

The Kingdom of the Heavens Has Come Near”

Written on: November 30, 2021

Article by: Paul Birston

Matthew 3:1–17

In our culture many important events and times seem far away in the future. When we are in grade 1 at school, grade 12 and graduation seem so far away in the future. At the beginning of our working careers retirement seems very far away. When children in our lives are infants seeing them as adults seems very far away. When we first buy a house the day when we will finally pay it off seems like forever away.

As we live our day to day lives as Christians, heaven seems far away. Though we know life is short and eternity is long, heaven still seems far away. In a culture like ours where the future seems far away it's difficult to understand that God says some very important eternal realities are actually very near to us, right here in fact.

While reading through Matthew 3, listen and watch for several very important eternal realities that we often think of as far away but are actually with us right now. Matthew 3 draws us into the life, work, perceptions, commands and prophecies of John the Baptist as he prepares the way for Jesus and meets Him at the Jordan River before Jesus begins His ministry.

Matthew 3:1 Now in those days John the Baptist arrived, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 **“Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has come near.”** 3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,

‘Make ready the way of the Lord,

Make His paths straight!’”

4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being immersed by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for immersion, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. 10 The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 “As for me, I immerse you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will immerse you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

13 Then Jesus Himself arrives from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be immersed by him. 14 But John was hindering Him, saying, “I have need to be immersed by You, and do You come to me?” 15 But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he *permits Him. 16 After being immersed, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, 17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

We see and hear from John that several eternal realities that seem far away in our culture are actually very near, in fact they are right here in our midst today.

The first words John speaks are, “Repent for the kingdom of the heavens have come near.” John’s command to repent is the second person plural “you.” You all turn your minds to God. Make a conscious decision to come to Him and leave all your sins behind.

Why John? What are you saying is the reason we should do this?

“The kingdom of the heavens has come near.”

The royal reign, the royal power, the royal rule of God the King of heaven and earth Himself has come near to us. The King is here among us reigning in His power and glory.

John says “has come near” with a perfect tense verb. The perfect tense expresses a past action with an abiding result. In English we might say, for example, “It stands written.” Something written in the past is valid today and for the future. In essence, the kingdom of God has come near and is here to stay.

An amazing confirmation of John’s revelation is that in Matthew 4:17 Jesus Himself opens His ministry with these exact same words, “Repent for the kingdom of the heavens have come near.”

I wish translators would simply translate the Bible. John and Jesus throughout Matthew speak of the kingdom of the heavens, **plural**. This is particularly important to their Jewish listeners and to us. Why? In Jewish cosmology there are three heavens. Paul talks about getting “caught up to the third heaven” in 2 Corinthians 12:2.

For Jesus’ and John’s Jewish listeners the *first heaven* was that immanent immediate heaven around us, the air we breath, the atmosphere. The *second* was the celestial heavens above us, the sun, moon and stars. The third heaven above all is of course the infinite eternal domain of God.

One of many important and stunning realisations in this phrase “the kingdom of the heavens has come near” is that God is present and sovereign in all three realms. He is right here in our midst every moment. As my grandmother would say, “He’s as close as your breath,” which is right inside you as we will see. He fills the universe and of course the Father and Son reign from their thrones in heaven as well with complete awareness of everything going on in our lives. And profoundly we know that they hear all of our prayers.

Next John speaks specifically to the Pharisees and Sadducees. We see the immediacy of John's language in his phrases, "the wrath to come" and "the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:7, 10).

Here at the beginning of the New Testament, years ahead of the Apostle John's reception of the Book of Revelation, John the Baptist uses apocalyptic language and visions notably *before* Jesus begins His ministry. The imagery of the "axe already laid at the root of the trees" tells us God is present to administer justice without deferring to Judgement Day. If we doubt that God is not deferring justice, we need look no further than His prophesying and bringing about the dissolution of the Roman Empire.

John goes on to say that though he immerses them with water for repentance, Jesus "will immerse you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Profoundly, God comes into our lives, right into the temples of our bodies, by His Holy Spirit. He sanctifies us as fire burns the dross and purifies gold.

Immediately John follows with his apocalyptic vision of Jesus, "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

In ancient times oxen would tread grain stalks on threshing floors to loosen the chaff that shielded the kernels of grain. Harvesters then used winnowing forks or winnowing shovels to scoop up the grains and chaff and throw them into the wind. The wind would blow away the chaff. The heavier valuable grains would fall down on to the threshing floor. From there, the valuable grains could be scooped up and placed in their barns for use and safe keeping. John's vision of course vividly describes Jesus separating His people from His enemies, the chaff.

God places this apocalyptic vision at the beginning of the New Testament before Jesus' ministry began because He wants us to keep our eyes on the horizon of His eternal glory now. Keeping our eyes on Him and all He has prepared for us will spur us on to prepare for His coming again and living with Him forever.

Notice what happens immediately after John's vision, "Then Jesus Himself arrives from Galilee..." Then He is immersed by John. God's Holy Spirit descends as a dove and lighting on



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Him. Then His Father speaks from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased!"

Father, Son and Spirit arrive. They are present. They have broken into their world in a whole new way and they are here to stay.

A fascinating feature of life in the first-century world is this. The future wasn't as far away as it is today. People lived with more awareness of their mortality and accepted the brevity of life. There were no guarantees, health insurance plans, thirteen grades of school, graduate degrees, 30 year mortgages, retirement savings plans and pensions all of which make our futures seem far away.

God has come near, very near. Jesus' Father came very near and spoke from out of the heavens.

Father, Son and Spirit are immanent. Jesus has come near to die for our sins. Jesus and John command us to repent in response. The root words of this command are "*with mind*." It is a total conscious reorientation of our thinking and behaviour directing our wholehearted attention, allegiance and obedience to God.

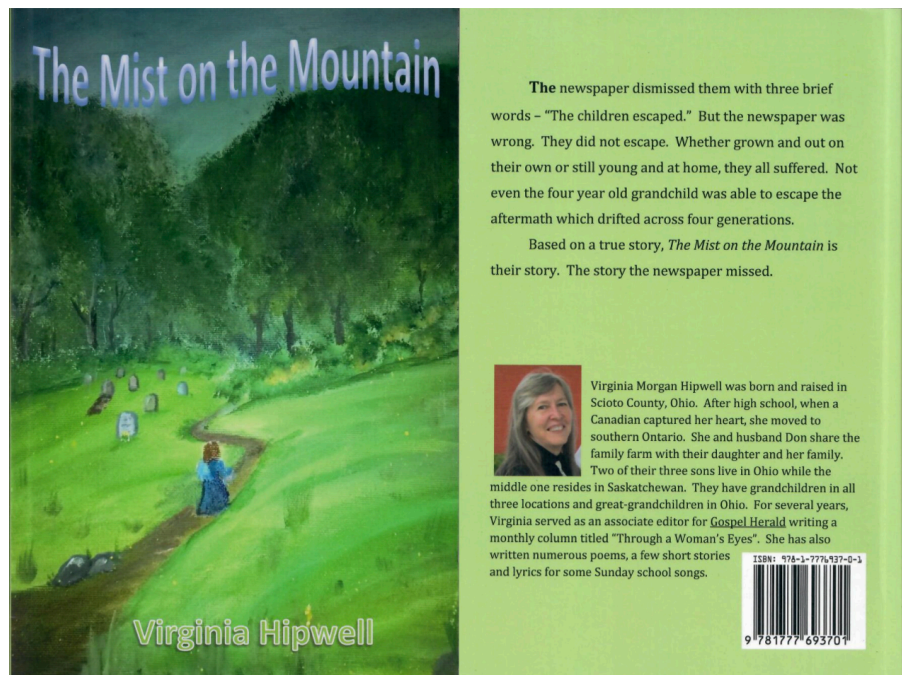
By God's command we are immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins (Acts 2:38). We receive His Holy Spirit. He lives in us.

