

The Good News

March-April 2015

A MAGAZINE OF UNDERSTANDING

HOW CHRISTIAN IS EASTER?

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Where Do You Get Your Beliefs?



My childhood memories of Easter are few and far between. I remember being bundled up for an occasional sunrise service, and I recall a few Easter egg hunts around the yard, but that's about it.

As much as anything, though, I remember being puzzled. Who came up with the idea of getting up in the dark to have church services at sunrise? That certainly held no appeal for me. Nor did Easter egg hunts, especially when the kids who were bigger and older than me found all the good ones first. For a while my family kept a few rabbits in cages behind the garage, and even at my young age I had figured out that rabbits didn't lay eggs, so why pretend that they did?

All in all, Easter was puzzling. My parents found it puzzling,

All in all, Easter was puzzling. My parents found it puzzling, too, and it wasn't long before they stopped celebrating the holiday.

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Their reasons were simple. They found that the only time the word "Easter" is found in the Bible is in Acts 12:4 (in the King James Version)—but that the actual original word there is the Greek word for *Passover*. Easter really doesn't appear there at all, but was inserted by a confused translator. So where did Easter come from?

They looked in several encyclopedias to learn about the origins of Easter and its traditions. They quickly came to see that sunrise services, rabbits and eggs were part of the ancient worship of the Babylonian fertility goddess *Ishtar*—whose name is preserved today in the word *Easter*—and that these customs and symbols were common in pagan religion long before Christianity came on the scene.

Digging further into the Bible, they saw in Deuteronomy 12:29-32 that God commands His people not to worship Him with the customs and practices that other peoples used in worshipping their false gods, and that God calls such traditions an abomination—something He detests and refuses to accept.

So they stopped. No more Easter for them!

Their search led them to discover that a lot of the practices commonly thought to be from the Bible actually had very dubious origins that had nothing to do with Christianity!

This learning process took time—several years, in fact. They also looked in the Bible to try to figure out how to fit the three days and three nights Jesus promised He would be in the tomb (Matthew 12:40) between a Good Friday crucifixion and an Easter Sunday resurrection. They learned that it just didn't work—that the most you can come up with is two nights, a day, and a small part of another day.

A turning point came when they realized that the Bible reveals a series of festivals and Holy Days that spell out God's plan for humankind, and how these teach us about Jesus Christ's role in that plan—and that while Jesus, the apostles and the early Church celebrated these days, they've been largely ignored by traditional Christianity for the last 2,000 years. My parents began keeping these instead.

Thanks to their diligence in searching out what the Bible really teaches about such things, and leading me to examine matters for myself, I haven't had to *unlearn* a lot of wrong assumptions and teachings that simply aren't true. I've studied these same things in great depth, and we share the key details with you in this issue.

So what about you? Where do you get your beliefs? Have you checked up on them to see if they agree with God's divinely revealed Word, the Bible? If not, isn't it about time you started?

—Scott Ashley, Managing editor

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How Christian Is EASTER?

Soon up to 2 billion people will celebrate one of the world's most popular religious holidays—Easter. But curiously, the Bible nowhere promotes such an observance. Where did this day come from? How did it become so popular? And is it even Christian? *by Steve Myers*

Where do you get your religious beliefs? Easter is the most important holiday for hundreds of millions of people. Anyone who claims to be Christian should want God to guide and lead them. But could you be misled?

I'm reminded of counterfeit money. Did you know that you could be carrying a worthless bill and not even know it? Counterfeiters are often successful because they make their fakes look like the real thing. Forgery is one of the oldest crimes in history, but it doesn't just affect money.

Today a much greater counterfeit is so successful that most people don't even realize they're deceived. What counterfeit? The religion known as Christianity, as surprising as that may be! Jesus Himself warned about religious counterfeits, saying, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and

show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24).

Deceptive religion and its wrong traditions have been foisted on the world by the greatest forger in the universe, Satan the devil (1 John 5:19; Revelation 12:9). Could religious celebrations like Easter be part of that? Let's examine three ways to answer the question posed by the title of this article: *How Christian is Easter?*

A lesson in Satan's deceptive techniques

To begin to understand how Satan uses religion to confuse and deceive, we need to go back to the beginning—back to the Garden of Eden. And here's where we find our first point: Satan leads people to decide good and evil for themselves and fools them by making evil look good.

The Bible is clear that God wanted to guide Adam and Eve. But Satan was in the

business of deception right from the very beginning. He knew exactly how to make his counterfeit sense of good and evil pass for the real thing.

So how did he do it? He *lied*. He told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the forbidden fruit, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). In fact, he contradicted God. But it wasn't all lies. He also said, "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (verse 5).

Did you catch the deception? Part of it was true—the knowledge of good and evil part, but it was only in the sense of acting as God in *deciding* what is right and wrong. God had placed two trees in the garden—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God wanted to lead Adam and Eve, and for them to choose life. But when they chose the wrong tree, they chose to decide for themselves what was good and bad, rejecting the real truth as to what is good and bad as determined by God.

So right at the very start, our ancestors began rejecting God's guidance—and that tendency has continued down to this day.

This tells us a lot about the state of our world—it's filled with error that seems to be truth, fable that seems to be fact, bad that seems to be good. At times it's hard to tell the difference between the real thing and an evil counterpart. Why? *Because of relying on faulty human judgment—especially as perpetuated over many generations.* As Proverbs states, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

Some things seem good and right, but the devil cleverly makes them appear as though they were not evil. Sometimes he does this by mixing in some elements that truly are good as determined by God—though corrupted in context.

And he is so devious in his deception that *it will hurt you*. He kept Adam and Eve from God, and he wants to keep you from having a great relationship with God, too. He's also affected Christianity and its customs and practices and wants to deceive everyone so they won't understand God's truth.

Sadly, most can't discern the real from the replica. God's true days of worship found in the Bible are priceless, but the devil has crafted multiple forgeries—fraudulent, cheap copies of what God gave us that is valuable and good.

It's true with money. It's true in religion as well. Satan uses his advanced counter-

We first have to recognize the disguising of error as truth, often by the inclusion of some actual truth out of proper context.

Once you understand Satan's tactic in this, it's time to take the next step of recognizing Easter for what it is—a counterfeit.

Easter's ancient, pre-Christian origins

Do you know where Easter celebrations originated? It may seem hard to believe, but they began hundreds of years before Jesus Christ's death and resurrection!

Genesis 10 tells how, several thousand years ago, people gathered into cities and opposed God. Remember the story? They began to build a massive skyscraper called the Tower of Babel.

Here again we find the devil at work. This time he inspired and used this kingdom of Babylon to help with his slick counterfeiting job. God finally confused the people's language, and they were scattered over the earth (Genesis 11:9).

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus records what they took with them. What was it? *Their religious beliefs and rituals.* He wrote that Babylon was the prime source of evil from which all systems of idolatry and false worship flowed.

Did it affect Christianity? Here's where the story gets very interesting!

The Babylonian fertility gods were *Tammuz* and *Ishtar*. Ancient tribes of Europe

worshipped a variation of that goddess of spring named *Eostre*. Do you realize that the word *Easter* is a variation of this name?

The notable British historian Sir James Frazer writes: “Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life . . . which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same” (*The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 325).

Alan Watts, in his book *Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, further explains: “It would be tedious to describe in detail all that has been handed down to us about the various rites of Tammuz, Adonis . . . and many others . . . But their universal theme—the

drama of death and resurrection—makes them the forerunners of the Christian Easter, and thus the first ‘Easter services.’ As we go on to describe the Christian observance of Easter we shall see how many of its customs and ceremonies resemble these former rites” (1950, p. 58).

Yes, history records that centuries before the death and resurrection of Christ, there were already ancient Easter celebrations—springtime fertility festivals honoring resurrection and worship of the rising sun long before Jesus' birth! This is where we get such popular Easter symbols as rabbits and eggs, which were popular fertility symbols centuries prior to Christianity.

Long before Jesus Christ gave His life as an offering for our sins and was raised to life again, the world had already accepted Satan's substitute—a *counterfeit* of how God intends us to worship!

But does it matter to God? Notice what He inspired the apostle Paul to write: “What do right and wrong have in common? Can light and darkness be friends? How can Christ and Satan agree? . . . How can the temple of the true God and the statues of other gods agree? . . . ‘So come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord’” (2 Corinthians 6:14-17, New International Reader's Version).

You see, God wants us to understand the difference, because one thing counterfeiters rely on is ignorance. If you're unfamiliar with what genuine currency should look like, it's easier to be fooled. The U.S. Secret Service has 20 Web pages under the title “Know Your Money.” It tells us, “Those who fail to carefully examine the money they receive . . . are potential victims.”

It's no different when it comes to counterfeit holidays and religion because they also thrive on people's ignorance—ignorance of the Bible. And that leads us to the third way to answer the question: *How Christian is Easter?*

How does God want us to worship?

As we have seen, the Easter holiday is unbiblical. It is a counterfeit. But a counterfeit of what? You see, God has *other ways* He directs us to worship.

Do you know for yourself what the Word of God actually says, or could you be fooled? Several years ago LifeWay Research surveyed American churchgoers and found that 90 percent of them “desire to please and honor Jesus” in all they do. That's very good! But it also found that *more than 80 percent don't read their Bibles daily!*

Our world is filled with error that seems to be truth, fable that seems to be fact, bad that seems to be good. At times it's hard to tell the difference between the real thing and an evil counterpart.

feiting techniques. He's constantly working to get you to trust your own sense of right and wrong, following what *looks* good to you (as influenced by him), rather than listen to and trust what God has to say. Instead you must “trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

As with Adam and Eve, God wants to *lead you*. He wants to guide you in truth and in love. He wants you to honor Him *in the way that He directs*. And that includes observing the days and the ways that truly honor Him as revealed in the Bible. That's where God's Holy Days come into the picture—as opposed to *humanly devised* holidays and religious traditions.

That's why it's important for us to answer the question, “*How Christian is Easter?*”



That's an amazing disconnect. How can you honor God if you don't know and haven't read what actually pleases Him? You can't honor God with the counterfeit because it's worthless to Him. So if you're unaware of what Jesus actually taught, you're easy prey for an empty imitation!

By not really understanding the Bible, you could be easily distracted. That's another tactic counterfeiters rely on—*diversion*. When people pass phony bills, they try to focus the cashiers on other things, hoping they don't check the money until it's way too late.

Most Christians aren't on the lookout for a counterfeiter either. Most just want a church they like, so even a cheap imitation will do. Manmade holidays deflect attention and concentrate on less important issues. You see, if you feel good about what you're doing, it doesn't make that much difference what you're taught. Some churches appeal to that. They appeal to your emotions by talking a lot about love and feelings.

But let me tell you why that's dangerous: It can cause you to choose what you believe and what you practice based on *how you feel* rather than on God's clear teaching in the Bible. As we've already seen, God warns us that a way can seem right to people but lead to death. His Word explicitly tells us not to try to honor Him with pagan religious customs (Deuteronomy 12:19-32). And it's important that we follow exactly what He says.

That's the issue! The devil wants you to have religion—but one that only *resembles* true worship so he can keep you in the dark. God, on the other hand, wants you to become an expert at identifying the counterfeits so you don't fall for an imitation. Here's how you can begin: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, Revised Standard Version).

That means you should carefully examine what you believe and what you practice and make sure it agrees with the Bible. Just claiming something is Christian, or just saying it honors God, *doesn't make it acceptable to Him*. Did you know that the Bible doesn't mention the early Christians celebrating Easter? They had nothing to do with this holiday. Instead, they kept the Passover and the other festivals of the Bible (Luke 22:8, 11, 13, 15; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Acts 18:20-21; 20:16).

Passover, along with the other true biblical festivals—that's the real thing. Easter is

The Resurrection Connection

How did worship of an ancient god and goddess come to be associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Although the details are lost in time, a closer look at the ancient mythology surrounding the worship of these gods and goddesses will help us understand how pagan practices have survived in popular Easter customs practiced to this day.

Two of the earliest recorded deities were the Babylonian fertility god Tammuz and the goddess Ishtar. Every year Tammuz "was believed to die, passing away from the cheerful earth to the gloomy subterranean world . . ." (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 326).

The seasonal cycle came to be connected with Tammuz's supposed annual death and resurrection. "Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life . . . which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same" (p. 325).

As worship of Tammuz and Ishtar spread to the Mediterranean region, including the territory of biblical Israel, the pair came to be worshipped under other names—Baal and Astarte (Ashtoreth), Attis and Cybele, and Adonis and Aphrodite. God heatedly condemned the sensual, perverted worship of Baal and Astarte (Judges 2:11-15; 3:7-8; 10:6-7; 1 Kings 11:4-66, 31, 33; 16:30-33; 22:51-53).

In ancient worship we find the mythology that would ultimately link these ancient customs to Christ's death and resurrection. Says Alan Watts: "It would be tedious to describe in detail all that has

been handed down to us about the various rites of Tammuz, Adonis . . . and many others . . . But their universal theme—the drama of death and resurrection—makes them the forerunners of the Christian Easter, and thus the first 'Easter services.' As we go on to describe the Christian observance of Easter we shall see how many of its customs and ceremonies resemble these former rites" (*Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, 1950, p. 58).

In its various forms, worship of Tammuz-Adonis-Attis spread around the Roman Empire, including to Rome itself. As Christianity spread through the empire, religious leaders apparently merged customs and practices associated with this earlier "resurrected" god and applied them to the resurrected Son of God.

In this respect Easter followed the pattern of Christmas in being officially sanctioned and welcomed into the church: "Motives of the same sort may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic god which fell at the same season.

"Now the Easter rites still observed in Greece, Sicily and southern Italy bear in some respects a striking resemblance to the rites of Adonis . . . The Church may have consciously adapted the new festival to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ" (Frazer, p. 359).

(This information is excerpted from our free study aid *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* Request or download your free copy at www.GNmagazine.org/booklets.)

—Scott Ashley

just a cheap imitation. Jesus Himself gave Passover even deeper meaning under the New Covenant.

And He expected His followers to continue observing the New Testament Passover. As Paul explained, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). The Bible nowhere tells us to have a special celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection—much less with a recycled pre-Christian observance. But Jesus explicitly tells us to have a specific memorial of His true Passover sacrifice—His death for our sins (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

The big switch

So, you may ask, with such clear instruction, how did Easter replace the Passover?

Notice carefully what noted historian Will Durant wrote: "Christianity did not

destroy paganism; it adopted it" (*The Story of Civilization, Caesar and Christ*, Part 3, 1944, p. 595, emphasis added throughout). That's amazing! And yes, after the original apostles passed from the scene, Christianity underwent an astounding transformation.

Sir James Frazer, quoted earlier, noted that Easter followed the pattern of Christmas (another festival of pre-Christian origin) in being accepted and promoted as the Roman church—now the center of the religion—compromised with paganism:

"Motives of the same sort may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic god which fell at the same season. Now the Easter rites still observed in Greece, Sicily and southern Italy bear in some respects a striking resemblance to the rites of Adonis . . . The Church may have consciously adapted

the new festival to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ” (Frazer, p. 359).

If you look into history, about 300 years after Christ the Roman Emperor Constantine became the greatest promoter of non-biblical Christianity. Expanding his empire and uniting the Roman church included the three things we’ve been talking about: disguising evil as good, accepting a substitute, and a true lack of biblical understanding.

Those early church leaders believed they could choose their own times and ways to worship. New converts from paganism didn’t need to throw away their religious traditions and rituals. Those counterfeit sacraments and artificial practices were absorbed right into this very different version of Christianity.

But God doesn’t mince words. The Bible tells us, “If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life” (Revelation 22:18).

Is Easter Christian?

The bottom line is that Easter does not and cannot represent a resurrected Jesus. Like any counterfeit, it’s hollow. It’s empty because God didn’t design it. Instead, it perpetuates the ungodly practice of honoring false gods.

Notice what Paul writes about mixing idolatrous pagan practices with true Christianity: “What I am saying is that these sacrifices which people make are made to demons and not to God. I don’t want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the Lord’s cup and the cup of demons. *You cannot participate at the table of the Lord and at the table of demons*” (1 Corinthians 10:20-21, God’s Word Translation).

So remember: Easter is a product of people determining for themselves good

Learn More

There’s much more to the story of how Easter went from an ancient fertility festival to one of the world’s most popular holidays. You need to read our study aid *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* A free copy is waiting for you!



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Symbolism in God’s Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

God has given us two connected annual festivals in early spring (in the northern hemisphere) that we definitely are to observe as Christians, even as Jesus and the apostles did—Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Jesus died on the Passover day. For centuries this day had foreshadowed His dying for our sins as the sacrificed Lamb of God, and He commands His followers to keep the Passover as a remembrance or memorial of His sacrifice for us (Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Three days later Jesus was resurrected during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. His resurrection is indeed a vital theme in the meaning of the festival—yet as part of a bigger picture. Consider what literally happened. Jesus was dead and buried in the ground for the first three days of this festival, was raised to life right in the midst of it and was then accepted as the firstfruits of God’s spiritual harvest, remaining alive to teach and direct His disciples thereafter. All of this is part of the meaning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, like the Passover, was revealed to the Israelites at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 12-13). Over the course of these days, the Israelites left the slavery of Egypt. And the removal and avoidance of leavening (an agent such as yeast that causes bread dough to rise in baking) was to symbolize our coming out of sin (see 1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Eating unleavened bread instead symbolized taking in God’s righteousness—ultimately revealed to come in a lasting way only through Christ living in us to help us develop godly character.

