

# The Outlook

JANUARY 2008

Volume 57 | Issue 1

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

Heaven:  
Does it Exist?

Thoughts for the  
New Year

The Passover:  
A Memorial, a Feast,  
and a Lasting  
Ordinance

Bible Studies on  
Joseph and Judah

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"And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands. . .and they cried, "The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon."  
(Judges 7:20).

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# Heaven: Does It Exist?

*“I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.”*

(Ecclesiastes 3:14-15)

Heaven: does it exist? As churches we pray to God the Father “who art in *heaven*,” we confess that He is the “Maker of *heaven* and earth.” And we express our hope “in *the life everlasting*” and “*the life of the world to come*.” As Christians we talk with our unsaved neighbors about sin and salvation, hell and *heaven*. Yet, all of this begs the biggest question of all—does it even exist?

In a survey published October 21, 2003, the Barna Research Group unveiled many fascinating statistics about life after this life. Speaking of a generic belief in life after death, 81% of Americans believe in an afterlife of some sort. Another 9% said life after death may exist, but they were not certain. Consistent with this, 79% of Americans agree with the statement “every person has a soul that will live forever, either in God’s presence or absence.” Those least likely to believe in life after death were Hispanics, Busters (ages 20–38), residents of the West, atheists and agnostics, those associated with a faith other than Christianity, and unchurched adults; although more than two-thirds of all those in these groups accept the existence of an afterlife.

Speaking specifically of heaven, 76% of Americans believe that heaven exists and 71% said that there is such a thing as hell (although

just one-half of 1% expect to go there). 64% of Americans believe they will go to heaven, 5% that they will come back as another life form, and 5% contend they will simply cease to exist. Of those who believe in heaven, 46% described it as “a state of eternal existence in God’s presence” and 30% said it is “an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death.”

All of this goes to show that we live in a religious society although *our* religion does not line up with those of our neighbors. My purpose, then, in this new series of articles is to equip you with “the reason for the *hope* that you have” (1 Peter 3:15) so that you might *rest* in the confidence of eternal life as well as be prepared to *reach* those who need to hear Scripture’s message on heaven. In this opening article, I purpose to answer the simple yet fundamental question of whether heaven exists. To answer this question we turn to the intriguing words of Ecclesiastes 3:1–15.

## Vanity

The title of the book, *Ecclesiastes*, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew term, *Qohelet*. This is the word translated into our English Bibles as “Preacher” (1:1). Yet “preacher” does not quite convey the image of the original term.

What these ancient Hebrew and Greek words speak of are the convening, or gathering together of a sacred assembly of God’s people. The words of Ecclesiastes are the words of the “Assembler,” or “Convener” of the people of God who endeavors to teach them God’s wisdom. What is so fascinating is that Ecclesiastes is such a pessimistic book. Qohelet gathered the people of God to hear the most honest, real-world sermon ever preached.

The perplexing question is, how can the Word of God say things like, “All is vanity” (1:1), when it also says that God made all things “very good” (Gen. 1:31)? To answer this question, some commentators have said that Solomon wrote the book at the end of his life, as a repentant old man to show the assembly of Israel how he fell into despair of vanity by his sins.

The best answer, in the opinion of this writer, though, is one that shows the creativity of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of Scripture. An unnamed narrator wrote Ecclesiastes (who very well may have been Solomon) and did so in the third person in the prologue and epilogue, but while speaking in the first person by assuming the name and persona of Solomon in the body of the book (Cf. Dillard & Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 247–55; Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 340–41). The whole point in doing this was for “Solomon” to teach his son to “fear God and keep His commandments” (12:13) because life apart from God and His covenant was vanity.

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## Tyranny

Ecclesiastes is hardly the book of Scripture, then, that we would expect to turn in seeking to answer the question of whether heaven exists. Ecclesiastes' pessimism is no more evidence than in chapter 3, which speaks of the *tyranny of time*. Verses 1–8 are hardly the idyllic lyrics of the 1965 song by The Byrds, who sang, "To everything—turn, turn, turn." Even closer to home, these verses are not to be used with the effect of saying, "Every cloud has a silver lining," when someone's loved one has died. No, these words are about despair—despair because time tyrannizes us. As Qohelet says, there is a "season" and a "time" for "every matter under heaven," which he expresses in couplets of polar opposites: born/die, plant/pluck, kill/heal, break/build, weep/laugh, mourn/dance, cast/gather, embrace/release, seek/lose, keep/cast, tear/sew, silence/speak, love/hate, war/peace.

These verses are a litany describing the sovereignty of God, who, in "His eternal purpose" and "according to the counsel of His will . . . he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 7). Since "every matter under heaven" has its appointed time, Qohelet asks, "What gain has the worker from his toil" (3:9)? Notice this tyranny of time comes from God himself, when Qohelet says, "I have seen the business that *God has given* to the children of man to be busy with" (3:10). Further, he concludes, saying, "He has made everything *beautiful* in its time" (3:11). What this word conveys is the idea of

everything being suitable or appointed, and because of this, time is "beautiful" (Keil & Delitzsch, 6:686). What Qohelet is expressing is that all things are vanity because of the "fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 7). And because of this, God's curse has come upon us.

Are you depressed yet? Do you feel in your hearts what Qohelet is saying? All things have their appointed times—the sun rises, the sun sets; we are born and God ordains the number of our days until death; the alarm goes off, you work, you race home, you go to sleep, only to awaken to do it all over again the next day! We are merely filling in time that goes on and on and on, seemingly with no end in sight, with no purpose—I work, I pay for my children's education, I try to fund my retirement, I will never have enough, so when does it end? We are like the mouse in the wheel, we run and run and run, never to get the cheese. Therefore, Qohelet concludes this discourse, saying,

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God

seeks what has been driven away (3:14-15).

## Eternity

Ecclesiastes describes the life of the fallen man and fallen woman apart from a saving relationship with their Creator. The Confession so beautifully teaches that the life of Adam, after his sin, "separated himself from God, *who was his true life*" (Belgic Confession, art. 14).

Yet as the narrator tells the tale of Qohelet's pessimistic nihilism, he also gives glimpses of hope throughout his book. In 3:11 that hope is summarized in the word "eternity," which is our translation of the Hebrew word, *olam*: "He has put *eternity* into man's heart." What exactly is this *eternity* that is in our hearts? A well-known Old Testament commentator, David Hubbard, says of this verse,

"*Eternity*" to Old Testament people was not timelessness or *absence* of time. They knew no such realm. It was, rather, *extension* of time—as far back and as far forward as one could imagine (*Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 106–107).

What was the effect of having this innate knowledge of and desire for eternity? One of the deans of Old Testament scholarship in our day, Walter Kaiser, said of this verse:

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***Ecclesiastes describes the life of the fallen man and fallen woman apart from a saving relationship with their Creator.***

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This quest is a deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive, because man is made in the image of God to appreciate the beauty of creation (on an aesthetic level); to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world (on an academic and philosophical level); and to discern its purpose and destiny (on a theological level)...Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, 66).

So then, addressing our main question: does heaven exist? According to Qohelet, “eternity” is a *universal* belief—“He has put eternity into *man’s* heart.” All cultures in all times testify to a belief that there is more to life than what we see and experience. For example, some ancient cultures believed that the soul lived near the grave of its body, and that the living family needed to take care of it. Don’t we evidence the same when we care for the graveside of a loved one? Other cultures in the East believed in reincarnation until the soul reached Nirvana. The Greeks believed after death the soul was taken across a river to either a place of reward or punishment. And the Greek philosopher Plato believed in the preexistence of the soul and in its immortality.

Further, according to Qohelet, “eternity” is an *internal* belief—“He has put eternity into *man’s heart*.” It is a part of our created nature that remains despite our fall. Of course

it is stained by original sin and we seek to repress it (Rom. 1), nevertheless, it remains and evidences itself.

While Qohelet speaks of the vanity of life apart from our true life, which is God Himself, for those who have been reconciled to Him and brought back to life, having our lives hidden with Christ in God, we can be joyful, do good, eat, drink, and even take pleasure in the toil of work. As Qohelt says, “This is God’s gift to man” (3:13). In his previous discourse in chapter 2, he concluded in a similar way, saying,

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind (2:24–26).

Qohelet longed for release from the vanity and tyranny of this fallen life. He longed for eternity, for the consummation of all things, when his toil would no longer be meaningless. In the midst of our seemingly meaningless nine-to-five jobs, we can have some measure of pleasure beyond our companions. Thus, as Paul says to us concerning the resurrection of Christ: “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied”

(1 Cor. 15:19). Thanks be to God that we have hope for the life of the world to come because of Jesus’ resurrection.

So does heaven exist? It exists. Even Qohelet in his pessimism knew it. Even your neighbors know it. Even we have come to experience it because of the work of Christ, who stepped out of eternity into time in order to take us into eternity.

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# The Passover: A Memorial, a Feast, and a Lasting Ordinance

*Exodus 12:1-29*

In this article we will consider the relationship between the Passover festival and the tenth plague. And in so doing, we will consider how the Passover is a memorial, a feast, and a lasting ordinance, which continues through the Lord's Supper. When Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper they are keeping the Passover that God commanded His people to honor in perpetuity.

## **The Passover As A Memorial**

In the Bible, memorials were established for the purpose of remembering. Memorials helped future generations remember something important. The Passover was an annual memorial that helped the people remember how God had conquered and humiliated the false gods of Egypt. It was a memorial that helped God's people remember not only how God had judged Egypt, but also how God had saved His people from Egypt, and how He had saved His people from the tenth plague. It was only through the proper application of blood that the firstborn sons, both man and beast, were saved when the death angel passed through Egypt.

Moses confirmed this understanding of the Passover in Exodus 13:9. "This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with His mighty hand."

The purpose of the Passover as a memorial is for the people, "This day is a memorial for you."

You will notice that there is a relationship in the Bible between remembering how God has delivered His people and the obedience of God's people. If the people forget that they belong to the Lord and how Jehovah has delivered them, then they will show no regard for God's law. If God's law is going to be on their lips, then they must remember that they belong to the Lord because He has saved them from the tyranny of slavery. They are holy because they belong to the Lord.

