

## **The Natural Man's Struggle with Reformed Theology: Heaven vs. Now**

**Genesis 25:29-30**

By [Tom Elkin](#)

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A question came up about my statement about unconditional love, and the condition being our doing something. I do understand the process of salvation is not my doing: "It is He that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure," and so I'll be glad to talk more about that at some other time, but I'm just going to mention that right now. I still believe that all love has some conditions to it, and especially as we as humans look at it. Okay, but having said that, let's begin with a word of prayer.

*Father, we pray that You will give us an awareness of each other, of Your word, and of what it means to live in this world where You have placed us, where You lead us and direct us. Give us an understanding of the people about us and the call that You have for us, because we wish to be ready to give an account of our faith at any time. Use us to Your glory, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.*

Quickly — we talked about the sovereignty of God/sovereignty of man; and we live in a world in which the sovereignty of man is becoming more and more of a driving force, and it takes place all around us. Keep in mind that the natural man wants the greatest amount of pleasure for the least amount of pain, as he determines pleasure and as he determines what's painful. By the way, I happen to believe that that is also a drive of the Christian — only pleasure comes in doing God's will, and the avoidance of pain is in heaven. That's a little bit of a set-up for what we're going to talk about tonight.

Scripture, or an external objective authority standard by which we live (or sacred individual rights), we talked about last time. We live in a world in which people don't want anyone telling them what they have to do about anything. "It is my right." And as I mentioned last time, in the privacy of my home I ought to be able to do what I want to, how I want to, when I want to, and you should leave me alone. "It's my body; I'll do with it what I want." And "nobody has a corner on truth," so the natural man says today.

Well, we disagree with that. We disagree with that, but that leads us into what I perceive to be the major dichotomy in the social forces of the world today:

Heaven vs. Now. Do we live in the light of heaven, or do we live in the light of right now — all that I can get in the moment?

I want to read a passage of Scripture to you that illustrates the “now.” You’ll guess where it is as soon as I start reading it.

Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick! Let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" That is why he is also called Edom. Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I'm about to die!" Esau said. "What good is a birthright to me?" So Jacob said, "Swear to me first," so he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew." [I love this next little phrase here.] He ate and drank, got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

Now I have to do a little segue, side-way, right here, okay? By my judgment this is the first biblical account or written account of ADHD. I believe Esau was ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. He had to have it in the moment, he could not wait, and what his feelings were determined everything that he did, and it didn't matter whether it was right or wrong, there was no objective external standard, and “I'm going to die!” We know he's not going to die if he doesn't get that lentil soup. Give me a break, okay? But to him, he had to have it.

By the way, the second most prominent person in the Bible...I did a series one time on biblical personalities. You may disagree with me, so feel free, okay? But the second person who was profoundly ADHD in the Bible — the Apostle Peter. Who should have written the most of the New Testament? He only wrote two little books, and he mainly dictated those. Who was impulsive enough to chastise Christ on more than one occasion? Who was impulsive enough to pull out a sword and chop an ear off? Who jumped out of a boat twice — once to walk on the water and once to swim to shore? Who, when Christ had been crucified, resurrected, didn't know where he was, sitting around a room, gets up and says, 'I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to go fishing'? Peter. Who says, 'I don't want to be crucified,' so tradition says, 'the way Christ was. Do me upside down'? Now whether he was ADHD or not is immaterial. All I'm trying to say is people are people are people are people. And things aren't new and different in the world today in terms of core components of personality.

Now back to Esau. This is an illustration of a person living in the “now.” The birthright had to do with the future. But he said, 'I want my lentil stew now. I can't wait.' Is that not characteristic of the world in which we live today? Everything needs to be instant, everything needs to be quick. Quality is not the No. 1 concern; speed is the No. 1 concern. We'll come back to that.

Another passage, because we are talking right now about the concept of heaven, the resurrection, et cetera:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you which you received, and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I have preached to you; otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that He was buried; that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures; and that He appeared to Peter and then to the twelve, and after that He appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James and to all the apostles. And last of all, He appeared to me also, as one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15.)