We are to figuratively be crucified and die with Christ—our old, sinful self being put to death and buried with Him so that we can be figuratively raised with Him to walk in newness of life, as pictured in baptism (read Galatians 2:20, Romans 6, Colossians 3:1-10 and Philippians 3:10-11).

We may understand that the Days of Unleavened Bread represent our coming out of sin. But we must realize that our coming out of sin relies on the person we formerly were being figuratively put to death and buried with Christ and then, in effect, rising with Christ into a new way of living—*His way*.

As the true Bread of life (John 6:35, 48-51), He lives His resurrected life in us through the Holy Spirit. This enables us to live a lifetime of sanctification and transformation until the culmination in

our literal resurrection at Christ’s return. Thus what these days symbolize, our coming out of sin to ultimately find new life and acceptance with God, was enabled by Jesus being literally buried, raised and accepted by God during these very days. This was clearly no coincidence!

We need to grasp that Jesus’ resurrection is vital to the process of coming out of sins. As Paul wrote: “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

And this is where the resurrection focus of Easter fails. It merely gazes at a hero who has conquered death. In the case of Jesus Christ, that is awesome and wonderful, to be sure. But by itself it lacks the context of His death and resurrection as the basis for our own renewed lives and ultimate future resurrection.

In keeping the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread, we do commemorate the fact that Jesus was resurrected to live in us to enable us to overcome—yet not as a celebration specifically of the resurrection in the way that Easter is for many, which misses the big picture of God’s great plan of salvation. It leaves out a proper balanced focus on the need for our old selves to remain buried and on now living new life through Christ, looking forward to ultimate transformation in the future.

For those who recognize the problems with Easter, we should not let pagan corruption take away from having a right focus on Jesus’ resurrection—and a recognition of His role in the meaning of the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread as the Bread of life through whom we also may receive eternal life by our own resurrection from the dead (John 6:50-58).

Some might wonder how a person could be a Christian and not celebrate Easter. But a more important question is this: How can someone be a Christian and *not* observe the days God commanded us to—the days that picture His great plan of saving mankind through Jesus Christ?

Before knowing about them, one might plead ignorance. But having learned about them, *now you know*. And we encourage you to come to know more—and to honor God the Father and Jesus Christ as They have directed!

To learn more, be sure to download or request our free study aid *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

—Tom Robinson

and evil under Satan’s influence. Easter is a counterfeit of how God intends us to worship Him. And Easter is not biblical. God has other ways He directs us to worship.

So isn’t it time to take a more meaningful approach to religion than such holidays?

God gives us a much more important alternative—the genuine article, which is authentic Christianity. And it’s not found in Easter or any manmade holiday, but instead by worshipping God in spirit and in truth—on the days He commands! **GN**



Good Friday–Easter Sunday: It Doesn't Fit With the Bible!

Jesus Christ said He would be entombed for three days and three nights. Can this be reconciled with a “Good Friday” crucifixion and burial and an “Easter Sunday” resurrection, which allows for barely a day and a half in the tomb? Or do the Gospels spell out a surprising, simpler solution that fits perfectly with what Jesus foretold? *by Scott Ashley*

In Matthew 12:38, we read where some of the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign to prove He was the Messiah. “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you,” they told Him (New International Version).

But Jesus responded that the only sign He would give was that of the prophet Jonah: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (verse 40).

Traditional view doesn't fit

But how can we fit “three days and three nights” between a Friday afternoon crucifixion and entombment just before sundown and a Sunday morning resurrection at sunrise? This traditional view allows for Jesus to have been in the tomb for only a day and a half!

Some believe that Christ's statement that He would be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” does not require a literal span of 72 hours or even close to that. They reason that any part of a day, even just a few minutes, can be reckoned as a whole day.

Thus, since Jesus died in the afternoon and was entombed just before sunset, they think the closing few minutes of that Friday constituted the first day, Friday night was the first night, Saturday was the second day, Saturday night was the second night, and a few minutes at dawn on Sunday morning made up the third day.

But where, then, is the third night? Even if a few minutes of daylight late on Friday and another few on Sunday morning constitute “days,” this interpretation fails to explain how only *two* nights—Friday night

and Saturday night—can somehow be the *three* nights of which Jesus spoke.

In fact, Scripture is plain that Jesus *had already risen* before Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early Sunday morning, arriving “while it was still dark” (John 20:1-2). So in reality, *no* parts of Sunday could be counted as a day, as Jesus was *already resurrected* well before the break of dawn.

Jonah 1:17, to which Jesus referred, states specifically that “Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” We have no biblical basis for thinking that Jesus meant only two nights and one day, plus part of another day. If Jesus were in the tomb only from late Friday afternoon to early Sunday morning, then the sign He gave that He was the prophesied Messiah *was not fulfilled*.

So which is it? Is something wrong with Christ's words, or is something wrong with the traditional view of when and how long He was in the tomb?

Let's carefully examine the details from the Gospels. When we do, we uncover the real story of how Jesus' words were fulfilled just as He said!

Two Sabbaths mentioned

Notice the sequence of events outlined in Luke 23. Jesus' moment of death, as well as His hasty burial because of the oncoming Sabbath that began at sundown, is narrated in verses 46-53. Verse 54 then states, “That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near.”

In Jewish society of that time, heavy cooking and housecleaning were done on the day before a Sabbath in preparation for it. Thus the day before the Sabbath came to be called “the preparation day” or simply

“the preparation.” The biblical Sabbath falls on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. According to Bible reckoning, days begin at sunset (Leviticus 23:32; compare Genesis 1:5, 8, 13), so all weekly Sabbaths start Friday evening at sundown.

Based on these facts, many people have assumed that it is the weekly Sabbath mentioned here, and that Jesus was therefore crucified on a Friday. But *two* types of “Sabbaths” are mentioned in the Scriptures—the regular weekly Sabbath day, which fell on the seventh day of the week, and seven annual Holy Days (listed in Leviticus 23), Sabbaths that could—and usually did—fall on days of the week other than the regular weekly Sabbath day.

Was the day after Jesus was crucified a weekly Sabbath, or one of these annual Holy Days?

John 19:31 clearly states that this approaching Sabbath “was a *high day*.” This term does not refer to the weekly Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset), but in this context to the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, one of God's annual Holy Days (Exodus 12:16-17; Leviticus 23:6-7). A number of Bible commentaries, encyclopedias and dictionaries will confirm that John is not referring to the weekly Sabbath here, but rather to one of the annual Sabbaths.

According to the biblical calendar, in that year this high-day Sabbath fell on a Thursday (meaning it began on Wednesday night at sunset). We can confirm this by looking at the details in the Gospel accounts—which show us that *two* separate Sabbath days are mentioned.

Luke 23:55-56 tells us that the women, after seeing Christ's body being laid in the tomb just before sundown, “returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils” for the final preparation of the body.

They would not have done such work on a Sabbath day, weekly or annual, since it would have been considered a Sabbath violation. This is verified by Mark's account, which states: “Now *when the Sabbath was past*, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother

of James, and Salome bought spices [which they could not have purchased on a Sabbath day], that they might come and anoint Him” (Mark 16:1).

The women had to wait *until this Sabbath was over* before they could buy and prepare the spices to be used for anointing Jesus’ body. Then, Luke 23:56 tells us that, after purchasing and preparing the spices and oils on Friday, “they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment”—which means they had to have acquired the spices *before* that Sabbath on which they rested. This *second* Sabbath mentioned in the Gospel accounts is the regular weekly Sabbath, observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

By comparing details in both Gospels—where Mark tells us the women bought spices *after* the Sabbath and Luke relates that they prepared the spices *before* resting on the Sabbath—we can clearly see that *two different Sabbaths* are being discussed here.

The first, as John 19:31 tells us, was a “high day”—the first day of the Feast of

Unleavened Bread—which fell on a Thursday that year. The second was the weekly seventh-day Sabbath. (See these events spelled out day by day in the chart below.)

Sign of the Messiah

After the women rested on the regular weekly Sabbath, they went to Jesus’ tomb early on the first day of the week (Sunday), “while it was still dark” (John 20:1), and found that He had already been resurrected (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:1-3). Jesus was not resurrected at sunrise on Sunday morning. When Mary Magdalene arrived “while it was still dark” she found the stone rolled away and the tomb already empty!

When we consider the details in all four Gospel accounts, the picture is clear. Jesus was crucified and entombed late on Wednesday afternoon, just before a Sabbath began at sunset. However, that was a high-day Sabbath, lasting from Wednesday sunset to Thursday sunset that week, rather than the regular weekly Sabbath that lasted

from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

While no one witnessed Jesus’ resurrection (which took place inside a sealed tomb), to fit His words and the biblical evidence it had to have happened three days and three nights from Wednesday near sunset until Saturday near sunset—with Jesus leaving His tomb at the end of the weekly Sabbath.

This time line perfectly accommodates three nights (Wednesday night, Thursday night and Friday night) and three daylight periods (Thursday, Friday and Saturday). This is the *only* time that fits Jesus’ own prophecy of how long He would be in the tomb. And, as we have seen, it fits perfectly with all the details recorded in the Gospels.

We can be assured that the entombment period Jesus gave as proof He was the Messiah was the very duration He foretold.

Because most people do not understand the biblical Holy Days Jesus Christ and His followers kept, they fail to understand the chronological details so accurately preserved for us in the Gospels! **GN**

The Biblical Chronology of Jesus Christ’s Burial and Resurrection





What

EASTER

Doesn't Tell You



Could it be that Easter traditions leave something missing in the story of Jesus Christ? *by Darris McNeely*

What do brightly colored eggs, rabbits, decorated cakes and sunrise services have to do with the Jesus Christ of the Bible?

There are Christians who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior who do not observe any Easter traditions. I happen to be one of them. Let me explain why.

I've learned that Easter doesn't tell you the whole story about Christ's life, death and resurrection. If something is missing—and there is—then it changes the entire story. What's missing and *why* is crucial for you to understand!

What do Easter customs have to do with Jesus Christ?

Did you know that Easter as a celebration has nothing to do with Jesus Christ?

The name itself doesn't mean Jesus' resurrection, as some might assume. The word *Easter* actually comes from the name of an ancient Babylonian fertility goddess worshipped long before Jesus was born!

A quick Internet search will reveal the origins of Easter bunnies, colored eggs, hot cross buns and the sunrise service. You'll find that these traditions associated with Easter for the most part come from ancient, idolatrous, pre-Christian fertility

celebrations. They were part of religious rites a long time before the time of Christ, and they have nothing to do with what the Bible instructs or the practice of the early Church.

Perhaps none of this matters to you. Maybe you believe Easter customs are fun as part of your worship of Christ or family traditions. If that's the case, let me show you from God's Word why it *should* matter.

Exchanging truth for lies

The Church Jesus founded had a very clear understanding of who He was and how to worship Him. But over many decades things changed. Early Christians became confused and then lost the plain biblical teaching about God the Father and Jesus Christ.

How could people who believed in God possibly let that happen? One reason is that we all have a natural tendency to forget the things we learn. The early Church learned the true faith by the teachings of Christ and the apostles. But we can tell from the very early writings of the New Testament that heresy was beginning to spread in the Church. False teachings were beginning to gain ground.

The apostle Paul warned that some were already flirting with a false gospel

(Galatians 1:6). The apostle Peter warned that "there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1).

In the years after the death of the original apostles, other false teachings began creeping into the Church. Among them was a distortion of the truth about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

As we just read, Peter warned that there was a danger of "denying the Lord who bought them"—that is, replacing the clear truth about Jesus Christ and His teachings on salvation and eternal life with pagan myths and falsehood. Yet despite Peter's clear warning, many bought into the denial.

Pagan myths at the heart of Easter

Easter evolved from a story about an ancient god named Tammuz. The story of Tammuz is at the heart of the pagan world—and at the heart of Easter. It's a story of a never-ending annual cycle without meaning, direction or purpose. In this myth, Tammuz died every year at the beginning of winter and was "resurrected" in the spring by a goddess named Ishtar.

Did you notice that name—*Ishtar*? Does it sound familiar?

That's because the word *Easter* ultimately comes from the name of this ancient false goddess, *Ishtar*. So much of what people do today to celebrate Easter is nothing more than customs that come directly

from the way ancient people worshipped their goddess Ishtar. Why and how did this happen? People had embraced the Ishtar and Tammuz myths and related stories for centuries. In the decades following Jesus and the apostles, as Christianity spread across the world, people started blending these myths into the true story of Christ.

Eventually the fake stories replaced the true one. For the corrupted church leadership taking control at the time, it was convenient to blend pagan myths into biblical truth to attract more people to the church—the more to hold power over. It’s a recurring story told often in the Bible.

But the life of Tammuz and other pagan gods is meaningless when it comes to salvation and what God is really doing with human life. Only God coming to live in the flesh could open the door of salvation for the human creation. Borrowing from false pagan myths to create a “Christian” story doesn’t work. It’s nothing more than empty, meaningless tradition.

But is it ever popular! Every year there are parades and Easter sunrise services. In America, Easter egg rolling takes place annually on the White House lawn.

People dress in their finest, and for many this is the one of perhaps two or three times a year they actually attend a church service. Easter services, even for casual believers, ease their conscience. Coupled with Good Friday, Easter observance becomes a long weekend of leisure and worship tradition.

Easter non-existent in the record of the early Church

About now you may be thinking, “All of this really doesn’t matter because I do it to honor God.” But it *does* matter. Something

So much of what people do today to celebrate Easter is nothing more than customs that come directly from the way ancient people worshipped their goddess Ishtar.

is missing in this story. What’s missing is *truth!*

What’s missing is understanding of the way to eternal life through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus came in the flesh and showed us, through His death and resurrection, the way into the Kingdom of God. He made possible the most awesome reality—the potential for you and me to become the very children of God in the family of God, entering eternity crowned with infinite glory and honor.

You may be surprised to learn that Easter is nowhere found in the story of Jesus and His followers. The book of Acts, which tells the story of the apostles and the Church in its first decades, has no account at all of Easter. The apostles constantly preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But they put this in the context of the true biblical festivals they already knew and observed.

These festivals were central to the life of the Church of God in the first century. As recorded in Acts 2:1, the Church was gathered and given the Holy Spirit on the biblical feast of Pentecost. Later, in Acts 20:6, Luke referred to key events taking place during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Another festival, the Day of Atonement, is also mentioned in Acts 27:9. The weekly Sabbath, another Holy Day of the Bible, is featured several times as the apostle Paul taught both Jews and gentiles (non-Israelites) alike



on that day (Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4).

On another occasion, Paul told the gentile Christians in the city of Corinth to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (1 Corinthians 5:8). He told them to keep these days “with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”—that is, bearing in mind the underlying spiritual reality these days represent.

Resurrection taught, but no Easter

Easter celebrations were nowhere in the

picture during the early days of the Church. But Jesus Christ’s resurrection as found in the Bible was.

Notice the first sermon that Peter gave on the feast of Pentecost. Speaking of the prophecies about the Messiah that King David gave, Peter said: “He, foreseeing this, *spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ*, that His soul was not left in Hades [the grave], nor did His flesh see corruption. *This Jesus God has raised up of which we are all witnesses*” (Acts 2:31-32, emphasis added throughout).

When he was called to task for healing a lame man, Peter was “filled with the Holy Spirit” and said, “Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, *whom God raised from the dead*, by Him this man stands here before you whole” (Acts 4:8-10).

Paul preached to a city in Greece for three straight Sabbaths “that the Christ had to suffer *and rise again from the dead*, and saying “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ”” (Acts 17:2-3). Again, throughout the New Testament, it’s the resurrection of Jesus Christ that was taught. But it is never found in connection with an Easter service.

Christ’s death and resurrection are clearly connected with the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Jesus was killed as “our Passover” (1 Corinthians 5:7). He was buried just as the Days of Unleavened Bread began in that year. Three days and three nights later He was resurrected during this seven-day festival. And He appeared to the disciples the morning after His resurrection on the same day that He was accepted by the Father (see the study guide offered at the end of this article).

All this was clearly understood by the Church. It was part of the apostles’ doctrine or teaching in the early days. Celebrating Easter was not part of the story. When it did come, it introduced doctrinal error!

Easter enters the picture long after the apostles. The story of how it became inserted into the teachings about the resurrection is preserved for us in history.

Decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, as the apostles began to pass from the scene, the Christian faith began changing. Before long it was transformed into something they wouldn’t have recognized. The false teachers that Peter warned about introduced false teaching about Christ’s death and resurrection, with some elements taken from pagan myths, and a great uproar resulted.



This is known in history as the Quarto-decimen Controversy. That's a big word, but the name really means the 14th day of the month, referring to the day the Passover was observed. Some were beginning to keep an Easter tradition borrowed from pagan myths instead of the biblical feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

The controversy became so intense that some church leaders excommunicated others who wouldn't go along with them and the newer teaching about Easter. History records what happened next.

A powerful defense of God's truth

A bishop of Rome named Victor, who was advocating for Easter, got so bold as to put out of the church another minister named Polycrates, who was standing up for the biblical teaching regarding Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Polycrates gave one of the most spirited and inspiring defenses of truth ever recorded. He was not about to abandon his conscience or faith for a pagan myth. At great cost, he rose in defense of the faith. His words are recorded for us: "We, therefore, observe the genuine day [of Passover]; neither adding thereto nor taking therefrom. For in Asia great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again in the day of the Lord's appearing, in which he will come with glory from heaven, and will raise up all the saints . . ."

The great lights in Asia that he was talking about were members and leaders of the first-century Church who first received the truth and kept it. They died in the faith and they await the resurrection. Among those Polycrates mentioned were the apostle John and other early men and women.

