

November 2002



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

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Something worth thinking about

by Joseph Tkach

Our Response to God

Ideas have consequences. The way we think about God affects the way we respond to him. In other words, our theology affects the way we live. Some people think theology is dull and irrelevant, but perhaps that is because they think God is dull and irrelevant; they would rather get on with their life without dragging God into the discussion. Everyone has a theology, whether they know it or not. They have some concepts of what God is like. They may think he is distant and unconcerned, or harsh and angry, or even that he doesn't exist at all. All these ideas affect the way we live. If we believe God is distant and unconcerned, for example, we may be angry because we are suffering from the sins of other people, and God doesn't seem to care. We may need help, but God doesn't seem to answer our cries for help. Or we may indulge our baser desires or take advantage of others with impunity, thinking God doesn't care one way or the other.

Living by faith

My point is that the way we think about God affects the way we live. This is implied throughout the Bible, which repeatedly connects doctrine and behaviour.

God cares about us, Jesus said, so we should not worry. Worry comes from a lack of faith that God is good, powerful, merciful and will not cease to love us and do what is good and right for us. If we don't trust God, we may think that he doesn't care, or that he doesn't have the power to take care of us, or that he is harsh, unforgiving or unpredictable toward us.

But when we trust in God, we do not worry even when bad things happen to us. We are confident that God is faithful to us, suffering with us, holding us, and that he will use even our pain to make us stronger and bless us.

He works all things, even bad things, for good. He brings light out of our darkness. Our belief about God's power and love affects the way we react to the situations we face.

Paul uses a similar kind of logic in his letters. He explains that we are saved by grace through the work of Jesus our Saviour, and then he writes, Therefore we should be living sacrifices, set apart to do God's will, putting off the old self and putting on the new, acting like the new people that God has declared us to be. In other words, our theology should affect the way we live. The book of Hebrews uses similar logic at several points. After explaining a concept, the author says, therefore let us hold fast to our confession, therefore let us approach the throne with confidence, and therefore let us encourage one another. He sees a close connection between ideas and consequences, between doctrine and practice.

Need for an accurate view

Since the way we think about God affects the way we live, we want to have the best understanding of God we can. If we think of God as a powerful physical being, then we will tend to focus on physical life, on external behaviour, on a future based on physical things. We will tend to neglect spiritual qualities such as grace and

love, and give little attention to concepts such as the heavenly and the eternal.

On the other hand, when we think of God as eternal and triune, then we see a God for whom relationships are essential to his very being, for whom love is essential, a God who gives himself when he gives his Son, a God who lives within us when his Spirit is in us. The triune God is a God who has fellowship with us directly, not through intermediaries. In contrast, a God who is only Father, but not Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in trinity, is more likely to be seen as aloof, distant, legalistic, stressing law rather than mercy. This is just how many people view God. If such a God sent his Son to die on the cross, he would be sending another being to satiate his angry judgment, not taking humanity into his own being and redeeming it through union with his own sinless Son, with whom he, with the Spirit, is One God.

It is not my intention here to discuss the nature of God in detail. We have already published quite a bit of material on that, and it is on our website (www.wcg.org/lit/God). More recently, Mike Morrison wrote an article summarizing it and listing a number of books for further study ("Introduction to God," May 2001 WN).

He highlighted two qualities of God—his greatness and his goodness. God always uses his enormous power to further his covenant of love and grace toward his people. He is gentle, loving, slow to anger and full of mercy.

Here, I want to focus on the "so what" question. How is this relevant to us? What difference does it make in our lives? How do we respond to a God who is simultaneously powerful and gentle?

Trust

I would like to highlight two ways in which we respond to God. The first is trust. When we realize that God has all power to do anything he wants, and that he always uses it for the good of humanity, then we can have absolute confidence that we are in good hands.

He has both the ability and the covenanted purpose to work all things, including all our rebellion, hatred and betrayal against him and one another, toward our redemption and glorification in Jesus Christ. He is completely trustworthy—worthy of our trust.

