

# The Good News

July-August 2014

A MAGAZINE OF UNDERSTANDING

## 100 Years After World War I WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

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## The War to End All Wars



**J**ohn McCrae was a 42-year-old Canadian medical officer when he fought in the second battle of Ypres, in Belgium's Flanders region, in 1915 during World War I.

Twelve days into the battle, the day after performing the burial service of a friend killed by a German artillery shell, he penned what is considered the most famous poem written in that war—"In Flanders Fields." It begins:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow | between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky | the larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago | we lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie | in Flanders fields. . .*

Hugely popular during the war, the poem is often still used in Canada during annual Remembrance Day ceremonies to honor those who died in the war. The Nov. 11 commemoration is sometimes called "Poppy Day," with brilliant red poppies serving as a

### German philosopher Friedrich Hegel perhaps said it best when he noted that "the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history."

poignant reminder of both the poem and the blood that was shed by so many young men in that conflict.

Today the fields around Ypres are much more peaceful, with more than 100 cemeteries providing a resting place for many of the thousands of British, British Commonwealth, French, German, American and Belgian soldiers who perished there.

Rows and rows of white crosses stand out against the neatly manicured grass. Thousands carry the sad epitaph, "A soldier of the Great War, known unto God"—marking the graves of unidentified dead who never returned home. During the war more than 1.7 million men were killed or wounded in the area of Ypres alone.

The horror and carnage of that conflict led to it being called "the war to end all wars," reflecting the hope that nations would come to their senses and put an end to war before war put an end to them. But it was not to be. After some 37 million military and civilian casualties suffered on both sides, many of the same nations lined up for a second worldwide conflict a generation later, this time killing an estimated 60 to 85 million and maiming millions more.

As the world commemorates the outbreak of World War I this August, what have we learned?

German philosopher Friedrich Hegel perhaps said it best when he noted that "the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history." Sadly, he was right. In spite of centuries of trying to overcome and unlearn the scourge of war, we have failed miserably. Currently the world is plagued by no fewer than 11 wars (defined as conflicts in which more than 1,000 people are killed annually) on three continents.

In spite of the curses we've brought on ourselves, there is hope for humanity. The Bible calls it the "gospel," or *good news*. It's the source for the name of this magazine. What it promises won't come about by human effort, but by a divine intervention to save us from ourselves.

"The War to End All Wars" didn't, but the time isn't far off when the Prince of Peace truly will bring peace to our troubled world. That's why He urges us to daily pray, "Your Kingdom come!"

—Scott Ashley, Managing editor

# The Good News

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#### NORTH, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

**United States:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027  
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [www.GNmagazine.org](http://www.GNmagazine.org) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)  
**Canada:** United Church of God—Canada, Box 144, Station D, Etobicoke, ON M9A 4X1, Canada  
Phone: (905) 614-1234, (800) 338-7779 Fax: (905) 614-1749 Website: [www.ucg.ca](http://www.ucg.ca)  
**Caribbean islands:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027  
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [www.GNmagazine.org](http://www.GNmagazine.org) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)  
**Spanish-speaking areas:** Iglesia de Dios Unida, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A.  
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: [www.ucg.org/espanol](http://www.ucg.org/espanol) E-mail: [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org)

#### EUROPE

**Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg):** P.O. Box 93, 2800 AB Gouda, Netherlands  
**British Isles:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 705, Watford, Herts, WD19 6FZ, England  
Phone: 020-8386-8467 Fax: 020-8386-1999 Website: [www.goodnews.org.uk](http://www.goodnews.org.uk)  
**Eastern Europe and Baltic states:** Head Sõnumid, Pk. 62, 50002 Tartu Postkontor, Estonia  
**France:** Église de Dieu Unie—France, 127 rue Amelot, 75011 Paris, France  
**Germany:** Vereinte Kirche Gottes/Gute Nachrichten, Postfach 30 15 09, D-53195 Bonn, Germany  
Phone: 0228-9454636 Fax: 0228-9454637  
**Italy:** La Buona Notizia, Chiesa di Dio Unita, Casella Postale 187, 24121 Bergamo Centro, Italy  
Phone and Fax: (+39) 035 4523573 Website: [www.labuonanotizia.org](http://www.labuonanotizia.org) E-mail: [info@labuonanotizia.org](mailto:info@labuonanotizia.org)  
**Scandinavia:** Guds Enade Kyrka, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027 E-mail: [norden@ucg.org](mailto:norden@ucg.org)

#### AFRICA

**Cameroon:** United Church of God Cameroon, BP 10322 Bessengue, Douala, Cameroon  
**East Africa, Madagascar and Mauritius:** United Church of God—East Africa  
P.O. Box 75261, Nairobi 00200, Kenya E-mail: [kenya@ucg.org](mailto:kenya@ucg.org) Website: [www.ucgeastafrica.org](http://www.ucgeastafrica.org)  
**Ghana:** P.O. Box AF 75, Adenta, Accra, Ghana E-mail: [ghana@ucg.org](mailto:ghana@ucg.org)  
**Malawi:** P.O. Box 32257, Chichiri, Blantyre 3, Malawi Phone: +265 (0) 999 823 523 E-mail: [malawi@ucg.org](mailto:malawi@ucg.org)  
**Nigeria:** United Church of God—Nigeria, P.O. Box 2265 Somolu, Lagos, Nigeria  
Phone: 8033233193 Website: [www.ucgnigeria.org](http://www.ucgnigeria.org) E-mail: [nigeria@ucg.org](mailto:nigeria@ucg.org)  
**South Africa:** United Church of God—Southern Africa, P.O. Box 1181, Tzaneen 0850, South Africa  
Phone: +27 79 725 9453 Fax: +27 (0)86 572 7437 Website: [www.south-africa.ucg.org](http://www.south-africa.ucg.org)  
E-mail: [UnitedChurchofGod.SA@gmail.com](mailto:UnitedChurchofGod.SA@gmail.com)  
**Zambia:** P.O. Box 23076, Kitwe, Zambia Phone: (0026)0966925840 E-mail: [zambia@ucg.org](mailto:zambia@ucg.org)  
**Zimbabwe:** P.O. Box 928, Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe Phone: 0773 240 041 E-mail: [zimbabwe@ucg.org](mailto:zimbabwe@ucg.org)

#### PACIFIC REGION

**Australia and all other South Pacific regions not listed:** United Church of God—Australia  
GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia Phone: 07 55 202 111 Free call: 1800 356 202  
Fax: 07 55 202 122 Website: [www.ucg.org.au](http://www.ucg.org.au) E-mail: [info@ucg.org.au](mailto:info@ucg.org.au)  
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**Philippines:** P.O. Box 81840, DCCPO, 8000 Davao City, Philippines Phone and fax: +63 82 224-4444  
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**Singapore:** United Church of God, GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia  
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# 100 Years

## After World War I

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?



An event that began 100 years ago this August might as well be ancient and irrelevant history for most. Yet World War I changed the world and set off a chain of events that continue to impact your life today. Don't underestimate what one man and one event can do to alter everything.

*by Darris McNeely*



# World News & Prophecy

Several years ago, during a visit to Germany, I toured the home of Kaiser Wilhelm II at Potsdam. The Kaiser's home is located within a large estate that includes another great residence, Sans Souci, home of the famous emperor Frederick the Great.

The Kaiser's home, called the New Palace, is a larger and more sumptuous home than the other. Originally built as a guest palace, it later became the home of the last two Hohenzollern rulers, Wilhelm and his father Wilhelm I. The furnishings in the home would fill more than 50 railroad cars!

For me the most interesting location in the whole palace was the smaller room on the north end of the second floor. Kaiser Wilhelm II used it as a dining area. In that room, in August 1914, he signed orders mobilizing German armies and setting off events that led to what would become known as "the Great War"—World War I. It was fascinating to be able to picture the Kaiser sitting at a small kitchen table putting his name to official documents that committed troops to the maelstrom of war.

A few feet from this room is the largest, most ornate chamber in the palace, the Marble Room. Floor-to-ceiling windows run its entire length. At a window just outside the kitchen you can stand and see across the estate through an avenue of trees for more than two miles in the distance. It is a long view.

The day of my visit I stood at that window and wondered if perhaps the Kaiser might have arisen from his table after signing the orders and walked into this room and stood for a moment to gaze out across his land. Might he have thought about what he had just done? Could he have considered how far-reaching was the decision he had just made?

Certainly he did not see how many years into the future that one decision would last—neither did he comprehend the lives that would be changed nor a world reshaped. He was not alone in failing to grasp the far-reaching impact—the long perspective, if you will—of the war that would be called "the war to end all wars."

## Long-term consequences continue to impact our world today

Today, as the world marks the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of that great



Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1902

**The stories of World War I are those of petty, vile and base men who desired more—more power, more land, more prestige. And the result was indeed *more*—more death, more suffering and more destruction.**

conflict, it still deals with the consequences of the decisions made by the Kaiser and other European leaders.

World War I resulted in the breakup of two world empires whose influence had shaped Europe and the Middle East. The Hapsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary had ruled in Europe for nearly 400 years. As part of the Holy Roman Empire, its influence at one time reached as far as California and the American Southwest.

Austria was one of the initial protagonists in the war. Austrian belligerence after its Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were assassinated in Sarajevo in June 1914 pushed the great powers to the brink by early August. Austria's manpower was quickly ground to dust by the machine of war, and by 1918 that once-mighty empire was at an end.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire, centered in Constantinople (now Istanbul in modern-day Turkey) had ruled most of the Middle East and large parts of Eastern Europe for centuries. Twice in history its troops had come close to rolling up all of

Europe and adding those lands to its Islamic empire. But both times its armies advanced no further than the gates of Vienna.

A succession of corrupt and incompetent rulers had eaten the heart of the Ottoman Empire by the start of the war in 1914. Vassal states in Europe and the Middle East were eager for independence. Allied with Germany and defeated by the West in the course of the war, this empire likewise collapsed, and it was left to the victors—primarily Britain and France—to carve up the Middle East and redistribute it into a patchwork of new states such as Jordan, Iraq and Syria.

The lines on the map delineating the borders of these new nations made little sense within the region's ethnic and religious context. Many of the conflicts in the region over the past century are the direct result of ill-advised decisions made in the wake of the World War I and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.

When you read headlines today of genocide in Syria, the launching of rockets into Israel from terrorist encampments in southern Lebanon and Gaza, or the continuing unrest among refugees throughout the region, you are seeing the fruit of decisions made by leaders who had to pick up the pieces from the collapse of empires in 1918.

What Kaiser Wilhelm II set in motion and what leaders decided afterwards developed into a series of events that span the last century. The long view of history is critical to understanding why today's world continues to experience unresolvable conflict.

## Old roots of modern conflicts

Every evening when I sit down to watch the news I see commercials asking for donations to help wounded warriors from the Middle East conflicts that have embroiled American troops for more than a decade. I see heart-wrenching stories of men and women who were wounded and survived their injuries from bombs and bullets in Iraq and Afghanistan.



The wonders of modern battlefield medicine have allowed these soldiers to survive and return home. But tragically, their lives often are a shadow of what they once were. They require years of rehabilitation and ongoing help.

No doubt many of them, their families, and those watching these stories ask *why*—why were we there, and what is the cause of these wars? Why were they in such remote lands fighting someone else's battle? What is the solution, if any? There are answers to these questions.

Iraq was one of the nations carved out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire following World War I. A ruler, a member of the Hashemite family from Arabia, was put in place. His name was King Faisal I. His tenure lasted only a short time until a revolt led to his ouster and a French mandate was imposed. What ensued, and remains, was sporadic unrest through the 20th century, with different rulers providing different versions of incompetence and inept leadership.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Islamic terrorists, the United States and its allies attacked and overthrew terror-sponsoring regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. When America toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, it not only deposed a corrupt strongman, but it “broke” the fragile and mostly peaceful coexistence of very different peoples. Westerners little understand the deep differences and long-time divisions between ethnic groups in that region.

It is this inability to understand the past and the root causes of conflict that can perpetuate wars today. America spent many years and many lives in Iraq trying to deal with the impact of political decisions made in the wake of World War I.

The shape of the entire Middle East today was determined largely by a conference held in Paris at the Palace of Versailles at the end of the war. Leaders still try to sort through the consequences of the decision of the Kaiser and other leaders to plunge the world into the dark abyss of war.

## What is the cause?

For a century now historians have examined the cause of the Great War. I grew up being taught it was all Germany's fault. German belligerence pushed the nations to war. It's a simple assessment, but it leaves out important elements.

Historians today focus on the entangling alliances of Germany and Austria-Hungary,

and Great Britain with France and Russia. When one was attacked, the others were obligated to be drawn into battle. The pre-war geopolitical map of Europe was a complex web of political alliances overlaying an antiquated system of family monarchical ties that doomed the continent to the cauldron of conflict erupting that long-ago August.

To illustrate, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II was cousin to the king of England. Another cousin, Empress Alexandra, was married to the Russian Czar Nicholas II. All traced their line back to England's Queen Victoria. You would think that such ties—they visited back and forth, and the Kaiser was a frequent guest at Windsor Castle—would act as a brake to the runaway train that led to the collision of nations. But it didn't.

What caused World War I? After reading several histories and analyses written dur-

## There is one source that tells us the cause of conflict among human beings of any age. That source is the Bible, the Word of God.

ing this centennial retrospective, the one cause that jumps out most to me is sheer incompetence. The leaders of that day saw war coming for years. Germany armed itself to the hilt—in fact it engaged in the first modern arms race with Great Britain. Plans for a German invasion of France were known to be in place for years prior to 1914. Nationalist urges in the Balkans were continual sparks, like matches repeatedly struck till ignited.

And when the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were assassinated on June 28, weeks of growing tension passed that all could see would lead to war—but no one, despite good intentions, could stop the inevitable. There simply was no prewar leader in Europe with the stature, wisdom and diplomacy to halt the insanity. It's one of the colossal failures of history that an interconnected Europe and wider world couldn't prevent the largest, bloodiest war to that time.

Historians mention the level of globalization that existed in 1914. Transportation and communication along with industrialization had created the first “age of globalization.” Wealth flowed across the Atlantic between Europe and the United States. Advances in science and education were lifting the nations to a new era of prosperity. Social ills were beginning to be addressed. There

was every reason to expect that a brighter age for all peoples lay on the near horizon. But the war ground these dreams, along with the lives of a generation of youth, into the mud of the battlefields.

Again, why? What ultimately underlies all this? Historians can recalibrate their studies and pore over the mountains of information seeking but not finding the ultimate cause for World War I. Yet there is one source that tells us the cause of conflict among human beings of any age. That source is the Bible, the Word of God.

## What lies at the root of wars?

The book of James, written by the half-brother of Jesus Christ, contains the key explanation for war and conflict among the human race, great and small. Notice what he says:

“Where do wars and fights come from

among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:1-4).

James lists within these verses the plot line for every war since Cain lifted his hand against Abel. From murder to battles to mass slaughter and world war, you see the seeds in these verses. From the envy and jealousy that pits brother against brother, father against son and husband against wife, it's all outlined here.

Unbridled lust and desire for power and control over land and resources move nations to war. Bloodthirsty desire to control the lives of men and women move dictators and kings to move armies against cities and lands.

The stories of World War I are those of petty, vile and base men who desired more—more power, more land, more prestige—more, more and more. And the result was indeed *more*—more death, more suf-

# One Woman's Long View

My mother, Josephine McVay McNeely, was born in August 1914, the month World War I began. Like many who grew up in America's "deep south," she was born into a family of farmers. Her two grandfathers fought in the American Civil War. She was a student of history and would tell me the stories passed down from her father of that conflict that defined not only the United States but, as I was to learn, her life.

As a child we would often travel back to the area of her childhood to visit relatives. Our travels would take us past a place called Shiloh, which marked one of the Civil War's bloodiest engagements. Mom would walk the ground and talk about "those poor boys who died" in battle far from home. She was mourning for them with a voice bred from countless hours of talk around the hearths of her youth, where she heard the stories from times past when the winds of war swept her people into history. My mother had a long view of life and history. She knew the consequences of choices people make.

My mother's "long view" also had its drawbacks. At times she would mix emotion into her recollection of history. My wife, a girl born in "the north," would often catch my mother stretching history to suit her ideas. It often made for some



stimulating discussion.

Nonetheless, my mother learned from history, and from her I have a love and appreciation of the subject. I have a photo of my mother that hangs on the wall in our home. I believe it captures the spirit of what I remember about her.

It's the picture of a young woman in her twenties standing under a tree in full summer bloom. Standing with her feet together and her hands clasped behind her back, she wears a simple one-piece print dress, clean and neat, with a white belt around her waist. A cape falls around her shoulders and a wide-brimmed hat shields her eyes from the sun. A slight

**My mother had a long view of life and history. She knew the consequences of the choices people make.**

breeze is evident by the blown folds of her dress. She is not looking directly at the camera, but is slightly turned and looks beyond, her eyes fixed on a distant point. There is a slight smile on her face.

As I look at this picture, I like to think she is looking with hope and expectation for a life beyond today—for a life promised in the Word of God, a life in His eternal Kingdom for those who develop and hold to the long view of life.

fering and more destruction.

Like leaders who went before and have since followed after, they could not take a long view of life and history and make the right decisions for their people. They could not make sound decisions based on truth, justice and temperance—all of which are within our power to achieve, especially when mixed with greater humility and less pride.

These virtues—truth, justice and temperance—can be found in drawing near to God. Together they can help us all develop a friendship with God and become enemies of the culture of death so often spawned in today's world. They can help us change our lives on the inside and produce thoughts and actions that lead to peace.

## Will you take a long view?

A study of a devastating war begun a hundred years ago can be an exercise in nostalgia and academic history. Only a few

people alive today can even remember this war in their earliest memories. For we who take a moment to reflect on what happened, let's be sure to take away a lesson that helps us understand our present world: History existed before our birth, it marches on now, and decisions made by people long ago and far away continue to impact our lives today.

At the same time, know that the decisions you and I make in the present have an impact on our lives and the lives of others today and long into the future.

We must learn to take the long view on life. The world sorely needs leaders with a view different from leaders of the past. The world needs leadership with the long view, the view of what is best and will benefit all others and avoid the destructive and bloody scourge of conflict and war. We desperately need leadership with the long view to the world to come, when the world will know peace under the rule of the Kingdom of God. **GN**



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# In Search of PEACE

Is peace just the absence of war? Is it possible to enjoy lasting peace on earth? If so, what constitutes lasting peace? How can we find it? *by Jerold Aust*

**N**early 100 years ago, the Great War in Europe ended. It left 9 million soldiers dead and an additional 21 million wounded. Man’s inhumanity to man is mind-boggling.

