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WORKING TOGETHER

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28, KJV)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (NIV)

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (RSV)

Three different versions of one verse. Three very different meanings. But which one, if any, is right? Could they all be right?

The original Greek does not help answer these questions. A literal, word-for-word translation would be “And we know all works with unto good, that loving God being called according to purpose.” As is often true, that leaves as many questions as it answers. That means that we probably ought to look at the scriptures as a whole to determine which translation is accurate. But does it make a difference? Don’t they all mean the same thing? Hardly.

The Revised Standard Version translation is the only one that says, “God works for good *with* those who love him.” This would imply that it is we that are working together, rather than “all things.” It states that God and man are co-creators of good. Some might object to that thought immediately, but is it totally inaccurate? While we are the creature, still God works through us to accomplish his purposes. God could choose to save whomever he will, and condemn whomever he chooses, without any choice, effort, or intervention of man. He did not choose to save us that way. Instead he relies on humans to convince others about his way.

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? (Rom 10:14)

God works with those who love him in the spread of the gospel. What could be more good than that?

What about the versions that say that God works “for the good of those who love him”? Is this statement true? Does God work in all things for the good of specific followers? Certainly God wants the best for his people, and “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.” (Jas 1:17)

But can we really say that everything that happens is “for the good” of believers? When an individual shot up a grade school, how was that for my good? There might have been some good come out of that event, but it is hard to say God was working with the individual gunman to bring about good for believers (specific ones or the church altogether). The danger with this translation is that it implies that God controls every detail of every life, and we have no choice. Furthermore, it implies that God causes evil to happen in order to bring about good; that the end justifies the means.

How does that differ from “for good to them that love the Lord”? This version could be interpreted as saying that even when bad things happen, the believers can see some good in it. “To those that love the Lord, God works.” This doesn’t say that everything that happens benefits believers. Rather it says that the attitude of the believer is trust in God, whatever happens. The event may not have had a specific benefit, but God works even so. The good might not have been *for* the follower of God; nevertheless, the one who loves God believes the good exists for someone.

Ultimately, we ought to look at the context for meaning. This verse comes in a discussion about suffering. Paul says that even if we suffer in this world, our suffering just works to increase our hope in the world to come. Not everything that happens in this life will result in good in this life. We may suffer persecution, ridicule, and even death. The good that God works is the ultimate good, our salvation that we might be with him in eternity. In this context, the translators of the King James Version might actually have made the more accurate translation.

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COMMANDMENTS: 1-3

Although the Ten Commandments were given to and for the Jewish people, and were never intended to be the law of the non-Jew, there is value in studying these laws. They reveal much about the mind of God, particularly the mind of a God who was preparing a people through whom the savior of the world would come. They also reveal much about the state of the world at the time they were given, because these laws were generally given to set the Jewish people apart from the rest of the world. Many national laws are based on some of the Ten Commandments because of their moral value. Therefore, it is worth looking at these commandments. This will take multiple articles, beginning appropriately this month of Passover (March 26-April 2 in 2013).

Introduction

“I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Ex 20:2)

Before God even starts giving the commandments, he establishes who is speaking. This is an important verse, even though it is technically not part of the Ten. It accomplishes several things.

First, by this introduction God establishes his identity: *YHWH elohim*. He uses two descriptions (names)

“Getting in your face” is not a new idiom; God used it thousands of years ago.

for himself here, and they are significant. The first is the name he gave to Moses to identify himself to the people. It is sometimes translated, “I AM.” It means God is the self-existent, all-existent, ever-existent one. He “was, and is, and is to come.” (Rev 1:8) What was before God? You can’t even say “nothing” because there was no “before” God. There will be no “after” God. There always is God.

He also calls himself “the ruler.” As the eternal, God has the authority to make laws, or break them. He is above law, because he is ultimately the foundation of law. There are no “laws of nature” but rather “laws of God in nature.” He establishes laws, and puts his limits on them. Further, by calling himself by this title he contrasts himself with the rulers under whom the Jewish people had been serving.

