

MAY/JUNE 2012

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

The Outlook

VOL 62 ISSUE 3

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Did You Receive the Holy Spirit?

Honor Your Mother

A Virtuous Woman Who Can Find?

A Call to Be Godly Men

Sarah: A Mother by Grace

Studies on Romans

How Should Moses Be Read?

The Titanic Century

Bavinck: The Origin of Sin (1)

Divine Hope in a Prison

Psalter Hymnal Committee Report

**When its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.
—Mark 13:28B**



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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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“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” —Acts 19:2a

More and more people are waking up to the truth that a change needs to take place within our society—not necessarily a political change, as offered in the United States four years ago, but a spiritual change. Hearts need to be changed. There can be no genuine change in the heart without the Holy Spirit.

I never cease to be amazed at the people I meet who claim to be Christians. Yes, they believe in God. Yes, they acknowledge the Bible as truth. They will even declare that Jesus is the Son of God who died and rose again from the dead.

Yet they live as if there were no God to whom they are accountable. More and more the question that Paul asked in Ephesus seems relevant for our day: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

Today that same question can be phrased, “Is your religion genuine? Have you experienced a true conversion? Is your religion only a matter of tradition and the result of certain customs, forms, or ideas? Do you have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit or a mere external religious profession?”

So many churchgoers fail to submit themselves completely to Jesus Christ and, in turn, fail to understand the comfort of belonging to Him in both life and death. For them the question asked by Paul might also mean: “Even though you say you are a Christian, do you possess the power of the Holy Spirit, the fervor and enthusiasm of the Spirit, and the assurance and the joy of the Spirit?”

Is it possible to have the Spirit and yet not be filled with the Spirit? It would be like having a couple of dollars in your pocket as opposed to having a wallet full of money. With a couple of dollars, you can buy a loaf of bread and have something meager to eat. With a pocket full of money, you can buy a whole stack of groceries and have the finest of meals.

It would be like having a flashlight with either fully charged batteries or batteries with only a little current left in them. Either way you have the batteries, but with a little current in them, you have only a little light; whereas with new batteries the light can shine brightly. So also there are many Christians who seem to have just enough current in them to get by, while others seem to abound in the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul’s Question in Ephesus

When Paul was in Ephesus he met twelve disciples who were not very far along in understanding of religious matters. They apparently understood the need for proclaiming repentance but could take that need no further than had their teacher, John the Baptist. This prompted Paul to ask them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

Their answer to his question was startling. They said, “No.” Then they added and even stranger comment, “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Paul was astonished. He could hardly understand how this was possible, so he asked them, “Then what baptism did you receive?” to which they replied, “John’s baptism.”



That explained it all. They had been baptized into the baptism of the last of the prophets from the old dispensation. He had baptized with water. He prophesied the coming of the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). He had pointed Jesus out as the Lamb of God (John 1:36). The disciples of John the Baptist were, no doubt, believers in the teachings of John. They had most likely known of the One whom John had pointed out as the Lamb of God and may have believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah. Paul seems

to consider them as believers, but as believers who lacked the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The significance is in the baptism they received. John the Baptist baptized with the baptism of repentance. These men understood and proclaimed the need for people to turn away from their sin. They understood the holiness of God and the need for people to be cleansed. Like many people today, they understood the evils of their generation and called for change.

But change to what? John's baptism was a preliminary and preparatory, pre-Christian baptism that emphasized repentance. It is not enough, however, simply to repent. That is why Paul adds, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." Christian baptism emphasizes faith in Christ. It presupposes knowledge of Christ's sacrifice and acceptance of Him as Savior and Lord. Such knowledge and acceptance come by faith, and faith comes from the Spirit.

When the disciples of John heard about the Christian baptism, they immediately wanted to be baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their desire was granted and they received the Holy Spirit.

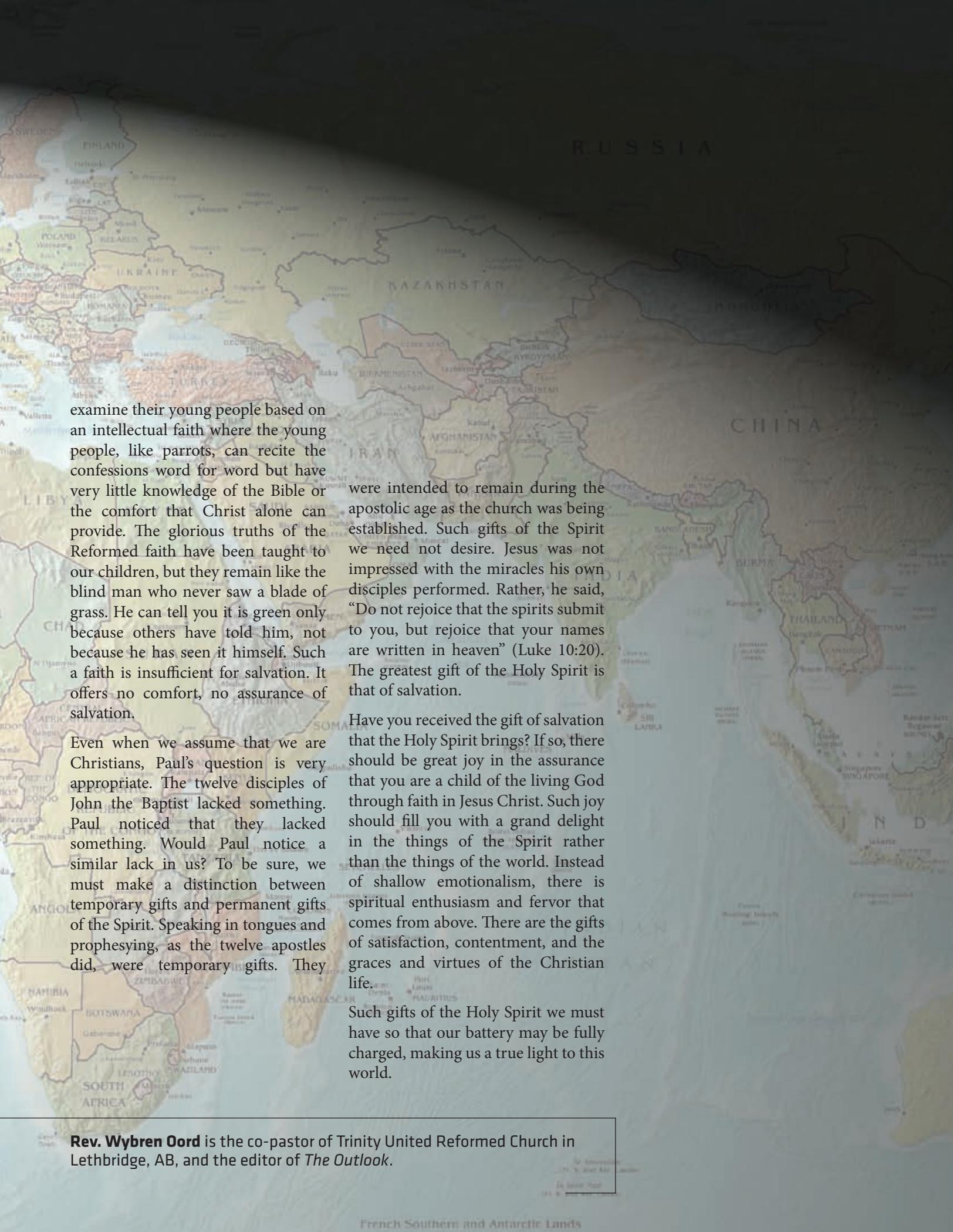
Paul's Question Today

If the same question asked of the followers of John the Baptist were asked of us, how would we respond? Not one reader of *The Outlook* would be able to say that he did not know that the Holy Spirit had been given. The church has celebrated Pentecost for longer than this magazine has been in print—much longer. The Bible clearly tells us who the Holy Spirit is and that He has come to dwell in the church and in the hearts of God's people.

If we were asked, as were John's disciples, "Did you receive the Holy spirit?" we would respond by saying, "Of course I received the Holy Spirit when I believed. If I believe at all, it is because of the Spirit's operation in my heart."

And that is true. Most Reformed people would get an A on their knowledge of the Holy Spirit. If we are believers at all, it is because the Holy Spirit has planted that knowledge and understanding in our hearts. Faith is the fruit of the Spirit. Yet all who believe are not equal. The Bible distinguishes between a living faith and a dead faith, a faith that saves and a faith that does not save, a faith that secures Christ's benefits and a faith that does not receive them.

In some churches young people are expected to make a confession of their faith, in which they acknowledge that they believe the truth of the Bible. In other words, they have a historic faith but may never have wrestled with the promises that God brings to those who acknowledge Christ as their Savior. Many Reformed churches



examine their young people based on an intellectual faith where the young people, like parrots, can recite the confessions word for word but have very little knowledge of the Bible or the comfort that Christ alone can provide. The glorious truths of the Reformed faith have been taught to our children, but they remain like the blind man who never saw a blade of grass. He can tell you it is green only because others have told him, not because he has seen it himself. Such a faith is insufficient for salvation. It offers no comfort, no assurance of salvation.

Even when we assume that we are Christians, Paul's question is very appropriate. The twelve disciples of John the Baptist lacked something. Paul noticed that they lacked something. Would Paul notice a similar lack in us? To be sure, we must make a distinction between temporary gifts and permanent gifts of the Spirit. Speaking in tongues and prophesying, as the twelve apostles did, were temporary gifts. They

were intended to remain during the apostolic age as the church was being established. Such gifts of the Spirit we need not desire. Jesus was not impressed with the miracles his own disciples performed. Rather, he said, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). The greatest gift of the Holy Spirit is that of salvation.

Have you received the gift of salvation that the Holy Spirit brings? If so, there should be great joy in the assurance that you are a child of the living God through faith in Jesus Christ. Such joy should fill you with a grand delight in the things of the Spirit rather than the things of the world. Instead of shallow emotionalism, there is spiritual enthusiasm and fervor that comes from above. There are the gifts of satisfaction, contentment, and the graces and virtues of the Christian life.

Such gifts of the Holy Spirit we must have so that our battery may be fully charged, making us a true light to this world.

Rev. Wybren Oord is the co-pastor of Trinity United Reformed Church in Lethbridge, AB, and the editor of *The Outlook*.

When you hear the word *honor*, what images come to mind? Do you picture a soldier dodging bullets to pull a comrade to safety? Do you picture a lineman taking a hard hit to protect his quarterback?

You mean you didn't picture a child interacting with his mother? The fifth commandment says that children are to honor their fathers *and* mothers. For all the accusations that the Bible is paternalistic or even chauvinistic, it's interesting that God addresses honor as it pertains to *mothers* and their children. God might have made the command generic: "Honor your parents." He might have mentioned only the father as representative of both parents. But as God sees it, the word *honor* should bring to mind a child interacting with his mother.

The command to honor mom is very practical. Most children spend more time with their mothers than their fathers. And in two-parent homes children sometimes tend to respect their father but dishonor their mother. The phrase, "Just wait till your father comes home," wouldn't exist if this weren't the case. Mom's spankings may hurt less, but that doesn't mean she deserves to be treated with less honor. Even if you haven't figured out what to get mom this year, it would be worthwhile to take a moment to hear what God has to say about honoring her.

What Is Honor?

Honor is made up of at least two parts that make it inherently unnatural. First, it is based on a principle of inequality. Second, it has to do with the heart.

Honor Implies Inequality

In the Bible *honor* conveys the idea of significance. To show honor means to value something because of its relative importance. This means that all things are *not* equal. Men are not equal to God. The six days of the week are not equal to the seventh. (Isa. 58:13). Ordinary citizens are not equal to the king (1 Pet. 2:17).

Likewise, children are not equal to their parents; in terms of eternal value, yes; in terms of position, no. God has made a distinction between parents and children that makes parents worthy of honor. Our society has lost much of what it means to honor. Indeed, the word seems to have an old-fashioned ring to it. We are taught today that everything and everyone is equal. The technical word for this belief in absolute equality is *egalitarianism*. Absolute equality excludes honor.

There was a time in our society when everyone would rise if an important person walked into a room, a time was when young people were expected to address older folks with a title of respect. This was not just being "old-fashioned." It was an expression of at least the leftovers of a biblical worldview. The Bible teaches us that honor should result from recognizing the distinction between ourselves and those that are in authority over us.

Honor Works from the Inside Out

In Ephesians 6 Paul exhorts children to *obey* their parents. But he supports

that command by citing the fifth commandment, which is a command to *honor*. He says that in order to obey your parents, you need to honor them. In other words, to honor is to show respect by your *actions*, which flow from the attitudes of your *heart*. Sincere honor precedes true obedience.

This is so important to grasp, especially at a young age, because this is also what it means to love God. Loving God is neither just about what we do nor just about how we think or feel about Him. Love is honor that expresses itself in obedience. Obedience without honor is cold-hearted legalism. A feeling without obedience is sentimentalism.

To say that honor begins in the heart is incredibly significant. To truly honor God and his societal order requires a change of heart. It requires a heart that first of all trusts in the sovereignty of God. It requires a heart that trusts in the promises of God. It requires a trust in Christ. Without true faith there can be no true honor. You can force external obedience; you cannot force honor.

How Do Children Honor Their Mothers?

It's one thing to say, "Happy Mother's Day, Mom." It's another thing to help make your mother happy in tangible ways. Here are four practical expressions of honor.

Love is honor that expresses itself in obedience.

Learn from Her Teaching

Mothers are teachers (Prov. 1:8). The best way to honor a schoolteacher is to learn from her. This applies in the home as well. From a strictly practical point, this should happen because moms know more than their kids. From a more theological standpoint, moms are one of the primary instruments that God has chosen to communicate his will. Moms need to see themselves as teachers. Their job description is varied, but near the top is the role of educator.

Obey Her

Children must obey their mother's law (Prov. 6:20). This means doing what she says with a cheerful heart. Parents must never separate obedience from honor. Where there is no honor, reverence or respect, there is no true obedience.

This is especially important for young men to hear. Wrong as it may be, it can be difficult for them to take orders from a woman. Young men need to learn that mothers, acting faithfully, represent God. "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1). One of the primary duties of husbands is to see that their children obey their mother. If there is anything worse than a child disobeying his mother, it's a husband who allows it to happen with impunity.

Submit to Her Discipline

From a parental perspective, mothers need to be discipliners. A disobedient son is a shame to his mother. "The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother" (Prov. 29:15). Except in extreme cases, mothers cannot afford to wait for dad to come home to discipline their children. Again, the father needs to stand behind the wife's discipline. From a child's perspective, the discipline of a mother and father should have the same effect.

Improve Her Quality of Life

This point will probably put a cynical grin on the faces of some parents: "Make my life easier, more pleasant? I can remember when my life was easier and more pleasant. It was *before* children!" But the Bible says that wise sons give joy to the one who bore them (Prov. 23:25).

In Bible times children were to honor their parents by physically supporting



them. (See Mt. 15:4–6. If you object that this is only applicable for adult children, then be ready to accept the biblical age of adulthood: thirteen!). I am not suggesting that every child over thirteen should get a job to support the family (although that may be necessary at times). I am saying that all children should have as their goal to improve the lives of their parents. Proverbs 31:28 says that her children rise up and call her blessed, literally, “Her children rise up and bless her.” This is not simply saying, “Bless you mom.” It is being a blessing to your mother by seeking to improve her quality of life.

Why Is This So Important?

In a word, it is because God promises curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience.