God is both infinite beyond time and present in time. Jesus said the kingdom of God is in your midst. His Spirit lives within everyone in Jesus.

John indeed prepared the way of the Lord and gave us these wonderful visions to help us keep our eyes on Jesus and the horizon of God's glory.

Thanks to Jesus and John, one of the greatest blessings of living in the last days is that we can constantly turn our minds, hearts and lives toward God who is with us. We know with confidence "the kingdom of the heavens has come near."

Winnipeg, Manitoba



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Explanations For Old Testament Quotations

Written on: November 30, 2021

Article by: Kevin Cleary

A look at Hebrews' Use of the Old Testament Part 2

In our first article, we discussed various ways that New Testament Authors quoted or cite passages in the Old Testament. This established some principles for considering specific examples of the connection between New Testament teachings and Old Testament source materials. In the general sense, the question is: “what do we do when a New Testament author uses the Old Testament to support a point, but when we look up the Old Testament reference, the connection is not obvious? And then more particularly, what about the quotations and citations that we find in the book of Hebrews?

Michael Heiser somewhat humorously described this situation by saying, “John did not have your hermeneutics class.” (Heiser, 2021). Others have been more forthcoming, admitting that they have no idea what is going on.

Commenting on Matthew 2:15 John MacArthur suggests that types of this nature can only be identified by New Testament writers implying the need for inspiration (MacArthur, 1997). This is perhaps the most reasonable suggestion in light of two things.

1. It is what Jesus did. When raised from the dead, He spent time explaining the meaning of Old Testament passages (Luke 24:27) to his disciples. Luke also records the fact that Jesus ‘*opened the minds of his disciples*’ to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45).
2. Knowing that he would not be around to finish the ‘job’, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit – who would not only give them something like ‘total recall’ of all the things which he had taught (John 14:26), but would also ‘lead them into all the truth’ (John 16:12-15).

So the writers of the New Testament were divinely guided in their use of the Old Testament. But perhaps they also used some methodology that we might discern and imitate. This is what we attempt to do when we consider the New Testament context of a quotation along with the Old Testament passage itself.

D.A. Carson has surveyed some of the various attempts that have been made to devise a standard set of principals, or a hermeneutical approach that explains the practices of

New Testament writers. Carson lays out several suggestions that have been made, which deserve mentioning in summary form (Resources, 2020):

- The **“Fuller Sense”** approach,: This method states that the writer by inspiration is giving a fuller meaning to a particular text. It is important to understand that this meaning is not dependant on the original intent of the text but rather on the authority of the inspired writer. However, this principle does not apply in every case – as in John 5:39, Hebrews 5:11ff, Luke 24:44-47, Acts 17:10 These and many other passages indicate that inspiration is not needed in order to identify the Christocentric nature of many Old Testament passages.
- The **“Sense vs Referent”** approach: This view suggests that many Old Testament texts are simply offering a sense or category but not a specific referent. The concept of *“rest”* may be an example of a sense or motif found in the Old Testament. But treating is as such is limited to those passages where it appears in the Old Testament without a specific referent. In most instances, this is not the case.
- The **“Canon Criticism or Canonical Theology”** approach: This attempts to treat scripture as an independent entity, describing a world of it’s own, rather than the real world. In this way, scripture can essentially do whatever it wants and the reader can accept the scriptural frame of reference, as being separate and apart from the real world, much as one would do when watching a movie. There are two problems here. The first is, that the Bible is set within history and it’s interpretation does not allow us to make this kind of a separation. And secondly, that this view offers no meaningful warrant to the interpretation being offered by the New Testament writer. It does not contribute to our understanding.
- The **“Jewish Rules of Appropriation”** approach: It says that the New Testament writers are using a system which was common among the rabbis of their time (Much could be said about these rules and the differing lists that could be found. A full discussion is available in “Three Views On the New Testament Use of The Old Testament (Lund, 2008, p. 27)). While there is little doubt that contemporary rules of writing and argumentation influenced the New Testament writers, this approach is also problematic. After all, the very question we are asking is, “Why did the New Testament authors differ so much from their Jewish contemporaries?” Again, this approach gives us very little as to why the New Testament interpretations bear rhetorical weight.
- The **“Hermeneutical Axioms”** approach: This approach advances the idea that while the New Testament writers did use certain rules from rabbinic Judaism, they held to certain axioms such as, “Jesus is the Messiah” which informed their interpretation. If this is the case however, how would this approach be of any apologetic value as it assumes the very thing that it claims to prove?
- The **“Typological Approach”** holds that various Old Testament passages are typological. This is of course true, but this approach, like the previous approach seems to lack apologetic value. It is highly subjective and limited only by the imagination of the interpreter.

From our summary of Carson's survey we can see that many efforts at developing a unifying theory seem to fall short of providing a true hermeneutical framework (We say this, while we admit there is some insight to be gained from some of these approaches). Should we throw up our hands and surrender the interpretation of the Old Testament solely to inspired authors? Should we say, that unless we have a New Testament cross-reference, we are simply unable to understand any Old Testament passage? I would suggest that this is probably not going to be the best approach. For one, we should not discount the great insights that have been gained by using a grammatical-historical approach. While we can admit that it's not the approach always used by the New Testament writers, it does ground our understanding of scripture soundly in historical reality. Furthermore, I would argue that a figurative approach often depends on a previously established grammatical-historical understanding to inform the figure. A grammatical-historical approach also brings us closer to the time and place of the author, helping to remove our bias and get closer to author's intent.

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Walter Kaiser argues, and I believe rightly, that we must first derive the authors meaning before we can make any application for today (Osborne, 2006). I do not think it is wise to forget this advice as we attempt to understand the use of a particular Old Testament passage in the New Testament.