Lasting peace always eludes us.

Mankind has searched for peace but has never attained it. Famed historians Will and Ariel Durant wrote decades ago that in nearly 3,500 years of recorded history, “only 268 have seen no war” (*The Lessons of History*, 1968, p. 81).

Nations have foolishly waged wars for thousands of years, only briefly interrupted by fading peace demanded by the victors. History proves that what we refer to as peace after a war appears to be little more

than a contradiction of terms.

It’s often the case that when the end of a war allows one nation’s greedy will to be forced on another, the vanquished immediately begins planning to strike back in some way; hence the brewing of another war to overturn the result of the last one. Or another power may seek to exploit the situation. The fact remains: The absence of war simply isn’t the same as lasting peace. History is largely a chronicle of wars.

Still human beings often search for peace through the terrible vehicle of war. But what war ever actually brought peace?

### In search of peace

Why can’t we as people find peace? The

reference to World War I as “the war to end war” or “the war to end all wars” is attributed to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who attempted, rhetorically, to soften America’s entrance into that European-centered conflict.

Wilson, however, didn’t originate the phrase. Famous British author and social commentator H.G. Wells published a series of articles in London newspapers at the beginning of the war that finally became a book titled *The War That Will End War*.

Wilson’s use of this phrase catapulted his popularity and credibility. But years later, the same phrase took him captive when it was used in a mocking, derisive way. His prediction that World War I would end all wars and would make the world safe for democracy and preserve human freedom failed. Wilson was wrong.

Conventional wisdom is wrong. Man can easily get himself into war, but he cannot, of himself, avoid war. This leaves us where



we began, in search of peace.

The Great War, later to be commonly known as World War I, was, according to President Wilson's war speech on April 2, 1917, the war that would end all wars. Wilson wanted to build a basis for peace that would prevent future catastrophic wars and needless death and destruction.

When the armistice was finally signed in 1918, the death toll was unconscionable. Yet many more terrible wars followed throughout the 20th century.

Since the end of the First World War, the United States and its allies have been continuously involved in conflict—World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan, the return to Iraq for round two of the Gulf

God disagrees: “The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace” (Isaiah 59:8).

True peace exists outside the human condition. God owns true peace. Thankfully He offers to give it to people as a gift, with conditions. One of the greatest conditions is personal sacrifice. True and lasting peace demands sacrifice. It's a difficult choice, because we as human beings prefer comfort to sacrifice.

Although the truth about true and lasting peace is plainly articulated throughout the Bible, people continue to resist it. Why? Human beings are self-absorbed, increasingly more narcissistic, and egregiously

He requires of Christians. Instead, well-meaning Christians falsely assume, especially during the Christmas season, that God's offer of His peace to humankind requires nothing of them.

God does indeed require professing Christians to do those things that please Him, specifically including the Ten Commandments, which, when obeyed, bring peace (Exodus 20; Matthew 22:36-40).

When it comes to true peace, there is a great difference between human beings and God. Christians often think that peace should come naturally if they just desire or prefer it. Do you assume that? God doesn't think the way people with fleshly orientation do (Isaiah 55:8-9). People think selfishly. God thinks unselfishly.

God's laws are at once demanding and peace-oriented. Keep, honor and obey God's laws and you keep the peace. Flout, scorn or reject God's laws and you invite contention and trouble.

God's peace resides in those who make peace by living God's way: “Now the fruit of righteousness [obeying God's commandments (Deuteronomy 6:25; Psalm 119:172)] is *sown in peace* by those who make peace” (James 3:18). God views peacemakers as His children (Matthew 5:9).

God shows us there's a great difference between man's peace and the peace of God. God is the ultimate and only source of true and lasting peace. When human beings turn to God and honor Him, they are on the road to lasting peace.

### **God's peace for 1,000 years and forever!**

God's promised peace is guaranteed to arrive on earth at the return of Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*. Of the increase of His government *and peace* there will be no end” (Isaiah 9:6-7). What a beautiful promise!

God's promise of lasting peace will begin to be experienced by the world at large when Jesus begins His 1,000-year earthly reign. It continues through that 1,000 years and the great White Throne Judgment period that follows—and it will never cease (Revelation 20:11-12).

Ironically, the Prince of Peace will have to enforce His peace on the world at His return. Following the period of unprecedented global trouble often called the “Great Tribulation” (Matthew 24:21),

## **God's laws are demanding and peace-oriented. Keep, honor and obey God's laws and you keep the peace. Scorn or reject God's laws and you invite contention and trouble.**

War. This isn't even counting the Cold War between the East and West (1947-1991), the opposing sides led by the then-superpowers the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Soviet Empire dissolved in various revolutions in Eastern Europe. Revolutions in the Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine and other important Soviet provinces began to rip the empire apart. “The evil empire,” as it was called by U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1983, suddenly became a second-rate empire.

Rumors of war continue to hover over the world, including ongoing threats from North Korea, Iran, Syria, Middle East extremist groups, and more recently Russia and its bullying tactics against Ukraine, as President Vladimir Putin appears to seek to restore the Russian empire.

Where is lasting peace in all these rumors of war? Where is lasting peace after the wars of the 20th century? From time immemorial, humanity continues its search for lasting peace.

### **Human peace and godly peace**

Human beings desire peace; we just don't know how to get it. A quick look at the world is enough to tell us that peace isn't inherent—it doesn't come from within us.

Even so, many philosophies and even religions are based on the idea that peace comes from within human beings. We pursue peace within a false construct, vainly assuming that we know the way to peace.

selfish. The entire world is given to selfishness, and it's especially hostile toward God and His way of peace and life.

This hostility comes from the god of this age, Satan the devil, who blinds humanity to the true God and His glorious good news of lasting peace (2 Corinthians 4:4).

The apostle Paul wrote that the human condition resists God and His instruction: “For the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God's law, for it is unable to do so” (Romans 8:7, Holman Christian Standard Bible).

Because human beings refuse to acknowledge God and His laws, humanity can't find the key to true, lasting peace. Yet God's desire for humankind to experience His peace was proclaimed after the birth of His Son Jesus Christ: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14).

God had previously declared that great peace was for those who love His law (Psalm 119:165)—through faith overcoming the fleshly inclination to oppose His law. This is the missing link to finding true, lasting peace. Human beings please God when they obey Him in living faith: “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God *must believe that He is*, and that *He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*” (Hebrews 11:6).

Many professing Christians *believe on Jesus* but *they don't truly believe Him*. That is, they don't believe what He says



humanity will not welcome Jesus Christ with open arms. The Bible indicates that following Christ's return, some nations will resist Him and His royal edict to come to Jerusalem in observance of God's festivals.

Egypt is singled out as one of those nations who may refuse to come to Jerusalem for the great Feast of Tabernacles. Christ will chasten any peoples who retain and maintain a rebellious attitude toward Him:

"And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain.

"If the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the LORD strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (Zechariah 14:16-19).

### God deposes Satan

God's peace is assured on earth after He deposes Satan the devil, the unseen god of this world (Revelation 20:1-3). Satan is the driving influence behind man's inhumanity to his fellow man. He is the instigator of all wars. Satan wants to exterminate human beings because he knows our ultimate potential of becoming glorified sons of God. He hates that our destiny is, among other things, to judge angels (1 Peter 5:8; Hebrews 2:10; 1 Corinthians 6:3).

The devil cannot directly destroy human beings without God's express permission (Job 1:12; Luke 22:31). Therefore he sets himself to influence human beings to destroy themselves, hoping to end it all through the carnage of the upcoming Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21).

Satan will fail, but the human family will be severely decimated in the process. The answer to this tragedy is God's plan of salvation for mankind. God will send the Messiah—Jesus Christ—to intervene in the human affairs and save humankind from itself.

God will gather the armies of the earth to an area in northern Israel called Armageddon or the hill of Megiddo. He will allow Satan to motivate them to proceed to Jerusalem to fight the returning Christ (Revelation 16:14, 16). It's an epic story. The good news is that the ending has already been written. *God wins*. Humanity wins, too, with the vast majority of people ultimately saved. Satan, the demons who serve him and the people who ultimately refuse to repent lose.

Christ will incarcerate Satan and the demons for 1,000 years: "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished" (Revelation 20:1-3).

Additionally, Christ will not leave the government in the hands of any man: "And in the days of these kings [of the final revival of the Roman Empire in the end time] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44).

When Jesus removes Satan and the demons from ruling the kingdoms of the world, the wild natures of people and even animals will begin to change (Isaiah 11:6-7). Jesus will write His laws on the hearts of all humanity, and they will have a heart of flesh and not of stone (2 Corinthians 3:3).

True, lasting, universal peace will pervade

the earth. No one will have to lock their doors at night (Micah 4:4).

Humanity has no lasting peace yet—only brief interruptions of perpetual war. God's message to you is that you can have God's peace *right now* if you really desire it.

### You can have lasting peace now

Wouldn't you like to enjoy the peace that only God can give to you? Jesus promised His peace to His disciples: "Peace I leave with you, *My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you*. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

Peace is not just the absence of war. The Hebrew term *shalom* denotes complete security, contentment and well-being. God's peace comes from obeying God's laws (Psalms 119:165). True Christians make true peace (James 3:18).

You can find the lasting peace you're seeking. Turn to God in heartfelt prayer and ask Him for His peace. Read His Word to find His true peace. It's right there in the pages of your Bible! Then apply His laws in your life. When you turn to God with all your heart, He *will give you* godly peace, as promised in Philippians 4:7: "And *the peace of God*, which passes all understanding, *shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*." **GN**

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# A Soldier on the Western Front

To many today, World War I seems like long-forgotten ancient history. But what was it like for those caught up in the maelstrom of death and destruction in “the war to end all wars”? And will war ever truly end? *by John Elliott*

A majestic sunrise splashed across the morning sky above a normally verdant Belgian countryside. The morning’s vibrant chatter of songbirds was muted by thunderous explosions launching domes of earth into the sky, while the aroma of ripe autumn fields was overwhelmed by the reeking stench of gangrene and bandages soaked with carbolic acid. This nightmare was never supposed to happen.

During the visit to Sarajevo of a not-so-well liked archduke from Austria-Hungary, underground Serbian nationalists protesting foreign control of their region assassinated him. In time the Austrians claimed the Serbian government was involved, and issued an ultimatum intended to crush the nation-

and dying without a known reason or cause.

Looking back on the terrible events of 100 years ago calls to mind a good friend who was there at the Western Front—and a



German troops fight from a shallow trench.

**“We were just kids. We didn’t even know what we were doing there. We never knew what we were fighting for. I still don’t know.”**

alist movement and cement their control of the Balkans. They hoped a skirmish would develop, with their ally Germany anxious to assist them with their goal of conquest.

But as often happens, things didn’t go quite as planned. Unrealized defensive alliances drew in most surrounding countries in Europe plus Russia, the United States and even Japan. Suddenly the nations involved in an ongoing arms race were sucked into the vortex of a global war. By the autumn of 1914 Germany was fighting Russia on its east while Allied forces were entrenched along a stagnant line in Belgium where neither side could move.

The Western Front became a bloody gristmill for millions of young men fighting

message of hope for a future in which wars will at last cease.

## Reminder of a world and a time long ago

Over half a century after World War I ended, my new wife and I were living in British Columbia, Canada. We had become close friends with an elderly German immigrant couple I will refer to as Mr. and Mrs. Paul Brollech. Their warmth was replete with Old World wisdom and advice conveyed with heavy German accents. They managed well on a small farm where they tended enough crops, fruit trees and livestock to support their personal needs and give to others, including some for us and our new baby at times.

After a few years of sharing farming methods and authentic German meals with us, I felt comfortable asking Mr. Brollech a personal question. One evening over cards I casually enquired, “How did you get the tremors in your legs, arms and face?”

It seemed an innocent enough question—after all he had just celebrated his 80th birthday. I assumed he would say that’s what happens when you get old.

But Mr. Brollech froze at the question—though his body kept shaking, a little more so now. His wife’s smile vanished and a scowl snapped into its place. She seemed concerned, fearful of some secret he might reveal. I had stepped into a private place where I suddenly felt very unwelcome.

Five years prior to that evening, I had been bicycling across Belgium with a college friend. The sunny springtime had given way to cold rain blowing onto the landscape and onto us all the way from Brussels to Aachen, Germany. We became sick with fever while riding in the rain and camping at night in wet sleeping bags inside a leaky tent. Knowing a little about the history of the area, we could only imagine what previous teenage boys who marched and camped here before us had experienced as they were hunted by and were the hunters of other young men.

We rode through endless miles of open landscapes with hardly a town or person to be seen, just field after field of budding vegetation studded with tree-lined boundaries and meandering ditches. It was somewhere in Belgium, in one of those snaking ditches, that a teenage Paul Brollech got his shakes.

## A young soldier’s story

It was painful for Mr. Brollech to speak about it, and Mrs. Brollech worried that doing so might somehow jeopardize their citizenship in their new adopted country. But he finally spoke. He wanted me to know. “I was a German soldier in World War I under Kaiser Wilhelm,” he stated with sadness and regret. Now, at age 80, he was catapulted back to events when he was 18.



Conscripted to support his proud country, he was caught up in the nationalistic fervor of the times. It had all begun innocently enough for him—joining the crowds of other youths to serve God and country under the noble Kaiser. There was training in warfare, the latest in advanced weapons and materiel, lots of new young friends all wearing smart uniforms, and the citizens busily purchasing war bonds in their support.

With deepening emotions (and accompanying facial tremors) he attempted to put into words the private hell he had suffered for 60 years: “We were just kids. We didn’t even know what we were doing there. We

sides dug in for what would prove to be a long and deadly conflict.

### A temporary truce

Five months into the war the young men fighting on both sides still retained some religious and humane feelings. In recalling the Christmas of 1914, Mr. Brollech laughed aloud as he described the developing spectacle along the Front.

“On Christmas Eve, everything was quiet. Then we started singing carols, and they did too. Then we sang carols to each other!” The next morning everyone walked out of their trenches and joined together in

On June 24 they bombarded a section of German defenses with 1.7 million artillery shells, then raced across no man’s land certain of victory. Too late did they realize that many of their shells had failed to explode, leaving many German fortifications intact. Helplessly exposed, 60,000 young British men were gunned down, most during the first hour. The bloody stalemate continued.

German soldiers also made an attempt to make a breach in the Front. Forbidden as being uncivilized prior to World War I, the development and use of poison gas became justified by all sides in an effort to break the stalemate along the Front.



never knew what we were fighting for. I still don’t know.”

### Hell on earth

At first the German army swept rapidly across much of Belgium and northern France for a quick dispersion of an anticipated defense by the French. But other alliances propelled greater armies to rush forward en masse with the expectation of repelling the German forces from the region.

The clash of a massive buildup of war machinery on both sides created a stalemated battlefield. Mr. Brollech and his new comrades took up arms along a rough line of 475 miles of trenches that stretched from the North Sea southward to Switzerland. It would become infamously known as the Western Front.

Attempting to break through the stalemate, massive shells pounded down on both sides, sending shrapnel down the entire length of trenches and ripping apart anyone caught in its path. Zigzag trenches were designed to localize the shrapnel’s reach, along with restricting the range of enemy bullets.

Over time multilayered trenching systems and corresponding underground bunkers became permanent and elaborate. Both

no man’s land to spend the day together.

They laughed, swapped stories, food and cigarettes. He explained that the German cigarettes tasted terrible and they swapped all they could for British and even a few American ones.

“We said to each other, ‘What are we doing this for?’ and nobody knew.” He said the British soldiers were nice and he really liked them. “We were all saying that we had no bad feelings for anybody and how nice it was to be together.”

Afterward they all went back to their trenches and let each other have it the next morning. A fellow German youth and veteran, Eric Remarque, would later write, “We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces.”

### Desperate means to break the stalemate

By the summer of 1916 pressure was increasing to find a way to break through the stalemate along the Western Front. The British and French hatched a plan to pulverize a section of the German line at the Somme River and then race through the gap.



The Germans’ first use of chlorine gas was unknowingly quite effective. However, they didn’t fully realize the impact of the gas cloud they floated onto the British, nor were they desirous to rush into that cloud themselves. So, while several miles of the Western Front was temporarily abandoned, nobody capitalized on the breach.

Allied forces, decimated by the gas, realized its potential and began developing their own versions of chemical warfare and protective gear to defend against it.

With his head and arms shaking, Mr. Brollech stated, “I shake because I was gassed by the British with mustard gas.” He didn’t elaborate on what that experience was like. But I would later learn what it

meant. Mustard gas caused the skin of victims to blister. They would begin to vomit, and their eyes became very sore. The gas caused internal and external bleeding and stripped the bronchial tubes of their protective mucous membrane, causing great pain.

A nurse treating soldiers with mustard gas burns said of the victims of gas attacks: “They cannot be bandaged or touched. We cover them with a tent of propped-up sheets. Gas burns must be agonizing because usually the other cases do not complain, even with the worst wounds, but gas cases are invariably beyond endurance and they cannot help crying out” (Leo Van Bergen,

the extreme physical and mental stresses of the war. In the book’s preface he stated, “I will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped [its] shells, were destroyed by the war.”

Somewhere on the Allies’ side of the line was another young soldier named John. As deadly shells exploded in trenches on either side, death and dismemberment became commonplace. Young John cried over the decimation of his youthful friends in his platoon. Eventually he too fell victim of a gas attack from the German side. John and Paul, two young soldiers, were disabled for life. One became my good friend, the other

the zigzag trenches of the Western Front. The subtle circular depressions in the fields of grain are craters where artillery shells shattered the earth and hurled it skyward.

### A coming time of peace

Regrettably, the world has not seen the end of war. Even now powerful forces are at work to reshape the world into prophesied end-time alliances and coalitions that will dominate the globe in a period the Bible calls a time of “great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21). The book of Revelation foretells that literally billions of people will die before mankind learns the painful lesson that human-caused wars resolve little and eventually lead to only further bloodshed and suffering.

But Bible prophecy is ultimately a message of great hope. At a time when humanity faces extinction in a final great worldwide conflagration (verse 22), Jesus Christ will return to usher in His glorious Kingdom of peace.

Then, as foretold long ago by the prophet Isaiah, the world will at last see peace. Under the reign of the long-prophesied Messiah, mankind will finally wage peace, not war. “He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4). We should all be praying daily, as Jesus Christ instructs in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:10, “Your kingdom come”!