We can skip on down about other statements being made, but the major point here —

...And those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost if...

[So-and-so...]

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

Which is a quick way of saying it is a core component of Christianity to believe in the resurrection of the dead and to believe in heaven. It's not debatable. Christianity includes heaven and the resurrection of the dead. Now I don't want to spend time on this because we have biblical scholars around here to do this kind of thing. I'm just the part-way guy.

What will heaven be like? Well, Plato had a way of describing what heaven will be like. I'll just pass this on to you. "One in which naked minds will intellectually contemplate the eternal unchanging ideas." Oh, I sure hope not! [*Laughs.*] I don't want naked minds running around contemplating and all that kind of mess, and I don't think he was accurate in his description. (By the way, I didn't read Plato and get that. I got that out of *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. I took the shortcut.)

The whole person in our theology is resurrected. We believe in a bodily resurrection. We also believe that in the resurrection [quoting from Matthew 22]:

"Jesus replied to the question put to Him, 'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage.'"

Now I know we can talk about that for a long time, but that's what He says. That's

what He says. And He says it also in Mark, same thing.

Now. We will see Christ as He is in heaven in the resurrection. I John 3:

“Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

Heaven. The resurrection. Jesus. The reality. The bodily resurrection. Eternity. All those factors stir in.

Revelation 21:

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning, or crying, or pain. For the old order of things has passed away.'"

Isn't that comforting? Especially when we have a funeral tomorrow scheduled at eleven for Frank. Funerals, by the way, are not for the dead. They're for the living. That's where we encourage one another and remind each other of what this reality of the resurrection and eternity and heaven is all about. There will be a bodily resurrection.

Now. Pause. I read strange little books every now and then. There's a guy who was at the University of Washington. He was a sociologist. And out there as a sociologist he wrote a book entitled *The Rise of Christianity*. His question was, humanly speaking...humanly speaking, how did this little old group of a dozen people turn the world upside down? How did that happen? He says several interesting things in it, by the way, one of which he says that in the early church the members were primarily females. He makes that observation on the fact that they have found clothes closet records, okay? From the early churches in Egypt in particular. And guess what? They had more female clothes than male. And I said to myself, "Does that prove anything?" [*Laughter.*] But that's what he says, okay? But that's not why I bring up Rodney Stark and *The Rise of Christianity*. His thesis is that one of the reasons Christianity took over the Roman Empire was because of the Christians' view of heaven. So when the plagues hit Rome in the centuries after the death of Christ and people were dying of the plague, all of those influential Romans and pagans with any assets whatsoever ...[gallopey-gallopey-gallopey]...and went off to the Reservoir or Lorman or somewhere like that and got out of town. They got out of the city. They got away from the plague. He says, "But the records indicate that the Christians didn't flee, but they stayed and took care of the sick, because they didn't fear death."

They had a hope that went beyond the plague. They had a hope of the

resurrection. They had a hope of life beyond now, and they had a confident hope of a bodily resurrection. So it didn't matter if they got...it mattered, we understand...but it didn't matter if they caught the plague and died. That could have been some of the thinking as to why they could walk into the arena and be eaten by the wild beasts. I'll read a quote here shortly about Paul, where he says he fought the wild beasts in Ephesus, okay? But there were a lot of things that went on in the first century of the Christian church, but one of the driving forces was the belief in Christian people that there was life beyond what we have right now. There was heaven. There was more than now.

Now, I don't know whether Stark was right or not. I simply reported to you. But I'll tell you this: it makes sense. It makes me say, "Hmmm. Yeah. That would motivate me, if I really believe that there's life after this." I tell this story all the time. I may tear up doing it. I do that every now and then, and I'm sorry if I do, okay? My father-in-law died at age 89. He came to our house in January and wanted a steak, so I did steak on the grill for him. He ate a filet. I mean he ate every bite of it, every drop of it. We took him to the doctor, who immediately put him in the hospital and he was determined to have a tumor so extensive in his throat that they couldn't get a tube down him. How he got that steak down, I don't know, but he did. But he was an elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. He was a trustee of the church. He was a godly man. And I can still remember him sitting in our den in the rocking chair in the sun with his fingers up like this, and saying, "I just wish the Lord would take me on home. I'm ready to go. I just wish I'd go on." His wife had died years before, and he was just sitting there doing like this. "I'm ready. Just hope the Lord will go on and call me home." That's the attitude historically of the Christian. The more we have that attitude, in my opinion, the more we are conforming to that image of Christ.