The focus of this discussion is Hebrews. We can turn our attention there by considering some specific passages and their uses in the book. This may allow us to establish a consistent approach taken by the author. With this in mind, here is a brief list of the Old Testament references in Hebrews. Archer and Chirichigno identify 37 Old Testament References in Hebrews. These are outlined these in the following table:

Heb 1:5	Ps 2:7
Heb 1:5	II Sam 7:14
Heb 1:6	Ps 89:27

Heb 1:5	Ps 2:7
Heb 1:5	II Sam 7:14
Heb 1:6	Ps 89:27
Heb 1:6	Ps 97:7
Heb 1:6	Duet 32:43
Heb 1:7	Ps 104:4
Heb 1:8-9	Ps 45:6-7
Heb 1:10-12	Ps 102:25-27
Heb 1:13	Ps 110:1
Heb 2:6-8	Ps 8:4-6
Heb 2:12	Ps 22:22
Heb 2:13	Is 8:17-18
Heb 3:7-11	Ps 95:7-11
Heb 3:15	Ps 95:7
Heb 4:3	Ps 95:11
Heb 4:4	Gen 2:2
Heb 4:5	Ps 95:11
Heb 4:7	Ps 95:7
Heb 5:5	Ps 2:7
Heb 5:6-10	Ps 110:4
Heb 6:13-14	Gen 22:16-17
Heb 7:1-2	Gen 14:18-20
Heb 7:17,21	Ps 110:4
Heb 8:5	Ex 25:40
Heb 8:8-12	Jer 31:31-34
Heb 9:20	Ex 24:8
Heb 10:5-7	Ps 40:6-8
Heb 10:16-17	Jer 31:33
Heb 10:30	Duet 32:36
Heb 10:37-38	Hab 2:3-4
Heb 11:5	Gen 5:24
Heb 11:18	Gen 21:12

Heb 11:21	Gen 47:31
Heb 12:5-6	Prov 3:11-12
Heb 12:20	Ex 19:12-13
Heb 12:26	Hag 2:6
Heb 12:29	Duet 4:24
Heb 13:5	Josh 1:5
Heb 13:6	Ps 118:6

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine each of these passages. However, the table is extremely helpful in identifying key references in the book. Some are used repeatedly, while others are part of a long discussion. If we add to the table, some consideration of the nature of the book, we can narrow our focus to specific texts that become central to the development of the author's point.

The book does not follow the typical form of an epistle, but is more of an epistolary homily as it takes the form of a sermon (Pace, 2007, p. 15). The author himself labels the book a "word of exhortation" (Heb 13:22). In this case, much like other sermons, the speaker quotes a passage of scripture and then proceeds to make several points or arguments based on the passage previously quoted.

Dr. Dan Owen offers an outline, (Owen, 2020, p. 7) which will be helpful as we seek to identify important passages. John MacArthur offers a similar outline (MacArthur, 1997, p. 1895)):

- I. 1:5-14 Exposition of Various Enthronement Texts
- II. 2:5-3:1 Exposition of Psalm 8:4-6
- III. 3:7-4:13 Exposition of Psalm 95:7-11
- IV. 4:14-8:6 Exposition of Psalm 110:4
- V. 8:6-10:31 Exposition of Jeremiah 31:31-34
 - a. 10:1-10 Exposition of Psalm 40:6-8 (This is a sub-section of the Exposition of Jeremiah 31:31-34)
- VI. 10:32-12:3 Exposition of Habakkuk 2:3-4
- VII. 12:4-13 Exposition of Proverbs 3:11-12
- VIII. 12:18-24 Exposition of Exodus 19:10-23

This outline combined, with the chart, helps us see that there are a number of key passages which should be considered, in order to determine how the author is using the Old Testament. These key passages would be; Psalm 2, Psalm 8, Psalm 22, Psalm 95:7-11; Psalm 110:1,4; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ps 40:6-8; Habakkuk 2:3-4.

With these background matters in place, we can turn our attention to these passages and attempt to determine how and why the Hebrews author uses them to prove his arguments. The question that we want to address, is "how does the author use the Old Testament?"

Summary:

- So far, we have reviewed some of the theories that have been offered by various scholars about how the New Testament Uses the Old.
- We also know some things about the book of Hebrews. We know that it is constructed more as a sermon than a letter. We know that we can break the book down into discussions of a series of Old Testament Texts.
- For further study on some of the points raised here you might check “Three Views on The New Testament Use of the Old Testament. (<https://www.amazon.com/Three-Views-New-Testament-Counterpoints/dp/0310273331>)
- Next time we will look in detail at some of the passages cited by the Hebrews Author and attempt to understand how these passages demonstrate the points he is trying to make.

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To Swear Or Not To Swear

Written on: November 30, 2021

Article by: Dave Knutson

Text: Mt 5:33-38, 23:16-22, James 5:12

The Sermon on the Mount has been compared with a messianic version of the law. In the beatitudes, Jesus moved from the Godly qualities of a person's heart to the sort of conduct flowing from those attitudes.

Following the beatitudes, He went on to talk about the righteousness of the scribes, hatred and murder, adultery, and divorce. And then it seems against the backdrop of failed marriage vows, Jesus addressed the practice of oath-taking.

Now when I was growing up, I thought that Jesus was forbidding crude and vulgar language. Swearing was bad because it was offensive and appealed to the worst in us. So it wasn't hard for me to see why Jesus would condemn it. But as bad as that kind of language has become, that is not what Jesus was talking about. There are other passages that teach us to put aside all crude language and coarse jesting...but this is not one of them. Jesus was actually talking about something good. He was addressing religious people who would have been embarrassed to death by the vulgarity of our day.

The kind of swearing that Jesus discussed had a good and proper place in the lives of God-fearing people. Let's start by considering the background of this practice from a few Old Testament passages.

I. THE TEACHING OF THE LAW

1. Deut. 6:13-14

You shall fear only the lord your God, and you shall worship him and swear by his name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the people who surround you"

2. Deut 10:20-21

"You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you, which your eyes have seen.

To put it positively, Israel is to fear, serve, cling to and swear by the God of Israel.

3. "And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your ; I am the LORD." – Lev 19:12

4. "If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." Num 30:2

5. "When you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay to pay it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you." – Deut 23:21

So an oath was a confirmation. It was an appeal to God to act as the ultimate witness to the truthfulness of a statement or to be the guarantor of a promise that was being made.

Every one of these passages demanded truthfulness in the heart and faithfulness in action.

1. When you take an oath, you must tell the truth. You must really mean it and intend to do it.
2. Not only must you mean it...you have to do it. If you say you'll do it, then you must keep your word.
3. All oaths must appeal to God and only to God. When an Israelite took an oath in God's name, it was a confession that Yahweh was his God.
4. It was also a profession of faith in the God who is everywhere at once...the God who sees and the God who hears. The same God who will not allow the words of his prophets to 'fall to the ground' ...they will all come to pass. So an oath claimed to be faithful, as God is faithful.
5. To take an oath in the name of the Lord was a good thing. Because speaking the truth has nothing to fear, even when it became an oath.

The Psalms and the Prophets stress the importance of truthfulness in the heart.