There were other important memorials that helped the Israelites remember their history and how God had delivered His people at critical times. For example, after the children of Israel had sojourned in the wilderness for forty years, they reached the edge of the Jordan River. The Lord caused the waters of the Jordan to pile up in front of the people so the people could cross the Jordan on dry ground. The miraculous crossing of the Jordan was not unlike the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea.

While Israel was crossing the Jordan River, Joshua chose twelve men, one from each tribe, to pick up a stone from the middle of the Jordan River. The stones were carried to the place where they spent the night. At that place the stones were

piled up to serve as a memorial, a visible reminder of what God had done that day: "tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever" (Joshua 4:7).

Just as those stones were a memorial to the people of Israel forever, likewise, the Passover is a memorial forever. Both memorials are eternal because both memorials are fulfilled through Christ. Jesus is the Passover Lamb that gave His life for His people. In this way the Lord's Supper is continuation of the Passover that God commanded His people to honor in perpetuity. For through the Lord's Supper the worshipper is reminded that they were redeemed from spiritual Egypt (sin and death) through the blood of Christ. The blood of Christ is the only blood that saves sinners from God's wrath. Likewise, no one enters into the heavenly land of promise apart from Jesus Christ. In this way, the twelve stones point to Jesus Christ.

## **The Passover As A Feast**

"This day is a memorial for you, and you will celebrate it as a feast to Jehovah throughout your generations." The Passover is both a memorial for the people, and a feast that the people celebrate to Jehovah. The first time this word is used in the Bible is in Exodus 5 when Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh. "Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let

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my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert” (Exodus 5:1).

As a memorial, the Passover was for the people, but as a feast it was a celebration for Jehovah. We see here how the Passover was both for the people and how it was also for God, because it was an act of worship unto the Lord. As a celebration to the Lord, the Lord cared about this feast and how it was carried out. God gave precise instructions including the way the meal was prepared and how the meal was eaten.

On the tenth day of the first month, each family was instructed to set-apart a one year old male lamb without blemish. On the fourteenth day of the first month, every family was instructed to slaughter the lamb in the evening hours. It was important that the lamb was roasted over the fire; any uneaten portions were reserved for fire. The meat was to be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. All these details had symbolic meaning regarding Israel’s experience in Egypt and regarding God’s deliverance of His people. For example, the bitter herbs represent the bitter suffering of God’s people while they lived under the yoke of slavery. The unleavened bread represented the unleavened bread that the people carried on their backs because they left in haste.

Because the people left in haste, the meal was to be eaten in haste with their outer cloak on, their belt fastened for travel, and their walking staff in hand. The idea of eating the feast in haste while one was dressed for travel was an important detail. In Exodus 23 Jehovah provides additional details which accentuate the idea of a pilgrimage. “Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed. Three times a year all the men are to appear before the Sovereign Lord” (Exodus 23:15,17).

An important part of this festival included the appearance of the people before their sovereign Lord. All the men had to appear before the Sovereign Lord in Jerusalem. The men were the covenant heads of each household; as a result it was necessary that each covenant head appear in Jerusalem before Jehovah to remember God’s mighty work and to worship Jehovah. The Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread were annual events, whereby the people were called together as a people to appear before Jehovah. In this sense the Passover festival was a corporate event, whereby God’s people appeared before Him and they

worshipped Him. The nation was being called on to worship God as they appeared before Him corporately at the temple.

The pilgrimage was also an important part of this festival. The pilgrimage was a reminder to the people that they had been sojourners in the wilderness for forty years, but it was also a reminder that they were still travelers. Even after they had entered into the earthly land of Canaan, and settled the land they were still living as pilgrims, because they had not yet entered into the heavenly land of promise. In this way the earthly land of promise was a shadow that pointed them heavenward. And therefore, if they had true faith, then they would understand that they were sojourners like their father Abraham.

Abraham traveled to a land that he would later receive as his inheritance, yet he understood that his earthly inheritance pointed forward to a better land, and heavenly inheritance that was eternal. Abraham lived as a pilgrim. Even when he arrived in the land of his inheritance he lived as a stranger and an alien, because he looked forward to a better land. This is certainly true of the Passover; it was important that the people travel to Jerusalem so they could look back and remember what God had done for them. But it was also important that the people look forward and learn to live in the earthly land of promise as strangers and aliens, because they were “looking forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

In a way similar to the Passover, the Lord’s Supper is also a feast. In-

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*As a memorial, the Passover was for the people,  
but as a feast it was a celebration for Jehovah.*

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stead of physically traveling to Jerusalem and eating the Lord's Supper before the temple we are actually elevated into the heavenly temple, whereby we fellowship with the resurrected Christ. Our pilgrimage is spiritual but our fellowship with the resurrected Christ is much more than symbolic. Through the elements of bread and wine, Christ is spiritually present and He is offered to us, whereby we eat His broken body and His poured out blood. Through the feast we are more and more united to Christ and we share in His life and His gifts (Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 76).

### **Passover As A Lasting Ordinance**

The Hebrew term for ordinance means law/rule/statute. The Passover memorial-festival is an ordinance that precedes Sinai. In addition, the ordinance is forever. The command to keep the Passover is emphasized by the reiteration of this law in Exodus 12:24 and again in 13:10. The Passover is to be observed by the people of God throughout history, from one generation to the next. The continuous, binding character of the Passover celebration raises a question for the church: how does the church keep this command? How does the church celebrate the Passover?

In the New Testament the Passover is fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled the Passover and He republished the Passover in the form of the Lord's Supper. Jesus reinterprets the elements: the bread represents His body and the wine represents His blood. In short, what Jesus is proclaiming is that He is the Passover Lamb. Jesus is the lamb that was set apart from

the flock. He was set apart as the sacrifice. He is the substitute, the first born that takes our place. By the shedding of His blood as a substitute. He suffered God's wrath for our sins.

In other words, as Israel was covered by the blood of the Passover lamb, so the new Israel is covered by the blood of the Messiah. The fact remains that when Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper they are keeping the Passover that God commanded His people to honor for eternity.

The Lord's Supper continues to function as a memorial and as a feast to the Lord. The Lord's Supper is clearly a remembrance, but it is much more, it is a visible proclamation of our Lord's death. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Through the Supper Christ is preached and He is spiritually offered. This is why it is so important that the participants judge themselves.

"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."

And last of all, the Supper is a feast. It is a fellowship meal whereby Christ is offered and received by faith. As the church fellowships with Christ, through the means of the Supper, the one loaf is an ex-

pression of the unity that the church enjoys. The one loaf is a symbol of the one body, the body of Christ. Through the one loaf, we have a beautiful picture of our spiritual union with Jesus Christ. Through the means of the Supper, the church appears before their sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ. And the Supper is a lasting ordinance that the church is commanded to keep until the time when Christ returns and we join Him in the marriage Supper of the Lamb.

In conclusion, the Passover continues as a memorial, a festival to the Lord and a lasting ordinance through the Lord's Supper. But in the Lord's Supper our fellowship with the body and blood of Christ is much greater than it was under the old covenant.

**Rev. Mark Stromberg** is the pastor of the United Reformed Church in Belgrade, Montana.

# Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

## Lesson 9: Joseph Puts His Brothers on Trial

### Read Genesis 42:1-28

#### Introduction

The famine strikes Egypt just as the dreams had indicated and just as Joseph had said. God had sent the dreams, gave Joseph the interpretation, and sent the famine, thus confirming Joseph in his role as a kind of prophet in Egypt. God had raised him from the pit of prison to the pinnacle of power and privilege. Joseph is a young man in his thirties, and Pharaoh tells anyone who is hungry, “Go to Joseph and do what he tells you” (Gen. 41:55). Egypt has food, and Joseph controls access to its supply. This now becomes important for the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan, because the famine has also reached into Canaan, and it impacts the family of Jacob as well. This suggests that the famine is caused not only by poor flooding by the Nile, but also by insufficient rainfall in Canaan. So, the crisis spreads. It will be a crisis over food that will serve to bring the family of Jacob back into the life of Joseph, although his identity will remain hidden from them for some time.

This chapter can be divided along geographic lines: in Canaan (verses 1-5), then in Egypt (verses 6-28), and then back in Canaan again (verses 29-38). This lesson will focus on the scene in Canaan and then the events in Egypt. The next lesson will deal with the brothers back with father Jacob in Canaan.

#### Standing in the bread line (42:1-5)

Travel and trade between Egypt and Canaan were not unusual activities, and therefore we are not surprised to read that news reaches Canaan that Egypt is surviving the current famine rather well. Egypt becomes again the “breadbasket” for the eastern Mediterranean region. When Jacob hears that food is available in Egypt, he addresses his sons basically by saying, “Why are you sitting around just staring at each other? Get up and go buy food for us!” Apparently even the food resources of Jacob and all his children have fallen on hard times so that their pantries and food stocks are running low.

In sending his sons to Egypt, Jacob very deliberately keeps Benjamin from going along with them. It is not because Benjamin is too young: he is over twenty years old. He is afraid “that harm might come to him” (verse 4). It is somewhat unclear whether Jacob’s fears are concerned with some unfortunate incident that may happen to Benjamin while in Egypt, by Egyptians, or whether he harbors some fears about something happening to Benjamin from his ten sons. To father Jacob, Benjamin is not merely the youngest son, he is the only surviving son of Rachel, his beloved wife, and thus a replacement for Joseph. Shortly after Benjamin had been born, Rachel died. The last time Jacob had seen Joseph, that

favorite son, he had left home with his special coat on a journey to find his brothers and their herds. Jacob is shown that very same coat, now smeared with blood, and he had concluded that “a wild animal” had devoured his son. But the reader wonders whether Jacob thinks that perhaps his ten sons know more about Joseph’s disappearance than what they let on. In any case, to be sure that Benjamin remains alive, Jacob keeps him home.

