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MINISTRIES



THE PROMISES OF GOD HOW TO HOPE – ROMANS 5:5-8

Perhaps you know a person who refuses to acknowledge the “bad” that appears plain to everyone else. We call these people optimists, people who “hope for the best.” Their hope is often grounded on little more than a dislike or denial of reality (as one wag put it, “Sometimes you have to look reality square in the face and deny it!”). Optimism may seem commendable, but there is little undergirding it. The most serious attempt to make optimism respectable was that of the seventeenth century German philosopher Leibnitz who posited the theory that we live in the best of all possible worlds (or the least of all evils, pessimistically speaking!).

Because theology is called the “Queen of the Sciences,” we can be forgiven for examining optimism scientifically. To truly have “hope,” it must be more than a wish or preference. Anyone can say, “I wish things would turn out for the best,” or “I prefer that things turn out for the best.” But to truly have hope, one must be able to say, “I know things will turn out for the best.” That level of confidence leaves an optimist confused and shaking his head. Who could possibly know that things will always turn out for the best? The Apostle Paul tells us: The person who knows the love of God.

True Biblical hope, Paul says, never disappoints. We have hope at all times—even in bad times—he says, because the Holy Spirit has made known to the believer in Christ the constant, unconditional love of the God of the universe. But is this hope grounded in something besides apostolic theory? How is this better than Leibnitz’s theory of optimism?

It is better because it is rooted in the historical, space-and-time death of Jesus Christ on a hill outside Jerusalem, Israel, in 30 A.D. This is how God proved his loved for us: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

God loves you, has proved it, and invites you to have hope today. Hope that is unshakable and grounded in His reality. Graduate from optimism to realism and know that everything will turn out for your best (Romans 8:28).

God’s Promise to You:

“If your hope is in me, you will never be disappointed.”

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REFLECTIONS

Reflections on God’s revealed truth
JANUARY 2012



GROWING IN COMPASSION

God of glory and grace, You have spoken timeless truth through Your servants the prophets, and through them You have called and inspired Your people to be concerned about the things that are of concern to You. You have revealed Your compassion for the poor, the orphans and widows, the destitute and the oppressed. Please enhance my compassion for these people as well and show me the specific things You would have me to do in order to manifest the Spirit of Christ among the needy. Let me not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. Open my eyes to the opportunities You have already placed before me, so that I will become an agent of grace and reconciliation to those whom You love. Let me make a difference in this world by being faithful and obedient to Your heavenly calling.

A teaching letter to encourage believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart

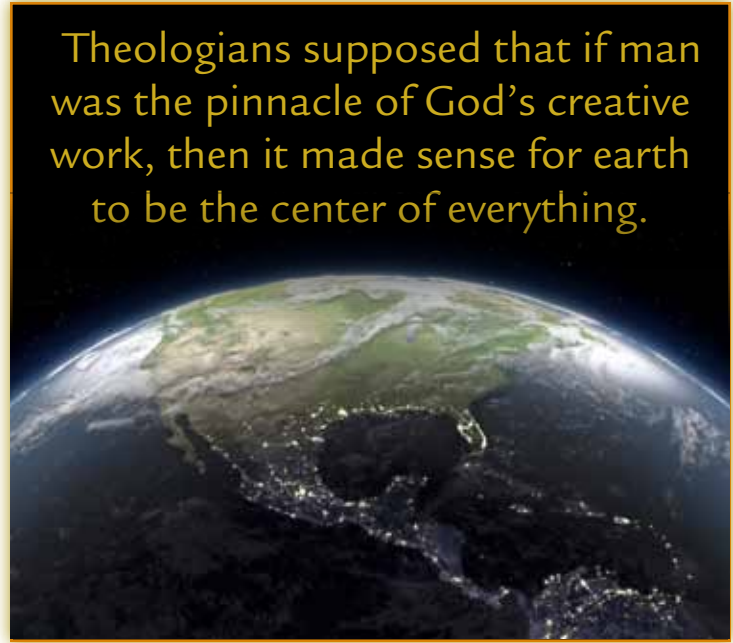


THE TEMPORAL AND THE ETERNAL (PART 5)

Daily the world implores us to accept what it offers, to believe that it holds our future and to chase its promises. But eternity in our hearts reminds us regularly that there is more to this life than we can see. So one day, our eyes open; our paradigm shifts, and we make a faith choice. We choose eternal life and eternal hope. But is that it? Once we choose the eternal perspective, why do this worldview and this hope so easily and so frequently evade us?

An Irreversible Paradigm Shift

The most celebrated example of a paradigm shift is the Copernican revolution in astronomy. Until the time of Copernicus, the reigning paradigm was Ptolemy's centuries-old "geocentric" (earth-centered) system. In his book, *Almagest*¹, Ptolemy had mathematically documented his argument that our non-rotating earth was the center of a terrestrial system, with all other planets orbiting around it. Theologians supposed that if man was the pinnacle of God's creative work, then it made sense for earth to be the center of everything. Based upon this fallacious understanding of Scripture, the church adopted and advocated Ptolemy's geocentric model. And while there was no warrant for this theology, they held to it (and to the Ptolemaic system) dogmatically.



