

# THE *November 15, 2001* STANDARD BEARER

A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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# Judgment over the Nations

Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron:

But I will send a fire into the house of Hazael, which shall devour the palaces of Benhadad.

I will break also the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from the plain of Aven, and him that holdeth the sceptre from the house of Eden: and the people of Syria shall go into captivity unto Kir, saith the LORD.

Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they carried away captive the whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom:

But I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, which shall devour the palaces thereof:

And I will cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod, and him that holdeth the

sceptre from Ashkelon, and I will turn mine hand against Ekron; and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, saith the Lord GOD.

Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Tyrus, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they delivered up the whole captivity to Edom, and remembered not the brotherly covenant:

But I will send a fire on the wall of Tyrus, which shall devour the palaces thereof.

Amos 1:3-10

**H**as it ever happened that you were awakened in the middle of the night by the faint, far-off rumble of thunder? Perhaps you thought, "Oh well, it is far away," and dropped back to peaceful sleep. But a little later, you were awakened once again by the thunder, which now was closer. Nearer and nearer comes the storm until finally it breaks forth in fury right over your head.

This shows the development of the opening of the prophecy of Amos from 1:3 to 2:6. The prophet brings the Word of God's judgment upon Israel. The LORD roars from Zion at Israel, as verses 1 and 2

warn. But He begins far off from Israel with Damascus, Gaza, and Tyrus. He continues with Edom, Ammon, and Moab. As Amos begins to roar, Israel would say, "Oh, the thunder of the wrath of God is far off; the storm breaks upon the nations." Uneasy at first, Israel is ready to go back again to her sleep, when she hears of judgment upon Damascus.

Soon, however, Israel realizes that the storm is coming ever closer: Damascus, Moab, Judah. Then it breaks with full fury upon Israel herself.

Always, the storm of judgment is intended for Israel, but as it approaches it touches the nations of the world. The roar of the Lion, directed toward Israel, does not leave the nations unscathed.

In the time of the Old Testament prophet Amos, in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and of Jeroboam king of Israel, God had a Word for the heathen nations of the world.

Today, likewise, God has a Word for the nations that are controlled by the ungodly. It is a mighty Word. It is a terrible Word. It is a Word of judgment.

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The Standard Bearer (ISSN 0362-4692) is a semi-monthly, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Inc., 4949 Ivanrest Ave., Grandville, MI 49418.

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to the Standard Bearer, P.O. Box 603, Grandville, MI 49468-0603.

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\$17.00 per year in the U.S., US\$20.00 elsewhere.

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16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm and 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms International.

Website for RFPA: [www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)

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## **Sovereign over the Nations**

Our God, the God of Israel in the Old Testament and of the church in the New Testament, is not a local deity. In the Old Testament, every nation had its own god. That god functioned in that territory and took care of that particular nation. The nations recognized this. They claimed that their god was the greatest god; they did not claim that it was the only god. Much less did they assert that it governed all people everywhere.

The God of Israel, whose name is the LORD (Jehovah), was not such a local deity. Although He was the God of Israel, the sphere of His Godhead was not limited to Palestine. Nor was it the case that the only nation that should take Him into account was Israel. This God, who is the God of the church today, is the sovereign of the world. He is Lord of all nations. He raises up the nations and casts them down at His will. All nations stand before Him in judgment, not only at the end of history but throughout history. Rulers and ruled alike are subject to Him, completely at His disposal. History, the history of the *world*, is inexplicable apart from our God. The truth of history, the history of the *world*, is the mighty acts of God.

The God of Israel/church has a Word for the nations: "Thus saith the LORD" regarding Damascus, Gaza, Tyrus, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. It is a Word of judgment. It is the lion's roar as he springs upon the prey (Amos 1:2; 3:4).

### **The Lion's Roar over the Nations Then**

Three nations come into view in Amos 1:3-10: Syria, Philistia, and Phoenicia. The capital city of each is mentioned: Damascus, Gaza, and Tyrus (Tyre). All of these were prominent, powerful nations in the Old Testament.

The Word of God upon them is a Word of judgment, that is, a Word of their destruction. Upon them all, God will send a fire. This

fire will be His awful vengeance that consumes them, so that the nations are destroyed. God will destroy the rulers of these nations: the house of Hazael, the palaces of Benhadad, the scepter of Ashkelon, and the palaces of Tyre. Thus, a fatal blow is struck against the nation.

God will also destroy the people: "the inhabitant from the plain of Aven" and the "inhabitant from Ashdod." Many of the Syrians and the Philistines will be killed in battle ("cut off," vv. 5, 8). The survivors of the Philistines will perish in some other way (v. 8). Those of Syria who are not killed will be exiled in the land of Kir (v. 5).

This prophecy was literally fulfilled in Old Testament times. A few years after this prophecy, Assyria destroyed Syria, killing many and carrying the rest into captivity (see II Kings 16:9). Philistia and Tyre were similarly destroyed. The Word of God did it, the Word that was announced by Amos. The Word spoken by Amos used Assyria to accomplish the destruction of the three nations, but it was the Word that did it.

The Word of God is a living, mighty, efficacious Word in time and history. History is governed, shaped, and directed by the Word of God. The ungodly, idolatrous nations are subject to the Word of God. Their rulers are subject to it—kings, czars, premiers, and presidents—as are the people.

### **The Lion's Roar over the Nations Today**

God has a Word for ungodly nations today. Damascus, Gaza, and Tyrus were typical of the wicked world, formed as nations, around the church. The Word of God to the nations today is proclaimed by the church. Do not forget: the LORD roars over the nations out of *Zion* (Amos 1:1). The thunderous roar over Damascus sounded from Jerusalem. The church has something to say to and

about the ungodly world. Since the only Word that the church has is the gospel, this Word to and about the world is an aspect of the gospel.

It is the judgment-aspect of the gospel. It is the Word of divine vengeance on the world, threatening the world's destruction. It is not a Word of love for that world in the common grace of God. It is not a Word about the church's becoming one with the world to improve it, or win it. It is not a Word about Christianizing the world through all kinds of man-made organizations.

But "thus saith the LORD": a fire! an overthrow of the rulers! A cutting off of the people! a perishing and a slavery—yes, an eternal perishing and an everlasting captivity.

It is the Word of the gospel that will be fulfilled upon the reprobate ungodly in that day when "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 1:7, 8). It is the Word of the gospel that already begins to be fulfilled in the outpouring upon the nations of the coming wrath of God (I Thess. 1:10).

"For three transgressions ... and for four."

### **"The Sins of the Nations Their Ruin Have Wrought"**

This judgment of God is not arbitrary, is not unjust. It is righteous punishment for the nations' transgressions. Amos makes this plain from the outset: "For three transgressions ... and for four," which phrase is repeated regarding each nation. The meaning is not that the nation is guilty of three or four sins. Rather, it is a way of expressing that each nation has fully developed itself in sin. Syria, Philistia, and Phoenicia have filled their cup to the full and even to overflowing. The fire that con-

sumes them is the fire of God's wrath, and God's wrath is the reaction of His righteousness against those who transgress this righteousness.

The judgment upon the nations is due to the righteousness of the one, true God, whose name is Jehovah. The Lion's roar over them is divine justice. God sees the nations and their deeds. He marks, not only the sins of His people but also those of the world. Jehovah is judge of the nations. When a nation adds the fourth transgression to the third, God punishes in perfect justice.

### **Oppression of the Church**

But mark well what the transgression is that brings down upon the nations God's judgment. It is sin against Israel. The three nations are on Israel's borders. All are enemies of Israel; all have oppressed the people of God. Until the reign of King Jeroboam, Syria was the worst, constantly attacking, seizing land, killing. Throughout Israel's history, the Philistines distressed Israel, especially during the period of the judges. And Phoenicia—that was the country of Queen Jezebel.

The specific sins charged against the nations are their wicked deeds against Israel. Damascus threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron. That was horrible cruelty. After conquering Gilead, the Syrians forced the people to lie down in a field. Then they dragged a heavy iron machine with sharp points over the people, tearing and crushing them. This had happened not long before the time of Amos, under Hazael, whose dreadful cruelty to Israel Elisha had foretold (see II Kings 10:32ff.).

Philistia and Phoenicia sold the people of Israel into slavery to Edom on their slave markets (vv. 6, 9). The sin was heinous, not merely because of the evil of slavery but because this was done to God's people. The people whom He had redeemed for His own

property were sold as slaves. What added to the wickedness was that the Israelites were sold to Edom, Israel's ancient and bitter foe. One can well imagine how Edom would treat their Israelite slaves.

In the case of Tyre, this sin was aggravated in God's sight because Tyre "remembered not the brotherly covenant" (v. 9). The reference is to the league that Hiram, king of Tyre, made with Solomon, which league was rooted in Hiram's love for David (I Kings 5:1, 12). It was a treaty that consisted both of a trade-agreement and of a non-aggression pact. Israel observed the treaty; she never went to war against Tyre. But Tyre violated it, selling Israelites into slavery.

God judges the nations for their oppression of His church. Everything in history revolves around God's elect church. Again and again, the nations of idolatrous, ungodly men and women persecute God's saints. Rome persecuted the early New Testament church, on and off, for 250 years. Spain oppressed the Reformed in the Lowlands for many years. Wherever it could raise the swastika, Nazi Germany attempted to crush the true church. The totalitarian, communist regimes enslaved in their concentration camps those who confessed the Lordship of Christ. Those communist nations that survive still do imprison and torture believers. Muslim nations harass, imprison, and kill Christians.

And if the nations of the West do not yet overtly bring the power of the sword to bear against those who resist the states' efforts to usurp the sovereignty of God, there is widespread hatred and ridicule. And bloody persecution is around the corner in the "Christian" West for those who insist in confession and life that Christ is Lord and who condemn the ungodly for their idolatrous worship of other gods, murder of the unborn, and filthiness of life in adultery (divorce and remarriage) and homosexuality.

For this, God will judge you, O world! For this, God is judging you *already*, O world!

### **The Storm Is Breaking over the Nations**

Keep your hands off the church and off every member of the church!

Because the wicked world will not keep their hands off God's church, and never have, the storm of His wrath is breaking over the world of nations.

We hear the roar, do we not? In the overthrow of rulers? In the wars between nations? In the violent strife within nations? In all the social, economic, political turmoil? It is the Lion who is roaring over the nations of the world.

Do we say, "Well and good, and it is high time too"? And are we ready to roll over and return to our peaceful slumbers?

### **The Storm Is Breaking over the Visible Church**

We must not do this, for the storm is gathering to break forth over us, the visible church among the nations.