This kingdom to come will address the challenge to human dignity of lives cut short or radically altered by war. The Bible teaches that all people throughout history who have suffered this way will live again and be offered an opportunity to come to know God and the salvation He offers! **GN**

## Even today the scars of World War I remain visible on the Belgian landscape. Zigzag hollows and circular depressions in fields are scars of entrenchments and heavy shelling from a century ago.

*Before My Helpless Sight: Suffering, Dying and Military Medicine on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, 2009, p. 184).

Partial exposures to gasses, coupled with wearing hot, confining protective gear compounded the already miserable lives of everyone along the Front. By the end of the war in 1918, some one million soldiers and civilians had been injured by poison gas. Yet in spite of the cruel inflictions of pain and lifetimes of suffering, the use of chemical warfare had no measurable impact on the outcome of the war. Mr. Brollech was disabled for life—for nothing.

### War’s deadly toll

The combination of incessant shelling, constant dismemberments, airborne chemicals and dying friends all took their toll on the youths who fought there. Eric Remarque’s famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* was written to try to describe

my grandfather—whose name I bear.

The fields in Flanders, Verdun and the Somme saw millions of young men entrenched in earth in areas so devastated by the battles of 1916 that some were declared *Zone Rouge* (Red Zone)—so destroyed and permeated with unexploded shells that habitation was no longer possible.

Even today the scars of World War I remain visible on the Belgian landscape. Zigzag hollows and circular depressions in fields are scars of entrenchments and heavy shelling from a century ago. To this day modern farmers continually unearth unexploded ordinance that must be defused and removed.

I was recently back in Belgium. The flight from Africa slowly descended over a springtime countryside that is peaceful and productive. The diverse landscape and productive agriculture still cannot mask the scars of 1914-18; the seemingly eroding gullies meandering through fields were actually



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# “The Horrors of All the Ages” They Didn’t See It Coming

One hundred years ago, experienced diplomats and military leaders blundered their way into a deadly globe-spanning catastrophe. Why were they so blind? Are there lessons for us today? *by Mike Snyder*

If you knew that you were in the cross-hairs for devastating slaughter, what would you do? Would you do everything in your power to understand what was going on and act? Or would you allow an unrelenting cascade of absurd assumptions and blinding emotions to take its toil?

The latter, tragically, is what many historians conclude that highly educated statesmen, diplomats, kings, emperors, generals and political leaders all collectively yielded to a century ago.

In a modern age where we take mechanized carnage for granted—from drone-fueled bloodletting in the Middle East to digital barbarism in video games—it may be a challenge to fully appreciate the scope of the butchery that was World War I. Today, one might ask: What truly went down a century ago?

The unprecedented and unparalleled introduction of industrial weaponry, a subsequent multinational arms race, and total all-out war in 1914 deeply brutalized the European Continent on two fronts, felled great empires, and destabilized Europe together with much of the world. Further, for the first time in human history it introduced massive death from the sky (mechanized aircraft-based warfare) and from underwater (submarines capable of launching torpedoes to destroy steel-hulled ships from far away).

Tragically, the Great War made possible the Bolshevik Revolution, thus helping herald into world status a formerly untested and obscure political philosophy—Soviet Communism. During this war a staggering 37 million people lost their lives, often in an inhuman and pitiless fashion. Millions more suffered incapacitating injuries. The continent-wide carnage swallowed whole national economies, leaving millions without food or shelter.

Future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later summed it up: “*All the hor-*

*rors of all the ages were brought together; not only armies but whole populations were thrust into the midst of them”* (emphasis added throughout).

How did any of this happen? What could possibly be worth this ruinous price? And what lessons can we learn from all this today?

## The consequences of flawed thinking

From a 21st-century historian’s perspective, the phrase “the war to end all wars”—as World War I became known when America finally entered the conflict—mockingly underestimates the catastrophic

ravaging power that engulfed Europe from 1914 to 1918.

As the ragged and exhausted nations stumbled toward the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, the global political landscape was forever changed in a manner no one would have dreamed of only four years earlier. In short order four great imperial dynasties—German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Turkish—would vanish from the world scene. In their gaping geopolitical vacuum would emerge a new world order, one that included a savage totalitarian regime in former Mother Russia that in time slaughtered many millions of its own citizens.

Instead of traditional territorial disputes, flawed thinking drove the world to the brink of savagery. The stunning fact remains that essentially everyone naively thought the war would commence and conclude in five short months—“the war will be over by Christmas” was the generally accepted prediction in August of 1914.

Also unforeseen, the culmination of this same global conflict would consequently

lay a dangerous foundation of smoldering national resentment. It would be on this very blood-soaked foundation that fresh barbarism and mind-numbing worldwide war would arise anew in the form of Adolf Hitler and the Axis Powers barely two decades later.

Didn’t anyone see this coming?

The answer, astonishingly, is *no*.

## Collective blindness

German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck did accurately predict that “some damned foolish thing in the Balkans” could trigger multinational conflict. However, the now-universally accepted “spark” in 1914 that blazed into a globe-spanning conflagration—the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand—was not initially viewed as any kind of major event.

## In the months and years preceding the onslaught of the Great War, numerous signals and ample warnings emerged that should have caught the attention of those in power.

As historian Zbynk Zeman later wrote: “The event *almost failed to make any impression whatsoever*. On Sunday and Monday [June 28 and 29, 1914], the crowds in Vienna listened to music and drank wine, *as if nothing had happened*.” A few months later, virtually the entire world was engulfed in hideous trench warfare. Few really saw the scope of the global conflict coming.

Why were people blinded? Instead of learning the harsh lessons of the impact of advancing technology, bad intelligence and the blinding power of unrestrained nationalism from the American Civil War, the Russo-Japanese War and other then-recent conflicts, national leaders and key influencers chose to overlook critical information and forge forward to unmitigated disaster.

As the fires of rampant nationalism burned brighter and brighter on the European Continent in 1914, other more rational minds looked on in incredulous dismay. In the United States, the Woodrow Wilson presidential administration vowed neutrality toward the European insanity. The



American people agreed, and the United States successfully stood apart from the roiling conflict for two years after the guns of August opened fire.

War came to the Americans only after German submarines started sinking U.S. ships in the Atlantic and a coded German message surfaced that promised Mexico large portions of American soil if it would declare war on its northern neighbor.

### Ignoring key warnings

In the months and years preceding the onslaught of the Great War, numerous signals and ample warnings emerged that should have fully caught the attention of those in power. Underestimated and unchecked, the power of national folly ran abreast of unprecedented diplomatic absurdity, even stupidity.

Given the open scope of rising tensions, massive military buildups, and the pile-on of complex alliances, nothing should have surprised world leaders in the final race to all-out war. Many historians note with dismay how opportunity after opportunity to avoid conflict was tragically squandered for no good reason. In hindsight it's difficult to imagine how blind so many experienced leaders, diplomats, influencers and generals were to the potential carnage that was materializing right in front of them.

Yet blind they were.

And 37 million people would die gruesomely as a tragic consequence of that blindness.

What lesson can we learn from this

today? Are we blind to looming catastrophe in the second decade of the 21st century?

### A red sky warning?

The appearance of a red-tinted sky in either the morning or evening tells an experienced person much in terms of what to expect from incoming weather. Speaking nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ used this natural phenomenon to underscore a key point for us today:

“When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, *but you cannot interpret the signs of the times*” (Matthew 16:2-3, New International Version).

Many biblical passages warn of a time when rampant evil and lawlessness will abound, including a disdain and rejection of God’s laws revealed in Scripture. That willful rejection will lead directly to serious global consequences—both self-inflicted and ultimately put in place by God Himself.

How bad are those consequences? The inevitable result of collectively and willfully breaking God’s commandments to humanity will directly lead to a time when “there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (Matthew 24:21, NIV).

This time of global “great distress,” called in other Bible versions the “Great Tribulation,” will be so intense and so world-engulfing that if God does not intervene to stop it,

“no one would survive” (verse 22, NIV).

### Could you be missing the warning signs?

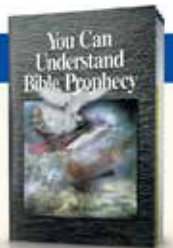
Like the experienced leaders of 1914, could you today be missing what Jesus called “the signs of the times”? Jesus warned that the culmination of these “signs of the times” will come “at an hour when you do not expect” (Luke 12:40, NIV).

Urging His followers to take care and avoid being blinded to what was transpiring, He used this illustration: “Learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it [the prophesied sequence of great end-time events] is near, right at the door” (Matthew 24:32-33, NIV).

The Bible, the very Word of God, includes many prophecies of the future. Most of these focus on the coming age of the Kingdom of God, a time of marvelous peace and prosperity. But many also show that the coming of the Kingdom will be preceded by the aforementioned time of “great distress.”

Unlike those diplomats and leaders of 1914, you can know what is coming and what it means for you. A new “horrors of the ages” is coming, as well as an incredible time of peace to follow. In 1914, they didn’t see it coming. In the 21st century, will you? **GN**

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# Current Events & Trends

by Milan Bizic, Peter Eddington, Darris McNeely and Rudy Rangel

## America losing credibility as the world's superpower

Inaction is a sign of weakness on the world scene as in the schoolyard. If the strongest kid in school declines a fight, his credibility is questioned. Will other tough guys call him out in front of all the other kids? Will other students still look to him as the toughest kid in school when he declines to stand up to the bully picking on the little kid?

The global playground is changing. A recent article in *The Economist* stated: "Rogue states will behave more roguishly if they doubt America's will to stop them. As a former head of Saudi intelligence recently said of Vladimir Putin's land grab in Ukraine: 'While the wolf is eating the sheep, there is no shepherd to come to the rescue'" ("The Decline of Deterrence," May 3, 2014).

The world watched Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad use chemical weapons on his own people and Russia tiptoe in and swipe Crimea from Ukraine. America's response? Nothing. Threats and warnings were

issued, yet nothing meaningful was done.

President Barack Obama is very adamant about using military action sparingly. The United States is in a tough situation when it comes to global affairs. When America intervenes it's condemned for being a bully and not "minding its own business." When America stays out of things, the world wonders if its people only care about themselves.

Whether America takes action or decides not to, the world notices and reads into it. Right now the world sees a sleeping shepherd, and the wolves are licking their chops at what they can gobble up.

Is America truly weakened? What is the cause of its inaction? That is still to be seen. The current administration, for the time being, has decided to not use its military muscle. That is news in and of itself, especially for the global leaders who are sizing up which country will try to rise as the next toughest kid in the schoolyard. (Source: *The Economist*.)

## Moscow eyes Moldova next?

Russia's bullying posture toward Ukraine has been the big news out of Europe so far in 2014. And it doesn't appear that Vladimir Putin's aggressive international policy will be ending there. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof says that it's time to "think of Moldova as 'the next Ukraine'" ("Moldova, the Next Ukraine," April 23, 2014).

Moldova has the dubious distinction of being considered Europe's poorest country. Many Moldovans, including many in the government, see closer ties with Europe as the way out of national poverty. Like its neighbor Ukraine, however, Moldova's European overtures have not been kindly received by Putin's Russia.

Bloomberg News' Olga Tanas reported on Russia's open threats to Moldova's attempts to grow closer to the European Union, saying that "Russia may raise trade barriers against Moldova if the former Soviet republic follows Ukraine in seeking an association agreement with the European Union" ("Russia Said to Plan Retaliation if Moldova Boosts EU Ties," May 21, 2014.)

Russia has reportedly even threatened to cut off Moldova's crucial supply of natural gas, which many Moldovans use to heat their homes. This scenario should sound very familiar if you've been following the Ukraine-Russia drama after the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich, who many Ukrainians considered too pro-Russian.

Much like parts of Eastern Ukraine, Moldova has its own separatist region: Transnistria. This small area of Moldova rests on the eastern border with Ukraine, and much like Eastern Ukrainians, many Transnistrians are native Russian speakers.

Will Englund wrote in *The Washington Post* that

"Putin said [recently] that his country reserves the right to stand up for ethnic Russians living outside its borders" ("Transnistria, the Breakaway Region of Moldova, Could Be Russia's Next Target," March 24, 2014). This is very similar language to the justifications Putin has used in annexing Crimea and promoting separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

Russia's tense relations with the European Union and the United States are being further exacerbated



Advanced Russian T-90A battle tank

by the Ukrainian crisis and a potential Moldovan crisis. There are indeed "rumors of war," as Jesus taught His disciples these would be on the rise in the times leading up to His return (Matthew 24:6).

Jesus' prophetic warnings, along with all the words of Scripture, were not given to us to make us fret or worry about world events, but so that we could have access to "all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue" (1 Peter 1:3). As we watch world events unfold, we should be convicted of God's truthfulness and promises of salvation and restoration in the days to come. (Sources: *The New York Times*, Bloomberg News, *The Washington Post*.)

## Russia cozying up to Iran and China

Aggression against Ukraine's sovereignty has diminished Russia's status in the eyes of its nominal Western allies. Relations likely will only be further strained with news that Russia is looking to strengthen its ties with Iran and China.

The Mideast-focused AI-Monitor reports that "Russia has taken steps to develop its trade and economic ties with Tehran" (Vitaly Naumkin, "Russia Stakes Out Iranian Market," May 12, 2014). Furthermore, as reported by Reuters, "Russia plans to sign a contract with Iran this year to build two more nuclear reactors at its Bushehr power plant as part of a broader deal for up to eight reactors in the Islamic state" ("Russia May Build Eight Nuclear Reactors for Iran," May 22, 2014).

A Russo-Iranian economic alliance and Russian help in advancing Iran's nuclear program may once again further isolate Russia from its Western allies. Moreover there are increased concerns about Chinese cooperation with Russia. The Associated Press reported in a story that appeared in *The Detroit News*: "The Obama administration is playing down an increasingly warm relationship between its main global rivals, China and Russia, that it may have inadvertently encouraged" (Matthew Lee, "Russia, China, and Where the U.S. Fits In," May 29, 2014).

The two countries recently double-vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions on Syria. And "with growing cooperation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in other areas—notably, a new \$400 billion natural gas deal and apparent agreement on the crisis in Ukraine—many believe Russia and China may now or may soon represent a powerful new alliance challenging not only the United States, but also the Western democratic tradition that this country has championed globally."

The Bible speaks of a future alliance of Eastern nations that will march on Jerusalem at the time of the end: "Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared" (Revelation 16:12). Verse 16 says that they will gather in the place called Armageddon or Megiddo in northern Israel. (For more on this ancient battleground and its prophetic significance, read "What Is Armageddon?" beginning on page 18.)

While the Bible doesn't tell us what nations will make up this great force, it gives us a direction—east—so that we can watch and stay alert to what is happening in the world around us (Matthew 24:42). (Sources: AI-Monitor, Reuters, Associated Press.)



### Balkan floods wash up landmines and memories

Just before the 100th anniversary of World War I, which covered the Balkan Peninsula in violence, the region was covered in floodwaters. The relentless flooding in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia is considered to be perhaps the worst the region has ever seen.

As of this writing, the death toll had risen to 74, with more casualties expected to be recorded as the cleanup continues. The flooding is just the latest event in the often-difficult and tragic past 100 years of Balkan history.

After drawing the wrath of the Austro-Hungarian Empire when a young Yugoslav nationalist terrorist named Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Balkan nations have experienced decade after decade of violence and unrest.

World War II saw Croatia adopted as a puppet Nazi state. Croatian fascists, referred to as the Ustashe,

committed countless atrocities against Serbs, Romanians, Balkan Jews, and non-fascist Croats. The seeds of ethnic hatreds and divisions were planted in the battlefields and concentration camps of the Balkan Peninsula of World War II.

These tensions flared up in a deadly way once again in the mid-1990s in the Bosnian War. This time Bosnian Serb and native Muslim Bosniaks shared atrocities in a bloody, three-year war that left over 100,000 dead. An uneasy but mostly unbroken peace has seen no major conflicts in the two decades since the war.

Many old wounds are being washed up in the recent wave of deadly floods, however. Reuters reports that one of the ugliest reminders of past conflict—leftover landmines—are being washed up and are threatening the residents. Reuters reports that “more than 120,000 landmines remain planted across Bosnia” (Maja Zuvela, “Balkan Floods May Have Undone Years of Landmine Detection,” May 20, 2014). In a region with such fragile ethnic and religious relations, reminders of past violence can be dangerous. (Source: Reuters.)

### Abortion counselor films her own abortion

In May, a New Jersey abortion clinic counselor, Emily Letts, filmed her own abortion and shared it on the Internet. The video gained immediate attention from news outlets.

“She says she hoped to inspire other women to not feel guilty about making the decision to have an abortion. ‘Our society breeds this guilt. We inhale it from all directions. Even women who come to the clinic completely solid in their decision to have an abortion say they feel guilty for not feeling guilty,’ Letts wrote. ‘I didn’t feel bad. . . and I am grateful that I can share

### Nothing is taboo any more. We have been desensitized to many abominations the Bible speaks against.

my story and inspire other women to stop the guilt” (“New Jersey Abortion Counselor Films Own Abortion,” NBC News, May 6, 2014).

Abortion is not merely a political issue. It’s a *moral* issue. When a convicted murderer shows no remorse concerning a victim, he or she is labeled as psychotic. Abortion has become so commonplace in our society that few feel remorse in ending the life of a prenatal baby. That was Ms. Letts’ goal—to help those who have aborted their unborn children feel less guilty.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke a warning message to a nation that had drifted from all that was right and just. He proclaimed: “‘Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down,’ says the LORD” (Jeremiah 6:15).

There is very little blushing in our modern world. Nothing is taboo any more. We have been desensitized to many abominations the Bible speaks against. If you voice the opinion that such things are wrong or mention that the Bible calls certain actions sin and evil, then you are labeled an intolerant hater.

This blatant display of sin without remorse should tear at our hearts. Society cannot be our moral compass. The *Bible* should be our compass. It is grounded and unchanging. Those who look to the Bible as their guide will live a fruitful and sound lifestyle that cannot be understood by those who cast every care to the wind. As we see nations drift more and more from the biblical standard, the conclusion of Jeremiah’s statement regarding punishment from our Creator will come to pass. (Source: NBC News.)

### School assignment underscores growing anti-Semitism

It’s not uncommon to hear stories of growing anti-Semitism in Europe or especially the Middle East, but a U.S. middle school seems like an unlikely place for promoting Holocaust denial.

