



# **Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship**

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# Something worth thinking about...

By Joseph Tkach

## Grace

**"If righteousness could be gained through the law," Paul wrote, "Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:21).**

**T**he only alternative, as he says in this same verse, is "the grace of God." We are saved by grace, not by keeping the law.

These are alternatives that cannot be combined.

We are not saved by grace plus works, but by grace alone. Paul makes it clear that we must choose either one or another. "Both" is not a valid option (Romans 11:6). "If the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise" (Galatians 3:18). Salvation does not depend on the law, but on God's grace.

"If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (verse 21). If there were any way that rule-keeping could lead to eternal life, then God would have saved us with the law. But it wasn't possible. The law cannot save anyone.

God wants us to have good behaviour, of course. He wants us to love others and thereby fulfill the law. But he does not want us to think that our works are ever a reason for our salvation. If our works contributed to our salvation, then we would have something to boast about. But God designed his plan of salvation in such a way that we cannot take any credit for saving ourselves (Ephesians 2:8-9). We can never claim to deserve anything; we can never claim that God owes us anything.

As I wrote last time, this goes to the heart of the Christian faith, and it makes Christianity unique. Other religions say that people can be good enough if they try hard enough. Christianity says that we simply cannot be good enough; we need grace.

On our own, we will never be good enough, and because of that, other religions will never be good enough. The only way we can be saved is through the grace of God. We can never deserve to live forever, so the only way we can be given eternal life is for God to give us something that we don't deserve. This is what Paul is driving at when he uses the word *grace*. Salvation is a gift of God, something that we could never earn with even a thousand years of the law.

### Jesus and grace

"The law was given through Moses," John writes. "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). John saw a contrast between the law and grace, between what we do and what we are given. Nevertheless, Jesus didn't use the word *grace*. But his entire life was an example of grace, and his parables illustrated grace. He sometimes used the word *mercy* to describe what God gives us.

"Blessed are the merciful," he said, "for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). In this, he implied that we all need mercy. And he noted here that we should be like God in this respect. If we value grace, we will give grace to others.

Later, when Jesus was asked why he associated with notorious sinners, he told people, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13, quoting Hosea 6:6). In other words, God wants us to show mercy more than he wants us to be perfectionists in law keeping.

Now, I do not want to encourage anyone to break the law. But since transgressions are inevitable, mercy is essential. That is true of our relationships with one another, and true of our relationships with God, too. God wants us to know our need for mercy, and for us to have mercy toward others.

Jesus was exemplifying this when he ate with tax collectors and talked with sinners—he was showing by his behaviour that God wants fellowship with us all, and he has taken all our sins upon himself and forgiven us in order to have that fellowship.

Jesus told a parable of two debtors, one who owed an enormous sum, and the other who owed a much smaller amount. The master forgave the servant who owed much, but that servant failed to forgive the servant who owed less. The master was angry and said, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" (Matthew 18:33).

The point of the parable is that each of us should see ourselves as the first servant, who was forgiven an enormous debt. We have all fallen far short of what the law requires, so God shows us mercy—and he wants us to show mercy as well. Of course, in mercy as well as in law, we fall short of what we should do, so we must continue to rely on God's mercy.

The parable of the good Samaritan concludes with a command for mercy (Luke 10:37). The tax collector who pleaded for mercy was the one who was set right with God (Luke 18:13-14). The wasteful son who came home was accepted without having to do anything to "deserve" it (Luke

15:20). Neither the widow of Nain nor her son did anything to deserve a resurrection; Jesus did it simply out of compassion (Luke 7:11-15).

### **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ**

The miracles of Jesus served temporary needs. The people who ate loaves and fishes became hungry again. The son who was raised eventually died again. But the grace of Jesus Christ continues to be extended to all of us through the supreme act of grace: his sacrificial death on the cross. This is how Jesus gave himself up for us, with eternal consequences rather than temporary ones.

As Peter said, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved" (Acts 15:11).

The gospel was a message about God's grace (Acts 14:3; 20:24, 32). We are justified by grace "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). God's grace is linked with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (verse 25). Jesus died for us, for our sins, and we are saved because of what he did on the cross. We have redemption through his blood (Ephesians 1:7).

But God's grace goes further than forgiveness. Luke tells us that God's grace was on the disciples as they preached the gospel (Acts 4:33). God showed them favour, giving them help they did not deserve. But don't human fathers do the same? We not only give our children life when they had done nothing to earn it, we also give them gifts that they could not earn. That's part of love, and that is the way that God is. Grace is generosity.

