

# The Outlook

MARCH 2008

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Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

Three Speeches  
from Three Crosses

The Fullness of  
Our Salvation

The Curtains of the  
Tabernacle

Bible Studies on  
Joseph and Judah

Heaven:  
What About  
Old Testament  
Believers?

Looking Above

Examining  
the Nine Points—  
The Prologue



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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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# Three Speeches from Three Crosses

*“There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death”  
(Luke 23:32)*

## A Meditation on Luke 23:32-43

Drama has never had a more momentous stage than Calvary; and never a weightier speaker than Jesus Christ. Luke 23:32-43 records three speeches from that great stage; one by that great Speaker, and two other by common men. Had we actually been there on that dramatic evening our eyes would have been lifted up to three rugged “podiums” which held their speakers probably not much higher than the average man’s height. If on that evening we had been close enough, we would have heard three utterances from three condemned men, each hours from death. The Lord, through His Word, gives us the opportunity to look to those crosses with the eyes of our minds and to listen to those three speeches from three the crosses.

### The Speech of Unbelief

The first speech we hear might well be called “The Speech of Unbelief.” It is uttered by the first criminal, and recorded in verse 39. From the start we should be aware that this speech is not only a true historical narrative; it also paints a picture of every natural man. This becomes clear when we answer the question, “who was this first speaker?”

The speaker is identified in our text as a “criminal” or, more literally, as an “evildoer” or “malefactor” (KJV). In Matthew 27:38 and Mark 15:27, the men crucified on the right and left are called “robbers.” The word denotes the idea of a revolutionary or an insurrectionist. This is certainly the way Jesus used the word when, on the night of his betrayal, he was approached in the garden by a detachment of soldiers: “Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me?” (Matthew 26:55). He knew they viewed Him not as a petty thief but as a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, and a rebel.

The bottom line is that the first speaker is a rebel, or an evildoer. He has not only failed to submit to the laws of the land but to submit to the will of God. This speech, then, is not only a true historical record; it is also a picture of natural man who at his core is in rebellion against God. The rebellious nature of this first speaker’s heart is made plain when we evaluate his brief speech: “If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!” What is the meaning of this speech?

First of all, it is clearly not a sincere request for help. True, one might read this speech with a

sympathetic intonation and get this impression. This is not, however, the way we should read this passage. It is not the way the words were understood originally. The other criminal understood the words to be mockery; thus his rebuke. Luke, also, introduces this speech by calling it “blasphemy.” This speech was not a sincere request but an impious demand.

More specifically, it is a speech of mockery. Sadly, this mockery was likely instigated by the religious leaders who crucified the Lord. It is improbable that this man would have known much about Jesus’ ministry. It is doubtful that he had evaluated the messianic character of Christ which undergirds his slanderous statement. But, from his proximity to Jesus Christ, he had heard the mockery of the chief priests around him recorded in Verse 35: “the rulers...sneered, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.’” This first criminal seems to be mimicking the scornful sneers of the rulers of the people.

Thirdly, this is a speech of folly. This fool demands that Christ come off the cross to save him! How little he understood of the mission of Christ. How ignorant he was of the way in which Christ, “when the time had come for Him to be received up...steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). It was the will of God that salvation come only through Christ’s death *on the cross*; the very thing that Christ was resolved to do. This rebel obviously hated the cross

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and saw no value in his or in Christ's cross.

Imagine, for a moment, the agony which our Lord was presently experiencing. He had obediently been led to the cross and was at that moment bearing the punishment of God for the sin of His people. At the height of His expression of love and self-sacrifice this impenitent fool says to the Savior, "Get off your cross and save us." What arrogant folly! And yet, even in his folly he gives us a glimpse of the manner in which Christ suffered for His elect. Christ bore the reproaches even of foolish robbers.

How many there are today just like this man. They find fault with the Lord for not dealing more kindly with them while at the same time living in rebellion against Him. In times of personal or national crisis many mimic the language of this fool. "If there is a God, why didn't He save us? Why did He let this happen to us?" If you are like this impenitent thief, you must admit your rebellious folly. Your only hope is to ask the Lord who created you to change your heart: "Lord, I have been living my life at enmity with you. I am a rebel. Conquer me by your divine power!"

### **The Speech of Belief**

This is, in fact, the lesson that we learn from the speech made by the second criminal (vss. 40-42). This speech, like the last speech, is more than simply a historical record. It is also a picture of regenerated or reborn man. This assertion is equally born out by identifying the speaker.

This man lived his whole life as a God-hater. Yet, something dramatic has happened upon the cross; there is a change in his life perspective. On the cross this criminal confesses Christ. And what brought about this confession; this change? It was not that he had undergone a period of indoctrination. He had not submitted, after a period of intense study and scrutiny, to a new religious philosophy. No. The reality is that the heart of this formerly hardened criminal and rebel had been changed by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit through the brief but intense ministry of the crucified Christ. Doesn't the description of this man approach the definition of regeneration? This man is a picture of all regenerated men.

And while we can not see the actual heart change we can see its evidence. Even during the brief span of his post-conversion life, we see fruit. We see a vivid example of repentance and faith.

His repentance is demonstrated through both personal introspection as well as in censuring his former partner. Foundationally, the penitent thief confesses his own sin. Speaking in the first person he says, "*We are condemned justly.*" He agrees with the decision that justice has given him. He agrees that he has lived as

heinously as the punishment he now receives: "*We receive the due reward of our deeds...*"

Secondly, in censuring the other thief, he demonstrated a hatred of sin. He heard the sinful raging of his former partner and it vexed him. So he rebukes the sin of his companion (in which he is implicated by the request, "...Save...us."). We might even say that he was evangelizing the other thief starting with his sin. He is saying, "Don't you fear God? Look at yourself! You stand guilty before God and are being punished to death for your sin." The penitent thief points out how the other did not fear God even though he was on the brink of being punished not only by death but also by Hell. He was on the edge of a very slippery slope. Still he did not repent.

This same scenario was given brilliant imagery in the most famous sermon ever preached on American soil. In *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, Jonathan Edwards illustrates the precarious position of unrepentant sinners. He portrays a man held by a thread over a raging fire: "You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold

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***The reality is that the heart of this formerly hardened criminal and rebel had been changed by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.***

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*It was in God's plan that the first sinner to have the vicarious death of Christ applied to his account would be one who had the least to offer in return.*

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of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath...nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment."

This was that thief; on the brink of hell. And so the penitent's rebuke: "You are on the brink of hell and you blaspheme Christ? Wake up, fool!" Edwards concludes his charge against foolish, unrepentant sinners in the same manner: "Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. And that is exactly what the penitent criminal did; and in so doing he teaches us the essential character of faith.

First of all, he ascribes to Christ the praise due to his righteousness: "This man has done nothing wrong." He realizes that he and Christ stand worlds apart in terms of righteousness. As a result he does the only thing he can do. He commits himself and his salvation to the protection of Christ. True faith arises out of a sense of personal need. This man saw his sin, he saw the sufficiency of the Savior and he entrusted his soul to the Lord.

We are given no doubt that if this man had somehow survived his crucifixion he would have lived henceforth a sanctified life. He was already showing the fruit of mortification of the old man and

the coming to life of the new. But God had something better in store for him. It was in God's plan that he not survive this crucifixion. It was in God's plan that the first sinner to have the vicarious death of Christ applied to his account would be one who had the least to offer in return. It is striking that after this urgent and sincere request the penitent thief fades from the narrative. All he can do is to plead for mercy, hoping for a favorable response. The response is given in the final speech, this time from the cross in the center.

#### **The Speech of Salvation**

The last speech is reserved for Jesus Christ (vs. 43). In His reply we again have not only a record of history but also a picture; this time a picture of God. F.W. Krummacher says that "in Christ's reply Calvary becomes a palace, the cross a throne of the Judge of all worlds."<sup>1</sup> The crucified Christ speaks as the judge of the souls of men. This judicial sovereignty is demonstrated in the first words from His lips.

He says, "Assuredly, I say to you..." His answer bears the stamp of truth and finality. It is as if He is speaking, not from a cross, but from a throne with a scepter in hand. And although He speaks with the authority of ultimacy, His reply is one of loving intimacy.

The real emphasis in the Lord's reply seems to be on the words "with me." In these words, Christ exceeds the man's request. The thief asks Christ to remember him; to think about him. Who is it that we remember? I remember with deep affection my grandmother who is no longer with me but with the Lord. We remember those who are apart from us. But Christ tells this man, in effect, "I will not need to remember, for today you will be with me."

Notice further, that Christ did not say "some day" you will be with me, but "today..." Why today? What was so significant about that day that it would bind together forever the Lord of Glory and a lowly criminal? It was, of course, the death of Jesus Christ. The moment that Christ died He defeated death and removed the separation between God and man. So He says "today you will be with me. You will no longer be alienated from God because of your sin. Today I die, and through my death you will be united to me."

Neither does Christ promise an amorphous or merely sentimental presence with the penitent thief. Rather, He concretely qualifies this promise with the words "in Paradise." This Paradise is clearly a synonym for heaven or the dwelling of God (Cf. Rev. 2:7; 22:2). It is a term that both points back to the Paradise of Eden and points forward to the Paradise of Heaven. The way to the Paradise of Eden was blocked because of the sin of man. Christ, through His death, has conquered sin and opened the way to paradise.

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What a sound to these ears! This promise of Paradise perfectly matched this man's need. In paradise, "There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying...[nor] pain, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). The wretched thief who presently hung on a cross of shame would by day's end be reigning with Christ in Heaven (Rev. 22:5). But first, death comes.

### Conclusion

As we well know, the three men on those three crosses died that day. This is a documented historical fact. As we conclude, we reflect on the outcome of each of those three deaths. The one unrepentant thief descended into hell, never to escape it. It is a sobering reality that this thief is in Hell this very moment being punished for his brief rebellious life. The One in the middle, also descended into hell, in a manner of speaking. He died bearing the curse of Hell for those whose names are written in the book of life.