When we are in the midst of trials, sickness, suffering and even dying, we can be confident that God is still with us, that he cares for us, that he has everything under control. It may not look like it, and we certainly do not feel in control, but we can be confident that God isn't caught off guard. He can and does redeem any situation, any misfortune, for our good.

We need never doubt God's love for us. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). The God who did not spare his own Son can be counted on to give us through his Son everything we need for eternal happiness.

God did not send somebody else: The Son of God, essential to the Godhead, became human so that he could die for us and rise again for us (Hebrews 2:14).

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We were redeemed not by the blood of animals, not by the blood of a very good man, but by the blood of the God who became human.

We can be confident that he loves us. Every time we take communion, we are reminded of the extent of his love for us—both of his death wherein we are forgiven, and his resurrection wherein we are given union with him and presented holy and blameless to God. He has earned our trust.

"God is faithful," Paul tells us. "He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13). "The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Even "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13). He is not going to change his mind about wanting us, about calling us, about being merciful to us. "Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23).

He has made a commitment to us, a covenant with us, to redeem us, to give us eternal life, to love us forever. He will not be without us. He is trustworthy, but how do we respond to him? Do we worry? Do we struggle to be worthy of his love? Or do we trust him?

We need never doubt God's power, either. This is shown in the resurrection of Jesus from death. This is the God who has power over death itself, power over all the beings he created, power over all other powers (Colossians 2:15). He triumphed over all things through the cross, and this is demonstrated through his resurrection. Death could not hold him, for he is the author of life (Acts 3:15).

The same power that raised Jesus from death will also give immortal life to us (Romans 8:11). We can trust that he has the power, and the desire, to fulfil all his promises toward us. We can trust him with everything—and that's a good thing, since it is foolish to trust in anything else.

Of ourselves, we will fail. Even the sun left to itself, will fail. Our only hope is in a God who has power greater than the sun, greater than the universe, more faithful than time and space, full of love and faithfulness toward us. We have that sure hope in Jesus our Saviour.

Worship

We also respond to God with worship, because worship is simply giving God what is fitting. He is praiseworthy, not only for his power but also for his gentleness. Raw power is neither good nor bad, neither to be praised in itself or condemned in itself. Dictators have power, volcanoes have power and bacteria have power, but we do not praise such power. Power is praiseworthy only when it is used in a good way, in a way that helps others.

God is love, and all that he does is done in love. This is praiseworthy. We praise love even on a human level, don't we? We praise people who give their lives to help others. They did not have enough power to save their own lives, but what power they had they used to help others, and that is praiseworthy. In contrast, we criticize people who had the power to help but refused to do it. Goodness is more praiseworthy than greatness is, and God is both good and great.

Praise deepens the bond of love between us and God. God's love for us is never diminished, but ours for him often grows weak. In praise, we rehearse his love for us and, in effect, fan the fire of love for him that the Spirit has started within us. It is good for us to remember and rehearse how wonderful God is, for that strengthens us

in Christ and increases our motivation to be like him in his goodness, which increases our joy.

We were made for the purpose of praising God, of giving him glory and honour, and the better we are in harmony with his purpose for life, the greater joy will be ours. Life is more satisfying when we do what we were made to do: to honour God. We do that not only in worship, but also in the way we live every day. We honour God when we serve other people using the gifts God has given us. We honour God when we forgive instead of seeking revenge.

We honour God and show that he is great when we shape our lives around him, when we value his loving word to us more than the ways of the world. We honour God when we look to Scripture instead of society, when we meet our obligations and responsibilities to others instead of shirking them.

Worship is a way of life. We offer our bodies and minds as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). We worship God when we share the gospel of his Son (Romans 15:16).

We worship God when we give financial offerings (Philippians 4:18). We worship God when we help other human beings (Hebrews 13:16). We say that he is worthy, worth our time and attention and allegiance. We praise his power, and his patience. We praise his glory, and his humility in becoming one of us for our sakes.

We praise his righteousness, and his mercy. We praise him for the way he really is.

This is what we were made for, to declare God's praises (1 Peter 2:9). Life works best if we live the way God intended us to. And this is our reasonable service. It is simply right that we praise the One who created us, the One who died and rose to save us and give us life eternal, the One who works even now to help us become more like him. We owe him our allegiance, and owe him our love.

