

*We Don't Work
for God Anymore*

I WAS ON A FLIGHT FROM BANGKOK, Thailand, to New Delhi, India, when I began to talk with Amit, a thirtyish man who was returning home from a business trip. He asked me what I did—the universal question the world asks to determine one's value as a person. I told him that I was a Bible teacher. "The Christian Bible?" he asked.

"Yes," I told him.

Without any hint of trying to be offensive, but rather just to make conversation, Amit said, "I don't like religion."

"I don't either," I replied.

He ignored my remark and continued, "Religion is the cause for many wars."

"You're absolutely right," I answered. "And not just between different religions, but even within the same religion."

Amit looked a little puzzled. "I think the Christian religion tries to control people," he said.

"Oh yes, you are right about that," I answered. "The Christian religion is terrible about that."

Amit turned and looked at me. "What did you say you do?"

"I teach the Bible," I answered again.

"But it sounds as if you don't like religion either," he answered.

"I don't," I said. I could see the wheels turning in his mind. "Amit, what I teach is the truth about Jesus Christ. There's a big difference between the Christian religion and biblical Christianity."

In the next hour or so, Amit and I discussed the differences between religion and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I explained that many people embrace the Christian religion by simply trying to live by the Bible, much like the Islamic people try to live by the Koran. I explained to him that real Christianity means sharing in a literal union with Jesus Christ, which comes by trusting Him and receiving His Life.

As we approached the airport at New Delhi, Amit said something that touched me. He said, "I never knew that there was a difference between Christianity and the Christian religion. Now I understand. The Christian religion means that a person tries to serve God by obeying the teachings of the Bible, but Christianity means that by faith a person absorbs the life of Jesus Christ into his consciousness and that Christ begins to live through him from that day forward." *Wow! I thought. He understands the meaning of authentic Christianity better than I did for 29 years after I became a Christian!*

Amit is not unusual in his understanding of Christianity. Most people think that the essence of Christian living means finding out what the Bible says we should do and then striving to do it. Many unbelievers hope to get into heaven because they "try to live by the Bible." Their efforts, however, are futile. Nobody can earn heaven by trying to do the things that God requires. The only entrance into heaven is found by faith in Jesus Christ.

It is also strange that the same Christian who knows that he didn't *become* a believer by working for God often believes that *after* he becomes a Christian, his whole life should revolve around working for God. He knows that he was saved by grace through faith, but believes that now the ground rules are dif-

ferent. This kind of Christian often studies the Bible to get instructions concerning what God expects of him now that he is saved. He understands the fact that the efforts of an unsaved man will produce no spiritual progress, but believes that his own efforts *will* yield spiritual results. He is sincere in trying to advance spiritually, but he is sincerely wrong. Self-effort will never yield spiritual fruit, but only a deep sense of frustration. We don't earn victory in the new land. It comes to us as a gift and can be received only by faith, not by our own self-effort, regardless of how heartfelt and sincere we may be.

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Watchman Nee wrote:

We know that justification is ours through the Lord Jesus and requires no work on our part, but, we think sanctification is dependent on our own efforts. We know that we can receive forgiveness only by entire reliance upon the Lord; yet we believe we can obtain deliverance by doing something ourselves. We fear that if we do nothing, nothing will happen. After salvation the old habit of "doing" reasserts itself and we begin our old self-efforts again. Then God's word comes afresh to us: "It is finished" (John 19:30). He has done everything on the Cross for our forgiveness and He will do everything in us for our deliverance. In both cases, He is the doer. "It is God that worketh in you."¹

Welcome to God's Grace-Land

The children of Israel had barely entered the land of Canaan when they realized that there was going to be resistance to their advance. The land was inhabited by pagan people who had no plans to hand over the deed to the property without a fight. As the Jews moved inland from the banks of the Jordan River, the first city they came to was Jericho. The residents of Jericho knew that the people of Israel had arrived; consequently, the city "was tightly shut because of the sons of Israel; no one went out and no one came in" (Joshua 6:1).

This was a pivotal moment in the life of Israel. How she approached the fortified city of Jericho would set a precedent for the future battles she faced. God had brought the people into the land, and now they had to decide whose responsibility it was to lead them *through* the land. Lest there be any doubt about God's plan, He spoke concerning Jericho:

See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and the valiant warriors. And you shall march around the city, all the men of war circling the city once. You shall do so for six days. Also seven priests shall carry seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; then on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And it shall be that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people will go up every man straight ahead (Joshua 6:2-5).

