

# THINGS TOO WONDERFUL—WEEK 3

## THE NEXT LEVEL



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## *Things Too Wonderful, Week 3 — The Next Level*

Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment, which would take them to the next level. We also seek advancement, despite the things that can distract us from getting to the next level.

Our view of the whole true is limited in this life.

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Things Too Wonderful, Week 3 — The Next Level  
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1 John 13:34–35 (NKJV)

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

Why is this a new commandment? Jesus had already set a very high bar for how much we are to love.

*Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”*

*Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”* — Matthew 28:35–40

What’s new about this one? How can that go beyond loving *the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*? How can it be so different that it will cause people to recognize them as “*My disciples*”?

At the moment, the disciples might not be able to imagine an answer. But Jesus is about to go to the cross, taking love to a new level. This will challenge them to go beyond what is currently all their heart, soul, and mind can muster.

If they can do that, people will definitely recognize them as His disciples.

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Now comes the hammer. Up to this point, the kingdom perspective sounds like it’s just a matter of getting into the right mindset. No big effort. No pain. No sacrifice.

No such luck. The kingdom attitude can include big sacrifice, even ultimate sacrifice. Remember, it’s all about not being distracted. What are the most distracting things in the world?

Danger (or its emotion, fear) and pain. Our natural response to them is essential. It’s hardwired into us by our creator to get our attention. We need it to survive.

We are not called to ignore these danger signals; we’re called to not be distracted by them. Don’t lose focus. This is standard training to prepare anyone for conflict. The Marines use it. Karate classes use it.

The whole New Testament is the story of the distractions facing kingdom citizens and how they either kept their focus or lost it. Jesus kept His focus every time, often surprising His followers. He did it on the way to the cross, and He did it on the cross. The apostles almost kept their focus perfectly too.

Peter denying Christ three times is the classic exception. He was under tremendous pressure.

And He forgot.

2 Numbers 21:8–9

*Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.*

Despite its original holy purpose, this bronze serpent is destined to cause problems.

*And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.*

*He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan. — 2 Kings 18:3–4*

What’s wrong with what the Israelites burning incense to the bronze serpent?

It’s wrong because it’s idolatry, and God specifically commanded us to not make idols.

But isn’t this particular idol an exception since God specifically told Moses to make it? If not, why not?

It became a problem because it became a distraction. This gets to the heart of the psychology of idols—and to the heart of this series on “Things Too Wonderful.”

The point of this series is not the distractions but the things we’re to not be distracted from—those *things too wonderful for me* as Job said. Those are the heavenly things that cannot be described, things that can only be partially described using rhetorical devices like parables, things that stretch our imagination.

Using imagination to try to comprehend things too wonderful for us is okay because we know they’re imagined and not reality. This keeps it at the right level of certainty—zero. Properly applied, using imagination is safe, but that safety comes from not forgetting that it’s just imagination.

Idols, on the other hand, are concrete—no imagination required. They are, at best, inaccurate depictions of things too wonderful for us. This fact is easily missed because we don’t have to strain to understand them. They bring too much certainty to our conception.

That’s a type of distraction.

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So, this lesson has two takeaways. First, one of the dangers of idols is that they can distract us from the full truth by giving us a concrete representation of things which cannot be represented concretely. Never trust an idol.

Second, never trust your imagination either. Imagination is good, even necessary, but don’t think too highly of it. Always remember that you’re trying to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Worship the incomprehensible as incomprehensible. Anything else isn’t really worship.

3 Luke 2:8–9 (NKJV)

*Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.*

Imagine something so beautiful that you can't stand to look at it.

Can't? Neither can I. Imagining the incomprehensible is supposed to be hard. So, why are the shepherds *greatly afraid*? Is it that the angels are huge? Or bright? Or incomprehensible? Or what?

Turns out that encounters with angels are generally terrifying. Here are some snippets from Matthew 28:2b–4, Luke 1:11–12 and 29–30 (all NKJV translation).

*An angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.*

*Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.*

*But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."*

These are all friendly encounters; yet they're terrified. How can that make sense? The incident where Jesus calmed the storm provides a clue. A passage from Isaiah fills in the rest.