Now, that's heaven. That's our history. That's the way it has been. Christianity has always held tightly to a real heaven, a bodily resurrection, thus a life after death which will be perfection — free from sin and from the pain, the results of sin, et cetera. This has historically strengthened Christians and enabled them to boldly face life and death. That is what I hope is a part of my life as I move on through life.

I tell the joke (and I've told it before, and I'll tell it again)...Because my mama died of Alzheimer's, my brother and I have a deal. It makes riding motorcycles fast look better and better! [*Laughter.*] And I'll also tell you something else — my little adage that I've said before and I'm going to keep on saying because it fits here — nobody gets to heaven early, and nobody gets to hell late. If we believe in a sovereign God — no, we don't tempt God...we don't try...we don't jump off a building and watch Him catch us. (I'll say that again a time or two.) But my point is we believe in heaven. We believe in a sovereign God. We believe in a God who predestines. We believe in a God who elects, a God who chooses, a God who holds. Therefore death is not the bad thing that it could be.

Now having said that, the natural man...the natural man has been motivated greatly by this avoidance of pain. As a matter of fact, one theory is that the natural man accepted the supernatural because he had no other logical explanation for pain. He needed help to overcome pain. Thus most people accept the concept of God, especially if this God will help me avoid pain. Is it any wonder that fertility gods were so popular with ancient people? We wanted pleasure too! Now the ancients had a god for everything. As a matter of fact, have you observed anyone recently say something like, "You know, the economy is really bad, but knock on wood...I'm doing okay." [*Laughter.*][Now Homer Lee, you've never done that! Don't you laugh at that! Because you've never done that and I know it!] By the way, this isn't wood right here. I don't know what it is, but it's not wood. I've had folks sit in my office and reach over and knock on the Plexiglas table and say, "Knock on wood...I'm doing okay." What is that? That's a carry-over from trying to elicit the help of the god of the oak tree to help me do all right. Please don't do that, okay? In case you find yourself reaching, stop and don't knock on wood, okay? Y'all know what I'm saying, okay?

The natural man needed to have an explanation for pain, and he needed to have help to have pleasure, and so he was working on these two things and he wanted all the help that he could get. But a knowledge of world order has increased, and the natural man has become more antagonistic to the Christian God, to the concept of a sovereign God, or to the concept of a book containing the thoughts of God that are authoritative and not to be followed because they will inhibit my ability to be sovereign myself and to have power myself. So the natural man today...by the way, I don't think people are any worse today than they ever were. That's not the point. But Christians were a minority group, we had the pagan world, and as Christianity rose in importance we developed a Christian culture, and as that Christian culture goes down that pagan world is taking back over. It's just a cycle, and I'm not worried about it. I happen to believe God's still in charge and is going to be in charge. He's not losing His control. God has the power. But as we look at the world we see this Christian culture going down, then we see the natural man assuming prerogatives in the way things happen.

There are several little statements that seem to apply here. Logic or scientific method seems to be the rule for everything in today's world. If I have an explanation for what's happened, I don't need a god in terms of what happened. So once I can explain how the plague is transmitted by rats, I then understand it had nothing to do with God, it was just the disease in rats. Well, I don't believe that. I think God's in charge of everything. But that's what the natural man says. This freedom provided by this logic of science has caused a fairly major shift in human thinking, in my opinion. If I can explain everything in terms of cause/effect logically, then the probability of a God goes down. And if the probability of God goes down, then death is the end and it's just like turning out the light. It's over, so I don't need to worry about anything.