God made it clear that Israel's victory at Jericho and at every point along their journey would be the result of *His* work, not theirs. He said, "I have given Jericho into your hands." All of Canaan was a *gift* to Israel. The only way the Israelites entered in was

because they finally believed God and realized the only way they would move forward would be by faith. Not only would their own self-effort fail to help gain victory in Canaan, it would actually impede the victory. They didn't have to do anything for God in Canaan; He had already done it all for them. This was God's land of grace, and in this land, He does it all. His people are simply grateful beneficiaries of His goodness. Israel had moved into the land by grace and would now move *through* the land by that same grace.

Rest Is a Gift from God

It took Israel 40 years to enter Canaan because they refused to believe that God had simply *given* them the land and that all they needed to do was receive it by faith. For 40 years, "we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19). While they struggled in the wilderness, God's desire was that they enter His rest. The book of Hebrews refers to Canaan as a type of the rest believers have in Christ (see Hebrews 3:11,18; 4:1,3,8-11).

It is amazing how the default setting in contemporary Christian culture tends to oppose the concept of rest, when that is exactly what Jesus promised to give to those who follow Him (see Matthew 11:28-30). Just as God called Israel to a land of rest, we are being called to a place of rest today. This concept requires a new mind-set for most people, especially in Western culture. We live in a society where people go on vacation with their cell phones, Palm Pilots, and laptop computers. To rest in Christ—to trust Him to express His life through us—sounds lazy and negligent after we have lived in the wilderness of rigorous religion for such a long time. Many mistakenly think of rest as some sort of passivity, which it is not. Rest means to trust Jesus Christ as our Life-Source, depending upon Him to empower our actions with His strength and direction.

As a legalist, the concept of rest was so foreign to me that I couldn't comprehend it. I didn't know rest was a gift from God. I thought it was a sin. I sincerely believed that the only time we would find complete rest was when we died and went to heaven. There was a verse I used to read at funeral services to give comfort to bereaved families. I would share Hebrews 4:10 with them: "For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His."

When I shared this verse, I would tenderly point out that our beloved friend who had died "has now entered into God's rest and ceased from his own labors." I talked about how heaven is a place where there are no more struggles. It is a place where we simply rest in Christ and enjoy Him forever.

For years, the idea of entering into God's rest and ceasing from our own works sounded like dying and going to heaven to me. Then one day I read the *next* verse in the passage—Hebrews 4:11, which says, "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall down through following the same example of disobedience." What? Be diligent to enter *that* rest? Now I was in trouble. I had always taught that rest meant dying. Now here I was being confronted with the verse that says to be diligent to enter that rest or else I would be disobedient to God. I knew I had to go back and reexamine that verse again and hope that my interpretation had been wrong or else I was in serious trouble! I didn't know at the time that I had *already* died with Christ and was able to cease from my own works.

Our Part and God's Part

"I understand that salvation is a gift, but when we become Christian we have certain responsibilities in living the Christian life, don't we?" Kelly asked. "We don't just sit back and coast to

heaven with no obligations in the meantime." Kelly's concern is common. Her statements reflect a belief that if we don't take ownership of certain things that we must do for God, we may become passive and lazy.

What is the responsibility of the believer toward God? The disciples once asked Jesus about the works they were to do for God. "They said therefore to Him, 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you *believe* in Him whom He has sent'" (John 6:28-29, emphasis added). When asked what we are supposed to do in order to do the work of God, Jesus gave one work: *believe*. If we are to take the words of Jesus at face value, then faith is the sole work of the Christian (and even that is a gift from Him—see Ephesians 2:8). That fact doesn't mean that nothing else will be done, but that nothing else *can* be done unless it flows from the abiding relationship of faith in Him as our constant Life-Source (see John 15:5). As we trust Him, we will discover the reality of the truth "faithful is he that calleth you, *who also will do it*" (1 Thessalonians 5:24 KJV, emphasis added).

The reason that Israel would possess Canaan wasn't because of any work they had done, but because of the promise God had made to Abraham many years earlier (see Genesis 12:1-3). It wasn't because of *their* work, but *God's*, that they would be blessed. It was only by God's doing that they would enjoy abundance in life. It would happen because of the covenant He had made with them through their father, Abraham.