God Promises Curses for Disobedience.

The Bible is strong here: “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by

the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (Prov. 30:17). This is a startling passage, a little scary for children. Actually, that’s the point. The book of Proverbs was written from the perspective of a father to his son. It’s a book for young readers. God wants to impress on them the dreadful consequences of dishonoring their parents.

Consider another Proverb: “If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness” (Prov. 20:20). You say, “I have never cursed my mother.” Really? The basic sense of the Hebrew word for “curse” here is “to slight” or “make light of.” This brings it a little closer to home.

The Bible says that the way of the transgressor is hard (Prov. 13:15). Most of us have experienced the hard reality that comes from dishonoring parents. These scars can last for a lifetime. Those who choose not to live God’s way live without God’s blessing.

I would like to survey one hundred people who are living a hard life due to their own folly. I would like to ask them, “As a child, did you honor your father and mother?” My suspicion is most of them did not. This is why God says that the son who despises his mother is a fool (Prov. 15:20). If you dishonor your mother, then you are a fool because you cast aside the blessings of God’s will.

God Promises Blessing for Obedience

God promises a good life to those who, by faith, honor their mother and father. God has our best interest in mind. He knows what it will take for us to live a good life. The world pretends to know what makes a good life and offers us all sorts of substitutes. But God *promises* a good life to those who are content in submitting to higher authorities, including parents. Parents, lovingly remind your children that they need to honor their father and mother. Do this not to feed your egos but to see them live within the sphere that God blesses.

Some have questioned the literalness of God’s promise that children who honor their parents will enjoy long life. (Eph. 6:3). Very often, the godly *do* enjoy long life on this earth. But since some godly people die young, we know that something more is meant here. God’s promises always extend beyond time. They begin now but extend forever.

Living long and prospering has nothing to do with science fiction. Instead it is rooted in the everyday experiences of mothers (and fathers) and children living within the bounds of the will of God. This is the only sure recipe for a happy Mother’s Day.



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Rev. William Boekestein

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A Virtuous Woman Who Can Find?

Proverbs 31:10–31

Rev. Bryan
Miller



This passage is one of several that are often used to celebrate Mother's Day, as it directly describes the practical, everyday life of one who is an example of a wise mother. However, I am not going to address this passage as if it were only for Mother's Day. I think it is intended to be relevant for every person. There are many themes, phrases, and words that are repeated here that are found throughout the rest of the book of Proverbs. This passage may have been intended to summarize the whole book.

We are not certain who wrote this passage. The first half of Proverbs 31 was attributed to King Lemuel's mother. It seems the last few chapters of Proverbs were written by authors other than Solomon, almost as an appendix to Solomon's Proverbs. Some note King Lemuel's name has the name for God (*El*) in its suffix and think Lemuel may have been another name for Solomon.¹ Solomon did have at least one other name, Jedidiah (2 Samuel 12:25). But since the rest of Proverbs is directly attributed to Solomon, I see no reason for a change to a pseudonym here, especially when the previous chapter was also written by Agur, whose name is probably not even Hebrew. It is for these reasons that I do not think Lemuel was Solomon (in which case Lemuel's mother would have been Bathsheba).

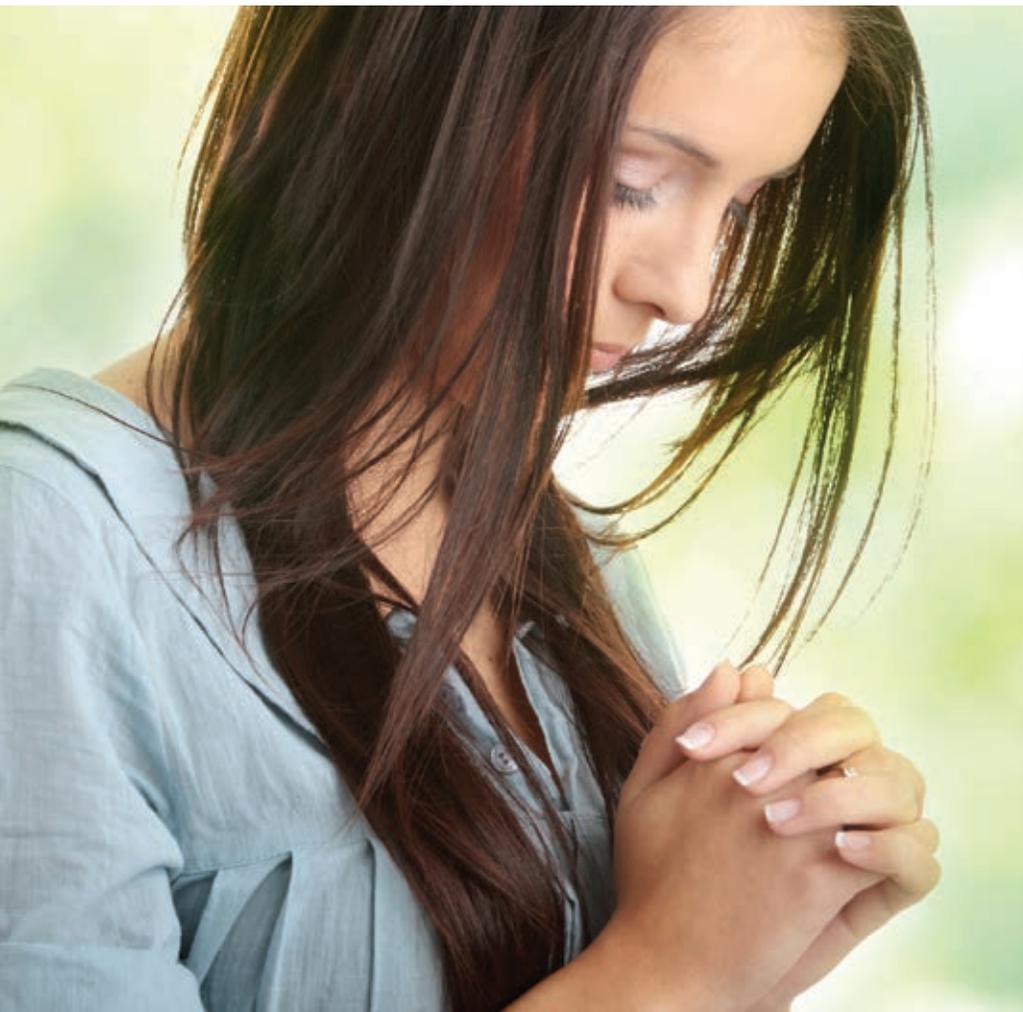
Some think that chapter 31 was from King Lemuel's mother, as she was the source of the first half of this chapter.² The suggestion is that King Lemuel's mother was trying to help her son find a wife of excellent quality by describing the perfect wife. She had previously warned him against "giving his strength to women" (31:3). But it is difficult to see how a woman who already cares well for her children could be presented as

an ideal mate. This section is also separated from the first half of chapter 3. It is an acrostic poem in Hebrew. Verse 10 begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, verse 11 the second letter, and so on, until the chapter ends. Others think Solomon wrote this passage, as the language is so similar to earlier Proverbs that were written by Solomon, and the themes throughout the book seem to be summarized here.

However, neither the theory of King Lemuel's mother as author nor that of Solomon as author seem to make sense in light of verse 23, which says that this woman's husband "is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land." Both Lemuel and Solomon were princes and then kings, as were their sons. Therefore to say that this woman's husband would be one of the many more common elders in the land would be a significant step down in terms of office, while the intent of the passage is to impress us with the benefits of having a wise wife, who is able to help her husband achieve a high status in the community. Had kingly types been in mind, then the benefit of having a wise wife would help establish the king's rule, not just confirm him as one of several elders in a town.

Another reason to doubt Solomon or Lemuel wrote this was because Solomon (and likely King Lemuel) had many wives, as was the common practice for rulers in that context—although Israelite kings were forbidden such by Deuteronomy 17:17. It was Solomon's many wives, including foreign ones, that led his heart away from the Lord by directing him towards idols and false gods (1 Kings 11:1–4). So it seems improbable that Solomon would encourage others to find "the one perfect wife" or to complain about himself not being able to find "the one perfect wife."

And yet I do think it is possible that Solomon wrote this passage with a different focus in mind. Earlier in Proverbs, Solomon went to great lengths to personify the character of Lady Wisdom, and perhaps he returns to that theme here to close his Proverbs. He may be encouraging his citizens to try to find a quality wife (or to be one), but above all perhaps he is extolling the many praiseworthy attributes of wisdom. He is encouraging us to value and praise wisdom, and he is calling for God's people to seek out wisdom.



Instead of thinking primarily about “the perfect wife,” it is more likely that Solomon was asking, as the KJV puts it, “Who can find a virtuous woman?” The Hebrew word can mean either. It is apparent from the rest of the passage that this is a married woman with children, but that does not necessarily mean that this lady’s role as a mother or wife should be the focus here. Beginning in chapter 1 Solomon described a specific woman, Lady Wisdom, as a woman who speaks, acts, and lives a certain way. Indeed one of her primary acts early in Proverbs is that she is constantly “calling out,” trying to “find” those who will listen to her.

Now perhaps Solomon is reversing the picture, asking who is able to recognize the value of wisdom and search for it (“Who can find a virtuous

woman?” in v. 10). Throughout the book of Proverbs Solomon has taught that finding wisdom is difficult. Many people do not undertake the journey. Even when they do, difficulties arise. Even the wise should not be wise in their own eyes, because perfect wisdom is never fully grasped in this world. We should continually seek after it all the days of our lives, as we will never fully reach the destination.

A second phrase in verse 10 also indicates that Solomon is the author. The saying that wisdom is worth “far more than jewels” occurs three times in Proverbs. Solomon wrote the first two, so it is likely that he wrote the third, found here, as well. That phrase also seems to indicate that Lady Wisdom is in view here. The only times the word *jewels* is used in the book of Proverbs is these

three references. The first was in chapter 3 verse 15: “She is far more precious than jewels.” The second was in chapter 8 verse 11, which says, “Wisdom is better than jewels; all that you desire cannot compare to her.” It is a solid indication that, since 31:10 uses the same phrase, this woman in Proverbs 31 is Lady Wisdom herself, and that Solomon wrote this passage.

Certainly the truths applied to the life of the married woman with children in chapter 31 are relevant to the life of a married woman in real life. But the picture of this woman is idealized and cannot be taken fully literally. If one were to try to apply verses 15 and 18 literally, it would mean that a mother should never sleep. Verse 18 says, “Her candle does not go out at night,” while verse 15 says that “she rises while it is still dark.” Perhaps the point is that there are times when, in order to meet the needs of the household, she is willing to stay up late or get up early. Sometimes Christian women feel guilty reading this passage because they do not feel like they are living up to the picture before them. Indeed it is an unattainable standard!

If we recognize that perhaps Solomon was using this imagery to summarize the whole book of Proverbs and to describe the fictional character of Lady Wisdom, it can help bring some perspective. The principles of wisdom found in this passage are just as relevant for any other person as well. In most of the book of Proverbs, Solomon was writing to his son, the prince, who would be king one day. For that very reason, many of the Proverbs have to do with ruling well, judging justly, and dealing with people. Yet no one would suggest that only princes who will be kings can learn from the lessons of wisdom taught throughout the whole book. Neither here is the intended audience only mothers but also all people who are interested to learn from Lady Wisdom and to heed her advice. Whether you are a man

or a woman, married or single, child or adult, wealthy or poor, wisdom is worth getting.

So Solomon is probably asking, “Who can find wisdom” in verse 10 rather than, “Who can find the perfect wife and mother of his children”—as if most Christian wives and mothers were not very good ones and a good one is incredibly rare! Likewise verse 29 seems to contradict the idea in saying, “Many women do excellent things [same word, ‘excellent,’ as in v. 10], but you surpass them all.” The point here is not that there should be some kind of competition or comparison between different wives and mothers, but rather that godly Wisdom is superior to all alternatives.

A few possible alternatives to true wisdom are given in verse 30: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Worldly wisdom is a false kind of wisdom and very different from biblical wisdom. There are many false alternatives to biblical wisdom. The kind of godly wisdom found in the Bible is very closely related to righteousness. Many proverbs are moral and ethical commandments. Worldly wisdom can include living selfishly, greedily, for power or fame or pleasure. But godly wisdom is superior to and better than the false alternatives, though they may be charming and superficially appealing.

And then there is the phrase, “A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (v. 30). That is a reference to chapter 1 where we find almost the same phrase. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.” Guess what? Wisdom begins and ends with the “fear of the Lord,” and this is one more indication that the woman in view in chapter 31 is Lady Wisdom herself.

There are many other parallels to verses found earlier in the book of Proverbs. Verses 11–12 say that wisdom is a trustworthy guide who

will bring good and not harm all the days of our lives. Godly wisdom isn’t the critical, cynical, self-righteous, arrogant wisdom of the world that often tramples others underfoot. Godly wisdom is gentle and kind. She brings good and not harm. Verse 26 says that she is a teacher of kindness when she speaks. The word for *kindness* here is the same word used often to describe God in the Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word *chesed*, which means *lovingkindness* and *faithfulness* and describe God’s relationship with his people. Wisdom is ultimately an attribute of God and his righteousness.

Verses 13–19 contain more parallels to earlier themes in Proverbs. Wisdom is hard working, smart working, not lazy, responsible, financially cautious and fruitful, meeting the needs of her family and those in her household. Verse 20 speaks of concern for the poor, which is a theme often repeated in earlier proverbs. Verses 21 and 25 speak of her confidence and trust in God with her life and her future. She has so firmly placed her life and times in God’s hands that she can “laugh at time to come.” She trusts God so much with her circumstances that she is not afraid for her household in the winter (v. 21). Yet she does not use her trust in God as an excuse to neglect taking appropriate precautions but prepares her household for winter. She simply is content to leave the results up to God. She knows where her responsibility ends and God’s begins, and she recognizes His prerogative above hers. These principles are certainly applicable to the life of a wife and mother but no less so to every other person, regardless of age or position in life.

As we come to the end of the book of Proverbs, the gospel is immediately relevant. Many times we do not pursue wisdom; many times we make foolish decisions. The very presence of the book of Proverbs with all of its moral instruction implies that

God’s people have much to learn from it, as we fall short due to the sinful nature that still remains even in the Christian. Jesus came not just to teach us more wisdom—though He did that. But Jesus came to be our wisdom for us. There is a close connection between godly, biblical wisdom and righteousness; perhaps they are identical. First Corinthians 1:30 connects these two ideas with Jesus, saying that “[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”

Jesus did not come primarily to be our teacher but to be our Savior. He actually accomplished all that we fail to do, and He earned our salvation for us. In the double exchange in the gospel, Jesus takes all His wisdom and righteousness and credits it to our accounts so that we can be clothed in His righteousness before God, acceptable and pleasing to Him through Christ. Jesus also took all our sin and put it on Himself on the cross to pay the penalty for our rebellion against God. And Jesus is still willing and able to receive and forgive anyone who will look to Him by faith and to trust that He has provided everything we need for life and salvation before God. “To all who received Him, he gave them power to become children of God who believed in His name” (John 1:12).

1. Matthew Henry wrote “Most interpreters are of opinion that Lemuel is Solomon” *Commentary on the Whole Bible Vol. 3* (Public Domain, 1706), 31:1.

2. This was the view of Charles Bridges, *Proverbs*, The Crossway Commentaries, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Book, 1998), 280.