Polycrates went on to say this: "All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. Moreover, I, Polycrates, who am the least of all of you, according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have followed. For there were seven, my relatives [who were] bishops, and I am the eighth; and my relatives always observed the day when the people threw away the leaven."

Here Polycrates mentions the Feast of Unleavened Bread. He was the eighth generation of his family to keep these biblical feasts, and he wasn't about to abandon what he knew to be biblical truth. Notice how he concludes:

"I, therefore, brethren, am now sixty-five years in the Lord, who having conferred

with the brethren throughout the world, and having studied the whole of the sacred Scriptures, am not at all alarmed at those things with which I am threatened, to intimidate me. For they who are greater than I, have said, 'we ought to obey God rather than men.'"

This is an inspiring but little-known story about how one man stood up against the Easter traditions that crept into the Church of God and overturned the true faith.

Does it matter to God?

But what does this matter? So many times on these issues we encounter the reasoning, "But if we have turned a pagan idea into a Christian idea, isn't that acceptable to God?" And sometimes we hear: "Christ conquers paganism." People reason around the issue, and as ideas are repeated again and again, they eventually become accepted.

But this doesn't square with God's instructions, which are actually crystal-clear: "Do not be trapped into following their [the pagan nations'] example in worshipping their gods. *Do not say, 'How do these nations worship their gods? I want to follow their example.' You must not do this to the LORD your God.* These nations have committed many detestable acts *that the LORD hates*, all in the name of their gods. *Carefully obey all the commands I give you. Do not add to them or subtract from them*" (Deuteronomy 12:30-32, New Living Translation, 1996).

It's hard to get plainer than that. God says He *hates* the mixing in of pagan practices to worship Him!

Easter obscures important truths

What Easter doesn't tell you is that you are missing out on the wonderful meaning of Passover and reconciliation through the death of Jesus—as Easter focuses only on part of the story and then mixes it with error. What do you need to know? You need to know that Christ died according to the Scripture as our Passover Lamb, in fulfillment of the many prophecies that foretold His coming, His suffering, His death and His resurrection.

You need to know that the Passover observance, as instituted by Christ the night before He died, fills this need.

You need to know that the Feast of Unleavened Bread shows the life of the resurrected Christ, the true Bread of Life of which we are to partake, and His power today. Because He was resurrected, we

have the power to live a life of hope and meaning with the power of God in you. It is that spiritual power, God's Holy Spirit, that can fill the emptiness in your life, giving you meaning and understanding in the midst of a confusing world.

It is this festival that Paul taught the gentile world to observe. This Festival of Unleavened Bread is what you can observe today to realize the full meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

You need to know that Easter misses all of these vitally important truths about Jesus Christ!

No room for error

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:19 that without Christ's resurrection, we are of all people most pitiable. The truth of the resurrection must be told, sticking to what the Bible actually reveals. There is no room for error and myth in this most important event.

Look at what you know, or what you *think* you know about the resurrection. The truth about the resurrection is a key to opening a relationship with Christ and the Father based on fact and truth. (Be sure to read "Saved by His Life," beginning on page 16, and "Christ's Resurrection: Key to Our Salvation," beginning on page 13).

Paul said, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Because Christ was resurrected from the dead and lives today, you have assurance that you, too, can enter eternal life. No humanly devised holiday can teach you what God reveals through His Holy Days. You need to educate yourself with the full story! **GN**

Learn More

We challenge you to look into your Bible and history to see what God tells us about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the plan of God. Instead of celebrating a humanly devised day rooted in myth, why not keep the festivals God gives us! To learn more, request our study aid *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. A free copy is waiting for you!



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Christ's Resurrection: Key to Our Salvation

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are key facts of history for a Christian. As the apostles testified, Christ's resurrection was the culmination of the events of His first coming—and enables the remaining steps in God's plan to save mankind. *by Vince Szymkowiak*

Before He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus promised: "Because I live you will live also" (John 14:19). He had been explaining to His disciples that He was about to die, which would demonstrate His incomprehensible love for humanity. As He went on to say in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for His friends."

The death of God's Son is the foundational step in God's plan to save humanity. His sacrifice allows every human being the opportunity to have his or her sins washed away and become the friend of both Jesus Christ and God the Father. And not only can we become the *friends* of God, but we are invited to live with Them forever as divine members of God's family! This is possible only through the *resurrection* of Christ.

Yet although the apostles heard Jesus speak these words, they could not understand what was about to happen or why. Their beloved Rabbi was about to suffer a horrible death to free others from death. He would be buried for three days and three nights and then be resurrected. Because of *His* resurrection, they too, along with every repentant, obedient and believing human being would also be resurrected at a future time. Everyone will ultimately be given the opportunity to choose the way of salvation to live forever in God's Kingdom!

Preaching the resurrected Christ, starting with Peter

Once converted through the Holy Spirit, the apostles proclaimed to the world that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the capstone of His ministry. Yes, "with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33).



Challenged over the healing of the lame man, Peter responded, "Let it be known . . . that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole."

They were so confident in what they'd seen with their own eyes (1 Corinthians 15:5) that they were willing to die for it. They *knew* it to be the truth. They suffered humiliation, beatings and, later, even death for the name of Christ.

Acts 2 records that Peter and the rest of the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, on the day of Pentecost. Starting in verse 11, we read Peter's first recorded sermon, which was given that day. His message centered around the life, death and resurrection of

Jesus Christ. Jesus was the miracle worker who "was crucified and put to death" (verses 22-23). But then Peter emphasized that before His body could suffer decay, God raised Him back to life (verses 24, 31-32).

Because He was crucified on our behalf, the only proper response for us is to repent of our sins and be baptized (verse 38). God then gives His Holy Spirit to repentant believers so they can "be saved from this perverse generation" (verses 38-40).

The next chapter records how Peter, accompanied by John, was used by God to heal a man who was lame from birth. Peter asked the crowd, "Why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" (Acts 3:12). He then explained that it was through faith in Jesus' name that the man had been made strong (verse 16).

When Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Jewish authorities, these apostles

were asked: "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (Acts 4:7). Peter simply stated, "Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, *whom God raised from the dead*, by Him this man stands here before you whole" (verse 10, emphasis added throughout).

Once again, the message of Peter was that it was because of the power of the *resurrected* Christ that miracles were being accomplished. Again and again, Peter's



messages resound with the fact that he served the risen Christ. Our “living hope,” he says in his first preserved epistle, is “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:3). And he adds, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, *but made alive by the Spirit*” (1 Peter 3:18).

This timeless message regarding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has been carried forth by God’s ministry down through the ages. Anchoring this message is the undeniable fact that we serve a *living Savior*, Jesus Christ.

Paul proclaims the same message

Paul’s first recorded sermon is found in Acts 13. He traveled first to Cyprus, then on to what is now southwestern Turkey, and observed the Sabbath with both Jews and Gentiles, worshipping God with them in the synagogue. After giving a brief history of the Hebrews, he began speaking of the Savior for Israel, Jesus (verse 23). He spoke of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate authorizing Christ’s execution (verse 28).

Then Paul spoke the words which are repeated throughout the New Testament: “*But God raised Him from the dead*” (verse 30). Like Peter, Paul too was driven to preach the crucified and resurrected Christ. This message contained a power heretofore not realized.

Jesus and His apostles proclaimed the gospel or good news of the Kingdom of God—the message that God through His Messiah or Christ would set up a literal kingdom to rule over all nations. As the biblical prophets had earlier foretold, when Christ establishes His Kingdom He will rule from Jerusalem and the world will at last know peace; the nations will learn war no more (Isaiah 2:4).

Paul never changed his message. The final words we read about him are these: “Paul . . . received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the

Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence” (Acts 28:30-31).

Paul started his epistle to the Christians in Rome by stating that he had been “separated to the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). He said the gospel concerned “His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, *and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead*” (verses 3-4).

Paul thus explained that both the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are vital to understanding God’s gospel. He further declared that the “gospel of Christ . . . is *the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes*, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (verse 16).

Christ’s gospel transcends nationalities. His life, death and resurrection are vital for everyone; it is God’s power to salvation—that is, eternal life in God’s coming Kingdom—for every believing human being. Without this salvation all people are headed to the second death—the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8).

Paul continues with the key theme of the importance of Jesus’ resurrection in Romans 5:8-10:

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *Much more* then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, *much more*, having been reconciled, *we shall be saved by His life.*”

This is a key scripture. Paul wants us to know that while Jesus’ death is crucial for our justification before God and reconciliation to Him (being declared not guilty and placed into a right relationship with Him), that death does not give us eternal life. We are ultimately saved, resurrected to eternal life, by the *living* Christ!

In Romans 8:34 Paul states: “Who is he

who condemns? It is Christ who died, and *furthermore* is also *risen*, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.”

The word translated “furthermore” is the Greek *mallon*, meaning “all the more,” “how much more,” “better,” “rather than,” “more than,” etc. So while the spiritual impact of Christ’s sacrificial death on humanity is immense, His resurrected life makes it more so because He lives to make “intercession for us”—pleading for us as priestly intermediary with God.

Paul also makes it clear that Christians live the Christian life only through Christ living in them through the Holy Spirit. As he explains, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, King James Version). Here we see how vital it is that Christ not only died for us but was also resurrected so that He could live in us—empowering us to resist sin and continue in God’s way.

Paul continues the focus in 1 Corinthians

Paul wrote his first preserved epistle to the church at Corinth to correct, in love, some heresies that were troubling the congregation. Earlier, he had spent 18 months raising up that church and teaching the members the fundamentals of the Christian faith (see Acts 18:11).

His instructions in this letter regarding the observance of biblical festivals date it to the spring of the year in the northern hemisphere. In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, we are exhorted to keep the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread with proper spiritual focus—both of these occurring in early spring. Paul gives further instruction in chapter 11 on the right attitude Christians must have as we partake of the New Testament Passover (as we must still today).

Notice in this regard that this epistle, written more than two decades after Christ’s

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death and resurrection, contains no reference to the observance of Easter Sunday. The popular Easter holiday is rooted *not* in true Christianity but in pagan religion (see “How Christian Is Easter?” beginning on page 4).

In fact, Jesus was not even resurrected early Sunday morning, as most believe. It is provable that He came back to life on Saturday, rising from the grave around the end of the weekly Sabbath at sunset after three days and three nights, as He promised in Matthew 12:40 (see “Good Friday—Easter Sunday: It Doesn’t Fit With the Bible,” beginning on page 8). The truth of the matter is that the early Church observed the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread in a New Covenant context. They never



Next he addressed the heresy some were spreading—that there was no actual resurrection of the dead. He anchored his rebuttal through the fact of Christ’s literal resurrection as a forerunner of the future resurrection of all believers. He said that if Christ was not risen, then his preaching and their faith were in vain (verse 14).

Furthermore, Paul said that if Christ was not risen, then he and the other ministers were false witnesses and the Christian faith is futile, with all of us left still in our sins (verses 14, 17). For it is Christ living in us that empowers us to live in obedience to God. And if Christ is not risen, Paul stated, then those who have died in Christ have perished—there is no hope of anyone ever being resurrected. And if it’s only in this present life that we have hope, we are of all men the most to be pitied (verses 18-19).

Paul goes on to emphatically state that Christ *has* risen from the dead and has become the firstfruits of those who have died (verse 20), the beginning of God’s spiritual harvest of mankind. He explains that while the first Adam, the father of wayward mankind, brought death, the last Adam—Jesus Christ as the beginning of a

Paul stated that if Christ is not risen, then there is no hope of anyone ever being resurrected. And if it’s only in this present life that we have any hope, we are of all men the most to be pitied!

observed Easter. (Again, see “How Christian Is Easter?” beginning on page 4.)

In this springtime epistle, Paul also wrote of the crucial importance of Christ’s resurrection. There were false teachers in the congregation who were denying the reality of the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:12).

He told them when first addressing them that Jesus rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (verses 3-4) and that Jesus died for their sins and was seen by Cephas (Peter) and the other apostles as well as more than 500 others (verses 5-7). He mentioned this large number of personal eyewitnesses to demonstrate that there was no possibility of fraud. These were all bona fide witnesses who knew they saw Jesus after His resurrection. Paul then reaffirmed that he himself had also seen the risen Christ (verse 8).

renewed human race—has brought life.

Paul then spends the rest of this lengthy chapter talking about the resurrection of the dead. Furthermore, he makes it clear that *Christ’s* resurrection is the guarantee of *our* resurrection.

The Kingdom of God is for resurrected believers

The key to the Kingdom of God promised in the gospel message is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If it weren’t for Christ’s resurrection, there would be no Kingdom of God to come. There would be no messianic King of that Kingdom—and no resurrected followers of His to serve as kings and priests along with Him.

Some think that the message of the Kingdom of God is merely about experiencing God in our lives today. But without a future

literal resurrection and ruling Kingdom to come, what would be the point? We would be most pitiable, as Paul said.

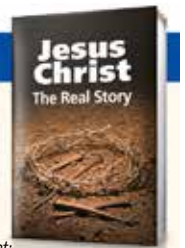
While we can experience a foretaste of the Kingdom of God today through personally living by God’s Word, Paul announces that the Kingdom is ultimately yet to come and that inheriting it requires a resurrection or change to immortality:

“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep [in death], but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (verses 50-54).

It is God who gives us this victory through the risen Christ (verse 57). Our living forever has been made possible through the One who said that He is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). His life, ministry, death and resurrection have made eternal life possible for humanity! We’re reconciled to God by Jesus’ death but saved by His life—by His living in us to lead us and interceding for us as High Priest.

Jesus will come back to rule as King under God the Father. In the coming Kingdom of God, the resurrected Messiah and His resurrected followers will lead the rest of mankind, those who are willing, to repentance and ultimately experiencing the same change to immortality. Let us never forget the awesome importance of Jesus’ death *and* resurrection! **GN**

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“Saved by His Life”

When you lose hope, how do you manage to regain confidence and purpose in life? *by Beyond Today host Darris McNeely*

Sheila was discouraged, perhaps even depressed. She told herself there was no reason to be down—after all, her life was stable and her family was doing well. She went to her doctor for help. The doctor opened his closet, handed over a package of antidepressants and said, “Take two of these and call me in the morning.” It’s that easy—or is it?

People spend billions of dollars annually on medications to help them cope with the stresses of life. These medications help many people to make it through each day.

Yet for some, such medications are not effective. The underlying problem may not be physical, as it can be in cases of depression, but spiritual. It may be that their lives have become empty and without hope. They lack or have never found true meaning in life.

In fact, this underlying problem affects most people to some degree. For many it leaves a general sense of unease. But for others it can lead to ruinous life choices.

This illustrates a fundamental human need not being met, creating a big hole in our lives. While some seek medications to deal with the problem, others turn to destructive methods. Some seek relief in a bottle, in illicit drugs, in gambling, in risky behavior or in any number of other vices.

What is this hole? Again, it’s an unmet need for *hope*. It’s a lack of *meaning and understanding of who we are and what life is all about*.

We need to understand that there is a God. We need to see why He made human life. And we need to understand who we are as individuals and what we were meant for—our purpose and the destiny planned for us.

That purpose is not found in any bottle or other addictive pursuit. Life’s meaning is found in the Bible, the Word of God. There is hope in the purpose it reveals—enough hope for a lifetime of meaning and fulfillment!

We’ll examine a passage of Scripture that describes hope and shows how to maintain hope even when things turn life upside down. It comes down to knowing we have hope in salvation through the life of Jesus Christ.

Assurance of hope through Christ

Because Jesus Christ came as the Son of God and lived a perfect life, died for our sins and was resurrected, we have the assurance of hope for eternal life as children of God, sharing in His glory. Here we find hope for



through Christ has provided a better way!

Justified by His death, saved by His life

In the Bible we have an encouraging passage that shows us the road to hope. It was written by a man who had learned just how big a hole he had in his life. He then dedicated

Life’s meaning is found in the Bible, the Word of God, not in a pill or a bottle. There is hope in the purpose it reveals—enough hope for a lifetime of meaning and fulfillment!

a contented life of purpose and meaning.

The Bible shows us God’s purpose and plan for our lives. It shows us God’s will to redeem our lives through the death and life of Jesus Christ. The fact that Jesus Christ died and rose from the grave is among the most important news you can have. The resurrected Christ can change your life!

His life in you today can lift the discour-

agement and emptiness from your life. His life can fill you with positive purpose, real hope and enduring courage. It is our choice whether we will let Him live in us today.

You may be thinking this is not reality—at least not *your* reality. You may be either too turned off to a religious message or feel you are too far gone to deserve God’s love and attention. Either way you would be wrong!

Every one of us must have hope so that we can live a stable life with purpose. Without hope we feel helpless, empty and without focus and meaning. And when we feel so empty—with such a big hole in our life—we are setting ourselves up for something else to fill the gap. And that doesn’t always go well. But you don’t have to take that path. God

through Christ has provided a better way!

In the Bible we have an encouraging passage that shows us the road to hope. It was written by a man who had learned just how big a hole he had in his life. He then dedicated

his life to helping others fill theirs.

Look at what the apostle Paul writes as he conveys this truth. He says: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, *having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him*. For if when we were enemies *we were reconciled to God through*



the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Romans 5:8-10, emphasis added).

This passage gives us much to think about. We need to have a balanced, proper perspective that focuses on both Christ’s death and His life. His suffering and death constitute a very important part of God’s plan. His death provides us with the sacrifice necessary to be reconciled with God and have our sins forgiven. It’s very important!

But this only *begins* the process. That He lived again, was resurrected from the grave and lives today is necessary for us to have any hope of eternal life. We are saved, and salvation—eternal life—is God’s gift by grace.