Christians Are a Covenant People

God has made a covenant with believers today. Just as was the case with the one He made with Abraham, the responsibility for fulfilling the covenant depends on His works, not the works of

man. We are simply to receive His grace gifts by faith. The same rest that He offered to Israel is promised to us. Don't think that God's offer of rest ceased when Israel entered Canaan: God has a bigger plan in mind than simply the one He has for the nation of Israel. That plan includes you.

The writer of Hebrews said, "If Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:8-9). There is a rest that's bigger and better than Canaan; it is the rest that we can experience through our life in Christ. Canaan is like a glimpse at a 50¢ postcard from Hawaii while being "in Christ" is living in a luxurious beach house on Maui—there's just no comparison! Experiencing His life surpasses anything that Israel could have known in the promised land. There's nothing we can do to earn it; we can only accept it as a gift.

One passage that so clearly illustrates the unilateral nature of God's grace is found in Genesis 15. After taking Abraham outside at night and telling him to count the stars in the sky, God told him, "So shall your descendants be" (15:5). Abraham believed God but couldn't imagine how such a thing could happen since he had no children at all, and he was an old man. God then gave him instructions that seem strange to our modern-day minds:

"Bring me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds (Genesis 15:9-10).

This may sound like a strange and gruesome scene, but it made perfect sense to Abraham. He understood that God was about to ratify a covenant.

This was a common manner in which covenants were made in Abraham's day. Sacrificial animals were divided into halves with an open pathway left between them, and the two parties who entered into a covenant passed between them together to seal their agreement. The ratifying of a covenant was much stronger than making a contract. The blood present at the ratification of the covenant indicated that the parties who passed between would be willing to fulfill their terms of the covenant even if it cost them their own lives.

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In the Bible, *nothing* was more serious than a covenant. In a contract men agree that both parties will do their part. If one fails to live up to his part of the deal, the contract becomes null and void. However, when one entered into covenant with another, he was indicating that he would fulfill his part *regardless of what the other person did*. Contracts are a 50-50 proposition, but when a man makes a *covenant*, he is affirming that he will give 100 percent toward his commitment even if the other person gives absolutely nothing.

As Abraham prepared the sacrifices for the covenant, he must have felt great anticipation about entering into a covenant with God. However, as the time drew near for the covenant to be ratified, an unexpected turn of events occurred. "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold,

terror and great darkness fell upon him" (Genesis 15:12). When God was ready to seal the covenant, He caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep.

"And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram..." (Genesis 15:17). The smoke and fire that appeared were the manifest presence of God. It is notable that in this instance, only one symbolic representative of the parties passed between the halves of the animals. The only one to pass through the halves was God. The covenant was to be kept from the Godward side alone. Only the Lord Himself could fulfill its promises.²

God Does It All

Don't miss the significance of God's covenant with Abraham. Israel missed the point and it cost them 40 years in the wilderness. When the time came for the covenant to be ratified, God caused Abraham to fall asleep for an important reason. There was no way that Abraham could live up to the promises he would have been making by passing through the sacrifices. It was as if God were saying, "Abraham, I know you have good intentions, but there is nothing you could ever do for Me. You would only break any promises you make. So for that reason, I want you to lie down and *rest* while I ratify the covenant. I'll do all the work. You simply trust Me and be the recipient of all I do."

Abraham had believed that he and God were going to enter into a covenant together, but God knew that a bilateral covenant would only set Abraham up for failure. So instead of them making a covenant *together*, God committed to the covenant for both of them, assuming responsibility for fulfilling both sides of

the covenant. Abraham's sleep was a foreshadowing of the rest that we experience in Christ. Any covenant we have with God *must* be one-sided because we totally lack the ability to live up to any commitments we make.

Many Christians have misunderstood the new covenant. They think salvation works like this: God forgives us for all our past sins. He now asks us to serve Him through our actions. He gives us a Bible to tell us *how* to live for Him. He offers to help us do the things we need to do anytime we ask Him. They believe that He forgave us; that was His part. Now we are to live for Him. That's our part. Right? Nothing could be further from the truth! If we couldn't save ourselves to start with, what makes us think we can live the Christian life now that we are saved?

For us to believe that we can live the Christian life is comparable to Abraham thinking that he had what it took to father a whole nation. He was 100 years old when Isaac was born. One hundred years old! It doesn't take a genius to figure out that at that age a double dose of Viagra, a trip to Fredericks of Canaan, satin sheets, soft music, candlelight, and a willing wife just weren't enough! He might give it the old college try, but apart from a miracle from God it just wasn't going to happen. Either God had to assume responsibility for it all, or the covenant wouldn't be fulfilled.