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A few years ago I was asked to lead a workshop on the roles of men and women. As I was preparing, I was again struck by the immense need of our time for men to be real *men*. I do not mean men as it is defined by the world: the image of a macho, sports fanatic, who is so self-absorbed that he does not have time for anybody else. I mean *real men*, as God defines and prescribes men to be, godly men, who take the Word of God seriously, who are devoted not to their work or their hobbies or their sports but who are devoted to God! I mean men who take their calling as husbands and fathers seriously, seeking to be loving, sensitive, and caring to their wives, and attentive, inspiring, and instructive to their children. This is the need of the hour, and a desperate need at that. Dr. James Dobson calls the recovery of the husband's leadership in the home "America's greatest need":

A Christian man is obligated to lead his family to the best of his ability . . . If his family has purchased too many items on credit, then the financial crunch is ultimately his fault. If the family never reads the Bible or seldom goes to church on Sunday, God hold the man to blame. If the children are disrespectful and disobedient, the primary responsibility lies with the father, not his wife . . . In my view, America's greatest need is for husbands to begin guiding their families, rather than pouring every physical and emotional resource into the mere acquisition of money.¹

He is absolutely right! What we need are more men who are more concerned about the glory of God and the good of their families than about money and recreation. More than ever we need men who embody and exude the biblical pattern of Christ-like headship so that our young boys can see the wonderful example of what a true man is. Our culture is so filled with godless examples of perverse men who deny on every level the biblical pattern of manhood that our children hardly get to see what true, godly, Christ-like men are supposed to be. If we do not live it, where will they ever see it?

For churches that are committed to the biblical perspective (1 Tim. 2–3; 1 Cor. 14) that men alone may serve in the offices of minister, elder, and deacon, the obligation and necessity for men to strive to be God-centered and not self-centered should be even greater. The rise of the movement for women in church office is not primarily the result of feminism but the lack of able and godly men who willingly take the lead at church and at home. See how John Piper puts it:

If I were to put my finger on one devastating sin today, it would not be the so-called women's movement, but the lack of spiritual leadership by men at home and in the church. Satan has achieved an amazing tactical victory by disseminating the notion that the summons for male leadership is born of pride and fallenness, when in fact pride is precisely what prevents spiritual leadership. The spiritual aimlessness and weakness and lethargy and loss of nerve among

men are the major issue, not the upsurge of interest in women's ministries.

Pride and self-pity and fear and laziness and confusion are luring many men into self-protecting, self-exalting cocoons of silence. And to the degree that this makes room for women to take more leadership it is sometimes even endorsed as a virtue. But I believe that deep down the men—and the women—know better.²

I think all Christian men must think long and hard about what Piper is saying here. Are we guilty of shutting ourselves off from our tasks at church or at home in "self-protecting, self-exalting cocoons of silence"? Are we willing, or do we even desire, to spend time in God's Word alone, and together with other men, so that we will be able to lead our family and God's people spiritually, or would we much rather spend our time on entertainment, sports, hobbies, or diddling in the garage? How the church and our families need men who are truly God-centered! Piper asks,

Where are the men with a moral vision for their families, a zeal for the house of the Lord, a magnificent commitment to the advancement of the kingdom, an articulate dream for the mission of the church and a tenderhearted tenacity to make it real?

When the Lord visits us from on high and creates a mighty army of deeply spiritual men committed to the Word of God and global mission, the vast majority of women will rejoice

over the leadership of these men and enter into a joyful partnership that upholds and honors the beautiful Biblical pattern of mature manhood and mature womanhood!³

Let us begin to pray that God will visit us and create such a mighty army of deeply spiritual men committed to his Word! Our churches and our homes desperately need it! The well-being, harmony, love, and joy of our churches and our homes depend upon it. Let us never stop praying that God would bless us with godly men!

But brothers, while we pray we must be at work. We must seek out God's Word. We must give ourselves to following Christ and putting into practice the requirements of his Word for ourselves and our families. As spiritual leaders of our homes we must avail ourselves of every opportunity to study God's Word and to be held accountable to it! Are you taking the time to study God's word for yourself? Are you part of a Bible study group or men's group that will hold you accountable? Do you surround yourself with friends who will challenge you to grow in Christ? Are you reading anything that stimulates your spiritual growth? Oh men, let us not neglect the means God has provided to help us to grow and become more and more what he call us to be: godly men!

1. Quoted by John Piper in "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity," page 39 in the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Crossway, 1991).

2. *Ibid.*, 53.

3. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

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**“Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.”
—Genesis 21:1**

Quite often we say about someone who was a devoted Christian that he or she was a true saint. I have heard children say it about their father: “He was a saintly man,” or about their mother: “She was a real saint.” However, without questioning the wonderful spiritual example a father, a mother, or some other person may have been to us, when we call a person a saint, and wish to be biblical about it, we must always remember that a saint is always that only because of God’s grace. In fact, a saint—a word with the original meaning of “one called to be holy”—is by nature a sinner saved by grace.

One of the saints of old mentioned in Scripture of whom that description is certainly apropos was Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Abraham is called in the Bible “the father of all believers.” He was indeed a great man of faith. Yet he also had some serious lapses of faith in his life. Sarah does not receive the equivalent title of “the mother of all believers.” Yet, like her husband, she, too, was a person of faith. And, like her husband, she also suffered some serious lapses of faith. Hence, we could well call Sarah a mother by grace—that is, a mother who though a sinner, experienced the rich grace of God—not only in her salvation, but also in becoming the mother of a covenant child, and of a covenant people.

Sarah’s Special Heartache

First of all, however, we should note that Sarah had a special heartache—one that she carried for most of her life—in fact, for almost ninety of the 127 years she lived. Her heartache was that God had not given her any children until she had reached the age where she was no longer able to bear a child. We read in Genesis 18:11, “Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years. And Sarah was past the age of childbearing.” At that time Sarah was eighty-nine years old. Indeed, the special burden

of Sarah is mentioned already when we first read about her in Genesis 11. She had married Abram in Ur of the Chaldees (at which time she was called Sarai), and before Abram left Ur to follow the call of God to go to a land God would show him, we are already informed in Genesis 11:30, “Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.”

Sarai moved with Abram from Ur to Haran. Abram was seventy-five years old at that time, and Sarai was sixty-five. Then, after spending some time in Haran, Sarai followed her husband as he moved on to Canaan. Sarai was also a beautiful woman. Her great beauty is mentioned several times in Scripture. Her original name Sarai meant “my princess,” perhaps because she looked like one. Indeed, because of her beauty Abraham lied several times about her being his wife, claiming she was his sister. Technically she was. Sarai was Abram’s half-sister, sharing the same father Terah but having a different mother. Another thing about Sarah’s situation was that she was married to a rich man, for that is what Abraham was. By today’s standards, he would have been a millionaire. So, Sarah had beauty and wealth.

However, she lacked something that she deemed much more precious, something that neither beauty nor



wealth could buy. She was not a mother, and it pained her deeply. To be sure, Sarai realized that her inability to have children was not her doing. She recognized the hand of God in it, as she told Abram in Genesis 16:2: “The Lord has kept me from having children.”

Yet, though she recognized God’s hand in it, her heart bled within her. Why? Well, for one thing, because God created woman to bear children. That was a woman’s greatest blessing and calling, and still is. It may sound strange to many modern ears to hear that. Under the influence of the today’s secular, feminist culture, many scoff at the role of women as child bearers and mothers. They claim that a woman, like the man, can just as well find her chief delight and fulfillment in a career and other aspirations.

To be sure, the Bible does not deny that a woman can meaningfully function and serve with her gifts in other ways beyond the home and caring for children. Yet her chief fulfillment, certainly when married, and the way God has made woman biologically and emotionally, is that she can bring forth children into this world. Hence, it is a great heartache for such a woman—even more so than for the man, her husband—when God in His inscrutable will does not always fulfill that desire. We must always remember those who carry such a burden in our prayers.

However, another reason this was a heartache for Sarah was because she knew the promises God had made to her husband Abram. He would become the father of a great nation and the progenitor of an offspring whose number would be like the stars of the sky and the sand by the seashore. Sarah was certainly aware of

these divine promises. But how could they be fulfilled if she was barren? Would she have the privilege of being the one through whom they would come to fruition? So this was a difficult test for her. And as the years went by, she must have wondered more and more whether God would indeed give Abraham offspring through her.

Sarah’s Lapse into Sin

Sarah got desperate at last, and her desperation led her into sin. One such sinful lapse is recorded in Genesis 16, which again begins with her plight: “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.” Frustrated by her barrenness, she urged her husband Abram to take her maidservant Hagar as a concubine and conceive children through her. Concubines and polygamy were not unusual in the time of Abram. Even men of God practiced it, and God did not expressly condemn their action. Nevertheless, it was not God’s desire. He had instituted monogamy before the fall of man as the pattern for marriage. It was no wonder that polygamy among God’s children always led to marriage and family problems.

Abram should not have consented to his wife’s urging. He, as well as Sarah, had a lapse of faith in the promise God had already made to them to give them offspring. They took matters into their own hands without consulting God. And it led to problems later on. The birth of Ishmael from Hagar was a source of further aggravation to Sarah. Her unkind treatment of Hagar was another evidence of Sarah’s sinful nature.

God’s Gracious Gift

However, despite Sarah’s sin, she was not only a child of God but also became the recipient of his special grace. God made a covenant with Abraham to be his God and the God of his descendants. That covenant

promise also included Sarah, who would become the mother of those descendants. So at last God fulfilled his promise to Abraham and Sarah. Genesis 21 begins: “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age.” What a great miracle and blessing this was for this old couple! For neither Sarah nor Abraham was any longer physically able to reproduce. They were the Old Testament parallel to the New Testament couple Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. They received from the Lord the gift of a special son, in a miraculous way.¹

Abraham named his son Isaac, a name that means “he laughs.” Abraham had laughed in disbelief when God told him at the age of ninety-nine that he and Sarah would have a son the following year. And Sarah, too, had privately and unbelievably laughed at this announcement. But at the birth of Isaac they had both laughed with joy. Sarah’s response to this amazing gift of God’s grace was: “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

What a surprise of joy God brought into her life! It’s a joy that especially mothers experience after the pain of childbirth. The pain is immediately forgotten and replaced with the joy of the gift of a child from the Lord. So, God was indeed gracious to Sarah.

However, that was not the only joy in His gift of a child to her. It was even more special in that through the gift of this child, God was fulfilling His covenant promise to Abraham to make him into a great nation who would become God’s covenant people. That nation was not only the Jews but would also later include Gentiles. It would ultimately be fulfilled in that

holy, elect nation of all true believers. They would become the true seed of Abraham. But God chose to bring this about through the womb of Sarah. In addition to the account in the book of Genesis, there is one other Old Testament reference to Sarah. It is found in Isaiah 51:2, where God says to His people: “Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.”

We noted earlier that Sarah’s name originally was Sarai, which means “my princess.” Then God changed it to Sarah, as He changed Abram’s name to Abraham. Sarah also means “princess.” However, she was no longer just Abraham’s princess, his honored wife. But as God said in Genesis 17:16, “I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

Who was the greatest king that would come from her? The Lord Jesus Christ, as to his human nature. Jesus came from the line of descent going back to Sarah and Abraham. That is the greatest way in which God was gracious to Sarah in making her a mother. From her eventually the Savior of the world would come to earth. God gave Sarah Isaac to fulfill His greatest of all promises, the promise of salvation through the birth of His Son. That was no doubt God’s greatest gift to and through Sarah.

Sarah’s Godly Example

Sarah also showed God’s grace in her life through her godly example, as a woman saved by grace. This comes through in what Peter says of her in 1 Peter 3, where the apostle addresses Christian wives and mothers (and some of what he says would apply to single women as well). Peter emphasizes the importance of women showing forth spiritual beauty in their lives. In that connection he cites the example of Sarah. Sarah was a physically attractive woman,

as noted earlier. However, Peter urges women not to be concerned about their external beauty but to cultivate a spiritual beauty, clothing themselves in the garments of purity and reverence. This is especially important as women live in a society filled with impurity and immodesty and lacking any respect for God’s will.

In addition, Peter urges Christian wives married to unbelieving husbands to show these godly virtues in their marriages. Instead of seeking to impress their husbands with their external beauty, they should show them “the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” How counter-cultural that counsel is in our modern society! After this, Peter points us to the women of old, like Sarah, who put their hope in God. Sarah’s faith was not always steadfast. She fell into sin more than once. Yet ultimately she put her hope in God.

And thereupon, Peter continues and says about these saintly women of old: “They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master.” It’s a statement that would no doubt set off fireworks today. Must women not only obey their husbands, but even call them “master”? Sarah did, but not in a fawning, slavish way. We can be sure that she also called Abraham by more endearing terms. She loved him as her husband, and he loved her as his wife. But she also recognized his headship over her. She respected him as her spiritual leader.

There is one critical incident in Abraham’s life, after Isaac’s birth, where Sarah’s role and name are never mentioned. It may seem a surprise to us. It’s the time God told Abraham to offer up his only son Isaac. We know what happened and how Abraham responded to this command—by an obedient faith. But what about Sarah? What did she think of this as the mother of her only son, a son born from her in her old age, the joy of

her life? How did she respond to this incredible command of God to kill Isaac on an altar? We do not know. The Bible does not say. But is her response not implied in what Peter writes about her? As a woman of godly hope and reverence, and one who honored and obeyed her husband, can we not be assured that she was in accord with Abraham’s decision to offer up Isaac in obedience to God’s command, hard as it no doubt was?

Sarah was a woman of faith in God. Therefore her name, too, is mentioned in Hebrews 11 among those saints who lived by faith. She knew and trusted the One who so graciously included her in His covenant and granted her His grace. May she remind all women, mothers, and daughters today—indeed, all believers in Christ—that we must manifest a holy beauty before God and the world, in our godly conduct and reverential spirit in our daily lives and roles. Then we also will be true saints—recipients of God’s eternal grace who live out our calling to be His holy people.

1. This is not to say that in some sense every child born manifests the miraculous work of God.

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Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 9: By Faith Alone (1), Romans 4:1–8

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I know a wonderful man who owns an excavating business. He tears down buildings so that Americans can build bigger buildings. He once told me, “Every morning as I drive to the city, I thank the Lord that I have job security.” He answered my puzzled look by adding, “Almost every building you see will be replaced within forty years. People in America don’t like old stuff.” How true. If the American mindset were in Rome, the Colosseum would have been turned into low-rent apartment buildings long ago—or a multi-level parking lot. We want things that are new. We are not content with the old.

That presents a problem for people who read Romans 4. Paul uses this chapter to explain that the radical teaching of Romans 3 is not new at all. Rather it is the old, old story of how God has been saving people from the very beginning of history.

In addition, many people today want a religion that makes them feel good about themselves. *Sin* has become a four-letter word as churches teach that the Sermon on the Mount begins with the “be-happy-tudes.” Never mind what is right and wrong; never mind what is truth and what is a lie. The prevailing question for many is, “How do I feel about myself with this religion?” And, should the elders of the church point out that our lifestyle may be contrary to God’s will rather than in compliance with His will, we will change churches. Churches abound

that approve paedocommunion, women in leadership positions, same-sex marriages, and a host of other things. I know of a church that counsels expectant teens by driving them to the abortion clinic.