This is the foundation for hope in your life—that Christ rose from the dead and lives today at the right hand of God as

our High Priest. His life makes possible our hope of eternal life with God. God’s purpose is to bring “many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10)—to share His spirit life with the human race He created. Life has a purpose, and that purpose is for us to inherit eternal glory as a child of God and fellow heir with Christ.

This is why Christ lived and died as a sacrifice for you—that you might share the glory of a spirit life with God forever. By becoming flesh, dying and being resurrected, Jesus Christ paved the way for your future eternal life. This is the bedrock anchor of our hope in this temporary physical life.

When life throws curves

It’s been said that hope is buying into what we believe. And that’s true. Every day we encounter situations designed to help us embrace and rely on the beliefs we hold close.

What do you believe? Is it grounded in

spiritual reality? When something bad happens to good people, how do you react?

When you and I pass into trying circumstances, whether health issues, or financial stress, or emotionally challenging conditions—how do we react? Does our faith keep us buoyed in hope, or do we crumble and abandon our faith and love for God?

Life is going to throw us curve balls. As a pastor I’ve worked for years with people committed to God who face the challenges of life. I’ve sat by the bedside of the dying. I’ve taken the 2 a.m. phone call of distress. I’ve counseled the addicted, the destitute and the down-and-outers. I’ve helped people put their marriage back together. I’ve stood by the grave with parents and watched as their stillborn child was lowered in the grave.

Even now I pray for and counsel people dealing with cancer, stricken children and depressed lives. Let’s be honest—bad things happen to even godly people every day.

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When it does, there's one place I take them to explain what God is doing. I take them to the passage in Romans we read earlier.

Finding peace with God

Let's look at another portion of this passage. It shows why hope is built on the truth that we are saved by the life of Jesus Christ: "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us" (Romans 5:1, New Living Translation).

Peace with God. Think about the level of anger, hatred and division that we see all around us. Political division. Religious strife. Racial division. You can see examples any moment on television or the Internet.

It affects each of us. Do you find yourself restless, agitated, suspicious, angry for no reason? Look around at the talk we hear, the feelings expressed. It affects us. It keeps us from being at peace.

Someone came to me once who was having emotional problems. As we discussed it, we came to one solution that did help in her case—she turned off the argumentative, polarizing radio programs she listened to on the commute to work and home each day. In her case, it was causing her distress. How about you? Are you at peace? Perhaps there is some other cause of distress in your life.

Paul in this passage is showing how deep inner peace begins when we see we have in God a father and in Jesus Christ an elder brother. That changes our whole life.

Paul goes on to say, "Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory" (verse 2, NLT)

Once we enter a real relationship with God, we have His favor and goodwill. He looks at us like a good father does to his children—with affection and love. We don't need to fear we might somehow be thrown out of the house if and when we're bad. God doesn't work that way. He is not abusive.

Trusting through trials

Another woman was once discussing with my wife how she had packed up her stuff and left her home the night before because her husband was upset with her. She had packed up a cherished item with other things that were going to be donated to charity. Nothing physical happened; he just didn't want his cherished item given away.

It meant something to him but not to her. Because she had been in other abusive rela-

tionships, she interpreted his disfavor as personal and left the house. When he apologized and explained that his love didn't change and that he was only upset, she realized she had overreacted. My wife told her she had to learn that in such a relationship you will hit times of disagreement, but you don't run away. You stay and work it out.

This illustrates a key feature of our relationship with God. We stand in God's grace. When trials hit, even when we know we might be at fault, it doesn't mean God has left or forgotten us. We face the problem, admit wrong if necessary, and move forward.

Now Paul gets down to the hard part: "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials . . ." (verse 3, NLT).

I don't know of anyone who is happy when something bad happens to him or her. Personally, I like a peaceful, uncomplicated and settled life. But we all know that bad things happen every day. And sometimes they happen to us or someone close to us.

Trials and problems are a part of life. God doesn't promise us a life without challenges. This life is a preparation for another life to come, and when we understand this we have a key to life that leads to hope.

Paul continues with his comments about problems and trials, noting that "we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation" (verses 3-4, NLT).

Trials build endurance, endurance builds character, and character builds hope.

How to keep going

Here in short form is the biblical answer to how we work our way through a trial without giving up on life, on others or on God. We have to be patient, knowing we still have God standing with us. He has not left us, but we have to remain standing and find out what He has for us to learn. And we will learn through all the experiences of life.

We cannot escape this fundamental part of life. No matter how "good" we are or think we are, no matter what we believe or don't believe, we're going to pass through difficult experiences. The key is to face them with grace and with God. Face them and determine to work through them to the end, whatever that end might be.

When we're patient, we'll develop positive experience. Trials will end and we continue on. The hard times pass and with time we heal. It's then that we've learned something about ourselves, about God and about life.

We also then have experience. With that

experience we better know how to work through the next difficulty. With that experience we're also prepared to help another person going through the same thing. "And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love" (verse 5, NLT).

With hope, we can meet each trial with determination and get through it. God uses our trials to fulfill His promise, to perform His salvation. We can see each trial to its end. And if the end is tragic, hope can pick us up and move us down the road and help us get back into the game.

We can encourage those who are going through trials. Our hope becomes a beacon for others. We honor God by enduring and not turning tail and running from Him or from life. Hope keeps us from anger and denial.

This life is filled with challenges. Sometimes these challenges will push us to our very limits—physically, emotionally and spiritually. But thankfully we aren't limited by our own strength. As Paul explained, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). In fact, Christ lives in the hearts and minds of believers to help us succeed (see Galatians 2:20).

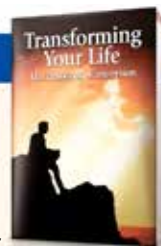
Remember that when the burden feels too great to bear and you're in danger of losing hope, hope remains alive because Jesus Christ is alive. You can fill the hole in your life with a new hope that only a relationship with God through Christ can provide.

You are created in God's image, and He through His risen Son can help you in any challenging trial and difficult period of your life. These challenges are opportunities to grow in the undeserved favor of God in Christ.

The hope that may be missing in your life comes through the knowledge and assurance that *we are saved by His life*—the awesome, invincible life of Jesus Christ, the life He wants to live *in us*. **GN**

Learn More

How can you build a relationship with Jesus Christ leading to eternal life in the family of God? Where do you start, and what does it require of you? You'll find the answers in our helpful study aid *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Download or request your free copy today!



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2015

A Year of Triumph or Trial for America?

After years of bad economic news, some think things are looking up for the United States. But are they? What troubling signs are on the horizon? *by Mike Kelly*

Millions of Americans have seen reasons to believe that 2015 is on track to being better than recent years. Economic forecasts are up. Crime is down. Lower oil prices translate into hundreds of dollars more per year in consumers' pockets.

Yet while this is all good, should we also be paying attention to troubling signs on the horizon?

To be sure, some signs do indeed look promising. After the economic crisis of 2008-2009 and several years of sluggish recovery, U.S. economists are nearly unanimous in the estimates of robust economic growth in 2015, with most expecting 3 percent or greater.

This would translate into more good news for the job market. The unemployment rate is expected to continue to decline, with tens of thousands of new jobs created each month. And the gradual tightening of the labor force should give U.S. workers more leverage in wage negotiations, finally driving up wages that have been stagnant for years.

A solid growth rate should also translate into stock and bond market gains, as an improving economy translates into higher earnings for companies. A growing econ-

omy would prompt the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates, which would help bond investors.

As mentioned, the nation can take some satisfaction in an improved crime situation. Federal Bureau of Investigation figures show a striking but positive trend: The rate of violent crime has dropped by nearly half since 1993. FBI data shows a decline in violent crime from a rate of 747 incidents per 100,000 in 1993 to 387 incidents per 100,000 in 2012, the most recent year for which complete data has been published.

Nearly every type of violent crime declined over the past 20 years, with homicides down 51 percent, forcible rape down 35 percent and robberies down 56 percent. Property crimes, such as burglary and vandalism, also dropped sharply.

Some U.S. cities are the safest they've been in decades. New York City of the 1970s was considered one of the most crime-infested cities in the nation. Since that time, however, the city's crime rate has plummeted to where it is now considered safer than Dallas or Houston (Justin Wolfers, "Perceptions Haven't Caught Up to Decline in Crime," *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2014).

The good news is something to rejoice about. But before we start celebrating too

loudly, we should ask ourselves: Are we seeing the complete picture? Or could we be closing our eyes to dangers we'd rather not think about?

Not-so-rosy economic figures

While some economic figures are encouraging, a number of others are highly sobering. For example, a Jan. 13, 2015, report by Jim Clifton, CEO of Gallup, Inc., noted at the Gallup website that over the last six years, *70,000 more businesses have shut their doors than have opened.*

He went on to explain: "When new businesses aren't being born, the free enterprise system and jobs decline . . . Without a growing entrepreneurial economy, there are no new good jobs. That means declining revenues and smaller salaries to tax, followed by declining aid for the elderly and poor and declining funding for the military, for education, for infrastructure—declining revenues for everything."

Going hand-in-hand with this, a *New York Times* article last year reported that over the previous decade, "the inflation-adjusted net worth for the typical household" had declined 36 percent (Anna Bernasek, "The Typical Household, Now Worth a Third Less," July 26, 2014).

A Jan. 16, 2015, *Washington Post* article noted the following shocking fact: "For the first time in at least 50 years, a majority of U.S. public school students come from low-income families . . . a statistic that has profound implications for the nation" (Lyndsey Layton, "Majority of U.S. Public



School Students Are in Poverty”).

Further, a CNSnews.com headline on Dec. 10, 2014, stated, “65 Percent of Children Live in Households on Federal Aid Programs.” The total number, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures, was more than 40 million.

Especially troubling is the skyrocketing U.S. government debt. According to the U.S. Treasury website, as of Jan. 1, 2005, total federal debt was just under \$7.6 trillion. A decade later, at the beginning of 2015, debt stood at *more than \$18 trillion*—a staggering *increase of almost 140 percent, and more debt than the nation had accumulated in its entire previous history of almost 230 years!*

Sadly, such figures are the tip of the iceberg in terms of the nation’s true financial picture. Making matters worse, on Feb. 2 President Obama presented a proposed 2016 fiscal year budget that would add another \$1.44 trillion in taxes and another \$6 trillion in debt over the next decade.

An island in a sea of turmoil

In spite of its financial problems, America could be likened to an island of relative peace and tranquility in a seething cauldron of worldwide unrest, where violence and hatred seem to be escalating everywhere.

The new year was barely one week old when two French-born Islamic terrorists of Algerian descent, brothers Cherif and Said Quache, stormed into the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on Jan. 7. Using automatic weapons with military precision, they gunned down 10 journalists and cartoonists, plus two policemen.

As they murdered a wounded Muslim policeman they shouted, “The prophet has been avenged!” Apparently they thought it was their Muslim duty to avenge any insult to the founder of Islam.

The murders had a chilling effect on press freedom, long a core belief of Western democracies. Major news organizations immediately began rethinking their editorial policies. At CNN, senior editorial director Richard Griffiths told staffers worldwide that *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons were not being shown on any CNN platforms, encouraging them instead to “verbally describe the cartoons in detail” (quoted at Politico, Jan. 7, 2015).

The Islamist terror organization al-Qaeda’s affiliate group in Yemen took responsibility for the Paris killings, which the French now refer to as their 9/11. Al-Qaeda has

shown its ability to strike the major Western democracies, with nearly 3,000 killed in the 9/11 attacks on America in 2001 and 52 in England with the 2005 London subway bombings.

The sensational news of the attacks in France overshadowed other terrorist incidents that day—suicide bombings in Iraq that killed 23 people and a car bomb in Yemen that killed 38 and injured more than 60 others. These followed attacks in which

trends portend for the nation’s future?

Failing schools reduce national competitiveness

For the past few decades, America’s failing educational institutions have been an embarrassment to the nation and a blot on its national pride.

A recent *Washington Times* article described American public schools as “*in a free fall,*” with U.S. schools now ranking



It seems that America’s long-running racial divisions have not improved as much as we would have expected since the early 1960s civil rights struggles. This does not bode well for the future of the country.

an estimated 2,000 people were slaughtered by the Islamist group Boko Haram in northern Nigeria Jan. 3.

Very few realize that the Bible sitting on their bookshelf has something to say about these events. Speaking through Moses, God foretold events that would befall ancient Israel—and its modern-day descendants, particularly the major English-speaking peoples—for national rejection of His law:

“But if you will not listen to Me, and will not do all these commandments, and if you shall despise My statutes, or if your soul hates My judgments . . . I will even appoint terror over you, consumption, and burning fever, consuming the eyes and causing sorrow of heart . . . And I will set My face against you, and you shall be slain before your enemies” (Leviticus 26:14-17, Modern King James Version, emphasis added throughout).

Could it be that we’re seeing these ominous punishments begin to be played out in America today? What do such growing

29th in the world. This from the nation that earlier put man on the moon and has for decades led the world in finding cures for killer diseases.

Slovakia, Russia and Vietnam have joined the ranks of China, India, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea in the list of nations surpassing U.S. schools in the quality of education and the caliber of its graduates.

And now comes evidence that many American college graduates lack the skills to compete even in an average U.S. work environment. In mid-January, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that *as many as four in ten U.S. graduates lack the reasoning skills to manage white-collar work.*

The Collegiate Learning Assessment Plus exam, given to 32,000 college seniors at 169 U.S. colleges and universities, measures reasoning ability needed in typical U.S. managerial environments. It noted that many students start college at a deficit in reasoning, making it that much harder to catch up by the time they graduate.

“Even if there is notable growth over four years, many students are starting at such a low point that they may still not be proficient at the point of graduation,” said Jessalyn James, a program manager at the Council for Aid to Education, which administered the test” (Douglas Belkin, “Test Finds College Graduates Lack Skills for White-Collar Jobs,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 16, 2015).

The implications for an America competing in a global economy could be disastrous. As nations such as China and India graduate more trained engineers, scientists, business managers and computer experts, American competitiveness will suffer.

Alarming increase in mental illness

Not well publicized is the dramatic rise of mental illness in America today. No less an authority than Marcia Angell, former editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, had this to say in a June 23, 2011, *New York Review of Books* piece titled “The Epidemic of Mental Illness: Why?”:

“The tally of those who are so disabled by mental disorders that they qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) increased nearly two and a half times between 1987 and 2007—from 1 in 184 Americans to 1 in 76. For children, the rise is even more startling—a thirty-five-fold increase in the same two decades.”

Today, young people by the millions are experiencing the onset of clinical depression, among the most debilitating of mental illnesses resulting in thousands of suicides annually. Speaking to the National Press Club in 1998, Martin Seligman, then-president of the American Psychological Association, reported that the average age for the onset of depression had decreased from 29 to 15.

Antidepressant use in the United States has increased nearly 400 percent in the last two decades, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), making antidepressants the most frequently used class of medications by Americans ages 18-44. By 2008, 23 percent of women ages 40-59 were taking antidepressants, the CDC reported.

It seems every other person in the country is on some type of antidepressant these days. What does it portend for America’s future with depression and other mental illnesses on the rise?

And how much of this may be attributed to a sobering prophecy that applies to our time today found in Deuteronomy 28:28?

Speaking to the ancient Israelites—and their modern-day descendants—about the consequences of disobedience to His law, God tells them, “The LORD will strike you with blindness and madness and confusion of heart.”

Rising racial tensions creating a divided nation

The election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president brought hope to millions that race relations in America would enter the final stage of healing, marking the start of a new era in the nation.

That optimism soon vanished. Annual *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News polls show that positive views of race relations peaked among African Americans at 66 percent in 2010, one year after Obama took office. Then opinions took a steady downturn so that by July 2013 only 38 percent thought race relations were good—worse than the 40 percent in 2007 before Obama.

Perceptions of race relations dropped even lower with the highly publicized 2014 killings of two black men by white police officers, one in Ferguson, Missouri, and the other in New York City, along with grand juries in both cases deciding not to indict the officers. In another *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll in mid-December 2014, only 35 percent of African-American respondents rated race relations as good, while 63 percent rated them as bad.

The change in perceptions among white Americans was even more dramatic, having risen from 59 percent seeing race relations as good in 2007 to a peak of 79 percent considering them so in late 2009 and then plunging to only 40 percent now feeling this way, as of December 2014 (Reid Epstein, “Poll: Views of Race Relations Worse Than Before Obama Took Office,” *Washington Wire*, blogs.wsj.com, Dec. 17, 2014)

It would seem that America’s long-running racial divisions have not improved nearly as much as we would have expected since the early 1960s civil rights struggles. This does not bode well for the future of the country. As Jesus Christ Himself stated, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand” (Matthew 12:25, New International Version).

Certainly, the U.S. is not the only nation with significant gulfs between racial groups. But we could ask ourselves to what extent will smoldering racial tensions lead to the weakening of the world’s leading democracy?

How much longer?

Some will point out that America has faced crises before. One can’t forget the grim situation the nation faced in the 1930s, when worldwide economic depression crippled the U.S. economy with 25 percent unemployment in 1933. The nation came through a decade later when, roused from isolationist slumber by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, it mobilized its human and material resources to defeat the Axis powers.

But other observers also correctly point out the differences in the character of the American people then compared to today. With the nation’s flagrant disregard for morality and God’s righteous law, does America have what it takes to pull through today’s challenges?

Moses’ warning to ancient Israel is especially relevant to 21st-century America. Read it in Deuteronomy 28, where God promised blessings for obedience and curses for violating His laws. God dealt patiently with ancient Israel, and He will deal patiently with us today—but only to a point. Has America passed, or is it about to pass, that point of no return?