When church members in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out on missionary trips, they commended them to the grace of God (Acts 14:26; 15:40). In other words, they put them into God's care, trusting God to take care of the travellers, trusting him to give them what they might need. That is included in his grace.

Spiritual gifts are a work of grace, too. "We have different gifts," Paul says, "according to the grace given us" (Romans 12:6). "To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" (Ephesians 4:7). "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

Paul thanked God for the spiritual gifts God had graced the believers with (1 Corinthians 1:4-5). He was confident that God's grace would abound toward them as he enabled them to do even more work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Every good thing is a gift of God, a result of grace rather than something we have earned. That is why we are to be thankful even for the simplest of blessings, for the singing of birds and the smells of flowers and the laughter of little children. Even life itself is a luxury, not a necessity.

Paul's own ministry was given to him through grace (Romans 1:5; 15:15; 1 Corinthians 3:10; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 3:7). Everything he did, he wanted to be according to God's grace (2 Corinthians 1:12). His strength and skills were a gift of grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). If God can save and use the biggest sinner of all (which is the way Paul described himself), he can certainly forgive and use any of us. Nothing can separate us from his love, from his desire to give to us.

### **Response of grace**

How should we respond to the grace of God? With grace, of course. We are to be merciful, even as God is full of mercy (Luke 6:36). We are to forgive others, just as we have been forgiven. We are to serve others, just as we have been served. We are to be gracious toward others, giving them favour and kindness.

Our words are to be full of grace (Colossians 4:6). We are to be gracious (forgiving and giving) in marriage, in business, in church, with friends and family and strangers. It's supposed to make a difference in our lives and in our priorities.

Paul spoke of financial generosity as a work of grace: "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability" (2 Corinthians 8:1-3). They had been given much, and they in turn were willing to give much.

Giving is an act of grace (verse 6), and I am encouraged at the generosity I see in the Worldwide Church of God. This is an appropriate way for us to respond to the grace of Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us so that we might be richly blessed (verse 9)—and that is certainly something worth thinking about.

**By Joseph Tkach**  
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# Here He comes... ready or not!

By James Henderson

**D**on't you wish that Jesus would return? That any day now all the wretchedness and wickedness that we see continually around us would end and that God would usher in a time when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9)? The New Testament authors lived in expectation of the Second Coming that would deliver them "from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). They exhorted Christians to prepare themselves spiritually and to be morally alert, knowing very well that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), unexpectedly, without warning beforehand.

When Jesus lived, just like today, people were anxious to know when the end would come so they could get ready for it. Interestingly, Jesus' reply implied that they should stop speculating and always be ready anyway without being prompted by prior indicators.

Look closely at the accounts in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 where Jesus explains to the disciples that the temple would be destroyed (this happened in A.D. 70). What was Jesus really saying? Was he telling us to look for the signs of the times?

"Tell us ... what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (Matthew 24:3) the disciples asked Jesus privately. Believers have had the same question ever since. How will we know more or less the hour when our Master comes? We feel a need to know. But Jesus points us to a different need—the need to be ready regardless of history's times and seasons.

The immediate answer Jesus gave conjures up in the biblically literate mind images of the figurative, frightening four horsemen of the Apocalypse (see Revelation 6:1-8) that have ignited the imagination of prophetic and fantasy writers for centuries. False religion, war, famine, deadly disease—sounds like our age right here and now? Yes, it does, and it was meant to sound that way. In fact, it was meant to sound like every age.

Some—many if you think about it—have said that what Jesus was saying is that when we see an intensifying of war, famine, and these other things, it means the end is near.

Stimulated by this idea of things getting really bad before Christ returns, fundamentalists have tried, in their zeal for truth, to flesh out what they view as end-time references in prophetic scriptures,

especially in the book of Revelation. But what was Jesus saying? He does not discuss the idea of intensification. He seems, rather, to be discussing the constant condition of humankind.

There has been and always will be until he comes again many deceivers who come in Christ's name as well as "wars and rumours of wars... famines and earthquakes in various places" (Matthew 24:5-7). Has there been, since Christ came, a generation spared these things? These prophetic words of our Lord find fulfilment in the human record of every age of history.