Hunger has reduced the family of Jacob (referred to as Israel in verse 5) to people who are no better than any other hungry folks. The covenant sons will have to go to the same “grocery store” called Egypt like everyone else, and they will have to stand in line to buy their share. This famine has not discriminated between the pagans and the family of God. But God has His saving purposes at work in all this.

#### Joseph arrests his brothers as a test (42:6-17)

Verse 6 summarizes what we had read earlier in Genesis 41:54-57. Joseph is revealed as a true *prophet* (41:54), as a *potentate* (a great ruler; 41:55), and an able *provider* (41:56). The result in verse 57 is that “all the earth” comes to Joseph for food. He clearly images what the Christ is today par excellence. Consider what this meant: Joseph now controls, directly or indirectly, the political and economic well-being of many peoples. And that will involve his family as well, although they will not know that for some time.

In reading narrative, the reader is always “all-knowing,” literarily

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speaking. But Joseph is also almost all-knowing, and this serves to heighten the dramatic tension in this story. He recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him. Of course not! They have assumed that he was dead (or, at best, slaving away in some house or field). Joseph remains hid from their eyes since he was dressed like an Egyptian, almost certainly clean-shaven (Semites were typically bearded), and he uses a translator to communicate with them.

We should not miss how the text arranges the details of the first visit. After reminding us in verse 6 that Joseph is the governor of the land as well as the distributor of food, then we are told that the ten brothers bow down to him as ruler and provider. Joseph recognizes them, but he pretends to be a stranger to them. In his recognition of them, coupled with their bowing down to the ground before him, he now recalls his dreams from years earlier. Some things are now coming together, but Joseph does not let on all that he knows. Although Egyptian policy allowed people to cross the borders to engage in trade, Joseph seeks to turn on them by accusing them of being spies. He is humbling them and testing what kind of men his brothers are.

But is this really a test? Is it not rather punishment? After all, these ten brothers are the very men who had first plotted to kill Joseph, only holding back because he was blood relation, but then selling him in order to make a profit from his disappearance. In effect, that sale to traveling merchants was the equivalent to murder in that Joseph was now out of their life, once and for all (or, so

they thought). Murder is any desire that seeks to remove that neighbor whom God has placed next to you. And actions follow desires. This is the sin of the ten brothers, and they have never been held to account for their actions. As they stand before Joseph, he is in a position to administer justice to them. Did they not deserve judgment?

### **Joseph tests his brothers in a second way (42:18-28)**

The ten brothers interpret these harsh circumstances as judgment for their cruel treatment of Joseph earlier. In verse 21 they literally say, “We are truly guilty.” Joseph’s pleas with them when he was in the pit (Gen. 37) and Jacob’s tearful grief have not moved them as these events have. Reuben (verse 22) states that Joseph’s blood is now demanded or required of them. The events of years before continue to trouble Reuben and apparently his brothers with him. Here is where we remember that it was Reuben, the oldest son of Jacob, who had planned to rescue Joseph from the pit and then send him back home. But Joseph was sold before Reuben’s rescue could be carried out. It seems that Reuben’s conscience has been vexed for all these years.

Reuben’s statement is an echo of Genesis 9:5, which says, “And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting... from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.” Some-

times we hear it said, “What goes around, comes around,” as if the world is governed by some kind of impersonal principle of (Hindu or new age) karma, that notion of rewards and punishments that govern what happens to people. Or, you may people say, “He got what was coming to him.”

But the world is not governed by impersonal forces. Our lives are not determined by mechanistic abstractions. This world is a moral universe, governed by a powerful, wise, and just God.

Joseph singles out Simeon for imprisonment. A likely reason may be that he has understood Reuben’s words to his brothers as a kind of exoneration of Reuben. Reuben did not want the boy to be harmed, but Reuben was not present when the brothers sold him to the traveling merchants. If age was a factor in terms of “who is in charge,” then Simeon as the second oldest would likely have been “in charge” while Reuben was gone. Joseph knows then exactly which of his brothers he will imprison. While we cannot prove that this is the reason, it is a plausible explanation. Simeon apparently had done nothing to stop the sale of Joseph into slavery. The brothers now watch as Simeon is arrested, bound, and taken away to prison. They are completely helpless to stop it.

But the picture is not completely bleak. They are given grain and

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*The events of years before continue to trouble Reuben and apparently his brothers with him.*

provisions for the journey. They do not know that the money is waiting for its discovery in each man's grain bag. On the journey back, one of them opens his grain sack and discovers that his money is there. They have escaped imprisonment in Egypt, but this new discovery does not fill them with joy. Rather, they are filled with dread. In the text of the Bible, this is the first recorded instance of the brothers referring to God (see verse 28). They interpret this event not as a chance mistake by the Egyptian officials, but as an event directed by God Himself. But their interpretation does not go any farther. They are not yet at the point where they would say something along the lines of the Apostle Paul, "God works in all things for the good of those who love Him" (cf. Rom. 8:28). They are men with guilty consciences, and now events take on a more ominous meaning.

Jesus Christ is the ruler over all creation, and He is the discernor of all hearts and consciences. As a father disciplines the children he loves, so Christ also disciplines congregations and Christian believers. Can we see the Spirit of Christ working through this "harsh lord of the land," not for destruction, but for the kind of godly maturity that God seeks in all His children? Behind Joseph is God our Father in Jesus Christ.

## Lesson 9: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Reflect on how much food is available in nearby grocery stores. "Give us this day our daily bread," we pray, but in our hearts we would rather have a nice steak and pie with ice cream. How easy is it to pray for "daily bread" when food supplies in North America are available in such great abundance? What would our society be like if all food production were to stop tomorrow?
2. How does the bowing of the ten brothers to Joseph remind him of his dreams in Genesis 37? Is Joseph beginning now to put the prophetic "pieces of the puzzle" together in regard to what God has in store for him as a ruler over even his family? In other words, how do the two dreams of Genesis 37 put light on what is happening in Genesis 42? If you read into the next several chapters, how much bowing is done by the several characters in this story?
3. The consciences of Joseph's brothers begin to speak in Genesis 42. Conscience is a God-given part of our own hearts and minds, and it is wonderful when that conscience operates according to what God wants for us as beings created in His image. What does it mean when a person has a "seared conscience?" What happens when a person's conscience is sinfully twisted or even basically dead?
4. What kind of subtle message might Joseph be giving to his own brothers when he says in verse 18, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God." Perhaps the ten brothers think that the Egyptian ruler is afraid of his own (Egyptian) god. But could it have awakened in them thoughts about what the true God would expect from them?
5. Joseph's words and actions strike real fear into his brothers. Was this the right thing to do? Is it possible that there is a kind of perverse delight in Joseph's heart as he watches his brothers squirm just a bit? How does verse 24 fit into the picture of what is in Joseph's soul? If he really loves them, why does he not reveal himself to them, then and there, before they set off back to Canaan?
6. In what ways have you experienced God's discipline in your life?

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# Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

## Lesson 10: Joseph's Test Continues in Jacob's Household

**Read Genesis 42:29-38**

### Introduction

The first audience of the ten brothers with Joseph did not go smoothly at all. It almost certainly did not occur to them as they had entered Egypt that they would be singled out and accused of being spies, held in custody, with Simeon arrested before they are permitted to return to Canaan. The harsh treatment comes from this mighty ruler of Egypt who says that he is concerned for the security of the Egyptian homeland. It is nowhere in the mind of the brothers that this harsh ruler is their own younger brother Joseph, and he has recognized them very well. Their bowing before him reminds him of the dreams of several decades earlier. The rough treatment has awakened certain thoughts in their conscience, and their hearts are heavy as they return to their father Jacob.

### Jacob's sons report to their father (42:29-34)

The Biblical text gives a rather lengthy description of what the ten brothers report to their father. It is important to listen to them speak, both in terms of what they say and what they do not say. They have no proper name of the Egyptian official who spoke so harshly with them. He is called "the man who is lord over the land" (verses 30 and 33).

There is one enormous gap in the brothers' report to Jacob. We do not hear any hint in their words of a

pricked conscience. There is no hint that something from their past, hidden in the depths of their hearts but now resurfacing, should be reported. How wonderful it would sound if we read something like the following at the end of their travel report: "Father, there is something else that we have to tell you. Please sit down, for this is something that happened years ago, something very sad, and we have to confess to you a terrible thing that we did." But those words we do not hear. In Egypt, their consciences have been tested and awakened. They even talk about it with each other. But they cannot bring themselves to confess their dirty deeds to their father. Instead, they dutifully tell Jacob what they had said to the harsh Egyptian lord, "We are honest men..." (verse 31).

Some ironies stand out in all this. First, though they claim they are "honest," we know that they have not been wholly honest. They stand in Joseph's presence and declare that they were "twelve brothers, sons of one father" (verse 32). How true! Joseph—unrecognized by them—is also part of that group of "twelve." Also, in Genesis 37 they came home with money, that of their sale of Joseph. They will again come home with money, this time with their returned money in their grain sacks.

### Sad confusion in Jacob's household (42:35-38)

After they have finished telling Jacob the story of their harrowing

trip to buy grain, they all discover something in their grain bags, something that only one of them had found earlier on the return trip (verse 27). We read this part of the story before we hear the reaction of Jacob. The earlier discovery of the money had shaken them, but now they all—the ten brothers and their father—are frightened. We usually feel good when a store clerk gives us back too much change... just before we point that out and return the money we should not have (if we are "honest" people!). But the household of Jacob is furthered frightened by this discovery of money. They know that they had handed over the silver to buy the grain that they have taken back from Egypt. That part was clear. But now, how in the world had that same money returned to them in their sacks of grain? Surely the Egyptians were not so foolish as to put the money of every brother back in each grain bag. If this is truly an act of God, then what is God saying to them? Why did God do this? We might well conclude that the brothers and Jacob their father are all spooked by this.

Jacob's reaction is not first of all about his uneasiness over the returned money. For him, the crucial thing is the loss of his sons: Joseph is gone, Simeon is likely gone as well, and the loss of Benjamin now threatens. He blames his existing sons for all this: "You have deprived me of my children!" (verse 36). Is he implying somehow that the loss of Joseph should also be placed at their feet and accounted against them? "Everything is against me!" he cries out in anguish.