*And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"* — Mark 4:41 (NKJV)

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. ... So I said:*

*"Woe is me, for I am undone!  
Because I am a man of unclean lips,  
And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;  
For my eyes have seen the King,  
The LORD of hosts." — Isaiah 6:1,5 (NKJV)*

An encounter with holiness is terrifying because our *unclean lips* (our sin) makes us allergic to holiness.

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This is not only hard to comprehend; it's **why** holy things are hard to comprehend. It's like how an allergy to a particular food prevents you from learning much about what it tastes like.

We won't learn much about holy things until we're fully sanctified in death.

4 Revelation 21:18-21 (NKJV)

*The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprased, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.*

Of all the things that are hard to comprehend, those things outside of our world—heaven and hell—are the most difficult. Scripture includes many images of heaven but, like the quote above, they are partial and analogical. Another passage in Revelation describes the fallen angels getting kicked out of heaven.

*And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. ... And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. — Revelation 12:3–4a, 7–9 (NKJV)*

We learn from another reference that heaven is paradise, and that its language is on a level we're not even allowed to understand. (Note: "the third heaven" refers to the modern concept of heaven—as opposed to the sky or to space. Greek doesn't have separate words for them; "ou-ra-nos" covers them all.)

*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. — 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 (NKJV)*

"Not lawful" implies that there are rules against knowing (or practicing) some aspects of heaven. Wow.

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So, as wonderful as heaven is, our foretaste of it is strictly regulated. You'd think God would want us to know a lot about heaven so that we'd be more motivated to get there.

But no. He leaves the door wide open for people to disbelieve—or even to be cynical. To wit:

*There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of "Heaven" ridiculous by saying they do not want "to spend eternity playing harps." The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grown-ups, they should not talk about them. All the scriptural imagery (harps, crowns, gold, etc.) is, of course, merely a symbolical attempt to express the inexpressible. ... People who take the symbols literally might as well think that when Jesus told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs. — CS Lewis*

5 2 Peter 2:4 (NKJV)

*For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment;*

Scripture gives us even fewer illustrations of hell than of heaven. I take that as an indication that we aren't know as much about hell. Suffice it to know that it's bad.

Consequently, popular illustrations of hell are all over the map. They're entertaining, but not to be taken literally. No attempt at accuracy seems to be made. Their hell is not the hell of scripture.

From Dante and Chaucer to *The Far Side* and *The Onion*, brilliant and often hilarious illustrations of hell are used to teach or to mock some human foibles. CS Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* is one of the treasures in this genre. Lewis prefaces it with two apt quotes.

"The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn." — Luther

The devil ... the prowde spirite ... cannot endure to be mocked." — Thomas More

*The Screwtape Letters* brilliantly skewers sinful behaviors. It's mockery of the devil (or devils) is clearly tongue-in-cheek, lest anyone take it literally.

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Hell is often depicted as being run by Satan and his minions. Nothing could be further from the truth. In hell Satan won't be a torturer; he'll be a torturee.

*Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison.* — Revelation 20:7

Conversely, popular depictions of Satan's actions in this world are reasonably faithful to scripture—particularly with respect to the books of Genesis and Job. They err in depicting hell as his current base of operations, but otherwise they usually get it right (or at least right enough to be useful).

By "useful" I mean that their depiction of the forces of evil inspires fear and awe. While Satan and his minions are often mocked (and deserve to be) that mockery must not lead to the kind of disrespect that causes us to let down our guard. We often mock enemies who are still plenty dangerous.

Never forget that fallen angels have angelic powers. They are vastly smarter and more experienced than we are. They know many things that we don't know. (For example, they knew instantly who Jesus is.)

It's a grave mistake to depend on your own wits in a battle with supernatural evil. Prayer is essential.

A great part of fighting evil effectively is simply being aware of spiritual warfare. This gets back to the distraction theme in this series. As long as we're conscious of spiritual warfare, we're at least in the fight.

But if we're distracted, and start focusing on worldly perspectives and priorities, we're in trouble.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What's the greatest spiritual fear you've had?
2. Do we have more idols than we realize?
3. What is holiness?
4. Do you think about heaven?
5. Is there a good description of demons?

*Items for prayer:*