Individually, none of us can change the course of a nation bent on increasingly turning away from God. But each of us can personally heed God’s command given through the prophet Isaiah: “Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:6-7).

May we have the wisdom to turn from our human ways that lead to suffering and death (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25) and choose, as we’re told in Deuteronomy 30:19, the way that leads to blessings and life! **GN**

Learn More

Why does it seem that so much is going so wrong for the United States? Why are troubles growing within and without? You can find the answers, which involve the remarkable story behind the nation’s rise to greatness and accelerating fall, in our informative study aid *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. Download or request your free copy today!



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Current Events & Trends

by Milan Bizic, Rudy Rangel and Tom Robinson

Divine creation or happy accident—the debate continues

The philosophy of secular humanism is the leading belief system in entertainment, journalism and science. The majority of Western politics is deeply influenced by a philosophy that pushes God and the Bible out of public consciousness and reinforces the belief that humanity alone holds the answers to the world's problems.

That's why it was so refreshing to read a very different sort of column in *The Wall Street Journal* recently. Author Eric Metaxas wrote of the well-reasoned, logical and even scientific evidences of God's hand in creation in an article titled "Science Increasingly Makes the Case for God" (Dec. 25, 2014).

The article, which is well worth reading, begins with the juxtaposition of a God-centered worldview

and a modern secular, humanist worldview. Metaxas writes: "In 1966 *Time* magazine ran a cover story asking: Is God Dead? Many have accepted the cultural narrative that he's obsolete—that as science progresses, there is less need for a 'God' to explain the universe. Yet it turns out that the rumors of God's death were premature. More amazing is that the relatively recent case for his existence comes from a surprising place—science itself."

He goes on to explain several of the amazing scientific facts that make it clear that this universe is not the product of random chance—that it has an awesome Creator. (See additional quotes from this article in "Wise Men Will Seek Him," beginning on page 24). Of course, there was a substantial back-

lash to what Metaxas wrote. Several secular commentators wrote responses in attempts to discredit the notion of a Creator God.

This battle of ideas will continue to rage on into the future. A Christian's heart and mind are not won through clever arguments or philosophical treatises. A Christian's heart is won through truth and the very real and very active presence of our God—the same God who created and sustains the universe around us. Stay strong and stay sure of His existence and His promises in your life. (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*.)

Another actor blasphemes God

In a recent interview on Irish television, British actor and comedian Stephen Fry, a famous atheist, was asked what he would say to God if God turned out to be real and he were confronted by Him. His reply: "I'd say: 'Bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain?' That's what I would say."

These are shocking, blasphemous statements, and he followed with more: "The God who created this universe, if it *was* created by God, is quite clearly a maniac—*utter* maniac, totally selfish . . . Atheism is not just about not believing there's a God but, on the assumption that there *is* one, what kind of God is He? It's perfectly apparent that He's monstrous, utterly monstrous, and deserves no respect whatsoever. The moment you banish Him, your life becomes simpler, purer, cleaner, more worth living, in my opinion."

The world we live in elevates and idolizes entertainers like Mr. Fry, but we have to remember that fame or social status does not give one wisdom.

Atheism runs into serious trouble in using moral arguments to deny God. If there is no God, why is anything right or wrong? And if there does happen to be a Creator God, then who are we to tell Him what is right and wrong? Who are we to judge *Him*? And why would we imagine that we know better than the Maker of the universe? This is foolishness.

Of course, Fry does not understand what God has spelled out in His Word—the human race as a whole is under a curse since the rebellion in the Garden of Eden.

So despite the wondrous brilliance of the creation around us, we also observe these serious problems. Yet God has a plan to *save* mankind—to lead us into a much better world and then a joyous eternity so that "the sufferings of this present time are not

worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Many feel that God has abandoned us, but the exact opposite is true.

Fry is not alone in claiming to know better than our Creator. The pride of the rebellious, fallen angel



If there is no God, why is anything right or wrong? And if there is a Creator God, then who are we to tell Him what is right and wrong?

Satan is becoming more and more evident in our world. To stand on the proverbial mountaintop and shout curses at God is nothing new for His wayward children, but it still represents a very small-minded and egotistical human perspective.

God says that one day every knee will bow before His merciful throne. We can all be thankful that God's throne is not only a place of justice, but a place of vast, undeserved mercy. Satan has deceived many in our world, and we see that in humanity's hateful and dismissive attitude toward God.

True wisdom and understand comes from God, not human learning or success. Stay close to God to ensure that this type of arrogant pride doesn't catch you off guard. And to better understand the misery of the present age and God's plan for dealing with it, be sure to send for our free study aid *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* (online at www.ucg.org/booklets).

New temple to Norse gods in Iceland

Belief in God is waning in most Western countries, along with a general increase in atheism. The small North Atlantic island of Iceland, however, has a group of followers who are looking to the pagan gods of old in their worship.

Reuters news agency reports: "Worship of the gods in Scandinavia gave way to Christianity around 1,000 years ago but a modern version of Norse paganism has been gaining popularity in Iceland" (Daniel Dickson, "Iceland to Build First Temple to Norse Gods in 1,000 Years," Feb. 3, 2015).

In the face of Scandinavia's strongly secular society, the attendance at the Icelandic church of Thor, Odin and Frigg has tripled in the last 10 years. So now the Asatru Association is planning to build a temple to the old gods that overlooks Iceland's capital city of Reykjavik.

Most of the patrons of this "new" church do not view the Norse gods in a literal sense, but embrace a spiritual focus on them as part of pagan earth worship.

Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson, the proclaimed high priest of the order, said, "We see the stories as poetic metaphors and a manifestation of the forces of nature and human psychology" (ibid.).

Jesus warned of far greater religious deception in the end time. The world will see a resurgence of religious fervor, but not the true religion of the Bible. How will this happen? The book of Revelation tells of a future false prophet who goes out and deceives the whole world. He will have power and authority and will perform miracles. But his power will not come from God—it will come from Satan.

For most atheists and humanists, worship at the temple of the old gods probably seems like a silly relic of ancient times. But this is a true modern-day pagan religion. Religious deception will not always be so obvious. Satan's deception is very subtle. (Source: Reuters.)



Charlie Hebdo and freedom of speech

The attacks in the Paris offices of the satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* dominated news around the world in a matter of moments. The hashtag #jesuis-Charlie (“I am Charlie” in French) gained widespread use as a display of solidarity with the publication’s employees and the families of those murdered.

It was a horrible scene in which writers and artists were murdered by Islamic militants offended by *Charlie Hebdo*’s articles and illustrations ridiculing Islam and Islamic extremism—along with poking fun at all religions, including Christianity and Judaism.

How should we view matters like this? The murder of *Charlie Hebdo* employees was certainly evil and inexcusable. There is no justification for it—and the murderers here have a very twisted view of right and wrong. But should others, in defense of liberty, now champion this publication with its blasphemous depictions and references to God and Jesus Christ? Using civil freedoms in this way is also evil and should be offensive to any serious Christian.

Would Jesus be in favor of our modern, Western version of freedom of speech? The freedom of speech does provide an avenue for this gospel message to go out to a world that desperately needs it, yet it also gives equal opportunity for blasphemies, pornography, hatred and many other things the Bible strongly condemns.

We often see the freedoms we value taken well beyond the proper limits of morality and common sense. Abortion, the murder of the innocent unborn, is acceptable in the name of freedom. Freedom of speech is another value and ideology that Satan will continue to lead people to severely abuse until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. God speed that day!

ISIS brutality brings more Jordanian involvement

The harsh reality of the unbelievably brutal tactics employed by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) continues to shock the world’s sensibilities. For some time now the Western world has responded to ISIS’ violence with targeted strikes in Iraq, strongly assisted by Iraqi Kurds.

Now the Middle Eastern nation of Jordan is upping its involvement in the fight against ISIS’ brand of Islamic extremism. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that “the Jordanian air force carried out a new round of airstrikes targeting Islamic State Thursday [Feb. 5]” (Asa Fitch and Suha Ma’ayeh, “Jordanian Fighter Jets Conduct Fresh Airstrikes,” Feb. 5, 2015).

This comes on the heels of a particularly despicable public show when ISIS released video of a Jordanian pilot being burned alive by militants.

The execution has sparked intense anger from many Jordanian nationals, including the royal family. “The country has vowed ‘punishment and revenge’ for his death, and the king described IS as a ‘deviant criminal group’” (Paul Adams, “Jordan Pilot Hostage Moaz al-Kasasbeh ‘Burned Alive,’” BBC News, Feb. 3, 2015).

While King Abdullah and the rest of Jordan’s ruling

family have been publicly condemnatory of ISIS previously, this marks somewhat of a shift in public opinion in Jordan as a whole. Only time will tell whether ISIS is able to make a strong push into Jordan—which they have previously threatened to do—or if their north-westwardly expansion will be stopped.

On Feb. 5, columnist Charles Krauthammer speculated that ISIS may be trying to draw Jordan into an unwinnable war in hopes that public support of military action will fade and eventually turn to discontent (as happened with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan), leading in time to destabilization of the kingdom. This would make ISIS the clear winner in the long term, and potentially lead to a takeover of that nation.

It’s not a coincidence that the Middle East continues to be an explosively violent region. Much that the Bible prophesies of the future centers around Jerusalem and surrounding areas. While the future holds even more chaos and tragedy, the end of the story is filled with hope, healing and reconciliation.

Stay informed about the present and future of the Middle East by reading future issues of this publication. (Sources: *The Wall Street Journal*, BBC News, *The Washington Post*.)

Putin raises the stakes

After a relatively peaceful couple of months, the early days of 2015 saw another increase in violence in Eastern Ukraine. Russian forces pushed into the country, upsetting the shaky ceasefire and reigniting the flames of war.



Russia’s westward move toward Ukraine shouldn’t be considered in a vacuum or regarded as an isolated conflict with no broader ramifications. The clear subtext (and even stated reasoning) behind Putin’s aggression is his contempt for NATO and other Western nations.

Russia’s recent history has seen it pushing away

its Western allies in favor of stronger alliances in the Middle East and East Asia. Particularly troublesome for NATO states has been Russia’s support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and Iran’s nuclear aspirations.

This trend should have the West on the alert. The British newsmagazine *The Economist* laid out a scenario that could be the possible culmination of Putin’s plan for Ukraine: “This warmongering is clearly aimed at the West, which is considering new sanctions, including cutting Russia out of the SWIFT banking system, something that could have a devastating impact on the economy.

“Dmitry Medvedev, Mr Putin’s prime minister, has warned that this would trigger unrestricted retaliation—and not just economically. The danger is not that Russia declares war on NATO, but that its recklessness could have unintended consequences” (“Understanding Putin’s Plans,” Jan. 31, 2015).

What could those unintended consequences be? Only time will ultimately tell, but it is interesting that the Bible talks about a time in the future when events to the north and east of the Holy Land will be a sign of great troubles to come (Daniel 11:44). What is immediately clear is that Putin’s Russia will focus on forming stronger alliances with Eastern powers at the expense of its historically troubled relationship with the West. (Source: *The Economist*.)

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/!



Wise Men Will Seek Him

The need for wisdom is one of the great themes of the Bible. And being wise leads inescapably to one course of action—seeking God!

by Peter Eddington

Let's weave together a fascinating story that includes the wise men on the scene soon after Jesus' birth, science, the prophet Daniel, evil king Belshazzar, Babylon, and you and me! The subject is *wisdom*, but this is a different approach to a timeless issue.

The famous American author and philosopher Elbert Hubbard wrote, "Every man is a fool for at least five minutes every day; wisdom consists in not exceeding the limit."

In the book of James we read, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Just like the men of Jesus' day, those with wisdom will seek out the truth—will look for God—will seek Him.

The wise men and Jesus

First, let's set up the story by noting the wise men seeking Jesus when He was born. Here is a quick synopsis of the story taken from the book of Matthew:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem . . . wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him' . . .

"Then Herod . . . sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.'

"When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts

to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:1-2, 7-11).

In ancient Babylon the king used wise men of science, or magi, to give him advice. They were generally knowledgeable in matters of astronomy, calendars and medicine. It seems probable that these wise men came from Parthia—a great empire east of the Euphrates River—biblically the distant east. Babylonia had been made part of this empire.

Parthia's territory also included the very lands into which the northern 10 tribes of Israel had been taken captive by the Assyrians centuries earlier. And the Parthian Empire and surrounding areas contained many descendants of the exiled tribes.

It may well be that these *wise men* in Jesus' story could claim Abraham as their ancient father. If so, they would have had a particular interest in the prophesied King of the Jews. And since the prophet Daniel had been placed over magi in ancient Babylon, his and other prophecies of Israel's Messiah may have been passed down among them. Perhaps they were familiar with an ancient prophecy that spoke of a time when "a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

When the wise men saw the star, they rejoiced. It led them to the precise spot where Jesus was then living.

"And when . . . they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, [they] fell down and worshiped Him" (Matthew 2:11). Notice that *men of wisdom* traveled from afar to see the Christ. They sought out the future ruler of the world. They worshipped Him. They fell to their knees in obeisance.

Do we appreciate that because of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice, we are free to approach God's throne of grace at any time? *Do we, too, seek Him?* Make it a *daily journey yourself* to seek God and His mercy—because *wise men and women will seek Him*.

Science and wisdom

In our increasingly secular world, society seeks the God of the Bible less and less—pushing people away from belief in Him. More and more, people are told that the Bible is nothing but myth.

But true science comes to terms with the *evidence* for God's existence. Discoveries continue to show that an intelligent designer, a divine Creator, is *the only plausible explanation* for us being on this earth. Consider this interesting analysis from author Eric Metaxas in a recent *Wall Street Journal* piece titled "Science Increasingly Makes the Case for God":

"In 1966 *Time* magazine ran a cover story asking: Is God Dead? . . . Astronomer Carl Sagan announced that there were two important criteria for a planet to support life: The right kind of star, and a planet the right distance from that star . . .

"What happened? As our knowledge of the universe increased, it became clear that there were far more factors necessary for life than Sagan supposed. His two parameters grew to 10 and then 20 and then 50 . . .

"As factors continued to be discovered, the number of possible planets [in the universe that could support life] *hit zero, and kept going*. In other words, *the odds turned against any planet in the universe supporting life, including this one*. Probability said that *even we shouldn't be here*.

"Today there are *more than 200 known parameters necessary for a planet to support life—every single one of which must be perfectly met, or the whole thing falls apart . . . The odds against life in the universe are simply astonishing*.

"Yet here we are, not only existing, but talking about existing . . . *At what point is it fair to admit that science suggests that we cannot be the result of random forces?*" (Dec. 25, 2014, emphasis added throughout).

The book of Romans points out that the creation all around us testifies of the Creator. When we, and science, truly look at the evidence, we reach a point where the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen: "From the time the world was created,

people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20, New Living Translation, 1996).

Science has to admit the evidence. True wisdom would dictate such. But let’s examine the story of a man who refused to acknowledge the Creator, the Most High God.



and his concubines might drink from them . . . They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.

“In the same hour the fingers of a man’s hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace . . . Then the king’s countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.

“The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. The king spoke, saying to the wise men of Babylon, ‘Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler in the kingdom [Belshazzar himself being second as coregent with his father Nabonidus] . . .’

“Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke, and said to Daniel, ‘Are

“O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor . . . But you his son [or descendant, here grandson], Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart although you knew all this. And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God *who holds your breath in His hand* and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.

“Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written . . . This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.’

“That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.”

What’s the point for us in this story? *Consider any handwriting on the wall of your own life*—signs that are meant to warn you of what’s going on and what will come of it.

Don’t ignore *“the wisdom that is from above”* (James 3:17). God *holds our breath in His hand* (Daniel 5:23). Be alert to any warning or admonition to you from God.

In the story Daniel recorded, years of hostility to the God of Israel led to Belshazzar eventually being slain. That is the ultimate outcome for all who reject the Creator of the universe and take to themselves foolishness. At some point in time, all people will come to worship the Father and the Son—worshipping as the magi did before Jesus. Wisdom will prevail!

One who rejected faith—and returned

Let me share with you a modern-day story of a man who rejected God and the faith of his parents and forsook all that was good. It’s someone you’ve probably heard of. But you may not have heard the rest of the story. I’d like to quote some excerpts from a story published in December 2014 by *CNS News*:

“Alice Cooper, the shock-rock megastar, stopped his hard-partying ways and returned to his Bible Christian roots in the late 1980s . . . [He] shot to mega-stardom in the 1970s and early 1980s . . . notorious for his demonic makeup and costumes and macabre theatrics on stage . . .

What’s the point for us in this story? Consider any handwriting on the wall of your own life—signs that are meant to warn you of what’s going on and what will come of it.

The wise man and Belshazzar

This is an account of wisdom versus foolishness, of a man not seeking the wisdom of God—of a man who believed in his own power and might, a man who showed his contempt for the people of God and abused the holy vessels taken from God’s temple in Jerusalem. It’s the story of a *foolish* king versus the *wise* man. It’s found in the book of Daniel, chapter 5:

“Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father [or ancestor, in this case his grandfather] Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives,

you that Daniel who is one of the captives from Judah, whom my father [again, grandfather] the king brought from Judah? . . . Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.’

“Then Daniel answered, and said . . . ‘I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation.’”