If God so judges the nations who do not know Him and His law, shall He not judge us, who do know Him, if we commit the same sins that the wicked world is guilty of. We can thresh God's people in other ways than with a harrow. We can plow furrows on each other's back with our hatred, our cutting tongue, our subtly made and exquisitely executed conspiracy.

Professing Christian husbands make slaves of their wives; covenant parents make slaves of their children; elders in the churches make slaves of their workers.

And how the real covenant of brothers is forgotten! God sees, and honors, every contract, every treaty, every vow, every sworn bond of friendship. If He destroyed Tyrus for violating a mere treaty with Israel, how will He judge the breaking of the covenant



between a husband and wife; between parents and children; between pastor and congregation; between brother and brother, in His own congregation.

The Word of God's judgment over the nations is directed toward us. The Lion roars over the na-

tions toward Israel. "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four" (Amos 2:6). The righteous God is coming to judgment. Repent! Seek refuge in the cross, where the roaring Lion sprang in His justice upon the Prey, Jesus

Christ, in the stead of all the elect church, so that every one who by His grace repents may find deliverance from the coming wrath of God! And do works worthy of repentance!

Or perish in the coming storm.



## Editorial

# Distress of Nations

**T**he church must see more deeply into the horror of men and women leaping to their death from high up on burning towers or perishing in the collapse of those towers than do the talking heads on television or the reporters in the newspapers. The church must see more deeply than do most religious commentators.

The deliberate crashing of planes into the towers in New York and the destruction of another plane with its passengers in Pennsylvania were cruel acts by heartless men. They demonstrated the truth of the gospel's verdict, that fallen mankind are totally depraved: "Their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known" (Rom. 3:15-17).

The terrorist act was an act of war upon the United States as our president declared. The right response is attack upon the terrorists and the nations that harbor and support them. This is the calling that God Himself gives our government as His servant. A fundamental duty of government is the defense of its citizens from aggression. For carrying out this duty, God gives the civil government the sword (Rom. 13:1-7). A war of defense against aggression is a just

war. Those who counsel turning the other cheek in the name of Jesus are utterly confused interpreters of the Bible and a threat to the nation.

Not only was the act of terror a declaration of war against the United States, it was also naked aggression against Western civilization. The Western nations perceived this quickly enough. They have banded together to repulse and eradicate the aggressors. This too is right. Failure to do this would be fatal. It would indicate such softness on the part of the Western nations as to invite the ruthless, determined enemies to impose their will upon the West and ultimately bring these nations down.

These facts, almost everyone sees.

But the terrorist attack upon the United States on September 11, 2001 and its aftermath were more than these earthly facts. And in the "more" is the truth of these events, that is, their reality in relation to the triune, one, true, living God and in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ.

The present time is the last hour. It has been the last hour since Christ ascended into heaven. Time is rushing on to the one great work of God that is still outstand-

ing: the bodily return of Jesus Christ and the final judgment. It is now late in the last hour.

Preparatory to the coming of Christ, God is pouring out His awful judgments upon a wicked world that is fast filling its cup of iniquity. This wicked world of totally depraved men and women is by no means limited to the pagans, who worship and serve their cruel idols. It includes multitudes in the nominally Christian West. They have changed the truth of God, whom they knew, not only from His revelation in creation, but also from His revelation in the gospel, into a lie. They are now worshipping and serving creatures rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18-25).

God has already been judging these apostates, who have besmirched His glory. He has given them over to the dishonoring of marriage, the shame of homosexuality, and such loss of natural affection that mothers butcher their own unborn (Rom. 1:18-32). His judgments fall also in the form of wars, social strife, and disease (Rev. 6:3-8). As the end approaches, God increases the severity of His judgments (Rev. 8, 9).

The effect of these judgments is "distress of nations." The turmoil of the nations is like the "sea and the waves roaring" (Luke

21:25). Out of this troubled sea of the nations will come the world-kingdom of antichrist, speaking "great words against the most High," wearing out "the saints of the most High," and thinking "to change times and laws" (Dan. 7). This union of all the nations under one head—the "little horn" of Daniel 7—will take place by the direct working of Satan. For a long period of time—1,000 years—Satan has been bound, not so that he can do nothing but so that he cannot deceive the nations. Toward the very end of history, Satan will be loosed a little season, so that he can deceive the nations into the union that claims to be the long-awaited kingdom of God and that promises everlasting, blessed peace, but which is, in fact, the cursed kingdom of the devil (Rev. 20). In this supposed kingdom of God, they will worship the dragon and the beast (Rev. 13).

A powerful instrument in realizing this monumental achievement will be the churches. As a result of centuries, even millennia, of apostasy, the churches will come together in a grand ecumenical alliance. They will come together, not in the pure doctrine of the gospel, which is the unity of the true church (Bel. Conf., Art. 29), but in toleration of false doctrine. This enables them to unite with the other religions of the world in the name of a common god. This great religious federation will then serve antichrist by exerting its considerable influence upon all the peoples of the world to look to the union of the nations as the hope of mankind (Rev. 13:11-18).

One nation will be excluded. This is the holy nation, the church, whose citizens confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ, worship the triune God and Father of Jesus Christ alone, rebuke the ungodly for their blasphemy of the one true God and for the unrighteousness of their lives, and warn of the impending judgments upon the kingdom of Man.

We see these things taking form before our eyes. We have no timetable. But Jesus' prohibition in Mark 13:32 of speculation about days and hours, as well as months and years, is not intended to dissuade us from a sharp-eyed observation and keen-minded interpretation of the signs of His coming that He Himself took the trouble to give us.

An astonishing result of the terrorist attack against the United States and the West is the uniting of all the nations of the world. This has been happening for some time. "Globalization" has been a pronounced movement since the collapse of Soviet communism. God's division of the human race into nations is challenged by internationalism. What drives internationalism is economics, technology, especially the technology of communications, and religion, particularly the message of universalism. The terrorist attack on the West has given internationalism a mighty boost.

The present union of the nations promises to be lasting. The war on terrorism will be long-term. In addition, the nations are discovering that their union can be beneficial to all. Of course, it will prevent such calamitous, costly deeds as were recently perpetrated upon the United States. It also bids fair to resolve old conflicts and to solve festering problems such as poverty and disease. In their union, the nations can bring about a settlement of the strife between Israel and the Palestinians, and enforce it. They can also address the needs, or wants, of the poor nations by vast re-distribution of the wealth of the West.

The churches come together, in concert with the other religions of the world, in order to support a political power and to promote the union of all nations. There it was before the eyes of all in the impressive prayer and worship service in Washington, D. C. Conservative and liberal Protestants, Protestants

and Roman Catholics, Christians, Jews, and Moslems, all worshipping and praying to one and the same deity on behalf of the union of the nations.

Even the fissure between the nations of the nominally Christian West and the nations of the non-Christian East that will eventually rupture the kingdom of antichrist is apparent in current events. The non-Christian East may for a short while cast in its lot with the West, partly for the benefits and partly out of sheer awe at the military might of the West, but its hatred for the "Christian" West, religious and otherwise, will never permit a lasting union. Armageddon is a certainty (Rev. 16:12-16).

Just as their insight into recent events is deeper, so also must the response of believers, particularly in the United States, go beyond that of their unbelieving neighbors. We share the anger and the grief. We are as resolute as any in our support of the United States as it defends itself against its murderous attackers. We are loyal citizens of the United States of America. For myself, I never knew how much I loved our country until the past months.

But we are also citizens of the kingdom of heaven, looking for the coming of King Jesus. That coming, and *only* that coming, will usher in universal, everlasting, blessed peace in a world of righteousness, in which the triune God will be all in all.

Therefore, we are not perplexed or fearful. Christ Jesus is risen from the dead in the body. He governs all, including terrorist attacks and their aftermath. Denial by prominent Christians that God, much less Jesus, had anything to do with the terrorist attacks on the United States is as much a blasphemous denial of the God of Christianity as is Islam's worship of Allah. The God revealed in Scripture is Almighty, governing the evil as well as the good. Jesus Christ sits at God's right hand ac-



tively realizing the counsel of God concerning all things that take place (Rev. 5). In all things, Jesus is coming quickly. And He has told us beforehand, in broad outline, what will, indeed what *must*, take place before He returns to deliver His elect, believing, confessing people and this groaning creation.

Out of the recent events and the ensuing developments that have so shaken our nation and the world comes the reminder to the saints: Think eschatologically, that is, in terms of the last days and the soon coming of Christ. View what is happening in light of the books of Daniel and Revelation.


Let us ourselves then repent of our own idolatries, unrighteous-

nesses, and worldliness. Let us take refuge in the cross of Jesus Christ to escape the coming wrath.

And live in hope! "Look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28).

Christ comes quickly.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

— DJE 

## All Around Us

Rev. Gise VanBaren

### ■ Is God Truly God?

**S**eptember 11, 2001 will live long in infamy in the history books of the United States of America. The events of that day are etched deeply in the consciousness of most Americans. How many did not sit transfixed before their television sets to watch in live time the World Trade Center towers first hit by two planes and then shortly after disintegrate into rubble in the heart of New York City? And how many have failed to see re-play after re-play of the event daily for weeks afterwards?

I must confess feeling deep pain within as I watched those towering buildings disintegrate with thousands of people still within. I must confess watching agonizingly as pictures were shown of individuals leaping from the heights of these towers to their death below. I must confess to shock at watching many fleeing before the cloud of rubble sweeping rapidly towards them. I was and am emotionally affected by the accounts of some who perished and others who managed to escape. Tears came to my eyes as I listened to telephone calls made to loved ones from the doomed airplane shortly before it crashed into the Pennsylvania countryside.

Nor has there been anything more stirring than the repeated singing of the "new" U.S. anthem: "God bless America!" Unity was emphasized. There is the common enemy we must confront: the terrorists. Marching orders were given to the armed forces.

Indeed, September 11 changed America forever. But there has been a greater change which took place—a change which must surely affect the faithful church of Christ. There are certain changes not often mentioned which will touch us as well in coming weeks.

First, from all sides it seems, there has been an attack on the sovereignty of God. The atheist insists that there is no god and therefore these events take place by chance. But many within the churches emphatically state as well, "God did not do this. God *could not* do this. He is a God of love—not of wrath or of punishment." (However, see Isaiah 45:7; Jeremiah 32:23; Amos 3:6.)

What then must be one's conclusion? Was God unaware of that which was going to take place? But if He is God, and He is aware of all these things, would He not as the God of love have stopped such a tragic event? Could He not have sent fire from heaven to consume the terrorists before they could carry out their dastardly deeds? Could He not have communicated somehow to someone in authority

and reveal the hidden agenda of the terrorists? But, clearly, most believe that God cannot do this either—otherwise, surely a God of love would have prevented this tragedy.

