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MR. WIZARD'S ADVICE

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. (Ex 3:13-14)

It is not uncommon to hear about God's response that the word translated "I am" shows a process and not a one-time action. He is not saying, I exist at this very time. Rather, He is saying, "In the past I am; I now am; and in the future I will still be I am." In other words, God is eternal, always existing outside of time. That is probably a valid observation, but there may be another lesson to be learned.

The literal phrase is, "I am; I am." The conjunction "that" was supplied by the translators of the King James Version of the Bible. If they supplied that conjunction, might it also be possible that God is saying, "I am who I am." In response to Moses asking a name to give to the Israelites, God says, "It is I, God, and nobody else." God is God and can be no other. Nor can another replace him as the savior of the nation.

Many years later, the psalmist Asaph said, "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High." (Ps 82:6) His point was that people should help the poor because, even though we may be God's children, we too will die. Jesus, however, used the verse to show that his claim to being the Son of God was not blasphemy because scripture said, "Ye are gods," speaking of the children of Israel. We are gods because we were created in the image of God.

Sometimes we fail to see what a gift God gave to us. He emphasizes that he is the unchanging and unchangeable God. He is who He is. If we are made in His image, then we are who we are; we are who he made us.

Back in the 1960s there was a regular cartoon segment that was part of a Saturday morning series. It featured Tudor (or Tooter) Turtle, who was always wanted to be someone in the past. His friend Mr. Wizard (a lizard, of course) would magically send him into this alternate destiny, and Tudor always got into trouble and had to call

to Mr. Wizard to bring him back to the present. At the end of each episode, Mr. Wizard would say, "Be just what you is, not what you is not. Folks what do this has the happiest lot."

Perhaps this is what God is telling us. God has created us in His image and we are endowed by our creator with those things that make us "what we is." Each of us has their own uniqueness. The gifts, abilities, and responsibilities that God gives one are not the same as those he gives another. Just as God is who He is, so we are who we are. God embraced his uniqueness, and he expect the same of us.

If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. (1 Cor 12:15-18)

Perhaps this is why God's law to the Israelite people included the one that condemned a thought rather than an action. "Thou shalt not covet." An inordinate desire for what another has or who they are shows disrespect to God's creation. It is saying that God made a mistake in creating me.

Rather, we should relish our uniqueness. Whatever God gives us, whoever he makes us, we can use that to his glory. "Folks what does this has the happiest lot."

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THANKS BE FOR THESE THREE

Many people somewhat mistakenly call 1 Corinthians 13 the “love chapter” of the Bible. It is true that a portion of that chapter gives various attributes of love, but the point of the chapter is the passing of miraculous spiritual gifts, such as speaking in languages not learned in the normal way. In the final verse Paul says, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Most people put the emphasis on the last word or even the trinity of “faith, hope, love” when Paul’s intended emphasis was the word “abide” or “remain.” Even though the miraculous gifts were soon to disappear, these three would not. Regardless of his intent, though, this is not the only time that Paul places these three graces together.

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father. (1 Thes 1:2-3)

If Paul combines these three qualities in letters to both the Corinthians and Thessalonians, we should consider their importance. Along with the gospel—

If you think God owes you salvation because of what you have done, you are sadly mistaken.

defined as the death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus—these three constitute important parts of Paul’s theology, possibly dating even from his youth.

Work of Faith

From early days of the church it seems that people misinterpreted the meaning of faith. In English it is often equated with belief, even a passive belief. A more accurate translation, according to some, would be trust. One can believe that a parent will take care of them, but still fear when danger threatens; but trust reduces or eliminates that fear. Trust is a more active word than mere belief. In Paul’s mind, however, faith goes even beyond the action of trust. It extends to proaction, to work.

Paul held an interesting view of faith and action. Some say it differs from that of James, but it really does not. James argued that “What doth it profit, my brethren,

though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? ... Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” (Jas 2:14, 17) Faith is revealed by action, and salvation is in the combination. Paul argues that works (actions) cannot save. “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” (Gal 2:16) What people tend to leave out is the phrase “of law.” Paul’s argument is that faith excludes earning one’s salvation by keeping a law, because nobody can keep law perfectly. Even James made that argument.