Reuben steps forward with a most clumsy offer. He had tried to protect Joseph earlier, almost certainly

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out of loving respect for his father. Now he offers to be the protector of Benjamin, holding out the prospect of his own sons as security. But how is this any comfort to Jacob? Says Reuben, “You can kill my sons if I fail to bring Benjamin back in safety.” Most unlikely! Jacob would never be satisfied if, having lost Benjamin, that he then turns around to kill two grandsons. What is Reuben thinking?

We should not downplay the terror and fear that Jacob experiences here. He has already lost his favorite son, Joseph, and there is no promise that he will ever see Simeon again. On top of that, this harsh Egyptian lord is demanding to see his very youngest son Benjamin. Even more, Reuben offers to have his two sons executed if Benjamin does not return. Jacob’s words come very close to an actual accusation against his sons when he says, “If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow.” In effect, Jacob says that the proposed actions of his sons may well kill him. Jacob is at an advanced age, and we should not dismiss these words as overly melodramatic: his heart has been scarred, and it would not take much more for tragic events to hasten his death. The question about their guilt had actually come up earlier in a comment made by father Jacob when he cries out in verse 36, “You have deprived me of my children;

Joseph is no more... you would take...” His cry is almost Job-like, but with this difference: Job does not know why all this has happened in terms of what he has lost.

#### **The mercy of the ‘court’**

The trouble Joseph gives his ten brothers highlights their guilt. Joseph is seeking honest men. That is what they had said they were. So now they must prove or substantiate their claim. His tests are seeking to draw out where they are really at. But Joseph also shows them mercy. Consider these facts:

1. If he really thought they are spies, he would have killed them. What ruler in the ancient world would have given it a second thought about killing people that he thought were spies?
2. Only Simeon is imprisoned after the three-day imprisonment. Again, if they are all spies, put them all in prison. But Joseph singles out only one man. This should appear merciful to them.
3. He allows grain to go with them on their return. Okay, a somewhat tolerant ruler in the ancient world might let suspicious characters go free, but what ruler would still sell them any grain at all?
4. He returned their all their money. Joseph is not after their money. He wants to know their heart. The brothers do not know that Joseph returned the money, but

the readers know it, and we can only conclude that Joseph is not, in the end, displaying a selfish kind of meanness.

Joseph is testing their words for truth value. After all, they claimed that they were honest and upright men! They can easily “talk the talk,” but have their lives in the past been honest and upright? We readers know otherwise, and Joseph knows otherwise. So Joseph had said in verses 15 and 16 that he would put them to through a test, an ordeal, to see whether their talk was genuine or whether it was just so much “hot air.”

Joseph has two purposes in all this testing:

1. He is testing the ten men to see if a genuine *attitude* of remorse and repentance is alive in their souls. Do they see how awful their sin against Joseph had been?
2. He is also testing his brothers to see if there are *actions* of repentance as well. Will they follow through and own up to their responsibilities by bringing forth fruits that go with repentance? For example, will they later abandon Benjamin? Time will tell.

Thus Joseph’s whole treatment of his ten brothers serves as a kind of sifting, a form of discipline. While Jacob does not know their crime (although he may be suspicious), Joseph does know it. By placing their money back in their grain, he has given them a trial in a kind of “take-home test.” The discovery of the money serves only to keep the agitation alive in their hearts and

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***Reuben steps forward with a most clumsy offer.  
He had tried to protect Joseph earlier...Now he  
offers to be the protector of Benjamin.***

consciences. The goal is spiritually therapeutic: if they allow their real guilt to come to the surface where they might deal with it, the healing of their hearts and their spiritual growth in holiness might move forward. If Christians wish to live and die in the joy of their only comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ, they must first know how great their sin and misery really is (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day one, Q/A 2). Then the splendors of grace in Christ appear so radiant and amazing. And then we are free to live the new life of thanksgiving in the joy and power of Christ's Holy Spirit.

The knowledge of God's grace is never well-known unless there is a right knowledge of our own sin and misery. The flood of joy comes when it breaks through our sin and into our dull hearts. Unconditional election by God is not the sovereign call in grace of those people who by nature are good, but of those people who are unrighteous. God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Consider the power of these passages:

1. Luke 7:47: Jesus tells the Pharisee Simon, "Her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Horrible sins are dealt with by means of even greater grace, and that in turn draws out of us even greater love.
2. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11: Paul reminds us that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God. He also notes that through God's grace "such were some of you." A genuine change takes place in the lives of God's elect so that

***Unconditional election by God is not the sovereign call of people who by nature are good, but of people who are unrighteous.***

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they are washed, sanctified, and justified "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Grace overcomes any kind of sin, even those that are so disgusting.

Ephesians 2:8-10: there is no room for human boasting, since salvation is by grace alone, not upon the basis of human works. Sin prevents our good works, even our best works, from ever being the reason

that we are saved. Instead, we are God's workmanship, created for those good works in Christ Jesus. Grace alone is the firm foundation for a healthy life of good works.

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**Lesson 10: Points to ponder and discuss**

1. Jacob says to his sons, "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more..." How might that statement have affected these sons? Did this likely press the test of conscience even more for them? Could they now wonder if their father is suspicious about their involvement in the disappearance of Joseph?
2. Joseph has put his brothers on a kind of trial, and these are men guilty of heinous crimes. We want judges, juries, and the court system to be just. However, if we are the ones aggrieved, how easy is it for feelings of revenge to take over? Do we rejoice when the guilty are found guilty? What role does mercy play in the whole question of administering justice?
3. What is meant by "cheap grace?" If Joseph had simply welcomed his brothers with a "let bygones be bygones" attitude, would that have cheap grace? Would there still be important matters unresolved?
4. Read Psalm 32. What does it say about the sinner when he does not confess his sins? What are the blessings of confession? Isn't confession "good for the soul?"
5. Why do people allow sins to go so long without confession? What happens in families in such cases?

# Godly Hospitality

Many of the words we commonly use today do not carry the same meaning as the Bible intended for them. The word “hospitality” is a good example. A simple *Google* search, for example, produces page after page of information on the *Hospitality industry* (hotels, restaurants etc.), but nothing resembling biblical hospitality. In modern vernacular, there is a vestige of the biblical concept of hospitality, but it is warped and deficient in the fact that it is selfishly and economically focused.

Christians sometimes talk of hospitality committees in a church (e.g. door greeters). When we leave our friends’ or parents’ house we might say, “thanks for your hospitality.” This is not a wrong use of the word but it only gives a partial view of the Bible’s teaching on the subject. Donald Guthrie, in commenting on Hebrews 13:2, writes: “It is clear that something more than the mere entertaining of friends and acquaintances is [here] in mind.”

The fact that we have lost much of the meaning of hospitality in our day, does nothing to diminish its importance in Scripture. One recent author calls this to our attention saying, “...hospitality is God’s commandment in the Old Testament...is called a “good work” in the New...and stood first in Christian social service in the early church.”

Our English word “hospitality” comes from the Latin, “*hospitalis*,” which means “guest or stranger.” Hospitality, as it appears in our lan-

guage, is a cordial or generous treatment of a guest. The word “hospitality” is found only four times in the Bible. The basic biblical definition of hospitality is *love for strangers*. Thus at the outset, we see that the Bible expands (in scope) and intensifies (in its ethic) the perspective of hospitality commonly held today.

## Old Testament foundations of Hospitality

Who was a “stranger” in the Old Testament and how does God view him in His revelation? Of the several Hebrew words translated “stranger,” the general meaning is consistent. They generally refer to those people not of Israelite descent dwelling with the Hebrews. They were to be distinguished from a foreigner temporarily visiting the land.

Strangers were among a distinct group of people upon whom God had special compassion, and the people of God we given a special responsibility for their care. While the stranger was not a full citizen, he had recognized rights as well as duties. He was under the protection of God, and the Israelites were charged to treat him kindly. His rights were guarded by injunctions in the law. When poor, he enjoyed the same privileges as the Hebrew poor.

In Psalm 39:12 David beseeches God to have mercy on him *on the basis that he identifies himself as a stranger*, with the understanding that God was even more propitious toward strangers. David could base

his reasoning on texts such as Deuteronomy 10:18 in which Moses says, “[God] doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.” If this is how God treats strangers, it is not surprising that His people are commanded to do the same.

The verse continues, “*Love ye therefore the stranger.*” God says to His covenant people, and therefore also to us, “I love the stranger in your midst. I provide justice and amenities for them; therefore you, My people must do the same because you are to be a reflection of My character.” While the world may have its own reasons for showing so-called hospitality, the Christian’s reasons are undoubtedly different. The Christian’s reason for thinking or doing anything is bound up in the character of God; God is the beginning and the end of Christian thought and practice. In other words, our reason for demonstrating hospitality is not to promote a name for ourselves or to make people like us, rather it is linked to God *and specifically to His love for strangers.*

There is a second reason for the injunction. The Israelites were to love the stranger, not only because God loves them, but also because *they were* strangers in the land of Egypt. This reason for hospitality is cited many times in the Old Testament. For example, Exodus 23:9: “...thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Not only shall you not

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*In the New Testament we see even more clearly that God is no respecter of persons. No excuse exists for mistreating the foreigner.*

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oppress him but you shall “love him as thyself; for ye were *strangers* in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33).

When God commanded the Israelites to love the stranger, He did not do so abstractly. Rather there are numerous particular provisions regarding their treatment in the Law, including but not limited to the following: Strangers were to be brought into the covenant (Genesis 17:12). They were beneficiaries of and responsible to the law of God (Lev. 17:15; 18:26 etc.) They were even welcomed to the covenant meal of the LORD, the Passover, provided they had properly become members of the covenant through circumcision (Exodus 12:48). The LORD provided a Sabbath for the stranger (Exodus 20:10; 23:12). Strangers were to be provided for by God’s people (Lev. 19:10).