In the *Grand Rapids Press*, October 6, 2001, there is a report of the renowned Bishop John Spong's response to this tragedy:

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 should shatter some faith illusions and awaken Christians to a new understanding of their faith, Bishop John Shelby Spong says.

One of these illusions is "an understanding of God as being in control of the universe and all-powerful," the retired Episcopal bishop told 400 people at Christ Community Church in Spring Lake (MI) last weekend.

"The definition of God as a being, supernatural in power, who invades this world periodically for good seems woefully inadequate," said Spong, an author and controversial theologian who taught last year at the Harvard Divinity School.

In response to crisis, many people cling to theism, the belief in a parent-like God who controls the universe, or atheism, not believing in God, Spong said.

He proposed "a nontheistic understanding of God" as a median way.

This nontheistic God is the source of life and love who calls and empowers humanity "to live fully, to love wastefully, and to

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have the courage to be who we were made to be."

The people killed in the attacks were killed by chance – not because God had it in for them, Spong said. Part of our human maturing is to accept the randomness of suffering and continue to live our lives fully, not fret over our continued survival.

It is also true that September 11 was the day that those of all religions were willing to join together in prayer to "God." Which God? Whose God? That did not seem to matter. The Religion News Service, in an article written by Adelle M. Banks, reports on the prayer service at Washington National Cathedral on the national day of prayer, September 14:

Inside, stoic and sometimes tearful faces gathered for prayer and unity. Bush sat in front, joined by all his living predecessors except an ailing Ronald Reagan. Not far behind them were members of his Cabinet, Congress, the military, and firefighting battalions.

Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim clergy took turns reading Scripture and reciting prayers.

"Those that lay the plots of evil, for them is a penalty terrible; and the plotting of such will not abide," said Imam Muzammil H. Siddiqi of the Islamic Society of North America.

Across the nation similar prayer services were held where all "faiths" joined together in prayer to God.

An interesting article assessing the current situation appeared in the *Christian News*, September 24, 2001 by Pastor Craig Stanford, Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church. In it he pointed out a sobering fact:

The first national tragedy is being used this very day as an excuse for millions of so-called Christians to set aside the true and uncompromising confession of Jesus Christ as the One and Only True God and Savior for another seemingly virtuous proposition.

Simply stated it is this: "We all, Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, Agnostics and Christians, worship the same God. We just do it in different ways and call him, her, or it by different names. What binds us together," they say, "is our common humanity and our common faith in one another."

In every place and in every community this week we are seeing "interfaith services" wherein people of all faiths and religious traditions have joined together to offer prayers to an unknown and "unpredicated" supreme being, who is without a true name, without true form, and without any sure word upon which we can rely in the hour of our need. And don't think that some of our church people haven't had a hand in this. But, this is not the time to relegate God to some abstract transcendent unknowable being....

This week thousands of people, Americans, died at the hands of evil men. But I tell you that this week something more sinister, something far more subtle, and something more devilish has come to light. In church buildings once dedicated solely to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, in churches who once worshipped the Only true God who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and TRUTH, God was reduced to some abstract concept and fleeting feeling....

...There has always been a spiritual war for the Christian. We see that in both the Old and New Testament. But, the war has escalated in our day. Biblical morality has been under siege for a long time, both inside and outside the visible church. Now the truth of God's word and the true nature of Christ are challenged at every turn. And we in the church...we have been more than a little occupied with recreation, collecting things, and "playing church." We haven't prepared ourselves, our children, our congregations, or our synod for this war. We haven't put on the full armor of God so that we can stand firm.

The sovereignty of God is de-

nied. The churches and those of other religions are joining hands. Nations are seeking alliances. All of this has been particularly evident since September 11.

Security is tightened in the country—apparently necessarily so. Suggestions are made that we may soon need identity cards giving a record of the individual carrying it. Some even claim that some computer chip should be implanted in each individual so that all can be carefully tracked. Security cameras already reveal most of our transactions and observe our activities. Just consider the many security cameras which evidently captured pictures of the terrorists in many places in our land. One cannot help but think of the number "666" of Revelation, which a government will require in order to buy and sell.

And is the Muslim religion as peace-loving and kind as has been portrayed by some? We can learn from a statement from the Barnabas Fund WebPages concerning the persecution of Christians in the lands controlled by Islam.

#### **Two Christians to be Killed for Every Muslim: Fatwa issued in Pakistan**

#### **Christians Killed, Churches Burnt**

Muslim religious leaders in Pakistan are reported to have issued a fatwa stating that two Pakistani Christians will be killed for every Muslim who dies during American strikes on Afghanistan. Earlier, Maulana Sami ul-Haq, a former member of Pakistan's legislative assembly and a nationally recognized figure closely connected to international Islamic extremist movements, told journalists that the Qur'an clearly states that Jews and Christians are the enemies of Muslims, and by inference should be killed.

Meanwhile the persecution of local Christians has already begun. On the very evening of September 11th a Christian restaurant owner was beaten to death by a



gang of Muslim men who refused to pay for their meal saying, "Take your payment from America." In Rawalpindi five Christian families were dragged from their homes and savagely beaten by Muslim mobs during anti-American protests. In a separate incident in Lahore a gang of Muslims set fire to a church. When the minister attempted to stop them he was viciously beaten. Another church has reportedly been stoned by Muslim rioters, and a Christian school broken into and vandalized. At least three more churches have also been attacked.

#### Christians Feel Betrayed

In Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria and across the Islamic world many Christians are terrified. They are living in fear and intimidation, facing the prospect of widespread, massive and violent reprisals from angry Muslims if America and its allies attack Afghanistan. At a time when Church and political leaders in the West have, quite rightly, rushed to condemn attacks against Muslims, they cannot understand why these leaders have not also spoken up on their behalf, or come to their defence. They feel betrayed both by their fellow Christians and by Western Governments.

Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo, Interna-

tional Director of the Barnabas Fund, commented, "The situation is extremely serious and demands urgent attention. Never in living memory has the situation for Christian minorities in the Islamic world been so precarious" (The Barnabas Fund, 03 October 2001).

Reports are given of the President and his advisors proposing to enforce a truce and peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Perhaps there would be the recognition of a Palestinian state. This would also demand a very sizable presence of the armed forces of the U.S. This might just quell the great opposition by many Muslims.

Again, one can see the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy when the hordes of unbelievers rise up against the so-called Christian nations at the end of the age. There will be the great battle of Armageddon. Will this take place even at that flash-point — the land of Canaan?


Meanwhile, there are those within the churches willing to take now their "potshots" at the Calvinists—or a certain element of them. On the discussion list of the United Reformed Churches, a report was presented by Jim Payer:

Why is it that Lutherans cannot resist the opportunity to criticize the Reformed whenever they get together on radio talk shows?

Just last night, and this is typical of this radio program (LCMS sponsored), one of their best known "apologists/polemicists," in discussing Islam, said that "Calvinists were the Muslim extremists of the Christian Church." He later clarified this to refer to "hyper-Calvinists", which he defined as those holding to "absolute predestination" and "reconstructionism."

I may agree in part on the latter, but certainly not the former!

I have yet to hear Lutherans "bashed" (except for 'my' diatribe here!) by Calvinists. Is this because of the historical conflict we have with them—not yet resolved? (Jim Payer).

There you have it. Calvinists, especially *hyper*-Calvinists, are the "Muslim extremists of the Christian world." Where would that then place us? What lies in store for those who insist on the scriptural truth of the sovereignty of God? Who insist that God then controls all events? Who insist that God judges and condemns all wickedness? Understand well: we too will be labeled "Muslim extremists of the Christian world." 

## Feature Article

Rev. Rodney Miersma

# True Thanksgiving Joy

*Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:*

*Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

Habakkuk 3:17, 18

**A**t this time of the year the citizens of the United States and Canada observe what is called Thanksgiving Day. On the second Monday of October and the third Thursday of November the prime minister of

Canada and the president of the United States declare a national holiday for their respective countries so that everyone can give thanks unto the Lord for benefits and mercies received.

Has it ever struck you as strange that our Thanksgiving Day should be a national holiday? I ask this question because the basis for this proclamation is, we under-

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stand, that all men have received blessings and mercies from the Lord and are able to render thanks unto Him from whom is every good and perfect gift. But where in Scripture do we read such a proclamation? Where are we informed in Holy Writ that all men are the objects of God's grace and therefore called to give thanks? O, let us not misunderstand. We do not deny the calling and obligation of every man to acknowledge Him who alone is the Giver of every good and perfect gift. However, what man must do and what he can do are two different things.

The teaching that all men have received blessings and mercies from the Lord and are therefore able to give thanks unto Jehovah is surely foreign to Holy Writ. How different it is in Psalm 118:2-4, "Let Israel now say, that his mercy endureth for ever. Let the house of Aaron now say, that his mercy endureth for ever. Let them now that fear the Lord say, that his mercy endureth for ever." This means two things. It implies in the first place that only the people of the living God are able to give thanks unto the Lord. And it implies in the second place that they are able to give thanks unto the Lord always. The only thing that can prevent us and does prevent us from giving thanks unto the Lord is the spiritual condition of our own heart and life and never anything outside of us.

In light of the events that happened on September 11 and the following fears of anthrax spores being sent through the mail, you may ask, How can I give thanks? Or you may have had more personal tragedies happen to you such as a serious illness, either to yourself or a loved one, or death or business failure. I am sure that you can add to the list. At such times and under such circumstances we are inclined to refrain from giving thanks to God.

Dear child of God, bear this in mind. In the first place, the Word of God does not attempt to mini-

mize your difficult position. Neither does it demand of you that you ignore it. Scripture does not ask of us that we assume the attitude of the stoic. Secondly, true thanksgiving must not be confused with worldly and carnal frivolity. The fact, therefore, that you are in difficulty does not exclude you from the privilege of giving thanks unto God. Thirdly, do you really believe that sorrow and worldly misfortunes and the giving of thanks exclude each other? In answer to this question please read the text above once again.

What an amazing Word of God! We cannot enter at this time into a detailed discussion of the calamity which the Lord visited upon His people through the instrumentality of the Chaldeans. Neither is this necessary. We must not overlook the tremendous contrast which is presented to us in this particular passage of Holy Writ. Amazing is this Word of the Lord because the destruction and joy whereof the prophet speaks occur simultaneously. The prophet does not declare that he is sorrowing but also rejoicing. Neither does he say that he is sorrowing now but will rejoice in the future when his present calamity shall be past. But the amazing character of the text consists exactly in the fact that, although disaster overtake and overwhelm him, nevertheless he will rejoice in the Lord even in the midst of these calamities and disasters. That is wonderful, because it means that the Christian always has the victory, regardless of the difficulties which trouble him.