Southern California’s Rialto Unified School District drew attention after eighth-grade students were given a writing assignment asking them to “write an argumentative essay about whether the Holocaust actually occurred or if it was ‘merely a political scheme created to influence public emotion and gain wealth’” (Veronica Rocha, “Rialto School Officials Apologize for Holocaust Assignment,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2014).

The school contends that the assignment was intended to promote students’ critical thinking skills in compliance with Common Core standards. In a statement, Matthew Friedman of the Anti-Defamation League, a prominent Jewish lobby, responded by saying that “asking students to question whether the Holocaust happened has no academic value; it only gives legitimacy to the hateful and anti-Semitic promoters of Holocaust Denial.”

Even following an official apology from the school’s interim superintendent, Mohammad Z.

Islam, it’s not hard to imagine that the seeds of normalized Holocaust denial have already been planted. This might be seen as shocking in the United States, but it’s decidedly normal in some other parts of the world. Iran, for instance, continues its brazen Holocaust denial, institutionalized by its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Europe is also continuing to radicalize in terms of anti-Semitic thought. *The Jerusalem Post* reports that Moshe Kantor, president of the European Jewish Congress, responded to a rash of anti-Semitic activity by saying that “normative Jewish life in Europe is unsustainable” (Sam Sokol, “European Jewish Congress: Amid Rising Anti-Semitism, Jewish Life in Europe Unsustainable,” April 27, 2014).

Underscoring his concerns, four people were killed on May 24, 2014 (including a Jewish couple from Israel) in a shooting attack at a Jewish museum in Brussels, Belgium. And later that evening two young Jewish men were severely beaten as they left a synagogue in Paris.

As world events collide in our global village, the return of violent anti-Semitism is an important trend to watch. Much of end-time prophecy revolves around the area of the modern state of Israel, the Jewish homeland, so increasingly hostile attitudes toward the Jewish people will have an impact on the fulfilling of biblical prophecy. (Sources: *Los Angeles Times*, *The Jerusalem Post*.)

### How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. *So are we.* That’s one reason we produce the *Beyond Today* daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at [ucg.org/beyond-today/daily!](http://ucg.org/beyond-today/daily!)





# What Is Armageddon?

Most people believe Armageddon is about the end of the world. But what does the Bible actually reveal? Learn the real truth!

by *Beyond Today* host **Darris McNeely**

**O**n the hills outside the city of Nazareth in Galilee of Israel, you can stand and look out over the flat plain of the Jezreel Valley. To the west, at the end of the valley you can make out a hill. It's the site of a place called Megiddo. I've been to both Nazareth and Megiddo, and there is a connection.

Nazareth is where Jesus was raised by His parents, Joseph and Mary. It's not hard to imagine Jesus as a young man spending time in these hills overlooking the valley. Jesus, who was God in the flesh, knew the history of the land before Him. He also knew its future. He knew that one day, on that very spot, armies would gather to fight Him at His glorious second coming.

In a number of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that place is called Armageddon. The story of Armageddon carries a powerful message for the world.

Armageddon is a real-life place on the map, and you can travel there today. It's a place no longer inhabited, and spread out before it is a long and wide valley.

The prophetic book of Revelation reveals that armies will gather in this valley to fight just before Jesus Christ returns in glory and power.

There's a powerful message for each of us in the prophecy of Armageddon. If you heed that message, it can change your life and prepare you for Christ's return.

In Revelation 16, we see seven devastating plagues that represent God's final judgment on the world—a world that has rejected Him. These plagues are symbolized by bowls being poured out on the earth.

The fifth of these bowls brings darkness on the throne of the evil ruler of the final superpower among the nations. This ruler and his empire are depicted as a beast. The impenetrable darkness will be so fright-

ening that people will be gnawing their tongues out of despair. In their anger and their pain they will curse God. And instead of turning to Him for help, they will refuse to humble themselves or to repent.

Satan is the one pulling the strings

the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet" (verse 13). Who are the dragon, the Beast and this false prophet? The dragon is Satan. The Beast is the leader of the final, evil superpower—a last revival of the Roman Empire. And the false prophet is an evil religious leader who will deceive the whole world with his false religion.

Next we are told, "For they are spirits of demons performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that



The author stands atop the hill of Megiddo—biblical Armageddon—overlooking the Jezreel Valley in northern Israel. The mountain in the background is the location of Nazareth, boyhood home of Jesus.

behind that evil superpower, and in his rage against God he prepares to maneuver the world and its armies into a box canyon. There will be no way out.

## A great war being prepared

Notice verse 12: "Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared." In other words, great armies from the east will be on the move toward Israel.

The passage continues, "And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of

great day of God Almighty" (verse 14).

What we're reading is an incredible look into the invisible spirit world. With views like this throughout the Scriptures, we know that there is another dimension that we can't see, feel, touch or taste. But it is very real. It's inhabited by good spirits or holy angels, servants of God, and evil spirits or rebellious angels, the demons led by Satan.

In this verse we see a figurative vision of what is going on in the spiritual dimension. It shows the dragon, Satan, spewing from his mouth evil spirits—represented here by frogs. What happens in the spirit realm has always had a connection with what happens



in our physical realm. We are reading here about evil spirits causing chaos in the spirit realm and directly influencing events in our physical world.

Satan's rage behind the scenes will be what causes the armies of the world to gather in the land of Israel. They will be gathered in that place called Armageddon for what is going to be the largest, and certainly the most conclusive, battle in all world history. It will be "the battle of that great day of God Almighty."

Of all the great battles in history, this battle will be more significant than all the others combined. It has been named 2,000 years in advance.

The vision continues: "And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon" (verse 16). The word "Armageddon" is just the combination of two Hebrew words—the word *har* (meaning "hill") and the word *Megiddo*. Of all places, why Megiddo? Why do the armies gather there? A brief look at the history of

the area can help us answer that question.

### Megiddo a historical battleground

You can see the site of Megiddo on a map of the state of Israel. For thousands of years, it was a city where people lived. After it was destroyed in war, the people would build on top of the rubble. Today it's a hill at the western end of the broad flat Jezreel Valley. Archaeologists have excavated the site for several decades. Their work has exposed layer after layer of ancient settlements long hidden beneath its soil.

Megiddo has seen more battles than any other place on earth. Why? The land of Israel itself sits at the crossroads of three continents—Africa, Asia and Europe. And whoever controlled Megiddo controlled a narrow, strategic stretch of road at this nexus called the Via Maris (or Way of the Sea, as a large portion of it ran near the Mediterranean). The Via Maris was a major international highway in the ancient world. It stretched from Egypt all the way

to Babylon, in what is now Iraq. In ancient times, the Via Maris was the link between the major empires and the trade routes of the day. In the ancient world, any nation that wanted control of this region had to control Megiddo.

Over the years, many battles took place at Megiddo. The Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III launched a campaign near Megiddo to assert dominion over territories in and north of Canaan.

In the Bible, we see that King Solomon stationed troops and chariots and horses in Megiddo, using the city as a northern fortress (1 Kings 9:15). Today the massive gates he constructed still stand at the entrance to the ruins in Megiddo.

Later, during the reign of Judah's King Josiah, Pharaoh Necho II from Egypt came to Megiddo to fight against Assyria. Josiah got involved and was killed (2 Kings 23:29).

In more recent times, both Napoleon (1799) and the British General Allenby (1918) defeated Turkish forces at Megiddo.

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The area has never lost its significance as a battleground for control over this crucial crossroad of empires.

Megiddo is a historic gathering place for armies. It's also where armies will gather in the future before "the battle of that great day of God Almighty." But the actual battle will be fought somewhere else.

### The battle will be fought in Jerusalem

Jerusalem is where the battle is actually fought: "Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem . . . Then the LORD will go forth and fight against these nations, as He fights in the day of battle" (Zechariah 14:1-3).

Christ will descend with a spirit army and tread the winepress of His wrath. "And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses' bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs" (Revelation 14:20)—that's 200 miles, thus stretching over the whole land of Israel.

As human armies fight God the carnage will be so great that the blood, mixed with mud and gore, will run several feet deep. It will be a terrible battle. But what is most important is that it will be followed by the peace of the Kingdom of God.

Megiddo and the adjacent Jezreel Valley provide an ideal staging point for this battle. Transport planes and helicopters, troop carriers and tanks will ferry men and materiel into the region, with jet fighters screaming overhead.

Suddenly attention will be turned to a force coming from an unexpected location—the heavens above Jerusalem. In their folly and deception, the assembled armies will then proceed to Jerusalem to fight Jesus Christ, failing to recognize Him as the Messiah.

Today, this is difficult to imagine. We read these scriptures and ask, "How could political leaders be deceived into fighting Jesus Christ, the Son of God?"

The answer lies in a small statement in the middle of Revelation 16. Notice that verse 15 is a thought injected by Jesus Christ: "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame." Here Jesus is saying that there is a way to avoid being part of this great end-time deception.

What is Jesus saying to us? What is in this message that we must understand?

What is the spiritual lesson that Armageddon represents? It's this: Unless you obey Jesus Christ and His teachings every day, you too may be fooled into resisting Him on that day along with the majority of people.

The Bible says that the deception will be so subtle and so powerful that even somebody looking for it will be deceived. How? Look again at what Jesus says in Revelation 16:15 just quoted.

What are the "garments" mentioned? They represent keeping God's commandments, knowing right from wrong, discerning between good and evil. Remaining properly clothed here means enduring in worshipping the true God instead of the devil, the god of this age. The right garments represent the "righteous acts" of God's people (Revelation 19:8). In the final confrontation between God and Satan, God wins! And Christ is summoning us to a life where we stand with Him against the powers of darkness. That's what it means to keep one's garments.

### What do your "garments" look like?

Are you standing with Jesus Christ today? Do you stand with God in truth when you see signs of spiritual and moral decay all around? Have you looked at popular culture lately? The signs of inner cancer are plain to see. Of course, we would all say that we try to stand our ground and keep our morals intact. It is so easy to slowly allow tolerance of sin to seep into our lives.

Megiddo was a place where empires sought to control the ancient world. In this prophecy, it represents sinful man's final effort to control the world apart from God. There is a parallel to our society today.

There is one vivid lesson from the old city of Megiddo that illustrates the point. Deep within the archaeological remains is a large circular altar. In ancient times people would offer sacrifices on this altar in the worship of a fertility god. Some historians even believe that human sacrifices were made here, including child sacrifice.

Imagine what one of those worship services might have been like. There would've been loud music, worshippers dancing, shouting and calling out to the fertility god. You would have seen a large fire roaring on the altar. And then you would've witnessed a small child thrown into the flames to die an excruciating, senseless death in honoring a false god. It's difficult to imagine how people could do such a thing. Today, we recoil in shock and horror at the thought.

But you know what? It happened in Megid-

do way back then, and in a sense it happens today. We don't call it child sacrifice; we call it abortion. Every year we sacrifice millions of babies to our modern gods—the gods of convenience and personal choice. We can't bring ourselves to call it murder. We call it "planned parenthood." And rather than admitting the baby is a human child, we call it a fetus.

We have corrupted our sense of right and wrong. We call good evil and evil good. The stain of abortion today is but one of many sins that will bring God's judgment on our country and the whole world.

We've allowed many other sins to control us—greed, gluttony, adultery, drunkenness, and much more convict us before God. We are a society turned inside out, incapable of discerning righteous judgment.

Mankind's sin and rejection of God's way is exactly why this battle must take place. This final battle represents God's judgment on a world that has forgotten and rejected Him in favor of its own desires.

We have forgotten God and abandoned His spiritual law. We don't want to admit that God has a claim on our lives. We're unwilling to submit to Him in obedience. What the apostle Paul wrote applies to us: "Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting" (Romans 1:28).

Megiddo was a key city in the ancient world. Whoever controlled it controlled a vital link in world commerce. And in the end of the age, Megiddo—or its other name, Armageddon—represents man's last effort to control the world without God.

But you and I don't have to be caught up in the spirit of this world. God is calling people right now to rise above the spirit of rebellion symbolized by Megiddo. Let God's words motivate you to discern this time and not be caught unaware, naked and ashamed! **GN**

## Learn More

Do you understand what end-time prophecy is all about? It need not be a mystery. God gave prophecy to help us understand where our world is headed and why. To learn more, request your free copies of the study guides *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*.



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# As America Retreats, a Dangerous World Emerges

What happens when the world’s policeman hangs up his badge and gun and retires into the sunset? We’re beginning to get a sobering firsthand look. *by Mike Kelley*



**T**he closing chapters of World War II took place in the spring and summer of 1945 with the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The United States became the dominant world power, with the world’s largest economy producing a full 50 percent of world economic output at the time. Its army and the Soviet Union’s Red Army were the two largest in the world.

However, as sole possessor of the atomic bomb, the United States stood at the top. Only the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), which obtained the bomb several years later, disputed American hegemony.

For half a century afterward, the United States played the role of the world’s policeman, intervening in Korea, Vietnam, Africa, the Middle East, even the Caribbean, to thwart communist insurgencies, upstart dictatorships and other threats to peace and a balanced world order. By no means did America play this role perfectly, yet the free world did come to rely on the United States as the one power with the will and the might to extend itself in the cause of international justice.

Yet recent events show an America on the retreat, backpedaling, withdrawing and in general on the defensive. What has

happened to the nation that most other countries have looked to for leadership in dangerous times? And what does it mean for the world?

### “Leading from behind” leads to chaotic realignments ahead

Over the past decade, commentators across the world have noted this change. Past *Good News* articles have cited respected sources such as the British news-magazine *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*, Germany’s *Der Spiegel* and *The Wall Street Journal*, all of which have noted the seismic shift in America’s willingness to involve herself globally.

Taking office in 2009, newly elected U.S. President Barack Obama lost no time in spelling out his new vision for America’s role in the world.

The United States would no longer assert its authority abroad, he promised. America would play nicely in the sandbox of nations, not driving its own interests, and would rely increasingly on other nations to carry the burden of maintaining international order. “Leading from behind” was to become America’s new role on the world stage.

Former U.S. National Security Advisor

Zbigniew Brzezinski is just one of many who are sounding the alarm on America’s retreat and its implications. In his 2013 book *Strategic Vision, America and the Crisis of Global Power*, Brzezinski argues that the eventual demise of the United States as the one global superpower would leave a fragmented world, one even more dangerous than the world today.

If this were to happen by, say, 2025, he says, “no single power will be ready by then to exercise the role that the world . . . expected the United States to play. More probable would be a protracted phase of rather inconclusive and somewhat chaotic realignments of both global and regional power, with no grand winners and many more losers, in a setting of international uncertainty and even of potentially fatal risks to global well-being” (p. 75).

### Ongoing crises in Egypt, Syria and Iran

More than five years of this thinking and the actions—or inaction—flowing from it has had its consequences.

Nearly two years ago, a September 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article focused on American inability to guide and influence global events: “The Obama Presidency has been an era of slowly building tension and disorder that seems likely to flare into larger troubles and perhaps even military conflict” (“The New World Disorder,” Sept. 13, 2012).

The article noted how little the United States was able to influence the events of the Arab Spring, how America’s passive approach to that year’s turmoil in Egypt resulted in the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, a long-time U.S. ally, and his replacement as president by a Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi. Since that time, Morsi has been deposed by the military, but Egypt remains a seething cauldron of unrest and instability.

Regrettably, the past two years have seen the situation only deteriorate.

After Syrian president Bashar al-Assad used poison gas to kill hundreds of Syrian civilians, a clear violation of international law, President Obama drew a “line in the

Thinkstock



sand,” threatening U.S. intervention if such weapons were used again. Russia’s Vladimir Putin shrewdly intervened to defuse the crisis, and Obama backed off. Now Assad has again used poison gas against his own people, and the world just yawns.

More than 160,000 people, mostly civilians, have died in Syria’s continuing civil war, and the world seems powerless to stop the carnage.

Eschewing armed military intervention, the Obama administration has turned increasingly to economic sanctions, which it terms “the 21st-century use of force.” No nation has felt the pressure of sanctions more than Iran, as America and the world seek to deter its open pursuit of its own nuclear capability. Sanctions have been in place for years, but how well have they worked?

In early May, veteran CBS newsman Steve Croft spent eight days in Iran, observing life in both urban and rural areas. “While we saw that the sanctions were causing considerable pain, we saw no evidence that the economy was on the verge of collapse,” said Croft in his report.

Among those he interviewed were two Iranian businessmen, leaders in Iran’s budding Internet industry. Asked what effect U.S. and worldwide sanctions were having on their nation, both assured him that although the sanctions were causing pain, they would merely slow down, not halt, Iran’s nuclear progress.

Earlier this year Iran again beat the United States and other Western nations in the international shell game of “watch the weapons.” Outflanking and outmaneuvering U.S.-led negotiators, Iran’s hardline leaders gave up virtually nothing, but gained a lifting of the most effective sanctions against them, including the unfreezing of billions of dollars’ worth of Iranian assets.

Iran’s former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made no secret of the contempt Iran’s leadership has for the United States and European Union, and their long-range plans to destroy them.

And despite Iran’s new president Hassan Rouhani being seen as more moderate, the real power lies with the religious clerics, the chief of whom recently expressed again the desire to eliminate the United States (“‘Jihad Will Only End When Society Can Get Rid of America’: Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in Chilling Threat Towards U.S.,” *Daily Mail*, May 26, 2014).

Yet the Iranians would start with getting rid of Israel, which they consider to be the Middle

## A Detailed Prophecy of Blessings and Curses

Speaking to the ancient Israelite ancestors of today’s Anglo-American peoples, God gave them a choice, one that bears directly on the lack of leadership that plagues America today. You should read Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, which describe God’s blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

Obedience to His law would bring national prominence, including victory when military conflict was inevitable: “The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven” (Deuteronomy 28:7, New International Version).

On the other hand, willful violation of His righteous law would result in defeat and lack of influence: “The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven” (verse 25, NIV).

Why did God make these promises of blessings and curses? Is there anywhere we can search in the Bible to see His purpose in offering the ancient Israelites—and their modern-day descendants—the chance for national greatness?

In an even earlier time, before He made His covenant with the Israelites, God began to work

with their ancestor, Abraham. In the covenant with Abraham, God told him: “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and the sand which is on the seashore . . . In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Genesis 22:17-18).

### God determined thousands of years ago that America and Great Britain would be His model nations.

God had determined thousands of years before America and Great Britain ascended to world power status that these would be His model nations. Like “a city on a hill that is not hidden” (Matthew 4:14), God had ordained that Great Britain and the United States be shining examples to other nations.