We see a similar, if not intensified concern for strangers in the prophets. The prophetic word regarding strangers often took one of two forms. They promised blessings if the people would demonstrate the veracity of their love to God by loving the strangers in their midst. They also promised curses against the mistreatment of strangers. Failure to observe the Lord’s will regarding the stranger would result, among other things, in desolation of the Lord’s house (Jeremiah 22:3-5). Sadly, here we catch a vivid glimpse of how far

the people had strayed from God’s law. In Ezekiel 22:7, oppression of the stranger is among the first in a list of accusations which God levels against Jerusalem for which He will scatter her among the nations of the foreigners who would rule over them. The people indeed refused to listen and obey. As a result God “scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they had knew not” (Zech 7:10) In sad irony, the “stranger oppressors” became oppressed as strangers in a foreign land. The fact that the same message is preached after the exile (Mal. 3:5) is evidence that the problem persisted even then.

#### **New Testament**

In the New Testament we see even more clearly that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). No excuse exists for mistreating the foreigner.

In the Gospels we see Jesus teaching the law of hospitality in both word and deed. It seems fair to say that hospitality has a place of prominence at the heart of the mission of Jesus. When Jesus taught that love is the fulfillment of the law, He requires it not only towards friends, but also toward enemies and strangers. When Jesus explained the scope of the word “neighbor,” He intentionally used a stranger, a Samaritan, to prove His point (Luke 10:30ff). This teaching was not new with

Jesus; rather it had Old Testament foundations (Leviticus 19: 18, 33, 34). Calvin shows the connection between the teaching of the Old and New. God’s people “are commanded to love strangers and foreigners as themselves. Hence it appears that the name of neighbor is not confined to our kindred, or such other persons with whom we are nearly connected, but extends to the whole human race; as Christ shows in the person of the Samaritan, who had compassion on an unknown man, and performed towards him the duties of humanity neglected by a Jew, and even a Levite.”

Not only did Jesus teach the requirement of loving strangers, He also exalted the stranger in His parables and healings. He used hospitality as an occasion to teach. He promised His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them. The one who in this life had no place of His own to lay His head will one day and forever after, be the great host. Yet remarkably, on this earth, the “head of all things” made Himself subject to hospitality. One application appropriate here is that we ought to give others the opportunity to be hospitable to us not only for our sakes but also for theirs. Unfortunately, too many of us are hesitant to put ourselves in the mercy of others but would rather care for ourselves.

#### **Acts and the Epistles**

Acts and the Epistles are considered under the same heading because of what they have in common. The events described in the book of Acts take place fairly

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concurrently with the writing of the Epistles. There is an intimate historical link between the two categories of biblical literature. In other words, the writers of the Epistles and missionaries in general, were the recipients *and* teachers of hospitality as evidenced in the book of Acts.

In Acts, we see hospitality as the general rule among Christians. At the early stage of the church, believers shared things in common. There was great practical need for this hospitality. When believers were a body of aliens, dispersed through the world, and when, as they went from one place to another, they could find homes only amongst their own brethren.

Acts 2 is an example of how the believers shared with those who were in need. On his travels we observe constant hospitality extended to Paul, particularly by the Philippian church. This virtue is extolled in his epistles (Philippians 4:10-16). An example here is the generosity of Lydia following her conversion (Acts 16:15). In the Epistles as well, we see much evidence of hospitality being practiced. In Romans 16:23, Gaius is referred to as Paul's host.

In the argument of the apostles for Christian hospitality we see a prominent connection to the Old Testament. God's concern for non-Jewish strangers in the Old Testament and even in the gospels is given enriched and expanded meaning in the New Testament and is brought out particularly in Paul's epistles. With the Old Testament background fresh in our minds, we will understand that

hospitality is to be a mark of God's people and particularly of the shepherds of God's people because it is a mark of God. But there is a deeper connection.

Paul takes full advantage of the fact that his audience is comprised, to a great extent, of "strangers" and "aliens." Thus we see that God's love for strangers in the Old Testament foreshadowed on a small-scale the large-scale influx of strangers into the covenant in the New Testament. From very early on, continuing to this day, the church is made up predominantly of former strangers.

The force in Ephesians 2:12 is both literal and spiritual. In times past, says Paul, "ye were without Christ, being *aliens* from the commonwealth of Israel, and *strangers* from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." The strangers—they were us. *We* were the strangers and aliens. But now, says Paul "in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. (vs. 19). Now we see why Paul and Peter can use the injunction to hospitality with such force. Because we were formerly strangers. As the Israelites of old, we "know the

heart of a stranger." Christian hospitality or love of strangers mirrors and reciprocates God's love *toward us* while we were strangers.

### **Biblical Conclusion**

At the consummation of history, we see the most perfect picture of hospitality—God's hospitality, perfectly and permanently administered. At this time God will take into His house, into Himself, forever, those who were strangers and aliens on earth. Those least of Christ's brothers who hungered and thirsted on earth; they who were subject to torture, cruel mocking, scourging, imprisonment, and stoning; they who were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they who wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented...they who wandered in deserts, and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth (Hebrews 11). Never again will they hunger or thirst.

In the seventh chapter of John's Revelation, one of the elders asked him, "who are these in white robes, and where did they come from?" John answered, "Sir, you know." The elder responded, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation" where, they were strangers in the world and hated. "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of

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***From very early on, continuing to this day, the church is made up predominantly of former strangers.***

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the lamb. Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night *in his temple*; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst...” (Revelation. 7:13ff). In heaven God will be the host and the house.

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## URCNA Classis Report

*Report on meeting of Classis Central US  
of the United Reformed Churches in North America*

Convening at Community United Reformed Church of Schererville, IN — November 12-13, 2007

Classis Central US has a new candidate for the ministry and a new manner of overseeing its treasurer.

Meeting at Community URC in Schererville, Ind., under the oversight of Cornerstone URC (Sanborn), the 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting of Classis Central US convened on the evening of Monday, Nov. 12.

Delegates spent the largest portion of Monday evening and Tuesday examining Mr. Steve Swets, a Community URC member and graduate of Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

It was Rachel Swets – Steve’s wife – who made the first appearance before classis, coming forward to accompany the delegates on piano as they lifted their voices in praise. But a short time later, all eyes turned to Steve, who testified to God’s work in turning his eyes away from himself and toward the ministry. Mr. Swets explained that, while he was a teen, he went through a time of rebellion which the Lord used to show him the significance of his comfort in Christ. It was at that time that he decided to enter college in preparation for serving the Lord in the ministry. During the course of his preparations, Mr. Swets obtained a bachelor’s degree from Calvin College, as well as his Master of Divinity from Mid-America. He served

summer internships in Sheffield, Ontario, and Neerlandia, Alberta; and also married Rachel during seminary. They currently are expecting their first child. Having witnessed his examination, delegates concurred with the decision of the Community URC Consistory that Mr. Swets had sustained his examination. Should he accept a call within Classis Central US, they agreed, his ordination examination will be waived.

Classis also approved a new method for overseeing its treasurer, in answer to an overture from Cornerstone URC of Sanborn, Iowa. Previously, the *Rules of Procedure* for Classis Central US did not specify a consistory to oversee the work of the treasurer. In the past year or so, it was recognized that this could cause a problem with tax law, in addition to leaving the treasurer with no direct consistorial oversight. Cornerstone requested a change to the *Rules of Procedure* that would require classis to appoint a consistory to oversee the treasurer’s duties. That consistory would appoint a treasurer and an alternate, and it would oversee their work, which would specifically include the sending of an annual financial report to each Church in the classis and a financial statement for each meeting of classis. Cornerstone’s overture asked classis to name it as the overseeing consistory. That overture was approved unanimously.

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In the midst of its business, classis also was asked to advise one congregation concerning a pending discipline case; delegates from Covenant Reformed Church of Kansas City reported on the needs of the Springfield United Reformed Fellowship; and delegates from Lynwood URC reported on their recent decision to begin a Church plant in the western suburbs of Chicago.

Delegates also took note of two reasons for rejoicing:

—Providence Reformed Church of Des Moines – which began as a church plant under Covenant Reformed Church of Pella – sent delegates to classis for the first time since organizing.

—Rev. Spencer Aalsburg of Sioux Falls URC Fellowship and his wife, Julia, welcomed a new daughter, Hannah Sophia, while delegates were preparing to meet on Monday.

Delegates also expressed their thanks to Rev. Ralph Pontier of Redeemer URC, Orange City, for his years of service on behalf of Classis Central US. Rev. Pontier, who chaired this meeting of classis, recently accepted a call from Emmanuel URC of Neerlandia, Alberta. He and his wife, Lois, plan to depart for the north country at the end of the year.

Classis Central US plans to meet again at 6 PM. on Monday, March 10, for a two-day meeting that is expected to include one candidacy examination. Grace URC of Waupun, Wisc., is the next convening consistory.

Classis wishes to express its sincere appreciation to Community URC for its gracious hospitality, as well as to the Consistory of Cornerstone URC for its work preparing for this meeting of classis.

For further information, contact **Rev. Doug Barnes**, pastor of Hills URC and Stated Clerk of Classis, by telephone at 507-962-3254 or by-mail at: hillsurc@alliancecom.net

## *URCNA Classis Michigan*

The delegates to Classis Michigan arrived early to the Covenant United Reformed Church in Byron Center to what was to become perhaps one of the most difficult meetings of her ten year history. Classis was very skillfully led by Rev. G. Lubbers. Rev. B. Vos served as Vice-Chairman and Rev. W. Oord as Clerk.

One of the first items on the agenda was to recognize the disbanding of the Allendale United Reformed Church. The Allendale URC was organized in 1992 and was faithfully led at first by the late Rev. C. Werkema and then by Rev. M. Zylstra. Long time member, Mr. Dale Oosterbaan, spoke briefly to Classis of the need for continued financial support for the emeritus Rev. Zylstra. Rev. E. Marcusse offered a prayer of thanks for the witness that Allendale URC had provided through her years and for continued blessings upon Rev. Zylstra and the former members of Allendale.