Paul, on the other hand, deals with logic. What good is your religion if it does not save you? You can have all the touchy-feely emotional highs your religion has to offer, but it is all useless if in the end you are still at enmity with God and destined for eternal condemnation. It is ironic that while Jews demanded miraculous signs and Greeks looked for wisdom, Paul confronted them with logic—and they thought he was foolish! Today, as well, the unbeliever considers Christianity to be foolishness when, in fact, it is the only worldview that logically makes sense. Many scientists today are abandoning evolution for the more logical view of an intelligent Designer. Which is more logical: life begins at conception or the zygote is only a potential human? Ask any livestock owner what he expects as he breeds his cattle, hogs, or sheep. He can very quickly point out the foolishness of those who think the fetus is only a tumor or a lifeless mass.

And so it is with salvation. Which means of reconciliation with God is more logical: one of God’s choosing or one of man’s design? Ask anyone who has ever grossly offended another person. Reconciliation must come on the terms of the one offended. After spending three chapters explaining how man has offended God, that all

are guilty before God, and that man must be reconciled to God in order to be saved, Paul explains how God Himself has graciously provided salvation through faith in His Son’s sacrifice on the cross.

Abraham’s Faith

In explaining that his teaching was not a new doctrine, Paul points his readers to Abraham. The Jews had long claimed Abraham as their father. When Jesus had confronted them with His teachings, they had retorted that Abraham was their father (John 8:39).

Unfortunately, the Jews misunderstood the faith and righteousness of their ancient ancestor Abraham. Many Jews believed that Abraham was a good and pious man who delighted in believing and obeying God. Based on his own goodness and piety, God saved Abraham. This is clearly salvation by works. It was the religion of the Pharisees who thought they could boast in their prayers saying, “I thank Thee, Lord, that I am not like the others.”

If Paul could prove to the Jews that Abraham was justified by faith (and not by works), they would have to believe in Jesus Christ. To combat their erroneous teaching, Paul brings the Jews back to Genesis 15:6 where God inspired Moses to write, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Genesis 15:6 is the first time in the Bible where we hear about faith, righteousness, and justification. *Faith* is something you believe, trust, or hope. For example, when you enter a room and see a chair you have faith that the chair will hold you up should you sit in it. Acting on your faith would be moving across the room to actually sit in the chair. *Righteousness* is being right with God, without sin, holy. Paul has just spent three chapters explaining how Jews and Gentiles alike have no righteousness of their own. We therefore stand in enmity before God until we can be declared righteous. The word *justification* does not actually appear in Genesis 15:6, but it is contained in the phrase “credited to him.” In spite of Abraham’s sin, God treated him as if he were righteous. As such, justification is not an action on the part of Abraham but a decree on the part of God. The difference between the tradition of the Jews and the logic of Paul is rooted in why God credited Abraham with righteousness. The Jews believed that Abraham was declared righteous *because of* his faith. Paul argued that Abraham was saved *by* faith.

When you go to the store with a twenty dollar bill, you may rightly expect to receive twenty dollars worth of groceries. You have faith in the purchasing power of that little piece of paper that has a twenty engraved on it. It is not your faith in that bill, however, that gives the twenty its purchasing power. The purchasing power of the twenty is given to it by something outside of yourself. I recently was given a one hundred trillion dollar bill (no kidding—fourteen zeros!) from the bank of Zimbabwe. It has a legitimate seal and serial number on it from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe. It is legal tender. Let’s suppose I take my newfound wealth and go to Walmart to buy a new tie. And I expect change. I daresay

that I would find out very quickly that my faith in the purchasing power of that bill was misplaced. Its actual value is under two dollars.

It is faith that motivates you into action, but your faith is not enough. It is not your faith in a chair that holds you up; it is the strength of the chair. It is not your faith in a twenty dollar bill that buys the groceries; it is the government’s guarantee to back up the purchasing power of that bill. Likewise, Paul argues that a person’s faith in what reconciles him to God has to be in the right thing. You must have faith in Jesus Christ to save you. Your faith itself, however, is not the thing that saves you. Your faith is not what gives Christ to power to save you. Your salvation must rest in something outside of yourself, and that is the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on the cross of Calvary. The worth of our salvation is in the work of Jesus Christ, not our faith. His sacrifice and His righteousness must be imputed to you.

Paul’s logic is very clear. It was not Abraham’s faith that saved him; it was his faith in the right thing—the righteousness of the promised One that God credited to him. Faith is not enough. Faith must be in the right thing—not your works, not yourselves, not your self-righteousness, but the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As Christians we live because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If ever we would think that we are righteous on the basis of our faith, we need only look at our sinful behavior (even as born-again believers) to know how much we need the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

David’s Faith

Paul continues to present his case by using logic. He moves away from Abraham, whom the Jews knew the Old Testament recorded as “a

friend of God” (2 Chron. 20:7, Isa. 41:8), to focus on David, a man after God’s own heart. Quoting Psalm 32, Paul presents three very important lessons on sin and how David viewed forgiveness.

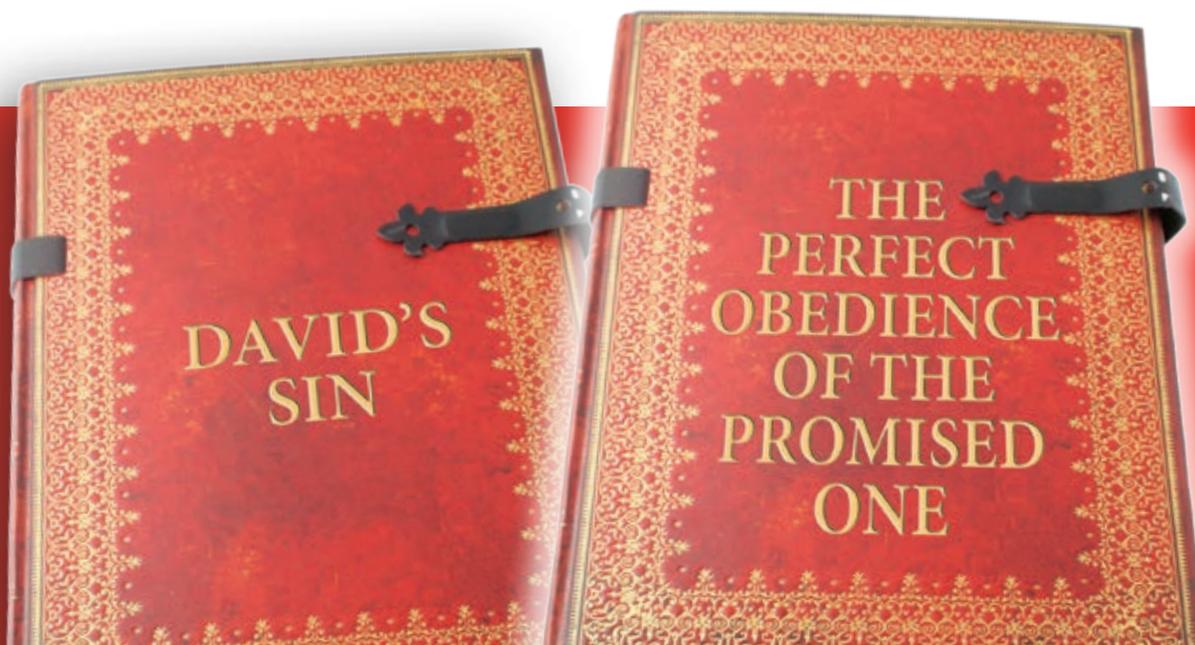
First of all, his sin was forgiven. The word used in the Greek can be translated “sent away.” David rejoiced that his sins have been sent away. The reference, of course, is to the scapegoat. In the Old Testament, the sins of the people of Israel would be placed on a scapegoat. The scapegoat would then be sent away from the city. This became very clear imagery of how the sinner is separated from his sin by a substitute. By means of the substitute, one’s sins were removed from him. David could rejoice in the glorious truth that his transgressions had been removed from him as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

In addition, his sins were covered. This was a reference to the great Day of Atonement when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the mercy seat of the ark. One of the items in the ark was the tablets that had written upon them the Ten Commandments. Once a year, the High Priest would pour the blood of the lamb on the mercy seat that covered the Law of God. The atoning blood became the memorial symbol of sin and salvation—Israel’s rebellion and God’s grace. Even so, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, shed His blood to take away the sin and rebellion of all who call on Him. Their sins are covered by His blood.

And finally, David rejoiced in Psalm 32 because the Lord has not counted his sin against him. Two ledgers have been kept. On one was written David's sin; on the other was written the perfect obedience of the Promised One. By judicial action, David's debt had been written on the ledger of the Messiah. The Messiah's righteousness had been placed in his account. The sovereign, gracious God looked upon

David, clothed in the righteousness of the coming Christ, as if he had never sinned. So also, when we look to the sacrifice of the Promised One, Jesus Christ, our sin is imputed to Him and His righteousness is placed in our account. The God against whom we have sinned must then look upon us just as if we had never sinned.

Surely, using these two key Old Testament figures should have been enough to convince the Jews to place their faith in Jesus Christ. It should convince us to do the same. In His mercy, God has provided the way for us to be reconciled to Him. It is not by works, lest any man should boast. It is all through Christ Jesus who gave Himself up as the perfect once-for-all sacrifice for our sin.



Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. In what ways has the world (and often the church) adopted foolish teachings? Why do they cling to such teachings?
2. Why does Paul appeal to the faith of Abraham in explaining salvation? What misconceptions of Abraham's faith did the Jews have? Are those misconceptions prevalent today?
3. How was Abraham saved?
4. What does the word *it* stand for in Romans 4:3?
5. Is justification a judicial act of God or is it an inward work of God? What is the difference? Why is it important to distinguish between the two?
6. Martin Luther said, "I am a sinner and righteous at the same time." How do you understand that statement?
7. How is having your sins sent away a comfort to the Christian?
8. What does it mean that your sins are "covered"?
9. "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:8 NIV84). How significant is the word "never" in this verse? How does it compare to man's forgiveness?

Bible Studies on Romans

Lesson 10: By Faith Alone (2), Romans 4:9–25

Rev. Wybren H.
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P Paul continues his logical explanation of why salvation is apart from the law and only to be rooted in a true faith in Jesus Christ. Having shown the Jews how the father of their race, Abraham, was declared righteous by grace through faith, and not of his own merit, Paul turns his attention to a second icon of the Jewish faith—circumcision. If what Paul had written about Abraham in the opening verses of this chapter was revolutionary, this would be even more so!

Paul presents the case that Abraham did not receive his righteousness because he had been circumcised. Remember, this was the boast of the Jews back in Romans 3. If all else failed and it could be argued that they, too, were totally depraved, they still had the mark of the covenant to prove that they, unlike the Gentiles, were children of God.

Paul argues that Abraham's righteousness cannot be credited to him because he was circumcised. After all, he was declared righteous by God in Genesis 15 and circumcised in Genesis 17, fourteen years later. If, then, Abraham is declared righteous prior to his circumcision, the declaration of righteousness is not based on the ritual of circumcision. The logical conclusion would be that

Abraham cannot be declared as “your father” by the Jews simply because he and they were circumcised.

So how does Abraham become “your father”? That question has been wrestled with for many generations. In the broadest sense, Abraham is the father of all the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael (not to mention the children of Keturah). Muslims can claim Abraham as their father because they are descendants of Ishmael. A more narrow view limits the fatherhood of Abraham to the descendants of Isaac because Isaac was the son of the promise. This is what the Jews believed. Paul, however, places the fatherhood of Abraham on a more spiritual plane. He argues that Abraham is not a person's father because he is circumcised or uncircumcised but because that person believes as Abraham believed. Abraham is the father those who have the same type of faith that Abraham had. They, like Abraham, are credited with righteousness.

The Law vs. Faith

Prevalent in Paul's day were three teachings toward salvation. The Jews taught that a person was right with God only through perfect obedience to the law. Judaizers believed in the sacrifice of Christ but taught that salvation came through Jesus Christ and obedience to the law. Paul taught that salvation comes by faith alone.

A rich young ruler once approached Jesus and asked Him how to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16; Mark 10:17). Jesus replied that he was

to keep the law. The young man's response was that he had, indeed, kept all the law since his was a boy. To that Jesus replied, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:18). The Bible tells us that the young man left very sad because he had great wealth. Often this passage is used as an argument against the wealthy. Jesus later said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). It was not, however, the wealth of the young man that Jesus condemned. Jesus squelched the self-righteous thinking of the rich young ruler. The young man must have been rather excited to hear that salvation was through the keeping of the law. After all, he thought he had kept the law since he was a little boy. In one sentence Jesus pointed out the fallacy in his thinking by declaring that he could not even keep the first of the Ten Commandments. He had replaced love for the one true God with his love for wealth (1 Timothy 6:10). So certain was he of his own righteousness that he failed to see the desperate need he had for the righteousness of Christ.

When a person seeks salvation through the law, faith has no value to him. That person would see no purpose in following Jesus, as was commanded of the rich young ruler. After all, if the law could save you (something Paul proved wrong), salvation would be self-motivated. It would be based on your own actions, and you would have no need of faith.

On the other hand, if you think faith will save you, then the law is not unto salvation. Paul has already argued, however, that reconciliation with God comes only through faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to the believer.

Furthermore, salvation through the law would make the promises of God worthless because they would become conditional. God would then say, “If you keep My law, then I will love you.” instead of “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Such was the teaching of the Pharisees. They built precept upon precept in an effort to gain the approval of God. Rather than assuring them of God’s approval, Jesus had some very harsh words for them in Matthew 23, calling them blind fools and whitewashed sepulchers.

Unfortunately, this also seems to be the thinking of many people today. How many parents don’t tell their children, “God doesn’t like it when you act that way”? Certainly, God does not like it when we break His law, but like the Pharisees, we add to His law by chastising our children with comments like: “God doesn’t like it when you don’t take out the garbage”; “God doesn’t like it when you don’t go to bed on time”; “God doesn’t like it when you eat so fast.” Those who use this tactic of “discipline” teach their children that God is some bad guy who hates everything we do. The only way we can please Him is through perfect obedience—an impossibility for those whose hearts are only evil all the time.

Finally, Paul teaches that those who seek salvation by means of the law are doomed to failure because the law can only bring wrath. It can do nothing but condemn. How do we know our sin and misery? It is through the law.

Does that make the law evil? Certainly not. The law is to be used to point us to our need for the Savior that God has provided, Jesus Christ. A mirror is not defective when it shows you that your face is dirty. That is the purpose of the mirror. Likewise the law is not defective because it cannot save you. It was never meant to save anyone. It was given to drive us to God’s mercy and grace in Christ Jesus.

Faith vs. the Law

Just as the law points us to works and our failure to perform them, so also faith points us to grace. We must come to an understanding through the law that we cannot obtain salvation by our own merit. Therefore, we must trust that someone else will provide salvation for us. That Someone Else is the very God whose law we are unable to keep. It is no wonder that Paul later cried out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:24). Only the God against whom we have sinned can rescue us out of our sin.

In addition, faith makes salvation certain. Obviously, if we would rely on works for salvation, we would have to comply with God’s standard set before us in the law. However constant that standard remains before God, sinful man would water it down, giving us a false assurance. Since no one is perfect, we would seek instead to be honest. What makes a person honest? One small lie is okay, perhaps two. Maybe three lies would be acceptable if he was a really nice person. Look how society has changed the standard of what is right and wrong over the last few decades. As in the days of Isaiah, we declare what is good as evil and what is evil as good (Isaiah 5:20). Over time, instead of seeking to be honest, we would teach that salvation is based on how nice a person is. Unable to be nice, we, like the military, would seek a few good men. How many funerals have

you been to where, as the minister preached the person into heaven, you wondered if you were in the right place? Faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ is complete, for it is rooted not in our works but in the work of our Savior. Clothed with His perfect obedience, we measure up to the perfect standard.