Another feature of this text is the fact that the prophet declares that he will rejoice. He does not say, for example, that he will bear his present trouble and affliction, or that he will not murmur or rebel. No, the church of God actually declares in this particular Word of God that it will rejoice. In order that there be no misunderstanding whatsoever, the prophet exclaims here, according to the original He-

brew, "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will leap for joy in the God of my salvation." To be sure, according to verse 16 the prophet trembled when he heard of the impending disaster; rottenness entered into his bones, and he trembled in himself. However, already in this same verse he declares that he would find rest in the day of trouble. Then, in the words of our text, he stands upon the mountaintop of faith and declares that, even in the midst of calamity and disaster, he will rejoice in the Lord and leap for joy in the God of his salvation. Are you able to say this? Also today, when the staunchest and bravest hearts of men are being shaken and disturbed because of the frightening uncertainty which confronts them? If you and I cannot join the prophet Habakkuk, what shall we say? If we fail to appropriate unto ourselves this comfort, wherewith then shall we be comforted?

The text speaks of the God of my salvation. We are all acquainted with the idea of salvation. It refers to our deliverance from the greatest evil and to our becoming partakers of highest good. This is not the highest good in the sense that it is the highest good to which we could attain, but in the sense that it is the highest good which the Lord could bestow upon us. Briefly expressed, this salvation refers to our deliverance out of all the power of sin and death into the blessed fellowship of God's eternal and heavenly covenant and kingdom.

That God is the God of my salvation surely implies that all salvation is of the Lord. He is a God of salvation; salvation characterizes Him alone and can be ascribed only to Him. He is the God of our salvation because He conceived of it, willed it, laid it away for us from before the foundation of the world. Secondly, God is the God of our salvation because He realized it for us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. It was He who took our flesh and blood, bore the burden of our guilt, descended into the unfathomably



deep and terrible abyss of hell, paid all our debt, and merited for us life and glory everlasting. And, finally, God is the God of our salvation because it is He who alone saves us, calls us out of darkness into the light, and causes all things to work together for our eternal and heavenly salvation.

Furthermore, He is the God of *my* salvation. The text is personal. Knowledge concerning the truth, fundamental and important as it is, cannot of itself enable us to give thanks unto the Lord. I must appropriate that living God unto myself. I must be able to say: God has elected *me*, bore *my* guilt, died for *me*, arose from the dead as *my* Savior. This I must know. And this I can know if His Spirit be in me and is leading me upon the way everlasting and causes me to seek the things that are above.

Moreover, and this must not escape our attention, the prophet declares in this text that he will rejoice in the *LORD*. The Lord in this text is Jehovah. Jehovah is the I AM, the unchangeable One. He is unchangeable, everlastingly the same in Himself, and therefore the unchangeable covenant God of His people. Having loved us, He loves us with an everlasting love; having begun His work of salvation in our hearts, He will complete that work of salvation even unto the end. Being Jehovah and therefore the unchangeable faithful God, He fulfills His promise, once given to His people and repeated throughout the old dispensation, and sends His Son into the world. He does not rest until all the sins of His people have been paid and everlasting salvation has been merited. This constitutes an essential part of the text and explains why trouble and thanksgiving do not exclude each other.

I will rejoice in the Lord, and leap for joy in the God of my salvation. This means in the first place that my joy will be in God; God Himself will be the content of my joy. Let us understand this. We will not rejoice in things.

Earthly prosperity and plenty will not constitute my joy and happiness. I will rejoice in the Lord. I will leap for joy because He loves me eternally, because He has blotted out all my sins and trespasses and merited life eternal for me, because He has shed His love abroad in my heart and filled me with the unspeakable joy of His fellowship and communion.

But there is more. What must I say with respect to my present anxiety and distress and trouble? What must be my attitude toward this grief and sorrow which are my lot? Must I ignore them? That, however, is impossible. The Lord does not send me trouble and affliction in order that I should ignore them. Certainly I must respond to His heavy hand upon me and take cognizance of my present grief and woe. What shall I say? I will rejoice in the Lord, and leap for joy in the God of my salvation, also in connection with my present distresses and sorrows. He is the Lord, Jehovah, is He not? The Lord is the God of my salvation. He is always and constantly the God of my salvation, also in the midst of my present troubles and distresses. He is Jehovah, the Unchangeable, who loves me and never changes in His love toward me. Hence, I will leap for joy in Him.

This does not mean that I will rejoice because of my present calamities and sorrows and that the Christian must assume an attitude of indifference over against them. I will rejoice in God. But I will rejoice in Him also in connection with whatever He pleases to send me in the midst of this world. Indeed, I grieve and feel the pain of my present afflictions. But, underneath my sorrow, and sustaining me in my present woe, is the unspeakable joy that also this trouble has been given me of the Lord in His unfathomable love and that all things must work together to realize the glory which the Lord has laid away for me from before the foundation of the world.

This expression of thanksgiving, so deeply and profoundly spiritual, is not easy. Do not be too hasty in declaring that you are able to take this song of thanksgiving upon your lips. It is easy to speak of victory when no enemy confronts you, to profess unwavering loyalty to the cause of God and of His Christ as long as such loyalty does not involve you in the sufferings of this present time. But are you able to utter this thanksgiving also in the midst of affliction? Are you, even at this very moment, in trouble and sorrow? And does this particular Word of God appear completely beyond your reach so that you cannot possibly attain unto it? Do you ask: How can I rejoice in the Lord and leap for joy in the God of my salvation?

Our text informs us that we must rejoice *in* the Lord and leap for joy *in* the God of my salvation. You cannot rejoice and leap for joy in your own strength. But you can do so *in the Lord*. This is true, first of all, objectively. To leap for joy in the God of our salvation implies that we are in God, are rooted in God, have been ingrafted in the God of our salvation and in Jesus Christ our Lord. God has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light and united us with Himself. Whereas we formerly were of the earth earthy and loved sin and the things that are below, now we have been transplanted into God and live out of Him as the God of our salvation. This is objectively true.

This must also be true subjectively. Also consciously we must stand and rejoice in the God of our salvation. We must cleave to Him and rejoice in the fact that He has called us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His own dear Son. And do not fail to apply this blessed consciousness of salvation also to the circumstances in which you may presently find yourselves. There is no evil in the city which the Lord has not done.

There is no distress or sorrow which did not come upon you from the living God. Moreover, He whom you confess to be the God of your salvation is the Lord, Jehovah, who loves you with an everlasting love, constantly and unchangeably. Never does He fail

to be kind and cause all things to work together for your good. Take this word upon your lips prayerfully, whatever may be your lot in life: "Thou, God, art the God of my salvation, also now, inasmuch as Thou art Jehovah; give me the peace that transcends all understanding, and enable me to view

all the things of this present time in the light of the glory that shall be bestowed upon me." Then you will be able to rejoice in the Lord, also today, and glory in the God of your salvation. Yes, truly, we can be thankful always in everything.



*All Thy Works Shall Praise Thee*

*Mr. Joel Minderhoud*

## Light Brings Life

**O**n the first day God created light, and in the days to follow, a creation that depended upon that light. As we read throughout the Scriptures, God chose light to be a marvelous tool in the revelation of Himself. One area in which we see the revelation of God through light is in the plant kingdom and the process of photosynthesis. Photosynthesis is that vital process created and maintained by God whereby plants, algae, and some bacteria convert the energy from the sun into chemical energy that is stored as food molecules. Photosynthesis provides food for the plant itself, and by eating plants, animals and humans also use the food made by plants. Therefore, much of life is directly or indirectly dependent upon the production of food by the plants. But without sunlight, photosynthesis cannot occur. The ability to convert energy from the sun into forms usable by all other creatures is a gift given by God only to the plant kingdom. It behooves us

to study this earthly picture and consider an aspect of what light reveals to us of things heavenly.

When studying photosynthesis, one's attention is particularly drawn to deciduous, broad-leaf trees. This is not because they are the major plant form that is involved in photosynthesis. Not at all. Trees, grass, and other common plants contribute only about 10% of all photosynthesis in the world. It is the algae, plankton, and bacteria that contribute the other 90%. Tree leaves are often used in the study of photosynthesis, not because of how much they do, but because they are easily examined, because they are so common in our lives, and particularly because they so readily grasp our attention in their autumn array of colors.

In order for photosynthesis to occur, a plant must have light. Generally, the leaves of deciduous trees contain three major pigments or chemicals that absorb sunlight. They are chlorophyll, carotene, and xanthophylls. Each pigment has a slightly different arrangement of its atoms and will act differently than any other pigment, especially in its ability to absorb light. Here we must note that visible light (white light) is actually composed of many

different colors of light (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet). Under regular circumstances we do not see the colors. However, if the light passes through a prism or through a raindrop, the individual colors will travel at different velocities, causing the light to "bend" slightly, displaying the different colors of a rainbow. These colors are further observed when this white light hits an object, where some of the colors are either reflected from the object or absorbed by it. For example, a black colored object absorbs all of the colors, reflecting nothing. A green object absorbs all the colors except green. Green light will reflect off the object because the molecules in that object will not allow the green light to pass into it, and our eyes interpret that light as the color green. Thus, when we see a green leaf, we know that that leaf is absorbing all the colors except green.

The pigments mentioned earlier, because of their different molecular composition, will absorb different colors of light. Chlorophyll, found in all plants, and the most abundant pigment in tree leaves, absorbs all the colors except green. Carotene, a major component in carrots, absorbs all the col-

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ors except orange. Xanthophylls absorb all the colors except yellow. The more colors of the spectrum absorbed by the leaf, the more efficient the leaf is in the process of photosynthesis. While chlorophyll is reflecting the green light, carotene and xanthophylls are absorbing it. While carotene and xanthophylls are reflecting yellow and orange light, the chlorophyll is absorbing them. Hence, all the colors of the spectrum are used by the leaf. The leaf uses all of these colors of light and the energy from each color, to make sugar and starches as its food source, and consequently for many organisms in creation. All of the light absorbed by the leaf is transformed by a very complicated chemical process involving water and carbon dioxide, where electrons are moving from one molecule to another in hundreds of individual chemical reactions in order to make sugar (glucose) and starches. These in turn become the food for the plant cells allowing them to grow and sustain the plant.

These pigments are found in the tiny cells (chloroplasts) of a plant or a tree leaf, where photosynthesis occurs. These chloroplasts become the vital "factories" that transform sunlight's energy into energy forms (sugar or starch) that the plant uses to grow and maintain itself, and which is then used by animals and humans that eat the plant or the fruit of the tree. These "factories" are so small that 2000 chloroplasts lined up next to each other would be no wider than a dime. In any given leaf there are thousands and thousands of these "factories" capturing and transforming sunlight into the sugars and starches needed to feed the creation. This fascinating aspect of the creation again humbles us to see how God created all things, including tiny "solar-powered" factories in plants in order to feed many of the organisms within the creation. We see how God, in His infinite wisdom, provides for all

creatures, especially the animals and humans, by creating and maintaining the plants, through the process of photosynthesis. "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth; and wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart" (Ps. 104:14, 15). The plant kingdom was created by God for that specific purpose of serving man, nourishing him with food, that he might glorify His God.

