

July 2017

Frank W. Nelte

THE MEANING OF JOHN 10:17-18

In John 10:18 Jesus Christ said: "I have **power to lay My life down**, and I have **power to take it again**".

What did Jesus Christ actually mean? Once He had died on the stake, how could He possibly have had "the power" to get His life back? **The dead don't actually have any power, do they?** Being dead and having power are contradictory states. Anyone who still has any kind of power cannot possibly be dead.

Therefore how could Christ have had any power while He was dead?

Here is the full text of verses 17-18 in the KJV, with significant Greek words in the text included.

Therefore does my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might **take** (Greek "**lambano**") it again. No man **takes** (Greek "**airo**") it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have **power** (Greek "**exousia**") to lay it down, and I have **power** (Greek "**exousia**") **to take** (Greek "**lambano**") it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. (John 10:17-18)

Verse 17 starts with the word "therefore". This tells us that these two verses are tied to the preceding verses. So we should view these verses in context.

THE CONTEXT

In verse 14 Jesus Christ said "I am the good Shepherd". In verse 15 He said that God the Father knows Him, and that He knows God the Father, implying a very, very close relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. Then Jesus Christ said: "**I lay down My life for the sheep**".

This statement about laying down His life represents the subject under discussion in verses 17-18.

Verse 16 addresses additional information that refers to people in the second resurrection ultimately being joined into "one flock" (the sheep analogy) with the rest of God's Family. Verse 16 adds information to verse 14. But verse 16 doesn't change the subject away from verse 15, away from Christ laying down His life.

The thought presented in verse 15 is continued in verses 17-18.

In our English text we have the verb "take" three times in verses 17-18. But those three instances are not all correct translations. There are in fact two different Greek verbs in these two verses, as I have already indicated above, and these two Greek verbs have different meanings.

So in these verses we are dealing with one more mistranslation into English. Let's take a closer look at exactly what Jesus Christ actually said in these two verses. Let's examine them phrase by phrase.

1) "I lay down my life, that I might **take** (Greek "**lambano**") it again" (verse 17).

The Greek word here translated as "I might take" is "labo", a form of "lambano". The meaning of

"lambano" is **"to receive"**, as well as **"to take"**. The difference between our English words "taking" and "receiving" is that in "receiving" somebody else is the active agent who gives to us what we are receiving, while in "taking" the focus is on our ability to take, whether or not someone else is willing to give. This distinction between "taking" and "receiving" does not exist in the Greek verb "lambano" because this Greek verb covers both of these meanings.

So here is the correct thought Jesus Christ was conveying with this statement:

My Father loves Me because I lay down My life, so that **I might receive it again** (from My Father).

This is also a correct translation of the Greek text. And this is exactly what Jesus Christ was saying. He was willing to lay down His life, and He had absolute faith that God the Father would give His life back to Him, and He, Jesus Christ, would be the receiver of that benefit from God the Father.

Jesus Christ was not saying that He would "take it" again; He was saying that He would "receive it" again from the Father. In other words, the power to have His life restored lay completely with God the Father, and not at all in any way with Jesus Christ Himself while He was dead.

Let's continue.

2) "No man **takes** (Greek **"airo"**) it from me, but I lay it down of myself" (verse 18).

The Greek word here translated as "takes" is "airei", a form of "airo". Now "airo" is a completely different word from "lambano". "Airo" means: to take up, to lift, to carry, to take away. This word is mostly used with its literal meaning. And "airo" doesn't mean "to receive".

So we should note that the writer, **the Apostle John, made a very clear distinction between** using the word **"lambano"** for what Christ said about Himself, **and** using the word **"airo"** for something that other people were simply not able to do to Jesus Christ: no human being was able "to take" Jesus Christ's life from Him.

This contrast should make clear that **in this particular context** John used the word **"airo"** to mean **"to take"** and the word **"lambano"** to mean **"to receive"**. By using two different Greek verbs John was presenting a contrast between the activities represented by those two verbs.

Let's continue.

3) "I have **power** (Greek **"exousia"**) to lay it down, and I have **power** (Greek **"exousia"**) **to take** (Greek **"lambano"**) it again" (verse 18).

Here we'll note two different Greek words. First, the Greek word translated as "to take" is "labein", a form of "lambano". This is the verb we have already seen and discussed. Next, the Greek word translated as "power" is "exousian", a form of the noun "exousia".

The noun "exousia" means: power, authority, right, etc.

The correct meaning of Jesus Christ's statement here is:

"I have the authority to lay down My own life, and I have the right to receive My life again!"

Jesus Christ committed Himself, of His own free will, to lay down His life to pay for our sins. And then Jesus Christ had **the right** to receive His life again from God the Father, because that was the

agreement God the Father and Jesus Christ had made, that **if** Jesus Christ fulfilled His part of the agreement, **then** God the Father was committed to resurrecting Jesus Christ, giving Jesus Christ "the right" to receive His life again.

So note this distinction:

For us human beings eternal life is "a gift" from God (Romans 6:23). When we stay faithful to the calling God has set before us, and strive to live a godly life, then God resurrects us to immortal life as a free gift. In other words, no matter how faithfully we live before God, for us immortal life is never "a right"; for us it is always still "a gift".

But for Jesus Christ being resurrected by God the Father was not a gift! Getting back His immortal life, after He had lived a perfect life and then died for our sins, was for Jesus Christ "a right"! Christ was entitled to receive immortal life again, because He had fulfilled His part of the agreement that He and God the Father had made. Jesus Christ had "the right" to receive His life again.

That is what Jesus Christ was saying in John 10:18.

And Jesus Christ was assuredly not saying that He Himself somehow had the power to resurrect Himself. He couldn't possibly do that. Only God the Father could possibly resurrect Jesus Christ from the dead. This is further amplified in the following statement.

4) "This commandment have I received of My Father" (verse 18).

There are no Greek words we need to examine in this expression. This expression simply makes the point: I have the right to receive My life again because that is what My Father has committed Himself to doing ... giving Me back My life after I have fulfilled my responsibilities as Savior of mankind.

So in conclusion: In these verses Jesus Christ was not implying any kind of power or authority for the period of time that He was dead! He was simply stating He would receive His life back from God the Father. Specifically, it was not going to be the Roman power or even the Pharisees that would take Jesus Christ's life away. No, it was Jesus Christ Himself who was unconditionally committed to laying down His life for our sins. And the Romans were nothing more than the agents in that process.

Furthermore, the statement "this commandment have I received of My Father" is a clear submission to God the Father by Jesus Christ, acknowledging that the restoration of life to Jesus Christ would depend completely on God the Father. At no point did Jesus Christ so much as imply or hint that He might have the power to resurrect Himself.

So be aware of this if anyone attempts to attach some totally unjustified significance to these verses. Recognize the mistranslations into English that are found in these two verses.

Frank W Nelte