But today we see just the opposite, as America has followed Britain into decline, retreating throughout the world. To understand the amazing story foretold in the pages of your Bible, download or request your free copy of *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.

Eastern outpost of their hated enemies.

### Israel-PA peace negotiations unravel

The United States has long supported Israel, seen to be the only true democracy and reliable ally in the region. But for decades, one U.S. administration after the other has pressured Israel to make peace with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Those efforts seemed to be progressing until recently. Mahmoud Abbas, viewed as a moderate in spite of being a Holocaust denier, became president of the Palestinian Authority in 2004, replacing the hardline terrorist Yasser Arafat. Years of painstaking negotiations seemed to produce a breakthrough earlier this year in which the Palestinian Authority signed on to 15 international agreements that, among other things, require the PA to respect human rights and punish war criminals. Israel began to breathe easier—perhaps peace might come after all.

But in late April Abbas did a complete about-face, signing a unity deal with two genocidal terror groups, Hamas and Islamic

Jihad, both pledged to the destruction of Israel and the annihilation of the Jewish nation. Both groups have carried out decades of terrorist attacks against Israel, including the unrelenting firing of rockets into Israel from the Gaza Strip. The international community considers leaders of both groups to be war criminals.

And where was U.S. leadership in all this? Writing for *The Jerusalem Post*, long-time Middle East observer Caroline Glick commented: “Abbas was only able to sign the Geneva Conventions on the one hand, and the unity deal with terrorist war criminals on the other, because he is utterly convinced that neither the US nor the European Union will hold him accountable for his actions. He is completely certain that neither the Americans nor the Europeans are serious about their professed commitments to upholding international law.

“Abbas is sure that for both the Obama administration and the EU, maintaining support for the PLO far outweighs any concern they have for abiding by the law of nations. He believes this because he has

watched them make excuses for the PLO and its leaders for the past two decades” (“Time for Consequences,” April 24, 2014).

She went on to explain: “The peace process is predicated on the notion that . . . if Israel would just surrender Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria to the Palestinians, then . . . the Muslim world as a whole will cast aside their support for jihad and terrorism and everything will be fine. At least that is how Abbas analyzes the situation. And so far, the US has not disappointed him.”

### China flexes its muscles

As if worries over the Middle East were not enough, Asia and the Pacific Rim continue to supply more headaches for foreign policy advisors in Washington.

The People’s Republic of China has astonished the world in the past 30 years with its vast, seemingly unstoppable economic growth. Chinese leaders are using their new strength to build up their military—to the dismay of both Japan and Taiwan. For decades, China has made it clear that it plans to reunite Nationalist China—the island of Taiwan—with the mainland, using force if necessary. Taiwanese leaders worry about the strength of U.S. commitment to their security in the event of a military strike by the People’s Republic.

China has raised the tension level with Japan by recently claiming a vastly extended airspace. Its claimed new “air defense identification zone” covers most of the Sea of Japan and includes several small islands that Japan has long claimed as its own. When the United States raised protests in favor of Japan, a Chinese defense spokesman bluntly told America to “butt out.”

American criticism of the air zone announcement is “completely unreasonable,” Col. Yang Yujun, a Ministry of National Defense spokesman, said in late 2013 in response to a protest lodged by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. The dispute, like so many in the world, remains unresolved, with the White House finding it can do little to influence the Chinese.

### Russia undeterred

Recent months have witnessed a development in Europe not seen by the world since the late 1930s—the brazen takeover of part of a European nation by Russia.

Smarting from the recent rejection of its puppet, Victor Yanukovich, as president of Ukraine, Russia brazenly fomented discontent among the majority Russian-leaning citizens of the Ukrainian province of

Crimea, then simply annexed the region.

European nations that share a common Russian border feel threatened, none more than the three former Soviet republics of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, which gained their independence from Russia following the collapse of the Soviet empire in the early 1990s.

Estonia, with its large Russian-speaking population, is clearly worried. As reported by Reuters in late March, Russia has signaled “concern” over supposed mistreatment of the Russian-speaking segment there, as it did earlier with the Russian speakers of Crimea. History remembers that Adolf Hitler also used concern for German-speaking Czechs to justify his takeover of the Czech Sudetenland in 1938.

As of mid-May the Ukrainian crisis was worsening, with Russian sympathizers in control of many government buildings in Eastern Ukraine. Increased economic sanctions by the United States and Europe were doing little to deter Russian actions.

In fact, on May 21, 2014, Russia announced that, after years of negotiations, it had signed a \$400 billion, 30-year agreement to supply China with natural gas. The deal provides Russia with an enormous cash flow from an emerging economic and military giant and provides a strategic buffer against the loss of any of Russia’s western European markets while providing China with needed energy resources to help fuel its economy.

With the West alienating Russia with threats of economic sanctions, it only succeeded in driving Russia into further embrace with the world’s other great totalitarian, anti-Western regime. At the same time, elements of Russia’s Pacific fleet were beginning joint naval drills with the Chinese navy, and both governments announced closer financial collaboration.

### Return to the Cold War?

One hears increasing talk of a return to the Cold War of decades ago. A *New York Times* story earlier this year quoted Stephen Hadley, President George W. Bush’s national security adviser, stating it would be harder to recover from this clash than in the past because Mr. Putin is effectively rejecting the international order established after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

“He wants to rewrite the history that emerged at the end of the Cold War,” Hadley said. “We have fundamentally different approaches to what Europe is going to be” (quoted by Peter Baker, “If Not a Cold War, a

Return to a Chilly Rivalry,” March 18, 2014).

Many centuries ago God thundered a prophetic warning to America and the other nations descended from ancient Israel: “*I will break the pride of your power . . . And your strength shall be spent in vain*” (Leviticus 26:19-20, emphasis added throughout).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in recent and current U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite more than a decade of warfare and more than a trillion dollars spent, Iraq is disintegrating into civil war. In Afghanistan, U.S. forces have announced a timetable for withdrawal, while Afghan President Hamid Karzai ignores America and even refused to meet with President Obama when he flew to Afghanistan on May 26, 2014.

Historians agree that the reason for the United States “winning” the Cold War in the early 1990s was its military and economic strength. Yet today we see that strength draining away. Though America still has the strongest military and the largest economy in the world, its enemies are catching up. The nation is steadily losing its advantages and ability to influence world events.

### Where should we turn?

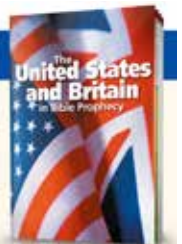
History does have a way of repeating itself. But what should be our attitude towards these events? In such a world, where is one left to turn?

The same God who said, “I will break the pride of your power” also commands His people to remain vigilant in a time of growing world crisis. “Watch therefore,” Jesus Christ told His followers when they asked him about the future (Matthew 24:42).

That same command applies to us today. America’s decline on the world scene will have tragic consequences. It is high time we open our eyes to what is going on in the world around us, as ancient prophecies begin to be fulfilled in our headlines. **GN**

### Learn More

What’s behind America’s sudden and accelerating decline on the world stage? Is there a connection with Bible prophecy? To understand the amazing story laid out in your Bible centuries ago, be sure to download or request *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* today!



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# Out of Darkness, Into the Light

A young man realized he could illuminate his dark world through the light of education. And his efforts to increase his knowledge, improve himself and serve others have since helped millions.

Discover vital spiritual lessons from his story. *by John LaBissoniere*

Louis desired deeply to learn, grow and accomplish meaningful goals. But he was born in the early 1800s, and he was blind. At that time in history there were few opportunities for people in his condition. Blind people were often doomed to a life of illiteracy and poverty. They frequently spent their lives begging in the streets.

But Louis was not dismayed. His thirst for education and improvement was unimpaired by his disability or other obstacles, and this resulted in great benefit for untold numbers of people. His story provides important lessons for all of us.

## Early attempts to teach blind children to read

Louis Braille was born Jan. 4, 1809, in the French village of Coupvray. Due to a tragic childhood accident he became blind by age 5. At age 10 he was given the opportunity to attend the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, which was one of the first schools for blind children in the world. Pupils were taught to read by a method developed by Valentin Haüy, the school's founder.

Haüy had produced books by embossing raised letters of the alphabet onto heavy wet paper so the impressions would remain after the paper dried. However, the huge, heavy books were difficult to read since the students had to trace their fingers over large imprints of each letter. Even reading a single sentence was a lengthy process.

In 1821, Captain Charles Barbier of the French Army visited the institute to share his invention called sonography or "night writing." He thought his discovery could be of value to the blind. It was a military code of dots and dashes punched onto heavy paper designating 36 sounds. Soldiers touched the impressions with their fingers

and could thus communicate among themselves during combat without the need for light or speech.

## An exciting new idea generated

Although this method proved unsatisfactory for use by the students, Louis found the idea of utilizing a code to represent letters an electrifying concept. Eager to find a simple yet effective method for reading and writing, he employed Barbier's basic notion as a model in developing his own system.

Louis created unique symbols for each letter by reducing the 12 raised dots of the sonography method to a maximum of six. Most importantly, his design made it possible to identify individual letters with a single touch of a finger. This was because the characters, which represented each letter, were arranged in small rectangular blocks called cells. The number and arrangement of the tiny raised dots, which were punched onto heavy paper, distinguished one character from another.

Louis' revolutionary technique made it possible for blind people to read as swiftly and easily as sighted individuals. He completed his project in 1824 when he was just 15 years of age.

## Louis Braille treasured learning

Throughout his time as a student at the institute, Louis proved to be highly talented and productive. He treasured learning and found that education gave him deep fulfillment in what otherwise might have been a bleak, fruitless existence.

After completing the school's curriculum Louis was asked to stay on as a teacher's aide. When he turned 24 in 1833, he became the first blind professor at the institute, where he taught mathematics and history. His fellow teachers and

pupils admired him greatly.

Louis' irrepressible desire to learn, grow and contribute to society also extended to his love for music. He adapted his reading system for use in musical notation. He also became a highly skilled cellist and organist and played the organ in churches throughout France.

Besides his visual disability, Louis faced health-related complications throughout his lifetime. He had a persistent respiratory disorder believed to be tuberculosis. By age 40 his condition deteriorated to the point that he found it necessary to resign his teaching position. The infirmity finally claimed his life on Jan. 6, 1852. He was buried in the small cemetery in his hometown.

## Braille system assists millions

On the 100th anniversary of his death in 1952, Louis' remains were moved to the Panthéon in Paris, where many French national luminaries are buried. A large public ceremony was held in his honor and attended by dignitaries from around the world. Among them was the famous blind and deaf American author Helen Keller, who remarked, "We, the blind, are as indebted to Louis Braille as mankind is to Gutenberg."

Eventually, Louis' groundbreaking reading and writing method spread around the globe and became known by his name. The Braille system made education more effective for multiple millions of blind individuals. It's available through many advanced communications methods today.

Louis hungered to learn, develop himself and serve others. His way out of the darkness of his disability was through the light of learning. He sought passionately and tirelessly to increase his knowledge and generate positive change.

## A paradoxical spiritual truth

Louis Braille's story is certainly remarkable and offers us vital spiritual lessons. To understand, we must first grasp something both significant and paradoxical. Louis was among the relative few who are physically blind in a sighted world. Yet, spiritually



speaking, the world at large resides in spiritual darkness while only a *few* have genuine spiritual vision (Matthew 13:11).

God has allowed Satan the devil to temporarily blind human beings from knowing Him and understanding His plan of salvation (Matthew 13:18-23). The apostle Paul explained this state of affairs when he wrote: “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose

While God gives to a few the opportunity to know and follow Him, we still need to grasp *another* important biblical reality. It is that even those God has called out of spiritual blindness do not yet have *complete* spiritual vision.

The apostle Paul wrote: “For now, we can only see a dim and blurry picture of things, as when we stare into polished metal. I realize that everything I know is only part

### **Avoiding spiritual perils**

Drifting away from God is a particular danger in our age due to the many physical distractions we can encounter (1 Timothy 4:1-2). Additionally, trials and pressures may wear down our passion to pursue God’s way of life. Considering these spiritual perils, what must we do to avoid losing our zeal? The book of Hebrews, probably written by Paul, answers by saying, “Therefore we must give the *more earnest heed* to the things we have heard, *lest we drift away*” (Hebrews 2:1).

Furthermore Paul wrote, “And let us *not grow weary* while doing good, for in due season we shall reap *if we do not lose heart*” (Galatians 6:9). To avoid “losing heart” we must firmly resolve, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to stay close to God through prayer and the regular study of His Word (Luke 18:1; 2 Timothy 1:6-7).

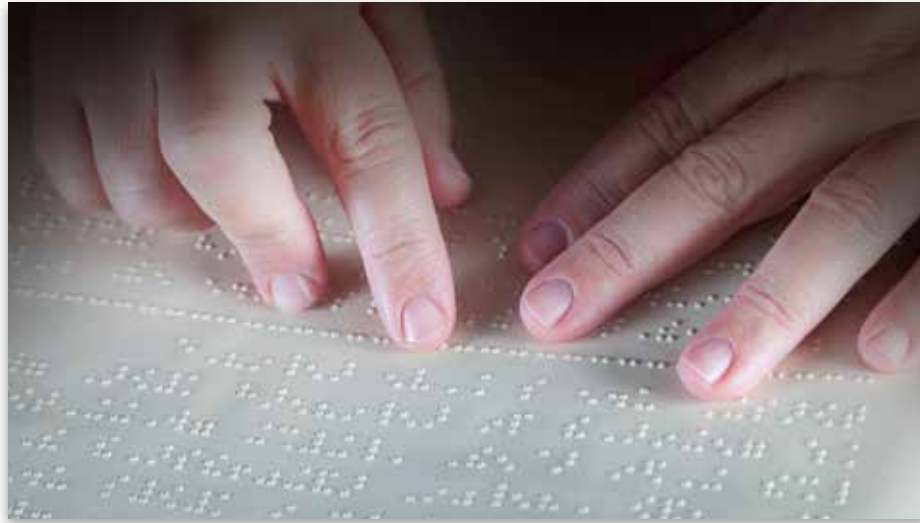
So, are we like Louis Braille in desiring so much to learn, grow and accomplish our objectives that we will let nothing obstruct our way? Louis relentlessly drove himself to bring the bright light of learning to his mind and heart. Despite his blindness and ill health, he worked diligently to develop himself and help others. Are we willing to strongly advance our education in godly uprightness no matter what obstacles or hardships we encounter?

### **Into God’s marvelous light**

The Eternal God has given us the most spectacular gift of spiritual insight. Although we don’t yet have perfect divine vision, our eyes are open to His magnificent truths and the reward of eternal life.

Will we take full advantage of God’s great calling by faithfully growing in grace and knowledge and hungering and thirsting for righteousness? (See 1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18; Matthew 5:6.) Will we steadfastly continue pursuing the awe-inspiring goal of the Kingdom of God? (See Matthew 6:33.) If so, we can look forward to the time when we will be awarded perfect spiritual understanding at Jesus Christ’s return.

As for Louis Braille and all those who have been or are now physically blind or visually impaired, the time is coming when God will not only heal them physically but will give them true spiritual vision (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5). That superb future is one we can all eagerly anticipate. So let those of us who have been invited to follow God do so zealously and steadfastly. For, in the words of 1 Peter 2:9, He has called us “out of darkness into His marvelous light”! **GN**



## **Louis drove himself to acquire the bright light of learning. Are we willing to do the same spiritually?**

*minds the god of this age has blinded*, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Corinthians 4:3-4, emphasis added throughout).

Although the majority of people are now blind *spiritually*, God will ultimately give every person who has ever lived—or will live—the opportunity to know Him fully (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

### **An invitation to spiritual understanding**

Despite the fact that God is not currently inviting all people to understand His precious truth, He is calling some. Those who respond through repentance and obedience are chosen for a special relationship with Jesus Christ as His brothers and sisters in His Church (Matthew 22:14).

How spectacular is the gift of His calling? “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who *called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

of the big picture. But one day, when Jesus arrives, we will see clearly, face-to-face.

In that day, I will fully know just as I have been wholly known by God” (1 Corinthians 13:12, The Voice).

### **Zealous to grow spiritually**

Since we do not yet have full divine comprehension, we need to ask ourselves a crucial question: Do we intensely desire to *increase* our knowledge of God as much as or more than Louis Braille yearned to understand his physical world? Are we *zealously* motivated to develop ourselves spiritually, no matter what our age, health or other circumstances? (See Colossians 1:10.)

The apostle Paul expressed it well when he said we should be “casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing *every thought* into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The phrase “every thought” indicates we must be utterly dedicated to imitating Jesus’ righteous example. Also, the apostle Peter advised brethren to “*grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).



# Is God's Temple Under Construction?

Scripture indicates that before the return of Jesus Christ, a new temple is to be built in Jerusalem. But is a grand temple of God already under construction? Does it involve you? *by Mike and Jamie Snyder*

**M**any Jews long for it. A number are actively preparing for it. Bible prophecy says it will happen. Amazingly, it directly concerns you.

Before Jesus makes His prophesied return to earth, certain passages in the Bible appear to state that a third physical temple of God will be constructed or will be undergoing construction alongside an operational sacrificial altar, possibly directly on the ancient temple site atop Mount Moriah in the city of Jerusalem.

Since Judaism—a variant of the original Israelite religion established by God thousands of years ago—has adapted and functioned for nearly 2,000 years without an operating temple, one might be initially hard pressed to understand and appreciate the once-central role the temple of God played.

Let's review a brief history of the first and second physical temples to better understand the significance of what God is doing today. Let's also see how they may concern you!

## The first physical temple in Jerusalem

First constructed and dedicated by King Solomon in the 900s B.C., the temple replaced the mobile sanctuary, commonly called the tabernacle, that was first developed during the time of Moses soon after the Exodus. This elaborate portable "temple" first served to house the resplendent Ark of the Covenant, which was placed in a designated space called the Holy of Holies—a space God's presence would occupy.

An estimated 15 to 20 stories high, the first temple complex made up about half of the city of Jerusalem at the time it was built. While the building was finished during the eighth month on the Hebrew calendar (1 Kings 6:38), it was not formally dedicated by King Solomon until nearly a year later in the following seventh month of the calendar, at the time of the annual Festival of Tabernacles (1 Kings 8:2; 2 Chronicles 5:3).