1. In the Psalms we read:

a. "LORD, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? "He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart;" – Ps 15:1-2

b. "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully." – Ps 24:3-4

2. The Prophets often mourn the absence of truth in the heart:

a. "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; See now and know; And seek in her open places If you can find a man, If there is anyone who executes judgment, Who seeks the truth, And I will pardon her. "Though they say, 'As the LORD lives,' Surely they swear falsely." – Jer 5:1-2

b. "Hear the word of the LORD, You children of Israel, For the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: 'There is no truth or mercy, Or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, Killing and stealing and committing adultery, They break all restraint, With bloodshed after bloodshed.'" – Hos 4:1-2

Oath-breaking and Law-breaking go hand in hand. So the teaching of the Law was clear:

- All vows must be taken in the name of Lord.
- All vows to the Lord must be kept,
- And all vows taken in the name of the Lord require truthfulness and integrity...they too must be fulfilled.

The basic principle was simple. If I take a vow in God's name, then it is not just my reputation that is at stake. God has been drawn into the equation. When I call God as my witness, I am claiming that my word is as good as his and you can count on it. Unfaithfulness on my part implies unfaithfulness on the part of God.. Suppose I take an oath in God's name and then I break my word...at least one of two things are implied. Maybe my god is a liar and I am living proof of it. Or I have so little regard for my god that I do not hesitate to drag his name down into the mud with my own. This was what had happened to God's name when Israel took vows in his name and then defaulted on them.

In Romans 2:24, Paul wrote that: “the name of God is blasphemed among the nations (gentiles) because of you... (speaking to the Jews).”

- When those who are identified as the people of God, break his laws, they dishonor God in the eyes of all men. Disobedience to God is not a private affair. The world is watching.
- If I fail to keep my word...If I lie and deceive, I deserve the reputation I make for myself. But God does not deserve to share that reputation. The problem is that because of my identity with him, I can cause others to lose respect for him.
- May it never be! May my failings never be an obstacle to the faith of others. May my words never cause others to curse the name of God.
- The fact is that God is faithful, even if all men prove to be liars.
- But this is what is at stake. By allowing us to be united with Him and to wear His name, God has become vulnerable to libel and false accusation.

On a later occasion, Jesus said: “And I say to you that every careless (or useless) word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37)

Words are powerful. They can heal and they can destroy. They can bring about peace and they can set the world on fire. How much more is this true when our words call on the name of God and make promises that can be kept only if it is his will? So Jesus spoke out against the abuses of his own day. The religious leaders had managed to take something good and turn it into something evil.

From the comments of Jesus in verses 34-36, it looks like the positive emphasis found in the law had shifted. On a practical level, it had become very harmful.

1. The law said...be truthful in all things
2. The traditions of the scribes and Pharisees said ‘truth is a sometimes thing’.

Vows not made ‘to the lord’ or specifically in God’s name were not binding.

1. In fact, Mt 23:16-19 gives us a slice and dice version of binding and non-binding oaths.
2. So you were free to spice up your talk with empty promises that you had no intention of ever keeping. You could say...
 - a. “I swear by heaven”
 - b. “I swear by the throne of God”
 - c. “I swear...by the earth...by Jerusalem...by the altar...by the temple...by my head..” And it didn’t matter if you stuck by your word or not.
3. In the part of the Mishnah that deals with vows (Nedarim 3:1-3), the sages declared four kinds of vows that were by their very nature non-binding. They were
 - a. Vows of incitement: vows used as bargaining tools with others
 - b. Vows of exaggeration: where the exaggeration was obvious and could not possibly be true.
 - c. Vows made in error: for example: vows that you made because your memory failed you...then you later discovered your mistake and you took it back.
 - d. And Vows that could not be kept by reason of constraint. If you fell ill or were prevented from keeping it by an ‘act of God’...like a flood.

Without getting into all of the circumstances and the details, the point here is that there was a whole class of vows made up of several categories, that the Scribes considered non-binding.

And having introduced the concept of a non-binding oath, the door was open for all kind of new candidates. They had shifted the emphasis completely away from truthfulness. Making and keeping vows had become a legal matter to be argued and litigated. But by no means were they absolute and binding.

When I was a kid...promises were not always kept. In fact, if you 'crossed your fingers behind your back', then you didn't really mean what you said and were off the hook. Well, this is almost like that, but it is not a child's game...

One time, my dad described striking a bargain for employment and shaking hands on it. Or agreeing to a purchase or a sale without putting anything into writing. The practice worked as long as the people were trustworthy and as good as their word.

The whole point of taking a vow was to make a promise even more binding. It was to assure the one to whom you were speaking that you were telling the truth and that you fully intended to carry through on your word. Jesus had little patience with the kind of legalised deception practised in his day. It was an outrage...it cheated men and insulted God. It put God's Name to shame...it made him out to be a liar and a cheat. This was one of the big lies, for God has never told a lie or failed to keep his word. No wonder that Jesus spoke out like he did and condemned this form of hypocrisy. It was a scandal for it invoked God's name in vain, making it an object of cursing and a symbol of deceit.

In Mt 23:20-22 Jesus exposed how wrong thinking had led to sinful behavior. He reasoned with them, showing that when someone swears by...

- a. The temple", he is swearing by the one who has caused his name to dwell there. You cannot separate the temple from God.
- b. When you swear by "The throne of God"...you are swearing by the one who sits on that throne!
- c. And when you appeal to "The altar"...you are swearing by the one who owns it.
- d. The rabbis had also taught, that
 1. If you swore by the gold in the temple you were bound, but not if you swore by the temple itself.
 2. They also said that if you swore by the altar you were not bound but if by the sacrifice on the altar, then you were bound.

But Jesus told them that they had gotten the whole thing backwards. Reasoning from the greater to the lesser, Jesus said that: The temple was greater than the gold stored in it. And the altar was greater than the sacrifices which it sanctified

Matthew 5:34-36 make it clear that you cannot swear by heaven or earth without involving the God of heaven and earth, since heaven is the throne of God and earth is His footstool. Jerusalem is his holy city and as for swearing by our own heads...what good is that? You and I do not even control so much as the colour of our own hair...not the real colour. (Miss Clairol and Grecian Formula notwithstanding)

3. The bottom line is that "ANY OATH IS AN OATH "TO THE LORD"!

- a. A non-binding oath is a contradiction of terms.
 - b. According to Jesus, there is no such thing.
- Now, our Lord had a simple solution to the problem.

Instead of taking swearing up a storm and muddying the water, Jesus said...just tell the truth.

1. Let your "yes" mean "yes"

2. Let your “no” mean “no”
3. In other words...say what you mean and mean what you say.
4. I would hope that all of us have known people like that and aspire to be one of them.

When the president or the prime minister is trustworthy, nations are blessed. When the leaders of the church are as good as their word, the church experiences what God is like and is drawn closer to him. When dad and mom keep faith in the home...children rise up and bless them.