Finally, faith opens the door of salvation to all, Jew and Gentile alike. Salvation is not a matter of what outward rites or ceremonies to which we have subscribed. It is not limited to a certain race. It is a matter of faith. God justified those who actually and completely place their trust and faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. All who believe that Jesus kept the perfect standard set by God and that He was truly righteous not only have their sins forgiven but they also have His righteousness imputed to them. God has promised salvation to all who trust in His Son’s sacrifice, and to that promise God will most certainly be true.

Abraham’s Faith

Once more Paul returns to the faith of Abraham. That faith was rooted in the promises that God was able to do what God said He would do. The promised blessing did not depend on Abraham’s performance; the blessing came from the generosity of God. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, Abraham believed that he would become the father of many nations—because God had said so! According to human calculations the promise of God that Sarah would bear a child was impossible. She was beyond childbearing years; Abraham was old. Yet he knew God would keep His promises and give life to those who were as good as dead.

Abraham believed God would not lie; His faithfulness is beyond measure,

Isaac was as good as dead, but Abraham believed that God could bring Isaac back from the dead even if he died. So also the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, was literally raised from the dead.

and He is able to accomplish and fulfill His promises. Even when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and it seemed as if the promises of God contradicted the command of God, Abraham believed that God was truly almighty and could make the seemingly impossible a wonderful reality as He had promised. Isaac was as good as dead, but Abraham believed that God could bring Isaac back from the dead even if he died (Hebrews 11:19). So also the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ, was literally raised from the dead.

Abraham glorified God by letting God be God and trusted Him to be true to His promises. That which God has promised shall come to pass. God treats all matters that have not happened as if they have

already happened because He is in complete control. He is the sovereign God, directing all matters to their completion. God could declare Abraham righteous through Christ even though Jesus had not yet accomplished the atoning sacrifice for his sin. God is not limited to time, and in His mind the future is as certain as is the past.

The promises made in the Old Testament now have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Whereas Abraham looked forward to the promises, Paul argued that the church today must look back to the revelation of God's faithfulness displayed and fulfilled. Jesus Christ was delivered over to death for our sins. He has paid the cost demanded by God in Genesis from all who disobey Him (Genesis 2:17). Those who believe that the death of

Jesus was made on their behalf have their disobedience and sins imputed to Him.

Paul also writes that Jesus was raised for our justification. The perfect obedience of God's Son is imputed to those who believe in Christ. Through Him they are declared righteous. Therefore, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ!

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Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. Why did Paul make such a fuss about when Abraham was circumcised?
2. How does Paul argue against those who taught that salvation was by keeping the law?
3. What is the function of the law?
4. How does Paul defend salvation by faith alone through grace alone?
5. In what did Abraham place his faith? What assurance was found in that faith?
6. How did Abraham give glory to God?
7. How does Abraham's faith relate to our faith?
8. How does our faith go beyond the faith of Abraham?



Over the last half-century or more the dominant view regarding the Mosaic covenant—though by no means the only view—was that it was an administration of the overarching covenant of grace *with no antithetical works-inheritance principle*. Recovery of the teaching of early, historic Reformed teaching, namely, the view that the Mosaic covenant does indeed convey a works-inheritance principle, has generated a good bit of debate over the last few years. Advocates on both sides of the dispute have claimed to be the accurate interpreters of the tradition since the opening days of the Protestant Reformation. Both cannot be true. The present controversy rests partly on misunderstanding of the issues in dispute and partly on issues that entail a decidedly different reading of Scripture and tradition. At the heart of the dispute is appropriation or misappropriation of the Protestant law/gospel contrast. Simply stated, the gospel sets forth the principle of justification/salvation by grace through faith, on the merits of Christ's righteousness accruing from his work of substitutionary atonement. The law propounds the principle of inheritance/reward on the basis of the creature's perfect keeping of God's commandments. This principle is formative in the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works, the covenant God made with Adam before his fall into sin. Those who adopt the doctrine of the covenant of works, including the idea of meritorious reward with respect to Christ's redeeming work, yet deny the role of merit in the covenant with

Adam at creation and in the Mosaic covenant, have to one degree or another undermined the doctrine of Reformed soteriology, consistently formulated.

The focus of this article is the legal feature of the covenant God made with Moses and all Israel—*legal* here construed as antithetical to *gracious*. The doctrine now widely disputed can be stated in these terms: Under Moses there is a *republication* of the works-inheritance principle, the principle operative in the original covenant with Adam prior to his transgression. God's covenant with Moses is *in some sense* a (modified) covenant of works. In current discussion the phrase *in some sense* is drawn from my 1980 doctoral dissertation ("The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics," completed at Westminster Theological Seminary).

There are two aspects of the debate, biblical and historical-theological. Before addressing each of these, a word of clarification is in order: Acknowledgement of the works-inheritance principle in the covenant with Adam (reinstated with modification in the covenant with Moses) is not optional, the present writer maintains, within the parameters of Reformed-evangelical interpretation. To be sure, the theological picture is a bit complicated and clouded. Thanks to genuine progression in theological understanding that comes over the course of the history of doctrine, it is my contention that we are now

in a better position to concede that *aspects* of teaching found in Reformed scholastic federalism, that is, Reformed Orthodoxy in the late seventeenth century onwards, are no longer tenable and, therefore, must be rejected. To continue to hold to teachings that are speculative, not biblical, serves only to fuel unnecessary conflict and discord. Given the clarity that has now been attained in theological discourse, we are afforded the opportunity to transcend previous conflict. To that end we turn to Scripture, the source of the church's theology.

Scripture Speaks: The Church Listens

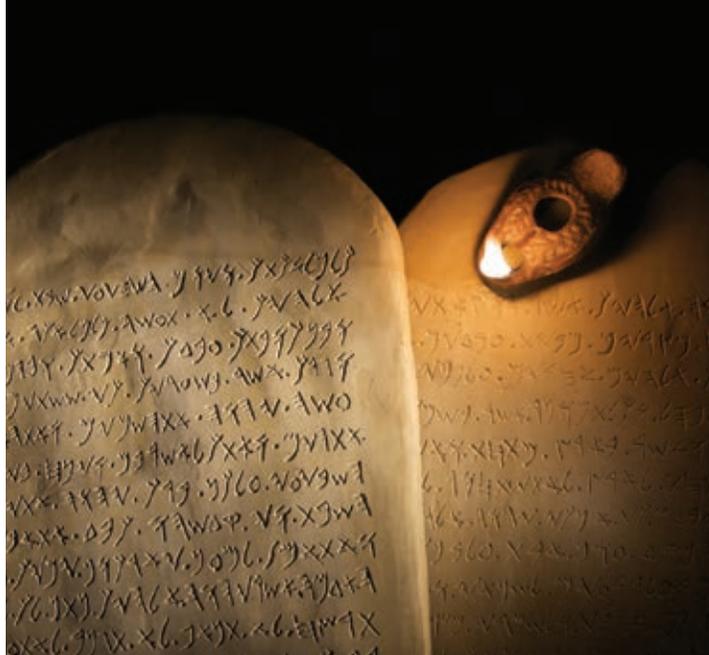
Paramount in formulations of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone is the law/gospel distinction. This distinction is of equal weight to the Creator/creature distinction within the Reformed system of doctrine. Procurement of God's eschatological blessing—what is the consummation of God's purposes in creation—has been granted to creatures (re)made in his own image by means of God's covenant sovereignly administered and maintained over the course of redemptive history. The beneficiaries of this gracious disposition are the elect in Christ. Caution must be exercised against speculative notions of creaturely autonomy, on the one hand, and false dichotomizations between an alleged "order of nature" prior to and distinct from the covenant administration established in creation, on the other. This false

dichotomy appears in the writings of several notable Reformed systematians.

Prominent in the teaching/preaching of the apostle Paul is the role of the Mosaic law in the history of redemptive revelation. The law is Israel's *schoolmaster*, leading her to faith in Jesus Christ as the One who alone redeems sinners from the curse of the law (see especially Gal. 3 and 4). In one of his sermons Paul declares: "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren,

that through him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38–39 NASB). Space does not permit an exhaustive explanation of the peculiar operation of the works-principle within the Mosaic economy, except to say that the legal principle functions on the *typological level of life in the land of Canaan*. Blessing and prosperity in Canaan are contingent on Israel's compliance with the law of Moses. (Spiritual blessing is contingent on the merits of Christ's righteousness exclusively.) The works-inheritance principle explains the tutelary, pedagogical use of the law. By frustrating Israel, resulting in her exile to the land of Babylon, the law points guilty sinners to Jesus the Messiah for life and salvation. Forgiveness of sins, which comes to all who trust in Christ, is a once-for-all benefit, secure and indefectible. Unlike the temporary forgiveness experienced by corporate Israel under the provisions of the Mosaic law regulative of life in earthly Canaan, this spiritual benefit is of eternal weight and value. (True Israelites enjoyed this benefit by virtue of faith in the Messiah to come.)

Elsewhere the apostle explains:



"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:21–26 NASB). The righteousness of the law, a reference to the works-inheritance principle, is antithetical to the righteousness that comes by faith apart from the works of the law. The tenth chapter of Romans elaborates on these contrasting principles (uniformly referred to as the law/gospel contrast in evangelical Protestant theology). Paul makes personal application of this gospel-truth in his autobiography (Phil. 3:1–10; cf. Paul's discussion of the role of the regenerating, illuminating Spirit of Christ in 2 Cor. 3:13–18).

Reformed Dogmatics: The

Church Responds

All of the Reformed confessions adopt the Protestant law/gospel antithesis, which antithesis has immediate ramifications for the Reformed doctrine of the covenants, the covenant of works (with Adam before the fall) and the covenant of grace (extending from the fall to the consummation). This is the *unanimous consensus* of the Reformed churches since the Protestant

Reformation, extending into the period of scholastic Orthodoxy and well into the twentieth century (at which time the doctrine of the covenant of works has come under attack within the "orthodox, evangelical" camp). How important is this doctrine? And what are the issues at stake?

Diversity of opinion surrounds the interpretation of the Mosaic covenant, whether or not there is a works-principle functioning at some level within the old economy of redemption. Despite the clarification that has come in recent years, Reformed interpreters (exegetes and dogmatians) remain polarized. Are we guilty of imposing a false schematization on the biblical text, in either affirming or denying the two-covenant doctrine (the covenant of works and the covenant of grace)? This is the question today. Space here does not permit a defense of one side or the other. We can only raise the question to those who deny the works-principle in the Mosaic covenant: How can we explain the exile of Israel to Babylon if the house of Israel had been the beneficiary of God's saving work (by virtue of all the benefits under the covenant of grace)? How can we explain Moses' exclusion from entrance into the land of promise (following his disobedience to God)?

Is not something else at work within the old, Mosaic economy, which comes to a decisive end/abrogation with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the new and better covenant?

Far more serious is repudiation of the doctrine of the covenant of works on the part of some. The issue came to a head in the teachings of Norman Shepherd at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia back in the mid-1970s (a dispute that extends to the present). If there is no principle of works-inheritance in the first covenant at creation, then obviously there is no works-principle in any of God's covenants. It was John Murray who first attempted to recast Reformed covenant theology by distinguishing between the original Adamic administration (which he preferred not to call a covenant) and the covenant of grace (which manifested God's gracious, *redemptive* provisions to fallen humankind). Despite the oddities of Murray's formulations, he did not deny the works-*merit* principle in regards to the conditions defining the Adamic administration (specifically, Adam's time of probation). He did entertain the Mosaic covenant as a purely gracious arrangement (recall that Murray preferred to define covenant as redemptive provision exclusively). All told, Murray vigorously upheld the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. Such was not the case with Murray's successor at Westminster. Shepherd views both faith and the good works of those *united with Christ* as "instruments" in the appropriation of justification, that is, the "way of salvation." Hence, the believer is justified by faith and good works. Together faith and good works weigh in on the final day of judgment (justification/judgment according to works). Shepherd's theology continues to have its passionate advocates among those who first stood beside him in the seminary

controversy and those who espouse a form of "multiperspectivalism" to justify Shepherd's theologizing. (More on this is closely detailed in my trilogy: *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective*, *Gospel-Grace: The Modern-day Controversy*, and *Federalism and the Westminster Tradition*, all published by Wipf and Stock; 2000, 2003, and 2006 respectively).

Throughout international Calvinism, past and present, the theological tradition under study has indisputably recognized itself to be "reformed and *always* reforming." While sharing high regard for the church's creeds and confessions, the Reformed tradition readily acknowledges that these confessional statements are neither infallible nor inerrant (Scripture alone bears these traits). Not only are there elements of confessional teaching subject to ongoing debate—for example, the Puritan versus Continental understanding of the Christian Sabbath, the meaning and length of the "days of creation" in Genesis 1—there are also more weighty, foundational issues in dispute today, such as the doctrine of justification by faith alone (bringing into view differing assessments of the role of good works, if any, in the procurement of justification/final vindication) and the legal covenant of works with Adam and with Israel at Sinai. These latter two are of great theological consequence.

Expressed in other terms, essential to the doctrine of justification and the covenants is the historic Protestant law/gospel antithesis. This subject addresses doctrines intimately related to one another in the biblical text, most notably in the writings of the apostle Paul. When we rightly maintain that perfect obedience is required of the first and second Adams in their probationary role, and when we say that this perfect obedience is necessary for the attainment of consummate, eschatological blessing

(eternal enjoyment and fellowship with God), we are essentially adopting the "merit" principle. It is by the merit of Christ's righteousness (or the merit of Adam's righteousness, had he passed probation in Eden) that all those represented in federal headship are confirmed in righteousness for all eternity. This reward of the covenant is freely granted by God to the creature, the son of God, fashioned in God's own image. (See my previous article, "The Glory of God: Archetypal and Ectypal—Part Two: The Image of God." *The Outlook* [July-August 2010] 9–12.)

For many, lurking behind the modern-day view regarding the Mosaic covenant as a pure administration of redemptive grace is disdain for the law/gospel antithesis, traditionally understood. The Shepherd dispute has served to advance the age-long debate among the churches of the Reformation regarding what is the heart of the gospel, justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law. The spiritual blessings of redemptive covenant are indefectible. Christ in his saving work has secured these benefits to all those united to him by grace through faith. Resolution of the current debate awaits an outcome faithful to Scripture, devoid of speculative notions and false schematizations. May God be pleased to bring unity in the truth in our day.

Dr. Mark W. Karlberg obtained three theological degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, including a doctorate in Reformation/Post-Reformation Studies. He is the author of *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (2001) and *Gospel Grace: The Modern-Day Controversy* (2003), both published by Wipf & Stock.

The Titanic Century

Jeremiah 13:1–11 and 29:4–14

Rev. Christo
Heiberg

Exactly one hundred years ago, on Sunday morning April 15, 1912 at 1:30 A.M., something happened that continues to fascinate the world. After two hours of steady flooding, the huge, unsinkable luxury liner, the Titanic, began to submerge into the icy waters of the Atlantic four hundred sea miles off the coast of Newfoundland. There were over twenty-two hundred people on board on this massive ship's maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York.