It is these very pigments, which are so important in the process of photosynthesis, that also contribute to the beautiful array of colors we observe in the trees at this time of the year. In autumn, cooler evening and daytime temperatures, along with fewer hours of sunlight, trigger various responses from the tree. The tree will slow the sap supply to the leaves so that the leaves and stem receive less nourishment. Furthermore, the chlorophyll pigments begin to decompose. This green colored pigment slowly "dies," giving the leaves less and less appearance of green. The other pigments, the carotenes and xanthophylls, do not "die" so quickly, and their colors of orange and yellow begin to dominate in the leaves so that we observe the leaves "changing color."

The process of photosynthesis demonstrates the truth of Scripture that "light gives life." Plants live because of sunlight. Often in our daily lives we observe how a plant will seek light, and turn toward the sun. Sunlight enters the plant and causes it to grow and to have physical life. In life, the plant produces its fruit and proffers it to man. In the darkness, a plant will surely die. The same is true for the members of Christ's vine, His branches. It is Christ, the "true Light" (John 1:9), the "Sun of Righteousness" (Mal. 4:2), that has brought spiritual life to the church. The whole of Scripture testifies to

this. We all were once in darkness and dead in our sins. But, by God's grace, we have been taken out of our sin and misery and have been given life by Him "who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9). "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (Is. 9:2). "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying: I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). "Whereby the dayspring on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sat in darkness" (Luke 1:78, 79). We cannot live apart from the Light. Apart from the Light we experience darkness and death. Only the Light gives us true and everlasting life. Only in the Light do we have and enjoy the life of the covenant – the life of fellowship with God and with His people. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (I John 1:5). This idea of having covenant fellowship with God only when we are in the Light is really the heart of Psalm 80. In Psalm 80, Asaph cries to God to visit His vine and to "cause thy face to shine" upon them so that they might be saved. Only in the "face" or in the Light of God do the people of God experience God's favor and blessing – the essence of true life. "Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved" (Ps. 80:18, 19). Thanks be to God for Christ, the true Light, that gave us life in the way of blessed covenant fellowship and friendship with our God. What an unspeakable gift!


Furthermore, because of the light of Christ in us we live in the light of God's favor and experience true, spiritual growth. This is often compared to the growth of plants. For not only will plants live

and exist when they are given sunlight, but they will flourish and grow and bring forth good fruit. Our everyday experiences testify that plants bring forth fruit due to sunlight and proper nourishment, and even the Scriptures speak of the "precious fruits brought forth by the sun" (Deut. 33:13). So it is with God's people. We bring forth good fruit only because of the Light. "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord; walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and truth)...and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Eph. 5:8, 9). The psalmist teaches that this fruit is born because of the work of the Light in us, especially when we are in God's house. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing" (Ps. 92:12-14). Matthew 7:17-18 further states that "Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit." The reason that we bring forth good fruit is because we are branches of the true Vine. This true Vine is also the true Light. To abide in the Vine is to walk in the Light.

Thus, Scripture teaches us that we are like the trees that grow and have good fruit because of the work of light within them. We have been given life-giving Light, and because of the work of Christ in us we shall prosper and bring forth fruit — good works of thankfulness to our God. Walking in that Light is the means God uses in order for us to experience growth and blessedness.

Apart from light we experience waning and death. The leaves on trees turn color, in part, because of a lack of light. The trees begin to "die," shown in the color changes and in the falling of the leaves. We too die spiritually without the Light. Just as we flourish like palm trees when we are in the house of our God, nourished and surrounded by the Light, so when we neglect the worship services, the preaching of the gospel, and the diligent study of God's Word, we slowly pine away and "die" for lack of Light. Weak and miserable will we be apart from the fellowship of our God and His life-giving Word. We, like the plants, need to experience a constant source of Light in order truly to live and flourish. May we by God's grace find ourselves seeking the Light daily, turning our face to the Sun, that we may grow and be strong

in the Lord. May God be gracious to us and continue to give us that Light.

Light brings life. Just as the tree lives because of sunlight, so we have spiritual life because of the true Light. Just as the tree grows, prospers, and brings forth good fruit because of life-giving sunlight, so we grow, prosper, and bring forth good fruit because of the life-giving Light, Jesus Christ. Just as a plant withers and dies without the light, so we too wilt spiritually when we neglect our source of Light and clamor after darkness. May we love to abide in the Light, for it is our life. Praise God for the gift of True Life! May God bless us so that we are conscious of the truths of Scripture that are clearly evident in the speech of God in the plants, and may the beauty of the same remind us of life-giving light. And may it stir in us deep thankfulness and a heartfelt desire to walk in the Light and to flee from all that would keep us from it. And yet, though we see now only in principle, may we long for that day when we shall be with God in heaven, where there will be "no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (Rev. 22:23). 

*Taking Heed to the Doctrine*

*Rev. James Laning*

## Regeneration: An Unsought Blessing

**T**he names Puritan and Reformed are often found together. They are often set forth as though they were two names for precisely the same system of doctrine. But a number of the teachings of some of the most influential Puritans are not Reformed, but rather are contrary to

the teachings of Scripture and the Reformed creeds. One of the errors found in the writings of some of these Puritans is the teaching that unregenerate persons can seek to be regenerated, and that God will often, but not always, grant them their request. To teach that one can seek the initial blessing of

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regeneration is to deny the biblical and Reformed truth of total depravity.

Regeneration is referred to in more than one sense. Sometimes it is referred to in a narrower sense, referring to the first moment that a person receives from God a new heart in which Christ dwells. Other times it is referred to in a broader sense, referring not only to the first moment that one receives the life of Christ, but also to one's constant conversion from sin unto God. In this article, I will be referring to regeneration only in the narrower sense, referring only to the initial moment that one receives a new heart and is thus raised spiritually out of death into life.

Regeneration in this sense is a blessing that is not first sought by the sinner. This should be obvious from the fact that before a sinner receives this blessing he is dead in sin, unable to desire to be saved or to do anything that is the least bit good. It is only after a person has already received this blessing, that he desires the promised salvation and requests to continue to receive the grace of God that mortifies his old man and quickens his new man.



### The Natural Man – Truly Dead

To understand what it means to be saved, one must first understand and confess the truth concerning the total depravity of the natural man. One must first understand the predicament into which man has fallen, in order then to be able to see what would be required to bring him out of this predicament.

That the natural man is totally depraved means that he is dead in sin, so that he is unable to do anything good, and everything he does is nothing but sin. There is nothing good in anything he does, anything he says, or anything he thinks or desires. He cannot even desire to be saved from his sins. He can

and does desire not to be *punished* for his sins, but he does not and cannot desire to be *delivered* out of his sins and conformed to the image of Christ. He loves his sin and despises Christ and those who are like Him. Only the believer longs for the everlasting life of covenant communion with God. The unbeliever hates God and loves death (Prov. 8:36).

Our understanding of this truth is of central importance. Even an unbeliever who sits under the preaching of the truth for a time is often able to recognize the central significance of the doctrine of total depravity. Not long ago a Roman Catholic came to my study inquiring into the truths that we confess. I asked him what specific doctrine he would like to discuss first. The man said he first wanted to understand what we confess concerning total depravity, because he could see that if what we confessed on this was true, then the rest of the system of doctrine we maintain would follow. He was right. When we witness to someone about the truth of the Reformed faith, a good place to start is with the T of the TULIP, namely, total depravity.

### The Puritan Doctrine of Seeking

Some who profess to believe the truth of total depravity nevertheless contradict themselves when they set forth their view of how a person is saved. Such a contradiction is maintained by those who teach that an unregenerate person is totally depraved, but that he can still seek to be regenerated.

This was the position of Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century Puritan and founder of what has become known as New England theology, a man whose teachings are still very influential today. John Gerstner, who died just a few years ago, wrote a massive three-volume work on the theology of Edwards, entitled *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. In this work, Gerstner says that one of the main doctrines

that distinguished Puritan theology in general, and Jonathan Edwards' theology in particular, is their doctrine of seeking.

The evangelical cutting edge of Edwards' preaching was the Puritan doctrine of seeking. This was true throughout his life and the doctrine occurs in all themes and texts everywhere. The seeking doctrine is Edwards' answer to the question, "How do I maintain the total depravity of man and the absolute sovereignty of God without rendering the sinner altogether inactive, if not despairing?" How does the evangelistic preacher give the "awakened" person something to do when in fact he can do nothing virtuous? If you would be in the way of obtaining a holy principle, live in a way of performing the same outward actions after the best manner you can, that would be caused by such a principle if you had it, is Jonathan Edwards' answer.<sup>1</sup>

The Puritans, says Gerstner, wanted to assure the unregenerate sinner that there was something he could do to make it more likely that he would receive the saving grace of God. He could obey the law of God externally, hoping that God would give him the grace to do it also internally. And if he continued to go through the outward motions of obedience, it would be more likely, but by no means certain, that God would give him saving grace, so that he would be able to worship from the heart.

To prove that this was indeed Edwards' position, Gerstner quotes from a number of Edwards' sermons. In one sermon, after making clear that he was talking to *unregenerated* sinners,<sup>2</sup> Edwards told them to make use of their opportunity to seek to be saved, and

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1 John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Powhatan, Va.: Berea Publications, 1993), vol. 3, p. 50.

2 Sermon of Jonathan Edwards on Hosea 5:15, *Works*, vol. 6, p. 1248.



then encouraged them by saying that those who seek Jehovah *usually*, but by no means always, find Him.

Consider the encouragement there is in Scripture to persevere in seeking salvation, as in Hosea 6:3. "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord." Thence we may gather, that God usually gives success to those who diligently, and constantly, and perseveringly seek conversion.<sup>3</sup>

Although Edwards uses the term "conversion" here, it is clear from the context that he is referring to regeneration, since he is addressing those who do not have Christ in their heart. God usually gives such "seekers" success, says Edwards, but there are some unregenerate persons who "have often striven to do something which is good, to be in the exercise of good affections, which should be acceptable to God; but they have no success."<sup>4</sup> Edwards went on to say that the reason these people do not succeed is that they try to do this in their own strength. In other words, Edwards is saying that sometimes an unregenerate person, out of a desire to receive the bless-


ings of salvation, seeks to do what is acceptable to God, but fails because he does not do it by faith.

