

# Message of Life Mid-Year Newsletter

## A Firebrand Plucked from the Fire

We lived in California's Bay Area until I was eight years old, and would often go camping as a family at nearby Clear Lake. After pitching our tent, I would go with Dad to find willow branches suitable for roasting hotdogs and marshmallows. After eating my fill, I remember casually tossing my paper plate and stick into the fire. But Dad quickly rescued the willow, saying, "Unlike the paper plates, the sticks must last all week."

I was recently reminded of that incident as our family looked at Zechariah 3:2 during our Bible study. Curiosity prompted me to investigate further, and I found that the OT also uses *'ûḡ* (*firebrand*) in Amos 4:11 and Isaiah 7:4.<sup>1</sup> The lexicons speak of firebrands as curved sticks used in stirring campfires.

In Zechariah 3, a small remnant returned to Jerusalem from captivity (cf. Ezra 2). Only a very few had obeyed God's command to leave Babylon. Even so, Satan stood ready to accuse Joshua, the high priest, as unworthy to offer expiatory sacrifices—without which the people would remain unclean. God rebuked Satan in Zech 3:2 for regarding His firebrand as kindling to be consumed.

And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a firebrand [that I] plucked from the fire?"

In rebuking Satan, God acknowledges that Joshua and the people have rough edges. National discipline has singed them, but who is it that plucked this firebrand from the fire? It was the Lord.

Amos 4:11 (forty years before her fall), delivers a past-tense oracle of Samaria's impending destruction, akin to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Just as angels had once pulled Lot's family out as a firebrand, God would only deliver a small remnant of Samaria.

"I have overthrown you, like God's overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a firebrand plucked from burning; yet have you have not returned to Me," an oracle of the LORD.

In these passages, God describes the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as firebrands plucked from the fire. If left in the fire too long, even the remnant would be destroyed. But time and time again, God delivers the nation "yet so as through fire"—to borrow another statement elsewhere in Scripture.

Zechariah's imagery of the firebrand plucked from the fire reminded Charles Feinberg of Moses seeing the burning bush in Exodus 3, while Israel was enslaved in Egypt:

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 7:4 refers to Pekah, Israel's king, and Rezin, Syria's king, as stubs of firebrands. After using them to stir the fire by attacking Judah, God now tossed them into the fire. By the time of Ahaz, they were mere stubs, who would die on history's ash heap. Unlike His chosen people, Pekah and Rezin would not be plucked from the fire, but would die in battle.

“Rightly has Israel been likened to the burning bush that Moses saw in the desert, ever burning, ever aflame, and yet never consumed. And do you ask the secret of the mystery? It is because God Himself is in the midst of the burning bush.”<sup>2</sup>

Israel has rebelled against God countless times, and God has often plucked them out of the fire—whether in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, or Nazi Germany.

God often uses fire to purify, rather than to destroy. One does not put a fine steak on the barbecue to turn it into a lump of charcoal. No one heats gold in a furnace to destroy it. The intent of a fire in the fireplace is not to burn down the house.

Now, if God used “controlled burns” with Israel and repeatedly plucked them from the fire, maybe He has similar policies with Church Age believers.

Consider a few clear examples. 1 Corinthians 3:15 speaks of the unrewarded believer himself being saved, “yet so as through fire.” The flames destroy wood, hay, and straw, not the believer. Hebrews 6:8 speaks of burning a field infested with “thorns and briars.” I grew up in California’s rice-basket, where rice growers always burn their fields after harvest. It is not the soil that goes up in smoke, but the field residue, the straw. “Burning a field” is a metonymy of the container (for the contained). In other words, Hebrews 6:8 means that God plans to vaporize believers’ *worthless production* (thorns and briars), and not that He would vaporize *them* in the Lake of Fire.

In reflecting upon how far the Church has strayed from the ideal (described in Ephesians 4:11-16), it is not hard to imagine two burning bushes that God does not consume: Israel as well as the Church. God’s grace never fails to impress me. He knows just when to pluck firebrands from the fire—whether Israel, the Church, or the individual believer. Unfortunately, interpreters’ tendency to equate firebrands with kindling wood obscures God’s grace. Satan made exactly the same error in Zech 3:2. Lord, help us to distinguish passages speaking of firebrands that You plan to pluck from the fire from those speaking of kindling wood.