Only one of the three men never descended into Hell. The repentant and believing thief never drank to the bottom the cup of the wrath of God. Yes, he deserved to do so. But this penitent thief was saved by the intercession of the Son of God. And when he died, he did not go down to hell but went up to forever be with the Lord.

Isaiah 53 speaks of the crucifixion and death of these three men: "He was numbered among the transgressors...and made intercession for the transgressors." This passage directs our eyes to the Son of God, crucified with a rebel on each side. But Isaiah also teaches us about the intercession that Christ made from that cross: "He made intercession for the transgressors."

Notice, that while Christ was numbered among two transgressors, He only made intercession for one of them. How is it then, that Isaiah speaks in the last part of that verse of "intercessors" in the plural? Who is he referring to here? He is referring to the rest of those for whom Christ died. We are the transgressors! When Christ died that day, He died not as an intercession for the penitent thief alone but for every one who truly repents and trusts in Him.

We have pointed out that the speeches made to the left and the right of our Lord paint a picture of both the unbelieving and the believing soul, respectively. In other words, each of our lives echoes the words of one of these two men. Which speech more accurately describes your life perspective? All of us by nature are born rebels and desperately need the conquering intercession of Jesus Christ. The question remains, will you apply for this intercession as the one evildoer did? Christ's an-

swer remains the same to everyone who makes that heartfelt petition: "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom?" "Assuredly, I say to you, today, you will be with me in Paradise."

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> F.W. Krummacher's, "The Suffering Savior." (Chicago: Moody, 1947), p. 364.

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*Three men on those three crosses died that day...  
Only one of the three men never  
descended into Hell.*

# The Fullness of Our Salvation

## Exodus 12:1-20; 13:1-16

The tenth plague, the Passover, and the feast of Unleavened Bread are related events, but they are also events that are distinguished from each other. The Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are liturgical ordinances tied to the tenth plague. Both ordinances are commanded by God, but both ordinances are distinguishable from one another. Consider God's instructions regarding the Passover. "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' Then tell them. 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.'"

From this statement it is clear that the Passover was an ordinance that God ordained as a means of remembering the tenth plague. More importantly, the Passover was a means of remembering that the salvation of God's people was accomplished by the blood of the Passover lamb. From Exodus 12:13, we can conclude that the blood applied to the houses was a sign that redemption would come only by the shedding of blood and by the proper application of that blood. Ultimately, the blood was a sign that pointed to the blood of Christ. In this sense, the Passover was not

only an ordinance that caused God's people to look back and remember, but the Passover also functioned as a shadow of what was yet to come. The Passover had more than one purpose. First, and foremost, it was a religious ceremony, an Old Testament sacrament that was central to the worship of Jehovah. The Passover was also an educational tool designed to provoke the interest of the children. It was useful as a teaching aid, to instruct the children how God had delivered the Hebrews from Egypt.

In the Old Testament, the Passover was distinguished from the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The festivals overlapped one another, with the Passover taking place on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month and the Feast of Unleavened Bread commencing with the Passover Feast, but continuing for six more days. "Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day. For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses" (12:17-18).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month, which was the same date that the Pass-

over feast was celebrated. But the Feast of Unleavened Bread continued for six more days. The Festival of unleavened bread lasted for an entire week. Both, the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were ordinances that were tied to the tenth plague, but they are also individual events, that were distinguished from one another.

## The Passover and the Firstborn

When the Lord passed through the land of Egypt, the application of blood resulted in the salvation of the first-born of Israel. The tenth plague was specific to the firstborn; all the firstborn sons were either redeemed or struck dead on the night that the Lord passed through Egypt.

The redemption of the firstborn required both, the shedding of blood, and the proper application of this blood to the entrance of the (Hebrew) home. In order for us to understand the importance of the firstborn we need to return to chapter 4 where Israel is described as Jehovah's firstborn son. "Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son'" (4:22-23),

From this passage it is clear that all of Israel is God's firstborn son. This included men, women, and children. Because all of Israel was God's firstborn son it would have been totally inappropriate for Moses to agree to Pharaoh's terms, when Pharaoh offered to send the men without the women and children

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into the desert to worship Jehovah. The implications were clear: if Pharaoh refused to let all the Israelites go to worship Jehovah, then Pharaoh would pay with the death of his firstborn son, and all the firstborn sons of Egypt. The statement was conditional: “if you refuse to let my firstborn son go, so he may worship me, then you will pay with the death of your firstborn sons.”

The tenth plague represented the execution of God’s attack against Pharaoh and the firstborn sons of Egypt including the animals. At one point, Pharaoh agreed to send the Israelites into the wilderness to worship Jehovah, but he would not allow their livestock to go with them. Moses refused to negotiate with Pharaoh. Just as every animal had to go with the Hebrews, likewise, the tenth plague was applied to the firstborn among the animals. The fact that the animals are included in both God’s judgment, and His redemption, is an indicator to the extent that the firstborn belong to Jehovah.

### **Consecration of the Firstborn**

The principle that the firstborn sons of Israel belonged to Jehovah was the basis for the consecration of the firstborn males that opened every womb in Israel, man and beast alike (Exodus 13:1, 2).

What was true corporately of the entire nation was practiced individually through the consecration of every firstborn son that opened the womb. This applied to both man and beast. It would have been impossible for the people to consecrate every individual in the same way that they were instructed to consecrate the firstborn males, be-

## ***The tenth plague represented the execution of God’s attack against Pharaoh and the firstborn.***

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cause the consecration of the firstborn required either the death of the firstborn or the death of a substitute. If every individual and every beast had to be consecrated through this same means, the people would have been left without any livestock; therefore the practice was limited to the firstborn son of every womb. If the firstborn was an animal, then it could be redeemed by the death of a substitute or it had to be put to death.

In the following passage, Moses provided instructions for this practice. “you are to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons” (13:12-13). All the firstborn male livestock had to be killed or they had to be redeemed by the death of a substitute lamb in its place. Likewise every firstborn son had to be redeemed by the death of a substitute. The lamb would be killed as a substitute in place of the firstborn son or animal that was being redeemed.

After providing instructions for this practice, Moses explained the reason for this practice. “When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons” (Exodus 13:15).

With this background information in place, it is easy to see how the consecration of the firstborn and the Passover are tied to the tenth plague. The basis for this practice was the fact that the firstborn son belongs to the Lord, therefore the firstborn male had to be put to death or the firstborn son had to be redeemed through the death of a substitute.

### **Mary’s Firstborn**

The consecration of the firstborn was applied to Jesus, because He was the firstborn male child of His mother Mary.

As the firstborn male that opened His mother’s womb, He was set apart, according to the Law of Moses. “And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord” (Luke 2:22-24). If Jesus had been the second or third born son He would have been exempt from the principle of the firstborn, and the requirement to redeem the firstborn son.

In Romans 8:29 Jesus is called the firstborn among many brethren, in other words He is the firstborn among the new humanity. The new humanity begins with Jesus Christ.

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In the New Testament, believers are described as the firstborn, by virtue of their union with Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews applies the term firstborn to the church in Hebrews 12:23. Because every believer is united to Christ and a member of His body, the entire church is recognized as the church of the firstborn. The church is corporate in nature, and therefore the church of the first born is in reference to every member who is united to Christ. The entire church has been redeemed and set apart as Christ's body.

In the New Testament, the biblical authors describe believers as "saints" (Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1). In Greek, the word "saints" literally means "the set-apart ones." All Christians are saints, because all Christians are set apart for God, by virtue of their spiritual union with Jesus Christ. Because, all believers are united to the firstborn son of the new humanity, all believers participate in the sonship of Jesus Christ. All Christians are in a special relationship with the Creator because they have been set apart from the rest of humanity, and because the Lamb of God has redeemed them.

The redemption of the firstborn in Israel by the blood of a lamb was a type and a shadow that pointed to the redemption of the firstborn by the blood of Christ. The redemption of the firstborn according to the law of the Lord was accomplished through a substitute; likewise the redemption of the saints was accomplished through a substitute. Jesus Christ is our substitute.

The author of Hebrews writes of the Messiah's work in a similar fash-

ion. The act of redeeming the firstborn of Israel was a mere shadow of the work of Christ. The result of the tenth plague was a deliverance of Israel that was physical, earthly, and temporal. But in contrast, the redemptive work of Christ is much greater: It is spiritual and eternal. The work of Christ is perfect and complete. For this reason the believer relates to the Father with a clean conscience.

The act of redeeming reaches its apex in the redemptive work of Christ. Since our redemption is perfect and complete we can serve the Lord with a clean conscience. The implications for Christian living are profound. Instead of motivating people to strive for obedience through fear and condemnation, the saints are compelled to serve God with a clear conscience and out of thanksgiving. As the firstborn you have been set apart, you belong to the Father through Jesus Christ the firstborn son of the humanity. Because this is true, it is only appropriate that you think and live in a manner that is consistent with this truth.

Just as the blood of the substitute lambs redeemed the firstborn of Israel, likewise the Lamb of God has redeemed us. He has redeemed us by the shedding of His precious blood and by the application of His blood to justified sinners. And therefore when Christ returns in power and glory, you will know and see the fullness of your salvation, because you have been marked by the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God that brings salvation to God's people. Israel's exodus from Egypt points to an even greater exodus, it points to our exodus from the bondage of sin, death,

and the tyranny of the Devil. We celebrate this greater exodus every Lord's Day through the ministry of the word and the sacraments. Every Christian has the ability to celebrate a new beginning that is born out of our redemption.

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

# The Curtains of the Tabernacle

*“And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. And there I will meet with you.”*  
(Exodus 25:8, 22a)

The question was asked: “What must I do to be saved?” That question coming from the jailer in Philippi was not a new one. From the very beginning it has risen from the hearts of those who are burdened by their sins. Sin separates us from God. How can this broken fellowship ever be restored? The cry of the jailer must be the cry of every convicted soul that longs to be restored to his Creator. The answer is given to us in Acts by Paul. It is not by doing, but it is by believing. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”

That was the purpose of the Tabernacle in the Old Testament. It was intended to show the Israelites the way to the throne of God and have fellowship with God. Jesus said in John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, but through Me.” The tabernacle, its vessels, its implements and its furniture all speak to us of Jesus.