We were made to praise God. John was given a vision of our future: "I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!' " (Revelation 5:13).

This is the right response: awe at the awesome, honour for the honourable, praise for the praiseworthy, allegiance to the trustworthy. That's something worth thinking about.

by Joseph Tkach

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Spiritual Warfare by Greg Hartman

Several years ago a friend of mine gave away his kids' cat. "God told me the cat was a familiar spirit Satan sent to destroy our family," he explained. What I never understood was why, if the cat was so dangerous, my friend gave it to some other unsuspecting and defenceless family. It's a little too easy, though, to poke fun at people who do things like that. When it comes to spiritual warfare, my friend was simply modelling what he'd seen, namely, the lack of theological clarity and critical thinking that plagues the church today. Despite the Bible's admonition not to go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6), so much preaching, writing

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and television has been devoted to spiritual warfare that many Christians have been distracted from what the Bible really says. Such theories and practices as generational curses, naming and mapping, binding and loosing and rebuking Satan are wildly popular, but marginally biblical at best.

"Much of Christian television's emphasis on the more showy forms of what they call spiritual warfare," writes Stu Webber in *Spirit Warrior*, "resembles actual biblical, spiritual warfare about as much as the World Wrestling Foundation resembles actual, competitive wrestling." What are some of the methods used today for waging spiritual warfare -- and what does the Bible really say?

Generational Curses

This theory is based on a passage in the Ten Commandments: "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5).

Proponents of this theory say the reason children of alcoholics, for example, tend to become alcoholics themselves is because of this "generational curse."

The idea that God might pass sin down as if it was a genetic trait, however, is not only unpleasant, but also contrary to Scripture:

God clearly says that each of us is responsible for his or her own sin or righteous acts.

In Moses' day, large, extended families were the norm. The phrase "third and fourth generation" refers to all the generations living in a household -- all of whom can suffer if the head of the household sins (Joshua 7:1-25).

For better or worse, kids tend to emulate what they see: Children whose parents practice destructive sins often fall prey to the same sins themselves. A terrible cycle, to be sure, and one we should try to help people break without giving them the extra burden (or convenient excuse) of a nonexistent curse (Ezekiel 18:14-17).

Naming and Mapping

Popular author C. Peter Wagner, among others, has done much to promote this practice. The idea is that geographic areas have "territorial spirits" governing them, and Christians will enjoy little success at ministry unless they identify and engage these spirits, often by name.

Wagner cites passages such as Luke 8:30, in which Jesus forces Legion, a horde of demons possessing a man, to name themselves. This is evidence, Wagner says, that "naming and mapping the powers" is necessary for victory, provoking his followers to seek the characteristics, territory and names of evil spirits. Jesus, however, identified demons by name *only* when dealing with Legion, indicating that the significance was his authority even over huge numbers of demons. And nowhere in the Bible do believers approach ministry by seeking out the demons in the area first. The demons' names seem pretty inconsequential, if you ask me. In all the other cases of deliverance recorded in the Bible, the demon's name never even comes up.

If you enjoy frustration, try developing a biblical recipe for casting out demons. More than 40 passages in the New Testament mention Jesus or his followers driving out demons; of those, only five incidents give any details. Jesus forced demons to name themselves on one occasion, yes, but many other times he forbade them to speak at all. He cast out demons "with a word,"

by merely proclaiming that they were gone without even seeing the victim, by rebuking them or by commanding them to leave.

The Bible makes it clear that casting out demons relies on God's authority, not on any particular method. On the other hand, the shaky biblical ground of Wagner's theories forces him to cite extra biblical books and prophecies, testimony from animistic tribes, apocryphal Bible books such as *The Acts of Andrew* and the fairy tale *Rumpelstiltskin!*

Binding and Loosing

Some teachers and evangelists encourage their listeners to bind Satan or other evil spirits, based on a few verses:

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19; see also Matthew 18:18).