### **Forthcoming Arabic *Living Water***

In association with the Denver Rescue Mission and Absolutely Free, we are assisting in the preparation of a new Arabic translation of the *Living Water*. No, I do not speak Arabic. My reading skills in Arabic are rudimentary. However, Steve Walkup, Lon Gregg, Joseph Shehata, and I have worked together to critique a translation of all notes portions of the *Living Water*. The other team members all work for DRM. Steve, Lon, and I all majored (or minored) in Hebrew at seminary. Joseph is a native speaker of Arabic. Hebrew and Arabic are sister languages, so their grammar and lexicography are related.

Passages like John 6:47 (“Amen, amen, whoever believes in Me [Jesus Christ] has eternal life) constitute one of the biggest challenges. First, neither Hebrew nor Arabic have a verb that means “to have.” Second, neither language has a present tense; both have a past tense and a non-past tense (meaning either *now* or *future*, but not necessarily *now*). The Arabic rendering of “I have a wife” would be: “A wife [is] to me.” The problem with saying “Eternal life to

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<sup>2</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *God Remembers: A Study of the Book of Zechariah* (New York: ABMJ, 1965), 57f.

whoever believes” is that neither Muslims nor Copts [a Christian sect] think of eternal life as a gift that one can possess in this life. Either group would understand the statement as: “Eternal life [will be] to whoever believes, [if he/she does enough good works].”

The first Arabic draft of the notes rendered *has* as *will acquire*: “Whoever believes in Me *will acquire* eternal life.” This surfaces two problems: (1) acquire can convey purchasing or working for eternal life, rather than receiving a gift, (2) the Arabic verb is not limited to a present-tense idea, so it could convey a future concept.

In light of these difficulties, the Arabic notes sometimes say that believers *live forever*. At other times, they say that believers *receive eternal life*. It is unfortunate that the simple truth of John 6:47 is hard to convey in Hebrew or Arabic. Think of all the people through the centuries that have essentially filled in the blank with works, when they read the following: “Whoever believes in Me #@\*?# eternal life. May God use the *Living Water* to overcome garbled translations of His message of life.

We are working together with the Denver Rescue Mission on other languages. We are in preliminary stages for three others: Khmer (Cambodia: 16 million speakers), Telugu (southern India: 75 million speakers), and Kannada (southern India: 38 million speakers).

### **Travel**

We are safe and sound, despite the storm of the century hitting Denver and its environs. We are on high ground in the plains, a mile from the nearest creek. Thank you for your prayers.

Last Christmas, Diane’s father visited from Oregon, so we did not venture far from home on wintry roads.

Early in February we began a serious Thursday-evening home-Bible study in Denver’s western suburbs. By request, sessions are two hours. Each starts with a major review, but time in the word puts building blocks together quickly. The group has had good consistency through all of these months. We see much *growth in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 3:18).

In light of our interest in church planting, the Denver Rescue Mission sent me for three days of immersion into the ministry of City-Teams, a rescue mission based in San Jose, CA. In other words, I stayed within a residential facility and shared meals with those in a recovery program. While there I shared *Living Waters* with residents. Two of them became quite interested upon realizing that everlasting life is everlasting. Suddenly, they were giving away Gospels of John and telling others about eternal security. During my three days in San Jose, I met with staff members and went on field trips to learn about their church-planting efforts. It was a profitable experience.

Diane and I went to the GES conference in April by way of Omaha, NE, to drop off a long-promised load of *Living Waters* for Ken and Anna Maria Pierce on a visit with them. We stopped at West Mineral, KS, to see Big Brutus: the world's largest surviving electric stripping shovel. It is 160' tall, 11 million pounds, and has a ninety cubic-yard (heaped) bucket capacity. The Lorain power shovel (circled) may seem small, but even its bucket dwarfs that of my father's Case 580 backhoes (that I operated long ago).



Big Brutus



First Baptist Church, Honey Grove, TX

We planned a leisurely trip through the Ozarks, but it rained and tornado watches were posted. We pushed on to Ft. Smith, AR. The next day we stayed with Joe and Chris Jones in Diana, TX, and saw friends in Longview, TX, before seeing Buddy (a DTS classmate) and Shirley Greer. On April 20, I spoke on John's Gospel at two churches: First Baptist Church of Honey Grove, TX, pastored by Ken Yates; and at Berean Memorial Church, Irving, TX, pastored by Leon Adkins. It was an enjoyable Sunday and some believers asked a couple of very productive questions—ones still on my mind to this very day.



