't make choices.

They don't have the ability to ask God for help.

The point of the parable is not to tell us that we are hapless seeds doomed to whatever fate might chance to befall us because of the sower's indiscriminate scattering.

The point of the parable is that we should take steps to prevent ourselves from acting like helpless seeds.

When we find ourselves letting the cares of this world put the gospel on the back burner of our lives, then Jesus wants us to take note and make a change.

He wants us to deepen our spiritual

roots, to chop up the spiritual thorns in our lives. He wants us to nestle into the good soil of spending time in his word, of taking our issues, our hopes, our fears and our triumphs to him in prayer. He wants us to put the word of God to use in what we choose to do, to let the gospel flow out from us in kindness, mercy and peace.

It is easy to use the parable of the sower as a tool to judge others, to look down on people we think are weak in the faith and bound to fall away from the word of God. It is harder, but far more useful, to let the parable of the sower teach us and admonish us to keep an eye on our hearts, to make sure that greed, pride and anxious care about possessions and self-importance are not easing into the driver's seat in our lives.

Are you looking for a New Year's resolution?

How about this one: Hear the word, accept it and love others as Jesus loves us. That's the lesson of the parable of the sower.

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