The Church Visitors reported on visits they had made to various churches, giving account to the blessings and challenges that the churches were facing. Classis went into Executive Session to hear the report of the Church Visitors with respect to their work with the Grace URC in Alto. After hearing the lengthy report, Classis voted unanimously to thank the Church Visitors for their diligence and work. The Chairman offered prayer for the continued work that must still be done.

Covenant URC in Kalamazoo asked Classis to appeal Synod's adoption of pastoral advice concerning justification. The appeal stated that the nine points adopted were contrary to the Church Order and that the URCNA has never defined the way churches are to receive "pastoral advice." After some discussion the appeal was denied. The delegate from Covenant URC of Kalamazoo informed the Classis that the Consistory of Covenant URC in Kalamazoo does not consider itself bound to the nine points adopted by Synod 2007. Grounds cited included that they were adopted in a manner contrary to Church Order Article 29 and that the URCNA does not give any official standing or sanction of "pastoral advice."

The bulk of the afternoon and evening session dealt with the standing of a minister in the URCNA who has resigned from the office minister in the URCNA after being suspended from that office, and, who has been involved with a schismatic church. Subsequent to his resignation, the suspended minister appealed his suspension.

First in open session and later in executive session, Classis dealt with many concerns brought up by the elders, the minister involved, and even considered concerns raised by the “schismatic” church. Although classis was divided on what the “right thing to do” in this situation should be, classis was VERY deliberative in their discussions. It was very evident throughout the debate that there was no politics, no hidden agenda, etc.; just a strong, and often emotional, desire on the part of each delegate to honor Christ and His Church.

In the end, it was decided to table any further action regarding Rev. Adams until Grace URC has time to deal with his appeal, and if necessary, Classis is called on to deal with it.

—Humbly submitted,  
Rev. W. H. Oord  
Clerk of Classis

## Reformed Fellowship Announces Our Third Annual Essay Contest

### Three Categories:

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### Contest Rules:

1. Manuscripts will be judged on spiritual insight, relevance to modern life, and style.
2. Manuscripts must include author's name, address, age, and school currently attending, if applicable.
3. Manuscripts should be a minimum of 1,500 words and not exceed 4,000 words.
4. Authors may send more than one manuscript. Only one prize will be granted per writer.
5. Manuscript must be original material.
6. Author must guarantee that their manuscript contains no copyright material without receiving full permission for its use.
7. Manuscripts must be received by the editor by January 15, 2008.
8. Manuscripts are preferred on disc in Microsoft Works or Rich Text Format or emailed to [wbykath@juno.com](mailto:wbykath@juno.com). If no computer is available, send manuscript to Rev. W. H. Oord, 7724 Hampton Oaks, Portage, MI, 49024.
9. Manuscripts become the property of Reformed Fellowship and will not be returned.
10. Regular contributors and family of Board members are not eligible.
11. By submitting a manuscript, all contributors accept the rules and conditions of this contest.

# The Creation Museum

## “In the Beginning God Created”

My family has a general rule of thumb that we try to follow whenever we consider going anywhere or driving any distance in order to see something. That rule is this: we need to be able to stay longer at the activity than it takes to drive there and back. In other words, if it takes four hours to drive to and return from an event and the event itself lasts less than that amount of time, then it probably is not worth attending that event!

A museum opened up this past May, however, that made us reconsider our rule. Answers in Genesis has been planning, designing, and building a state of the art, interactive, multimedia museum for most of the last decade. This facility finally opened its doors to the public this past Memorial Day weekend. The museum has as its goal the defense of a literal, historical interpretation of the book of Genesis “from the very first verse.” Answers in Genesis is an apologetical organization that seeks to explain to the public in general, but to church people especially, the fact that a literal understanding of the six days of creation is not just proper theology but that it is good science as well.

Answers in Genesis is led by the very gifted Ken Ham, a native of Australia, who many of our readers may know through the various church conferences that are put on all across the United States and Canada. One of Ken Ham’s dreams has been to open a museum that would not only explain the very good science that lies behind a literal six, twenty-four hour day understanding of creation week,

but one where the results of such an understanding could be seen and made practical to our everyday lives. This museum turns that dream into a reality.

A variety of life-size, full scale, animatronic dinosaurs greet you when you first enter the lobby of the museum. After viewing the many displays already present in the lobby, you enter the main theater to view a film that presents the main questions that all people ask themselves at some point in their life: how did I get here? Why am I here? Why is there so much pain and hurt in this world? The rest of your walk through this museum answers these questions and many more.

The displays are designed to tell the visitor the story of Biblical revelation: from the perfection found in the Garden of Eden, to mankind’s fall into sin, to our redemption from sin through faith in Jesus Christ, to the glorification that awaits believers in the new heaven and the new earth. All of these themes are clearly set forth as you walk through the museum. The last challenge given to every visitor is to point them, by way of film, to “The Last Adam.” Jesus Christ is clearly presented as our only hope and the only answer we need to those great “Why?” questions of life.

Mixed in with these exhibits that tell the story of Holy Scripture there are not only those superbly done dinosaurs, but you will also find rare and unique fossil displays. There is a life-size, walk through presentation of

what it might have been like building Noah’s ark. There are also many smaller theaters and television screens which explain various facets and studies that are currently going on in the creation science movement.

Another very important feature of the museum is the state-of-the-art planetarium. This facility gives a fascinating display of God’s incredible universe explaining how the stars and various galaxies align with and compare to earth. While entrance into the planetarium is not included in the cost of the museum, it is worth the extra \$5 charge to see the words of the Psalmist come to life over your head, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

While this museum is located just south of Cincinnati, Ohio and involved an eight hundred mile round trip from where we live, it was definitely worth the trip. We gladly set aside our “rule” for this experience! My family and I were thoroughly blessed from our visit, and our understanding of the vital importance of the first chapters of Genesis was strengthened.

I would raise only two objections or concerns for the museum; one of them is based upon a principle while the other is more practical. My concern based on principle focuses on the decision of Answers in Genesis to have its museum be open on Sunday. This organization so zealously advocates and declares to be essential the absolute literal understanding of the first six days of God’s creation week. Yet, it apparently takes much less literally the pattern of Sabbath rest established by God for the seventh day of creation week. In my view this un-

dermines their credibility and hurts their apologetical efforts.

My practical concern involves the fact that the designers of the museum simply thought too small! The crowds have been enormous ever since its opening in May, and they have only gotten larger throughout the course of the summer. The walkways are too narrow for the numbers of people who come each day, and this makes it difficult to follow the story that is being told from exhibit to exhibit. There is an unannounced but very real “pressure” on you to keep moving, which makes it hard to take in all of the sights and to process all of the very good information that is available in the various displays.

These crowds may lessen over time. However, if you would like to take in this very valuable asset to our Christian culture, my recommendation would be that you go early in the week, arrive when the museum first opens in the morning, and plan on staying until it closes at night. Also be sure to get your planetarium tickets when you first arrive, as these limited shows regularly sell out quickly.

May your faith be strengthened as you see that the truth of “In the beginning God...” can be defended scientifically even in today’s agnostic and evolutionary world.

**Rev. Ed Marcusse** is the pastor of the Faith United Reformed Church in Olive Center, Michigan.

## Thoughts for the New Year

We are living in an age where Hollywood permeates the modern mind and holds all things holy in disdain. Public education disregards the Triune God altogether while flaunting the blasphemous theory of evolution. Throughout the nation laws are being passed protecting evil while our Lord is being banned from all places public. The preborn babes shudder in the womb.

The filth of homosexuality is flaunted far and wide. Many, if not most, of the marriage vows being made today are set aside almost at the moment they are uttered. Sexual immorality and the perversion thereof is paraded daily before all upon screen, stage, and scandal sheet. Everyone is clamoring for their rights; few are talking about their responsibilities. Much of this mentality has crept into the modern churches, and at times, even defended by its leadership.

Church after church is falling into the trap of modernism. One is hard pressed these days to find simple faith in our Lord. The *I’m OK, You’re OK* mentality is permeating much of modern church life. Many of the once conservative Reformed churches have been slipping into the morass of complacency; many are but a mere shadow of their recent past. Sad to say, frequently even here one must look far and wide to see the true Christ.

Self sacrifice is dead; self indul-

gence is king. Many are preoccupied with their pension plan; few are concerned about their eternal retirement. “Here am I Lord, send me,” is heard far too infrequently. The distinctively Reformed practice of Family Visitation in many of our congregations is practically at a stand still. Interestingly, the Great Synod of Dordt determined that every family should be visited both before and after each celebration of Holy Communion. (Art. 23, Synod of Dordt 1618–’19)

Many modern day ministers view their office more often as a career rather than a calling. Elders are being elected because of their personality rather than their qualifications. Newly elected officers regularly sign the Form of Subscription, but would be hard pressed to articulate the five points of Calvinism. Some have never even attended a serious Bible study, let alone a carefully applied examination of the Reformed tenets as set forth in our three Forms of Unity. These leaders are in a position of awesome responsibility to Christ and His people; few seem to realize the gravity of their situation. When blind watchmen are put upon the wall, the city will surely fall!

Many a modern congregation is preoccupied with entirely too much facility and not enough Church. Everybody is talking about the love of Christ, few about the fear of God. The

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‘make no waves, the Lord loves you’ mentality predominates. A faithful and dedicated former pastor of mine recently related to me that he sees the churches of the land, if not of the entire world, sinking very fast and that they are in dire need of nothing less than another Reformation.

Even in the more conservative churches, to get folks to attend any kind of a serious Bible study is like pulling teeth. Too many of the modern day church folks are somehow unwilling to think, to reason, and to search the Scriptures daily and be more noble (Acts 17:11). It has been said that 85% of the people do not think, 10% think they think, but 5% actually do. There may be some Biblical basis for this concept if we look at how many folks were thinking the right thoughts prior to the flood, or in Sodom and Gomorrah, or of the twelve spies. The fast, computer-dependent pace of this modern life causes many of us to become downright lazy spiritually.

