

Herald

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No 6

GREATER WORKS THAN JESUS

How are we to understand John 14:12 ?

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When last did you do greater works than Jesus?

Do you find it a shocking question? Well, it is based on a very explicit promise of our Lord:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father." [John 14:12, NASB]

This verse has been the source of much controversy. It has precipitated uncertainties and doubts in countless hearts. It has been used to support heresies and deceptions without number.

But it is written, nevertheless - black on white! There is no doubt whatsoever about its textual authenticity. And the NASB translation is above criticism.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS STAGGERING PROMISE

❑ How are we to understand these puzzling words? After all, when a saying of Jesus starts with "truly, truly" (Gr. *amen, amen*), we should jump to attention. These words invariably introduce some of the most solemn and profound statements of our Lord. They tell us that all the authority and affirmation

of the Son of God Himself is behind a particular announcement. A closer look at this promise is therefore quite revealing.

❑ It is given to him "who believes in Me". John uses his peculiar way (in Greek) to describe saving faith - *to believe into Christ*. This faith is therefore not something exclusive of which only a very few spiritual giants partake. It is the faith given to all in Christ. It is saving faith.

❑ The promise is given to *every individual Christian*. The singular is used throughout. It is therefore not a promise to the church corporately.

❑ The Greek word "greater" (*me gas*) denotes a difference of degree and not a difference of number (*polus*). It therefore means *greater*, rather than more.

❑ A burning question is what Jesus means by the word "works". Apart from this verse, the word occurs 26 times in the Gospel. In 8 cases man in general is the subject with the works referring to his actions, whether good or evil. In 18 cases, however, Jesus Himself is the subject with the works referring twice to the whole of His earthly work (4:34; 17:4), and 16 times to His miracles¹. When this information is applied to

our verse, the following can be stated:

- The "works" of Jesus' disciples referred to here, cannot be ordinary human deeds like the 8 cases above, because they are compared to Jesus' works and are clearly of the same nature.

- These "works" can clearly not be compared to the whole of His earthly work.

- But one alternative remains: these "works" of the disciples are compared to the miracles of Jesus! The immediate context confirms this. In the previous two verses Jesus refers to His works, clearly His miracles.

□ The condition for and key to the fulfilment of this staggering promise is *Jesus' departure to the Father*. This was of course the prerequisite for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33). The disciples would not do these "works" in their own strength, but through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit based on the finished work of Christ.

□ No thorough, responsible and honest exegesis can escape the conclusion that Jesus promises true believers that they, like Him, would perform, in the power of the Holy

Spirit, astounding miraculous things; in fact that these things would be even *greater* than the miracles that He performed during the time of His humiliation!

WHAT ABOUT THE FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISE?

□ Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the early church entered into experiences never known by believers before. Much is said about amazing miracles in the Book of Acts. It would therefore seem logical to see in all this the fulfilment of the promise in John 14:12. Many people hold this position. And without doubt they have a case worthy of respect, deserving closer attention. Should they be right, hardly any verse in Scripture can have more profound practical implications for the church of our day.

□ A careful and thoughtful study of the Word of God and church history does, however, reveal serious flaws in this belief. It crumbles under at least two undeniable realities.

- The promise is made to each and every believer, but at no time over twenty centuries (and that includes the first century) has the miraculous (in the sense of the above interpretation of the verse) been the

typical experience of Christians in general.

- In no way can it be said of any "miracles" happening since the day of Pentecost, that they have surpassed the miracles of our Lord in greatness.

□ Does this mean that we have here a promise of our Lord which has failed to materialise? Many are the disillusioned who have this suspicion lurking in their hearts. (It is indeed, for many other reasons as well, one of the pastoral tragedies of our day that numerous people have, due to false expectations, been disillusioned into spiritual paralysis.)

However, as will be shown below, this promise has been fulfilled millions of times since the day of Pentecost.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

□ The key which unlocks John 14:12 is to be found in the structure of John's gospel. It can be represented as follows:

PROLOGUE (1:1-18)

MAIN BODY (1:19-20:29)

Introduction (1:19-52)

John's message (2:1-20:18):

Behold, Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ! Believe in Him, and you will have eternal life!

Conclusion (20:19-29)

PURPOSE (20:30-31)

EPILOGUE (21:1-25)

JOHN'S PURPOSE IN WRITING (20:30-31)

□ These two verses are vitally important for understanding the method John uses to put his message across.

John makes it clear that he has carefully selected and described a number of (miraculous) signs in order that his readers "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God".

□ What must be grasped and appreciated, is that this Gospel is meticulously planned; that it is carefully structured like a poem. No student of this Gospel will deny that it is a wonderful work of art.

John structures the main body of his Gospel around seven signs or miracles of Jesus. These signs are strung together by some of the most profound discourses of our Lord (relating to and interpreting the signs), but the skeleton and message

of the main body is primarily to be found in the miracles, not in the discourses.

THE INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION OF THE MAIN BODY [1:19-52 & 20:19-29]

❑ In the *introduction* of the main body (1:19-52), Jesus the Christ takes over the baton from the herald, John the Baptist. In the last portion of this introduction (1:44-52) Jesus leads the sceptical Nathanael to faith and confession (v.50) by giving him a very personal *sign* (v.49). Jesus then makes an announcement concerning what is to follow: "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see *greater* things than that" (v.50). There can be no doubt that Jesus refers to the many miracles which would authenticate Him to be the Messiah (v.52). Nor can there be any doubt that John describes this incident to prepare his readers for his plan of action described above. And in the very next verse he starts implementing this plan.