On the previous night, Sunday April 14, just before midnight, those who were still awake could hear a faint scratching sound from the bow. The ship had sideswiped an iceberg on a peerless starry night, with the ocean as flat as a mirror. The starboard side of the hull was ripped open for over three hundred feet, exposing six watertight compartments to the deep, dark sea. The only effect on board was a tinkling of cutlery and glasses. The late night card games and chatting could go on. Most of the passengers were already fast asleep, also the poorer ones who were hoping for a new life in a new world on the other side of the Atlantic.

Why should we pay attention to a maritime disaster that occurred one hundred years ago? Because what happened to the Titanic was so hugely symbolic for what was about to happen to Christian Europe—and the entire world—during the century that would follow. It was a sign from above, I believe, of what was going to come unless the nations of Europe would humble themselves before the Almighty. A vessel with so much pride was sprinting so smartly to a new world with such

promise, only to be mortally nicked by something as old and cold as a drifting iceberg. The result was utter consternation and chaos, a disaster of mammoth proportions, resulting in fifteen hundred souls perishing and a stunned silence on both sides of the ocean.

Very few understood the lesson. It was all soon forgotten, and hence the twentieth century became the bloodiest in all of history, and Christian Europe changed into secular Europe, with massive effects on every one of us here today.

The prophecy of Jeremiah, and especially its 13th and 29th chapters, helps us to view this sad tragedy from a biblical angle.

The God of Jeremiah Is the God of History

The prophet Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet or the prophet with the broken heart. He lived in a small village called Anathoth and was called by God at a time when Judah and Jerusalem were unusually stubborn and set in their evil ways. Yet God in His great mercy sent this prophet to His people with a stark message of clear warning. In this message God made it abundantly clear: "I am the sovereign Ruler of the destiny of my people, and not only of my own people, but of all nations and peoples on the earth. That's why you need to listen to Me."

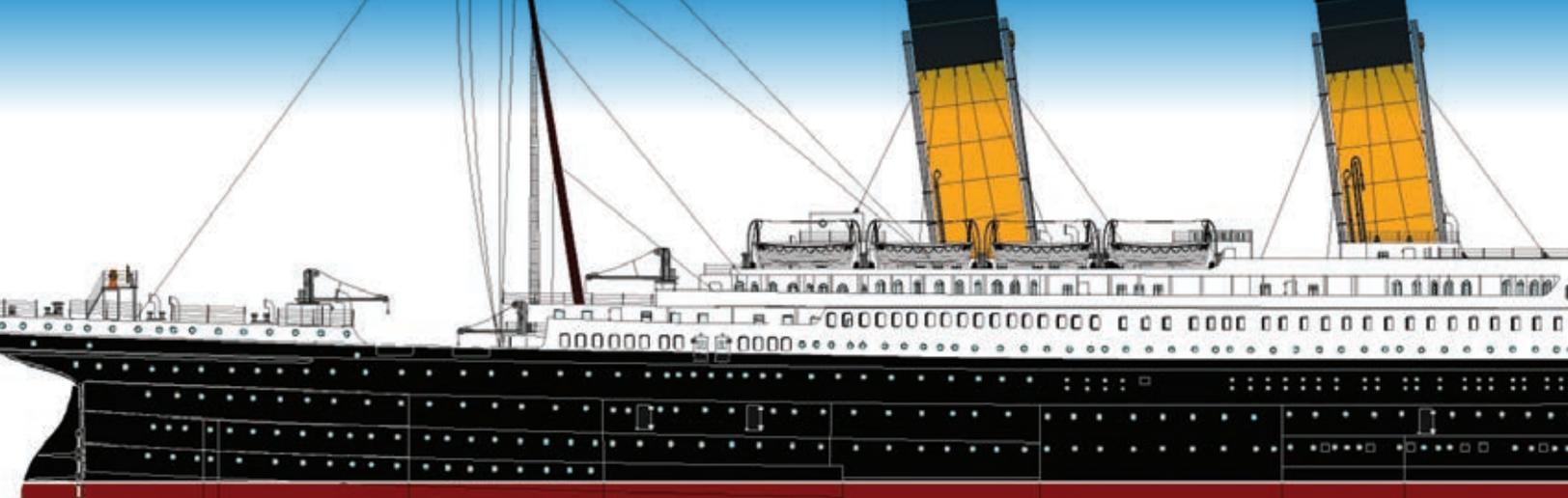
Jeremiah did not have an easy task. It was so hard that he sometimes wished he had never been born. In chapter 20 he cries out: "Cursed be the day that I was born. Why did I ever come forth from my mother's womb to see all this labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?"

So what made his life so hard? It was this: He was sent by the living God to His covenant people with a message about the future that they did not want to hear. They did not want to touch the topic of the future, at least not from Yahweh's point of view. The God who determines the destiny not only of individuals and of families but also of tribes and nations was calling for their attention, but they would not listen.

We see this already in the opening chapter in his calling. The word of the Lord came to the Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon, the king of Judah, and also in the days of his son Jehoiakim, until the eleventh year of Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, until Jerusalem was carried away into captivity (cf. 1:1–3). "Then the Word of the Lord came to me saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I sanctified you, I ordained you a prophet to the nations'" (1:4–5).

Jeremiah resists, claiming that he's not a good speaker, that he's too young. But the Lord says: "Don't say that. Don't say that you are too young, Jeremiah, for you shall go to whomever I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you." And so the Lord stretches out his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth and says to him: "Behold I have put my words in your mouth. See I have this day set you over nations and over kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant" (1:10)

Right after that the Lord shows him



two signs. The first is an almond branch. It carries a very simple message. The Lord is saying: “I am watching over my word to perform it” (The word for *almond* and for *watching* is the same in Hebrew).

The second sign is a boiling pot, tilting over from the north. This also carries a simple message: Out of the north disaster is going to come on the inhabitants of the land. “For behold I am calling all the tribes and the kingdoms of the north, and they shall come . . . to execute my judgments upon this wayward people.” Why? Because they have forsaken the fountain of living waters, only to hew for themselves cisterns that can hold no water. They have forsaken their Glory for those that are no gods.

While Jeremiah is still overwhelmed by his new task, the Lord then says to him: “Dress yourself for work! Arise and go and tell them all the words that I tell you.” Is there a single one among us who would envy that calling? Certainly not! And yet this call came from a God who determines the destinies of nations and who loves his people with an everlasting love. That’s why He sent this man with this solemn message to His people.

Who predicted the imminent destruction of Jerusalem? Was it not the same Jesus who wept over the city? Who warned us so repeatedly against judgment day and hellfire? Was not the One who died for us on the cross?

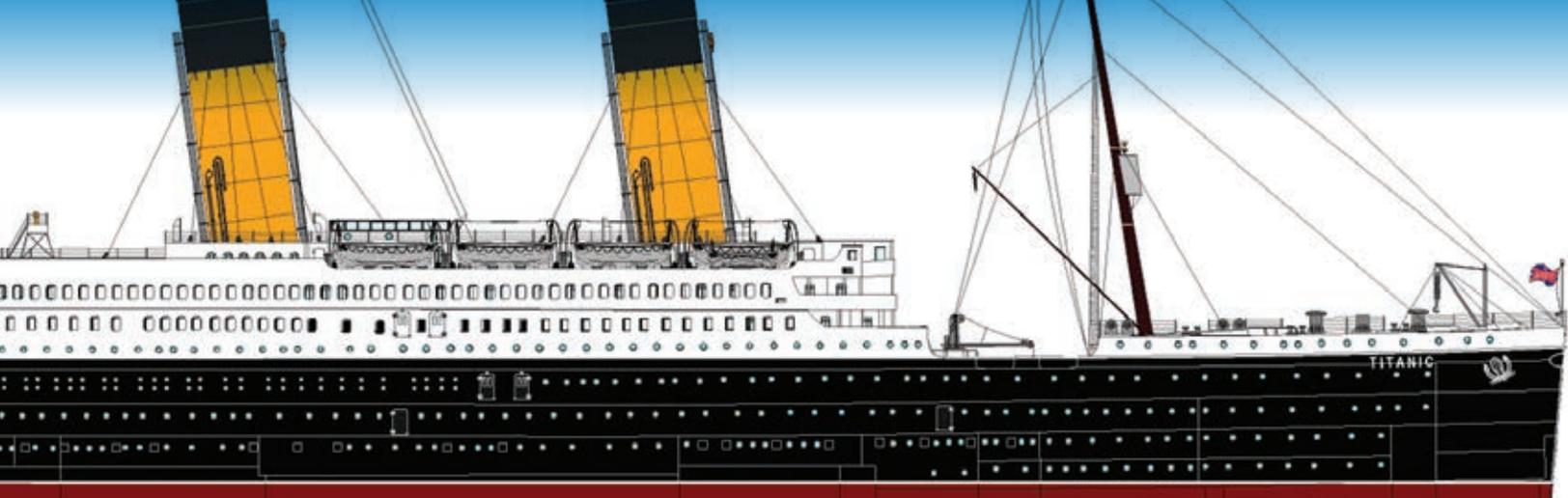
It’s only a God of love who can send a man like Jeremiah with a message of such warning to a people so wayward. Many of us think a God of love must always speak softly and comfortably. The false prophets of Jeremiah’s day also thought so. We also think the living God is only (or mainly) concerned about our personal salvation, and maybe for our families and churches. The Bible however, reveals to us a God who cares for this world, a God who is the God of history, a God of the nations. This much is abundantly clear not only from Jeremiah but also from all of Scripture from Genesis through Revelation. “Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe before Him,” says the Psalmist (33:8).

I got an unexpected telephone call from an old friend back in South Africa the other day. We know each other from our army days. He has been doing quite well in business and was just calling to hear how I am doing. Halfway through our conversation

he said this: “I am finished with the church. Not with God, but with the church. My wife still wants to argue, but I am done with it. I will just continue to worship God in my home with family.”

I asked him why. What made you decide to take such radical step, my friend? His answer was simple. I have heard it many times before over the last decade or so. It is this: “The church (in South Africa) let us down. The church never spoke to our deepest crisis, our country’s crisis. It let us down. It let us down in the old dispensation, and it lets us down even more so today. The church is irrelevant. It has no prophetic message for our crisis. The church is only concerned about itself. Ministers want to please everybody. They hang around on golf courses and tea parties instead of sounding the clarion call for a day like this. I am finished with it all.”

Unfortunately I had no answer. I knew he was right. For the most part, the church in the country of my birth has indeed been a lame duck over the last forty years or so. No wonder the people walk away in droves. But is it really so much different here? Don’t many of us suffer from a kind of



pietism that prevents us from facing the future and the world we are living in?

And what is behind this sad situation? Is it not the idea that the church's task is only spiritual? Is the church here only to speak to my little world, my family, my salvation, my comfort, and perhaps my morality, and that's it? The country is heading for a cataclysm, the world is falling apart, but the church is basically silent about it all!

You see the same thing in the new biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The church in Germany, for the most part, was in a state of total paralysis during the rise of Hitler. It did not and could not and would not hear God's voice in the midst of the crisis. And the reason was that it never had a history of speaking as Jeremiah did. Their God was not the mighty God of the nations and of history. He was an idol of their making, a God who's there to make sure we go to heaven.

That is why we can't let the Titanic sail pass us like a ship in the night, for even the world sees a clear message in its sinking. Listen to the words of James Cameron, the man who made the movie: "The Titanic is a drama about reliance on technology, illustrating the bankruptcy of the things that are promised in the name of progress. I consider its story as symbolic of the

twentieth century. We are all sailing on some sort of a Titanic."

The God of Jeremiah Is the God of the Humble

"Thus the Lord said to me: Go and get yourself a linen sash, and put it around your waist, but don't put it in water" (Jer. 13:1). The linen cloth, or loincloth, was a single piece of cloth that men wrapped around their waists, below the ribs and above the hips, under their garments. On a hot day, they would wear only the linen cloth, as we see often in illustrations in children's Bibles of the disciples catching fish.

So Jeremiah is told to go and buy one of those, since he had no wife to make him one, and to put it around his waist. After he wore it for a while, the word of the Lord came to him a second time: "Take the linen cloth, and go to the Euphrates and hide it there in a hole in the rock [that is, in some crevice by the waterside]" (1:3).

Scholars wonder whether it was really the Euphrates that's meant here, or whether it's not rather a fountain near Anathoth called Perath, since the journey to the Euphrates would have taken Jeremiah at least three months. If we remember though that this was meant to serve as a powerful symbol to God's people, then it makes very

good sense. So Jeremiah did as the Lord commanded him. He took the linen cloth and hid it in a crevice, just above the water level of the Euphrates.

"Now it came to pass after many days that the Lord said to him: Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I have commanded you to hide there" (13:6). So Jeremiah tells us: "Then I went there and dug, and I took the loincloth from where it was hidden, and behold: The loincloth was spoiled; it was good for nothing!" The word spoiled literally means *destroyed*. It was totally ruined. It still existed, but it was good for nothing, useless.

It's a very simple sign isn't it? Almost too simple. Here is a loincloth in rags, ruined by months of exposure to the elements. What in the world could that mean? Well here is its message: "Then the word of the Lord came to me saying: In this manner will I ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem!" (13:9). This is stunning!

Now if you read around this chapter, you will soon realize that this is really a central message of Jeremiah's prophecy. God hates human pride. He hates the vainglory of His people, and if they don't listen to his voice and humble themselves, then He will certainly come to humble their pride.

PRIDE

In other words, what goes up must always come down. And nowhere is this truer than of human pride. Either we bring it down ourselves, or God brings it down. God calls us to humility and trust, to submit to Him and to each other, for He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble, says Peter the apostle. “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

So what does God have in mind here? The Lord says He is going to ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem, like that linen cloth has been ruined. The word *pride* here can also be translated *glory*. “I am going to ruin the glory of Judah and the great glory of Jerusalem!”

Pride and glory go hand in hand, don't they? What makes us boastful and proud? The stuff we depend upon and the things we glory in. It could be anything, our money and possessions, cars, homes, boats—you name it—our healthy bodies and pretty looks, or our skill with words, our friends and contacts, our learning or experience, our image and status, our tools and technology . . . and, of course, do not forget our national pride and symbols!

Slowly but surely we rely on these

things and glory in them, and they determine who we are. No, not the Lord, not his grace and His promises, but all this stuff defines our very identity, attitude, and demeanor. God and His Word get pushed out slowly but surely because we have to bring our sacrifices to keep all these things in place. Just think for a moment: what makes you feel good about yourself, whether as an American or a Canadian, or as a subculture of Dutch Reformed folks? What are those things that give us a sense of importance, so that we feel just little bit better than others, not only other individuals, but other social classes and nations? What are those things that cause us to push the Lord and his glory aside, day after day?

Do you know what all these things are? They are our gods! That's what Jeremiah called them. Those things that give you your sense of prestige, of being somebody, they are your gods. And God hates them with a vengeance. Humble gratitude is what He is looking for, not pride. Do you now see where the Titanic comes in?

And when we begin to feel smug about all this stuff, then we begin to walk wherever our fancies lead us, to whatever our hearts get excited about. We are going after our gods. And that was the reason for the Lord's judgment. Listen to verse 10:

“This evil people who refuse to hear My words, who follow the dictates of their own hearts, and walk after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this linen cloth, which is profitable for nothing.” Do you get the point?