## The View From Sinai

In this issue, we start on a tour of a most amazing place. We come to Mount Sinai, a prominent mountain standing some 6,700 feet in elevation. As we come up on the side of the mountain we see something of great interest. Here on the mountain-side we look over a vast encampment—hundreds upon hundreds of tents as far as the eye can see. These are the twelve tribes of

Israel encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. In an orderly fashion they are camped tribe by tribe, beautifully arranged around a central meeting place.

As we look down from the mountain slope our attention is focused upon the place of meeting around which each tribe is camped, three tribes on each side. There we see the Tabernacle. It is closed in by white linen curtains, right in the middle of all the black-topped tents.

As we look down from the mountain slope we can see beyond the linen curtains into the tabernacle. There we see the Brazen Altar upon which the sacrifice is burning continually. Beyond the Brazen Altar there is the Laver at which the priest washes his hands and his feet daily before going into the Holy Place. In the Holy Place he will partake of the bread upon the Table of Showbread and trim the lamps of the seven-fold Candlestick.

The Table of Showbread and the Golden Candlestick are invisible to us. Contrasting the white curtains of the courtyard, the Holy place, like the Holy of Holies is covered with beautiful ornate curtains of blue, purple, and scarlet. Here, we are told, the priest goes to the Altar of Incense for prayer. Furthermore, we are told that one day of the year, the great Day of Atonement, Aaron the High Priest goes into the completely covered Holy of Holies into the very presence of

God. There he stands before the mercy seat of God with the overshadowing cherubim. On that one day of the year God’s presence is manifested.

## A Closer Look at the Temple

As we come down the mountain and approach the Tabernacle we see the outer court is some one hundred seventy-five feet in length and eighty-seven and a half feet in width. It is of this place that Jehovah has said: “There I will meet with you.” For four hundred years the Tabernacle set forth the steps laid out by God in which sinful people may approach Him.

We come to meet with God. We approach the Tabernacle. We see some sixty pillars made of acacia wood. Those pillars stand some eight feet nine inches in height. They are connected by bars of silver from which hang the fine-twined linen curtains. We cannot see over the curtains, nor can we see under the curtains.

Somehow, even though the great Jehovah has said, “There I will meet with you,” yet He seems distant from us. We cannot meet with Him because there is an eight foot barrier between us and the inside of the Tabernacle. As we walk around the south side, the west side, and the north side there is no entrance into the Tabernacle.

We stand before that pure white linen curtain we are immediately reminded of our own filthy, desert sand covered clothes. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah 64:6 where we are told that all our deeds—even the best of them—are as filthy rags before God. We

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are immediately face to face with the fact that we are sinners and we cannot enter into God's presence as we are. God is holy. God demands holiness of us. God has a standard of righteousness from which sinful man falls far short.

As we see our burden of sin and the desperate wickedness of our hearts, we fall upon our knees. Are we to be forever shut out from communion with the Holy God? Has the heavenly architect barred us from entering into His sanctuary to commune with Him and have fellowship with Him? Are His words, "There I will meet with you," not meant for us?

### **The Way of Approach**

Oh, no! There is a way. God has provided a way. On the east side of the Tabernacle there is an entrance. Here at the gate we find a beautiful three-colored linen curtain. God has provided a gate thirty feet in length, seven and a half feet in height. We have not been shut out; God has provided a way for us to have fellowship with Him. We may enter in through the one gate and come to the Brazen Altar where the sacrifice is burning continually. There the lamb whose blood was shed points us to the sacrifice of Christ who shed His blood, thereby paying the penalty for our sin.

Man is a sinner. We are doomed to die for our sins for, indeed, the wages of sin is death. Yet there is the innocent lamb shedding his blood as a sacrifice. This is for us an Old Testament type of Christ, the Lamb of God who shed His blood on the cross for our sins. The person who acknowledges his sin enters in thru the one gate—Jesus

Christ. He will feel the burden of his sin lifted as he comes to the sacrifice of the lamb, also Jesus Christ. In newness of life, given to him thru Christ's sacrifice, we may then move on to the Laver for cleansing and on to the mercy seat where God will meet with us in sweet fellowship. All of these things that we find in the Tabernacle point us to Christ and the once for all sacrifice that Jesus made for us at Calvary.

The Book of Romans shows us that natural man is without hope, without Christ, and without God in this world. Paul begins already in the first chapter to point out that the scarlet sinner—the drunkard, the adulterer, the murderer, etc—

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*Has the heavenly architect barred us from entering into His sanctuary to commune with Him and have fellowship with Him?*

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is lost. God has given them up to their vile affections. Anyone reading those verses in Romans would immediately agree that such a person is in need of salvation. Yet, without Christ that is where we are. We are no better than the drunkard, the adulterer, or the murderer. Standing there before those white, fine-twined linen curtains of the Tabernacle we must say, "How can I, devoid of God's standard of righteousness, enter

into the presence of God and meet Him in the Holy of Holies?"

The answer is you must enter in through the gate where the very first thing that you have before you is the Brazen Altar—the sacrifice of the Lamb. Just as on Good Friday we look back to the sacrifice that the Son of God made upon Calvary's cross, so the Israelites looked forward to the sacrifice that would remove their sin from them. God has so loved His chosen people that He has provided the way for them to approach Him. It was by going through the only gate and coming to the Altar, both of which pointed to the Christ and His work accomplished at Calvary. When we come by faith through the gate, we find that God has prepared the way for us to be able to approach Him. The sin question has been settled. God has provided an innocent substitute for you in His Son, Jesus Christ.

### **The New Tabernacle**

God is not out there somewhere looking down upon us on occasion to make sure that we are good and that we are behaving ourselves. As we see with the tabernacle in the midst of Israel's encampment, God has chosen to take up residency with us. In fact, not only does God take up residency with us, but *in* us. Paul writes, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God?"

Consider again the white linen. It puts sinning in a totally different perspective. There are some things, I am sure you would agree, that are unthinkable in the house of God. For example, no one would think of setting up a

magazine rack that sells pornography in the narthex of a church. We would not think of opening up a bar in the church's kitchen so that people could have a drink before they head home after the service.

Now remember this—we are God's house and those very same things ought to be unthinkable for us. Thirteen chapters in Exodus describe the details of the Tabernacle. Throughout those thirteen chapters Moses was reminded that the pattern was to be followed exactly without the slightest deviation. Any deviation from the directions given by God was unthinkable.

How much of the Bible isn't dedicated to how we as Christians should live? Those instructions, too, must be followed even to the smallest detail. James writes, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10). Any deviation from the directions given to us by God should be unthinkable. They are sin.

How necessary for each one of us to remove the sand riddled, sin-stained garments that we wear and cloth ourselves with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We have been cleansed by His blood. The joy of the Old Testament Tabernacle is that it reminds in every detail that the way to true fellowship with God is through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Upon seeing the Tabernacle, before ever even entering in, we are reminded of our sin; and upon entering, we are told that our sins

are atoned for through the precious blood of Christ. What must I do to be saved? Make your temple pure through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Keep your temple pure by clothing yourself in His righteousness.

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# Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

## Lesson 13: Judah Intercedes for Benjamin

### Read Genesis 44:18-34

#### Introduction

During the first visit Joseph's ten brothers to Egypt, they claimed that they were "honest men" (Gen. 42:11). Joseph recognized them and remembered the dreams of his youth. He then proceeds to test them to see whether their claim to be honest men was true (Gen. 42:15,16). But Joseph's interest is more than whether they were honest in their words at the present moment. What kind of men are they now, years after the tragic events in which they had plotted murder and then sold Joseph into slavery? Had they changed, or were they even more hardened in their sinful hatred and cruelty? Joseph overhears them say that God had exposed their guilt. But now the test that Joseph puts them through will reveal whether they are changed in terms of how they will act. Joseph secretly has planted his own silver cup in the grain sack of his brother Benjamin. Will the brothers defend Benjamin, or will they abandon him to his fate?

Joseph awaited the return of his official, the man sent out to stop the brothers on their way home. The plan is working out as he had anticipated. The cup was found in Benjamin's sack of grain. The brothers are not prepared to fight back against the Egyptian authorities. They have torn their clothes in shock and grief, and they silently

return to Joseph's house where they throw themselves to the ground. Joseph stays in character as the harsh official, the man who has accused them, imprisoned them, released them, and also feasted with them. He roughly accuses them again, suggesting that he knows more than an ordinary mortal might know.

Judah faces this harsh man with no plea, pained by the knowledge that they are all innocent. How can their innocence be proved? On the other hand, the evidence against them was clearly found in Benjamin's sack. "God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves" (verse 17). This is the situation in Judah's mind. In other words, we will all suffer the sentence together.

Joseph counters with a kind of bargain for the brothers to take, and, on the surface of things, a bargain that is truly merciful: only the guilty man, Benjamin, should pay for the crime and not the entire group. This is quite a merciful offer from such an important Egyptian official, from the same man who had accused them of being spies before. He is showing the ten brothers an open door that will allow them to escape slavery in Egypt. No money to bribe the official. No "community service" to perform in some Egyptian city. Just go home!

Again, from a truly selfish vantage point, the picture presented by Joseph is clear. Self-interest would

whisper in the fearful, anxious hearts of the brothers, "Let's get out of here! The man is prepared to let us go. Let's get out while the 'getting' is good, before this guy changes his mind." They have now every opportunity to abandon Benjamin. They could now all get away now with their lives. Will they take this opportunity to save their own skins? Here is the test.

#### Judah recalls the events to this point (44:18-30)

Genesis 44:18-34 is a very moving and passionate defense of Benjamin. It is as moving as the following scene in Genesis 45 in which Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Judah and his brothers cannot argue justice, but only mercy. Judah is almost eloquent as he begins with words that border on flattery. Joseph is addressed repeatedly as "my lord" while the brothers are referred to as "your servants." All of this is in line with the language style of the ancient Near East. He seeks to soften up the harsh official. We the readers, however, must be clear as to what Judah's purpose is here. He is not seeking to have the harsh Egyptian lord release him and his "non-guilty" brothers. Joseph has said that he may go! Rather, Judah is trying to have Benjamin set free. That is the sole issue that Judah must address.