So Jesus said...let your yes be yes and your no be no. Any more than this is evil, and is contrary to the principle of speaking “truth in your heart” that we read about in (Ps 15:1-2)

This passage exposed the hypocrisy of non-binding oaths. In it, Jesus commanded us to speak the truth. But down through the years, his words have sometimes been misunderstood and it has led many to ask the question:

“Did Jesus forbid the use of all oaths...even those called for in court?” Consider what it was the Jesus actually said and later references to that same principle in the New Testament.

Both Matthew and the Lord’s brother James address the subject and each qualified what they said. When Jesus said “swear not at all”, (In Mt 5:34ff) there is no period or punctuation after the statement. Jesus went on to qualify what he meant by listing the kind of oaths that were off limits. He forbade his followers to swear by heaven or earth, Jerusalem or their own head.

Now bear in mind that to the Jews of Jesus’ day, even the formula that you used to initiate the oath was crucial. The oath was valid only if you said

I adjure you”, or “I command you” or “I bind you”,

Here is a list of binding and non binding oaths taken from the Mishnah. They come from a section entitled Oaths (Shebuoth), section 4, verse 13. If a person took an oath by any substituted name of God, he was bound. If he swore by:

1. the Lord of Hosts
2. the Merciful and Gracious
3. the Long-suffering One.
4. The one of Great Kindness
5. Or any of God’s attributes, then he was bound.

But, if a person swore by heaven or earth, he was not bound. This belonged to a class of non-binding oaths and had no legal force to them. Both James and Jesus deal with this issue... both spoke to Jewish audiences coming from the same background.

James 5:12 – repeats the command of Jesus and simply builds on it. The phrase “Do not swear” is also qualified by James to refer to the same kind of meaningless oaths.

James wrote: “”But above all my brethren, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes and your no be no; so that you may not fall under judgment”

When James said “do not swear by any other oath”, he used the word ‘**allos**’ for other.

- This word usually means another of the same kind.
- The Greek word heteros means another of a different kind.

This is very important. It means that James is forbidding the use of these specific oaths and others of the same kind. Neither James nor Jesus give an absolute command forbidding all oaths. This is consistent with the practice that we find in the rest of the New Testament.

It is consistent with the fact that God has sworn an oath to us. The Hebrew writer explains that when God wanted to show how serious he was about keeping his promise to Abraham, he took an oath. He 6:16-18. Because God took an oath, we have two unchangeable things guaranteeing that He will keep his word. God cannot lie and his oath cannot be broken.

2. Jesus himself testified under oath before the high court of the Jews.

The high priest said to Jesus: "I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said to him, you have said it yourself..." - Mt 26:63-64

The high priest put his question in the form of an oath. He called on Jesus to speak under oath. And when Jesus answered, he could only answer under oath...and answer he did.

Mark 8:12 reads: And sighing deeply in his spirit, He said, "why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly (surely) I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation."

The structure of this oath in Greek is the same as the one that God made to Abraham and recorded in Hebrews 6:13-14. God said..."I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you". The words of Jesus took the form of an oath on more than one occasion

In the writings of Paul, it was common for him to take a solemn oath and even to place his readers under oath. Here is a sampling from his letters.

a. He took an oath in 2nd Corinthians 1:23 when he said: "But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth". 2 Co 1:23;

b. "Now in what I am writing go you, I assure you before God that I am not lying" Gal1:20

c. "The God and father of our Lord Jesus, who is blessed forever knows that I am not lying" 2nd Corinthians 11:31

d. "As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be stopped in the regions of Achaia. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do." 2nd Cor. 11:11

Paul even binds his readers at Thessalonica with an oath: "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren" 1st Thess. 2:27

The 'strong angel' of Revelation 10: took an oath. In verses 5-7 John wrote...

'And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things in it and the earth and the things in it and the sea and the things in it, that there shall be delay no longer.

Summary

So what is the bottom line? What do the scriptures teach?

- The evidence suggests that Jesus and James condemned the use of oaths believed to be non-binding. After all, the only reason that a person would use a non-binding oath is to get out of having to keep it. In other words, it is a promise that you just don't intend to keep. The scriptures are clear when they forbid the use of these kinds of oaths. There is no such thing as a non-binding oath.

On the other hand, God commanded the use of oaths and it is a good thing

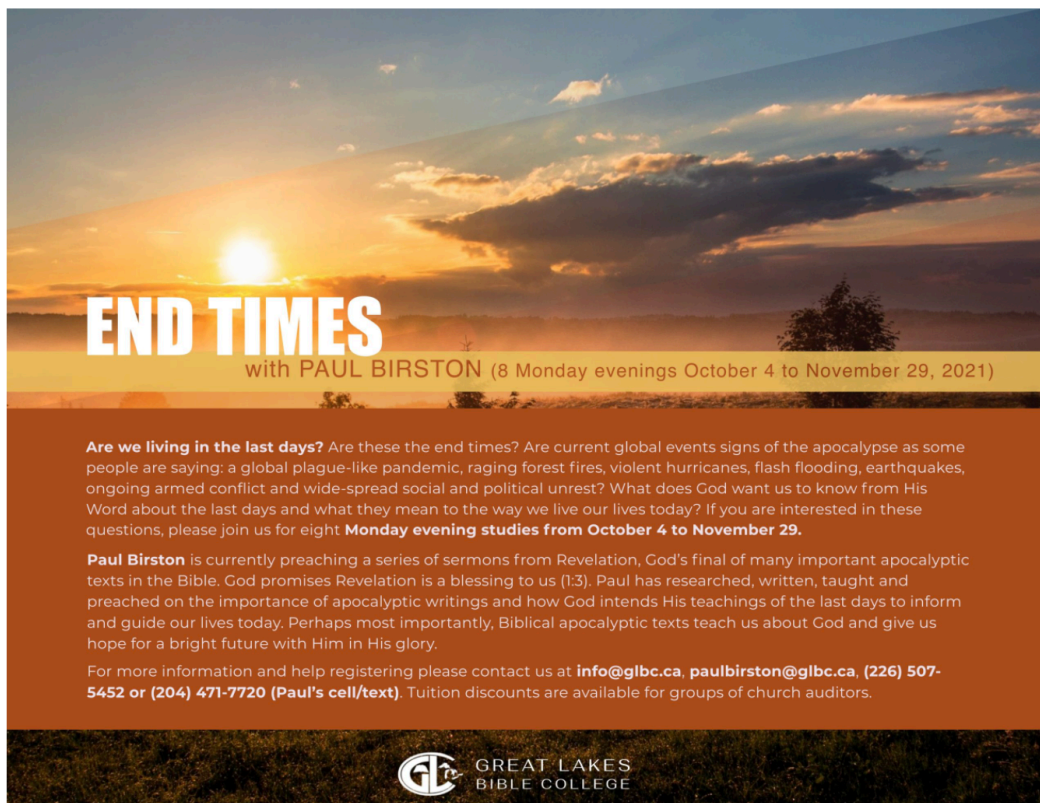
- a. Jesus took an oath when the occasion called for it.
- b. When Paul came under fire from false teachers, He assured his readers that he was telling the truth by taking an oath.
- c. Paul even bound his readers by an oath...to follow his directions
- d. When an angel of the lord swore with an oath so that we can know that God will keep his word.