The finished temple, which towered over the city, meant different things to different people. Reflecting the future statement by Jesus that "a city that is set on hill cannot be hidden" (Matthew 5:14), the temple was specifically set on Mount Moriah by God to be "of great magnificence and fame

Now, with no more tribute being paid to the Assyrians, the Phoenicians were eager to forge strong ties with the burgeoning military power to the south, particularly since it seemed to win major battles effortlessly. Phoenicia thus was quick to recognize the victorious King David of Israel, sending diplomatic emissaries south with gifts of prized wood from the legendary cedars of Lebanon.

The Festival of Tabernacles dedication of this mammoth and glorious physical structure was an event of epic scale. Shortly before a dramatic dedication prayer by King



**As significant as the construction of this end-time temple will be, there is something far more significant in God's plan with regard to a temple being built.**

and splendor *in the sight of all the nations*" (1 Chronicles 22:5, New International Version, emphasis added throughout).

To the ancient Phoenicians up north, the presence of a new regional superpower was most welcome. After becoming king, David ultimately united all of Israel, creating a regional military and political presence that could not be ignored. In fact, the new united kingdom that grew under King Solomon, David's son, stretched its borders far, shunting aside the Assyrians. The hated Assyrians now no longer dominated the Phoenicians, who were regional leaders in trade.

Solomon, the priests carried the cherished Ark of Covenant, which contained the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been written by God Himself, into the new Holy of Holies.

As the priests withdrew from this sacred space, "the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple" (1 Kings 8:10-11, NIV)

The first temple dominated the early history of the united kingdom of Israel. But what does that have to do with you? Let's read on.

## The once-proud temple destroyed

Tragically, despite this majestic and awe-inspiring beginning, the people of Israel and Judah ultimately allowed the beauty and magnificence of the physical temple to eclipse God Himself. They allowed, then promoted, its desecration. Despite many dire prophetic warnings from Moses to Jeremiah and more, first Israel, then Judah, turned to other gods, powerless idols of clay and stone (Ezekiel 8:5-17). As a result, they would pay a severe price.

The consequences of these lawless actions finally reached a bitter climax. The prophet Ezekiel recorded a vision of a dreadful scene. Centuries after Solomon's magnificent dedication, the presence of God once again took the form of a cloud. God's mighty manifestation again "filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD" (Ezekiel 10:4, NIV).

But this time something terrible happened—all a result of Israel's manifold sins and rejection of God: "Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple," rising to the east gate of the Temple Mount and then on to lift above the Mount of Olives (verse 18, 11:1, 22-23)

With God's presence removed, the once-glorious temple became as an ordinary building. Without God's protection, ancient Jerusalem was doomed.

Finally, the previously unthinkable happened. "The city was besieged . . . the city wall was broken through" (Jeremiah 52:5, 7). The result? Just as prophesied, in 587-586 B.C. King Zedekiah was forcibly captured and taken captive to Babylon, together with multiple thousands of Jewish families, now simply the booty of war.

Shortly thereafter the captain of the guard for Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem. There "he set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building *he burned down*" (Jeremiah 52:13, NIV).

The promises of disobedience had tragically come to life. Now virtually annihilated, the ruins of Jerusalem and its once-mighty temple became the habitation of crows and vultures (Psalm 79:1-2).

However, all was not lost. God is merciful. And what came to pass has a direct impact on us today!

## Rebuilt, yet not as before

Over time the political sands shifted. Decades later, the Persian Empire conquered the former Babylonian empire, and God

caused its king to look favorably toward the captive Jews. Miraculously, King Cyrus of Persia was inspired directly by God to not only allow the Jews to return to their homeland, but to provide funds and supplies to rebuild the previously destroyed temple!

Accordingly, Cyrus the Great issued a decree in 538 B.C. to allow about 50,000 Jews, led by Zerubbabel, to return to Jerusalem and begin the rebuilding (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5). This was no easy task, particularly given that the Jews now lacked the massive resources of an emerging superpower that Solomon previously enjoyed.

The Jews ran into numerous difficult challenges, and work lagged. In 520 B.C., nearly two decades later during the second year of the reign of King Darius (who succeeded Cyrus), God subsequently empowered the prophet Haggai to encourage and direct the Jews to again take up the rebuilding of the temple.

But as the rough-hewn walls of the second temple rose up, some of the older people present remembered the magnificence of the first temple and shuddered. Haggai again delivered a critical message from God: "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like *nothing*?" (Haggai 2:3, NIV). Obviously the second temple in 520 B.C. was a far distant second to the structure it replaced.

## Prophecies of greater glory and destruction

But Haggai then uttered a critical prophecy: "What is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD Almighty . . . 'The glory of this present house *will be greater* than the glory of the former house'" (verses 7, 9, NIV).

This, of course, is nothing less than the prophecy that Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe, would come to this second temple in person! That was fulfilled many times, when Jesus—the desired of all nations (Isaiah 9:6-7; 42:6)—would proclaim and teach many priceless truths in the temple courts (John 7:14; Matthew 21:12-16). What could be more glorious?

So this second temple had great significance, both for the ancient Jews and for us today.

The second temple would continue to be remodeled and transformed, finally undergoing massive redevelopment by Herod the Great some half a millennium after Haggai prophesied. This massive new structure finally physically eclipsed the temple built by Solomon in many respects. It was to this

temple that Jesus Himself came.

But tragedy struck again. A few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Jews collectively rebelled against the occupying Romans. They failed to trust in God, and they failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The result of the rebellion against the Romans was barbaric carnage, and a first partial fulfillment of Christ's warnings given on the Mount of Olives came to pass (Matthew 24).

During the Festival of Unleavened Bread in A.D. 70, the Roman general and future emperor Titus surrounded Jerusalem with four legions of battle-hardened soldiers. The engines of war ground for months until July, when the temple area was set ablaze and thousands were slaughtered.

The magnificent temple was gone. And so we come to today. What does all of this mean for you?

## What lies ahead regarding a temple?

As we have read and understand, the first and second temples played major roles in ancient Israel that reach across the ages to us. As students of Bible prophecy know, the book of Daniel points out that a future terrible entity "shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering" (Daniel 9:27) and that the forces of this entity "shall take away the daily sacrifices and place there the abomination of desolation" (Daniel 11:31).

This was partially fulfilled at the time of the Syrian Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. But Jesus pointed to Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of desolation as something future (Matthew 24:15). There was a measure of fulfillment with the Roman destruction that soon followed. But Jesus clearly connected the abomination prophecy with end-time events.

The prophesied cutting off of sacrifices and desecration presumably cannot take place without a functioning priesthood and a sanctuary area, which is part of what shows that a third temple with a functioning altar will likely stand in Jerusalem prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

But as significant as the construction of this temple would be in the march of end-time events, there is something far more significant in God's plan with regard to a temple being built.

Apart from the ancient physical temples of old, the Bible reveals the present construction of a temple that is of utmost importance to God. That temple has eternal consequences. God Himself is building it.

Where is that temple?



## God is dwelling in a new temple

To answer that question, consider what the apostle Paul asked a gentile congregation in the Greek port city of Corinth some 2,000 years ago: “Do you not know that your body is a *temple of the Holy Spirit* within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19, New Revised Standard Version). He went on to emphasize this to the same congregation a few years later, when he told them “*We are the temple of the living God*” (2 Corinthians 6:16, NIV).

Why is this critically important to understand? The answer relates to the true definition of a Christian. A person can possess extensive biblical knowledge, can perform great acts of sacrifice and can demonstrate what appear to be major spiritual fruits, but that person *may not be a true Christian* except *for the inclusion of one crucial element*.

Paul defines a true Christian in a letter that he wrote to the congregation at Rome: “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, *if the Spirit of God lives in you*. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ [the same as the Holy Spirit], *he does not belong to Christ*” (Romans 8:9, NIV).

So a Christian is one who has living within him or her the Holy Spirit of God, making that person a living temple and part of the collective temple of all those in whom God’s Spirit dwells, the temple now under construction that God is most concerned with!

While the gift of eternal life is just that—a momentous, unbelievable gift from God that cannot be earned—a Christian develops holy righteous character through overcoming trials and growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:17). This holy character results from the construction and development of the living temple of God—reflected in our thoughts, words and actions.

## Our own spiritual construction project

Paul tells us, “*Offer your bodies as living sacrifices*, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1, NIV).

How are we to do this? How are we to foster the development of our spiritual temple? Paul continues, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (verse 2).

The mind is where we truly surrender to God, where “*we take captive every thought* to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV).

The Bible often gives us physical parallels to consider when we are trying to grow

spiritually. In reviewing the building of the first temple, consider what David said about our motives for wanting to build our spiritual temple.

To be successful in our spiritual temple construction project, we must first acknowledge God as all-powerful, and then serve Him both with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind.

Why is a *willing mind* so important? Consider this critical fact: “The LORD searches every heart, and understands



5:22: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (NIV). What is the chief defining milestone? As Jesus Himself said: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, *if you have love for one another*” (John 13:35).

Why is building a spiritual temple important? As noted earlier, a major purpose for the magnificent construction of the first temple was to bear witness of God’s way of life. It was to be built “in the *sight of all the nations*” (1 Chronicles 22:5). Similarly, Jesus commanded His disciples to “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, NIV).

Finally, building a major construction project is tough work. If you don’t know what you’re doing, the construction of a spiritual temple can produce high anxiety.

But we have a spiritual construction manager onsite! He is prepared to help us with all directions and supplies. Paul declares this promise from God: “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19, NIV).

The same words David told his son

## To be successful in our spiritual temple construction, we must acknowledge God as all-powerful, then serve Him both with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind.

*every motive* behind the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9, NIV).

*Wholehearted devotion* means we do it with all our might (Ecclesiastes 9:10). We don’t hold back. As David prepared to set up Solomon for the construction of the first temple, we find that he publicly gave his “personal treasures . . . for the temple of my God, *over and above everything* I have [already] provided for this holy temple” (1 Chronicles 29:3).

Even though God is invisible, to succeed in our spiritual temple project we must deploy faith. Why? Because “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that *he exists* and that *he rewards those who earnestly seek him*”! (Hebrews 11:6, NIV).

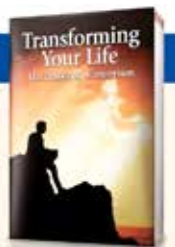
Any construction project has milestones and outcomes to meet. Our spiritual temple construction project is no different. As we progress in our Christian construction project, together with the Holy Spirit living and working within us, we will begin to display and demonstrate critical milestones and outcomes. We find them listed in Galatians

Solomon are true for us today as we conduct the construction of our spiritual temple: “*Be strong and courageous, and do the work*. Don’t be afraid or discouraged by the size of the task, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. He will see to it that all the work related to the Temple of the LORD is finished correctly” (1 Chronicles 28:20, New Living Translation 1996).

Yes, God’s temple is already under construction. Is He building it within you? **GN**

## Learn More

For additional reading to give you further insight into this topic, please download or request our free study aids *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *The Road to Eternal Life*.



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[www.GNmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.GNmagazine.org/booklets)

# The Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ

**A**ny retelling of the life of Jesus Christ falls far short of doing it justice. If you're not familiar with the facts of Jesus' life and ministry, this study will be an introduction that hopefully will whet your appetite to want to learn more.

Understanding Jesus Christ is the foundation for understanding true Christianity, which is believing and living by His teachings and striving to imitate His perfect life.

If you already have a good understanding of Christ's life and teachings, this study should be an inspiring review and overview of that most precious understanding. It may also help prepare you to know how to explain to others our purpose in life and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

For modern-day disciples of Christ who love Him above all else, it's always a joy to read and meditate on His wonderful life and teachings. To be a true disciple of Christ means not only to be an admirer and follower, not only to obey and imitate Him, but *to try to become like Him in every way*. We hope this study will help you toward that goal.

## We weren't there, yet we must believe

The following account from John 20:19-29 about "doubting Thomas" has a great lesson for all of us:

"Then, the same day [the day after Jesus rose from the dead] at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, 'Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' . . .

"Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, 'We have seen the Lord.' So he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.'

"And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you!'

"Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.'

"And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!'

"Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*'" (emphasis added throughout). This is talking

about us and our responsibility to trust the biblical message!

## The sources of information about Him

The primary sources of information about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ are the first four books of the New Testament, which are called the Gospels. Other sources are the many prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures—commonly called the Old Testament—which foretold the future Messiah, and

**The four Gospels have different perspectives that complement each other and help to fill out the whole picture of Jesus' life and teachings.**

the New Testament books in which the apostles explain many things about Christ and His teachings.

Why are there four Gospels instead of just one? First, the Gospels are not purely biographies. Each of the four authors write from different perspectives and for different audiences, and are meant to provide multiple witnesses to the life of Christ. Of course, each author was inspired by God through His Holy Spirit.

There are no real contradictions among the four accounts. The four different perspectives complement each other and help to fill out the whole picture of Jesus' life and teachings. There is, in fact, harmony, continuity and unity among the four accounts. It's profitable to combine the perspectives into an overall view, but it's also interesting and profitable to focus on one perspective at a time.

Summarizing the particular focus of each author can be challenging, but here is one simplified approach: Matthew announces Jesus as King, Mark presents Him as Servant, Luke focuses on Him as Man, and John highlights Him as God. Jesus is our perfect model in each of these roles.

## A scriptural overview of Jesus' life

Let's look, then, at what the Bible reveals about the life and ministry of our Savior.

### ► What are the meanings of Jesus' primary names and titles?

"And she [Mary] will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name *Jesus*, for *He will save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21).

"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name *Immanuel*,' which is translated, '*God with us*'" (Matthew 1:23).



“He [Andrew] first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, ‘We have found *the Messiah*’ (which is translated, *the Christ*)” (John 1:41).

“But why do you call Me ‘*Lord, Lord,*’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’” (Matthew 16:13).

We can understand a lot about Jesus and His mission by understanding His names and titles. *Jesus* is actually the Anglicized Latin form of His name. The Greek text has *Iesous*, but the actual Hebrew form of His name by which He was called was *Yeshua*, from which we derive the English name *Joshua*. The name *Yeshua* means “Yah (God) saves” or “God’s salvation.”

Jesus truly was and is *Immanuel* or “God with us.” He was and is the Son of God and therefore God. He was *God in the flesh* (Luke 1:35; John 20:28).

*Messiah* (from Hebrew *mashiach*) means “anointed” or “anointed one,” a term for consecrated servants of high position—particularly used to signify the future King of the line of David who would rule the world. Many prophecies promised this Ruler to be sent by God as a deliverer and liberator. Jesus came to the earth the first time to die for our sins and will come the second time to ultimately deliver us from mortality to immortality—then leading the world to the same salvation. The Greek word for *Messiah* is *Christos*, from which derives *Christ*.

*Lord* means *master* and *ruler*. Sadly, however, most who have called Him “Master” would not obey Him as their master.

### ► Did Jesus exist before His human conception?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14).

To learn more about Jesus’ preexistence, see the Mini-Study in the November-December 2013 *Good News* titled “An Amazing Truth: Jesus Christ Was the God of the Old Testament.”

### ► How was Jesus conceived as a human child?

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).

God the Father used the Holy Spirit to bring about the conception of Jesus in the womb of the Jewish virgin named Mary. For further description, see Matthew 1:19-23 and Luke 1:26-35. And for a description of the Word voluntarily giving up His divine power and glory to temporarily become a human being, see Philippians 2:6-8.

### ► What were the circumstances of Jesus’ birth?

“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered [for a census] . . . Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger” (Luke 2:1, 4-7).

The events that followed Jesus’ birth are described in the remainder of Luke 2 and in Matthew 2. The exact date of Jesus’ birth is unknown, but it was certainly not in midwinter, as the

Christmas tradition maintains. For thorough proof that most of the traditions involved in Christmas celebrations are not from the Bible, see our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

### ► What was Jesus’ childhood like?

“So when they [Joseph and Mary] had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:39-40).

“Is this [Jesus] not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called

**Jesus’ last and most important sign was His prophecy that He would rise from the dead in three days and would be in the tomb exactly three days and three nights. That was precisely fulfilled!**

Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things [His wisdom and miracle-working abilities]?” (Matthew 13:55-56).

Jesus grew up with His mother, stepfather and several younger siblings, the natural children of Mary and Joseph. Jesus certainly was precocious, being able at 12 years old to discuss Scripture with scholars at the temple (Luke 2:41-52). And in order to later be the perfect sacrifice and Savior, He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15).

### ► When, where and how did Jesus begin His ministry?

“Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23).

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John [the Baptist] at the Jordan [River] to be baptized by him” (Matthew 3:13).

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1).

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee” (Matthew 4:12).

After His baptism and His 40-day fast and temptation by Satan, Jesus returned to Galilee to begin His ministry. Galilee is the area around the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of the land of Israel.

### ► What was the message that Jesus preached?

“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15).

The word *gospel* means “good news.” Jesus’ message was about God’s plan to establish His Kingdom and to offer to all humanity the opportunity for salvation, eternal life, in that Kingdom!

### ► What else was remarkable and astonishing about Jesus’ ministry?

“And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

Jesus healed people everywhere He went, which reveals several important things. His miracles proved He was sent by God (Acts

2:22). They showed that He cares for our physical needs as well as our spiritual needs. He loved and respected all people, regardless of gender, race, age or status, demonstrating a degree of love the world had never seen and which serves as a role model for all His future followers (John 13:34-35). He also used miracles to prove that He had the authority to forgive sins and to heal us of our spiritual problems (Matthew 9:6).

► **Is Jesus the foundation and Head of His Church?**

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles



and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19-20 ; see also 1 Corinthians 3:11).

“And He [Christ] is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18).

► **Did Jesus die and rise from the dead exactly as He foretold?**

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40).

At the close of Jesus’ 3½-year ministry, Jesus willingly allowed Himself to be arrested, tortured, crucified and killed. Jesus’ last and most important sign was His prophecy that He would rise from the dead in three days and would be in the tomb exactly three days and three nights (Matthew 12:38-40). That was precisely fulfilled!

Careful study of all the accounts shows He was crucified on a Wednesday afternoon and was put in the tomb before sundown. He rose from the dead and then left the tomb exactly three full days later, late in the afternoon of the weekly Sabbath (Saturday). (To see this spelled out in detail, download or request our free study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*.)

After His resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven and returned to appear to His followers several times. Then 40 days after His resurrection, He again ascended to heaven to be at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 1:1-11). As Jesus repeatedly promised, He will one day return to the earth (verse 11). And this next time, it

will be “with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26).

► **What was the main reason for Jesus’ earthly life and death?**

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31).