Judah's emotional address to Joseph reveals to him what the "official story" had been about his death earlier: he had been torn to pieces. Furthermore, Judah's appeal contains a few minor differences with what we have read earlier. For example, Judah says that Joseph had asked about a father and a

brother. But in Genesis 42:13 we read that the brothers had mentioned their father and brother, apparently unasked. Also, earlier the brothers had said that one brother is “no more.” In Genesis 44:20, Judah says that he is “dead.” (Quite a surprise: Joseph knows that reports of his death are greatly exaggerated... but Judah does not yet know that!).

In this speech of Judah, Joseph learns about the painful reaction of his father Jacob to both the demand that Benjamin come along as well as Jacob’s reaction to the loss of Joseph, 22 years earlier (verses 24-29). We can read of Jacob’s earlier reactions in Genesis 42:36-38; 43:6; and 43:11-14. In the speech, Judah mentions his father 14 times! Jacob had loved Joseph, and Joseph knew it. They all knew it!

There are three points in Judah’s most moving intercession, as he pleads to suffer in Benjamin’s place. Judah recalls the facts leading to Benjamin’s coming to Egypt. We learn (again) the facts that led to the present situation, we hear what effect there will be on father Jacob if Benjamin does not return, and we hear of Judah’s firm vow to take the younger brother’s place.

#### **Judah details the possible effects on Jacob (44:30,31)**

Judah spells out how the father’s love for Benjamin is like two lives that have become intertwined. If the one is gone, the other will fade away in grief and sorrow. Joseph must have heard these words and remembered Jacob’s love for him in earlier years. Thus Joseph knows that Jacob has transferred that same love and affection upon Ben-

jamin. Losing Joseph had been hard enough; losing Benjamin will be fatal, according to Judah.

What has gotten into Judah to say all this? He has really changed! Judah accepts God’s ways in exposing their guilt (verse 16). Compare this with the earlier Judah (Gen. 37:26,27). Joseph now knows that the brother who sold him into slavery has become a brother willing to assume slavery rather than cause the death of his father. Once an enemy, Judah has become a true “brother.” This point

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### ***The brother who sold Joseph into slavery has become a brother willing to assume slavery.***

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is critical for all that happens next. Clearly Judah emerges now as an intercessor who is willing to assume the fate of his brother. Compare this with what Christ did (Phil. 2:5-11) when He emptied Himself of heavenly glory and assumed servant form and willingly died a cursed death in our place.

Clearly, Judah has accepted the fact that Benjamin has replaced Joseph as his father’s favorite son. No bitterness, no jealousy, and no hatred against Benjamin are evident. This is quite remarkable, but it is something for which we readers can give God alone the glory. The emphasis should not be first of all on Judah, his honesty or even his bravery. Rather, such a transfor-

mation of heart and attitude in Judah comes about only through the quiet yet powerful working of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.

#### **Judah vows to take Benjamin’s place (44:32-34)**

Judah is being true to his word, since he had vowed that he personally would act to defend the safety of Benjamin (see Gen. 43:9,10). There is some irony here in that it was Judah who had earlier proposed selling Joseph into slavery (see Gen. 37:27). Now Judah stands before that same brother, only now Judah is offering himself as a slave to Joseph. The tables are turned!

By nature, we are selfish, considering “number one” (“Me, myself, and I”) to be the center of the universe and therefore the focus of reality. By nature, we are absorbed in ourselves, and the concerns of others are not our primary concern. Judah, like his other brothers, hated Joseph and was prepared to kill him. But he has changed: now he is fully prepared to give up his own life for Joseph’s younger brother, Benjamin. This change comes by God’s amazing grace!

The character of Judah’s offer of himself stands in stark contrast with what Reuben had earlier proposed. Reuben had earlier offered his two sons, proposing that they die if Reuben failed to protect Benjamin (Gen. 42:37). That is, “let me—Reuben—live, but you can kill my two sons.” That is a rather sorry offer! Jacob could not bear to lose Benjamin *and* watch two grandsons also be put death. But Judah does not offer anyone else—just himself.

A later son of Judah, Jesus Christ, would do something like that. “For God loved the world in this way: He gave His only begotten Son...” (John 3:16). That verse, which we all know and love so much, puts before us the great reality that God sent His own and only Son, not someone else’s son. For there was no other because there could be no other to accomplish what needed to be done in order to rescue and redeem those who were under a death sentence. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God their Father in the Garden of Eden, the entire world and all of mankind stood under a death sentence. Humanity was condemned to death. But the gospel announces that God the Father sent God the Son into this world, not to condemn it, but to redeem it by His blood (see John 3:17). He gave His life as a substitute for us, purchasing all those whom God had chosen in electing love before the foundation of heaven and earth (see Eph. 1:3ff.).

“Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Judah refuses to leave Benjamin to a future of slavery and thus watch his father die in soul-crushing grief. Judah declares that he will trade his life for his half-brother. Judah’s speech shatters Joseph. His demeanor breaks, for he hears the very words that only come from a man changed by something far greater than human “niceness.” Judah has been changed by the Spirit of his even greater descendant, his Son Jesus Christ.

### Lesson 13: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Why does Judah take the lead here in speaking to Joseph? Why do Reuben and the other brothers seem to fall silent?
2. Judah and his brothers experience a kind of “judgment day” when they appear before Joseph to give an answer for the accusation of stealing a special silver cup. They throw themselves on the “mercy of the court.” Hebrews 9:27 says that man is “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” What is the only hope for believers in that great day of days when we must all appear before God in judgment? How can God be merciful to us then?
3. The dilemma the brothers face when Joseph offers them an escape—but in the process they would abandon Benjamin—is one Christians often face. It is easy to confess love and loyalty to Jesus Christ on Sundays when surrounded by fellow believers, but how do we confess him in the areas of life outside of the comfortable church circles? What kinds of challenges do you face at work or in school in which it is very difficult to confess Christ?
4. Judah is prepared to defend Benjamin from slavery. Later, Peter in the upper room was prepared to die for Christ. But he wilted later when he stood in the courtyard of the high priest, and people pointed at him as a follower of Christ. Why did Peter’s faith falter at that point? From where does true Christian courage come?
5. The Apostle John writes in 1 John 4:16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” This suggests that our love for one another should be prepared to go as far as martyrdom. But, since most of us will not be confronted with that extreme sacrifice, how do we show the same kind of love today to brothers and sisters in the faith?

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# Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

## Lesson 14: Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers

**Read Genesis 45:1-15**

### Introduction

The speech of Judah put in front of Joseph a picture of a family going through misery and distress. Joseph has been testing his brothers, but the dramatic and moving speech of Judah is the “final exam” in this test. Joseph now knows that his brothers (at least Judah, but surely the same is true for the others) have changed. They have grown in God’s grace and knowledge as the Holy Spirit has been working in their collective hearts. They freely admit guilt, and they will not seek the easy way out by quickly exiting the court where Joseph is judge in order to flee to the safety of Canaan but abandon Benjamin in the process. Love is not merely emotional attachment; it is seen in giving oneself. Judah pledges that he will give himself in the place of Benjamin. Judah cannot bear to see Benjamin lost to slavery and thus bring his aged father Jacob to the grave in abject misery, broken-hearted.

### Joseph, the weeping patriarch (45:1-3)

Few people can read this story without themselves being moved deeply in their souls. Joseph’s tears of joy are an expression of the pain, the love, the affection, and the reconciliation that has been welling up in his soul, only waiting for the right moment to express it. Now the opportunity has presented itself,

and Joseph this time does not walk quickly into another room in order to have a good cry. He has wept on two other occasions. The first time that he had wept was when he heard Reuben chastise his brothers for sinning against him (see Gen. 42:22-24). Joseph gets the first inkling that there is some sense of guilt among his brothers (at least with the eldest). The second time was when Joseph sets his eyes upon his younger brother Benjamin during the brothers’ second visit to Egypt to get food (see Gen. 43:30). On both of these earlier occasions, Joseph had to make an emotional recovery, wash his face, and thus continue to hide from his brothers what he knows (and what we readers know): the brothers are all together physically, yet Joseph is hid from their eyes, but in time they will be united again in heart. But now Joseph’s emotional outburst is like the bursting of the proverbial dam so that all the feelings that have welled up in him, may come out. They then hear words that leave them all speechless, “I am Joseph.”

### Joseph reveals God’s plan in all this (45:4-13)

Joseph’s speech is also eloquent in its own way. He is not only over them in terms of power, but he reveals himself to be advanced in knowledge of the ways of God. Perhaps the years of separation from his family in Canaan have given him the occasions to think about the big picture of what is go-

ing on in all of this. Again, perhaps the sight of his own brothers bowing down to him, a sight that recalls his own prophetic dreams (see Gen. 42:9), has spurred his reflections in an even sharper way to reflect on how the hand of God must be involved in all this. Consider this: if the dreams come from God, then they were prophetic. The message in the two dreams would be that Joseph at some point in time would have authority over his brothers, and he would rule them. But who would have imagined that being a ruler over the brothers would mean that Joseph would have to undergo a couple of near-death experiences! First in a pit in Canaan, and then in the royal “pit” (prison) in Egypt, Joseph escapes death, certain death in any other set of circumstances.

But God had now elevated him to a key position in Egypt, controlling the food supply that would feed people both far and near. Joseph describes himself as “father to Pharaoh” (verse 8), an honorary title apparently that indicates Joseph, although young, is a very important advisor to the ruler of Egypt (like a chief of staff to a national leader). Even more than that, Joseph *rules* Egypt under Pharaoh! God must have done all this. Looking back upon all these events, Joseph is given insight by God to see that this is not random chance, and it is not fickle “good luck.” Not at all! Three times (see verses 5, 7, and 8) Joseph tells his brothers that God had sent him ahead of them in order to save many people alive. In other words, we may say that God was working through events that from one angle surely are evil and wicked, but in the divine plan, these events and

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actions will serve to keep the church of God alive. Joseph is a kind of Noah (on a smaller scale), a man used by God to preserve life, the life of His people.