Fairfield, MT

The GES conference was superb. Renewing friendships is always a highlight. Both of my papers were on passages that cause difficulty for grace and non-grace interpreters alike. The plenary paper was: "Free at Last: John 8:30-32." Contrary to the prevailing view, John 8:31f does not make perseverance (abiding) requisite to having eternal life. Rather, features of John's

style show that Jesus addresses believers, urging them to become His abiding disciples. The first installment of an abbreviated form of that paper appears as: “Who Can Abide?” in *Grace in Focus* 5 (Sep–Oct 2013). A second installment will follow in the Nov–Dec issue. An audio of the message is at: [www.mol316.com/mp3s/Free%20at%20Last%20GES.mp3](http://www.mol316.com/mp3s/Free%20at%20Last%20GES.mp3)

My workshop was: “Where in the World Is the Old Man?” Paul is the only NT author to use the old-man/new-man terminology (in Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians). In Colossians 3 it is undeniable that old man refers to our old corporate position in Adam; while new man is our new corporate position in Christ. Interpreters of Ephesians 4:22-24 often explain it under the rubric of old-nature/new-nature. However, such a view ignores Ephesians 2, which uses the term to describe our new position in Christ. Romans 6 agrees. An audio is at: [www.mol316.com/mp3s/Where%20in%20the%20world%20is%20the%20old%20man.mp3](http://www.mol316.com/mp3s/Where%20in%20the%20world%20is%20the%20old%20man.mp3)

Seeing Zane Hodges’ Romans commentary in print was a highlight of the conference. Soon after Zane died, Bob Wilkin asked me to help him finish the commentary. Much time over five years was devoted to it, seeking to understand Zane’s approach to Romans. Completing a mentor’s work is far different than writing one’s own. It is Zane’s commentary (not mine nor Bob’s). We believe Zane would be pleased. Finally, people can see Romans from his vantage. It was a privilege to be part of it.

After the conference, we visited Mike and Letitia Lii and went to seminary libraries for an upcoming book. We also went to a library for another reason. Mike lives in walking distance from Southern Methodist University. In appreciation for those who endured traffic and dust during construction, the George W. Bush Museum and Library invited neighbors for a block party the evening it opened: April 25, 2013. We had the privilege of attending. After an uplifting patriotic program, the former president briefly addressed those gathered. Diane and I enjoyed it greatly.

During the conference, we gave away about 20,000 English *Living Waters*, 10,000 Spanish, and about 1,500 between French and Russian. We like to tell conferees, “Got life? . . . Got *Living Waters*?” At GES, we are always surrounded by believers who answer the first question affirmatively. Wonderfully, more and more get *Living Waters*, so they can give them away. We ourselves cannot give anyone eternal life, but can give Jesus’ message of life in John to others. Got it?



Vista Ridge Bible Fellowship



Corum, OK

On Sunday April 27, I spoke again at Vista Ridge Bible Fellowship (Lewisville, TX), pastored by Philippe Sterling (a classmate at DTS). Their building (a vault-equipped former savings and loan) is a natural for illustrating eternal security. After enjoying a meal with a group from the church, we headed north. We took a less-traveled route through Corum, OK, a town named after a shirt-tail relative of Diane's father.

After being home a month, we made our annual pilgrimage to the West. We returned to Fairfield, MT, for a question-and-answer session hosted by Clark and Ruxandra Fee that lasted until midnight. The next day we visited Phil and Lynne Taylen in Alberton, MT. One of their ministries is to send Gospels of John to those in the armed forces overseas. Then, on Ryan Korver's birthday in Spokane, WA, there was a bit of a college reunion. Everyone present gives away *Living Waters*, so there were many levels of comradery. We added a stock of Spanish to the two pallets of English in Ryan's garage.

Then we headed to Sequim, WA, for a busy weekend. Friday evening was a home Bible study hosted by Frank and Babbette Tyler. Fellowship through the years with Frank on John's Gospel has impacted both of our messages deeply. The next day (Pastor Glenn Douglas' home) was a six-hour mini Bible conference on passages that seemingly pose problems for grace. We had expected to see Bob Kenagy, but as a bonus, he brought Randall Johnson, who was visiting from Arizona. On Sunday, I spoke on John at the Crossing Church in Port Angeles, WA.