For centuries, they maintained this view of the solar system. During those centuries, many observations were made that simply didn't fit that model. The most notable of those observations was the retrograde motion of Saturn and Jupiter. These planets seemed, at times, to halt and begin to move backward. Through some brilliant mathematical gymnastics, Ptolemy was able to explain these movements, and even almost predict them, by a very complicated system of what he called "epicycles," circles around the edges of which the planets rotated.

But the problem with this is obvious: Instead of revising their way of seeing, they adopted a very clever system to account for what made no sense. The concept of epicycles was brilliant; but

it still didn't explain everything (not to mention the fact that epicycles don't exist). It didn't settle the matter completely, and so more and more sophisticated methods had to be developed. The result was a well-documented, elaborate mathematical system that never completely

¹ Ptolemy, *Almagest*, 2nd Century (Roughly translated, "Almagest" means "the greatest" or "the greatest compilation.")

worked. Yet this old paradigm reigned, because most astronomers couldn't accept another.

In 1543, the year of his death, Nicholas Copernicus published his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* ("On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs"), presenting his "heliocentric" or sun-centered system. Knowing that this hypothesis would meet with a good deal of hostility from the religious establishment and from his colleagues, Copernicus waited to publish his book until long after it was written. In it, Copernicus provided a far simpler and more elegant explanation of the movement of the planets and definitively settled the question of the planetary order. In the years that followed, the findings of Galileo, Kepler and Newton provided further support for Copernicus' ideas; and by the end of the next century, information supporting the heliocentric model provided a foundation so strong that science would never be able to shift back to a geocentric paradigm again.

A Reversible Paradigm Shift

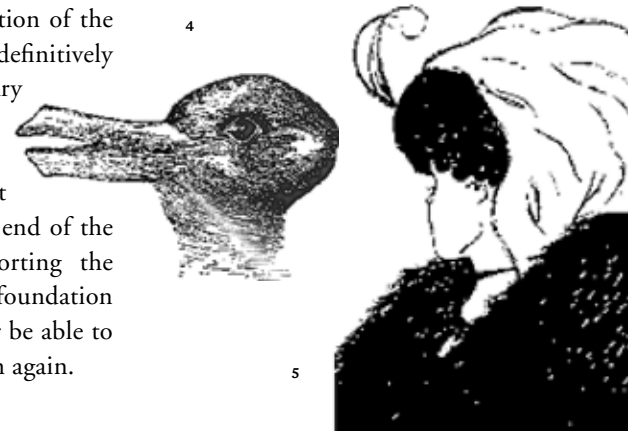
The Copernican revolution didn't happen in an instant, but some paradigm shifts do. Take a look at the two figures below. Whether you see an old woman or young woman in the first image, and a duck or a rabbit in the second, depends on your perspective - or your paradigm. But that paradigm can change when you learn that the chin line of the young woman is the nose of the old woman or when you find out the rabbit looks right and the duck looks left.

Psychologist Joseph Jastrow used the duck/rabbit figure to demonstrate that perception doesn't just depend on the object being perceived. Several other factors must also be considered, including circumstances and mental activity.² For example, one study found that, "Interestingly, children tested on Easter were more likely to see the figure as a rabbit,

² Kihlstrom, J. F. "Letter to the Editor." *Trends Cognitive Sci.*, Nov. 16, 2004.

whereas when tested on a Sunday in October, they tended to see it as a duck."³

We've all seen optical illusions before. We look at the illusion from one point of view and are unable to see it. But after it's pointed out, suddenly we make out what we hadn't seen before. There are other optical illusions that you see for a while and then lose. Some are only one way - once you see it, you can't help but see it. There are others, like the two below, which you can see either way - reversible visual paradigms.



Christianity —A Reversible Paradigm

The optical illusions above demonstrate that some paradigms can be reversed. The temporal versus the eternal is another example of a reversible paradigm. While we might hope that "catching" the message of the gospel will create a Copernican shift in our lives (and often it feels as if it has), we can become disappointed, as growing Christians, when we find that it has not. Embracing the eternal view does not ensure our hanging onto it. Instead, this perspective that we so need slips from our grasp because it's so easy for us to return to the orientation that we had lived in so long before.

³ Brugger, P. Brugger, S. "The Easter Bunny in October: Is It Disguised as a Duck?" *Perceptual Motor Skills* 76, 577-578, 1993.

⁴ Boring, E. G. "A New Ambiguous Figure." *Amer. J. Psychology* 42, 444, 1930.

⁵ Jastrow 1899, p. 312; 1900; see also Brugger. 1999.



NOTHING TO PROVE

Joe Louis was the world heavyweight boxing champion from 1937 until he retired in 1949. During his time of service

in the army, Louis was driving with a fellow GI when he was involved in a minor collision with a large truck. The truck driver got out, yelling and swearing at Louis, who just sat in the driver's seat, smiling. "Why didn't you get out and knock him flat?" asked his buddy after the truck driver had moved on. "Why should I?" replied Joe. "When somebody insulted Caruso, did he sing an aria for him?"

This story well illustrates the theme of identity. The truck driver clearly didn't know the real identity of the person he was cursing, for if he had, he would have treated him in a dramatically different way! On the other hand, Joe Louis knew who he was—the best boxer in the world—and therefore he had nothing to prove. Many other men in his position would have been tempted to fight back or at least return insult for insult. But Louis was secure enough in his identity to understand that such a response would only be degrading. The truck driver's opinion of him was irrelevant to Joe's self-understanding.

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A teaching letter of