The Way to Victory

"What do you mean I need to rest in Christ?" Rodney asked. "I'm the head of the outreach committee in our church. If I rest, who will lead the effort to reach the unchurched in our community?" Rod's question resonated with me, reminding me of my own past experience in ministry. For many years I had reasoned that there was no time for rest. After all, I was in ministry and there were places to go, things to do, and people to see. My life was

illustrated in a poem I once heard that says, "Mary had a little lamb; it used to be a sheep. Then it joined the local church and died from lack of sleep!" I used to say that I'd rather burn out for God than rust out. Then one day the Lord caused me to realize this: "Either way, you're *out*." I now know that God doesn't want us to burn out, but to burn *on*. Rodney's concern that the work of God would go undone if he rested is shared by many believers, but it simply isn't true. To rest in Him is to be both empowered and motivated by Him.

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A recent article in a leading Christian periodical wrestled with the matter of how we are to rest in Christ and still be consistent in our spiritual service. The author concluded that what we need is balance, reserving a time for resting at the feet of Jesus and a time for working out in the field. This author's viewpoint is common in the contemporary church, but it misses the essential element of resting in Him. It isn't necessary at any given moment to choose between resting in Christ and serving Him. It is possible to do *both* simultaneously. Isaiah 40:31 says, "Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary." Those who trust in the Lord as their Source are active, but their activity is propelled by a power outside their own—thus they rest and work at the same time.

The way to victory is to rest in Christ by recognizing Him to be our very Life. It is to realize that in God's grace-land, we do not work for Him, but rather we allow Him to do the work Himself *through us*. Jesus wants us to recognize our complete insufficiency to produce works that have eternal value. He wants to be the One who does the works through us as we renounce our own self-sufficiency and depend continuously on Him.

It is obvious that God didn't cause Abraham to become the father of a great nation without His involvement. The source of Abraham's capability to father children in his old age was the divine enablement of God, not Abraham's sufficiency for the task. When Isaac was born, Abraham never fancied himself to be a "lean, mean love machine." He knew the Source of his sufficiency. It was pretty obvious to everybody how it had all happened. It was God's doing. The way to victory for Abraham was by faith and faith alone.

Choosing What We Are Going to Believe

As the people of Israel faced the fortified walls of Jericho, they had to decide what they were going to believe. They could have reasoned that God had been good enough to lead them across the Jordan River and into the promised land, and it was now up to them to conquer the city by their own determination and commitment.

Fortunately, Israel did not take that approach, as logical as it might have seemed. Instead, they chose to believe God's statement that He had indeed given them Jericho as a gift. They didn't ask Him to help *them* flatten the city walls, but simply followed God's instructions on how to proceed. They *rested* in Him, moved forward in complete obedience, and trusted Him to do the work. Consequently, God *did* do the work and they simply reaped the benefits.

What a life we have been given in Christ! He does the work and we get the benefits. How different this new land is from the wilderness of religion, where blessings are directly commensurate with our own self-effort. When we lived in the wilderness, blessings were a reward for faithfulness. Here in God's grace-land they are an unconditional gift. In the wilderness, our works were of primary importance. In grace-land it is *His* work that becomes the focal point of life. The only thing we need to do is learn how to live in this new world, a lesson that sometimes isn't learned easily, as Israel was about to find out.



Dear Father,

For too long my focus has been on what I should do for You. I realize now that the good news of the gospel is in what You have done for me! Thank You for everything You have given to me in Christ. Teach me how to actively trust in You, depending upon You to do the things in me and through me that You want to accomplish.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

1. Discuss five differences between Christianity and the Christian religion. How does a Christian become vulnerable to becoming involved in the Christian religion and losing his focus on Christ?
2. Read Joshua 6:2-5. List three similarities between how God gave the victory to Israel at Jericho and how He wants to give victory to Christians today.
3. What does it mean to rest in Christ? What is the difference between resting in Him and being passive? What keeps the believer from the danger of passivity?
4. What is man's part in salvation? What is the Christian's part in the process of his own spiritual growth?
5. Read Genesis 15. What part did Abraham play in the covenant God made with him? What part do Christians have today in the new covenant?