Tell me, what's a linen cloth for? It was meant to cleave to your body, around your waist, to protect you and cover your shame, was it not? Listen to verse 11: “For as the sash clings to the waist of a man, so I have caused the whole house of Israel and Judah to cling to me, that they may become my people, for renown for praise, and for glory . . . but they would not hear.” Judah's calling was to cleave to the Lord. God made His covenant with them. They were His people. They were made and called to cleave to Him. They were intended to be His praise among all people. Is this not why God also sent His only begotten Son into this world, so that we should cleave to God and make His Name great? Our Form of Baptism tells us we are saved through Jesus and by the work of His Spirit to cleave to this One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Listen to God's word in Jeremiah 9:23–24: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him who glories glory in this: that he



understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth, for in these I delight, says the Lord.” And so the Lord’s message is that He is going to ruin the pride of Judah, and the *great pride*—please notice—of Jerusalem, her temple and royal palace, her priests and her kings, yes, her national symbols of pride, everything that made her feel so good about herself.

Was the Titanic not the pride of its builders and nations? Was it not considered unsinkable? But indeed a vessel so proud, sailing so smartly, toward a world so wonderful, was slit by something so cold and ordinary as ice. And that became the story of the whole century.

One hundred years ago, the Christian West was filled with untold optimism, not in God, mind you, but in man and his achievements. There was this indomitable confidence in technological progress because of things like elevators, automobiles, airplanes, and wireless radio. Everything seemed to be in a wondrous upward spiral. A well-known academic in Groningen of those days even said that all our learning and education would mean the end of prisons and crime.

One hundred years ago Europe was Christian. There was no rival for Christianity anywhere in sight. Missionary leaders gathering in Edinburgh in 1910 spoke of winning the globe for Christ in their generation. Reformed leaders in Holland dreamed about the Reformed faith covering the earth.

But then it all came crushing down. And look where we are today. Millions upon millions died in two world wars. Europe turned its back on God. Moreover, we are now living in the age of the greatest persecution of Christians. The entire moral fabric of the West is in total rags, just like that linen cloth, worthless. And behind it sits one thing: man’s pride and glory, his unlimited confidence in what he can do to control his own world and to shape his own destiny. Not the Lord, whose Word made Europe and America so great, was its glory, even though everyone was stilling going to chapels and cathedrals one hundred years ago. Even though the Bible was still read in most Protestant homes, not the Lord but man was the measure of all things.

But then the Great War broke out as a direct result of the immense pride of rulers and nations. And the rest of the earth stood in shock as these Christian nations went for each other’s throats. Protestant nations that

were known to send out missionaries in their hundreds to a lost world were now slaughtering each other in the trenches, and the pagan world could only look on in shock.

World War II followed as a direct result of the continued idolatry and the pride of Hitler’s Third Reich. And after the two world wars an entirely new man arose from the rubble, first in the Europe and later in America. Secular man. Godless man. Man with no place for God and His Word in his life, yet no less haughty than his predecessors, and still worshipping the idol of technology, trusting that it will bring him ultimate happiness.

Surely, the prophecy has been fulfilled. The Lord has made our Christian nations like that linen cloth, useless, good for nothing. He humbled the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. A sinking ship in God’s merciful providence was intended to be a timely signal to an evil people who refused to hear His words but who followed the dictates of their own hearts.

3. The God of Jeremiah Is the God of the Future

Should all of this leave us in despair? Absolutely not! The God of Jeremiah and the God of Scripture is above all the God of hope. He has the future

in his hands. Let our youth take this to heart. All of what has been said should not make you morbid or sad. It serves as a powerful reminder to us all to get our focus right and to live the life God has given us in humble wisdom and patient joy.

There is no reason for despair. The God of all creation, the God of all history, of all the nations, is our God. He is telling us to rid our hearts of every idol. He sent Jesus His Son into this world not only to deliver us from His ultimate judgment but also to place our feet on a rock while the world is rushing down in the slipstream of history.

Listen to the Word of God in Jeremiah 17:5–8: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man, and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the Lord. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places of the wilderness, of a salt land not inhabited . . . but blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is in the Lord. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads its roots out by the river; he will not fear when the heat comes, but his leaf will be green, and he will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will he cease from yielding fruit.”

The future belongs to Jesus, to Him who conquered sin and hell and who was seated in glory above every power and principality, both in this world and the next, who has defeated death and destruction through his cross and resurrection. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Our God reigns. He is absolutely in control.

He gave the exiles in Babylon—that small hopeless remnant—a message of hope when they had no idea what in the world was going to happen to them. We see that in chapter 29. In the midst of their deep humiliation, God said to them: “For I know the thoughts that I have concerning you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and

not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Praise God for these words! And that hope is not only for each person in that remnant of Israel but also to all of them as the nucleus of God’s redeemed people for all generations. He was yet going to take them back to their own land after seventy years, for to that land, and to that city, God’s Messiah must soon come to save the world.

God will have a future for his people in this world. He will yet again exalt them and use them to His praise and glory. He tells the believing remnant in chapter 29 not to stop living, not to look around in panic, but to dwell in Babylon and keep on living with hope. Build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children and seek the peace of this city, for the future belongs to Me. I am watching over my Word to bring it to fulfillment.

If that was true for them, how much more for us living on this continent! Don’t stop living; raise your children in hope. And please, seek the peace—the wellbeing—of the place where God has put you. Don’t abandon your country or city. Pray for its wellbeing and peace, and reach out to its people. They too need to see that our God is righteous and merciful.

Jeremiah is also saying that those whom God is giving a future will live in a close and intimate relationship with him. They will never again follow their own hearts and bow to the idols of this world. No, they will seek Him and find Him because they will seek him with all their hearts. They will cling to the Lord only, as they were supposed to, like that linen cloth to a man’s waist. And the Lord promises He will let Himself be found by them. He will gather us and bless us as He gathered his people and brought them back to their own land.

The future belongs to the Lord, both in this age and in the age to come. He will prosper us, and He will provide

for us whatever we need. If God is for us in His Son, who or what can be against us? Your leaf will always be green, and you will yield your fruit, for you have been planted by the stream, and even in the year of drought, the Lord will be on our side to cause us to bear fruit for His name. But then we must understand one thing very clearly: we are here on this earth not for ourselves but for Him, until Jesus comes to make all things new.

There was a young man on the Titanic named Jack Phillips. While everybody was rushing to the deck, he stayed at his post in the stern of the ship, sending out distress signals. Were it not for his heroic bravery, many more than fifteen hundred would have perished. But he stuck to his difficult task to the very end. His last signal went out at seventeen minutes past two in the morning, three minutes before the stern sank. His body was never found.

Apart from living wisely and trusting God alone, apart from listening to His voice and to no other, our calling in this world is to do exactly what that young man did. Put duty first, always, duty to God, to your neighbor, to your family, to your church, to your country. Never put first your own desires or ambitions, not even to survive, but duty, even when the ship is sinking. You may know for certain that the ship of this world is going down. But make sure you send out those distress signals to the very last moment, the wonderful message of salvation in Jesus Christ—for those who heed will never be pushed away. They will never find the lifeboat too full or too far away. The Lord will most surely save whoever calls on His name! Let us therefore sing the song that the band played as that great ship went down: *Abide with me*.

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The third volume of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* treats the broad topics of the introduction of sin into God's good creation and the subsequent work of redemption that culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. After his consideration of the work of the triune God in creation, including the creation of human beings in the image of God, Bavinck takes up the subject of the fall into sin within God's good creation and the provision that God makes for the salvation of his people, including the restoration and perfection of the fallen, sin-cursed creation through the work of Christ as Mediator of the covenant of grace. Since the Christian teaching regarding God's work of redemption in Christ presupposes the fall into sin and the consequences of this fall in terms of God's curse on human life and the created order, Bavinck deals comprehensively with the doctrine of sin before he addresses the topics of the covenant of grace and the redemptive work of Christ.

Bavinck opens the third volume of his dogmatics with a lengthy discussion of the doctrine of sin, which includes distinct treatments of the following topics: 1) the origin of sin; 2) the spread of sin; 3) the nature of sin; and 4) the punishment of sin. In this article, we will consider the topic of the origin of sin. In subsequent articles, we will consider the topics of the spread, nature, and punishment of sin.

The Genesis Story of the Fall

In the biblical story of creation, the triune God, upon completing his work of creation, declared the creation to be very good. Though the



creation before the fall into sin was “at the beginning of its development and hence enjoyed a perfection, not in degree but in kind” (RD 3:38), it existed in a state of integrity and original goodness, without defect or blemish of any sort. However, it was not long before the original integrity and goodness of God's creation was marred and ruined through sin. The great mystery of created existence was compounded by the introduction of a new mystery, namely, the “mystery of evil.” “Almost at the same moment creatures came, pure and splendid, from the hand of their Maker, they were deprived of all their luster, and stood, corrupted and impure, before his holy face. Sin ruined the entire creation, converting its righteousness into guilt, its holiness into impurity, its glory into shame, its blessedness into misery, its harmony into disorder, and its light into darkness” (RD 3:28–9).

The sad reality of human sin and disobedience, which has had far-

reaching consequences for the ruin and brokenness of God's good creation, is one that is generally acknowledged, even by those whose understanding is not informed by biblical revelation. The presence of sin and evil in God's good creation raises an inescapable question: where does sin and evil come from? If God is the Author of a creation that was originally in a state of integrity, then how are we to account for the introduction of sin and evil into the creation? If God is the overflowing fountain of all good, who in his holiness and righteousness opposes and judges whatever is unholy and unrighteous, what explanation can account for the presence of so much sin and brokenness in God's handiwork of creation?

With respect to this question, Bavinck observes that “when it comes to the origin of sin, Scripture always points us in the direction of the creature” (RD 3:29). Although the Scriptures do not divorce the introduction of sin and evil into God's good creation from the providential government of God or his sovereign counsel, they never view God as the Source or Author of sin. Nevertheless, it is permissible to say that God “created the possibility of sin” by the manner in which he first created human beings in his image, and granted them “the perilous path of freedom” rather than “elevating [humanity] by a single act of power above the possibility of sin and death” (RD 3:29). The Genesis account of the fall into sin on the part of Adam and Eve indicates that the possibility of sin and disobedience was not excluded from the original state in which they were created.

According to the account of the fall into sin in the early chapters of Genesis, there were two trees in the garden of Eden that served a special purpose within God's original dealings with human beings as his image bearers: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life, which does not appear in the story until Genesis 3:22–24 after the fall into sin. Even though there is a considerable difference of opinion regarding the significance of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Bavinck interprets it to represent the knowledge of good and evil that would be given experientially to Adam and Eve upon their disobedience against God and fall into sin. If Adam were to transgress the prohibition to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he would not thereby come into possession of moral knowledge of the difference between good and evil for the first time. The test of Adam's obedience that is described in Genesis 2 and 3 focuses not on the *content* of his moral knowledge, but on the *manner* in which that knowledge would be obtained. Would Adam be willing to live in absolute dependence on God, willingly and lovingly submissive to the requirements of his holy will? Or would Adam rather assume a posture of independence and self-assertion, seeking to be "like God" in the sense of determining for himself what is good and what is evil?

The account of Adam's transgression in Genesis 3 is a story of a *fall* from an original state of integrity, and may not be viewed in any way as a "step of progress" in the advancement of human life. In the Genesis account, the serpent is represented as the tempter, who first sought to sow "doubt in the heart of the woman about the commandment of God and to that end presented it as having been given by God out of harshness and selfishness" (RD 3:33). Sowing the seeds of unbelief and pride, the serpent sought to lure Adam

and Eve from their state of blessed communion with and dependence on God and to cause them to assert themselves in proud unbelief and independence against him. While the account in Genesis must be read as a sober historical record of what transpired and led to the fall into sin, it is only in the context of subsequent history and the fuller light of New Testament revelation that the full implications and nature of the fall into sin become known. Even the fact that the serpent was merely an instrument who served the purposes of Satan, the great adversary and enemy of God and his people, only becomes known in the light of subsequent revelation.

When a first *fall* or turning away from God in defiance and disobedience occurred on the part of Satan and his fellow, fallen angels, is nowhere told us in the Scriptures. What is revealed is that Adam's transgression and fall into sin became the occasion for the commencement of God's purposes of redemption in Christ, the "last" Adam. Christ, though subject to the temptations and subtleties of Satan, triumphed over the powers and principalities of darkness and brought new life to his people as the head of a new humanity. In this way, "Old Testament revelation also bears a prophetic character and looked forward, not backward, and thus only the second Adam was able to illumine the full significance of the first Adam" (RD 3:35).

At the close of his treatment of the Genesis account of the origin of sin in the fall of Adam, Bavinck returns to a question he addressed previously in his treatment of the doctrine of creation: is the account of the fall into sin in Genesis an account that describes what occurred in history? In the modern period, the historicity of the account of the origin of sin through Adam's transgression has been challenged not only by biblical criticism but also by evolutionary theory. Within the orbit of biblical

criticism, questions have surfaced regarding the nature of the Genesis story. Is the story a kind of legendary or mythological account, which explains the universal sway of sin in the world and in human life but which is not to be taken as a description of what occurred at a particular time and place in the early history of the human race? And how can we square the story of an original human pair, Adam and Eve, who were the original progenitors of the entire human race and the ones through whom sin was introduced into the entire stream of human history, with the theory of evolution? For biblical critic and evolutionary theorist alike, it is no longer credible to affirm the basic historical nature of the events recounted in the Genesis story of the fall.

In his reply to these forms of modern skepticism regarding the historicity of the Genesis story of the fall into sin, Bavinck observes that the "fact" of the fall into sin and its consequences for the entire history of the human race can scarcely be denied. Even within the circle of those who are unacquainted with or hostile toward the biblical record, the reality of sin in human life is recognized. The real issue has to do with the "testimony" that Scripture provides of the historical occasion and circumstances for the introduction of sin into human life.

Even as the science of history relies on testimonies to events that occurred in the distant past, so the science of theology relies on the testimony of Scripture regarding the decisive event of sin's origin in human history. Christian theology must base its convictions about this event, and indeed interpret all history in its light, by no other standard than the clear and compelling testimony of Scripture. The historical event of the fall into sin is, Bavinck insists, "of such great weight that the whole of Christian doctrine stands or falls with

it” (RD 3:38). Among advocates of the theory of evolution, no room is left “for a state of integrity and for a fall of the first humans. According to this theory, there never even existed a first human, for the transitions were so minute and stretched out over so many centuries that no one can say where the animal stops and humanity begins” (RD 3:39). Christian theology must not abandon the Bible’s testimony, however, to a historical fall into sin on the part of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. Rather than make concessions to modern evolutionary theory, Reformed theology must continue to affirm the “organic unity” of the human race, the descent of all human beings from one ancestral couple, and the introduction of sin into human history through a historical fall from an original state of integrity.

Alternative Explanations

After his consideration of the biblical story of the fall into sin, which provides an answer to the question of the origin of sin in the world and human history, Bavinck addresses the subject of alternative explanations for the origin of sin. Even within non-Christians settings and religions, the witness of Scripture to the ruin and brokenness of human sin is indirectly confirmed and attested. In some non-Christian and pagan sagas that recount the history of the human race, there are even intimations of a kind of “golden age” that preceded a subsequent decline into sin and destruction.

However, in the religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as the ancient philosophies of Greco-Roman culture, there is little or no appreciation for the biblical doctrine of a historical fall into sin from an earlier state of integrity. In one common view, whatever evil may exist in the world is said to belong to the fabric of things as they presently are and always have

been. In Confucianism “a shallow form of rationalism and moralism” predominates, which regards humans as naturally good and capable of obtaining salvation by living a virtuous life (RD 3:41). In the philosophies of Greece and Rome, though there is some acknowledgment of a decline or degeneration during the course of human history, human beings are still thought to possess the ability to live a good life and find blessedness through their moral achievements. Socrates, for example, taught that human beings only needed to acquire greater knowledge to mature in the practice of virtue; education is the means to provide human beings with the ability to live well. The great philosopher Plato offered another explanation for the origin of sin, positing the “pre-existence of the soul” and its fall prior to the imprisonment of the soul within the body as a precondition for life in the material world. Among the ancient Stoics, a somewhat different approach to the problem of sin and evil was adopted. According to Stoicism, sin does not originate in the human will but represents a necessary piece in the larger “order and beauty of the whole.” In this conception, sin and evil may be overcome through a patient submission to events as they occur within this world.