Joseph uses words that have the effect of binding him again to his family. He refers to “my father,” calls himself “your brother” or (in reference to Jacob), “your son.” His goal is reconciliation and reunion with his family. He has seen his brothers; all that is left to complete this cozy picture is for Joseph to see his aged father again. So he tells them to return quickly (see verses 9, 13) to Canaan in order to bring father Jacob and the entire clan of Israel to Egypt.

Joseph also shows true empathy with his brothers since he knows what it must mean in their troubled hearts now to realize that the brother they had once tried to remove, once and for all, now stands before them with the power of life and death *over them!* His words, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!” (verse 4) is both a reinforcing of what he had said earlier and, at the same time, a kind of indictment, perhaps even a kind of rebuke. Joseph knows exactly what they had done to him, but he also knows that the present moment, as everything is now beginning to become clear to them, will strike utter terror and distress in their hearts. Joseph quickly speaks pastorally with his brothers, “Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here” (verse 5).

Forgiveness, empathy, and knowledge of the future. Joseph shows this last item as well. He knows

that there will be five more years of famine, not because he uses a silver cup to predict the future and not because he has better insight into long term weather patterns or how the Nile River will (or will not) flood. He tells his brothers exactly how long the famine will be because the LORD has revealed that important fact to him. Joseph knows where he can settle his family, once they all get back to Egypt: they will live in the region of Goshen, and Joseph will provide for them, just as he provided for all Egypt. Here is the choice: life in Egypt under Joseph’s care, or destitution, poverty, and much hunger in Canaan.

**Joseph’s brothers: terror,  
then tears (45:3,14,15)**

Joseph’s brothers have been on an emotional roller-coaster in all their dealings with this harsh ruler, and this scene of personal full disclosure is no different. We can only wonder what thoughts are racing through their hearts and minds as they hear Joseph bark out the order, “Everybody out!” Once all of the Egyptian staff that waited upon Joseph had exited the room, the brothers watch in embarrassed silence as the Egyptian ruler, who earlier had them arrested and brought before him presumably for their sentencing, now breaks down in loud sobbing, crying that was loud enough for the entire court of Pharaoh to hear it.

This moment: awkward, frightening, clumsy, filled with love but also terror. What else can describe this moment? In the Biblical text, the brothers have said nothing in response to Joseph. They stand in terrified silence. Judah and the rest are now at a loss for words. But Joseph “breaks the ice” again by moving toward his precious brother Benjamin, and he “falls” (the literal word here) upon his brother’s neck, and he again weeps. Benjamin embraces his long lost brother back and weeps as well. This grand Egyptian ruler is his own brother!

They talk, and I suspect that they talked and talked some more. There are many years of their lives that must now be brought up to date. This day in Joseph’s house began with the brothers happily journeying back home, but then that was abruptly halted when they were apprehended and brought back to his house for judgment. Judah had given a moving defense that causes Joseph’s rigid façade to crack. The day is now ending with the brothers taking a major step forward toward the unity of this family, a dramatic movement toward reconciliation among brothers. Joseph’s actions toward his brothers had been firm and apparently harsh, but the outcome is beautiful in that the issues of recognizing guilt, seeing what grief their sins had caused, realizing that love was costly and demanding, even

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*Jesus still gives new names today. In baptism,  
we are set apart and given the name  
“Christian.”*

sacrificial—all that had been brought to the surface by the winnowing process through which Joseph had put his brothers.

If left to ourselves, we would kill each other in a bloodbath of hatred and revenge. When the power and tenderness of God’s grace and love take over, there is reunion, unity, healing of the past, and hope for the future. In Genesis 45 we see something of the beauty of God’s Kingdom because of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

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## Lesson 14: Points to ponder and discuss

1. Joseph sends all his Egyptian attendants out of the room. In this way they will not hear the disturbing fact that Joseph’s brothers were the ones who had sold him into slavery. All they will hear are Joseph’s loud sobs coupled with the news that his brothers are now with him. Why does Joseph act so that his family’s “dirty laundry” does not get exposed? Does he simply want this moment of revelation to be private and personal?
2. Joseph points out at least these two realities: “You sold me . . . God sent me.” Here we see the realities of God’s great sovereignty, on the one hand, and human responsibility, on the other hand. How are both things true in this particular story? Does God’s sovereign control of all things excuse the brothers for the guilt of their actions against Joseph?
3. What comfort do we have as believers in a sovereign God that He will work out everything for the good of those who love Him? Is there any comfort in believing in a God who is not completely sovereign? How does “good theology” help Christian believers deal with difficult circumstances in their lives?
4. Read Psalm 133. Joseph forgave his brothers and loved them. This leads to restored unity among the brothers, or, at least, the first important steps toward brothers dwelling in unity. Why is Christian unity so important, and why is it so painful when it is missing? What does Psalm 133 say is God’s blessing upon Christian unity? What sinful things disrupt Christian unity today?
5. Joseph’s emotional meltdown touches every thoughtful reader who listens to this story with Christian sensitivity. Obviously Joseph was glad to see his brothers and to reveal himself finally to them. Could it be that the brothers were also overjoyed to realize that Joseph was not dead, to know that their murderous hatred had not, in the end, succeeded? Do people act sinfully and foolishly, and then on the “morning after,” hope that their sinful acts do not succeed? Do we sometimes “sow wild oats,” and then hope for a crop failure?
6. Jesus is Lord of all the earth. He has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us (see John 14:1ff.). How does Joseph’s treatment of his brothers in Genesis 45:1-15 reflect and anticipate how Christ treats those whom His grace has adopted as His brothers and sisters?

# Heaven: What About Old Testament Believers?

The Word of God did not just fall from the sky. It was progressively revealed through the ages from Genesis to Malachi. This means that the Old Testament is like a child while the New Testament is like an adult. We see this in Scripture when the writer to the Hebrews exhorts Jewish believers to leave behind the “elementary doctrine of Christ” in order to “go on into maturity” (Hebrews 6:1). In other words, what God revealed to His people before Christ was meant to prepare them for Christ.

In this article we move from the questions of whether heaven exists and what it is like to a more intramural question among Christians today: What about Old Testament believers? Did they believe in heaven; did they expect to experience it, and greater yet, did they actually go there upon their deaths? Understanding the progressive nature of God’s revelation is key to answering this question, since we must realize that all that we know of heaven (which is still very little) as New Covenant believers is more than Old Covenant believers knew.

This does not mean, however, that what we know about heaven was not the reality they hoped for and experienced. While the Old Testament saints expected heaven, what heaven was like was not as clearly revealed to them. To use another illustration, think of the Old Testament as a dimly lit room with the blinds over the windows, while the

New Testament is that same room with the blinds drawn. All the furniture that was already there is now clearly visible.

## They Expected Heaven

The first thing Scripture teaches us about Old Testament believers is that they expected heaven. As we saw in our first article from Ecclesiastes 3, there is a sense of eternity placed in the hearts of all humanity by God. The Old Testament saints expected life beyond the grave.

Another reason we can say that the Old Testament believers expected heaven is the New Testament teaching about Abraham. “Father Abraham” is the paradigm Old Testament saint, as he is called the father of all believers (Romans 4:16). We who believe the promise of the God are called the sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7). As our forefather, Abraham was called out of the land of his father and was called to the land of promise. Yet we learn from Scripture, that he looked for a city beyond the cities of this earth—even the Promised Land (Hebrews 11:10). Along with Abraham, all the patriarchs died in faith, desiring a *heavenly* country (Hebrews 11:16).

Besides Ecclesiastes 3 and the example of Abraham, a third reason we know the Old Testament saints expected heaven are the poetic expressions of the Psalms. There the singers of old expected

to see the face of God (Ps. 17:15), to dwell in the house of the LORD (Ps. 27:4), and to experience His everlasting grace (Ps. 63:3).

Finally, we see this expectation of heaven all the way back in the opening two chapters of the Bible. God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested the seventh day (Gen. 1:1–2:3 cf. Ex. 20:11). What is so telling is that while days one through six end with the refrain, “And there was evening and there was morning, the *x* day,” the seventh day has no such marker. The theological point the text is making is that God intended creation to move from work to rest, from time to eternity into the eternal Sabbath rest of God (Cf. Heb. 4). The means by which Adam, and all creation through him, was to enter that ultimate rest was the test of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the covenant of works. As our Catechism teaches us, the purpose of Adam’s creation was that he might “live with Him [God] in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him” (Q&A 6). The means of this was what our Confession calls “the commandment of life” (art. 14).

Our ancient forefathers expected to live after they died. They did not expect to be annihilated; they did not expect their souls to sleep; they did not merely expect the final resurrection; they expected that when they died in this life, to awake in the life to come—in the presence of the LORD God.

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*It is the teaching of Scripture, as well as the Reformed confessions, that all believers, regardless of when they lived in the history of redemption, experienced heaven.*

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### **They Experienced Heaven**

This naturally leads us to our second point: the Old Testament saints experienced heaven upon their deaths. This is an important for our own comfort as well as our comforting others. The reason we need to be clear on this question is the confusion that abounds in our day because of the teaching of both the Roman Catholic Church as well as many evangelical teachers. These say that the Old Testament saints did not expect nor experience heaven upon their deaths, but expected and experienced what the Bible calls *Sheol* or *Hades*. These words are interpreted to mean that all those in the Old Testament, whether believer or unbeliever, went to what may be described as a holding place, which was neither heaven nor hell. This holding place had two rooms—one for believers and the other for unbelievers. Nevertheless, it was not heaven for believers and not hell for unbelievers. It is the teaching of Scripture, as I hope to demonstrate, as well as the Reformed confessions, that all believers, regardless of when they lived in the history of redemption, experienced heaven.

One example of this is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Published in 1647 by a united Reformed church in Great Britain, made up of Presbyterians, Independents, and some Anglicans, it speaks to this issue in chapter 32:1:

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

### **Matthew 22:22-33**

What biblical reasons do we set forth to substantiate such a claim? The first is the basic formula of the covenant of grace, that is, God's promise all throughout Scripture where He says, "I am the God of Abraham, etc." In debating the Sadducees who were materialists—believing only in this life since there were no spirits or a resurrection of the dead—Jesus pointed to the words *He* spoke to Moses at the burning bush, saying, "Have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham,

and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:32).