You see, the natural man doesn't fear death as much as he has in the past because he assumes a termination point. Now if there's no life after death, then all of existence or meaning is summed up in today and in the now. By the way, I was going to show you this and I forgot to. This is Newsweek magazine, 2002: "Heaven: Visions of Heaven — How visions of paradise inspire and inflame Christians, Muslims, and Jews." The concept of heaven has been a fairly important one. There's also an article in Time magazine — you can get it online if you want to see it. I've mentioned before "Ten Things That are Affecting Our Culture and the World Today," one of which, No. 5, they say — not me, they say — ("not I." My wife will correct my grammar.) Amortality is a term... *amortality* is what they're calling it, and this is a coined term. They're saying that in today's world people wish to live as if there is no death. People wish to have a life that is bigger than death itself. And they talk about all the different people who are radically... (quote) "Radical life-extending and life-enhancing technologies are being worked on at Cambridge University. Gerontologist Aubrey deGrey is toiling away at just such research in his laboratory." (Quote) "We are in serious striking distance of stopping aging," says deGrey, founder and chairman of the Methuselah Foundation..." [Laughter] "...which awards the

M-Prize to each successive research team that breaks the record for the lifespan of a mouse." [Get the mouse to live longer, then you break the record!] "It is..." [Excuse me. And over there this would be cursing, okay, so forgive me...] "It is bleeding obvious," he adds, "that it is possible to extend the human lifespan indefinitely." [Laughter.] That's why I'm saying that in today's world the now is important, and the natural man is doing away with God because we're going to be able to scientifically expand life, and I can live like Methuselah. By the way, at 250, I don't know that I want to live much longer. I probably don't want to live much longer, period! I've got 69 good ones. I'd just as soon go with that. But the natural man is fighting against this whole concept of death itself.

"The thinking maximizes the ability to experience pleasure in the moment and allows for almost any step to avoid pain in the moment." This sets us up for some interesting things. I have to say something here. This is another Elkinism, okay? The worst thing that one Christian can do to another human being is not murder. The worst thing that you can do to another human being is to insulate that human being from the consequences of their sin. To do so is to train them that their sin has no consequence. Now if that's true — you don't have to agree with me, but if I'm right about that...maybe it's not the worst, but it's a baddie, okay? Is that not what a hunk of our world today is geared up to do? To insulate from the consequences of our behavior? The consequences of our sin?

Forgive me, I'm going to say something plain and I'm sure somebody is not going to like this one, okay? I wish to have research to do away with every disease or problem that human beings have. I've got no problem with the research, for instance, to do away with AIDS. But AIDS is a consequence primarily — not exclusively, but a consequence of...what? It is a consequence of the pursuit of

pleasure and raw pleasure without any concept of true deep relationships.

Now it's not just AIDS. It's a whole bunch of other things that stir into this, but it's pleasure with no consequence. What is the root of abortion? I wish to have sexual pleasure and not have a consequence of disease, but also of a child. I was on the phone today with a young man whose girlfriend is pregnant. [No, they don't live in Jackson, okay, so don't try to figure out who it is. If it's somebody around here, no, that is not who I was talking with!] He was saying, "What do we do?" In today's world, I shouldn't have to deal with the consequence of my sin. I should be able to have the option of getting rid of the consequences of my sin. What that does, it means that I can live in the now and fully experience my pleasure and avoidance of pain — whatever it takes. That's the natural man. That's the world in which we live.

All these lead to what I call a mantra, because I've heard it more than once, okay? It leads to a mantra of the modern natural man that says, "Never put off until tomorrow what you can enjoy today." And that's sort of the way we live today. In psychology there's a term for this. It's called "the inability to delay gratification." I had a colleague when I was here at the medical center. His name was Ed Blanchard. He came here from Georgia. And while in Georgia he did research with adolescent criminals. And one of his little research projects was he would ask the adolescents in this particular facility where he was a staff psychologist...he said, "Would you rather have one candy bar now at 11:00 in the morning..." [he had a fixed time he did it so it was standardized for the study.] "Would you rather have one candy bar now, or would you rather I give you five candy bars at 5:00 this afternoon?" Now what do you guess they wanted? The theory was they want the one now because they'll try to figure a way to work you out of the other four later, see? It was called the inability to delay gratification. Now that's a primitive little study, but it was a very good study and it illustrated a point.

