

Definition of Misthology

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Misthology is a coined term which I (Marty Cauley) have been using for years to refer to matters pertaining to biblical rewards. The word *misthology* itself is derived from the Greek word *misthos* (reward) and *logos* (teaching). In terms of a simple definition, *misthology* refers to the *doctrine of rewards*. Something may be described as *misthological* if it is a matter dealing with rewards. For example, a misthological inheritance would be an inheritance that is considered a reward (rather than a gift), as is the case in Col 3:24. Just as *geologist* refers to a scientist who is a specialist in the study of geology, so *misthologist* refers to someone who has reached a certain level of biblical competency in his or her study of rewards. This does not necessarily mean that misthologists will be in complete agreement on every area their field of study. But then again, one would not expect every geologist to necessarily concur with the continental drift theory espoused by their fellow geologists either.

Even so, an expertise in the doctrine of rewards should allow one to advance beyond the basics (such as acknowledging that crowns are rewards) to a more mature understanding of the biblical perspective that shows a unified perspective on certain misthological matters. I have interacted with fellow misthologists and would-be misthologists in my forthcoming book—*Outer Darkness*. For reasons explained more fully therein, acknowledging that the outer darkness, as described in the Gospel of Matthew, is a misthological issue is necessary to be regarded as a misthologist in the truest form of the word. To be sure, there are *Free Grace* (FG) soteriologists who misperceive the outer darkness as being a soteriological issue (i.e., an issue dealing with salvation from eternal damnation in the lake of fire). But this sad state of affairs only goes to show that not all soteriologists make good misthologists. On the other hand, a misthologist may be reasonably expected to be a good soteriologist. The key to being a good soteriologist is to simply recognize the unconditional security of a believer. A misthologist cannot stop there, however. He is ever sensitive to the fact that many texts are concerned with the conditional security of a believer. After all, the study of rewards is the study of a believer's conditional security pertaining to those benefits regarded as rewards. Naturally, a misthologist must limit this conditional security to the matter of rewards. Consequently, by default the misthologist has accepted the believer's unconditional security in the realm of soteriology. So naturally, the misthologist is a good soteriologist regarding this soteriological key.

In affirming unconditional soteriological security, the misthologist makes a much stronger affirmation of eternal security than those who merely advocate *once saved always saved* (OSAS). There are many conditional securitists who affirm OSAS. A misthologist, in stark contrast, relegates the believer's conditional security exclusively to the misthological sphere. In this regard, a misthologist might be described as someone who believes in an industrial strength OSAS that is not watered down with conditional security. To be sure, there are many FG soteriologists who would likewise be able to hold to an equally strong view of unconditional security, who would not be considered good misthologists because their sound soteriological perspective is not balanced with an equally mature misthological understanding. Specifically, misthologists agree that the outer darkness is a misthological matter, not a soteriological concern. FG soteriologists who do not recognize that the outer darkness is dealing with rewards are not to be regarded as misthologists since they have failed to follow rudimentary misthological themes to their logical conclusion in considering the outer darkness as a picture of misthological truth.

The fundamental axiom of misthology is simple: rewards are earned, gifts are not. This axiomatic truth is strongly affirmed by the *Free Grace* (FG) camp, as exemplified by *Grace Evangelical Society* (GES). As misthologists study the dynamics between rewards and gifts, it becomes increasingly clear that the eternal security of the believer must be affirmed since the gift of eternal life is not a reward at the soteric level (dealing with salvation from eternal damnation in hell). The basic *possession* of eternal life is a free gift (in both its *reception* and *retention*). Eternal life, at this level, is freely bestowed on the believer at the moment he believes in Christ alone for eternal life. So-called Lordship Salvationists are nothing more than conditional soteriological securitists who make the basic possession of eternal life (in either its soteric reception or retention) contingent on one's performance. Contrastively, a misthologist is someone who acknowledges the believer's unconditional security in the soteriological sphere and who limits conditional security to the misthological orb. Submission to the Lordship of Christ in the area of one's performance (in terms of theological necessity) is explicitly limited by misthologists to the misthological realm. Misthology is,

therefore, the study of the believer's security which (1) affirms his unconditional security soteriologically but (2) emphasizes his conditional security misthologically.

Lest there be a misperception as to what constitutes being a believer, let a *believer* be defined simply as *someone who has believed in Christ alone for the free gift of eternal life*. By choice of verb tense, this definition purposefully rules out the need for perseverance in faith in order to be regarded as a believer. Perseverance in faith is a misthological issue, not a soteriological necessity. Additionally, this definition as to what constitutes being a believer implicitly affirms the necessity of assurance. Since one cannot believe in Christ for eternal life and yet not believe that one has eternal life as a result, assurance of one's own eternal security at the moment of saving faith is a given necessity. At the moment of coming to saving faith, a person must come into the realization that he has received a quality and quantity of life that assures him that he will live with God forever. Better soteriologists acknowledge this fact, and we do not hesitate to institute this perspective as fundamental as to what it means to be misthological in one's orientation.

While many excellent soteriologists will further demand that this degree of assurance be absolute to constitute saving faith, the misthologist may insist instead that degrees of faith are misthological issues rather than soteriological concerns. A misthologist, then, is someone who has studied rewards with enough consistency to come to the conclusion that assurance of one's eternal security is a given within the soteriological realm, but a misthologist may not necessarily agree with his soteriological counterparts that a perfect assurance necessarily falls within the soteric realm and may prefer instead to relegate that degree of assurance to the misthological sphere to be evaluated at the Judgment Seat of Christ for potential reward.