The irony, of course, was that the Sadducees taught that the soul died with the body at death, but they were asking Jesus about what happens after the resurrection! Jesus powerfully exegeted Scripture, which says, "I *am*" the God of those who have died because they are alive in His presence in heaven. In the parallel passage in Luke 20, Jesus makes this point: "Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, *for all live to Him*" (Luke 20:38).

### **Psalm 16**

In the Psalms, David confessed what Jesus taught. In meditating upon the LORD's preservation of His holy one in Psalm 16, who prophetically was also Christ (Acts 2:22–32), David said, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (v. 11). Here he was not only expressing the LORD's preservation of David in this life, but the ultimate end of this preservation: to enjoy the LORD in the LORD's presence.

### **Psalm 17**

David also meditated in Psalm 17 upon the wickedness of the world and the blessedness of the righteous. In verse 15 he spoke about his awaking from this fallen life in the life to come: "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness." Certainly what David said here is prophetic of the final resurrection when he would

awake from the grave in his body, but his words also speak of the expectation and experience of the godly after death but before the resurrection. To see the “face” of the LORD and His “likeness” is to be in the LORD’s presence and “see” Him.

### **Luke 16:22**

Despite these texts there is still a widespread belief that our forefathers did not experience heaven, but a place described as “Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22–23). In Roman Catholic doctrine this is known as the *limbus patrum* (“border of the fathers”). It was the holding place for the Old Testament saints before the resurrection of Christ. Only then did they enter into what we know as heaven. This is also the view of contemporary movements such as Calvary Chapel.

What are we to make of this text and interpretation? The great seventeenth century theologian of Geneva, Francis Turretin, explained that the language of “Abraham’s bosom” was a vivid way of describing eternal life “shadowed forth under the symbol of a sumptuous feast.”

Is this a valid exegesis? Space does not permit a full explanation of the text, but the phrase “Abraham’s bosom” is not meant to communicate a non-heavenly existence of pre-resurrection saints, but is a way of describing the afterlife. For example, in Matthew 8:11 Jesus describes eternal life as reclining at a table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Further, the language of being in someone’s “bosom” is a way of describing intimate fellowship

with that person. It is a spatial way of saying something like, “They are so close.”

We see this elsewhere in the New Testament. In John 1:18 we read that the Word “is in the bosom of the Father” and in John 13:23 we read about the disciple whom Jesus loved being “close to Jesus” (ESV), but literally, “in the bosom of Jesus.” Lazarus was close to Abraham in fellowship just as John was close to the Lord.

What about Old Testament believers, then? Not only does heaven exist in the abstract but also our forefathers longed with all their hearts and souls to go there and to experience the eternal fellowship of their LORD and Savior. May God cause in us a longing for heaven because it is the place where we will experience our God as he created us to experience him: to “live with Him in eternal blessedness [and] to praise and glorify Him.”

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# Looking Above

## A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ

### Revelation 11:3-4

*“The Two Witnesses”*<sup>1</sup>

After the sounding forth of the first six trumpets in Revelation 8-9, we have an interlude before the sounding forth of the seventh and final trumpet in Revelation 11:15ff. The interlude is found in Revelation 10:1-11:14, and it concerns the nature of the church, even as she finds herself in the midst of the mighty trumpet blasts.

The mighty trumpet blasts are sounding forth. As trumpets one through four sound forth, the created order itself is shaken and undone. But what of the church? As fifth trumpet sounds forth, the hordes of hell are unleashed upon the inhabitants of the earth. But what of the church? As the sixth trumpet sounds forth, wars and rumors of war ravage the earth, killing a third of mankind. But what of the church? These mighty trumpet blasts sound forth as harbingers, warning of the last trumpet that will sound on the great and coming day of the Lord when Christ Himself shall descend on the clouds of glory to judge the living and the dead. As we await the sounding of that last great and terrible trumpet: what of the church?

#### Measuring the Temple

The church has already been set before us in this interlude in 11:1-2. There we learned that a measuring is taking place—a measuring not so

much for dimensional purposes, but a measuring that effects separation—a measuring between the true church and the false church. John is commanded to measure the temple, the altar, and those who worship there. The temple is the church of Jesus Christ. Here you might remember Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and Ephesians, where he calls the church the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit. The altar is the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, the means by which we enter into the very presence of God. Here you might remember the book of Hebrews, where again and the again the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ is set before us, the author even telling us that we have an altar from God, Jesus Christ Himself. Those who worship there are the elect of God, those who have been brought into union with Christ, now bound to God Himself (Ephesians 1).

John must measure the temple, the altar, and those who worship there, but he is commanded to leave the outer court unmeasured. The outer court is given over to the Gentiles, to non-Christians. That outer court is the false church. Its location is significant: the outer court is before the temple, it even surrounds the perimeter of the temple proper. Thus we see something of the na-

ture of those who belong to the false church: they find themselves in the proximity of the temple, in the proximity of the true church, they may even have the appearance of the true church. They have the form of godliness, but know not the power thereof. How do the wolves come into the church but dressed in sheep’s clothing?

What is it then that ultimately separates the true church from the false? The answer is simple: the altar—the altar of Christ—His sacrifice. Here we learn something of the nature of the true church. The true church is made up of those who by God’s sovereign grace—and by God’s sovereign grace alone—cling to the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The true church loves the Lord Jesus Christ. She knows no other message than the message of Jesus Christ. She stands upon Scripture alone. She knows no other gospel than the glorious gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. She has always before her the great and consummate calling of the glory of God, and of God alone!

We also we see something of the nature of the false church. The false church does not cling to Christ. She may pay Him lip service, but He is not the life of that church. She may claim to love Him, but her actions prove that her love lies elsewhere, namely upon man, and because her love lies upon man, her worship follows suit. Her worship is not centered upon the throne. Her worship is centered upon man. “Give me what I want in worship. Make me feel good. Give me those warm fuzzy feelings.

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Give me those spiritual pep talks. Speak to my felt needs. Here I am, entertain me!” Such is the nature of the false church: she does not worship Christ, for ultimately she does not love Christ.

This measuring is even now taking place. The true church clings to Christ, the false church does not. That is Revelation 11:1-2. Now as we turn to 11:3-4, we have the church set before us once again, albeit under a different heading. Now the church is set before us in terms of the two witnesses. Those two witnesses are described as those who have been given power from on high, those who prophesy for 1260 days, those who are clothed in sackcloth, those who are identified as the two olive trees, and as the two lampstands, standing before the God of all the earth.

#### **The Two Witnesses in Zechariah 4**

If we are to understand Revelation 11, we must understand that its background is found in Zechariah 4, a chapter which is no less enigmatic than Revelation 11 itself. Perhaps the background of Zechariah 4 will help. In the year 538 B.C., Cyrus, king of Persia, had issued the edict that the Jews could return to Jerusalem, in order to build once again the temple of God. Many of the Jews left the city of Babylon and returned to Jerusalem and began to build the temple.

Very quickly opposition arose. That opposition was mighty; it was powerful, and it was strong. You can read about that opposition in Ezra 4:1-5. Not only was the opposition mighty, powerful, and strong, the opposition was also quite success-

ful. The building of the temple ceased. No work was done on the temple for nearly seventeen years, so intense, so powerful, and so mighty, was the opposition.

In the year 520 B.C., the temple once again began to be rebuilt. It was in that year that Zechariah began to prophesy, having received a series of night visions from the Lord. This, then, is the background of Zechariah 4: the temple is being rebuilt, but the opposition remains—it is still strong, mighty, and powerful.

Undoubtedly, the Jews were discouraged. Will the temple ever be rebuilt? Will they finally be overcome by their enemies? In Zechariah 4 the great question is: “What of the temple? What of the temple? What of the temple?” And the answer to that question is given in the night vision of Zechariah 4.

Zechariah is awakened at night, and he sees a vision, a vision of a lampstand of solid gold with a bowl on top, and on the stand seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps; two olive trees are by it, one at the right of the bowl and the other at its left. Understandably, Zechariah does not understand the vision. Three times in this one chapter he asks the question, “What is going on?” “What are these my Lord” (v. 4)? “What are these two olive trees at the right of the lampstand and at its left?” (v.

11)? “What are these two olive branches that drip into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden oil drains” (v. 12)? Zechariah did not understand the vision but the angel revealed it to him.

The angel revealed to him the significance of the two olive trees. The two olive trees are the two anointed ones of the Lord, they stand beside the Lord of all the earth. Still we must ask the question, who are these two anointed ones? Commentators agree that the two anointed ones to which Zechariah 4 is referring are none other than Zerubbabel and Joshua.

The Joshua that is in view in Zechariah 4 was a high priest in the line of Aaron. This Joshua was a priest who ministered among the people of God in the days of Zechariah as the temple was being rebuilt. Note that, and note it well: Joshua is a priest.

And what about Zerubbabel? Zerubbabel was of the tribe of Judah; he belonged to the line of David; he was a prince; he was a governor. Indeed, if Cyrus had allowed it, Zerubbabel would have been set up upon the throne as king of Judah. This Zerubbabel was a ruler of the people in the days of Zechariah as the temple was being rebuilt. Note that, and note it well: Zerubbabel was a prince.

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***The two olive trees are the two anointed ones of  
the Lord, they stand beside the Lord of all the  
earth.***

The two anointed ones that stand beside the Lord of all the earth are Joshua and Zerubbabel: Joshua the priest, Zerubbabel the prince, these are the two anointed ones of the Lord, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out the rebuilding of the temple even in the face of great and powerful opposition.

In Zechariah 4:7 the opposition to the building of the temple is represented to us in terms of a mountain. This opposition was setting itself up against the great and mighty mountain of the Lord—Mt. Zion itself—that mountain upon which the temple was being rebuilt! Over against this great, powerful, and mountain-like opposition, the rebuilding of the temple seemed impossible. And yet Zechariah was assured that this great mountain-like opposition would be leveled and brought low. The temple will be rebuilt! Zerubbabel will lay the capstone with shouts—shouts of “Grace! Grace to it!” It may seem a small thing; it may seem insignificant in the face of the great, mighty, and powerful world empire. But Zechariah must not despise the day of small things (verses 9-10). He must finish the work. The temple must be built! Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts (Zech. 4:6).