Yet today, as in the past, people look at world events and some, even some leading Christian opinion makers, claim prophecy is unfolding and the end is near.

Of course, all of us want the end to be near, and we desire our Saviour's return. However, Jesus himself said, in suggesting our response to what some call the signs of the times: "See to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come" (verse 6).

Regrettably, sensational end-time scenario preaching in public campaigns or through television, radio and magazines is often used in the cause of evangelism to frighten people into believing in Jesus Christ. Shape up or burn up is an option given. If you don't give your life to Jesus, you will be a victim in the violence to come.

We forget how Jesus himself evangelised—how he brought the good news. He evangelised above all through kindness and mercy—look at the weight of the examples in the Gospels and see for yourself. Paul explains that clearly when he says: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (Romans 2:4). It is God's goodness expressed to others through us that brings people to Jesus. We can be sobered by the concept of divine judgment, but we should not evangelise through threats of apocalyptic retribution.

Jesus pointed to the need to make sure we are spiritually ready for his return whenever it will be. That was his emphasis. That is more important than trying to establish something beyond the scope of human knowledge—"no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (verse 36). Being better informed than the angels instead of being better prepared for his coming is where some of us focus. Jesus concentrated on our being prepared. In reinforcing this point to his disciples Jesus used various illustrations and analogies. For example, "as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (verse 37). At the time of Noah there were no signs of imminent disaster, no discussion of wars and rumours of wars and

famine and disease. No threatening clouds on the horizon, just sudden rain.

Relatively peaceful prosperity and moral depravity appeared to have gone hand-in-hand. They "knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:39). What should we learn from the reference to Noah? To look at the weather patterns and watch for the telltale signs that may inform us of a date that the angels are ignorant of? No, it rather reminds us to "be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap" (Luke 21:34).

Jesus also presented the parable of the 10 virgins to hammer this idea home. I understand this more since I moved to Africa. Some years ago I was to perform a wedding at noon and come 3 p.m. the bride, not the bridegroom, had not arrived—she had delayed her coming!

Some of the attendants—not the bridesmaids as implied in the parable—fell asleep while waiting. At one point I noticed the bridegroom himself beginning to nod off.

What was the message of Jesus' story? Lest you fall asleep, have your lamps filled with oil so that your light can shine. Use the Holy Spirit. Be generous, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, be Jesus in your community (Matthew 25:31-46). If we do so, that is like giving people food in due season, when they need it. "It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns" (Matthew 24:46).

We know that in faith Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). That his kingdom has begun in us and in his church, that there is a gospel work to be done now wherever we live, and that "in this hope we are saved" (Romans 8:24) of the return of our Lord. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise" (2 Peter 3:9). "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:14).

*By James Henderson*

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## **An open letter to Generation X**

By Ray Meyer

**D**ear Gen-Xers,  
I am a Boomer born in 1947. Life was sure different back then. This letter is to you of the succeeding generation—Generation X or

Busters—born between 1961 and 1981—who are a part of the Worldwide Church of God. Time marches on, and soon your generation will fully occupy the driver's seat. This is good. It is what God intends.

I came into the Worldwide Church of God in 1965. I can't explain this except by the supernatural drawing of the Holy Spirit. I found people who took Christianity seriously—who had faith and wanted to live Christianity as a way of life—24/7. Previous to this, my mother, brother, sister and I attended church on a fairly regular basis, but for the most part, I grew up in nominal Christianity—one-day-a-week. My mother was not a nominal Christian, but most churchgoers I knew were. When I sensed God calling me to radical obedience, the Worldwide Church of God was a breath of fresh air, in spite of its flaws.

As I look back over the last 37 years (and especially over the last 12), I see a journey that has been both wonderful and painful. I deeply appreciate the wonderful values instilled in us—a high view of Scripture, obedience at any cost, faithfulness, tenacity, zeal, a desire to please God and a willingness to change when shown to be wrong. I also thank the Chief Shepherd for ironing out our flaws and the Spirit for leading us into deeper truth. This journey is all a part of God's plan for us.

Part of the pain and grief of this journey is the departure of so many dear people from our fellowship—people we have known and loved, and deeply miss. I have experienced this pain, and I deeply empathise with the pain and grief of you Gen-Xers because you have also lost many of your friends. But the Lord is Sovereign, and he will work in every life as he sees fit.