But do these verses really tell us anything about how to deal with evil spirits? Scholars don't always agree on precisely what Jesus meant, but the two main interpretations have little to do with spiritual warfare. Some say Jesus gave his church the keys to salvation -- that is, the gospel -- and thus the responsibility to rebuke sin and proclaim forgiveness. Others say Jesus charged his disciples with taking the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles -- that he granted them the privilege of unlocking the kingdom of heaven on earth. Scholars agree on one point, though: namely, that binding and loosing is directed toward people, not demons. Notice also that although Jesus gave his church the keys to the kingdom of heaven, he alone holds the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1:18). Seems to me that the keys of death and Hades have far more to do with authority over Satan than do the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

The finer points of theology aside, I've always been more than a little confused at this whole process of binding demons. When Satan is bound in Revelation, he stays bound until he is released (Revelation 20:1-3). Not to be flippant, but if we're binding the devil and his angels week after week in church and prayer services, either we're not doing it right, someone's letting them loose behind our backs -- or we're wasting our time trying to do something God neither told nor gave us the authority to do.

Rebuking the Devil

Tune in to a televangelist, and you probably won't have to wait long before you hear him or her rebuke Satan. Is this a legitimate tactic for Christians?

Hardly. "Even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" (Jude 9).

Jesus may have rebuked demons, but if Michael, the *archangel* Michael! Dared only pray that God himself would deal with Satan, what gives us the audacity to speak so carelessly about celestial beings (Jude 8)?

The Bible tells us to resist the devil, not to deride him (James 4:7).

Lowest Common Denominator

I've looked only at the mainstream of the fringe here, so to speak. Besides the above examples, there are those who teach that vomiting is a necessary part of deliverance; that Satan is female, and we'll never defeat

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her until this is widely known; that nearly everyone has repressed memories Satan uses to keep us in bondage; that Cologne, Germany, is a "gate of hell" responsible for more bloodshed and heresy than anything else in history; and that demons can attach themselves to inanimate objects to sneak into Christians' homes. Dr. Barry Davis, assistant professor of Greek and Hebrew at Multnomah Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, says a common thread runs through most of these tactics.

"Any time we place a greater emphasis on what we do rather than who we serve, we'll get into error," Dr. Davis says. "If certain things have to be done a certain way to see results, is that the gospel or some magic formula?" Most scholars agree that exorcism is no different than magic: It attempts to use a ritual or certain objects or words to manipulate demons, whereas true deliverance can be performed only with God's authority by a Christian in a right relationship with Christ.¹³ This is why there's no deliverance recipe in Scripture: The method is irrelevant.

"Nowhere in the Bible," says Stu Weber, "do we see Christians using sacred objects, holy water, wooden crosses, key chains or other trinkets to combat the devil or demons. There is no mumbo-jumbo, no bargaining or exchanging in conversation with demons. In the Bible, demons are simply sent packing by the power of God based on the triumph of Christ."

The Real Deal

Like the Pharisees, today's warfare preachers have taken something childishly simple and made it unnecessarily complicated. If spiritual warfare is none of the things described above, what is it?

"The real battle isn't physical," Dr. Davis says, "which means the way we fight is total reliance upon God -- he fights for us."

Stu Weber adds, "The Christian fights Satan by living a holy personal life in obedient faithfulness to God. Christians should forget toying around with formulas, shows and stagecraft, and concentrate instead on personal holiness."

Maybe holiness and obedience aren't as spectacular as binding, loosing, rebuking, naming, and mapping or vomiting, but then again, God has no need to show off. I'll take something that works over something that's spectacular any day.

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Getting Real

By J. Michael Fezell

Most of us go to great lengths to look good in the eyes of others, but according to Jesus, it is only when we honestly see ourselves as we really are that we can become who God has made us to be. Life has much more to offer than the frustrating rat race of "keeping up appearances."

New life

The night Jesus was arrested, he spent some time telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit. He referred to the Holy Spirit with an Aramaic word that was translated into Greek as *parakletos*, a word conveying the sense

of "advocate," "friend" or "supporter." *Parakletos* was used to describe, for example, a person who would stand beside you in court to support you and your cause, to speak up for you, to hearten you.