The vision of Zechariah 4, then, sets before us the mighty working of God by His Spirit, through His anointed ones, to accomplish the building of His temple, and that in the face of great, mighty, and powerful opposition. That is Zechariah 4 in a nutshell.

## *The two witnesses are the offices of the minister of the Word and the eldership.*

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### **The Two Witnesses in Revelation 11**

Having considered Zechariah 4, we are now ready to understand Revelation 11:3-4 and the two witnesses that are set before us. Together, Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the prince set before us the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ. Joshua was a priest—one who served God and the people of God in the worship of God. Zerubbabel was a prince—one who governed the people of God in service to God and in service to the people of God. Joshua and Zerubbabel set before us the office of priest and prince. Joshua and Zerubbabel set before us the offices of ministry and governing.

Joshua, the priest, lines up with the office of the minister of the Word. Zerubbabel, the prince, lines up with the office of the elder. Joshua the priest serves God and the people of God in the worship of God. What is the role of the minister but to serve God and the people of God in the worship of God? Zerubbabel the prince serves God and the people of God in governing the people of God. What is the role of the elder but to serve God in the service of the people of God in governing? The minister lines up with Joshua the priest. The elder lines up with Zerubbabel the prince.

The two witnesses are the offices of the minister of the Word and the eldership. Such are the two wit-

nesses. But let us push things still a step further. Why are the two witnesses—the office of the minister of the Word and the office of elder—now set before us in Revelation 11 in terms of two olive trees and in terms of two lampstands? What is the significance of those two olive trees? What is the significance of those two lampstands? The olive trees and the lampstands are indicative of the work of the Holy Spirit!

Here remember the vision of Zechariah chapter 4: the oil flowed from the olive trees into the lampstands, thereby giving the lampstands their light. And so it is with the ministry of the church today, in the office of the minister of the Word and of the elder. As the oil flows from the olive trees into the lampstands, so the power of the Holy Spirit must dwell in the ministry of the Word and in the rule of the elders. The ministry of the Word and of the eldership draws its strength and power from the Holy Spirit. Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord of hosts. As the lampstands were useless without the oil from the olive trees—no oil, no light—so the offices of the minister of the Word and of the elder are powerless without the effecting work of the Holy Spirit—no working of the Holy Spirit, no power in those offices.

But with the power and strength of the Holy Spirit these offices shine forth as light in this dark world, illu-

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minating the way to God Himself. Consider the implications then, of these two witnesses. Note that they are given power by Christ Himself. It is Christ who gives the authority and power through His Spirit both to the minister of the Word and to the elder. The authority and the power reside not in the men themselves, but in the offices. That power is given from on high. No minister of the Word nor any elder has the right to arrogate to himself such power. It belongs to the offices, not to the man, and it is the Spirit's to give.

We are told furthermore that the two witnesses prophesied for 1260 days. Do the math: it works out to be the same as the 42 months of Revelation 11:2. In other words, the ministry of the church, and that through the proclamation of the Word and the rule of the elders, continues from the first coming of Christ to His return on the clouds of glory. The church will endure! Why is it pictured to us here in terms of 1260 days? In order to emphasize that ministry must go forth each day—each day the gospel must be held forth as light shining in the midst of darkness! Each day that gospel must go forth even in the face of great opposition. You remember the mountain of Zechariah 4:7! Still that gospel must go forth!

To be sure, that gospel ministry is a glorious ministry, but lest we might be deceived into thinking that it is only a glorious ministry, we are reminded here that the two witnesses are clothed in sackcloth, the garments of mourning. The church knows the sweetness of the gospel, but she knows as well the bitterness that it brings as the world hates the gospel and persecutes the church.

The church on earth is a militant church. She wears sackcloth as she awaits the great and glorious day when she shall stand triumphant, robed in white apparel!

The ministry of the Word and that of the elders is to proclaim Christ in the face of great opposition to a dark and dying world. The two witnesses are the witnesses of Christ, after all! He calls them My witnesses! The ministry of the church, then, is the ministry of summoning the lost to salvation in Jesus Christ. The ministry of the church is the ministry of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. The ministry of the two witnesses, the ministry of the preacher, the ministry of the elders, the ministry of the church is to stand upon Scripture alone, proclaiming salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone!

No other ministry will do. The Reformers had it right. No other ministry will do in the midst of a dark and dying world. No other ministry will save a dark and dying world. No other ministry will bring light in the midst of a dark world. No other ministry will bring life in the midst of a dying world. No other ministry will do for a church that knows her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A ministry that does not proclaim Christ cannot rightly be called a ministry of the two witnesses, for a ministry that does not proclaim Christ is no ministry at all.

The ministry of the church, then, does not consist of social action, as important as that may be. Nor does the ministry of the church exist in political action, as important as that may be. Nor is the ministry of the church to speak merely to the felt needs of the people, as though the religion of the church were little more than an opiate for the masses. The ministry of the church, let it be clear, is nothing less than the glorious ministry of Jesus Christ and His Gospel!

The ministry of the church is the proclamation of the glorious gospel. That this is the church's ministry is evident finally from the place of the lampstand in the temple. Do you remember the furniture of the tabernacle and of the temple? Do you remember the place of the lampstand? Do you remember where it stood? It was there in the holy place. It stood in the holy place between the altar of sacrifice in the outer court and the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. Between the outer court and the Holy of Holies—between the altar of sacrifice and the ark of the covenant—you have the lampstand in the holy place. In fact, in the Solomonic temple, there was not only one lampstand in the holy place, but ten, five lampstands on the south, five lampstands on the north, forming a passageway from the sacrifice of the outer court to the glory-throne of God in the Holy of Holies. The way from Golgotha,

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***With the power and strength of the Holy Spirit  
these offices shine forth as light in this dark  
world.***

the place of sacrifice, to the Holy of Holies, the Presence of God, is only through the One who proclaimed, "I am the Light of the World!" And the ministry of the church is to bear forth that Light! To illumine the way into the presence of the living God: such is the ministry of the two witnesses. Such is the ministry of the church. She proclaims Christ, the Light of the World.

And so, what of the church? What of the church? Does she seem insignificant? Does she seem powerless? Does she seem weak? Would you despise the day of small things?

Let the message of Rev. 11:3-4 be clear. God is presently at work building His church, and that work goes forth, not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Make no mistake about it. The church is being built even in the face of great opposition. When the last trumpet sounds, and the opposition is finally struck down, you may be assured, that the church will still stand! Do not despise the day of small things. Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord of hosts!

#### ***Endnotes***

<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my indebtedness to both Charles Dennison and Meredith Kline for many of the insights in this article: Meredith Kline for the insights on Zechariah, and Charles Dennison for the connections between Zechariah and Revelation.

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# Examining the Nine Points: An Introduction

## The Prologue to the Nine Points

*Synod affirms that the Scriptures and confessions teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone and that nothing that is taught under the rubric of covenant theology in our churches may contradict this fundamental doctrine. Therefore Synod rejects the errors of those:*

This preface to the Nine Points is particularly important as it establishes a fundamental point, a foundation, and conviction that guides the points that follow. Indeed, the Nine Points are really nothing more than an elaboration of this foundational truth.

Reformed theology is covenantal. Yes, Reformed theology must also be expressed in systematic and catechetical terms but covenant theology is the Reformed account of the history of redemption and it is substantially identical to what we confess in our Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort. Our understanding of the history of redemption and the progressive revelation of redemption is also summarized in our systematic theology texts. In other words, we have one faith that can be expressed in redemptive-historical (covenantal), systematic, or confessional terms. Because covenant theology is the shorthand way of saying, “the Reformed account of redemptive history” and it is that stuff that informs and controls

what we teach in systematic theology and what we confess as churches, to change our account of the history of salvation is to change our faith. Covenant theology is inextricably bound up with our confession considered narrowly as ecclesiastical documents and considered broadly as the Reformed understanding of Christianity.

Though there is room for difference of opinion, the Reformed understanding of Redemptive history is not endlessly elastic. For example, it is not possible to postulate that Adam was not the head of humanity or if he was he was only an example and that nothing he did does anything more than set a bad example, and still call oneself “Reformed.” That view would be the Pelagian not the Reformed view. According to the Reformed understanding of redemptive history, it is not possible to say that God established for national Israel one way of being accepted by God as righteous and being delivered from sin and judgment, and that God established another way of acceptance with God and deliverance from sin and judgment for the New Testament church. These are two boundary markers on which all Reformed people must agree, if the word “Reformed” is to have any fixed meaning.

### Variety Within Boundaries in Reformed Theology

For most of the last ten years we have been told by proponents of the so-called Federal Vision theology

that there were such great differences of opinion among the Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries regarding their understanding of the history of redemption that it is virtually impossible to say with certainty what constitutes Reformed “covenant theology.”

This claim would surprise the orthodox Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and it would also surprise their Arminian, Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, and Lutheran critics, all of whom believed that they knew the main lines of Reformed covenant or federal theology. Further, it would surprise those Reformed theologians in Europe, England, and Scotland to learn that there were fundamental differences in Reformed covenant theology.

What one finds is variety in the way Reformed writers spoke about the covenant made with Adam before the fall. Most writers spoke of a covenant of works, others about a covenant of nature, and still others about a covenant of life. In most cases, however, these writers were saying the same thing in different ways. To speak about a covenant of works was to focus on the condition of the covenant. To speak about a covenant of life was to speak about the goal of the covenant and to speak about a covenant of nature was to speak about the circumstance of the covenant. These were all complementary ways of explaining the covenant with Adam before the fall.