#### **Grace Sought Only by Those Who Have Already Received It**

The Puritan doctrine of seeking, as presented by John Gerstner, is not biblical. An unregenerate person is both unable and unwilling to seek the salvation of God. He is dead in sin, unable and unwilling to do anything that is the least bit pleasing to God. Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is "only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). The only person who longs for the salvation of God is one whom God has already regenerated and saved. Lydia, for example, longed for the blessings of God solely because God had already opened her heart (Acts 16:14). When Jesus preached, He did not say, "He who does not have ears, let him seek to get ears." Rather, He said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15).

One must grasp this truth to understand how the Word must be preached to an established congregation that is sound in the faith. God's people are addressed in the preaching as "Beloved in our Lord

Jesus Christ." It is true that believers are directly commanded to live a life in which they are constantly converting from sin unto God. But when the law of God comes to them, it comes as a command, not to become what they are not, but to be what they are. The command is not, "You are unregenerated, seek to become a regenerated person." Rather, God, in and through the preaching, says to His people, "I am the Lord your God who has already brought you out of your sins, out of the house of spiritual bondage. Therefore, you are holy, and you are to live as those who are holy."

It is, of course, true that the command to repent and believe the gospel comes also to those who are unregenerate. Indeed, God commands all men everyone to repent (Acts 17:30). But the promise of salvation comes only to those whom God has chosen to be in Christ. And only those who have already received the beginning of the promised blessings will call out to God for more of the same. 

3 Ibid., p. 1252.

4 Ibid., p. 1242.

*Marking the Bulwarks of Zion*

*Prof. Herman Hanko*

# Thomas Aquinas and Rationalism

## **Introduction**

**W**hen I discussed the error of mysticism in connection with the Medieval mystics, I pointed to the fact that God created man in body and soul, thus

one living, rational-moral creature. Man has a mind and a will. Part of man's activity as a willing creature is his emotional life. That which can satisfy man is ultimately that which feeds his entire soul-life in intellect, will, and emotions.

The Word of God in all its full glory is such a revelation of God that it satisfies the whole man when it is believed by faith. It is

intellectually satisfying because its truths are the great truths of God Himself as He reveals Himself in Christ. There is enough in Scripture to keep one occupied in theology all his life long. And, when he reaches the end of his life, there are still those great depths of scriptural truth which need to be plumbed but for which there is no time in the fleeting span of a man's

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life. Indeed, the depths of Scripture are greater than can be investigated and appropriated in the entire history of the church, with all its great and gifted theologians.

But the Scriptures are also emotionally satisfying, if I may put it that way. In Scripture's truth and in the appropriation of it one finds the great joy of forgiveness of sins — after the deep sorrow of repentance and confession. One finds peace and comfort in grief. One finds courage in the face of insuperable odds as the Christian warrior does battle with the enemies of God and of his own soul. The Scriptures contain the whole spectrum of Christian emotion, from the heart-rending words of John, "Jesus wept," through the soaring prophecies of Isaiah, to the almost black despair of Psalm 77 and the agony of Job in his misery, to the triumphant shout of victory in Romans 8:31-39.

The pendulum in the church throughout the ages has tended to swing from one extreme to the other. When religion became almost entirely intellectual, the emotional aspect of it was ignored or denigrated, and rationalism was the result. When the truth of Scripture was no longer of interest, and how and what one felt became the big thing, the emotions were given prominence and mysticism resulted. And, if one observes the currents in the church through the ages, one discovers that mysticism was a reaction to rationalism, for man is more than a brain; and rationalism was a reaction to mysticism, because man is also more than a collection of feelings.

In our last articles we were busy with mysticism. In this article we shall pay attention to rationalism. We shall use as our pattern for this error the great theologian Thomas Aquinas.

The choice of Thomas Aquinas is somewhat arbitrary. The medieval times produced others more rationalistic than he. Rationalism was a pattern of thought among

many as early as the seventh century. But Thomas Aquinas cast a longer shadow than any other medieval theologian, and the rationalism of the Middle Ages came to fullest expression in him.

Thomas Aquinas was not a cold and emotionless rationalist. Indeed, if anyone came close to combining in his theology both rationalism and mysticism it was this great figure. That this is true is evident from the fact, on the one hand, that he wrote the greatest systematic theology of the entire medieval period, his *Summa Theologiae*; and, on the other hand, that he was among the rare theologians who spoke of the church as the *mystical* body of Christ: the mystery, the mystical relation between Christ and His church.

Insofar as Aquinas held both rationalism and mysticism in equilibrium in his thinking, he represented these two streams which were always present in the Roman Catholic Church. Mystics of the most subjective sort stood side by side with theologians whose teachings were more philosophy than theology. It was one of the oddities of the period and one of the strange phenomena of medieval Roman Catholicism.

But we ought to get on with Thomas.

### The Life of Thomas Aquinas

I doubt very much whether there was a more influential theologian in the entire medieval period than Thomas Aquinas. So great was his influence that he not only dominated in years following his death, but he also shaped the creedal statements of Roman Catholicism found in the *Decrees of the Council of Trent*, when Rome drew up her response to the Reformation. That influence of Thomas continues to the present. The shape and form of Romish theology is that which Thomas Aquinas gave it.

He is also much revered in both Romish and Protestant circles. Hundreds of books have been written about him, and commentaries to fill whole shelves have been produced as efforts were made to probe his magnum opus, his *Summa*. Biographies also abound, although Thomas led about the most uneventful life that anyone could possibly lead. Many of the biographies are defenses of his sainthood, including the worshipful biography of G. K. Chesterton, with the title, "The Dumb Ox."

Chesterton got this title from the words of Albertus Magnus, Thomas' teacher. Thomas was big, clumsy, and very quiet. The students referred to him as a dumb ox. When Albertus Magnus heard this, he roared: "You call him a Dumb Ox; I tell you that the Dumb Ox will bellow so loud that his bellowing will fill the world."

Thomas was born in either 1224 or 1226 to a family belonging to the nobility. He was born in the Italian town of Aquino (hence his name) in the kingdom of Naples.

His parents were interested in getting for him the best possible education, and so they

sent him, at the tender age of 5, to the monastery of Monte Cassino, just a bit southeast of Rome and one of the first monasteries (if not the first) in Europe. It was a fatal decision of Thomas' parents, one they were to regret.

Thomas' dedication to the Romish church grew during these years when his young mind could easily be influenced by his teachers. The end of it was that in 1241, without the consent and knowledge of his parents, he joined the Dominican Order.

A word about the Dominican Order will, perhaps, help put Thomas in some perspective. Two new mendicant orders were established in the latter part of the twelfth century. The word "mendicant"

*The shape and form of Romish theology is that which Thomas Aquinas gave it.*

means "poor" or "begging." They were established as protests against and options to the other existing corrupt and wealthy monastic movements. The Franciscans were founded by Francis of Assisi and were noted for their care of the poor, the erection of hospitals, orphanages, and leper colonies and other like institutions. The Dominicans, founded by Dominic, were noted for their emphasis on education and their total devotion to the welfare of the Romish church. The Dominicans soon controlled some of the most prestigious universities, but were also the leading figures in the Inquisition, one of the cruellest and most awful institutions to promote orthodoxy which this world has ever seen. But Thomas lived before those awful days.

Thomas' parents were distressed and angry at his decision, and they were determined that their son would not remain a Dominican. Unwilling to admit that they had really brought this on themselves when they sent their five-year old boy away from home to be educated by the church, they now blamed the church for what they considered to be a major catastrophe.

Thomas' mother went in search of him. When she found him she, with the help of her servants, seized him on a public road and locked him away in a castle in Rocca-sicca. While Thomas was confined in this closely guarded room in the castle, his parents did everything in their power to dissuade him from the course he had chosen. They used pleas, tears, angry outbursts, threats, and promises of great things to try to change his mind. Everything failed. Thomas was resolute and determined to remain a Dominican.

During the two years of his confinement he spent his time in warding off the efforts of his parents to convince him to follow a different path, and in studying the Scriptures, dogmatics, and Aristotle. From a certain point of

view, these two years may have been the most influential in his life.

Thomas finally brought his captivity to an end by escaping from the castle through a window and fleeing to Naples. This was about the only exciting event that took place in his entire life.

In 1244, at the age of twenty, he went to Cologne in Germany to study under Albertus Magnus, or Albert the Great, one of the most outstanding medieval theologians prior to Thomas. When Albertus went to Paris, Thomas followed, for he was devoted to his teacher. In Paris he completed his studies.

In 1248 Thomas began his teaching career. He started in Cologne, where he taught philosophy and Holy Scripture. He 1252 he taught in Paris. In 1255, now 31 years old, he received his doctor of philosophy degree. From Paris he returned to Italy, where he taught at one time or another in almost every university in the country, until he settled finally in Naples, where he died on March 7, 1274, at the age of 50.

### Thomas' Character

In many respects Thomas was an unusual man. He was unusual, in the first place, because he was totally indifferent to money, wealth, prestige, honors, and fame. He was offered many dignities, many awards, many positions of honor. To all these he turned a deaf ear. The pope even offered him the archbishopric of Naples, one of the most prestigious posts in all Europe. But this too he declined. Such a man was not only a rarity in Medieval Europe, but remains a rarity today. And in this respect at least he reminds one of Calvin.

Perhaps his indifference to the things of the world is to be explained by the fact that he was totally absorbed in his studies, teaching, and writing. In this area Thomas was brilliant. It was said of him that he could dictate on different subjects to different secretar-

ies at the same time. He was a master not only of all the church fathers who preceded him, but he also absorbed the culture and philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. He was particularly a student of Aristotle, the last of the great Greek philosophers.

His teaching was so learned, so powerful, and so original that he drew students literally from every part of Europe. Yet, he had that great gift of preaching which enables the uneducated and little children to understand what he was saying.

His works fill a large shelf, but none is so influential as his *Summa Theologiae*, which is still considered today an authority on Roman Catholic teaching, and which has been described as "one of the grandest attempts at a complete science of theology ever planned by a human intellect."

His complete absorption in his work is legendary. The story is told that Thomas was invited to dine with King Louis IX of France, who was accustomed to ask Thomas' advice on affairs of state. Thomas was at the time occupied with a somewhat difficult theological problem. In his absent-mindedness he dabbled with his food and was unresponsive to what was going on around him. Suddenly, to everyone's consternation, he hit the table a mighty blow and shouted: "Now at last I found it!" His prior and superior reminded him immediately that such actions were a disgrace to his order for he was dining at the king's table. But Louis must have had some inkling of his genius, for he immediately ordered a scribe to be fetched so that Thomas could set down his thoughts.

The pope summoned him to Rome when he was near 50 years old. He never made it to the Vatican, but died enroute. ❀



# Maintaining Authority in our Homes

**A**uthority is something very few acknowledge today. Instead of respect for it, there is disrespect. Instead of obedience, there is rebellion. Instead of honor, there is defiance.