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law. (Jas 2:10-11)

Paul’s view of work and faith contrasts the “work of faith” with “work of law.” He does not discount the role of work in salvation. Rather he contrasts two motivations. If one thinks, “I will be saved because I did what God demanded,” one is doomed to failure; at some point he will violate a command. If you think God owes you salvation because of what you have done, you are sadly mistaken. You failed before you even began. If, on the other hand, your actions demonstrate your trust in the blood of Jesus for salvation, then you begin to understand the “work of faith.”

Notice also that the contrast is between “works” of law and “work” of faith. When one is obeying law, every individual action is a separate work. Not committing murder is a separate work from obeying the speed limit, which is a separate work from “love your neighbor as yourself.” Many members of the U.S. Navy commit adultery while overseas because they don’t have the fear of getting caught; they can get away with it in the Philippines, whereas their wives might catch them if it is done in their home port. Their obedience is based on fear. In the same way works of law are based on fear that one bad action will counterbalance all good actions.

Work of faith, though, is a lifestyle rather than a set of actions. Faith is itself the work. “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” (Col 3:17) Work of faith says that every action is the same, a means of glorifying God. If everything is done to glorify God, then individual failures of action do not negate the overriding motivation. God sees faith in Jesus and forgives failures in the working of that faith.

Labor of Love

In 1 Corinthians, Paul gives the order of “faith, hope, love.” To the Thessalonians it is “faith, love, hope.”

In the former passage love comes last, because it is the greatest. In the latter it is placed second because the work of faith and the labor of love assist the patience of hope.

Some people may be thinking, “Labor of love, work of faith; what is the difference?” When one looks at what Paul really says there is a big difference.

There are advantages and disadvantages to reading the Bible in translation. The obvious advantage is that most people are illiterate in Hebrew and Greek, so the only way they can read the Bible is in translation. That far outweighs the difficulty of translating some things into another language. Sometimes the translators make obvious mistakes, such as using Jesus instead of Joshua in Hebrews 4:8 in the King James Version. Sometimes it is intentional, such as refusing to render a certain Greek word immersion instead of transliterating it to baptism, knowing that many people don’t practice immersion. Sometimes the translators use a perfectly good word which may have more than one meaning in the language to which they are translating. That is the case here.

When you hear the word labor, what do you think? Most men will automatically equate it with work, such as the labors of Hercules or the Labor Party. Some women will make that same association, but many women equate labor with the process of giving birth, such as going into labor or labor pains. The latter idea is actually closer to what Paul says here. It is not the work of love, but the effort of love. Paul says love may include difficulty and pain.

Maybe it is a cultural thing, but in the United States we don’t often associate love and labor. We think in terms of the old Sammy Cahn lyric (made famous by Frank Sinatra) that says, “I fall in love too easily” or the song that says falling in love with Jesus is more important than obeying God. We speak of loving pets, spouses, sports, and food as if they were all on an equal plane. We treat love as a feeling, an emotion. In the Bible, however, Jesus and Paul equate love with a choice, an action.

Jesus says to love your enemies, which is hard work. Paul speaks here of the painful effort of love. In the Roman world it was not easy to be a Christian. They were either ignored or persecuted. Loving other Christians would be easy, but the Thessalonian Christians apparently displayed love beyond the boundaries of their fellowship. Choosing to love when the other person is unlovable is hard work. Maybe even as hard as childbirth.

Patience of Hope

Love may be the greatest of the three because it lasts beyond the need for trust or hope, but to some people the patience of hope may be the most difficult. We in America are used to instant gratification. We have “fast food, fast cars, and fast women.” Instead of saving up for a purchase we put it on the credit card. Even the tax preparation services promise that you don’t have to wait

for the government to cut your refund; they will loan you that amount right away. If patience is a virtue there aren’t very many virtuous Americans.

It was not always so. Go back to the generation that was raised during the Great Depression. One of the causes of the depression was excessive credit, and when people were out of work banks were unwilling to extend credit. If that generation wanted something they usually had to wait until they could save enough cash to buy it. In some cases you could put an item on lay-away, and pay for it over time, but you still did not see the fulfillment of hope until it was fully paid for. That generation knew what Paul was talking about.