But Jesus seems also to teach, that Oaths and Vows are only instruments. We can choose to use them or not to use them. They seem necessary on occasion because men and women are not always honest. So perhaps to make up for past failings, an oath has the effect of saying...I am assuring you that this time I really mean it. And to show you how serious I am...here is an oath...‘As God is my witness’.

And that is just the very point that Jesus was making. God is always your witness whether or not you call on him. God will judge every word that comes out of your mouth and mine. We are bound by every word that we say...not just some of them.

So Jesus has a simple solution. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. This is what it means to be the children of God and to belong to a kingdom in which righteousness dwells.

Barrie ON




END TIMES

with PAUL BIRSTON (8 Monday evenings October 4 to November 29, 2021)

Are we living in the last days? Are these the end times? Are current global events signs of the apocalypse as some people are saying: a global plague-like pandemic, raging forest fires, violent hurricanes, flash flooding, earthquakes, ongoing armed conflict and wide-spread social and political unrest? What does God want us to know from His Word about the last days and what they mean to the way we live our lives today? If you are interested in these questions, please join us for eight **Monday evening studies from October 4 to November 29.**

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For more information and help registering please contact us at info@glbc.ca, paulbirston@glbc.ca, (226) 507-5452 or (204) 471-7720 (Paul's cell/text). Tuition discounts are available for groups of church auditors.

 GREAT LAKES
BIBLE COLLEGE

Doreen Margaret Ellis

Written on: November 30, 2021



Article by: Geoffrey Ellis

Doreen Margaret Ellis in her ninetieth year, passed peacefully Saturday evening, September 4th at West Lincoln Memorial Hospital. Doreen was born January 23, 1932, in Toronto to Lloyd and Isabelle (Roy) Begley. She was the oldest child of three, with sister Carol MacLean, and brother Donald Begley predeceasing her.

She is survived by her beloved husband Geoffrey and by her two sisters-in-law, Joan Ellis (David) and Sandra Begley (Dona [https://s3.us-east-1.wasabisys.com/gospel-herald/](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/gospel-herald/)

2021/11/Doreen.jpg ld). Geoffrey and Doreen were blessed with three children: Elizabeth Forsyth (Brent), Rebecca Courson (Steve) and Mark (Julia Jones); with eight grandchildren: Brittney (Peter Springer), Brent Jr. (Suellen) and Bryce (Kristen) Forsyth; Katrina (Kevin Trussler), Christopher (Heather) and Adam (Christina) Courson; David (Amy) and Jonathan (Ashley) Ellis; with twelve great grandchildren: Marlo, Hudson, Carter, Hannah, Callie, Maggie, Kate, Camden, Charlie, Aubrey, Walker and baby Chase. Doreen will also be missed by her many loved nieces and nephews.

Doreen attended Abilene Christian College in 1952 and was married to Geoffrey in Toronto, December 27, 1952. The Ellises moved to Beamsville in 1954 to work with Great Lakes Christian College, where Doreen worked as a Phys. Ed. Instructor and athletic coach. A lifelong sports enthusiast, Doreen was a nationally ranked high school basketball and volleyball referee. She later served as secretary for the Beamsville branch of the CIBC. She then moved to Waterloo, Ontario where her husband served in the ministry, and she continued to work with the CIBC.

Doreen was known far and wide for her warm hospitality and loving nature. Many adopted her as their second mother and were blessed by her ability to make each one feel special. We praise God for granting her rest, but she will be sorely missed by her family and a host of friends who were positively impacted by her Christian spirit.

Our sincere thanks to Dr. DePetrillo, Jill H., her many PSWs and the kind nurses at WLMH. Special thanks to Lynn MacKenzie for her constant love and support. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Great Lakes Bible College or Great Lakes Christian High School.

Online condolences at www.tallmanfuneralhomes.ca

Bible Stories for Adults – Noah's Ark

Written on: November 30, 2021

Article by: Bob Sandiford

The story of Noah's Ark seems to be a favorite with kids and parents. Most of the songs that we sing about it are happy and upbeat. They paint a picture of a big boat with animals going into it two by two. We sort of skip the flood part and before long Noah is sending out the dove which returns with an olive twig and then the raven which does not come back at all. The ark settles on the mountain and before you know it, it is all over. Everyone and everything is out of the ark – the earth is fresh and new and a rainbow seals the deal with God promising that this will never happen again. The nice part of the story is on full display complete with cartoons, wallpaper and toys. But this story is not really for children. The grown-up version is not 'nice' at all and it seems to raise far more questions than answers.

As with other miracles, the details of this event provide multiple targets for ridicule and attack. There are so many unanswered questions, which in turn leave so much room for disbelief. Where did all that water come from? Where did it all go? How could it cover Mount Everest? How did all of the animals fit onto one boat? And if all of them did, where did all of the biodiversity come from that we see today? And given that only 8 people survived to repopulate the earth, how did they multiply and spread out so much? When and how did racially distinctive features come about along with a plethora of languages?

Interestingly enough, most ancient peoples preserved their own stories of a flood – by some counts there are about 275 of them. Many of these predate the writing of Genesis. For example, the Epic of Gilgamesh has an account of a great flood that is similar to the Genesis account in very general terms but very unlike it in others. If an actual event lies in the background, the existence of these stories is reasonably explained. Periods of oral transmission before committing each to writing may furthermore account for the dissimilarities.

Some object to the historicity of these events on moral grounds. While there is no conflict between the capricious gods of the pagan world and the destruction of human beings, that is not so with the God of the Bible. How after all could a supposedly loving God be so cruel as to commit genocide?

The account of the flood takes up a full 4 chapters in Genesis (ch.6-9.) And, while we won't read the whole thing today, we will consider some excerpts and comment upon them.

The first observation is...that this story is really not for children. It is an account of both the depth of sin and the breadth of human rebellion. It is about a time that was as bad as any in the history of Mankind. And it is a sobering account of God's judgment upon all of humankind, along with a measure of God's grace.

Unanswered questions do not however cancel out the ones that are answered. And yes, there are reasonable explanations for questions raising reasonable doubt.

Consider the following:

Contextually, the 'sons of God' were the descendants of Seth – who sought the will of God and 'called upon His name'. These, it would seem, intermarried with that branch of humanity that had rejected God, with results that destroyed faith in God.

The term Nephilim is used in the O.T. to refer to men of stature and prowess. They were in the land of Canaan at the time of Moses and the some of the spies found them intimidating. The term is otherwise undefined – but is simply a reference to men.

The reference to 'land' or 'earth' may also have been regional yet have had a universal effect. If all of humanity still lived in close proximity, a more limited flood would still destroy all of the living.