Second, God establishes his power. “I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Middle Kingdom Egypt was the great power of

the Mediterranean world. Even the Hittites, the inventors of iron chariots, bowed to the Egyptian rulers. And yet, this God brought his people out of this great nation “with great power, and with a mighty hand.” (Ex 32:11) In this God reiterates his ruling authority because he brought his people “out of the house of bondage.” He is their ruler, not their Egyptian taskmasters.

Third, he identifies his audience. These laws are to be for the people who were brought out of Egypt. Some people today ignore this part of the introduction. They claim the Ten Commandments were given for every person for all time. Yet here God specifically denies that these laws are for the Egyptians from whom he freed the Jewish people. In doing so, he also places all others who were not captive in Egypt and taken out at the exodus as being outside the laws he is about to give. While many of the commandments coincide with other laws, these are ones being given to a specific people—the Jewish people.

No other gods

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” (Ex 20:3)

In a world full of gods, the supreme existence commands that none of them shall come before him. Some might say that in using the same word (*elohim*) that he used of himself, God is acknowledging the other gods. In a sense, he is. God admits here that people will, by their nature, be subject to rulers. Everyone has a boss; even bosses have bosses. With the exception of those who hold the doctrine of the “divine right of kings,” everyone acknowledges subservience to someone else. God realizes this, because he created it in us.

Literally, though, this commandment says “allow no other masters in my face.” We may be under rulers in our nations, states, or cities. We may be subject to masters in our jobs or our schools. God tells the Jewish people, however, don’t let them get in my face. (And some people think “getting in your face” is a new idiom; God used it thousands of years ago.) Perhaps God is using this in the same way we use the idiom today. It is acceptable to have lesser masters, but don’t let them get the idea that they can face God on equal terms. They can, and do, have their place, but it must never be God’s place. He is their master, as well.

We often think of this law as prohibiting placing others ahead of (before) God. It actually says not to put others even equal to God. The book of Esther points out more than once that the kings of the Medes had the authority to kill anyone who came into his presence (before his face) without his having called them. This is the power God claims in this commandment. You can

come into his presence, but only as a servant, not as a master.

No other images

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God.” (Ex 20:4-5)

This is generally considered a separate command (thus making ten), even though it is logically a part of the first one. If the Jewish people (and God’s creation in general) were to allow no other masters before God’s face, then it makes sense that they were not to make images of them.

This commandment eventually causes a theological problem. God says make no images or likenesses of any of the creation, and yet he shortly thereafter commands Moses to create a tabernacle that contains images of almond blossoms, cherubim, and cattle. Is this not contradictory? If, as the rabbis say, the Tabernacle was commanded as a reaction to the sin of the golden calf, would not putting images in it be the same as the sin that prompted its construction? If, as some say, the people were not worshiping the calf itself, but God as if seated on the calf, is this not the same thing?

There are two parts to this commandment. The first is the prohibition of making images. The second is the prohibition against bowing to them and serving them. Both parts, along with the first commandment, must be considered together.

Can one wear a Polo shirt, which has a horse embroidered on it? Can one have paintings or carvings in his/her house? That depends. If one has the image, but does not bow down and serve it, one has not violated the command. Some people do serve their Polo shirts and works of art. The violation is in the second half of the command.

How do we know this? Because God himself gave the justification for this commandment. “I am a jealous God.” God wants to be, and is, the master. He is jealous of the service, not the image. Just as one can have other masters as long as they don’t get in his face, one can create art works as long as they don’t become objects of veneration or service.

Kiddush Hashem

“Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.” (Ex 20:7)

Many Christians limit this commandment. They consider it a prohibition against using God’s name as a swear word. Certainly, using the name as a profanity would be included, but the commandment goes much beyond that. It is not a prohibition concerning the word

that is God’s name, but concerning the reputation that is God’s.