The source of this widespread contempt for authority is the home. Children today increasingly disregard and disobey their parents. They “lip-off” to them. They ignore the commands parents give. Striking is their boldness, for they do this, not just behind their parents’ backs, but to their faces. No doubt this is something that many of us have often observed, and perhaps even commented on.

One might be inclined to blame the children for this. However, the parents are usually at fault. This is because they fail to exercise their God-given authority. They do not insist, as they ought, that their children respect and obey them. They allow their children to get away with outright disobedience. Or they put up with delayed obedience — by using a countdown method, or by repeating commands instead of administering discipline. As a result, children take over in the home. A role reversal occurs. Instead of parents enforcing rules, children dictate how things should be.

This disregard for authority spreads from the home into all areas of life. Children who disregard

and disobey their parents grow into adults who do not submit to those whom God has placed over them in society, at work, and in the church. We as God’s people are not immune to this sin.

One of the most direct influences on us and our children is the world. The world surrounds and bombards us with its ungodly lifestyle and man-centered thinking. We are affected, not only by what we observe, but also by the literature we read and the music we hear. Satan uses these things to teach us an unbiblical view of authority.

One of the many tools Satan uses, and perhaps the most crafty of them all, is the television. Through what some might wrongly consider to be humorous “family” shows, as well as through supposedly innocent cartoons, the world’s ideas are promoted. Parents and their requirements are made a mockery. Children are considered amusing when they talk back to parents or teachers or others in authority. Parents are portrayed as fools who have no control. Children are the intelligent ones who have the skills as well as the right to take charge. As children watch this trash they are taught that disobedience is not only acceptable, but highly recommended. It is the way to make others laugh. It is the kind of behavior that gains approval.

This ought to make parents seriously consider whether the lack of respect for authority that is evident among their children is a result of allowing the world’s influence to creep into their homes and

lives. Have we allowed the television to be our children’s teacher?



The Scriptures provide much instruction concerning God-ordained authority.

Authority, we must understand, is the right of one to impose his will upon another. He has the right to decide for another what that person may or may not do. He has the right to require submission and to demand obedience. And he has the right to judge whether or not the other has obeyed, and if he has not, to punish him.

Authority is a right. The only reason anyone has authority over another is because God confers on him that right.

All authority is in God. As Lord over all, He has the perfect right to rule over all. God does this, but He does not always do it directly. God gave all authority to Christ and rules all things through Him (Matt. 28:18). Christ in turn does the same. He does not rule directly, but rules through men. He confers His God-given authority on men. One has authority only because God through Christ gives it to him.

This teaches us a few things about authority. First of all it tells us that authority is not brute power. Some think so. In fact, it is often said that “might makes right.” But that is not true. One nation may not rule another just because it is more powerful. A child may not bully another child simply because he is stronger. Nor do parents have authority just because they are bigger and stronger



and thus able to force their children to submit and obey.

This is an important truth. Without it, parents could not exercise, or continue to exercise, authority. For the fact is that in most instances children reach a point where they become stronger than their parents. Then what? Does the child at that point have the right to begin exercising authority over the parent? He may not. Parents must realize that obedience to them is required regardless of their size or strength. And children must realize this too. Parents need to make it clear to them at a very early age.

Another important implication of the fact that authority is a God-given right is that one does not have authority because of superior abilities. Teachers do not have authority because they know so much more than their students. It is true that they generally do, and need to. But that is not the basis of their authority. The same is true of officebearers in the church. They do not have authority because they are men who are superior in knowledge, wisdom, and experience. The same is true in government. A man is not president just because he is the one most capable of ruling the country.

It is certainly a good thing when those in authority are well qualified for their work. It is not good when a teacher or elder or president is a fool. But even if that is the case, such a person has just as much authority as one who is wise. And those under him have just as much obligation to obey. Why? Because God has placed that person in that position. That person has a God-given right to rule.



This has practical implications for those who are in positions of authority.

First of all it means that those with authority not only may, but also must exercise their God-given authority. They are to do so, of

course, in the right way, namely in love for God and the neighbor. Any other motive or approach leads to tyranny. But the point is that authority must be diligently maintained. Parents, teachers, employers, and officebearers in the church are required to exercise strictly and consistently their God-given authority.

They must also realize that they are answerable to Christ. All are — parents, teachers, ministers, elders, deacons, presidents, judges, politicians, and police officers. Their position carries with it serious responsibilities. They are to rule in the name and love of Christ. They will have to give an account one day to Him in whose name they rule.

This is just as true for those who are wicked. In their wickedness they may rage against God and His people. They may use their position to their own advantage. If that is so, they do not serve Christ but are against him. Yet the fact remains that God through Christ has put them in their positions. They are accountable to God, whether they acknowledge it or not.

Those who have God-given authority must take their responsibilities seriously. Parents must do so (Eph. 6:4). So must employers (Eph. 6:9), governors (Rom. 13), and officebearers (Acts 20:28). Christ requires this of all on whom He confers the right to rule.



There are also practical implications for those who are under authority.

Authority implies obedience. The two are inseparable. One who is under another's authority must willingly submit his will to the will of the other. And he must obey. He must do exactly what he is told. This must be done without questioning — without even asking, as children like to do, "Why?" Perhaps especially our children need to be reminded of this.

The Scriptures clearly set this forth as God's requirement. It is required of citizens in regard to those over them in government (Tit. 3:1; I Pet. 2:13-15). It is required of children in regard to their parents (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20). It is required of employees in regard to their employers (Col. 3:22; Tit. 2:9, 10; I Pet. 2:18). It is required of the members of the church in regard to the officebearers (I Thess. 5:12, 13; Heb. 13:17). It is required of all of us whenever we are under another's authority (Ex. 20:12).

This includes respect for and obedience to one who is wicked. It is true that when such a person commands us to do something which is contrary to the Scriptures, we ought to obey God rather than men. But still we are called to submit. This may even involve having to bear a punishment for not doing the sinful deed that we were asked to do. But we may not rebel against or try to overthrow God-appointed authority.

Since our obedience is to be motivated by love for God and the neighbor, the motive may never be one of fear. One who obeys out of fear does so only because he is afraid of the consequences of disobedience. Nor may the motive for obedience be that we see the advantages of doing so — such as favors from parents, advancement at work, or better grades in school.

The motive must be love, only and always. And that love must be a love of the heart. Then the obedience will also be proper obedience. External obedience is not enough. It may appear to be good, and it might very well gain the approval of men. But if it is not done from the heart, it is, in the eyes of God, disobedience and disrespect.

We should obey in the realization that God through Christ has placed that person in that position of authority. Submission and obedience to parents, teachers, employers, policemen, or the elders of the church is submission and obedience to God Himself.






Since the home is the most fundamental sphere of authority, it is especially there that respect for authority must be taught and maintained. What is learned in the home is carried into every area of life.

Children by nature do not willingly submit to the authority of their parents and obey them without question. They need to be taught this by their parents. Parents should teach it by word, by example, and by use of discipline.

They must insist that children respect and obey them, and thus also Christ. They do not need to provide a reason for obedience, except to point out that God requires it. Only if a child is taught obedience in the home will that child, by God's grace, obey in all spheres of life.

God wills that parents teach their children, in the home, to respect authority. And what better place could there be for children to learn! In the home exists the natural love of parents for their children. Such a sphere of love

cannot be found anywhere else in society. And in a godly home, it is more than just a natural love. There the children are loved and taught by parents who have received and who regard those children as covenant gifts from God. Not through force or tyranny, but lovingly those children are brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Obedience needs to be taught. Submission to authority needs to be enforced. May we, by God's grace, do this. 

## Review Article



### *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*

By Bruce Wilkinson

#### A VERY DANGEROUS BOOK!

Reviewed by Rev. Bruce C. Davis

**I**n I Chronicles 4:9-10, the prayer of Jabez is recorded. "And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow. And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested." Jabez sought the blessing of God and asked for His protection, provision, and guidance; God was pleased in His sovereign good pleasure to answer this prayer for His name's sake. Many people now know about this prayer through a short (92 pages) best-selling book, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, by Bruce Wilkinson, founder and president of

Walk Thru the Bible Ministries in Atlanta. In fact, over four million copies have been sold since the book was published about sixteen months ago. The author asserts that "People...are excited about what happens to them when they pray Jabez. They get a whole new vision of what can happen to them. God can bless them a whole lot, but they must ask for it...."

The publisher's promotion on the back cover and the author's preface to the book clearly reveal the unbiblical direction in which the book will take its readers.

Do you want to be extravagantly blessed by God? Are you ready to reach for the extraordinary? To ask God for the abundant blessings He longs to give you? Join Bruce Wilkinson to discover how the remarkable prayer of a little-known Bible hero can release God's favor, power, and protection. You'll see how one daily prayer can help you leave the past behind — and break through to the life you were meant to live.

(From the back cover)

I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief — only one sentence with four parts — and tucked away in the Bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God.

This petition has radically changed what I expect from God and what I experience every day by His power. In fact, thousands of believers who are applying its truths are seeing miracles happen on a regular basis.

(From author's preface)

A true call to prayer should be welcomed anytime, and such a call to prayer takes seriously what the Word of God teaches on prayer. *The Prayer of Jabez* fails miserably in this regard. The book unashamedly deviates greatly from historic Christian teaching on prayer that is consistent with the Word of God and the Reformed confessions and catechisms. The flaws and weaknesses of the author's theology are consistently promoted as biblical truth throughout the book. From a biblical perspective, this book is very dangerous. The errors are subtle because the author uses broadly Christian vocabulary, language that is strikingly similar and identical to the language used in word-faith and other charismatic movements. Many points that the author asserts are true are simply not true when evaluated in the light of God's Word. Some examples are the following statements: "He (God) becomes great through you." "When you take little steps, you don't need

God." "He (God) will never send someone to you whom you cannot help."

Wilkinson advocates praying the prayer of Jabez verbatim, word-for-word, for a month in order to see the power of God released in our lives. For Wilkinson, the prayer has become the secret to success in every endeavor. God is viewed as a butler who responds in a mechanical manner when certain words are recited. One critique of this book stated that it is so easy for individuals to "read this book and come away thinking that prayer is a series of inputs and outputs." What seems to matter to the author is finding the right formula to pray and then repeating the formula until the desired results occur. His is a gimmicky approach to prayer. He asserts that the formula he has discovered, if followed diligently according to His instructions, guarantees successful praying.

I challenge you to make the Jabez prayer for blessing part of the daily fabric of your life. To do that, I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next thirty days. By the end of that time, you'll be noticing significant changes in your life, and the prayer will be on its way to becoming a treasured, life-long habit (p. 86).