And as for the carnivores surviving the flood without eating the herbivores, we must not forget that God's intervention from first to last is a miracle. Demands for 'natural' explanations for miracles is nothing more than a refusal to believe in the God who performs them.

It is important to distinguish between unanswered questions and questions incapable of answers. And while some questions remain unanswered we ought not let that distract us from the point of this story or fail to embrace what it teaches.

So for example, why did God do it?

- What was accomplished?
- What do we learn about God from it?
- And what lessons are there for us, today?

We're going to look at three things the account tells us about God.

- God's heartache
- God's joy
- And God's grace.

We hope then to arrive at a better understanding of God and who He is, and also of ourselves and where we stand with God.

God's Heartache

The picture that Moses painted as he penned these chapters, was of a completely corrupted world. Wickedness and evil had become the norm to such an extent that it was all pervasive, encompassing the world of thought and action.

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Genesis 6:5-13 (NIV) ⁵ The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. ⁶ The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. ⁷ So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them.” ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

⁹ This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. ¹⁰ Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. ¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. ¹² God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. ¹³ So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.

The moral state of humanity in the days of Noah was deplorable. The presence of faith in God and good in society had all but been extinguished. There was almost no ‘salt or light’ left in the world and this helps us to understand God’s reaction. His heart was troubled to such an extent that He regretted making us. The purposes for which He had created mankind had been thwarted to such an extent that only drastic measures remained.

We are reminded then, that God sees evil.

- He sees the evil in peoples’ lives, just as He sees everything. Our joys and sorrows, our righteousness and our sinfulness. He sees where we go, what we look at, the things we listen to.
- Gloria Gaither talked about how it was never really hard for her to believe that God made the universe and all of creation and all those big things. But, that God chose to get involved in her Monday mornings – that’s what she said was hard for her to grasp.
- God still sees the wickedness in the world. This is both a source of comfort and discomfort. To the degree that the world remains in each of us, it puts us on edge. It reminds of the distance between the holiness of God and our soul’s condition. For God both sees and knows.

God will not contend with sin forever. In other words, there is an end to the patience of God.

Reading on:

Genesis 6:17-22 (NIV) I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. ¹⁸ But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark —you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁹ You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. ²⁰ Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. ²¹ You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.”

²² Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

God is patient, and He’s kind, and He’s loving. But, in verse 3, God says, “My Spirit will not contend with humans forever.” (NIV).

- There came a time, when ‘time was up’. It happened within history in Noah’s day. God decided to take punitive action, visiting the consequences of sinfulness upon a world captivated by sin.

- In the years that followed, there were many other ‘days of the Lord’ when God said ‘time is up’. So when Israel sacrificed their sons and daughters to Molech, God distanced Himself from them saying, “though I never commanded – nor did it enter my mind – that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.” (Jer 32:35)
- God’s plan was off-track and needed to be put back on-track.

I have the strong impression that some people, some churches, put such an emphasis on God’s love and His grace and His mercy and His patience that they get the idea into their heads that God WILL contend with our sin forever.

- But – the Bible tells us that a point can come where God says, “Enough is enough”.
- We see it over and over in the story of God’s people. Like when God sent Assyria to conquer Israel and Babylon to lay waste to Judah. His people were carried off into foreign captivity, forfeiting their lives and their freedom for refusing to let go of sin.
- His judgment carries over into the New Testament. No one spoke more often about the ‘judgment day’ than did Jesus. We get a taste of what is to come when Jesus used a whip to drive those who were desecrating the temple, away from the presence of God.
- It seems clear, then, that God will NOT contend with sin forever. He does not change – He is the same God now as He was then.

Although God will not contend with our sin forever, He does grieve over our sin (v6) – His heart was deeply troubled.

- It breaks God’s heart when we follow a sinful path. The starting place for all sin is when we reject of the sovereignty of God. And this begins when we remove Him from the place that He deserves in our lives.
- He longs for us to ‘hunger and thirst for the righteousness’ that defines who He is.

It is the righteousness of God that leaves Him no other alternative than to condemn sin. Since the God who is righteous is eternal, He will not allow sin to persist.

This is the hard part of the story – the part that innocent children cannot yet understand.

- But it is the part of the story that should grieve us. We should grieve the sinfulness of the world and our part in it. For God takes sin seriously. He holds us accountable for our thoughts and actions, rewarding righteousness and punishing sin.

Let us not lose sight of that fact that God loves sinners:

- He loves us so much that He gave his one and only Son, that whomever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

But God also hates the sin in the sinner.

- We have to take responsibility for our sin. In order to accept God’s salvation in Jesus, we must repent of our sins. We must own them, confess them, turn away from them, and, to whatever extent that we are able, make amends.

In Noah’s day – God knew that every inclination of the heart was only evil all the time.

- Eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil opened a flood-gate that has not yet been closed.
- In the flood, God served notice that He would not overlook sin nor would He leave righteousness unrewarded. He distinguished between the two, sparing one man and his family

God’s Joy

Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord. He was righteous, and blameless, walking faithfully with God.

- That doesn't mean Noah was sinless – but his heart was in a different place than the rest of humanity's. He had a relationship with God choosing to *go with* God and not the world.

Noah walked with God by being obedient – he did things just as God commanded him (6:22)

Noah built the ark – which probably took about 120 years, and wasn't something he did in his basement or his garage.

- The ark was about 145 metres long, 24 metres wide, and 15 metres tall.
- What do you think people thought about Noah building that big boat? About Noah himself?
- Noah put his faith on display for all to see.

Which raises the question...is our obedience visible to others?

- And if so, how ridiculous does it look in the eyes of the world?
- In some parts of the world, a noticeable faith invites persecution. It adds risk and challenges each believer to '*count the cost*'.

It seems likely that Noah was ridiculed about what he was doing – but he kept right on. He finished the work that God had given him – both as a warning to the world and the means of salvation for himself.

In a word, Noah was faithful.

- He believed God when He said He would destroy the world by a flood – even though it was likely over 100 years before the first raindrops fell.
- He believed God when he was told to enter the ark with his family, all the animals, and the provisions – again, before the rain started.

God's Grace

We've already seen that God chose to spare Noah even though Noah wasn't sinless. Blameless is not the same thing as sinless. It is a measure of God's grace, that He accepts blameless people at all.

Yet...'God remembered Noah' (Gen 8:1)

- It was not that God had forgotten him, perhaps thinking after a few months, 'Hey, I better do something about Noah on that boat.' *God remembering Noah* is more along the lines that God always had Noah in mind, and was ensuring that Noah and the whole cargo of family and animals had a future.

I Peter 3:21, compares the ark to baptism – life rising out of death. From the shelter of the ark, out of the death and devastation of the flood, a new world arose. As water separated the believing and unbelieving world in the days of Noah, it continues to do so today.

There was only one door in the ark – which was operated by God. And we read of another doorway to go through – a narrow door – that leads to salvation in Luke 13:24

In Noah's day, simply *knowing* there was an ark didn't save anybody. It was being *in* the ark that saved Noah and his family. That is still true. It is those who are *in* Christ that are saved, not just those who know about him or utter the words 'Lord, Lord'.