The Jewish people have two opposing concepts: *kiddush Hashem* (hallowing the name) and *chillul Hashem* (profaning the name). These come from the literal meaning of this commandment, “you shall not lift up the name for nothing (or nothingness).”

God is not talking about a single word or name here. It is not about not using the word “God” in a profane manner. Rather it is about everything that is related to “Godness.” “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.” (Prov 22:1) The writer is not saying that Timothy is better or worse than Patrick or Dennis as a name. The word chosen to name a person may have meaning, but it has no value except that earned by the person wearing it. The name is the essence of the being, the reputation and the character. Thus lifting up God’s name is about how we present Him, not just how we use a word.

It is possible that we might do something that would bring discredit (or honor) on our own names

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without it being either a *chillul* or *kiddush hashem*. There are many things that people do that are not done in the name of or by the authority of God. If, on the other hand, we do things specifically in God’s name, or if we are known as a follower of God, then anything that might be done could either hallow or discredit God. A Jew or a Christian who would bomb an abortion clinic or protest outside a funeral, especially if done using scripture as a basis, brings discredit upon God. A person who takes a hateful attitude toward one he considers a sinner may be taking up God’s name for nothingness, because he does more harm than good. On the other face of the coin, one who does good, and claims God as the motive for doing so, will honor or hallow God’s name.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. (1 Pet 4:15-16)

These first three commandments were to establish God as the supreme authority in Jewish life. Even to those who are not Jewish the principle applies. God wants the primacy. If he is in first place, everything else falls into place. If something else takes his place, everything falls apart.

AFTER DEATH

People are fascinated by what happens after death. At any given time the booksellers' shelves have one to several best sellers about someone who claims to have died, gone to heaven (rarely hell) and returned to tell about it. Ignoring that most of these books do not agree on particulars, and the broad strokes can be accounted for by shared cultural expectations, people want to know what will happen after we die. Nor is it a new phenomenon. After all, the whole purpose of monumental burial (think the pyramids, or any cemetery) is to prepare or preserve a body for the afterlife. Strangely, with all the books about what happens after death on the shelves, few people consult the Bible on the subject. Well, perhaps not strangely, since the Bible is essentially silent about the matter, and what it does say contradicts most of the books.

Throughout the Hebrew writings there is extremely little about what happens after death. If reading the Psalms, for instance, one gets the impression that once a person is dead they go into the grave and that is the end of the matter. "I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength: Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand." (Ps 88:4-5) And yet the Jewish people had a concept of the resurrection of the dead.

Actually, even two millennia ago that was a major point of contention for the Jews. The Sadducees denied a resurrection; the Pharisees advocated for it. Jesus argued in favor of resurrection, using the Old Testament scriptures. (Matt 22:28-33) Paul used the argument to his own advantage. (Acts 23:6-10)

The New Testament scriptures are as vague about what happens after death as the older scriptures. One, and

only one, passage seems to indicate some sort of consciousness after death. That is the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). Because this is the only passage that indicates that the dead possess any awareness, some have said this was merely a parable in order to make a point. They say Jesus used the beliefs of the day (of some people) in his teaching, whether the beliefs were valid or not.

Paul seemed to think that the dead remained in the grave until the final resurrection. This was what he taught the Christians of Thessalonika who worried about what would happen to those who had died when Christ comes.

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Thes 4:13-18)

Note that Paul does not say that Jesus will bring the dead with him. Instead, they will rise from the grave, and then all will simultaneously go to be with the Lord forever. Paul uses the metaphor of sleep for those who are dead and awaiting the resurrection.

Is Paul in conflict with Jesus? Not necessarily. Does it really make a difference? Definitely not. People argue over this issue, when they neither know the answer nor know why it matters. What happens to us after we die is infinitely less important than what we do in this life to prepare for what happens after we die.