Jesus Christ lived His earthly life to set us an example and to build His Church. He died for each and every one of us to pay the penalty of our sins so we can be forgiven of those sins. And He lives again to serve as our Savior, High Priest and Master (Hebrews 4:14-15).

► **So what shall we do?**

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:36-38).

When Christ’s disciples received the Holy Spirit on this Day of Pentecost following Jesus’ ascension to heaven, the apostle Peter preached a sermon about Jesus being the prophesied Messiah and how He had been raised from the dead and “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33). He stunned the assembled people in telling them, “You crucified [Him]” (verse 36).

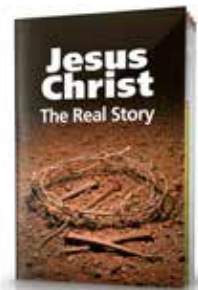
Of course, most of that crowd had no direct part in getting Jesus condemned to death. But we all are guilty indirectly because “all have sinned” and “Christ died for our sins” (Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 15:3).

When the people were convinced that Jesus was “both Lord and Christ” (verse 36) and that the guilt for His death lay on everyone, many of them asked, “What shall we do?” They knew they needed to take action. Peter then told them what each person must do to be forgiven of his or her sins and to receive the awesome gift of God’s Holy Spirit (verse 38). Peter’s instruction to repent and be baptized is just as valid and vital today as it was at that time. This is explained in more detail in our study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.

**Apply now**

Simply *knowing about* our Lord and Savior isn’t enough. We must, like those who heard Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, ask, “*What shall we do?*”

Read through the answers in *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and write down a plan of personal action in response to the perfect life and sacrifice of our Savior. Also, to learn much more about Him, download or request your free copy of our eye-opening study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. **GN**



# Lessons From the Parables

## The Fig Tree: A Lesson in the Patience and Judgment of God

What does a parable about an unproductive fig tree have to do with how you're going about your life? The answer is—quite a bit!

by Darris McNeely

**T**he parable of the barren fig tree offers both good news and bad news. The good news is that God is merciful and willing to forgive. The bad news is that even God's patient mercy has its limits. Neither you nor I want to be on the receiving end when God's patience runs out. It's better to repent while we have the opportunity!

Jesus Christ spoke one of His most interesting parables about a barren fig tree. Here's what He said: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down'" (Luke 13:6-9).

Fruit trees require lot of care and proper handling to continue producing luscious fruit year in and year out. It's rewarding to see a tree bending under the weight of apples, pears, oranges or grapefruit. To go into your backyard and pick your own fruit you watched develop and ripen is both instructive and rewarding.

It's instructive in that we see how fruit develops on a tree. We see the bloom appear and then the first buds of the fruit begin to grow and develop through the months. Seeing the process teaches more than we learn by going to the market and buying the fruit off the stand. Fruit doesn't just appear in the grocery store; it's not grown on a delivery truck. It takes time and care to nurture and develop.

It's rewarding to take part in the process

by which fruit grows. Your efforts combine with the work of nature to bring fruit to harvest.

The harvest of ripened fruit is the reason the tree is taking up valuable real estate. Satisfaction is so important in this process that when there is no fruit you stand looking at the tree trying to understand why it has borne no fruit. I've stood looking at barren trees and asked myself the same questions. Before delving further into the parable,

**Repentance is not a fashionable word today. Its basic meaning is *to change*. It means to stop doing something that's not productive or taking you in a wrong direction.**

we need to look at what Christ was saying before He gave it.

### A message about repentance

At the beginning of Luke 13 we see where Christ had been informed about some "Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (verse 1). It was an atrocity committed by the Roman ruler of the province upon the Galileans. We're not told whether there was any provocation. Was it done in retaliation for an attack on the Romans, or was it just done on the whim of the Roman governor as a display of Roman ruthlessness to keep the locals in fear? We don't know. However, Christ used it to teach a profound lesson, and as He often did, He moved right into a parable to drive home the point.

In verse 2 Jesus responded to the news: "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you,

no; *but unless you repent you will all likewise perish*" (emphasis added throughout).

Time and chance happen to everyone, Solomon once wrote (Ecclesiastes 9:11). We don't always control the events that can happen to us with the rush of events and everyday life.

Jesus was saying that these poor people were just like everyone else. They were human, with weaknesses and strengths like everyone else. They were going about their daily lives and were suddenly caught up in an event that happened to come their way.

In the next verses Jesus referred to another well-known recent event, the collapse of a building on unsuspecting bystanders: "Or those eighteen on whom

the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; *but unless you repent you will all likewise perish*" (Luke 13:4-5).

Two stories from everyday life. Two calls to repent, to change the direction of one's life. In telling them that they could "likewise perish," Jesus was warning that they could be like those who, unexpectedly caught up in circumstances beyond their control, had their lives snuffed out in an instant.

That's sobering. We don't like to think about it, and to be blunt, most of us don't consider that life is really like this. But *it is*. There are no guarantees.

Every day we hear news reports of accidents, natural catastrophes and attacks that take innocent lives. People suffer loss of property, lands and rights because of actions taken by others with little thought about what's right or wrong or just.

The world is often this way, and we need



to understand the implications. Jesus was being blunt—*realistically* blunt—with His audience. Events happen in this world over which you have no control, and sometimes good and well-meaning people—people just like you and me—get hurt. His point was that we understand this and do what we can and should do, realizing that time and chance could unexpectedly strike at any time.

### Change and produce

Repentance is not a fashionable word today. You might even need to go to a dictionary to look up the meaning. Its basic meaning is *to change*. It means to stop doing something that’s not productive or taking you in a wrong direction. It means to stop going in one direction of life, a direction that can be self-destructive, and to turn around and go another—in a way that’s productive and even godly.

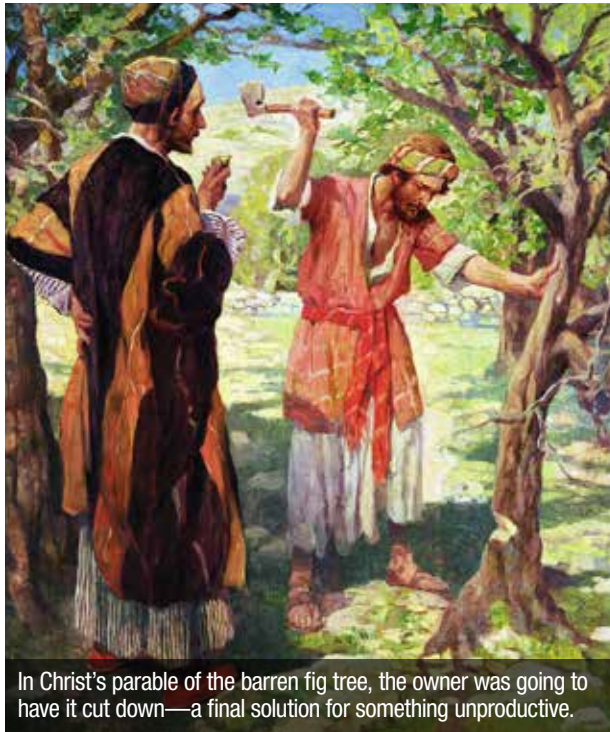
Biblically, and as Christ meant it here, it means *to stop breaking the law of God and begin to obey God’s law*. Christ meant it in the same way He used it when first preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God as quoted in Mark 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” It means that through this announcement a new order of life is at hand and we need to obtain a mind-set that fits. It means to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:8).

Which leads us back to the parable.

An unproductive fig tree in a vineyard is pretty much useless—unless you’re like Nathaniel and want to use it only for shade (John 1:48). And if it hasn’t produced fruit for three years in a row, a remedy needs to be applied. It isn’t that the tree is dead and incapable of producing. The tree hasn’t had the proper care and feeding and is just there, marking time. It’s like a lot of people—alive and breathing, but not really going anywhere.

How about you? Do you understand your life? Can you make sense out of this confusing, sometimes disorderly and uneven existence? Do you know the purpose for your life and what it can become? Forget for a moment the bigger question of “the mean-

ing of life” and just focus on you. What is the purpose for you drawing breath, eating food and taking up space on this planet?



In Christ’s parable of the barren fig tree, the owner was going to have it cut down—a final solution for something unproductive.

If you don’t know, or if your answer is pretty weak and unsure, then just consider for a brief moment that this unproductive fig tree could be a symbol of your life. You are alive. You have a “place.” But are you producing fruit? Are you living as part of a bigger, overarching purpose?

You can find the answers to these questions. And they can make a positive difference in your life. And God wants you to find the answer!

### Extending time to turn things around

The vineyard owner’s solution to this unproductive fig tree was blunt: “Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?” (verse 7).

This is a hard solution, and a final one. It shows us a truth about God. God is full of mercy and compassion. He is patient and loving. But God is also a God of judgment, and Christ is warning here that a time of final judgment will come on a life—especially a life that has had opportunity, warning and the benefit of the doubt. When linked to the earlier statement “unless you repent,” we learn that there’s a way to avoid being “cut down” and considered of no value.

Don’t be discouraged! The remainder of the parable shows us the way out!

The keeper of the vineyard answers the

owner: “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down” (verses 8-9).

The keeper asks for one more year in which to work with the tree—to turn it around and make it useful and productive. There is hope and every expectation that the wise and capable attention of the keeper will produce a new burst of productivity so that the next harvest will see fruit on the tree. That is the key thought here.

We can see that God is in a dual role here as both keeper and owner of the vineyard. This shows us that God both owns us and gives us room to grow spiritually, but He also expects us to produce “fruit”—the product of a life of good works of righteousness.

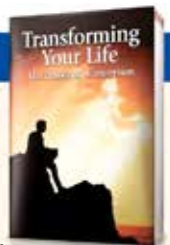
Galatians 5:22-23 defines the kind of fruit God wants to see produced in our lives: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” The apostle Paul explains here that these qualities are the fruit of God’s Spirit. They are what can be produced by God through our lives when we repent and believe the gospel, surrender ourselves to Him and allow our lives to be led by His Holy Spirit.

This parable of a barren fig tree is meant to teach us a vital truth. Repentance is necessary, and it is possible with God’s help. He is patient and grants us time to change and bear fruit. Yet at the same time, none of us knows how much time we have left—so we’d better get moving!

God in His judgment is always just, and only He understands the depth of your life. That He is aware and inspecting His “vineyard” to know the condition of each of His trees is a comfort. His desire is that none perish (2 Peter 3:9) but that all produce abundant fruit and inherit eternal life! **GN**

### Learn More

How can we produce the kind of fruit God desires to see in our lives? What kind of fruit does He want to see? Where do we begin? Download or request our free study guides *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion and Tools for Spiritual Growth*.



Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download them from our website.

[www.GNmagazine.org/booklets](http://www.GNmagazine.org/booklets)



# Discipleship Will Cost You—You!

What does following the One who gave Himself in total sacrifice mean for you and me? Put simply, it means that we are to give of ourselves completely and always. *by Robin Webber*

Perhaps you've heard the story of the farmer's chicken who proposed to the cow that they make the farmer breakfast. The cow cheerfully responded: "I'm in! What will we give him?" The chicken replied, "I'll supply the eggs, and you supply the meat."

The cow's countenance dimmed as she realized the ramifications of the initial invitation. She sadly replied to the chicken, "For you that's devotion, but for me it means total sacrifice." And she walked away.

This barnyard fable serves as a meaningful introduction for us to plumb the depths of Jesus Christ's exhortation of "Follow Me" (John 10:27). It leads us to a series of conversations Jesus had with three potential disciples. They too were seemingly prepared to respond to an invitation but, like the cow, were stopped in their tracks when confronted with the full measure of what discipleship entails.

We find this series of conversations in the Gospel of Luke at an important juncture in Christ's earthly ministry. Luke 9:51 describes how "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem." His time was now short. He desired total commitment from those surrounding Him for the remainder of His earthly journey. It would be better to have few with staying power than a large entourage of conflicted individuals who would flinch at the first sign of distress.

Jesus here makes it very clear that being His disciple will cost you—you! And, it will cost *every part* of you.

## Excuses for declining the greatest invitation

Luke records: "Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, 'Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'" (verses 57-58).

As was His manner, Jesus was being brutally honest regarding the man's future if He heeded the call of "Follow Me." The would-be-follower would have to hand over his future to Christ in uncharted territory known but to God. The call was that moment. The invitation was there. But we never hear of the man again in the Gospels.

Jesus then invited another potential disciple by saying, "Follow Me." But this man responded, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach

the kingdom of God" (verses 59-60). This statement might seem to be an extremely uncaring response in light of Jesus' generous and kindly nature. What's going on here?

The general understanding regarding this statement is that the man is telling Jesus: "It's simply not a convenient time. I have an aging father. When he's dead and buried, I'll find you then."

Jesus' blunt response is meant to clarify a vital point—that *now* is the moment of decision. The time of your personal calling and for responding to it is *now*, not tomorrow. So far we have two would-be disciples—one consumed with fear of the future and the other preoccupied with the present.

But there's one more potential disciple and one more dimension of life to consider. Verse 61 states: "And another also said, 'Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house'"—that is, to paraphrase, "I'm not quite ready. This just isn't the time to move forward with you. I have to take care of some old business and acquaintances

before I can follow You."

But Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (verse 62, New International Version). This appears to be a reference to what was then a well-known biblical example of discipleship—that of Elisha leaving behind his own life of plowing to follow Elijah. Elisha did quickly say goodbye to his parents but then slaughtered his oxen and burned his plow to cook the meat to give to others—and then set off to follow Elijah (1 Kings 19:19-21).

The reference to looking back could also be an allusion to the fate of Lot's wife, who spurned God's invitation to physical deliverance by looking back on what she was told to leave behind (Genesis 19:15-17, 26).

In any case, Christ's statement was

**Christianity isn't simply about *half-measures* on our part, but *total sacrifice of every part of our being*. It's "putting our skin in the game," as the expression goes.**

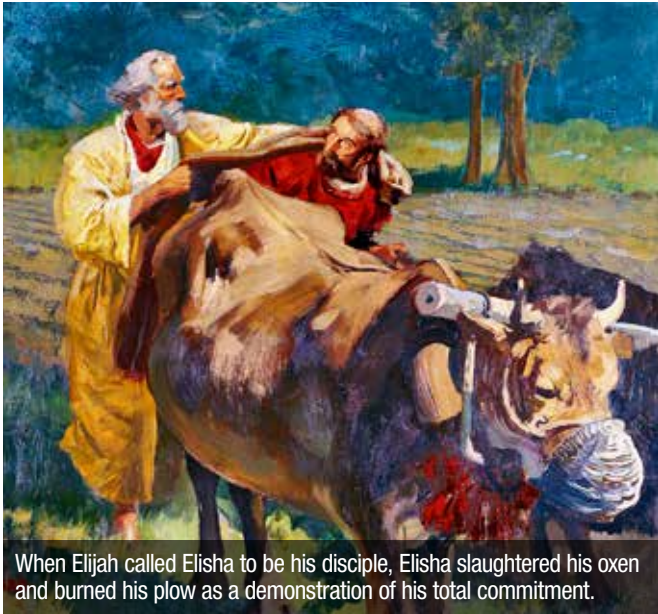
designed to jolt the man from considering revisiting his past when Christ was offering him a future in His eternal Kingdom.

What personal lessons, then, can we draw from the fictional barnyard story and the real-life interaction between Jesus and seemingly sincere wannabe followers? Let's focus on two specific points.

## Putting skin in the game—all of it

First, Christianity isn't simply about *half-measures* on our part, but *total sacrifice of every part of our being*. It's "putting our skin in the game," as the expression goes (think of the cow) and having faith that God will supply our needs. It's about giving up the past and giving over to God our entire life (not just the convenient parts), and saying it's *all Yours*—every chapter and season of my whole life right now and into the future.

Some of us may be holding on to some parts of our lives while thinking we're being honest with God and ourselves. Some of us may have let go of our past through repentance but are unsteady in the face of



When Elijah called Elisha to be his disciple, Elisha slaughtered his oxen and burned his plow as a demonstration of his total commitment.

new and continual challenges in life and aware of stepping into a future fully given over to someone else—even God.

Jesus Christ said, “Follow Me.” We must follow the perfect example He set for us. Discipleship in biblical times was not merely a matter transferring “head knowledge” from instructor to student. Rather, the disciple was to emulate his master and teacher in every aspect of life until he became *just like* the master. In the same way *we* must become just like *our* Master, Jesus Christ.

Consider, then, how Christ fully “put his skin in the game” when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Such determined sacrifice of giving up everything is defined in Philippians 2:5-10:

“Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name” (New Living Translation, 1996).

Our Heavenly Father and Christ wanted to give us something special—the *gift of eternal life*. That gift of life would cost the One known as the Word *His life*. He would not walk away but would fulfill His words that He would “lay down His life for the sheep” (John 10:15).

Let’s fully comprehend: Being a disciple of Christ at its core is “giving ourselves

away” in faith that God will place into our lives what we need to prepare us for His eternal Kingdom. Total sacrifice is *not optional*. It’s a *requirement*. Following Christ must come before everything else in life. That is the cost of discipleship—the cost we are to count before committing to it (Luke 14:25-33).

Let’s remember that total sacrifice is the bottom line of following such a Master. We can have sustained confidence in Jesus because He never asks

anything of us that He has not already done Himself. He emptied Himself of divine glory and might to set an example of letting go of our past. If we are unable to let go, we can find ourselves stymied by present weights or petrified about a future we don’t plan for ourselves.

### Ongoing sacrifice on our part

Second, Christianity is responding to the ongoing call to follow Christ after being set apart for discipleship. Please understand: Becoming a disciple isn’t an event, but a *never-ending lifetime experience*. It doesn’t just *happen*. Over time we are tutored and molded—lesson-by-lesson and person-by-person.

Sometimes we might say, “Lord, please, no more lessons!” But God knows what He’s doing each step of the way. Unlike those mentioned in the Gospels who weren’t prepared to respond, we must remain open, available and willing to participate in Christ’s ongoing discipling of us in the workshop of life.

Why? It’s noteworthy that the risen Christ states in Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” Let’s grasp the big point here. He’s speaking to His Church (the *ekklesia*—those already “called out,” as the Greek word literally means). Yet He continues to knock at the door of our hearts in His own time and purposes with an *ongoing* invitation to become like Him.

It doesn’t always come at convenient moments or times of full understanding.

God pointedly makes clear in Isaiah 55:8, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways.”

So let’s be forewarned and prepared that discipleship will cost you—you! Yet the cost of rejecting Christ and the way of life He offers is much higher in the end.