Before we move to the next two topics in covenant theology where one finds diversity in terminology

## THE NINE POINTS OF (URCNA) SYNOD (SCHEREVILLE) 2007

Synod affirms that the Scriptures and confessions teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone and that nothing that is taught under the rubric of covenant theology in our churches may contradict this fundamental doctrine. Therefore Synod rejects the errors of those:

1. who deny or modify the teaching that “God created man good and after His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness,” able to perform “the commandment of life” as the representative of mankind (HC 6, 9; BC 14);
2. who, in any way and for any reason, confuse the “commandment of life” given before the fall with the gospel announced after the fall (BC 14, 17, 18; HC 19, 21, 56, 60);
3. who confuse the ground and instrument of acceptance with God before the fall (obedience to the commandment of life) with the ground (Christ who kept the commandment of life) and instrument (faith in Christ) of acceptance with God after the fall;
4. who deny that Christ earned acceptance with God and that all His merits have been imputed to believers (BC 19, 20, 22, 26; HC 11-19, 21, 36-37, 60, 84; CD I.7, RE I.3, RE II.1);
5. who teach that a person can be historically, conditionally elect, regenerated, savingly united to Christ, justified, and adopted by virtue of participation in the outward administration of the covenant of grace but may lose these benefits through lack of covenantal faithfulness (CD, I, V);
6. who teach that all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way such that there is no distinction between those who have only an outward relation to the covenant of grace by baptism and those who are united to Christ by grace alone through faith alone (HC 21, 60; BC 29);
7. who teach that Spirit-wrought sanctity, human works, or cooperation with grace is any part either of the ground of our righteousness before God or any part of faith, that is, the “instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness” (BC 22-24; HC 21, 60, 86);
8. who define faith, in the act of justification, as being anything more than “leaning and resting on the sole obedience of Christ crucified” or “a certain knowledge” of and “a hearty trust” in Christ and His obedience and death for the elect (BC 23; HC 21);
9. who teach that there is a separate and final justification grounded partly upon righteousness or sanctity inherent in the Christian (HC 52; BC 37).

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(and sometimes a genuine diversity of doctrines), in connection to this first point it will be useful to address the repeated assertion that the “covenant of works” (or covenant of life or covenant of nature or covenant of law) is a uniquely “Presbyterian” or British doctrine and not a “Dutch Reformed” doctrine. As a matter of the history of doctrine, this claim is baseless. The doctrine of the covenant of works was just as widely held among the Dutch (and other Europeans) as it was among the British Reformed theologians. For example, the Dutch theologian Herman Wits(ius) (1636–1708), one of the leading European Reformed theologians of the second half of the seventeenth-century and widely regarded as a representative of the mainstream of Reformed orthodoxy wrote:

In the covenant of works there was no mediator: in that of grace, there is the mediator, Christ Jesus....In the covenant of works, the condition of perfect obedience was required, to be performed by man himself, who had consented to it. In that of grace, the same condition is proposed, as to be, or as already performed by a mediator. And this substitution of the person, consists the principal and essential difference of the covenants.

A second representative of Dutch Reformed theology from the same period should be enough to put to rest the claim that the “covenant of works” is not a “Dutch” doctrine. Wilhelmus ‘a Brakel (1635–1711) is widely recognized as one of the great theologians of the Nadere

Reformatie (roughly, Dutch Puritanism) and no one in the period of Reformed orthodoxy was more vigorous about the importance or necessity of the doctrine of the covenant works than he:

Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will very readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect. This is to be observed with several parties who, because they err concerning the covenant of grace, also deny the covenant of works. Conversely, whoever denies the covenant of works, must rightly be suspected to be in error concerning the covenant of grace as well.

The covenant theology of Witsius and ‘a Brakel was not exceptional. These two were mainstream Reformed theologians and quite representative of Reformed orthodoxy across Europe and Britain. Further, we should not accept the premise that there was a distinctively “Dutch” Reformed theology any more than we should accept the claim that there was a distinctive “German” or “British” Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Scholars of Reformed orthodoxy have known for many years that Reformed theology was an international phenomenon. The British Reformed theologians

were reading the Europeans and the latter were reading the former.

A second place where one finds some variety is in the way writers, particularly in England in the mid-seventeenth century, described the relations between the Mosaic covenant and the tenure of national Israel in the land. Some writers spoke of a works element relative to the land promises but others emphasized the Mosaic covenant as an utterly gracious covenant focusing on its relations to the Abrahamic promise.

A third area of diversity, in the classical period, concerned the way some writers related the eternal, pre-temporal covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son (*pactum salutis*) to the covenant of grace. Many writers in the seventeenth century spoke of an identity of the covenant of grace with the covenant of redemption and others distinguished them. Again, as in the case of the covenant of works, these two views are complementary. The same covenant of redemption can be reckoned as a covenant of works relative to the obedience required of the Son and it can be considered a covenant of grace in view of the salvation freely given to the elect.

The claim that there was a distinctively Dutch Reformed theology is what is known in logic as “special pleading.” In this case, this claim seems to have arisen during arguments in the Netherlands in the 1940s. The supporters of Klaas Schider, in reaction to what they perceived to be persecution by the Kuyperians, in the midst of a nasty theological and political fight, made

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the argument that they were the true heirs of the Afscheiding theology (the 1834 “Separating” by conservative and confessional Reformed folk from the national Dutch Reformed Church). In so doing, they cast their Kuyperian opponents as “scholastics.” This rhetorical move signaled to pastors and laity in their movement that the “scholastics” (i.e., the mainstream of sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed theology) were somehow tainted and not to be trusted. By this same period, for different reasons, Reformed theologians in the North America had also come to be somewhat suspicious of their own tradition. As a consequence, much of the Reformed world in the twentieth century lost contact with the sources of classical Reformed covenant theology.

Another reason that some readers have the idea that there was fundamental diversity in Reformed covenant theology is that they read back into the tradition the idiosyncratic covenant theologies developed in the twentieth century, during which time the orthodox or confessional view became the minority report. The reasoning goes this way: “I am Reformed. I think x. Ergo, x must be what we have always believed.” Of course, when put this way, it is easy to see that such reasoning is completely fallacious but that does not mean that it is not widespread. Some of our writers who revised the classical covenant theology were quite plain about what they were about. Others, however, have not signaled clearly that they were proposing a major revision of Reformed theology.

### **Reformed Theology is Covenant Theology**

Synod affirms that the Scriptures and confessions teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone and that nothing that is taught under the rubric of covenant theology in our churches may contradict this fundamental doctrine.

Reformed theology is covenantal. Not all “covenant” theologies are Reformed, however. There are a great many covenant theologies. The early and medieval churches had an account of the history of revelation and redemption that contained truths but also contained significant errors. Many of the fathers and virtually all the medieval theologians thought of Bible as containing two kinds of law, the old and the new. When these writers said “gospel,” they defined it as the “new law.” According to the medieval church, the difference between old law and new law is the greater degree of grace available (via the Roman sacerdotal system) under the new law enabling Christians to obey the law toward final justification. The pre-Reformation doctrine of “old law” and “new law” was an explanation of redemptive history and a kind of covenant theology and it was rejected by all the Protestants as an inaccurate account of the Biblical doctrine.

The Reformation formulated a significantly different account of the history of revelation and redemption. The magisterial Protestants agreed the Bible reveals that God entered into a legal relationship with Adam as the first head of humanity and, after the fall, he

entered into a gracious relationship with sinners, in Christ. The Protestants confessed that, after the fall, God revealed progressively one story of salvation, by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone. Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, and Calvin (to name but a few) taught explicitly that, relative to righteousness before God, the Bible has two ways of speaking to sinners throughout: “do” (imperative or law) and “done” (indicative or gospel). Thus, the relationship (covenant) that God made with Adam before the fall was fundamentally legal: “the day you eat thereof you shall surely die.” After the fall, the relationship (covenant) into which God entered and the promises that He made to all those who would believe was fundamentally gracious.

This distinction between law and gospel was a fundamental structure to the Protestant account of redemptive history, i.e. the story of the covenants in Scripture. Another fundamental structure was the idea of the covenant of grace whereby God made promises in types and shadows (by illustration and foreshadowing) to save His people by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestants, who developed this covenant theology, this way of reading the history of redemption, also wrote our catechisms and confessions. They did not see any tension between their reading of redemptive history and revelation and their systematic reading of Scripture and their catechisms and confessions.

They saw these two ways of accounting for the biblical teaching as closely interrelated. They said what they did about Reformed system and they confessed what they did because of the way they read the history of redemption (covenant theology).

What distinguished the Reformed from the earlier Protestants is that they developed a covenant theology more intentionally and thoroughly, but it is important to understand that, in the history of Reformed theology, covenant theology was not regarded a highly specialized, technical, or mystical discipline that only a few illuminati could understand. Covenant theology was simply the Reformed way of talking about the history of redemption and the progressive revelation of salvation. Our covenant theology was not terribly complicated.

This is important because, in the modern period, there has been a concerted attempt to drive a large wedge between systematic theology, our confessions, and what has come to be known as “biblical” or “redemptive-historical” (i.e. covenant) theology. Prior to the nineteenth century, however, there was no great dichotomy between these ways of doing theology. In the sixteenth century, one of the authors of our catechism, Caspar Olevianus (1536–87) wrote books on systematic theology, catechetical theology, and biblical or covenant theology. About the time of the Synod of Dort an Old Testament professor, Johannes Wollebius (1586–1629), wrote one of the more important handbooks of systematic theol-

ogy. Later in the seventeenth century, the great theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603–69) wrote books on both the history of redemption and on systematic theology.

In the next issue we will conclude the explanation of the preface to the Nine Points by considering the question of the relations between biblical, systematic, and confessional theology. We will also reckon with the influence some types of biblical theology have had upon the doctrine of justification.

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## **Mr. Henry Nuiver**

The Board of Reformed Fellowship extends its sympathy to the family of Mr. Henry Nuiver. Mr. Nuiver went to be with his Lord on February 5, 2008. Mr. Nuiver had faithfully served on the Board of Reformed Fellowship for several years. His dedication to the Kingdom of God, his love for the Church of Jesus Christ, and his diligence in serving his Lord were easily evidenced in his life and had a profound impact on all who knew him. We pray that the Holy Spirit will uphold his wife, Trudy, sustaining her and the Nuiver family with the rich promises of the eternal glory Christ has won for His elect.

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