For Wilkinson, the main thing in prayer is not a focus on God's character and ways and purposes but on man's character and method of praying and his desires that God is obligated to grant him as the prayer of Jabez is offered to God on a daily basis. Prayer, according to Wilkinson's interpretation of Jabez's prayer, is not God-centered and based on the merits of Jesus Christ but rather man-centered and based on man's desires and formula in approaching God. In this bizarre approach to prayer, we effectively cause God to become our servant. We end up boxing Him into a corner so that He *has* to an-

swer our prayers just as we want Him to. We put God into a position so that He cannot say "no" to the countless repetitions of this prayer. Thus God is coerced and manipulated into answering our prayers. He is put into a position in which He *has* to give you what He longs to give you but wouldn't give you apart from responding to this particular prayer.

Wilkinson's book is surely a cruel book in that it teaches that if we fail to see God's power unleashed and receive miracles by praying this prayer, we are undoubtedly spiritually deficient. Our faith has not brought about the desired blessings. What devastation there must be when a person, while praying this prayer, goes through one of God's dark and frowning providences, e.g., a death of a child, a terminal illness, a loss of employment. What is God doing by ordering these hardships and afflictions while the person is busy praying the prayer of Jabez on a daily basis? Wilkinson offers no biblical answers.

There are many things in the book that contribute to its being unsound theologically and unbiblical in its propositions. The book advocates that it is the will of God that His people always prosper in material, earthly things, and that His people should have whatever they desire. The prayer of Jabez, prayed according to Wilkinson's instructions, is supposed to guarantee the obtaining of the desire of our hearts. This kind of thinking and acting is consistent, not with the Word of God, but with the health, wealth, and prosperity perversion of the gospel and the "name it and claim it" crowd. Wilkinson's careless and reckless approach to prayer is an affront to God's people who suffer for His sake according to His will.

The book does not give Jesus Christ the preeminence in our prayers. In fact, our abiding union with Jesus Christ and our access to the Father through Him is mini-

mized at best and largely ignored in the book. Christ's name is mentioned only a few times in the whole book. Sin is discussed as a barrier before God in our prayers, but it is viewed as something that we can make right ourselves, a mere bad habit that we can break rather than a disease that is incurable apart from the grace of God in Christ.

A great emphasis in the book is on rituals, formulas, and repetition. Prayer is seen to be efficacious and virtuous the more it is repeated. Daily and weekly rituals are suggested in the book in order to assist people in praying the prayer of Jabez over and over; but our Lord warns us in the gospels of the danger of vain repetition and empty rituals in prayer. Wilkinson's overall position on prayer seems to be unscriptural and an eclectic blending of various prayer traditions with a veneer of Christianity.

Wilkinson ignores the centrality of the Lord's Prayer as our model prayer, and, for all intents and purposes and without any biblical warrant, substitutes the prayer of Jabez for the Lord's Prayer. Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches one thing; Bruce Wilkinson teaches the opposite. Who is right and who is wrong should not be a difficult judgment to make.

Wilkinson uses the word "miracles" very frequently and loosely in this book. His understanding of miracles is not according to the Bible. The prayer of Jabez, which becomes a selfish and self-centered prayer through Wilkinson's spin on it, is to be repeated in order to bring about the release of God's blessings and receive miracles.

Wilkinson's testimony is that his experiences over the years validate his method of praying. His own "success stories" and those of others are reinforcement of his conviction that vain repetition of this prayer results in the prosperity of the one praying. Therefore, the experiences of men are exalted above



the Word of God, according to Wilkinson. But this is no different from the many adherents of false religions who ascribe validity and legitimacy to their respective religions and beliefs because of whatever "successes" they have. So many assume that anything "good" that happens to them after they begin engaging in some ritual must be because of the ritual itself. Wilkinson, by his own testimony, falls into this camp.

Is it legitimate to use biblically the prayer of Jabez in our own prayer life? Of course it is. But is it the only prayer we should pray? Of course not. There are many other prayers in the Bible that should be incorporated into our personal and corporate prayers. But in answer to the question, "Do you Jabez?" you should answer a resounding "No!" Following the instructions of this book will be spiritually disastrous. Although there are true statements among all the false and anti-bibli-

cal teachings of the book, at best all the author offers his readers is spiritual fluff that is as helpful to the readers' spiritual development as a teaspoon is to someone wanting to empty an ocean. This book is not a nugget of gold but rather a lump of coal. Avoid it and books like it at all costs. The author is not qualified or competent to teach others concerning the Christian life or how we are to pray to our covenant God.



## News From Our Churches

Mr. Benjamin Wigger

### Congregation Activities

**T**he Council of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI recently organized a Technology Committee. This Committee was organized due to a request from someone in another state who expressed the desire to be able to receive an audio/video presentation of Georgetown's worship service directly from their website. Georgetown's council responded by forming this committee to investigate and advise them concerning the possible uses of technology and how it could be used to help their efforts in church as well as to make more effective their gospel witness to those within and without their congregation.

The congregation of the First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI recently was invited to a family-fun outing at the Post Family Farm in Hudsonville, MI. In addition to all the sights, sounds, and smells of a traditional working farm, the members of First were also able to enjoy activities which included hay rides, tractor rides, volleyball, and a petting zoo. Despite the damp weather in Grand Rapids, the sun

shone in Hudsonville and the group had a nice time.

Members of the Cornerstone, Peace, and South Holland PRCs in the Chicago, IL area were invited to a celebration of thanks and praise for God's rich provisions to the congregation of the Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL as seen in the retirement of their debt for both their church and parsonage. Rev. R. VanOverloop, who first worked there as missionary, and then as their first pastor, and now serves as pastor of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI, was the featured speaker for the program.

On Sunday afternoon, October 14, after their afternoon worship service, the congregation of the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB, Canada met together for a supper and a singspiration in recognition of Rev. R. Miersma's 30 years as minister of the Word of God.

From the most recent "Newsletter" received from the Grace PRC in Standale, MI, we learned that the framing is now done on their building expansion and the shingling of the 150 or so squares of shingles is proceeding right along. Also the gas lines have been put in.

If you live in the United States and would like to prepare somewhat for our nation's day of Thanksgiving on November 22, we encourage you to read Habakkuk

3:17, 18 and consider it under the theme, "True Thanksgiving Joy." We mention this because our churches in Canada celebrated Thanksgiving on October 8, and Rev. R. Miersma, pastor of the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB, used those verses and theme for their celebration. (See the Feature Article elsewhere in this issue.)

### Evangelism Activities

**T**he Evangelism Committee of the Kalamazoo, MI PRC is involved in a number of projects that have been keeping its members quite busy for the past several months. Over the next few issues of the "News" we will be telling you about some of them. Presently Kalamazoo is very busy in publishing in pamphlet form the speech Prof. H. Hanko gave there this past May on the subject, "Genesis 1 and the Framework Hypothesis." Presently this pamphlet is at the publishers. They intend to print a thousand copies and make them available to other of our denomination's Evangelism Committees.

### Young Adult Activities

**A**n unofficial group has been organized on-line for general announcements and ongoing discussions. The address is [groups.yahoo.com/group/protestant\\_reformed](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/protestant_reformed). The group is for

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*Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.*



post high young people and is free to join. You are invited to visit the group online or call Mr. Jason Kuiper at 616-677-1172 for more information.

## Young People's Activities

**T**he Young People's Society of Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI, this year's host society for the annual YP Convention, sponsored an auction at their church on October 5. In addition to items up for bid, the auction also included a pig roast supper.

The young people of the Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL sponsored a camping trip for October 5 & 6 at White Pines State Park Campground. Couples and young adults were also welcome to attend.

The young people of the Peace PRC in Lansing, IL were asked to reserve October 13 for a canoe trip on the Kankakee River.

## Minister Activities

**R**ev. Mark Shand, a graduate of our seminary, was ordained September 29 into the gospel ministry as pastor of the Winnaleah Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Winnaleah, Tasmania. His ordination answers to a pressing need of our fellow saints in Australia and was an occasion of much joy and of thanks to God. We rejoice with the EPC of Australia and their new pastor in this gift of God's grace.


Rev. Doug Kuiper has accepted the call he was extended to serve as pastor of the Randolph, WI PRC.

On Sunday, October 14, the congregation of the Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI extended a call to Rev. J. Slopsema to serve as their first pastor. With him on that trio were Rev. C. Terpstra and Rev. M. VanderWal.

On October 15 the congregation of the Doon, IA PRC extended a call to Rev. A. Spriensma to serve as missionary to the Philippines. Also included on that trio were the Revs. W. Bruinsma and J. Laning.

## Food For Thought

"Three things make us happy and content: the seeing eye, the hearing ear, the responsive heart."

—Missionary Digest 

## Announcements

### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On November 7, 2001, our parents, **RICHARD and TENA POORTINGA**, celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We praise and thank our covenant-keeping Father in heaven for their faithful instruction and example. "Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

- ❖ Robert Poortinga
  - ❖ Randall and Debra Poortinga
  - ❖ Peter and Julie Zandstra
  - ❖ Kenneth and Cindy Poortinga
  - ❖ Daryl and Suzanne Poortinga
- 25 grandchildren  
8 great grandchildren

Dyer, Indiana

### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

On October 26, 2001, our parents and grandparents,

**HARRY and MARY KAISER**, celebrated their 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We are thankful to our heavenly Father for the years He has given them together. Their godly instruction and example have been a blessing to us. We pray that God may continue to care for them for His glory. "They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever" (Psalm 125:1).

- ❖ Bern and Linda Zandstra  
Benjamin, MariBeth  
Patricia and Rebekah in glory
- ❖ Dan and Julie Kaiser  
Ross, Alex, Mitchell
- ❖ Doug and Julie Kaiser  
Nathan
- ❖ Tim and Joan Kaiser  
Matthew, Joel, Jonathan,

Amy, Kristin

Byron Center, Michigan

### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

We are pleased to announce that our parents,

**HARVEY and MARILYN HOLSTEGE**, recently celebrated their 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary on November 11, 2001. As children and grandchildren, we are humbly thankful for the blessings that our heavenly Father has given to our parents during this time together. We give thanks for the covenantal instruction and guidance that they have shown to us in these years. Our prayer is that God will continue to bless them and guide them in the years to come.

"... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

- ❖ Greg and Rhonda Holstege  
Michelle, Marissa, Stephanie
- ❖ Mark and Brenda Zandstra  
Christina, Ryan, Chad, Nicole
- ❖ Jay and Heidi VanBaren  
Zachary, Connor
- ❖ Mike Holstege and  
Nicole Carpenter (fiancée)
- ❖ Jeff Holstege
- ❖ Joel and Lanae Holstege  
Lindsey

Grandville, Michigan