In the midst of this, I have a particular kind of joy, a spiritual kind of joy. The apostle John talks about it in 3 John 4: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." I don't think one can grasp the meaning of this verse until he or she sees the succeeding generation enter adulthood. This verse includes both biological offspring and spiritual offspring.

To all of you Gen-Xers or Busters who have remained on the journey, I say thank you. Thank you for the joy you have given me. In the midst of a lot of grief and heartache, thank you. You give this old heart joy. Thank you for blooming where you were planted. Thank you for making yourself available to God to help advance his kingdom. Whenever I see one of you leading worship and lifting up the name of Christ, my heart fills with joy! Whenever I hear one of you lead in prayer, my heart fills with joy! Whenever I observe one of you serving, leading or proclaiming the word of God, my heart fills with joy!

Some of you are now leaders in your congregations. Some of you are now elders in your congregations. Some of you are now even pastoring congregations. God is in the process of raising up a whole new generation of leaders! A couple of summers ago, when I was in the hospital in serious condition with pulmonary embolism, I received and read with joy a "Praying for You" get-well card from a congregation I pastored many years ago. Many people I fondly remembered had signed it and by some I had never met.

In the center of the card was a note from a young woman who was a little girl when I was her pastor. She said: "Hey Mr. Meyer, I loved you as my minister when I was a little girl—you prayed for me in an anointing and I was healed. You have been such a big part in bringing me to Jesus and I love you for that." Those few words brought tears to my eyes and joy to my heart. They meant more to me than she could ever know. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." Thank you Cindy!

Over the years I have known and loved hundreds of young people. Teen Bible studies, outings, basketball games, talent contests—many wonderful experiences together. I am saddened that today I do not know what is going on in the lives of most of them. But I am overjoyed when I hear about God's children walking in the truth! Thank you!

These same sentiments apply to those who are teenagers now. I read with joy the WN articles about Discovery Weekends and see the names of teens and young adults taking leadership roles, many of whom I knew when they were children or young teenagers. I read with joy any article in which a young person is involved in serving Christ in our church.

Thank you, teenagers!

Generation X and teens, you bring joy to my heart. This is to let you know there are people out there like me who deeply care for and appreciate you and your faithfulness, and who are praying for you and God's blessings in your lives.

My prayer is like that of Aaron in Numbers 6:24-26: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." With love, an old Baby Boomer

**Ray A. Meyer**

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Ray A. Meyer, along with his wife, Carol, pastors the Kansas City, Missouri, Northland, and Kansas City, Kansas, Southland, churches.

## **Bible Study**

By Michael Morrison

### **The Radiance of God's Glory:**

A study of Hebrews 1

In the first century, some Jews believed in Jesus as the Messiah and yet still wanted all the rituals of Judaism. The boundaries between Christianity and Judaism weren't clear, and these people weren't sure where their primary identity was. The book of Hebrews may have been written to some of them. It was apparently written to people who already believed in Jesus as the Messiah. What the book argues is that Jesus is better than Judaism. The readers should see their religious identity in Jesus. It is Jesus who gives us access to God. Let's see how the letter begins.

#### **The exact representation**

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Heb. 1:1-2). The sentence goes on for two and a half more verses. It's an elaborate, well-composed sentence, written with rhetorical polish. This is not the way that Greek letters normally begin—this is the way that oratory begins. This book was written to be delivered as a speech, as a sermon.

Here, in the first sentence, it draws a contrast between old and new. God spoke to the patriarchs in many ways—some things to one person, something else to another, a different portion to someone else many years later, etc. God would sometimes speak in a thundering voice, sometimes in a whisper, and sometimes in a vision.

Some Jews might have been proud that God had dealt with their nation in many different ways, but the problem is that none of the methods were perfect. None of the prophets had the whole message, none of the visions revealed everything we need to know.

That is in contrast to the way that God has spoken in his Son. Jesus is not a prophet—he is a Son, and as a Son he has a complete revelation of what God wants to reveal. This is definitive. The day of Jesus Christ is the day the prophets could only dimly foresee, but Jesus is the fulfillment of what they said. God has spoken to us in his Son. How great is he? Verse 2 tells us: "whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." He was appointed heir even before anything existed. He is the Creator and the owner of the universe.

Not only that, "the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,

sustaining all things by his powerful word" (v. 3). Unbelievers would probably think it blasphemous to say that Jesus is just as glorious as God, that he looks just like what God is, and that he does what only God can do. He radiates God's glory and he is the exact representation of his nature, and he is so powerful that he can sustain the universe simply by speaking a word.