To help make this point, let’s consider a story told about a missionary of India in the early 20th century, Sadhu Sundar Singh. It’s said that Singh and a companion were traveling through a Himalayan mountain pass when they came across a body lying in the snow. Singh wished to stop and help the man, but his companion refused, saying, “We shall lose our lives if we burden ourselves with him.”

Yet Singh, according to the story, wouldn’t think of leaving the man to die. As his companion bade him farewell, Singh lifted the poor traveler on his back. With great exertion, he bore the man onward, but gradually the heat from Singh’s body began to warm up the poor frozen fellow, and he revived. Soon both were walking together side by side. Later, catching up with Singh’s former companion, they found him—frozen by the cold.

Some have questioned the truth of this story, and we can’t know for sure if it really happened. But it nonetheless conveys an important lesson.

Singh in this story was willing to lose his life on behalf of another and in the process found it, while his callous companion sought to preserve his life but lost it. This story illustrates the words of Christ in Matthew 10:39: “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” Of course, ultimate finding of life comes in the future Kingdom of God.

And the story further tells us that 1) we must readily accept the invitation to think beyond the moment, and that 2) we must put skin in the game with no thought of gaining for ourselves in this life.

So what part of your life have you not handed over to God? Being paralyzed by our past, stuck in the present or stymied by what may happen in the future hinders our ability to be ready for Christ’s call of “Follow Me.” He can persistently knock, but we alone have to be willing to open the door to “present [our] bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1).

Perhaps it’s time to recount the cost. Remember that the cost is high—it is *everything*. And discipleship will cost you—you! But remember when counting that Jesus never said it would be easy—but He did promise that it would be worth it! **GN**

# Letters From Our Readers

## Comments on recent *Good News* articles

I just finished reading "Pentecost: The Power of God in Our Lives" in the May-June 2014 issue. It is such a powerful message about the importance of having a one-on-one relationship with God. It reminds me of a recent motto I read: "Life without God is like an unsharpened pencil—it has no point!"

*M.S., Internet*

I read your booklets *God's Holy Plan* and *Holidays or Holy Days* along with the article "Did Jesus Keep His Word?" in the March-April issue. I must say I was informed and I now agree with the Tuesday night (Nisan 14) Passover through to the Saturday Sabbath resurrection. I want to add that I've been receiving all your literature for a few years now, and my eyes have been opened more through you than at any other time. May God bless you as He has me and countless others. He is doing really great things through you! I pray that all of you feel the assurance that you are making a difference in people's lives.

*Reader in Pennsylvania*

Please cancel my subscription to *The Good News*. The article on hell in your May-June issue was over the top and beyond my Baptist belief. It was filled with errors. Somebody, especially the author, should read the Bible.

*Reader in Arkansas*

*Interested readers may wish to review the questions and answers on the facing page, which touch on biblical teachings regarding heaven and hell. Obviously the few articles we published in the May-June issue cannot cover the full scope of what the Bible teaches about heaven, hell and life after death, so we encourage readers to download or request our free study guides What Happens After Death? and Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach? so they can understand this subject in much greater detail.*

Thanks to the May-June 2014 *Good News* and the Bible, I have finally learned that good and bad people don't proceed immediately above or below at death but rest in sleep until the day of judgment. I fully agree. Also, as I have always believed, a God of love could not have created a fiery pit to torment sinners forever. Thanks for this wisdom and other excellent articles in a unique publication.

*Reader in Ontario, Canada*

## Appreciation for *The Good News*

I'm just expressing my appreciation for your magazine. I don't always agree with you, but I admit that all your articles are thought-provoking. Keep it up!

*Reader, Internet*

I'm reading my second issue of *The Good News* and I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed it. I can't seem to put it down once I start reading it. I must say that this magazine has aroused in me an urge to get down on the playing field and follow the only Person who has the answer to our worldly problems. Thanks for putting it together, and keep up the good work.

*G.R., Internet*

## *Beyond Today* TV program

Hello! I just wanted to comment that I had the opportunity of viewing your

program last Sunday and found it very informative regarding the book of Revelation. You were able to explain it so that I could understand more fully the return of Christ coming as a thief in the night. I would very much like to request your study guide *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*. I found your website through Vision TV and am so happy I did. I thoroughly enjoyed your program and hope to have my husband watch it with me this week. Thank you again!

*Reader in Ontario, Canada*

Can you please let me know where we can view *Beyond Today*? It has helped me to get a clearer understanding of God and Jesus Christ, the Holy Sabbath, the Holy Days of God and the Word of God. Thank you for your kind response.

*Reader, Internet*

*Interested readers can find a log of stations on page 19 of this issue or online at [www.BeyondToday.tv](http://www.BeyondToday.tv). At this same link viewers can watch dozens of previously aired programs from our archives as well as short BT Daily video blogs on current topics and in-depth Bible studies on important biblical subjects.*

## Feedback from around the world

I am writing to tell you how much *The Good News* means to me. It has taught me more about how to have a relationship with God than anything else, and the importance of understanding how modern events and Bible prophecy go hand in hand. I know now that it is important to be a well-informed Christian. Your magazine helps me a lot, but the most important thing is to read the Bible and pray daily.

*Reader in Queensland, Australia*

*The Good News* magazine is a big help for everyone who wants to know the whole truth. I consider it as a priceless treasure in my life. Once more, thank you, and may God bless you always.

*Reader in Leyte, Philippines*

Thank you so much for the love and concern, and for continuing my subscription to *The Good News* magazine. I do appreciate it. I'm happy to inform you that *The Good News* magazine is the best magazine so far with critical thinking views. It is unique when you compare it to other religious magazines.

*Reader in Bukidnon, Philippines*

I do appreciate the United Church of God sending me *The Good News*, and I read the issues thoroughly. I also enjoy the information I receive from UCG programs and sermons that I watch and listen to on the computer. Thank you very much again. I wish you, UCG, and your members all the very best. I realize it is members' tithes that enable me to receive educational materials on God's way of life and how to apply it to our lives.

*Reader in Kyoto, Japan*

## Locations of church congregations

I agree with you that the Sabbath is Saturday [i.e., Friday sunset to Saturday sunset], but every Church of God I find hold Sunday as its worship day. How can I find a church that keeps the true Sabbath near me?

*Reader in Greenville, North Carolina*

I am interested in fellowshipping and learning more about congregations that are closer to me. Right now, my family is not acquainted with anyone locally who is a part of the United Church of God. We have not observed any Holy Days, but I am interested to learn more about how to celebrate these times.

*S.L., South Carolina*

*We have forwarded contact information for our nearest church pastors. We have congregations in most major cities in the United States and in a number of international areas. To find a current list of congregations with contact information, visit [www.ucg.org/churches](http://www.ucg.org/churches). You can also submit your contact information at [www.ucg.org/contact](http://www.ucg.org/contact) and we will get back to you. This link also provides addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses for our offices around the world.*

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to *The Good News*, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or e-mail [ginfo@ucg.org](mailto:ginfo@ucg.org) (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).

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Are you on Facebook? If so, visit our *Good News* magazine page. See what other readers are saying. Find links to interesting articles and Web commentaries. Become a *Good News* magazine Facebook fan!

I really enjoy *The Good News* magazine. It gives a good understanding of the Bible and highlights information not given in mainstream Christian faiths. I highly recommend this magazine to all.

*- K.T., Good News magazine Facebook fan*



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# Questions & Answers

**Q: Statements in the article “Will I Go to Heaven When I Die?” in the May-June issue aren’t totally accurate about going to heaven or hell at death. Look in Matthew 25:41, 46 to see Jesus Christ’s view on final judgment for the believers and the unbelievers. Jesus plainly declares an eternal punishment for the unbelievers and also that the righteous will live forever in heaven with God.**

*Reader, Internet*

A: Many people assume that these verses, Matthew 25:41, 46, prove the wicked are to be eternally tortured in hellfire while the righteous go to heaven. But is that what these verses say?

First, notice the setting to which these verses refer—when Jesus “comes in His glory” (verses 31-32). We are told that He will then separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent the righteous (verses 34-40). At His return He sets the sheep at His right hand. The goats in this instance represent sinners who ultimately refuse to repent. They are appointed to assemble on Jesus’ left hand. He then consigns the goats to “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

The word *everlasting* is translated from the Greek word *aiōnios*. The key to understanding this verse is knowing what will occur everlastingly. Does it refer to a fire that tortures without end, or does it have another meaning?

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus spoke in a single sentence of everlasting (*aiōnios*) punishment and of life eternal (*aiōnios*). Since the righteous will be given eternal, or everlasting, life, many theologians believe the punishing of the wicked must last as long as the life given to the righteous. But this cannot be reconciled with the statement that those cast into the lake of fire *perish*—they are killed. As explained elsewhere, they suffer death—the second death (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

A plain and simple meaning of Matthew 25:46 that fits with the rest of the Bible is that the wicked are cast into a fire that annihilates them—renders them forever extinct. The resulting punishment of being cast into the *aiōnios* fire is a one-time event. It is a permanent punishment, the results of which will remain forever—that is, eternal death. It is not ongoing punishing that continues forever without end. Put succinctly, it is everlasting punishment, not everlasting punishing. This is the only explanation that agrees with the rest of the Scriptures.

An additional point should be made regarding the meaning of *aiōnios* here. Genesis 19 describes God’s destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness: “Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 19:24). They were utterly consumed by fire.

Some 2,000 years later the book of Jude describes these cities as “suffering the vengeance of eternal [*aiōnios*] fire” (verse 7). Yet it is obvious that the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning. In the case of these cities and in the case of the wicked, who are consigned to *aiōnios* fire, the fire burns and completely destroys. But the eternal aspect of the fire is its everlasting effect, not how long it actually burns.

As for the righteous, they will indeed inherit eternal life in the Kingdom of God “when the Son of Man comes in His glory” (Matthew 25:31, 34, 46), but that life will not be spent in heaven. They live and reign with Jesus Christ when He returns and establishes His Kingdom (Revelation 20:4, 6), but they reign with Him in that Kingdom *on earth* (Revelation 2:26; 5:9-10; Matthew 5:5). This is why Jesus exhorts us to pray, “Your Kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2)—because that Kingdom is coming to earth at His return.

For more information, we recommend our study guide *Heaven and Hell*:

*What Does the Bible Really Teach?* You can download or request it online at [www.ucg.org/booklets](http://www.ucg.org/booklets).

**Q: In the May-June issue, the article “Will I Go to Heaven When I Die?” states: “How does Jesus Himself describe death? He doesn’t say that people who died immediately went to heaven or hell at death. He simply compares it to sleep.” I’m confused because Jesus stated otherwise when He told the thief dying beside Him on the cross, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.”**

*Reader, Internet*

A: Two important principles of Bible study are to read a difficult-to-understand verse in its context and then in the broader context of the entire Bible. The meaning of this verse must agree with the rest of the Bible, for “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

So let’s look at the context in which Christ made this statement. He was replying to the thief’s plea, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). This man clearly understood that Christ would be resurrected to life again and would inherit His Kingdom.

The broader context of the entire Bible tells us that Jesus’ Kingdom referred to here is the rule of God’s government over the entire earth, with Christ as its King. Who will enter that Kingdom? The “sheep” of His flock, or Christians, will inherit the Kingdom at the return of Christ (Matthew 25:31-34; Daniel 7:27). Human beings, “flesh and blood,” cannot inherit that Kingdom but must be transformed into spirit (1 Corinthians 15:51-53).

It is unreasonable to think that the thief was instantly converted with no opportunity to grow in God’s way of life. He may have been sorrowful for his mistakes, but he had no opportunity to live a life of obedience to God—all aspects of the biblically revealed process of conversion. Contrary to stories people tell of “deathbed repentance,” conversion does not occur instantaneously. The thief merely made a positive comment about Jesus Christ, and Christ spoke comforting words to him in return.

We also need to answer this question: Did Jesus Himself enter “paradise” that day? By His own mouth, He was in the grave for the next three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). This, in itself, tells you that the thief did not join Christ anywhere that day—certainly not in heaven. During this time He “was dead” (Revelation 1:9), not in some disembodied afterlife with the thief. Several days later, when Jesus revealed Himself to Mary after He had been resurrected, He plainly told her that He had “not yet ascended to [His] Father” in heaven (John 20:17).

What, then, is the accurate way to understand what Christ said to the thief? The New King James Version reads, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” However, the Greek text of the Scriptures has no punctuation. Translators added it to make the reading easier. In this instance, however, the misplaced punctuation leads to misunderstanding.

If we remove the comma after “you” and instead place it after “today,” the meaning changes significantly—and agrees with the rest of the Bible. It correctly reads, “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise.” Christ gave the thief the promise on the day they were dying that he would (eventually, but not that same day) be with Christ when He rules over the earth.

Our free study guides *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, *Transforming Your Life—The Process of Conversion* and *What Happens After Death?* (from which these answers are adapted) add more information about these topics. Download or request your free copies at [www.ucg.org/booklets](http://www.ucg.org/booklets).

# REEBOK SPARTAN RACE

YOU'LL KNOW AT THE FINISH LINE



## “MUD BUDDIES” Lessons From an Obstacle Course

Two friends, one tough race—crossing the finish line with priceless lessons learned. *by Debbie Werner*

In August of last year, my best friend Lindsay and I had the opportunity to try something outrageous, adventurous, unbelievably challenging and fun—an obstacle run. Obstacle race courses are designed to test participants’ physical and mental limits. This particular race, the Spartan Sprint, was on 3½ miles of motocross track consisting of strenuous terrain with plenty of steep inclines and 18 obstacles to overcome.

We were committed to two things—having fun and completing the course. But we also enjoyed finding many spiritual lessons scattered throughout the event.

With many unknowns ahead of us, and after seeing one of the elite competitors limping off the course shortly before our start time, we knew how we had to warm up—with some stretching and some prayer! As we ran out of the starting gate with the 300 or so people in our wave and charged up an incredibly steep track, we knew we were in for one of the most

demanding experiences of our lives.

### Enduring lessons

One particular verse in the book of Hebrews popped into mind during the day: “Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

This was especially true for the obstacle where we each had to drag a concrete block attached to a heavy chain while we balanced a small, but heavy, log on our shoulders.

How often do we try to go it alone when God is always there to carry our burdens for us? We were reminded that we need to look to God and give our burdens to Him or we will swiftly run out of energy (Hebrews 12:2).

We also quickly acknowledged each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Lindsay’s

asthma kept her from being able to sustain the cardio parts of the race. I did not have the upper body strength needed for some of the climbing challenges. But that allowed me to encourage Lindsay when she was out of breath, and Lindsay helped boost me at the climbing walls.

We needed each other to be able to continue.

### Running the race—with a little help

The reality that we need others physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually to run the race of our daily lives hit home again when we encountered the toughest challenge of the course—a slippery crawl up a quarter-mile, steep hill. Oh, and the race organizers decided to add barbed wire to the mix, stretched about a foot-and-a-half above the mud at close intervals, just to make it interesting.

The hill was teeming with slipping and sliding racers just inching forward. But an amazing thing happened—we strangers all helped each other. We had to. There was no going it alone. No one would have made it to the top that way!

We all pushed and hauled our neighbors forward an agonizing inch at a time and

were in turn boosted and pulled up the hill by others. It was definitely a muddy example of a biblical principle: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

In our individualistic culture, it was humbling and gratifying to have to rely on others to do such a deceptively simple-seeming task as crawling up a hill! And it confirmed that going through the tough stuff in life helps us bond with each other. We gave one particular “mud buddy” some high fives after we reached the top, since we three had helped each other up



**If you are facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles, give your burdens to God, look to others for help and maintain your commitment to finish strong.**

in many spots on the hill.

#### Encouragement, just in time

This situation came up again when we helped other weary racers pull massive tires at the end of the course. The exhaustion, and for some despair, was palpable at that point in the race. So helping was crucial. It halved the struggle that we each had to make.

Throughout the race, both verbal and nonverbal encouragement and help were crucial. Race volunteers sprinkled here and there told us to “Keep it up!” and said, “You’re doing great!”

After all, “Anxiety in the heart of man

causes depression, but a good word makes it glad” (Proverbs 12:25). There was plenty of anxiety in the racers, with so much unknown ahead, but we all encouraged each other to keep going. And we kept a sense of humor by repeatedly mentioning, with grins, the fact that we’d all paid for this experience too!

#### Expect the unexpected and finish strong

Lindsay and I had both gone into the race asking God to keep us free from injury. Aside from scraping off an entire layer of skin, some epic bruises and a couple barbed-wire puncture wounds, He definitely delivered (though the feeling the morning after made Isaiah 40:31 that much more something to look forward to!). But for me, my last chance at injury came when least expected. The final obstacle was to get past three “gladiators”—guys with massive pugil sticks.

We were tantalizingly close to the finish line, so we charged them. We got through all three, and then the third unexpectedly swung his stick backwards and caught me on the back of my lower legs. If it weren’t for a quick hop forward, that could’ve been a sure spill and injury. I was reminded to “be sober, be vigilant,” and to keep an eye out for the ways that trouble can pop up just when you think you’re safe (1 Peter 5:8-9)!

Throughout the race, the opportunity to just give up and say it was too much was always there. But we had each other, and we had our commitment to finish. We need that in life when all our trials get in the way of our own

finish lines and we cannot see the end. If you are facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles, give your burdens to God, look to others for help and maintain your commitment to finish strong.

In the end, we can all then say like Paul did: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

We hope to see you there so we can give all our “mud buddies” triumphant and thankful high fives! **GN**



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# “The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.”

—German philosopher Friedrich Hegel, 1770-1831

A century ago the world was plunged into World War I, the greatest bloodbath in human history up to that time. Yet only a generation later another world war followed—followed by still more wars. Today our headlines are filled with bad news—war, famine, terrorism, corruption, social breakdown, crime and more.



Why can't we learn from our tragic history? With all this bad news, what kind of future can we look forward to?

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ came bringing a vital message from God for the world. That message was “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark

1:14). The word *gospel* means “good news.” But what was the good news Jesus Christ brought? What is the Kingdom of which He spoke? Does it have anything to do with the problems that threaten us today, and what does it have to do with your life?

Most people don't understand the truth about the Kingdom of God. Yet it is the central theme of the Bible—and truly the best news the world could ever hear!

In our free study guide *The Gospel of the Kingdom* you'll discover the exciting truth of the message Jesus Christ brought. This booklet shows you, from the pages of your Bible, exactly what that message of good news is—and what it means for you and your loved ones. Download or request your free copy today!

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