However, to be sure, it is in this very society our Lord yet intends to have His Church! Not too long ago a concerned preacher addressed some of these problems within the church. His advice for his congregation was: “The problem with the Church of today that it is overburdened with too many nice guys, and not enough real men who will take an unwavering and strong stand for the Christ and all things holy. You can not ride into heaven on the coattails of these nice guys.” By real men he meant those who know their Lord and are able to articulate intelli-

gently and strongly concerning His commandments. Too many elders today are very nice guys, but ultimately only mere ‘rubber stampers’ for their preachers.

However, I hasten to add that there are yet many faithful preachers and elders, who often stand alone and consequently are frequently faced with difficult situations. May the Lord continue to bless them. They are in need of much prayer!

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***The training of  
potential future  
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For the Church, the Bride of Christ, to survive she must have a strong, faithful, well informed and dedicated leadership. She must be led by committed and well informed elders who are able to teach, and do it well (2 Tim. 2:2). This is a requirement, not a suggestion. Indeed, it is a command! There must be harmony, not the “peace at any price” sort of harmony; but the God honoring harmony, with one accord, focused on the Christ. (Acts 1:14, 2:1, 4:26, 8:6, Phil. 2:2). There must be a constant searching of the Scriptures by all members, but especially by the leadership. There must be a system of checks and balances. This is often as difficult

to find in the Church as it is in secular government. No one of us is sinless, all of us need re-evaluation from time to time. The Reformers were very concerned about many of these potential problems. The natural tendency to gravitate towards self-will is found in all of us.

Much of the Reformation was about the evils and inherent corruption of the system of one-man rule into which the papacy had developed over the centuries. As a consequence, as a preventative measure, as a checks and balances system, the Reformers introduced the concept of Church Visitors, not only for the entire consistory, but separately as well, the minister alone, the elders alone. The minister was questioned concerning the performance of the elders, and the elders concerning that of the preacher. This practice too has been largely lost.

The training of potential future leaders, according to the Scriptures, must begin in the home, early in life; indeed, from the cradle (Prov. 22:6). This training, obviously, should involve all believers. It must be continuous; it must be a lifelong occupation. But for those entering office of minister, elder, and deacon it is doubly important. It has to be viewed as an absolute must for these candidates to have a thorough understanding of what the requirements are.

Particularly elders and ministers are to be a special people; they are appointed by God Himself to govern, to train and to direct their

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respective congregations towards a Christ honoring and Spirit driven life. Their offices are solely and strictly spiritual in nature. (Acts 6: 2-3, 1 Tim. 3:1 & 8, 5:17, 2 Tim. 2:2 & 14-16, 3:14, 4:1-5). In Acts 17, we read about the teachers who “received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

Here are demonstrated, in but one sentence, all the required ingredients of the true Church of Christ; receiving the Word eagerly, and examining for themselves, if what they were hearing was in accord with the Scriptures!

Ideally, each believer today should see it as their duty to study the Word diligently, continually to increase in wisdom, know their teachers, know what they are being taught, and see to it that the things being taught are pure and in accord with the Scriptures. Therefore, each believer should be concerned about the men presented to the congregation for election to the offices, deacons as well as elders. Especially where the elder nominees are concerned, the general membership should examine these candidates personally; they should check them out, see where they stand. Find out from these men themselves what they know; indeed, if are they able to teach!

After that, they are to vote intelligently! After all, would any of us even think of going to a medical doctor who smiles a lot but has never been properly trained? Actually before a candidate is even considered for the office of elder,

he, according to the Scriptures, must have well established credentials as being qualified for this high office. His reputation must be of good report with all men. He must have good reputation even with outsiders. (Ex. 19:21, 1 Tim. 3:1-7). Idealistic? To be sure. But isn't this exactly what is advocated in Acts 17:11? If this were the mentality of every believing family, indeed every congregation, imagine were we would be today. But alas, the devil is hard at work!

The falling away, the decline into modernism of the Churches has been blamed on many things such as affluence and the softness of life that goes with it, the leading away from the truth by those in positions of power in our Church affiliated institutions of higher learning, or just plain old apathy and laziness. These are merely symptoms of something far deeper, something that has been coming for a long time: the loss of serious spirituality.

But not all! The Lord will always maintain a remnant for Himself. His Church cannot die! It appears that a very active group of concerned Christian Reformed Church members has been formed, led by young preachers, calling themselves “The Returning Church” who are earnestly seeking to return to the true, Bible based tenets so long the hallmark of that denomination. A statement recently issued by that group includes the following: “.....We have considered and have rejected the option of leaving the denomination for three reasons: (1) We believe that the denomina-

tion has many members and churches that are dedicated to God's Word and who value the confessions. (2) We believe that other denominations have problems as well. And (3) We feel that God is calling us to exercise our faith and use our spiritual energy to bring about renewal in the Christian Reformed Churches so that the power of Scripture will be the primary influence within them. We are dedicated to the catechism instruction of our children that reflects the continuing importance of the Reformation tradition. And we are dedicated to evangelism and missions built on biblical principles” The beauty of this is that they are led by young preachers. Young preachers dedicated to serving their Lord, yes indeed, our Lord. Not all watchmen are blind!

Let us pray that the Lord will continue to provide us with many “real men” such as these young ministers, men who will stand for the faith, staunchly defending the Word. What many of us tend to overlook is that, here and now, we are part of the Church militant, by God's grace, headed for the Church triumphant. Let's pray for this, and other such groups, and for their supporters who continue to stand for the Christ of the Bible and His holy tenets!!

**Mr. Nicholas Lindemulder** is a member of the Preakness Valley United Reformed Church in Wayne, New Jersey.

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# The Almighty King

## Worship Him in His Holiness

### Psalm 99

There is a theme that runs throughout the entire Bible. It is evident in the creation of the world, in the calling of Abraham, the giving of the law, the sacrificial system, the tent of meeting, tabernacle and temple. It is evident with the death of Achan when he disobeyed the Lord and took plunder from Jericho. It is evident with the death of Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts 5 when they withheld money from the church and lied about it. It is evident when Saul offered to God an uncommanded sacrifice. The theme throughout all of these stories and events is that the LORD God of Israel is holy.

The holiness of God is evident in our creeds and confessions. It is also seen in the Lord's Prayer when we confess, "Hallowed be they name." Psalm 99 instructs us of God's attribute of holiness and how we are to respond to it.

### The Exalted King (verses 1-3)

In the first three verses of Psalm 99, we see four distinct aspects of the Exalted King. First we see that He reigns and He is enthroned. "The LORD reigns" refers to the everlasting King, Jehovah. The response by the people is necessary. They tremble because they live their lives before the face of the great King.

The King's reign reaches far and wide. He is the king of all creation. Even the earth responds to His majesty. When Moses ascended

Mount Sinai, the earth shook, for Moses was in the presence of the LORD (Exodus 19:18). The power of God manifests itself in creation. Everyone knows that God is at work and the earth is His creation. Though many deny, by word, they often affirm it in action. Think what happens when a natural disaster devastates a region. Some might ask what did they do to turn God's anger upon them.

The second characteristic we see here is in verse 2. We read, "The Lord is great in Zion." The place called Zion carries with it both a geographical and spiritual meaning. Zion is Jerusalem, or more specifically the mountain in Jerusalem.

There is also a spiritual meaning to Zion. Zion can symbolize heaven. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and temple were symbols of Immanuel -- "God with Us." Zion is the holy city where the almighty God dwells. Zion is where we long to be to see our God in His glory. May this always be our heartfelt desire.

The third characteristic we see of the exalted King is that He has a powerful name. Kings always have names and titles by which they are to be referred. The name of the Lord, Psalm 99 tells us is, "great and awesome." The name renders honor and respect and reverent awe from His loyal subjects. The names of God reveal much about Him. His name is Jehovah, which is the covenant name of God. To hear that name

must provoke the idea of grace into our minds.

Beyond His name, there is a fourth characteristic in the Psalm. We read "Holy is He!" This phrase is repeated almost word for word in verses 5 and 9. You will notice that the three divisions of this Psalm all end with that phrase. What does it mean that we serve a holy God? When Adam was in the image of God, our catechism tells us that he had perfect holiness. He was in communion with God and he was without sin. But something changed when Adam sinned, he lost his holiness. We do not have this attribute anymore. Therefore, we are unholy.

Unholy sinners cannot approach God on their own. We either need to bring something to Him or His attitude has to change about us when He looks at us. The works of our hands, our thoughts, and emotions are all unholy. We have nothing that we can bring to God. The only way to approach this God is with Jesus Christ. For He was holy. He stands in our place so that we can approach God. He is our holiness and He attributes that unto us by His grace.

It is as if we are standing before a judge and the evidence is stacked against us. There is no way that there will be insufficient evidence. We know we are guilty and so does the judge. It is not that the judge fails to punish our sins. He does so, but the one charged guilty in our place is Christ. Praise God!

This beautiful and free salvation affects every aspect of our lives in terms of how we view ourselves

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## *Free salvation affects every aspect of our lives in terms of how we view ourselves and our God.*

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and our God. When we come before God in prayer and worship, it is always in terms of being a redeemed people. To be a redeemed people means that we have been purchased. Now we belong to Christ, our pardoner. This is the work of the exalted King.

### **The Just King**

Psalm 99:4 begins, "The King in His might loves justice." Upon reading this, we should see that this is bad news for us. We are the guilty ones. God is a just God, and He loves justice. Since He is just, He is the standard of justice. God has executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. This is a reference to Israel as a theocracy. We live in a democracy, that is, a rule by the people. Israel was a theocracy, which is a rule by God.

Our law and constitution in America are the standards of justice in this land. The president elects judges that can interpret the law and constitution with fairness and equity. However, there are loopholes in our system. If someone is tried for a crime, he could be acquitted if there is insufficient evidence. Maybe there are no witnesses to a crime. Maybe the crime was committed a long time ago and the statute of limitations on the offense has run out. God's law is different. His law is the ultimate authority. God knows hearts and minds and nothing can be hidden from Him. He will mete out justice because He is just. As the judge,

He condemns us as guilty.

Yet, there is hope found in the footstool of God. This Psalm is in the context of the temple. What in the temple is the footstool? Remember where God is present. On top of the ark of the covenant, there were two cherubim. God was enthroned upon the cherubim. So where would His footstool be? On the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. On the day of atonement every year the priest would enter the holy of holies and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. The sins of the people would be atoned for.