Although scholars differ as to Daniel’s age in 539 B.C., he was probably at least 80 years old. He likely would have been in semiretirement since he wasn’t present with the other so-called wise men. The king had not remembered his name nor his previous accomplishments under his grandfather’s reign. And now, Daniel gives Belshazzar the interpretation of the handwriting on the wall:



“Cooper explained that despite all the wealth and fame he attained early on, there was a huge emptiness in his life. ‘I grew up in a Christian house,’ said Cooper. ‘My dad was a pastor, he was an evangelist for 25 years, and I used to go up and do missionary work with him with the Apaches in Arizona. My grandfather was a pastor for 75 years. I grew up in a Christian home. And my wife’s father is a Baptist pastor . . . We were PK’s—preacher’s kids—so we married each other.

“I went out and the Lord let me do everything . . . Maybe didn’t let me but allowed it, and then just started reeling me back in . . . When you get out there and realize you’ve had every car, every house, and all that, you realize that that’s not the answer . . . There’s a big nothing out there at the end of that. So, materialism doesn’t mean anything.

“A lot of people say that there’s a big God-sized hole in your heart. And when that’s filled, you’re really satisfied, and that’s where I am right now . . . I stopped drinking and I started going back to church . . . and there was this pastor in Phoenix . . . [who] was—just nailing me.

“Every weekend I’d get out exhausted. I’d come out of there and be, ‘I don’t want to go back.’ It was like torture and I always came back. I finally realized . . . I had to make a decision for one side or the other, because I was so convicted” (Michael Chapman, “Alice Cooper, Christian: ‘The World Belongs to Satan,’” Dec. 31, 2014.)

It’s encouraging to see someone reject such a wayward life and return, like a prodigal son, to a Christian belief system. We all need to realize what Solomon ultimately came to see: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Ultimately, there can be no denying God!

Wise men of the end time

How wise will you be? The wise men of old set a course for us to consider. Look at the following story of wisdom, *or lack thereof*, concerning men and women in the end time. It’s found in Matthew 25:

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took

oil in their vessels with their lamps.

“But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’

“And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.”

Are you using wisdom every day, wisdom that comes from being filled with the Spirit of God? Is your lamp filled with oil? As the parable shows, you can’t just fill it up at the last minute when you think Christ is returning! This is the lesson of wisdom for those living in the end of time.

Belshazzar, Babylon and the end time

We’ve looked at the story of Daniel and Belshazzar. *For the end time* the book of Revelation describes the *duality*, the prophetic fulfillment of Daniel’s story. The end-time ruler of the world, called the Beast, will follow the same foolish pride and arrogance of Belshazzar, his final act being to defy and fight Jesus Christ at His return:

“And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him [Christ] who sat on the horse and against His army. Then the beast was captured, and with him the false

prophet who worked signs in his presence . . . These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19:19-20).

Belshazzar failed the test, and so will the beastly ruler of the end time.

How will you and I do on the test? Will we use the wisdom of this world or the wisdom from above? Who will be the wise men of the end time? It must be you and me! We have the means to *understand the*



“The greatest miracle of all time, without any close seconds, is the universe. It is the miracle of all miracles, one that ineluctably points . . . to something—or Someone—beyond itself.”

handwriting on the wall. Daniel showed how, stating, “There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets” (Daniel 2:28).

We must allow the great God above to teach us His great plan, and we must *obey Him*. Human beings can learn from God if they *humble* themselves before His almighty hand. Remember Daniel 5:22? “But you his son, Belshazzar, *have not humbled your heart*, although you knew all this.”

We’re coming to a time in history when governments and religions will combine and make pronouncements of peace and safety throughout the world. But that peace will disappear in a moment when the Beast and False Prophet begin to exercise their might. Many will perish, as Christ Himself warned in Matthew 24.

But the person who truly knows God has his lamp filled with the Holy Spirit, seeks the *wisdom from above*, and as a wise Christian—seeking Him—will understand His handwriting on the prophetic wall and be assured of eternal life. Wise men and women of the end time will seek Him.

The cup of His wrath

How many will wake up to the reality of God? Eric Metaxas gives some further mind-blowing details in his *Wall Street Journal* article quoted earlier:

“The fine-tuning necessary for life to exist on a planet is nothing compared with the fine-tuning required for the universe to exist at all . . . For instance, if the ratio between the nuclear strong force and the electromagnetic force had been off by the tiniest fraction of the tiniest fraction—by even one part in 100,000,000,000,000,000—then no stars could have ever formed at all . . .

“Multiply that single parameter by all the other necessary conditions, and the odds against the universe existing are so heart-stoppingly astronomical that the notion that it all ‘just happened’ defies common sense . . .

“The greatest miracle of all time, without any close seconds, is the universe. It is the miracle of all miracles, one that ineluctably points with the combined brightness of every star to something—or Someone—beyond itself.”

Those on this planet who are truly wise will continue to seek Him. Just like the wise men of the time of Jesus’ birth, the wise men and women of today will acknowledge God’s existence and follow Him. *They will seek Him.*

God does not forget. What He has promised *will* come to pass. At the time of Christ’s coming, the mighty Babylon and Beast power will come to its final end:

“Now the great city [Babylon] was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was *remembered* before God, *to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath*” (Revelation 16:19).

This is a *fascinating parallel*, as God uses language that characterized the fall of *ancient* Babylon. Belshazzar drank wine from holy vessels that were dedicated to God alone. That was his undoing. In the final days of mankind’s rule, the Beast, the False Prophet and modern Babylon will *drink of the wine of God’s fierce wrath*. Mankind fails to learn from the past.

An excellent spirit

God gives us a choice. He gives all men and women a choice. *Wise men will seek Him.* Humanity can either follow the proud way of King Belshazzar—defying Almighty God and remaining blind to the handwriting on the wall—or we can be like Daniel, who possessed an “excellent spirit” (Daniel 5:12; 6:3).

God has promised and given that same “excellent spirit” to Jesus Christ’s disciples who obey Him. That is the promise of Acts 5:32. The Holy Spirit is that excellent Spirit, which not only reveals to us the glory of, and honor due to, Jesus Christ, but it leads us into an understanding of God’s complete truth.

Whatever road you and I may choose, one thing is absolutely certain: The handwriting is still on the wall. Keep your lamp filled because all wise men and women still seek Him.

J.E.B. Spredemann, a Christian fiction author, wrote this in her 2014 novel *A Secret of the Heart*:

“To deny the existence of God would be to close your eyes to the beauty around you, to close your ears to the symphony of nature, to close your nostrils to the scents wafting on the breeze, to close your mouth to the delicacies of nourishment, to close your hands to the feel of luxury, to close your mind to the ability to think, and to close your heart to the only love that can penetrate the depths of the soul. For in Him all things consist, in Him we live, and move, and have our being, and without Him we cannot help but be fools.”

I like the way Spredemann expresses this in such poetic language. How do we avoid being fools? We follow the example of the wise. We seek God because wise men will seek Him. Don’t be counted as a fool. Seek wisdom. *Seek Him! GN*

Who’s Behind The Good News?



Who’s behind *The Good News* magazine? Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide *The Good News* free to all who request it. Simply put, *The Good News* is provided by *people*—people from all walks of life, from all over the world, as enabled by God.

And those people have a common goal: **to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded** (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought—the wonderful *good news* of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). That message truly is good news—the answer to all the problems that have long plagued humankind. Through the pages of *The Good News*, dozens of helpful study guides (also free) and our *Beyond Today* TV program, we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution



and threaten our very survival.

We are committed to taking that message to the entire world, shar-

ing the truth of God’s purpose and plan for us as taught by Jesus Christ.

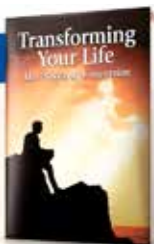
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Is Your Christianity “the Real McCoy”?

“The Real McCoy” means “the best of its kind” or “the highest quality.” But do you know the story behind the phrase and what it teaches us about embracing true, biblical Christianity? *by John LaBissoniere*

Elijah McCoy was born in Colchester, Ontario, Canada, in 1843. His parents had fled there from slavery in Kentucky in the late 1830s. When they resettled with him in Ypsilanti, Michigan, in 1849, they observed how their son demonstrated a strong mechanical aptitude. When he turned 16, they sought to enroll him in a university offering an engineering education. But they soon learned that people of black African descent were not permitted to register. Despite this obstacle, they sent him to Edinburgh, Scotland, to be trained by a mechanical engineer.

After serving as an apprentice master mechanic there for five years, McCoy returned to his parents’ home in 1864. He began searching for employment in mechanical engineering but felt he was being denied entrance to the profession due again to racism. He then took a job with the Michigan Central Railroad as a steam locomotive fireman and oiler. His duties included throwing wood and coal into the engine’s firebox, the flames of which generated steam to power the locomotive.

He was also responsible to keep the engine well-oiled to prevent damage due to overheating. Although the axles and bearings of the railroad cars (carriages) were lubricated automatically by oil-filled chambers, the locomotive engine was not—as its intense steam pressure pushed oil away from moving parts. Thus the train had to stop periodically so McCoy could exit the operator’s cab to manually lubricate the engine.

McCoy’s highly successful invention

Taking advantage of his mechanical engineering skills, McCoy began considering how steam pressure could be employed to automate oiling the engine. He set up a home machine shop where he designed, built and tested a potential device. This led him to

invent his “automatic lubricator” for which he obtained a patent in 1872.

Officials at the Michigan Central Railroad offered him support by testing the mechanism on their locomotives. McCoy’s invention proved highly successful, dramatically enhancing efficiency by eliminating time-



consuming lubricating stops. His original device and subsequent upgrades ultimately became standard features on locomotives throughout the United States and were adapted for stationary engines in factories and on steamships.

McCoy’s career soon took him to Detroit, where he began to focus on solving problems related to other railroad and train technicalities.

These challenges arose due to the development of larger, more powerful locomotives using “superheated steam.” McCoy proved once again to be on the leading edge of

designing critical lubricating methods. In 1915 he was awarded a U.S. patent for his “locomotive lubricator.” This device allowed the use of a mixture of oil and powdered graphite, which could withstand extremely high operating temperatures.

Author and historian Robert Hayden, Jr., in his book *Eight Black American Inventors* (1972), quotes a letter from a railroad superintendent of that period: “We have found the McCoy graphite lubricator to be of considerable assistance in lubrication of locomotives equipped with superheaters. There is a decided advantage in better lubrication and reduction of wear in valves and piston rings.”

Inventions of superior design and quality

Throughout his career, McCoy continued refining his engineering skills and products, over time obtaining at least 57 U.S. patents. His inventions generated enormous respect because they represented superior design and quality.

Although competing mechanisms were available, most purchasing agents sought McCoy’s authentic equipment. Many of them insisted on what they termed “the real McCoy,” meaning the industry standard, the best of its kind or that of the highest quality.

Elijah McCoy died in 1928 at the age of 85. His legacy of distinctive excellence lives on today through the

expression that bears his name. The phrase “the real McCoy” migrated from industrial to consumer applications and remains in general use in much of the English-speaking world.

For example, people often use the slogan when referring to “brand-name” consumer merchandise. They prefer such products because they trust that the manufacturer or company offers premium quality over competing brands.

Accepting “bargain-brand” Christianity?

While bargain brands may be suitable if

they meet the needs they're used for, imagine if this practice was applied to one's Christian life and beliefs. Would anyone *intentionally* reject Elijah McCoy's model of highly valuing and pursuing quality in favor of a mediocre imitation of true, biblical Christianity, something clearly inferior?

But the fact is, *many* people have actually done this very thing! How is this possible?

Christ gave the answer when He said: "Take heed that no man *deceive* you. For *many* shall come in my name, saying [that] I am Christ; and *shall deceive many*" (Matthew 24:4-5, King James Version, emphasis added throughout).

Jesus cautioned His disciples that *many* people would be *fooled* into accepting less than "the real McCoy" in terms of Christianity (see also verses 11, 24). The apostle Peter likewise wrote: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as *there will be false teachers* among you, who will *secretly* bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1).

The apostle Paul also expressed grave concern about corrupt, fraudulent teachers and corrected some of the Christians in Corinth for easily accepting lies. They believed smooth-talking charlatans who preached heresy (2 Corinthians 11:4).

This wasn't just a problem of that era. Paul warned that this situation *would continue into our time* (1 Timothy 4:1).

But why do people reject Christ's original teachings and accept spurious ones? Although Satan the devil plays a major role in adversely influencing human beings, they themselves are not without fault (Ephesians 6:12; Romans 1:18-21). People often believe *what others say* about Jesus' words, rather than studying for *themselves* what the Scriptures really teach (Ephesians 4:14).

The mistake of not knowing the Scriptures

Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day about this error when He told them: "You are mistaken, *not knowing the Scriptures* nor the power of God" (Matthew 22:29). People stumble over this same problem today. They believe—often without question—what their church, minister or priest has "always taught" about Christian doctrine (Matthew 15:9). However, to build a steadfast relationship with Jesus, *His words and example*—not the teachings of men—must be your foundation (2 Timothy 3:15).

Consider another striking question Jesus asked those who claimed they were His faithful supporters: "But why do you call Me

'Lord, Lord,' and *do not do the things which I say*?" (Luke 6:46). He emphasized this point when telling His disciples, "Not every-one who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who *does the will of My Father* in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

And what is the Father's will? It is that people obey His commandments (1 John 5:3; Exodus 34:28). And where can we learn how to fully obey God's commandments? By studying His Word, the Holy Bible. And to help us in living by His Word, God tells us to not neglect regular assembly with fellow Christians (Hebrews 10:24-25). He knows we need this fellowship in God's one true Church, "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

The Church is not a building or corporation

Jesus said He would build His Church (Matthew 16:18; Acts 20:28). The Church consists of a small group of people the Father "calls out" of the world's society into His service (John 6:44; 2 Timothy 1:9; Luke 12:32). "Church" as used in the Bible is not a building or corporation, but a *spiritual body of believers* who are unified in purpose, faith and love (Ephesians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 12:12; John 13:35).

The Church is also God's spiritual family. It protects, nurtures and guides His children as they grow in character, spiritual knowledge and godly wisdom (Romans 8:16; Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15).

The people God calls into His Church are to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). They are also commissioned to help proclaim Jesus Christ and His gospel—meaning "good news"—of the coming Kingdom of God and to make disciples throughout the world (Matthew 24:14; 28:19). Jesus gave His repentant, Spirit-filled Church the mission of training new converts to "*observe all things that I have commanded*" (Matthew 28:20).

But what do we observe in the world of traditional Christianity? We see multiple thousands of denominations and organizations, each teaching contradictory and incompatible beliefs. While they preach ideas about the *person* of Christ as Savior, they ignore the *very message* He taught about the Kingdom of God (Matthew 9:35).

This results in millions who believe in Christ but know *nothing* about the world-ruling government He will set up on earth at His return (Isaiah 9:6-7; Zechariah 14:4) or of being part of God's family forever. The end result is a Christianity that doesn't understand God's purpose for humanity!

What about your form of Christianity?

What then is the authentic form of Christianity? A person who is part of "the real McCoy" in this case will strive to have Jesus' words guide his *every* thought and action (2 Corinthians 10:5). He will deeply repent of sin. He will love God above all things and be building a lasting relationship with Him through fervent prayer and Bible study (Matthew 22:37; Psalm 73:28).

A genuine Christian will recognize his complete dependence on his Creator and revere Christ as his Savior and coming King (Galatians 2:20; 2 Peter 1:11). A Christian will exhibit the fruit of God's Spirit through loving others and doing good works (John 13:34; Galatians 5:22-23).

A Christian will assemble regularly with like-minded Church members to worship God on His weekly, seventh-day Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset) and His annual Holy Days (see our free study guide *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* at www.ucg.org/ booklets).

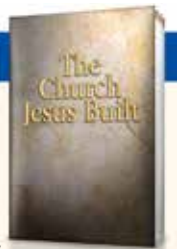
Understanding these and other aspects of genuine Christianity is essential in identifying what a true follower of Jesus Christ does and how he lives.

Elijah McCoy drove himself to produce the highest quality lubricating devices for railroad and industrial applications, accepting nothing but the best. If you applied the demand for excellence as found in "the real McCoy" to your Christian life, how would *you* measure up? Are you faithfully obeying Jesus Christ and following His genuine teachings? Or are you simply believing and acting on *what others say* is correct?

With God only the genuine biblical standard will meet His requirements (Matthew 7:21-23; 1 Corinthians 12:31). Is your form of Christianity "the real McCoy"? If not, what are you going to do about it? **GN**

Learn More

Jesus Christ promised that He would build His Church (Matthew 16:18). But how can you identify that Church among the thousands of competing denominations that claim to be Christian while teaching totally contradictory beliefs? You need to read our study guide *The Church Jesus Built*. A free copy is waiting for you!



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Lessons From the Parables

The Sower and the Seed Part 2

You're holding in your hands the "seeds" of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. But you may not understand the spiritual battle taking place right now with you at the center. Read on to understand how it can play out! *by Darris McNeely*

Most people live out their lives without truly understanding the way this world really works. We see the physical dimensions in which we live, but most of us see *only* the physical. Unknown to most is the greater, more powerful and pervasive *unseen* spiritual realm revealed in the Bible. That spiritual realm has more influence on everyone than we can know.

Jesus Christ reveals this truth in the parable of the sower and the seed recorded in Matthew 13. In the first installment on this parable in the last issue, we briefly covered the four examples of seed falling on different types of ground.

First is seed that falls on the hard path and is eaten by birds. Second is seed sown in soil with lots of rocks, where a plant emerges but withers when the weather turns hot and dry. Third is seed scattered among thorns, where the good plant is eventually choked out by thick weeds. But the seed sown into good soil produces anywhere from 30- to 100-fold increase.