Why does the author think that the readers will accept this without any evidence? Probably because he knows them and knows what they have been taught. Perhaps he is the one who taught them. He is reminding them of how great Jesus is, because they are letting this greatness slip away, and they are ignoring the salvation that Jesus brought.

Now the author gets to the real subject of the letter, the subject that he will develop in much more detail: "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (v. 3).

If you want your sins to be forgiven, then you need to pay attention to Jesus, because he provides the way for us. He is with God, and he carries far more authority than the prophets do, because they had only part of the truth. It was true, but it was only part of what we need. Now we have Jesus, and in him, we have all that we need.

### **Better than angels**

The author now introduces the subject of the first chapter, which argues that Jesus is better than angels: "So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs" (v. 4). As the Son of God, he is superior to the angels, the messenger servants of God.

Jews in the first century had a lot of respect for angels. They speculated about them and even assigned them a role in giving the law at Mt. Sinai (see Gal. 3:19). Some even gave the angels too much honour (Col. 2:18), but this does not seem to be a problem among the readers of Hebrews.

The author wants to correct some of the readers' ideas, but he does not attack them in the very first chapter. That might cause resistance. Instead, he is warming up to the subject and reminding them of things they already know. It is only later in the book that he says, now let's go on to something new.

The author uses a chain of scriptures to support his point that Jesus is superior to the angels. He does not stop to demonstrate that these scriptures are really about Jesus—that seems to be something he figures the readers already agree on. On this topic, he is writing to a sympathetic audience, not a hostile one.

But in preparation for the subjects that he deals with in later chapters, he does want to remind them of how great Jesus is, and he begins by comparing

him to angels. Hebrews 1:5: "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?" The answer is that God never said this to any angel, but he did say it for Jesus.

The first quote comes from Psalm 2:7, which was originally about the kings of Israel, but was often understood as a messianic prophecy. The second quote is from 2 Samuel 7:14, which was originally about Solomon, but came to be applied to the end-time Son of David, the Messiah.

The point in both quotations is that Jesus is the Son of God, whereas angels are only messengers. Although angels are great and powerful, they aren't even in the same league as Jesus. They are the hired help; Jesus is the Son of God.

The next two quotations are about angels. "And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.' In speaking of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire'" (Heb. 1:6-7).

The first quote is from the Greek version of Deut. 32:43; the Hebrew original doesn't say this. And even in the Greek version, the scripture is about the angels worshipping God. But the author makes no attempt to explain why he can use this verse for Jesus—he apparently knows that these readers already understand the verse in this way.

The second quote is from the Greek version of Psalm 104:4; the Hebrew version has a different emphasis.

### **Like God in every way**

The next two quotes are much longer. "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy'" (Heb. 1:8-9, quoting from Psalm 45:6-7).

Again, there is no attempt to explain why these verses can be used for Jesus Christ, even when they plainly call him God: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever..." Apparently the author is reminding the readers of something they have already been taught. The point is that the Son is a ruler, but the angels are only servants.

The next verses are quoted from Psalm 102:25-27: "He also says, 'In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end'" (Heb. 1:10-12).

The original psalm is about God. In Hebrews, it is applied to Christ, saying that he is the Creator and that he will live forever. In every respect, Jesus is greater than angels.

"To which of the angels did God ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?'" (v. 13). As in verse 5, the answer is "none." God never put an angel at his right hand, but he did put Jesus there.

This is quoted from Psalm 110:1, the Old Testament verse that is quoted the most often in the New Testament. This verse will be used again in Hebrews, but here, it is used simply to say that the Son is better than the angels. They are merely "ministering spirits," as it says in verse 14, "sent to serve those who will inherit salvation."

Angels serve us; we serve Christ; that makes them two steps lower than Christ is. He is really great—exactly like God, called God, creating like God and living like God.

What conclusion can the readers draw from this review? That will be revealed in chapter 2.

### **Questions for application**

- When I think of God, do I remember that Jesus is exactly like him? Does my concept of God look just like Jesus?
- When I think of creation, do I think of Jesus?
- Without the book of Hebrews, would I apply these Old Testament verses to Jesus Christ?
- Do I view the heavens and earth as perishable, scheduled for change? How does this affect my priorities?
- In what ways have angels ministered to the children of God?

***By Michael Morrison***

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