Blood no longer needs to be sprinkled, for it was all poured out on Calvary. Our sins are atoned for; Christ accomplished what the priests foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Today is the day of atonement!

Psalm 99:5 concludes in the same way that verse 3 concluded, "Holy is He." His holiness is shown by His residence. He dwelt in the holy of holies--a place no person could go. The only hope was through the priest, once a year, as the intercessor.

This statement of the holiness of God is not just a statement of truth by the Psalmist, though it certainly is that. It is rather a confession of faith. We rest assured in the holiness of God. The Psalmist ends this section with a doxology, "Holy is He."

### **The Gracious King**

Psalm 99 continues by reminding the people of Israel and us of some great men of the past. "Moses and Aaron were among His priests, Samuel also was among those who called upon His name." What is so special about these three men? Moses led the people out of Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments. Aaron and his sons became priests to speak for the people to God. They were to perform sacrifices and intercession. Samuel was a prophet whom God called to service. What did these three men have in common? They all sinned greatly at one time or another, but they were all in the presence of the Lord.

These great men of faith were not perfect. They were sinners. Yet the sovereign God called them, led them, and blessed them. These men called upon God and "He answered them." God listened to the voice of His servants. He heard their cries and prayers, just as He hears our cries and prayers in Jesus name. Praise be to God for His great grace for His covenant children.

We see God's grace even more when we read next that, "In the pillar of cloud He spoke to them." God not only listened to them and led them through the wilderness to the promised land, but He even condescended Himself to dwell among them. As we confess with the prophet Isaiah, "God with us." They obeyed God and they believed His word.

In verse 8 we see another aspect of this gracious king. He is just for-

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giver. Our text states, “O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.”

Even though God chastises His children for their wrongdoing, He does so in order that they may be more ready to serve Him. It is for their good. It is for the very sake of their souls. All throughout biblical history we see the chastising grace of our God. From the time that Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, to the time of the flood, to the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness, and many times in between, we see that God is surely gracious with His people. This is even more evidenced with the phrase, “you answered them.” God could have turned a deaf ear to their cry for help, but he didn’t. No, God answered them and He forgave their sins in grace.

So, what should the response of God’s people be to his grace? This is what we see in verse 9. We read, “Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.” How shall we respond? Exalt the LORD our God and worship Him. This is what we do at church twice each Sunday, but this is what we must do through our whole lives. Q. and A. of the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it beautifully. It asks, “What is the chief end of man?” A. “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” This is the re-

sponse the Psalm is calling us to. Worship the enthroned king in heaven.

Psalm 99 concludes, “for the LORD our God is holy.” This is the third time that our Psalm states that God is holy. This can be taken as a Trinitarian holiness. The Trinity should come to mind at this point. Our God is thrice holy. As the angels of Revelation claim, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.” We serve a holy God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is to whom our awe, worship, praise and adoration is to be given.

God is what we are not. God is holy. This must be a comfort to us, for we know ourselves. Parents oftentimes can predict what their children will do. They can tell what a certain expression or phrase from their child means. Maybe a parent knows that their child is lying when they ask a question and their teenager repeats the question. For example, “What time did you get home last night?” The teenager responds, “What time did I get home last night?” Parents know this because oftentimes our children are not that different from how we once were. But, it is different with God. He is wholly other. This is our comfort, for if we look at ourselves, we see that we cannot get close to saving ourselves. We need the gracious King to save our souls.

As we live our lives and get busy with school, work, homework, and housework; let us take time out of our busy schedule and praise God for His holiness. May our worship be offered to Him in sincere faith for what He has given to us. The great King sits upon His throne and we enter His presence with fear and trembling. He tells us to enter into His kingdom. A proper knowledge of this informs our very souls that we are not our own, but belong to our “faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

**Mr. Steve Swets** is a student at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He is a member of the Community United Reformed Church in Schererville, Indiana.

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*Even though God chastises His children for their wrongdoing, He does so in order that they may be more ready to serve Him.*

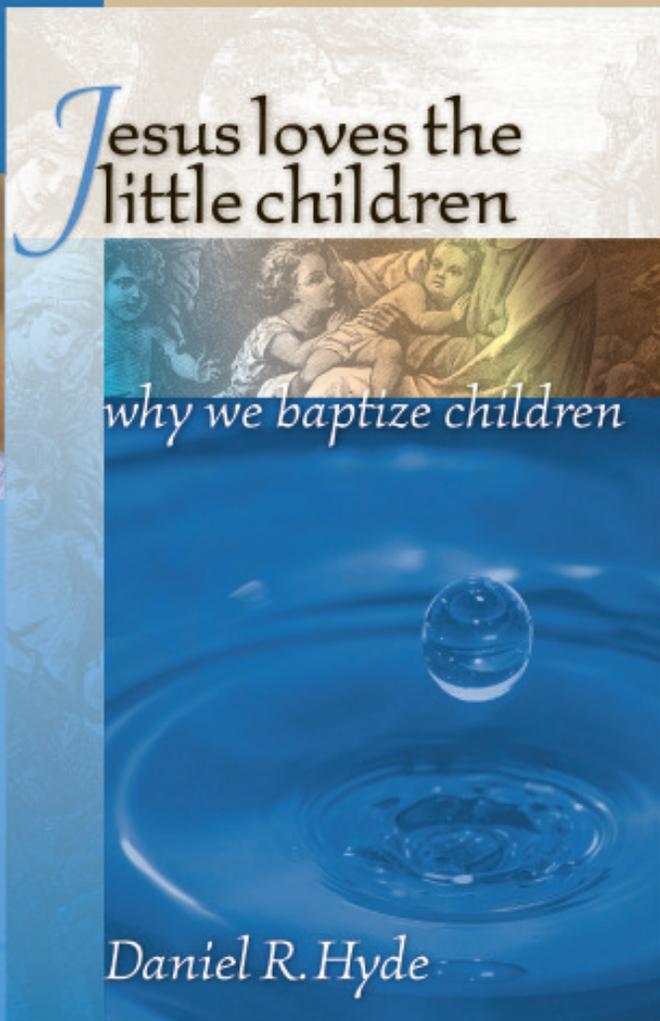
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## *VanderPol Update*

# Teaching English Courses for Miami International Seminary

### **New Beginnings**

One year ago I began to inform churches and individuals that, if the Lord wills, I planned to begin a new phase in my ministry of the Word. I had accepted the position of Director of English Studies with Miami International Seminary (MINTS). The position would involve me in following up on requests for English courses which have come from study centers around the world. Though I began fund-raising late in 2006, I received 25% of what we set as a full-time budget. During the past year I have visited meetings of church leaders in my denomination (Classes and Synod) and have written my first course. This *Update* intends to inform you concerning my first two teaching trips overseas.

### **Nigeria**

MINTS has been in correspondence for some time with an emerging school in Uyo, Nigeria. This is a small city in the southeast corner of the country, about fifty miles west of Calabar. I had the privilege of traveling to Uyo in the second week of September to establish personal contact with the leader of the school, Rev. John Paul Idio. (He told me that he was not named after the Pope; his name is John and his father's name is Paul.) John Paul is one of several pastors in his local church. None of them is paid. He is employed in the public secondary school where he teaches Bible knowledge. Though he has received some theological

training, he desires more thorough training for the young men who are eager to become pastors in his area of churches. He does not know Reformed theology, but he was very interested in the book on divine election which I assigned in my course. He said it was a very good book.

I had hoped to teach the students of the school, but they were on school vacation during the time that I was there. So I taught my course, *The Trinity and the Cults*, to church leaders in John Paul's congregation; some of them are teachers at the theology school. I believe the course was challenging for them and that they learned some basics of the Christian understanding of who God is.

### **A New Goal**

My trip to Nigeria made me think through the level of English I use in the courses I write. Before I was ordained as a minister of the Gospel, I was a teacher in Nigeria for two years. In those years I often listened to the Voice of America radio broadcasts in "Special English." These broadcasts included news, stories about English words, and news features. They utilized a limited English vocabulary, were delivered at approximately two-thirds the normal speed of speaking English, and employed only one main verb in each sentence. What fascinated me then was the great skill the broadcasts exhibited in presenting complex concepts with simple

English. During this recent trip to Nigeria I concluded that I would be a more effective teacher overseas if I developed a similar way to communicate complex concepts to bright mature minds with simplified English. This is a new goal I have given myself for future writing and speaking projects.

### **St. Vincent**

I also traveled to St. Vincent in October. St. Vincent is an island in the southeast Caribbean about 250 miles north of Venezuela. This teaching trip was very different from teaching in Nigeria. The study center was established several years ago by Rev. Neal Hegeman. It is under experienced and organized local management, and it produced its own graduates last year. I taught the same course that I did in Nigeria. These experienced students seemed to appreciate what I presented to them.

There was another graduation this year. Approximately fifty graduated with a one-year certificate. Five more received more advanced degrees. It was encouraging to see what may become of the study centers we hope to establish in other countries in the future.

### **Future Hopes**

I hope to travel to the Philippines in January where an emerging group of pastors, who have discovered and embraced Reformed theology, is asking MINTS for teaching. Like my trip to Nigeria, this trip is planned to establish initial contacts and set up the organization needed for a study center to be formed. I also hope to teach a course.

As other plans are being explored,

another hope for 2008 is that full funding will be established. Churches are being contacted for next year. If you or your church sends gifts, please send them to:

Vander Pol Support Fund  
First United Reformed Church  
6159 Riverside Drive  
Chino, CA 91710.

### Prayer

Since neither the Christian life nor Christian service can succeed without the grace and blessing of the Lord, please remember MINTS and my work in prayer. Please pray:

- 1) that the Lord will provide more complete funding;
- 2) that I will be able to make progress on my new course, *The Doctrine of Man* (I believe this is essential for students to understand the Gospel fully.);
- 3) that the Lord will bless plans being made to visit new places where study centers can be established;
- 4) that the Lord will give safety when I travel.

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