❑ In the *conclusion* of the main body (20:19-29) the resurrected Jesus appears to His disciples. He then commissions them (v.21-23). So the baton of action is once again handed on. Then in the last portion of this conclusion (v.24-29), Jesus

leads the sceptical Thomas to faith and confession (v.28) by giving him a very personal 'sign' (v.27). This is proof of Jesus' last, final, ultimate sign: the resurrection (2:18-22). Jesus then makes an announcement concerning what is to follow (v.29). Thomas has come to faith by witnessing with his own eyes Jesus' final sign to unbelieving man. But what about future generations, after Christ's departure? How would they come to faith? Jesus' announcement is consolatory beyond words. Thomas, you believe, having seen. And this is no small thing, because it brings you eternal life. However, from now on, something even more remarkable, something *greater* will take place - people will believe, without having seen any signs!

❑ The correlation between Nathanael's and Thomas' respective encounters with the Lord is unmistakable. Both are told by others: "We have found Him" (1:45), "we have seen Him" (20:25). Both react sceptically (1:46; 20:25). Both receive a personal *sign* (1:47-48; 20:27). Both believe and call out a profound confession (1:49; 20:28). Both receive an announcement concerning what was to follow: *It is good that you believe, but much more remarkable things are to follow - greater things* (1:50-51; 20:29).

What is more, both encounters

are part and parcel of two of the most important transitions of all revelational history. In the first instance the Son of God is about to start His public ministry on earth. And things never known before would become the order of the day: the sovereign God would work in a completely new way. In the second instance, the disciples are about to start their ministry, having been sent as Jesus had been sent (20:21). And things never known before would become the order of the day: the sovereign God would work in a completely new way - sinners would believe without having seen!

THE DISTINCTIVE MIRACLE OF THE LAST DAYS

❑ The riddle of John 14:12 has clearly been solved. What are the *greater works* the disciples would do? *After the departure of Jesus, having become partakers of the Holy Spirit, they would lead people to true saving faith in Jesus Christ!*

❑ They would of course not do this in their own strength. Only the Holy Spirit can bring somebody to salvation. But He does so *through* the disciples. They are therefore, as co-workers, completely involved - so much so that it can indeed be said that *they* are doing it (cf. Acts 26:18).

❑ This promise was wonderfully fulfilled in the ministries of the apostles, so that Peter could write some thirty years later: "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy ..." (1Pet 1:8).

And for almost two thousand years now, millions have experienced this *distinctive miracle of the last days*. Not only have their blind eyes received sight to see "Him who is invisible" (Heb 11:27). They have also, as co-workers of the Lord of the harvest and equipped by His Spirit, taken part in the unspeakable privilege of *doing greater works than Jesus*.

A LAST PROBLEM

❑ One question still remains: *Can it honestly be said that leading someone to true faith in our day is a greater work than the miracles of Jesus?*

❑ It can be looked at from two points of view.

• *Firstly, consider what actually happens in the receiver of the miracle.* By and large, the contemporary Church has watered down the sinfulness of man (the doctrine of original sin) to such an

extent that conversion is looked upon as hardly more than the pulling up of one's religious socks. But the Bible clearly teaches that natural man is fallen. And this means (to refer only to one portion of Scripture, Eph 2:1-10) that he is spiritually dead (v.1); that he is under God's wrath (v.3); and that he is a slave of the world, Satan, and his own flesh or sinful nature (v.2-3). When such a person receives the gift of saving faith in Christ (v.8), he is made spiritually alive (v.5); he is raised up into a justified life (v.6); and he is made to sit in heavenly realms in a position of authority over the world, Satan and his flesh (v.6).

Is this change a small thing? No one who has any understanding of the radical depravity of natural man, and the staggering privileges of someone united to Christ through faith, can ever think so. In fact, people who personally know the reality of this great work, can never stop thinking about it in awe. And exploring the riches of their salvation, becomes a lifelong and passionate endeavour.

The greatness of this *greater work* is therefore not primarily to be sought in numbers. The miracle is that even *one* believes, without having seen. It is like a high jumper. The incredible thing is not that he clears seven feet 42 times, but that he clears seven feet at all.

• *Secondly, consider the consequences for the receiver of the miracle.* Jesus healed lepers, the blind, the lame, the dead. And we can just marvel at that. But all those people died again physically. And without God's saving grace, each one of them will spend eternity in hell. On the other hand, if the Spirit's effectual call works through my ministry but *once*, that person will spend all eternity in the glorious presence of God!

☐ Need more be said? A sinner coming to saving faith in Christ, is a greater thing than a Lazarus being raised from the grave.

Underlining this is not to belittle the glorious ministry of our Lord on earth (God forbid!). It is accentuating the majestic sublimity of the triune God's gracious work of recreation in a sinner's life. It is putting the emphasis where God's Word puts it. And it is celebrating the staggering Biblical revelation that He uses feeble and impotent men and women as co-workers to bring about His mighty works.

O, what a privilege to say with the Apostle Paul that our Lord has given us this mission: "I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who

are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:17-18).

MAJORING IN GOD'S MAJORS

☐ Let the reader test himself. Suppose you had to make a choice. Either, you could from now on have a healing ministry like Jesus and the ability to walk on water, to multiply food, and to raise the dead. Or, in the time left for you in this life, you could enjoy the privilege of leading *one* person to saving faith in Christ. *Which would you choose?*

☐ John 14:12 is a promise - a glorious promise. But it is *more*. It is also an implicit *command*. Let us therefore not grow slack in our obedience to this solemn, sublime, urgent and exciting calling. Until the King of kings returns, we can confidently conclude that all the harvest has not yet been brought in. *And until that happens, we must continue doing the greatest of all miracles!*



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