Jesus knew that things were about to get hard, not just for him, but also for those who would follow him. So he said to the 11 disciples, "I've told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favour. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I've told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you'll be well-warned and ready for them" (John 16:1-4a, Message paraphrase).

What is it that these persecutors did not understand about the Father? They did not understand that the Father loved the world so much that he would send his Son to save it from its sins. They did not understand the "mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God... which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:9, 11). They didn't understand that "in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence" (verse 12).

Jesus went on: "I didn't tell you this earlier because I was with you every day. But now I am on my way to the One who sent me. Not one of you has asked, 'Where are you going?' Instead, the longer I've talked, the sadder you've become. So let me say it again, this truth: It's better for you that I leave. If I don't leave, the Friend won't come. But if I go, I'll send him to you" (John 16:4b-7, The Message).

The disciples were sad because Jesus was leaving them. But what they didn't yet understand was that his going to the Father would result not in their loss of him, but rather in their union with him and with the Father. How? Because he would send the Holy Spirit, the Friend, who would draw them into the eternal relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son.

Sin, righteousness and judgment

"When he comes," Jesus continued, "he'll expose the error of the godless world's view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He'll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted" (John 16:8-11, The Message).

How is the world wrong about sin? The world thinks sinners can atone for their sins by doing works of goodness. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that Jesus has come to forgive all sin and reconcile all things to God, the only kind of sin that can remain is the sin of not trusting in him who takes away all sin. The root of all sin is unbelief in God's own atonement for human sin through Jesus Christ.

How is the world wrong about righteousness? The world thinks of righteousness in terms of human virtue and goodness. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that the Son of God has lived a sinless human life and has been accepted by the Father as the perfect offering of humanity in sinful humanity's place, righteousness can be defined only in terms of the gift of God, a gift rooted in Jesus Christ, who, in our place and as one of us, did everything his Father commanded him to do for our sakes.

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How is the world wrong about judgment? The world thinks people who endure great suffering in this world are great sinners under God's curse, and that people whose lives are abundant have been judged worthy and are under God's favor. But here is the fascinating thing. Now that the Son of God has destroyed the works of the devil, the pioneer of sin, judgment can be defined only in terms of the condemnation of the god of this world, not in terms of the condemnation of the very people Jesus came to save.

But the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, would bring the truth about sin, righteousness and judgment. He would "take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. He will honour me; he will take from me and deliver it to you" (John 16:13-14, The Message).

Forgiveness of sin, righteousness, and deliverance from sin are all gifts of the Father to us through Jesus Christ, and we experience them only by trust in God's Word of salvation, which he gives us by the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are reconciled to the Father, partakers of Christ's righteousness and of his union and communion with the Father.

Getting Real

In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus illustrated the difference between the world's view of sin, righteousness and judgment and the true view that the Spirit would lead us to see. The two men went up to the temple to pray, one a tax collector and the other a Pharisee. You can read the story. But take special notice of verse 9: Jesus told this story for the sake of those "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else."

Such people don't feel the need to pray for God's mercy like the tax collector did. But it was the tax collector, the one who saw himself before God as he really was—a sinner in great need of mercy, who "went home justified before God" (verse 14). And think about this: The tax collector had to trust God with his life, didn't he? He knew he deserved nothing, but he trusted God to be the way God says he is: "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

When we go to the judgment seat of God, honestly confessing our sinfulness and asking for mercy, the Judge turns out to be the Defence Attorney who turns out to have taken our crimes on himself and then declared us innocent and set us free. That is why we live in the world as people who understand grace, mercy and compassion and who devote ourselves to extending these to others.

The Prodigal Son in the Luke 15 parable knew he needed mercy, and that is all he knew, so he went to ask for it. When he did, he found out that he had had it all along—but only now that he had come home, trusting his father to be merciful, was he able to start enjoying it.

What is good?

In Micah 6, God gives his answer to what the Israelites should do in the wake of their sins. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

To act justly requires an unselfish agenda—to do what is right without regard to what may or may not be in one's personal best interest. We can do that when we trust God, because we believe God sees everything and makes everything right in the end.