Jesus later explained the meaning of the parable to His disciples. He started by telling them something quite surprising:

"He replied, 'You have been permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others have not. To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them'" (Matthew 13:11-13, New Living Translation, 1996).

Christ's words here are hard for most to comprehend. He says some are permitted to hear and understand while others are not. His closest disciples were permitted to hear and understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God. The reasons are given in His expla-

nation and in the stark reality of how life really works. The world we see is not all the world that is. Let's delve deeper into what Jesus was revealing in this parable.

Mass deception from the enemy

He went on to say: "Now here is the explanation of the story I told about the farmer sowing grain: The seed that fell on the hard path represents those who hear the Good News about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches the seed away from their hearts" (verses 18-19, NLT, 1996).

Here is the first example of the hard-packed ground where no seed can take root. Here is the key to understanding why so many people cannot see, hear or understand the plain teaching of the Scriptures.

God's seed falls on all kinds of "soil"—some rocky, some weed-choked and some fertile. Consider whether you can allow that seed to begin to change your life now.

The wicked one, Satan the devil, quickly removes the understanding of the gospel planted in a person's life.

You are now holding in your hands the seeds of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Right now you are weighing the value of what you read in this issue. Does it make sense to you? Does it ring true?

What will you do with what you've learned in these pages? Will you allow it to change your life for the better, or will you put it down and go on with your life and forget what you've read?

Satan, by many deceitful methods, doesn't want you to receive this message and act on it. In Revelation 12:9 we read that *the whole world* lies in his deceptive

grasp. That includes you!

Christ gives us the key to understand not only the *why* but the *who* of this parable. The inability to hear and understand this parable is the result of humanity being caught in a web of spiritual deception woven through generations. God is working to disentangle some in this age from Satan's clutches. You can take that step with Him if you understand the secrets of this parable. Let's notice further.

A busy life in an evil world

We must realize that Satan works in ways we might never perceive! He has created an alluring world filled with sensations and attractions all designed to distract us and absorb our time and life. Regardless of our status, we can all too easily be distracted from the serious reflection it takes to understand Christ's message and commit to the Kingdom of God.

Look at the next category He mentions: "The rocky soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But like young plants in such soil, their roots don't

go very deep. At first they appear to be growing, but they wilt as soon as they have problems or are persecuted because they believe the word" (verses 20-21, NLT, 1996).

You can hear the true message of the Kingdom and understand parts of it. You may even accept parts of it in your life for various reasons, perhaps because it may reflect something you already believe about life or God and the Bible. But the world's religions contain a mixture of truth and error that prevent most people from seeing and receiving the whole picture. Remember, the world we see is not all the world that is.

Jesus warned that problems and persecution will follow when a person believes and tries to follow God's Word. Unless he or she

develops deep roots, running deep into good soil, the growth won't last. Events and circumstances can crowd out the seed of truth that has been placed in your life by God.

A rich young man came to Christ desiring to know what he could do to inherit eternal life. Christ told him to keep the commandments. The man replied that he had done so from his youth. Jesus then

or believing in God, Satan cooked up a scheme to break the intimate spiritual connection believers should have with God. He would fill their lives with materialism and physical pursuits.

So Satan told his demons: “*Keep them busy in the non-essentials of life and invent unnumbered schemes to occupy their minds. Tempt them to spend, spend, spend, then,*



went to the heart of his life: “‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’ But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matthew 19:21-22).

Living by Christ's teachings is not easy in today's world. You will find opposition when you embark on this life journey. Friends or relatives will discourage your decision. *Don't let them.* Put your life in God's hands and trust Him to fight for you and guide your path forward. To succeed, you must put down roots in God's way of life. These roots will sustain you when the path becomes discouraging or frightening.

Crowding out the message

Let's look at the next category, which offers a similar lesson: “The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life and the lure of wealth, so no crop is produced” (verse 22, NLT, 1996).

A fictional tale by an unknown author goes like this: Satan and his demons met to determine how to disrupt the lives of Christians. Knowing they couldn't keep people from going to church, worshipping

borrow, borrow, borrow . . . Crowd their lives with so many good causes they have no time to seek power from Christ. Soon they will be working in their own strength, sacrificing their health and family unity for the good of the cause.” . . . And the evil angels went eagerly to their assignments, causing Christians everywhere to get busy, busy, busy, and rush here and there.

Does this sound like life today? It sure does! Don't be mistaken in thinking the gospel message is opposed to wealth and to enjoying the fruits and pleasures of this life, because it isn't. But Christ addresses the worries and distractions that can crowd out a serious relationship with God.

We all know how busy each day can be with work, school, entertainment and other pursuits. Modern life is geared to lure us away from time spent thinking about life's meaning, studying the Bible, talking with God in prayer, and spiritual fellowship.

The apostle Paul spoke to this in his letter to a younger minister, Titus. Through God's graceful care, Paul writes, we are being taught “that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:12).

We can do what this passage urges us to do. We can live a godly life today, no matter

what the distraction. We can produce godly fruit. But we have to make the choice and then stick to it!

You can understand

What we do with the knowledge of the Kingdom comes down to the choices we make each day. Carefully read this parable and consider that the message of the Kingdom of God has come to you. God may indeed be calling you to salvation. *You have a choice.* You can respond to this message and begin to live by the new knowledge and understanding God has given you.

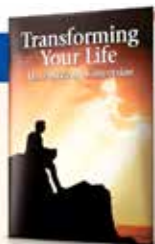
Notice what Jesus said about the final category: “The good soil represents the hearts of those who truly accept God's message and produce a huge harvest—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted” (verse 23, NLT, 1996).

Think about this. The knowledge given through this magazine is unique and opens to you an understanding that most of the world can't see or grasp. Their minds are deceived by the ruler of this world, Satan, who wages a relentless battle to thwart God's eternal purpose of bringing many children to share in the glory He has with His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:10).

Remember, there is a spiritual world influencing the physical world. Satan does his best to disrupt the plan of God, but he wins *only if we let him.* God allows us to choose between His way and the way of this world. You have a choice—the choice to yield to the knowledge of the Kingdom and begin to produce fruit for eternal life.

God continually sows the seeds of the Kingdom today. It falls on all kinds of “soil.” Consider your heart, whether you can allow that seed to put down root and begin to change your life now, in preparation for the coming Kingdom to which He is calling you! **GN**

Learn More



How does God want us to respond to the seed of the Kingdom of God He has sown in our life? How can we avoid being like the seed sown on hard, rocky and thorny ground and produce the kind of growth He wants to see in us? You need to read our free study aid *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* to understand the important answers!

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“Whatever You Ask in My Name”

What does it really mean for us to pray in the name of Jesus Christ?

by Robin Webber

There is a story surrounding noted 20th-century conductor Bernard Reichel conducting a final rehearsal of George Frideric Handel’s beautiful and inspiring 1741 oratio

Messiah.

When the soprano soloist came in with the refrain, “I know that my Redeemer liveth” (from Job 19:25), she sang with flawless technique, perfect breathing and clear enunciation. After completing her part, everyone looked at the conductor expecting to see his response of approval.

But with a motion from his baton for silence, he walked over to the soloist and said, almost sorrowfully, “My daughter, you do not know that your Redeemer truly lives, do you?” Embarrassed, she answered, “I think I do.” “*Then sing it!*” cried Reichel. “*Tell it to me so that I’ll know you have experienced the joy and power of it!*”

Then he motioned to the orchestra to begin, and she sang that profound truth with a fervor that testified of her personal belief and faith in her risen Lord. Those who listened wept, and the old master, eyes filled with tears, said to her, “*You do know*, for this time you have told me!”

Knowing the right password

How do you know that your redeemer lives and that you can communicate with Him?

Have you ever tried to access information from your computer or smartphone only to discover you’ve forgotten your password? You try various letter and number combinations only to be totally frustrated.

Many people trying to access God possess a common user name—it’s called Christian. But the user name alone isn’t going to grant the access needed to supply our spiritual needs! It’s that all-important second part that allows our prayerful communication to move into something greater than cyberspace—the spiritual realm of God’s heavenly throne room!

Just like the password hint on your computer, allow me to give a scriptural hint. You’ll find it in John 14:12-14, where Jesus said: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.”

Are you still pondering over the hint? Let’s get to the point. Jesus tells us *to pray in His name*. The “password” is the phrase “*In Jesus’ name, Amen*.” That’s it!

But what should those four little words—“*In Jesus’ name, Amen*”—signify to those

Now we approach God not through the acts of a mortal high priest at certain places and times, but in the name of Jesus the Christ, who has been accepted as our mediating heavenly High Priest at the right hand of God the Father.

striving to access our Heavenly Father? Let’s gain the full picture of what Christ was directing His disciples to do so we can better understand and respond to His invitation to “*Follow Me*.”

Not a magic formula but authorized access

Let’s begin by understanding what Jesus *wasn’t* saying before we can understand what He *was* endorsing that grants access to our Heavenly Father’s love, power and wisdom.

“*In Jesus’ name*” isn’t a tagline at the end of prayers that has to be perfectly enunciated like some magical formula to awaken a slumbering deity. Simply reciting so many words and getting them just right doesn’t give our prayers extra power to catapult them to heaven.

Neither was Jesus saying that anything Christians ask in His name is automatically received like a withdrawal at a spiritual

ATM. We don’t just punch in a code to have our needs list instantly met.

Words should—and *do*—have meaning! Jesus clearly stated, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). He’s not nearly as concerned with what’s on the external tip of our tongue as He is with the motivations lodged in our hearts.

In our Western societies we can lose the significance of a name. We think of spelling out a name, one letter at a time, rather than the biblical sense of a name that conveys the attributes of the individual (see Proverbs 22:1).

It’s here in John 14:12-14 and John 16:23-26 that Jesus introduces a new relationship between God and those seeking Him. Here the access code was changed forever. Now we approach God not through the acts of a mortal high priest at certain places and

times, but in the name of Jesus the Christ, who has been accepted as our mediating heavenly High Priest at the right hand of God the Father, continually making intercession for us (Hebrews 8:1-6).

Therefore, when we pray “*in Jesus’ name*,” we’re knocking on the door of God’s throne room by the authority of that name just like an officer might knock on a door and request that it be opened not because of his own power but “*in the name of the law*.”

The reason we’re told to pray “*in*” and by Jesus’ authority isn’t to register some secret access code to a heavenly mailman, but to assert before God Almighty that we come to Him through standing granted to us under Jesus’ direction and work on our behalf.

“Found in Him”

Scripture itself defines a proper biblical understanding on this matter. The apostle

Paul uses the preposition “in” to emphasize the connectedness of the believer to Christ and His authority over our lives. This is demonstrated in Philippians 3:8-11 when Paul describes his surrendered life:

“I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him . . . that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

The apostle John further describes the



surrendered life of the individual found in Christ when he writes: “And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him” (1 John 3:23-24).

The word “abides” here is translated from the Greek word *meno* which is also translated as “continue,” “dwell,” “endure” and “remain.” This is not talking about a passive relationship!

Words and phrases such as “in,” “to be found,” or “abide” remind us that God expects that when we rise from our knees in prayer, we go forth to meet life as Christ did while here on the earth. Consider Colossians 3:17 in this regards: “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all *in the name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to

God the Father through Him.”

Understand that whatever we ask in His name is not merely a pronouncement of specially enunciated words, but an ongoing acknowledgement to our Heavenly Father that every day we “get it.” It shows Him we understand that we have entered a personal and mutual transaction of giving ourselves away and seeking God’s Kingdom and His righteousness first (Matthew 6:33).

We realize that God gave much to us (John 3:16), and we give much back to God in approaching Him in the spiritual framework of being rid of our old sinful selves and letting Christ rule in our lives. As Paul wrote, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, King James Version).

Simply put: What we’re doing by embracing this password phrase is giving away our life and surrendering it to our Heavenly Father through the one name above all names (Ephesians 1:21) and acknowledging the one exclusive existence by which we can be saved—Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Understanding God’s “No”

Even as we access God’s heavenly presence and needed answers in such a framework of prayerful understanding of being “in Christ,” does it mean that we will receive our human desires? Let’s go a little deeper as to what it means to fully surround ourselves in the framework of Christ’s living example by understanding there will be times when we must be willing to accept “no” for an answer. But God’s “no” isn’t a “no” of rejection, but rather a “no, I have something better for you.”

Why? Consider these instructive thoughts from Rose Publishing’s *Names of Jesus*: “Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane before His crucifixion should teach us both about whose authority we are under and about accepting God’s better plan (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42) . . .

“Christ’s Gethsemane prayer (‘Let this cup pass from me’), the only request He made that was denied, teaches us that there are some things we ask for—good as they may seem—that are simply not God’s best for us. Jesus knew it was the Father’s will that He should suffer on our behalf; many of our prayers may also fall into this category. But observe the powerful results: In Jesus’ case, as in ours, the ultimate outcome will be life out of death” (2006, p. 4).

Jesus declared the Father’s name

Jesus placed His entire human existence under the name and authority of God the Father. Listen to the words of His prayer before that final agonizing sacrifice for us: “O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:25-26).

Ultimately He declared the Father’s name not by what He said, but *by what He did* over the rest of that day in accepting God’s best even while with His last breath uttering, “Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit’” (Luke 23:46).

For some of us it’s time to move from simply knowing our user name of “Christian” to applying our personal spiritual password phrase every day of our lives, because we need so very much what our Heavenly Father provides through Jesus. As we seek to respond to Christ’s invitation of “Follow Me” in all things, let’s be fully aware that:

1. Keeping Christ’s personal example of sacrifice, obedience and acceptance before us allows us to be “in Him” and therefore gives our prayers focus.

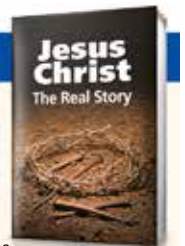
2. Our Father above is actively glorified (John 14:13) when we acknowledge what He is doing even now through His Son.

3. As we rise from our prayers to face the day, come what may, we fully believe these God-breathed words written by the apostle John: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13).

So if you were to declare the words of Job in Handel’s *Messiah*, “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” would you truly mean it? **GN**

Learn More

To know what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ and to come to the Father in His name, we need to understand who and what Jesus is. To learn the eye-opening truth, download or request our free study aid *Jesus Christ: The Real Story* today!



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“I’m Not Sending You Away”

Christians are God’s own children whom He in His love has chosen. Just like any loving parent, God won’t forsake us when we make mistakes or fail to live up to His standards, as long as we will still repent and seek to please Him. *by Janet Treadway*

“I’m not sending you away,” said the new mother. She was now a newly adoptive mom, and she was talking to her newly adopted son Taylor.

As reported by CBS News, 50-year-old social worker Connie Going of St. Petersburg, Florida, had placed more than 1,000 Tampa Bay-area foster kids with adoptive parents before Taylor came along.

Taylor, along with his siblings, was thrown into the foster care system in 2003 because of neglect by his drug-addicted parents. Taylor and his siblings were adopted, but because of Taylor’s anger issues he was sent back (Steve Hartman, “Social Worker Finds Perfect Home for Troubled Foster Child,” Dec. 27, 2013).

After the second time of being sent back, 10-year-old Taylor broke his social worker Connie’s heart. “All I could think about was how he was feeling and how he was blaming himself again,” she said.

The next day after he was returned, she made arrangements to drop him as a client and take him on as a son. She had looked all over for someone to parent him. “And it was me,” she said.

That’s when Connie decided to become his mom instead of his social worker. He still has anger issues, but they have greatly improved after an emotional turning point. In an angry moment he said he was going to run away. As he was leaving Connie told him, “I’m not sending you away.”

Taylor took his backpack off and came back in. He realized he had found someone who would love him through the good times and bad would not send him packing to yet another temporary home. “And I’m like, ‘Yeah, this is where I belong,’ Taylor says. ‘She knows my worst side and she

still cares about me and still loves me.”

The story of Taylor was so opposite to a story I read in the local Cincinnati, Ohio,



knife. But rather than getting him needed help, they decided to dump him off. While I don’t know what actually happened, my heart ached for this boy. This family is all he knew from infancy, and now he was being given back.

Both situations made me cry, as I understand the emotions one can feel of being rejected. Growing up in eight foster homes and two children’s homes, I always felt it

was my fault, that I was not loveable enough for a family to keep me. Like Taylor, if it got too hard, the foster family would send me packing, for I wasn’t really theirs. I felt very insecure.

The two stories and my own experience reminded me of our relationship with God. He has chosen us and will remain committed to us!

God wants to be your Father

For whatever reason we can also have insecurities in our relationship with God and in our Christian life.

How many times do we mess up, sin, and think God will never forgive us? We just know that if we mess up one more time God is

done with us. That’s how Taylor felt with his foster family—and with good reason until Connie came along.

I can tell you from experience that God has always been my stabilizing factor. When everyone else was done with me, God was always there. It took a while for

Despite your stumbles into sin on so many occasions, God will never give up on you as long as you can be led to repentance, he will never send you away!

news a month earlier. Parents committed a crime in trying to return their 9-year-old adopted child to children’s services after having raised him from the time they adopted him as a newborn baby! They said he was displaying aggressive behavior and had earlier threatened the family with a

me to learn that God would always be there.

Despite your stumbles into sin on so many occasions, God will never give up on you as long as you can be led to repentance! Never! He is invested in you! He *will* keep His promises to you. “For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5).

Remember two things: If you doubt your worth or feel you have fallen short, remember you are made in the image of God. And He loved you so much that He took the punishment for you so that you might live: “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).

Now if God loved you so much that He even gave His Son to suffer and die in your place, then why would He turn His back on you in your lowest moment? God didn't create us just to abandon us. He offers us forgiveness and life!