Commenting on these various approaches to the problem of sin and evil, Bavinck observes that “outside the area of special revelation, therefore, sin was always either interpreted deistically in terms of the human will and construed purely as an act of the will or derived pantheistically from the essence of things and incorporated as a necessary component in the order of the universe as a whole” (RD 3:42).

In the history of the Christian church, the superficial view of sin as no more than a distinct act of the will expressed itself in various forms. In the teaching of the British monk, Pelagius, who opposed Augustine on the doctrine of original sin, sin is limited to distinct

acts or choices of the human will. In Pelagius’s view, sin never affects human nature, its dispositions and affections, in such a way that human beings become sinfully corrupted in heart, mind, and will. Sin consists merely in a distinct act of the human will, which always retains its full ability to choose to sin or not to sin. Even after the first sin and fall of Adam, neither he nor any of his progeny can be said to have become sinners in the sense of an inherited depravity or propensity to sin. Though Pelagius’s benign view of the introduction of sin into human life and history was universally condemned throughout the Christian church’s history, it continued to exercise considerable influence in the form of semi-Pelagian doctrines, all of which deny the pervasive and radical consequences of human sin and depravity. The Socinians of the Reformation period, the Arminians in the early history of the Reformed church in the Netherlands, and the “rationalists” of the post-Reformation period—all advanced some form of semi-Pelagianism, which insists on the natural ability of all human beings, even after the fall into sin, to “cooperate” with the grace of God in doing what is required for salvation. In all forms of Pelagianism, sin tends to be defined solely in terms of a discrete decision of the human will, which retains the power to do or not to do what is pleasing to God. In none of the historic forms of Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism do we find a fully biblical view of the nature and consequences of the fall into sin for the inability of sinners to act in a way that pleases God or conforms to his will.

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Divine Hope in a Prison

Henry Gysen

“We need Reformed systematic theology!” This is the plea that Juan, an inmate at Danville Correctional Center, made to the men from Immanuel United Reformed Church when they held a Bible conference in the prison three years ago. It was a plea they could not forget.

The men from Immanuel URC in DeMotte, IN, were already committed to ministering to those in prison because of an experience within their own fellowship. A member of their church had been convicted of a crime and was sentenced to prison. The church was seeking to minister to this

member and his family during his prison term. Several members of the church became involved in holding chapel services in jails and prisons, recognizing that God was calling them to minister not only to their brother in Christ but also to others in prison.

When the group from DeMotte held their one-day Bible conference in the Danville Correctional Center in Danville, IL, three years ago, their vision for prison ministry expanded dramatically. The men in the prison were not only eager to have more instruction in God’s Word but they

were also hungry for organized, long-term instruction. Desiring to meet this need, Immanuel URC formed a committee to explore the possibility of creating a seminary within the prison walls, following the pattern of New Orleans Baptist Seminary, which created a branch seminary inside the walls of Angola Prison in Louisiana in 1995.

That vision became a reality on Saturday, March 10, 2012, as nearly thirty inmates and thirty others—including chaplains, seminary professors, board members, the prison warden, and guests—attended



Rev Brummel and Mary Engle of Prison Fellowship



Rev Brummel delivers his address



Dr Kloosterman, Warden Keith Anglin, Jaclyn O'Day, Chief of Constituent Services at Illinois Department of Corrections, Rev Brummel and Chief Chaplain Stephen Keim

a ribbon-cutting ceremony within the walls of Danville Correctional Center to celebrate the beginning of Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary. The seminary has appointed Rev. Nathan Brummel to be the director and first professor of the new seminary. He began teaching the first classes on March 5.

Jon Hoek, president of the board of Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary, made the opening remarks in the ceremony. He warned the students that they could expect instruction in the Reformed confessions from Rev. Brummel: "Nathan will give you the Reformed confessions until you choke on them."

Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, executive director of Worldview Resources International, spoke next. He described four features of Reformed theological instruction. First, it is Bible-based. He told the students,

"You will never read your Bibles the same way again." Second, it must be Christ-centered, leading you to love Jesus as never before and to model who and what Jesus is. If it is not Christ-centered, Kloosterman said the students should "ask for your money back." Third, Reformed theological instruction must be church-directed—it must be a community endeavor that draws Christians together. Finally, it must be life-changing. There is no sense in learning for the sake of learning alone. Learning is for living.

Kloosterman next addressed the question of social justice, which must be other-directed, so that the students will develop a heart and hands that are willing to serve others, being willing to model weakness in a prison atmosphere where bravado and appearance of strength predominate. "It means you are willing to die. Die to

self, and show others how to do that." Kloosterman said we should expect a real change in the atmosphere in this prison because of the new seminary. "It may not get headlines, but your warden and the guards will notice."

Why should a seminary be started inside the walls of a prison? "Why *not* in prison?" asked Kloosterman. "This is a controlled environment, a needy environment; therefore, the prison community can be a model environment."

On the basis of 1 Corinthians 8, Kloosterman warned the men of the danger of being puffed up with knowledge, which results in brutality, or of thinking they can have love without knowledge, which leads to sentimentality. Instead, "knowledge working in love will motivate you to have a true love for God, for each other, and for the broader world."

The seminary choir sings praise to God at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.



Mr. Jon Hoek and Warden Keith Anglin



Warden Keith Anglin and Rev. Brummel cut the ribbon



Rev. Brummel and wife Paula

One significant factor in making Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary a reality is the enthusiastic support of Warden Keith Anglin. He had seen the success that New Orleans Baptist Seminary had in Angola Prison, and he is eager to see the same transformation at Danville. As Warden Anglin introduced some of the chaplain staff, he commented on how the board of DHRBS and Rev. Brummel are totally committed to making this project a success.

Rev. Brummel spoke next. He thanked several people for their tireless work in bringing the seminary to this joyful commencement. He expressed his own joy in being called to this ministry. It is quite evident that he loves not only the work to which he is called but also the men whom he will be teaching, calling them “my joy and my crown” (1 Thess. 2:19). Brummel addressed the question of how men in prison can be rehabilitated, that is, restored to a useful and constructive place in society. Understanding the difference between Augustine and Pelagius on the question of the nature of man is key in addressing this. Man is conceived and born in sin, so we dare not be falsely optimistic. We need a dramatic transformation. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Brummel emphasized that seminary instruction would involve studying God’s truth as he reveals it in his Word. Quoting from John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth,” he pointed out that God’s Word is not only true, but truth. The men will be required to memorize Scripture, which is hard work. Why will this be necessary? “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). Rev. Brummel said, “We expect great blessings from God on your re-entry into society.” He pointed out that Reformed theological study is

difficult, but it is so important to love God with your mind. Quoting from Abraham Kuyper, he reminded us that “In the total expanse of human life there is not a single square inch of which the Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare, ‘That is mine!’” Following Voetius, Brummel believes that orthodox faith gives testimony to itself in a changed life. He closed by expressing his desire for the men whom he will be teaching: “What I pray for you is that you will have intelligent piety.”

Jon Hoek returned to the podium to describe the process the board went through to find the man who was qualified to lead Divine Hope Seminary. As they reviewed the organizational, theological, and pastoral qualifications for a director and professor for the new seminary, they believed that such a man could not possibly exist. That is what they thought until they met Rev. Nathan Brummel. Hoek told the students, “The Lord brought you the best of the best!”

Next, the guests were privileged to hear a choir composed of the prison students singing the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Four of the students spoke briefly about what this new seminary means to them. It was especially gratifying to hear Juan, the same man who three years earlier had urged the brothers from DeMotte to give them systematic theology, speak of the unchanging faithfulness of God, express praise and glory to God, and thank the men who made this possible. He has found his first week of instruction to be enjoyable and enlightening. Another student, a death row inmate, said, “It’s not for us; it’s for Jesus! He doesn’t share his glory with anyone.” A third student declared the existence of this seminary to be “evidence of God’s power to do miracles.”

Chaplain Stephen Keim, chief chaplain for the Illinois Department of Corrections, expressed his excitement

in seeing the new seminary begin. Keim was thrilled to see students seated before him who had received instruction from him at Menard Correctional Facility in Chester, IL; he encouraged all the students to gain wisdom and knowledge and put them in action. “How proud of you your loved ones must be that you are taking this step!”

Ms. Mary Engle, executive director of Prison Fellowship, extended greetings and well-wishes for the new seminary. She said, “You will be amazed to see the change that takes place in you. God is raising you up as a great army for his glory. It will be hard; you will be challenged, but always remember, God is with you.”

God has certainly shown himself present in the beginning of this new seminary. It was a thrill for my wife and me to be present at this opening ceremony. We were greatly encouraged to have an opportunity to shake hands with the students and to see their excitement in being a part of this new work. One of the men told us, “I learned a new word already: monotheism.” I was reminded of the words of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” That one, true God shows his sovereign grace not only to us who live in freedom but also to those whom he has called and redeemed who are in prison. Praise to God for the work he has begun in this new seminary!

For more information about Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary or to support this ministry, visit www.dhrbs.org or email divinehopedanville@yahoo.com

Mr. Henry Gysen is a member of Sovereign Grace URC in Grand Rapids, MI. He is the general manager and president of the board of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

URCNA Psalter Hymnal Committee Report

With an eye toward fast-approaching Synod Nyack 2012, the URCNA Psalter Hymnal Committee met April 10–12 at the facilities of Faith URC in West Olive, Michigan. The main priority for the Committee at this meeting was to select psalm songs to complete the psalter section. In the interest of keeping the churches up-to-date on the Committee's work, here's a brief wrap-up of the April meeting.

First, with Synod 2012 only two months away, the Committee was focused on completing a first draft of psalm selections for the new songbook. With the guideline of keeping psalm-singing a priority in our churches, excellent psalm songs were chosen, and the Committee looks forward to publicizing the selections soon. However, because of musical or editorial changes to these selected psalm songs (e.g. comparing texts, reducing duplicate tunes), and because of the possibility of working with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, no hard copy draft will be submitted to the churches at this point. However, it is very encouraging to note that there is a strong overlap of psalm selections between the OPC and our committee. If Synod 2012 indeed approves working together with the OPC, the psalm section will be further strengthened and the process should move forward more quickly.

As stated in the past, the Committee's priority is to choose complete texts that are faithful to Scripture and set to singable, appropriate, and beautiful music. One of the challenges is finding the most faithful texts to Scripture without allowing too much poetic liberty or changing of

Scripture. Thanks to the large number of solid song sources, the Committee has put together a biblical, faithful collection. Many well-known psalm songs that do not closely adhere to the biblical text have been retained as secondary selections and could be noted in the final songbook proposal as paraphrases or partial versions.

Ecumenical Relations

The OPC's General Assembly has overwhelmingly approved the motion to work with the URCNA on a joint psalm and hymnbook. The URCNA Committee is strongly recommending collaboration with the OPC to Synod 2012 for the purpose of a common psalm and hymnbook.

Hymn Proposal

As a reminder, we ask all churches to discard the printed Hymn Proposals given to them by the Psalter Hymnal Committee at the previous Synod. Churches that have a CCLI license can use songs covered under CCLI.

Looking Ahead

The Committee looks forward to the upcoming decisions of Synod Nyack

2012, and plans on holding their next face-to-face meeting in fall 2012, Lord willing. For more information on the Committee and its work, visit the FAQ section of the URCNA Psalter Hymnal Committee page at www.URCNA.org

Submitted by the URCNA Psalter Hymnal Committee:

Rev. Randal Lankheet, Chairman
(Classis Southern Ontario)

Mrs. Angeline Vanderboom,
Secretary

Prof. Scott Finch
(Classis Western Canada)

Rev. Christopher Folkerts
(Classis Pacific Northwest)

Mrs. Denise Marcusse
(Classis Michigan)

Mr. Joel Pearce
(Classis Eastern U.S.)

Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen
(Classis Southwest U.S.)

Mr. Daniel Zylstra
(Classis Central U.S.)

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH of Prince Edward Island

We are changing location and service times. Our new service times are 10:30am and 7pm. We are now renting the Seventh Day Adventist building and our new address is:

70 Royalty Junction Road
Winsloe, PE C1E 1Z2

Website: www.peiurc.org

Driving Directions to the church:
To get to the new building, take Highway 2 (Malpeque Rd.) going north from the Charlottetown bypass past the Sears. In Winsloe, turn right on Winsloe Road (Rt. 223). Immediately turn right again on Royalty Junction Road.

**We would love to have you
come for a visit this summer!**

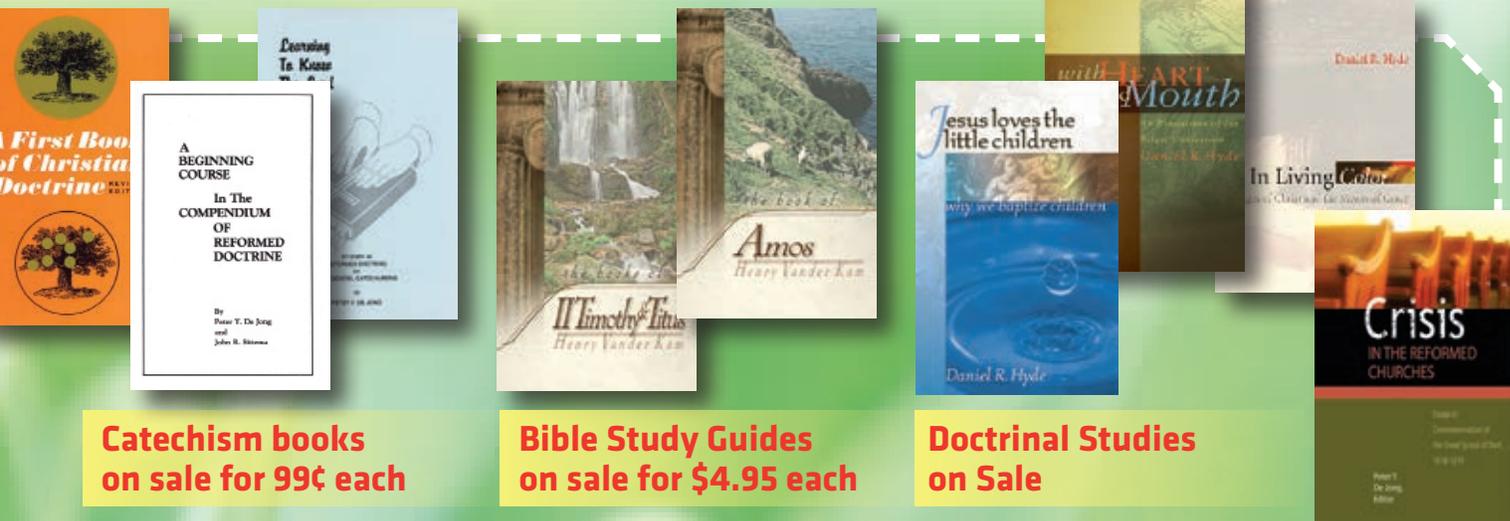


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