God promised never to destroy the earth again by water.

Genesis 9:11 (NIV) I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. ”

But God’s judgment of the whole world within history is a type of the universal destruction that is yet to come.

Jesus said this, when asked about His coming back:

Matthew 24:37-40, 42 (NIV) ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ... ⁴² Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

And Peter tells us some additional things about that day.

2 Peter 3:10 (NIV) ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Jesus’ warning isn’t primarily targeted at those who don’t know Him – but at those who do. We are to keep watch. We’re not to be like the world. ‘Normal’ in the sight of the world never has been ‘Righteous’ in the eyes of God.

We know that God will never again destroy mankind through a flood. But destruction will come. Like Noah, we’ve been given advance notice along with instructions about how we are to live in order to be ready. Unlike Noah, *our* ark already exists and we have entered into it through the narrow door, who is Jesus. Let’s make sure we are still inside when the end comes! The great thing is, that God has made room for all of mankind inside of his new ark. So let us reach out to others so that as many as will, may be saved.

Source

Portions of this are inspired by ‘Noah’s Ark – For Adults’, by Betty Johnson, 2012.

Kitchener ON

Moses Misses a Blessing

Written on: November 30, 2021

Article by:
Thayer Salisbury

Deuteronomy 3:23-28

Israel stood on the border of the great blessing toward which they had looked for generations. But one of them was not going to receive it. Moses, the only leader they have known, would not be crossing. This is one of the great tragedies of biblical history. It should cause us to think. What had gone wrong? Why was Moses excluded? What lessons are to be learned from his exclusion? Why is this story mentioned so often, and from multiple points of view?

It is fair

Moses missed a blessing, not an entitlement. Moses was not being treated unfairly. The Lord did not owe him anything when he called him from herding his father-in-law's sheep. It was by grace that Moses received that call and vision. It was by grace that he received the power to work wonders in Egypt. It was by grace that he received the law, the water, the manna, the quail.

God owed Moses nothing. God owes me nothing. He owes you nothing. We must learn that. If we do not get over our childish tendency to demand entitlements, there is no hope for us. We come before God as humble sinners seeking grace, or we might as well not come before him at all. Coming before him to demand rights is just to deepen our guilt. He does not owe us.

The sin of the people

Moses missed out, in part, because of the sins and the needs of the people. There are at least two ways in which the people contributed to this tragedy.

Israel's constant complaining wore Moses down and clouded his focus (Dt 1:37; Num 20:2-3, 10). We should not excuse our own sin by blaming others. We are responsible for our own actions. But it is true that sometimes our actions cause others to be tempted (Lk 17:2). People who continually make life bitter for their leaders share the blame when those leaders fail (cf Heb 13:17).

Their unjustified focus on Moses really made it imperative that he not continue as their leader. They had come to think of Moses, rather than the Lord, as the one who had

saved them from Egypt (Ex 32:1). It was not good for Moses and not good for Israel either. They were putting him in the place of God.

Even in human organizations it is often considered unhealthy to allow one person to be in the top leadership position for too long. In the United States, the practice was for the president to serve no more than two terms. It was not a law, but it was the practice of every president to step down after eight years in office. In 1940, Franklin Roosevelt violated that practice. He ran for a third term and then in 1944 for a fourth. Although he had been an effective administrator, and was considered a national hero by many people, the law was later changed so that this could never happen again. Many people, even in his own party, came to feel that Roosevelt had hurt the country by staying in office too long.

Of course, church leadership is different. We should always have more than one elder at a time in the church (Titus 1:5). In that case, church leaders may sometimes serve effectively for a longer time. But when people start putting a church leader in the place of God, it is time for that leader to move on.

Israel was no longer responding properly to Moses and God decided that it was time for Moses to move on. So, in a sense, the death of Moses was not just a punishment to Moses because of his rash words, it was also that which was best for the people. Since the people had put Moses in God's place, it was time for a new leader. In order for Israel to understand that it was God who was leading them into the promised land, He chose Joshua to replace Moses.

Moses' sin

Moses missed out mainly because of his own failure to put the Lord first. I know that a lot of preachers have taught that Moses' sin was in striking the rock rather than speaking to it. But the scriptures state that it was his failure to honour God, not only in what he did but especially in what he said. Yes, the people were unfair to Moses, and they bear responsibility for that. But Moses spoke the rash words. He bears the responsibility for what he said.

He said, "Hear now, you rebels: *shall* we bring water for you out of this rock?" (Num 20:10)

Do you see the problem with those words? Those words do not honour God (Num 20:12). The "we" could include the Lord, but it certainly includes Moses and Aaron. At best it put Moses and Aaron on a level apart from the people and on par with God. At worst it is all about Moses and Aaron and the Lord is left in the shadows. Moses makes it sound as if he and Aaron are the ones bringing water out of the rock. When this event is recorded in one of the Psalms, it is the words of Moses that are condemned, not what he did in striking the rock.

“They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips.” (Ps 106:32-33, emphasis added)

We need to ask ourselves if our words honour God as they should. We are to live the Christian life in a way that causes people to honour the Lord (Mt 5:16). We must not do good deeds in a way that causes people to honour us (Mt 6:5,16-18).

We also need to be careful that we do not focus so much on the reward that we forget the giver of the reward. Peter Craigie suggests that Moses may have become so focused on the land promise that he was looking to the land rather than to the Lord (127). It is better to have our focus on the Lord who gives the gift rather than on the gift itself. Our attitude needs to be that expressed in the hymn “The Sands of Time.”

The Bride eyes not her garment,

But her dear Bridegroom’s face;

I will not gaze at glory,

But on my King of grace:

Not at the crown He giveth,

But on His pierced hand;

The Lamb is all the glory,

Of Emmanuel’s land!

It is not easy for leaders to lead well. People tend to get the wrong impression. People will often begin to focus on the human leader rather than the Lord. It is not easy for us to keep our own focus on the Lord rather than on the blessing he gives. But we must try to keep the focus on him.

Plenty of lessons for us

They stand on the border of the promised land, and Moses will not be going over. It is their fault to some extent, and that is what is emphasised here in Deuteronomy. They needed to learn how they had wronged Moses so that they would not treat Joshua the same way.

But it was also Moses’ own fault. He failed to honour the Lord at Meribah. He spoke rash words that placed himself in the forefront.

It may also just be the fact that it was time for a change of leadership. It was time for someone other than Moses to lead.

If our concern is the glory of God, rather than our own advancement, we will accept the fact that sometimes this is the case. This event is recorded repeatedly and from different points of view because it is so very relevant to us in several different ways. God's grace was good to Moses, but he did miss the one big blessing that he most wanted. God's grace has been wonderfully good to us. Let us not take God's grace for granted and end up missing greater blessings. Let us never put ourselves at the centre and push the Lord into the shadows. And let us never tempt one another in that direction.

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