Living Water Home Group  
Sequim, WA

After church, we drove to Bremerton, WA, to visit my brother Joe and his wife Ann. We had a wonderful visit. One evening, their pastor, Grant Christiansen, came over. We have great discussions on Greek and on grace: much food for thought.

On May 22, I spoke at Manning (OR) Bible Church, which a friend, Gordon Shearer, pastored from 1977 until his death in February of this year. Gordon and I had Greek and Hebrew classes together from 1975–77. Gordon loved to tell people about the Lord and to give away Gospels of John. Diane and I stayed overnight with his wife, Lois.

The next day, we stopped for lunch and Bible discussion with everyone at Absolutely Free in Glide, OR. After an enjoyable stop, we drove to Silver Lake, OR, to visit Diane's ninety year-old father, Earl. Lots of relatives stopped by from elsewhere in Oregon on Memorial Day to



place flowers on family grave-sites at the town cemetery. So, we had a bit of a family reunion. The next day, we left for California and placed flowers on my parents' burial plot in Farmington, CA (near Stockton, my hometown).

The next day we drove to Huntington Beach, CA, to see our son, Joseph, and Missy. On May 30 I met for Bible study in San Clemente, CA, with a men's group from Coast Bible Church (San Juan Capistrano, CA), pastored by Neil Anderson.

At Ben David, a Messianic congregation meeting in Santa Ana, CA, I spoke on Romans 16 and the rapid numeric growth of believers within Rome's tenements Cf. [www.mol316.com/mp3s/Ben%20David%20Messianic%20Congregation.mp3](http://www.mol316.com/mp3s/Ben%20David%20Messianic%20Congregation.mp3)

On Sunday, June 2, I spoke on John 21 at Grace Chapel in Orange, CA. It was great to see everyone. Alas, after church, I began my long drive home alone. Diane had flown home a few days earlier for a commitment in Denver.

In my absence, Mike Thompson, Professor of Hebrew at Rocky Mountain Seminary, started my summer intermediate Greek course. No sooner had the term ended and the new fall semester began. My courses are the second portion of intermediate Greek and an evangelism class. Of course, the Gospel of John is the core for the course.

On June 18, we had a half-day session at the Denver Rescue Mission: "A Romans Refresher." That will result in an article about Romans 8. On June 23 I spoke on repentance at New Hope Church, Wahoo, NE, pastored by Joe Lombardi. Rich and Judy Sanne were able to drive up from Lincoln. It was a truly enjoyable weekend.

A couple of our articles will soon be published by GES.

Frank Tyler visited briefly from Washington state. Torrential downpours did change plans, but it was a wonderful reunion. One highlight was that we walked to one of two pizza parlors in our little town. The owner is a believer, quite interested in displaying *Living Waters*. In focusing on getting John into the hands of individuals and churches, we had overlooked local businesses. It was a good reminder.

### **Projects**

Elsewhere in this newsletter, we discussed the Arabic translation of the Living Water. We (MoL and the Denver Rescue Mission) are in preliminary stages for three other languages: Khmer (Cambodia: 16 million speakers), Telugu (southern India: 75 million speakers), and Kannada (southern India: 38 million speakers).

We are working on a new Majority-Text-based translation of John as part of a commentary on John. We have reached a major milestone in preparing to publish a revision of my dissertation on the synoptic problem, but further milestones remain. We continue to work on forthcoming articles and books.

We are also working with the Denver Rescue Mission to create a twelve-lesson Basics Course, based on the book of Matthew. It is a companion to the Gospel of John basics series. From John, students learn the message of life: that those believing our crucified and

resurrected Messiah's promise of everlasting life receive what He promises. Matthew prepares believers into seed-bearing disciples who can share that message of life.

### **Prayer**

Thanksgiving for our safety during the deluge, but pray for the many are suffering greatly.

Pray for our continued opportunities for ministry and for completion of projects.

Pray for the printing and distribution of Arabic *Living Waters* and for translations into many new languages, starting with Khmer, Telugu, and Kannada.

Thanksgiving for our older son, George, finding additional work.

Pray for our continued good health and safety and for the Lord to provide for Message of Life.

Pray that our nation will not infringe upon our God-given right to proclaim the politically-incorrect message of life free from governmental harassment (cf. 1 Timothy 2:2).

Pray for Israel's security and for Jesus' message of life to have an impact on Jewish people.