Granted, the Bible teaches both temporal and eschatological rewards. But just as the focus of the NT shifts to eschatological rewards, so misthology is more concerned with teleological than temporal rewards. Most misthologists would affirm that rewards are eternal. Granted, there are some kingdom exclusionists who believe otherwise. More popularly known as millennial exclusionists, some within their ranks would argue that the biblical discussion of rewards is limited to the millennium. Naturally, their approach practically requires a premillennial approach to eschatology since they believe that at the beginning of the millennium some believers are excluded from the millennial kingdom, but at the end of the millennial kingdom these believers are then allowed into the eternal kingdom. Quite possibly, the greatest weakness of this millennial-exclusion approach is in trying to limit the biblical presentation of rewards to the millennial kingdom. To the credit of some millennial exclusionists, they acknowledge that rewards are eternal and try to find ways to maneuver around the obvious difficulty this admission poses to their misthology. We will consider it the mark of a good misthologist to acknowledge that rewards are eternal. Accordingly, a recompense is not considered an eschatological reward merely because it is in the future or given at the end of the age but because that reward is eternal. Along these lines, the definition of misthology may further be refined as the study of biblical rewards which focuses primarily on **eternal** rewards.

Since rewards are eternal, a sharp distinction between millennial and eternal rewards is unlikely. We would expect, rather, that rewards dispensed in the millennial age will carry over into the eternal state. As a result, a sharp distinction between the millennial and eternal nature of these future rewards would be the exception rather than the rule in misthology. Therefore, even though a premillennial approach is frequently preferred by misthologists in general and perhaps necessary for certain misthologists in particular, it would be possible, theoretically at least, for those outside the premillennial camp to concur with the most distinctive findings of premillennial misthologists in that even an amillennialist could hypothetically affirm unconditional security soteriologically and regard the outer darkness to be a misthological matter. Consequently, a premillennial eschatology will not necessarily be considered decisive in determining if someone qualifies as a misthologist.

In summary, misthology is a systematic study of the biblical doctrine of rewards with a focus on the eschatological dimension of those rewards as being eternal. Since these benefits are rewards, they are conditional and forfeitable. Since the free gift of eternal life is not a reward, misthology affirms the unconditional security of the believer regarding regeneration. Therefore, at the soteriological level, misthology affirms the unconditional security of the believer. Misthology itself, however, is the study of a believer's conditional security. By the very nature of the case, this misthological insecurity must logically be limited to the topic of rewards.

For further discussion, see the *GES Chat* at <http://www.faithalone.org/chat.html>.

For further explanation, see my upcoming book *The Outer Darkness*.

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Conditional soteriological securitists do not make for consistent misthologists and are thereby excluded from being regarded as misthologists because of the axiomatic failure of exclusively conditional securitists in subscribing to what it means to be a misthologist. By the same token, securitists who fail to note the misthological nature of the outer darkness are disqualified from being regarded as misthologists because they have failed deduce the axiomatic implications regarding this vivid misthological doctrine. Nevertheless, one's eschatology is not necessarily considered decisive in and of itself in determining whether or not one qualifies as a misthologist. Thus, in a nutshell, misthology is the study of believers' eternal rewards which affirms that the outer darkness is one such reward (albeit a negative one) and which thereby concludes that the outer darkness cannot be associated with suffering eternal damnation since believers are unconditional secure from the lake of fire. To put it as succinctly as possible, **misthology is the study of eternal rewards which affirms the believer's unconditional security from eternal damnation but which at the same time emphatically asserts the believer's conditional security from the outer darkness.**

It might be mistakenly thought that this truth concerning the outer darkness is the apex of misthology. It is not. Acknowledging that the outer darkness is a misthological theme is but an intermediate stage in the study of rewards. One must simply be able to trace and interlace the misthological strands in the Bible to only an intermediate level to reach a misthological perception of the outer darkness that entitles one to be considered a misthologist. But beyond this initiatory level into the ranks of misthology, one encounters various misthological specialists such as *Gehenna Misthologists* who have moved beyond recognizing that the outer darkness is dealing with rewards to conclude that unfaithful believers are thrown into Gehenna during the millennium. In fact, some Gehenna Misthologists believe the outer darkness is Gehenna.

Other misthologists, such as myself, do not share this speculation concerning Gehenna and believe the outer darkness is spatially located within the kingdom. Regardless, it is not necessary to be a Gehenna Misthologist in order to be a *Bridal Misthologist* (a misthological specialist who believes that those believers thrown into the outer darkness will not compose the Bride of Christ). Those misthologists adopting this point of view may point out to their friends in the Gehenna camp that since rewards are eternal from the majority perspective of misthologists, even if Gehenna has misthological possibilities, Gehenna misthology is but a unnecessary and passing phase to acknowledging the ultimate lasting reality—Bridal Misthology. Therefore, those misthologists who are able to leave the hermeneutical base camp of the outer darkness and scale to more lofty heights might think that they have reached the summit when they reach the plateau of Bridal Misthology. I would urge my fellow Bridal Misthologist to traverse that terrain as I have done in the *Outer Darkness* and find the pinnacle of misthology in *Misthopology*.