Is that not the same sin of deficit spending? Only that's on a national level. Let's all get five candy bars now and we'll pay for them a year from now. Is that not the same thing, an inability to delay gratification? Is that not the same sin of living together and not being married? Let's go and have all the pleasure of marriage without the responsibility. We'll work that out later. Is that not the same thing? Let's have all the freedoms of adulthood now without the responsibilities of adulthood in all areas.

There's going to be another reality show on TV. You've probably heard about it. It's going to be the rich and famous adolescents in New York depicting all of their wild crazy parties and what they go and do. Why are we putting that trash on TV? Do me one favor. I'm sorry, I'm an activist when it comes to this point, okay? Do me one favor. Watch the program one time, find out who's advertising it, and don't buy that stuff anymore. It's driven by the dollar, y'all. It's not driven by the quality of the program, it's driven by the dollar. Christian people, adults, watch

one time and make a list. And then you know what not to buy. That would change a few things.

This really is a conflict between heaven and now, what I'm talking about. Heaven is perfection, but will come only after death. Now is pleasure with no pain in the present. The resurrection is a hope for the Christian; now is all we really have, so the modern man says. Heaven gives a calm sense of purpose; the now gives a frantic sense of a chase for all I can get.

Have you ever watched one of those programs where you go into the store and they say, "You've got five minutes, and everything that you can carry out..." [it's usually not five minutes, by the way...something like ninety seconds] "...everything that you can pick up in ninety seconds you can have." And they show it, and, boy, they just go crazy going for the most expensive items that they can get, see, because that's the way you get the most. Get the small cameras. Load up with cameras and go sell them. But anyway, that's what they're trying to say.

Is this not a little bit of a parallel of Esau? Is this not a little bit of a parallel of Esau wanting his bowl of soup now? I've got to have it, I just can't stand not having it?

Stark would say Christians were not afraid of the plagues and they made a significant difference in the world to the point of God blessing them so that Christianity, for better or for worse — and I don't know which one it is — Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. I don't know if that was the only cause, humanly speaking. God did it, I know that...but humanly speaking, that was a major contributor to what happened.

"Do not be afraid of those who will kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Hmmm. Ah. Now. Conclusion. There's a flow here. Sovereign God? Or human beings are the highest form of animal development on the face of this planet? [Sovereign animals/sovereign God.] Scripture, God speaking to His people, or I have rights as this highest order animal? Living in the light of eternity, or living in the light of now?

More and more of what we endure, put up with, or experience on a day by day basis is a frantic chase of the now. Some of you — bless your heart — you drive those kids to fourteen different things all during the week. You have to get them everywhere because they have to participate in everything, and if they don't they'll be ostracized from their classmates, and if they're not there who knows what will happen to them, and beside that they won't be stimulated and won't make as good grades, and if they don't make as good a grade they can't get in the school where they want to go [and of course they want to go to med school]—

and they can't do all that stuff!

Where is our sense of God's calling? Where is our sense of God's purpose? And our sense of our being held in His right hand, the hand of strength and the hand of power, from which no man can pluck us?

Paul says it best — I Corinthians 15:

“Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized?”

[Skipping on down ...]

"And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I die every day. I mean that, brothers. Just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord, if I fought wild beasts at Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

We're Christians. We've got a sovereign God, and we've got His word. And we live in the light of eternity. I'm not worried about the culture. Culture-shmulture! I am worried that Christian people take seriously what God wants them to do. That's all I'm asking.

Let's pray.

*Father, I ask earnestly that if I have said anything not in accordance with Your will and Your way to eradicate it from memory. But Lord, if this is the way the world is, if we do function in this manner, give us courage and give us a zeal to live in the light of eternity. May we be Your people, and may we do so with an integrity and with a hope that goes beyond what the natural man can stir up. You have called Your people. You have enabled Your people. You have empowered Your people. You are the one who does in fact work within us both to will and to do of Your good pleasure. We thank You for that love, for that encouragement, for that strength. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

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