Your Father will stand by you through trials

Taylor was blessed to find an adoptive mom who will love him no matter what. We have also been blessed with a perfect Father who loves us no matter what as long as we keep trying to follow and please Him.

Just like Taylor who heard those words from His new mom, “I'm not sending you away,” God will never send us away into this darkened world to fend for ourselves. Nothing can keep us from our Father in heaven! As long as we have a repentant heart, God will pick us back up and care for us in our times of weakness and need.

There are times when we feel pretty much cut off from God, and that we are unworthy of love. Connie Goings went on to say about children, “When you feel you're not loveable, and you're up against someone loving you, that's a pretty scary thing.”

Taylor could not wrap his mind around

the fact that someone could love him despite his shortcomings. We can feel that way with God when we're going through a trial or have messed up. We can feel unlovable and scared. At times you may even wonder how anyone could love you after what you have done.

God keeps His promises, and one is found in Romans 8:38-39: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (New International Version).

And when you're at your deepest low and feel that perhaps God has abandoned you—that your sin is too great to be forgiven—remember another promise found in Psalm 55:22: “Cast your burden on the LORD, and he shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.” Through repentance—asking for forgiveness and working to not repeat the sin—God lifts us up and sustains us through trials.

God offers encouragement in 2 Timothy 1:7: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Build a relationship with your Father today

So if you fall, if you mess up, or you feel you are not worthy of love, get back up and know that God is there to give you comfort, to love you, to encourage you forward. You belong to Him. He knows everything about you. He understands you and is invested in you. He knows the good, the bad and the ugly, and He still loves you.

In adopting Taylor, Connie *chose* him as her son. Likewise, God *chooses* us! Paul expressed this idea to Christians in his day: “Even before the world was made, God had already *chosen us to be his* through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. Because of his love God had already decided that through Jesus Christ *he would make us his children—this was his pleasure and purpose*” (Ephesians 1:5, Good News Translation, emphasis added).

Indeed, God desires that you be part of His family forever.

So be encouraged that God is not going to send you back when you make a mistake. For you are His son or His daughter! You are not His foster child. You are His own chosen child with whom He wants to spend eternity! **GN**



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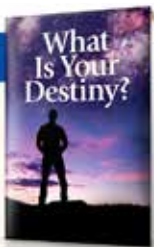
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Letters From Our Readers

“Middle East Chaos: What’s Happening and Why?”

I have only read the first three articles of the January-February edition of *The Good News*, and I have to take time out to write to you. I am just overwhelmed at the information and incredible knowledge the writers are sharing. Thank you for giving me a true education on what is happening in the world. I have been fascinated and at the same time surprised at how ignorant I have been about the subject of the Muslim state of affairs. But now I can hold my own in conversations relating to this subject.

With what just happened in Paris [where Muslim terrorists killed 17 on Jan. 5], you could not be more right and aware with your publications. I am so grateful for receiving *The Good News*, and it certainly is the best magazine of understanding. I will read the rest of the magazine, but I just had to share my thoughts of appreciation and gratitude for giving me the opportunity to be better educated, better learned, and truly blessed. Thank you to all the wonderful people who make this terrific treasure available to me.

Reader in Florida

I want to compliment you on the latest *Good News*. Your articles on the menace of radical Islam were especially timely. People need to wake up! Fundamentalist Islam intends to conquer the world. They failed the first time so they think the time is right to try it again. I have read the Quran four times. It has good and bad in it. I don’t believe that the majority of Muslims believe in what the radicals are doing. However, there are enough who do believe it to make radical Islam a worldwide menace.

Reader in Tustin, Michigan

“America’s War on God”

First let me thank you for the wonderful magazine *The Good News*. I have learned so very much by looking up in the Scriptures what is written in your magazine. The November-December issue with its theme of “America’s War on God”—I cannot express how it has hit on so many topics of today. I could not put this particular issue aside. I have read some things two or more times. I had the wrong idea on the rapture and yet had read my Bible before. This time a light bulb came on in my head and my thinking cap pulled on tight. Your magazine has helped me to understand things.

Reader in Homer City, Pennsylvania

Your piece on “Banning the Mention of God in Public Life” in the November-December issue is first-rate. How could what was achieved by the Founding Fathers be ignored? This is an issue to be seriously considered by every American to remind any president that America is a God-fearing nation and God must always be respected. America is the only country where on public buildings like the Lincoln Memorial and Supreme Court are engraved biblical texts. This is the peculiarity of the United States, a nation under God. So let God continue to bless America as an exemplary nation worldwide. It deserves to be so.

Reader in Amboise, France

Though I am not a member of your faith, for over 20 years I’ve read your magazine. The November-December issue had three articles that I’ve read more than once and shared with others: “America’s War on God,” “Government and the Gay Agenda,” and “Silencing God’s Children.” It is good to see churches that aren’t afraid to take a stand for God’s Word. Keep up the good work.

Reader in Fayetteville, Arkansas

Beyond Today TV program

I would like to say that your TV program is the best show on TV and the *best* religious show hands down! It is a joy to at last hear the uncompromising truth told in such a wonderful way. I am so thrilled that this is available to everyone now and being presented so beautifully. I am letting everyone in my family know about the truths taught by your organization and the explanatory booklets to back everything up. Thank you so much.

From the Internet

I tune in almost every weekend to watch the powerful messages from *Beyond Today* daily commentaries. The commentaries have helped me with a lot of biblical awareness and understanding. I pray that the good Lord gives

strength and encouragement to the hosts to continue with the good work.

Viewer in Silverwater, New South Wales, Australia

We wish to thank you for the godly service you provide for my family and me. We miss seeing your program and we have tried to contact your station, but have been told that it is no longer available in our area. However we are blessed to receive your *Good News* magazine. My sister, niece and I use that magazine as our sermon each Sabbath. Thank you so much!

Reader in New York

We’re sorry that you had a difficult time finding our Beyond Today TV program. On Jan. 1 we moved from Sunday mornings to Friday mornings on the ION television network at 8:30 a.m. ET/PT and 7:30 CT/MT. You can view a complete list of ION stations airing our program on our website at www.ucg.org/beyond-today/channels. Please note that you can also watch our programming at any time on our website at www.BeyondToday.tv.

Looking for congregations in Australia

I’ve been watching your TV program and I really like your teachings. I’m based in Adelaide. Do you have a church here?

Viewer in Campbelltown, South Australia

First of all I want to thank you so much for the beautiful *Good News* magazines, I am enjoying reading them. I love your program on TV, and I would like to request your booklet *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. Please accept the stamps for the postage and a small donation. Also could you please tell me where in Brisbane can I go to listen to Bible preaching?

Reader in Queensland, Australia

We watch your program every week and have a lot of your literature. What we’d like to know is where and when do you meet in Melbourne?

Viewer in Nunawading, Victoria, Australia

We have congregations that meet every Sabbath in all three of these cities. Readers and viewers who wish to know if a United Church of God congregation meets in their city or nearby can visit our website at www.ucg.org/churches. Congregations are listed by country, state and city along with contact information.

“I wish I could send more”

Enclosed is a donation. I wish I could send more. I believe all of your material to be the truth. Your magazine is wonderful, and I look forward to it being delivered! Also, the booklets are wonderful. While searching the Bible trying to prove the articles wrong, my search has only proven them to be correct! I thank God someone put me on the mailing list.

Reader in Fort Thomas, Kentucky

We enjoy your *Good News* magazine and publications very much. My parents enjoyed your materials for many, many years before their passing. Like my parents, after I read the material I pass it on to others and ask God’s blessings for them also. We would like to help with donations so others come to better understanding of God’s Holy Word.

From the Internet

May God’s and Christ’s blessings be over all of you there! Thank you very much for your nice, eye-opening and uplifting spiritual articles! May our Heavenly Father continue to bless your remarkable ministry in *The Good News* magazine you always send me. I enclose a modest contribution.

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Please give me details on how I can send my offerings to you for being a blessing in increasing my knowledge through these magazines. They give me more understanding about the Word of God. God bless you with more wisdom to share with more people of the earth.

Subscriber in Parañaque City, Philippines

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 gninfo@ucg.org (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).



Questions & Answers

Q: Who are the two witnesses mentioned in the book of Revelation? *Internet reader*

A: The two witnesses are two prophets of God who will deliver God's messages to the world during the 3½ years prior to the return of Christ. Revelation 11:3 says, "And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sack-cloth."

The Bible does not give the names of the two witnesses. But notice Revelation 11:4: "These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth." This is taken from Zechariah 4, where we read of "two olive trees" in verse 3 and that, in verse 14, "these are the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth."

We are introduced to the end-time two witnesses at the temple site in Jerusalem. This is significant. Throughout Revelation the temple is consistently associated with worship of God (verse 1). However, we are told that "the court which is outside the temple . . . has been given to the Gentiles"—along with "the holy city" of Jerusalem (verse 2). What Jesus foretold in Mark 13:14 and Luke 21:20 is likely describing the same crisis.

These two witnesses stand before the God of the earth, and will be given miraculous powers. Like Elijah, they will be given the power to call fire down from heaven to devour their enemies and to pronounce drought on portions of the earth (Revelation 11:5-6; compare 1 Kings 18:36-38; 2 Kings 1:10). And like Moses, they will have "power over the waters to turn them to blood and to strike the earth with all plagues" (Revelation 11:6; compare Exodus 7-12).

The work of the two witnesses is presented between the sixth and seventh trumpet plagues outlined in Revelation. Yet this is actually near the conclusion of their work—their prophesying lasts for 3½ years, the same length of time Jerusalem will be occupied by the gentiles (Revelation 11:2-3). Thus it will have commenced just before the start of the Great Tribulation.

How will the two witnesses and their message be received? Most people will loathe them. Like no other prophets in the history of God's people, the witnesses and their message will be hated by all nations. As Jesus told His followers, "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9).

The two witnesses will gain worldwide attention, giving them an unprecedented opportunity to warn the nations that they should repent of their sins and rebellion against God. Then, when God has seen that their message and warning has been delivered, He will allow them to be martyred.

By that time the people of every nation will have seen and heard frequent reports on the activities of these two prophets through television and other worldwide communications systems. This becomes clear from John's statement that "peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves" (Revelation 11:7-9).

After their 1,260-day prophetic work, they will be martyred by a powerful civil leader called the Beast. This evil man will be in league with the False Prophet. In Revelation 16:13 we read: "And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet." These evil men will be directed by Satan the dragon (see Revelation 12:9).

Jesus's own words in Matthew 24:14-15 indicate that the devil will

enable the prophetic Beast and False Prophet to commandeer the temple area of Jerusalem, temporarily making it the center of their own satanically inspired system of worship. Opposing the Beast and False Prophet will be God's two witnesses. Jerusalem will find itself in the vortex of a great spiritual battle as prophesied events reach their climax.

Notice the world's reaction to the murder of God's prophets: "And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth" (verse 10). The whole world, having hated the two witnesses' rebukes and calls for repentance, will celebrate their deaths.

But the rejoicing will be short-lived. After 3½ days, the world will be shocked when the two witnesses are resurrected and called up into the sky (verses 11-13). This will apparently happen at the time of the sounding of the seventh trumpet announcing the coming of Christ, when the dead in Christ are resurrected (verse 15; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18).

It is important to consider that although many may think that it will be easy to recognize the two witnesses as servants of God because of the great miracles, we must realize that the Beast and False Prophet will be working miracles, too:

"And he [the false religious leader and system] exercises all the authority of the first beast [the civil leader and empire] in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived" (Revelation 13:12-14).

So in this passage, we see that the evil one will also perform miracles ("great signs"), and call fire out of heaven. Many will be deceived by both the Beast and the False Prophet.

One might ask: "How can you tell the difference between the two witnesses and the Beast and False Prophet? Both seem sincere, both are working miracles." A close look at Scripture reveals the vast difference. The Beast is described as speaking blasphemies (Revelation 13:5-6). He will "make war with the saints" (Revelation 13:7). The second beast in verse 12 "exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast."

Millions will be forced to either worship the image of the beast (verse 15)—which involves *breaking* the commandments of God—or face death. Those who know God will know whom they are dealing with. By contrast, the saints are identified as those "who *keep* the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

So the obedient followers of the Father and Christ will not be deceived by the Beast and False Prophet. Instead, they will prefer to give their lives in martyrdom if necessary (Revelation 13:15) rather than submit to the evil power of the Beast and False Prophet.

In the few years immediately preceding Christ's return the identities of the two witnesses will become known by those who have been called by God and are faithfully following Him. And, likewise, the identities of the Beast and False Prophet will become apparent to them as well.

For further information, please read our free study guides *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* and *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.

Do We Need to **FEAR** World Events?

A gas mask lies on the ground in a desolate, war-torn landscape. The mask is dark and appears to be made of metal or plastic, with a circular lens and a filter. The ground is dirt and rubble, and the background shows a hazy, overcast sky. The overall mood is one of despair and danger.

A dangerous and darkening world can lead to constant anxiety. How do we cope?

by Scott Hoefker

Have you ever experienced a fear of flying? One flight in particular stands out to me. All four seats were filled. The pilot, my wife and me, and our luggage were loaded in a small single engine airplane. I think it was a Cessna 170. We were flying at a lower altitude than normal when we encountered a series of air pockets and quickly plunged several feet. I was off my seat by at least several inches, and I pulled my seat belt tighter.

My knuckles turned pale as I squeezed the door handle, holding on tightly. I realized at this juncture that my stomach had found a new place to rest in my body—right near my throat.

The pilot, who had been silent for most of the short 40-minute flight, turned and looked at me with a halfhearted smile. The undulating motion of the aircraft did not seem to bother him, and he continued checking his e-mail on his phone as if nothing was wrong.

Between the air pockets and both fuel gauges reading in the red zone, I was feeling like the little aircraft might not make it. Not too many days before that flight, I had mentioned in a sermon the importance of prayer and trusting in God, and now I was practicing what I preached.

Fear, anxiety—we've all experienced this gripping emotion. Fear creeps into your mind through many different doors and windows. Fear of flying. Fear of

Proverbs 28:1, we are told that the righteous are characterized by boldness!

We cannot escape fear by taking a dose of drugs or alcohol to send us into a deep stupor or sleep. We cannot defeat our fears by trying to just “get away from it all” by taking a vacation somewhere. Deliverance from fears begins with our *mental attitude*.

2. Recognize we do not face our problems alone.

No matter how severe our problems are, or become, *we are not alone*. God does not abandon us, even when our personal safety is threatened.

The book of Hebrews encourages us with God's promise to keep us in His care: “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never fail you nor forsake you.’ Hence we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6, RSV).

3. Keep motivated by love, which casts out fear.

The apostle John tells us, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

Contrast the two. Love looks for opportunities to give, and serve others. “What can I do for someone else?”

Fear keeps a wary eye on the possible consequences of getting involved in other's lives, and asks, “What will he or she want from me in return?” Love thinks no evil. Fear thinks little else. Love believes all things. Fear is always suspicious.

Love is busy doing today's tasks, and does not worry about tomorrow. Fear, because it constantly frets about tomorrow and what might happen, fails to undertake responsibilities or focus on the task at hand.

The world is going to get much worse. But soon after that, it's going to be better than it's ever been. That's a promise from our Creator!

As you face your fears, think vertically. Face them with confidence that God will help us. He will be with us. He will help us learn to truly “be not afraid.” **GN**

The world is going to get much worse. But soon after, it's going to greatly improve. That's a promise from our Creator!

heights. Fear of groups of people. Fear of disease. Fear of other countries invading where you live. The list goes on.

But, as we see so many fearful things taking place in today's world, do we need to be afraid?

The kind of fear God commands us to overcome is *inner tension* that comes and tears us apart emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Some who watch the news constantly have found that they live in a state of fear and worry.

Let's look at three things that are essential in coping with this type of fear:

1. Realize that fear is not a part of what God wants for us.

We are told directly in many Bible passages to “fear not” or “be not afraid.” In



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How Did *That* Get Into the Resurrection Story?



What do rabbits, painted eggs and colorful Easter baskets have to do with the death and resurrection of the Savior of mankind?

It may sound like an odd question to ask—but then it's truly odd that these symbols should have ever come to be associated with Jesus Christ's resurrection in the first place!

So what *do* these things have to do with Christ's resurrection? The plain answer is *NOTHING*.

So how did this strange association come to be? The same way that holly, kissing under mistletoe, decorated evergreen trees and a jolly plump man in a red suit (riding in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer!) came to be associated with Jesus' birth.

Curiously, all these odd customs and symbols do have one thing in common. All were important symbols in pagan religions that had nothing to do with Christianity—most *long before Christianity even started*. So why are they part of the world's most important holidays today?

You need to **discover the facts**. And most importantly, since most people think they are worshipping God through these customs, you need to understand what *He* thinks about them! Our eye-opening free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* will help you discover the surprising answers. Request or download it at our website, or contact any of our offices listed on page 2. A free copy is waiting for you!

He Is Risen

1 And the women went to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week, and saw that the tomb was empty.

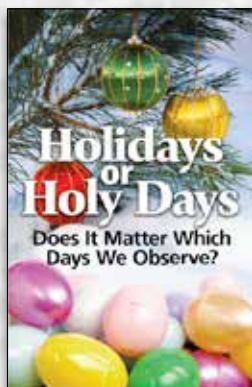
2 And behold, up hopped the Easter rabbit with bright basket of colorful decorated eggs.

3 And he said to the women, "Lo, He is not here, He is risen!"

4 Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.

5 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles.

6 And their words seemed to them like idle talk, and they did not believe them.



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