This goes hand in hand with loving mercy (or kindness, as it can also be translated). James pointed out that mercy triumphs over justice (James 2:13). The kind of justice God is interested in is the kind that is subject to mercy. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7), and "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7).

To walk humbly with God means that one sees his or her need before God and accepts in faith God's gift of mercy, which creates fellowship with God and with humanity. Another way of saying that is "repentance and faith," but for many people that phrase carries so much baggage that the real meaning is obscured.

To repent is to see our need for God's mercy and turn to him in complete faith that whatever he does will be good and right. It is to rest in God, and in God alone.

Forgiven and forgiving

This instruction in Micah goes hand in hand with what is called the Lord's Prayer. Jesus told the disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors." This is not a new form of legalism. It is, rather, a description of what life is like among those who are in Christ. People who cannot see their own condition of sinfulness, and therefore do not feel their own need for mercy, do not extend mercy to others. People who do understand the grace they have received from God, on the other hand, are not quick to hold a grudge or to withhold forgiveness. Because we are in Christ, we are forgivers and we trust God to forgive us.

When we pray, "Forgive us our debts," we do not ask as though God might not do it. In Christ, God has already forgiven us. Our asking is both a reminder of and a participation in the forgiveness we already have in Christ. In the same way, the prayer "as we forgive our debtors" is also a reminder of and a participation in our new life in Christ in which we forgive as we have been forgiven (compare Ephesians 4:32-5:1-2).

Turn and trust

We can trust God to give us everything we need for life, godliness and salvation. Because he is the Judge, we have nothing to fear in the judgment. And more than that, God does what he does for us because it is his good pleasure to do so (Luke 12:32). He is for us.

We don't have to be prisoners of "keeping up appearances." We don't have to carry around anxiety about whether we will "make it into the kingdom." We can live carefree before God, casting all our anxieties, all our cares, upon him, because we know he cares for us (see 1 Peter 5:7).

With God, we can "get real." We can be perfectly honest. We don't have to hide anything. We can unload all our sinfulness, all our failures, all our fears on the One who loves us and gave himself for us—and who makes all things new. Turn to God and trust in him!

By J. Michael Fezell

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Bible Study:

By Michael Morrison

Think about Jesus and be faithful:

A study of Hebrews 3

How can we be faithful? How can we help one another? Hebrews 3 addresses these questions. They are as important today as they were in the first century.

The first word in Hebrews 3 is *therefore*, which means that it is drawing a conclusion based on previous things. Chapter 2 explained that Jesus became a human being so he could save human beings. He is our high priest and intercessor because he was a human. He suffered, so he knows the struggles we go through, and he can sympathize with our weakness. He can help us. He not only atoned for our sins, he is able to help us in our temptations.

Think about Jesus

Based on that foundation, the author writes, "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (Heb. 3:1).

Since Jesus is the basis of our salvation and the one who enables it to be applied to our lives, we need to concentrate on Jesus. We need to make sure that nothing distracts us from a focus on Jesus.

This is the only place in the Bible where Jesus is called an apostle. The word means "one who is sent," and Jesus was sent from God to us. He had a message, and we are to pay attention to what he said, but we are also to pay attention to Jesus himself, because he as a person is part of the message of God. His death has meaning for us only because of who he is: the Son of God.

Hebrews is the only book in the Bible that calls Jesus our high priest. As an apostle, he speaks to humanity on behalf of God. As a high priest, he speaks to God on behalf of humanity. He is our mediator, who bridges the gap between us and God. That's why we need to look to him.

What are we supposed to see in Jesus? Verse 2 tells us: "He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house." The readers respected Moses, so our author is saying, Moses was a really faithful person, but let's compare Moses with Jesus.

"Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself" (v. 3). Jesus, at the right hand of God, has been given more honour than Moses. "For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything" (v. 4). God made everything through his Son (Heb. 1:2); that in itself gives Jesus more honour than Moses.

Servant or Son?