We live in a painful world. We look forward to a better one. The price has been paid; the lay-away has been fulfilled. And yet we still have a hope of salvation that requires patience. That is not “I hope I am saved.” It is rather “the trip is paid for, but the ship has not left the

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dock yet.” We know that for which we hope, and eagerly anticipate its arrival. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1)

It is just this assurance that informs the patience of hope. With the assurance of heaven we can be patient. The person who says, “I hope I am saved,” may exhibit patience or a lack thereof depending on how he perceives his current standing with God. If he knows he has sinned, and is legalistic enough to believe that each sin will cause him to lose his salvation, he may be willing to wait patiently until he has asked forgiveness. If he thinks he is currently in a saved status he may actually be impatient, for fear of losing his salvation. On the other hand, one who has the assurance of faith has the luxury of patience of hope; he can patiently await death or Christ’s return because day-to-day incidents make no difference in his salvation.

Faith, love, hope. Work, effort, patience. The greatest of these, without the adjective, may be love, but Paul made them equal in his prayers for the Thessalonian church. Each is important in the life of a church or of an individual. Because of our faith we act in hope and out of love. Because of our love we make the effort to maintain our faith and our hope. Because of our hope we can patiently show our faith and our love, even when it seems nobody wants them. If Paul specifically mentioned all three in his prayers about the Thessalonians, then perhaps we should try to show these qualities in our lives as well.

I PLEAD SELF-DEFENSE

When one has killed another person there are several possible defenses if the matter goes to court. The primary biblical defense is accidental death. The Law of Moses provided for several cities of refuge to which the accidental killer could flee and be safe until the death of the High Priest. (Numbers 35) Another plea is temporary insanity. That is related to the plea of “not guilty by reason of insanity,” which some states more properly state as “guilty but insane.” Then there is the plea of mental incapacity, which says that the killer is not insane, but does not have the ability to know right from wrong. This would be used for children and the developmentally disabled, among others. One of the most famous defenses, though, would be that of self-defense. This was a plea of a whole nation at this time of year.

In the book of Esther we read that the evil Haman plotted the genocide of the Jewish people in the Persian Empire, primarily because one Jew, Mordechai, refused to bow down to him. (At least that was the inciting incident, although his racism probably existed long before that encounter.) Haman had the ear of the emperor and finagled a law allowing the Persian citizenry to kill any Jews they encountered on a certain day chosen by lot (*pur*, from which we get the name of the holiday Purim, which falls on March 21-22 in 2019). The date chosen was almost a year away, so the Persians had plenty of time to prepare, and the Jews had plenty of time to tremble. (Modern similarities may be drawn in the state-sponsored racism in wartime Germany, in Rwanda, or in Kosovo, as well as the anti-Muslim sentiment of some in the United States today.)

The Jews had a long time to fear, but they also had an ace up their sleeve. Unbeknownst to Haman, the

emperor, or even most Jews, the favored queen of the land was Jewish. She invited Haman to a private dinner with her husband and herself. The first dinner went well, so she planned a second one the next night. At that dinner she revealed to her husband that people were plotting to kill her and her people. The emperor had recently faced an assassination plot, foiled by Queen Esther’s uncle, so he was probably pretty sensitive about plots against himself or his wives. Just that day he had honored Mordechai for saving his life, an honor which just fueled Haman’s hatred. When he asked who was responsible for the plot against her, she pointed across the table, at Haman. The emperor was in a quandary; his favorite advisor and his favorite wife were at odds with each other. When he left the room to figure this out, Haman begged the queen to save him, but in doing so appeared to attack her. When the emperor came back to the room, he saw Haman in this compromising position and had him arrested and subsequently executed.

Now there was a problem. Persian law said that a royal decree could not be rescinded. The Persian people were still allowed to kill the Jews. The solution was to allow the Jews to defend themselves. But this was done in an interesting way. A decree was promulgated that on the day of the planned pogrom, the Jewish people were allowed “to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish” any Persians they knew or suspected of planning to kill them. This decree was extended to include the following day, and the Jews killed over 75,000 people.

When the Persians knew that their prey could fight back, fear came upon them. And so annually the principle of self-defense is celebrated. It is as biblical as that of accidental manslaughter.

Timothy J. O’Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123