The author now shifts to a different analogy, the difference between a servant and a son: "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future" (3:5, quoting from Num. 12:7). Moses was faithful, saying what God wanted him to say, but he was faithful as a servant. The best that he could be, the best that any human being could be, was a faithful servant.

"But Christ," v. 6 says, "is faithful as a son over God's house. Jesus Christ is in a class by himself. Moses was

faithful, but if you look to him as an example of faithfulness, you are looking to an inferior example. Before Jesus, he was the best example available. But now that Jesus has been revealed, we should look to Jesus as our example. Our religious life centres on him, not on Moses.

Then we are told, "And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (v. 6b). If we keep our faith in Christ, then it shows that we are his people. This is a general statement; it is not talking about whether a person can leave for a time and then come back to Christ. This verse does not tell us to relax, but to be diligent.

Do not resist

"As the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did' " (vv. 7-9). This is a quote from Psalm 95, which was apparently read in the synagogues at the start of each Sabbath.

This, like everything else in Scripture, is a message from the Holy Spirit, and it applies today, just as much as it applied when first written, and in the first century. Do we hear his voice today? We should, because he is still speaking in Scripture. Are we listening? Are we willing to do what he says?

Hebrews was written to people who were attracted to Moses. And the author says that's not good enough anymore. Someone better has come along, and we need to respond to him. You can't just keep on doing the same old things you have always done. You have to change.

That is still true. We can't just keep doing things we have always done. We have to look to Christ, not to traditions. He may want us to do the same things for a long time, and they may become traditional to us, but we can never let those traditions become more central to us than Christ is. We cannot let them become so important to us that we can't hear him saying, It's time to change.

When Israel was in the wilderness, they had to listen to what God was saying. They didn't go to Canaan by the quickest highway, because first they had to learn to trust God. When Christ calls us to follow him, we need to follow. We can't just pick our own path—and we can't even stay on the first path he puts us on. We have to continue to follow him. We have to let him change us. This is what God says about those who resist his will: "I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest' " (vv. 10-11).

And then he makes the application from ancient Israel to the church of the first century: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (v. 12). Make sure that you believe in your heart, and that is how you can be faithful. That's the way to avoid turning away from God. Examine your heart—are you focusing on Jesus?

Encourage one another

How can we be faithfully focusing on Christ?

"Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (v. 13). Anything that takes our minds away from Jesus is deceitful. Anything that causes us to tune him out is a sin. Anything that makes us want the

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old, when we need the new, is a sin. We need to encourage one another to focus on Jesus.

Faithfulness is a community project. God puts us together to help one another. We are to encourage one another in the faith, so that no one drifts away. Our priority is not a style of music, a day of worship or a particular tradition. Our priority is Christ, and we need to help each other remember that, so no one will become tired of hearing about the one who died for us.

"We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (v. 14). Our future faithfulness will demonstrate whether we are now sharing in Christ. So hold on tight, and help other people hold on tight. We do that by meeting together and worshiping together, always fixing our thoughts on Jesus.

"As has just been said," verse 15 tells us, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." Even today, some people harden their hearts and resist the changes that Christ wants to bring to their lives. The answer now, as it was then, is to fix our thoughts on Jesus, so that we hear what he is saying.

The need for faith

"Who were they who heard and rebelled?" the author asks, and then he answers: "Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?" (v. 16).

"And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?" (v. 17).

"And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?" (v. 18). The people who disobeyed were not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Why? "Because of their unbelief" (v. 19). They refused to trust God—refused to listen and follow. The same thing was happening in the first century, the book of Hebrews implies. The same thing can happen in any century. If people don't focus on Christ, they drift away and begin to trust in other things instead of him.

Questions for application

Do the worries of this life take my attention away from Jesus? (v. 1) What can I do today to focus on him?

Do I have courage in Christ, and do I boast in the hope he gives? (v. 6).

Are there any traditions in my life that might make me less responsive to Jesus? (v. 7). What can I do to be more responsive?

Do I encourage others by meeting together? (v. 13).

Am I holding tight to the faith, or is my confidence slipping a bit? (v. 14). Do I have any unbelief that causes sin? (v. 19).

By Michael Morrison

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