

# The Good News

September-October 2014

A MAGAZINE OF UNDERSTANDING

## Jesus Christ in the Biblical Festivals

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**A**s I write this editorial, I can't help but feel numbed at the sheer brutality of the unrelenting violence plaguing our planet.

In July a Malaysia Airlines jet was blasted out of the sky by a surface-to-air missile apparently launched by pro-Russia rebels in eastern Ukraine. Weeks after the fact, bodies and body parts are still strewn around the crash site, unrecovered due to ongoing fighting between rebels and government forces in the area.

In war-torn Syria and Iraq, an Islamist group so extreme that it was rejected by al-Qaeda has announced a new caliphate—a new Islamic empire—and begun instituting sharia law under which those who hold to other religions are forced to convert, surrender their property and flee for their lives, or be killed. To illustrate their seriousness, they have shot or beheaded hundreds of captured soldiers.

In the latest war in Gaza, at least six cease-fires between Israel and Hamas broke down when Hamas terrorists continued to indiscriminately launch rockets—some from schools and hospitals—at

## We live in a world that seems to grow more insane by the day. Will the madness ever end? If so, how?

Israeli towns and cities, bringing predictable counterstrikes that added hundreds to the unnecessary death toll.

We live in a world that seems to grow more insane by the day. Will the madness ever end? If so, how?

*The Good News* is a magazine of hope. We draw our name from the word *gospel*, which in its origins means “good news.” And of course, that portion of the Bible called “the Gospels” tells us about the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ—including the message of good news He brought.

But what does that have to do with the many problems that plague our world today?

One of the best-known and best-loved prophecies of Jesus Christ, immortalized in George Frideric Handel's musical masterpiece *The Messiah*, is found in Isaiah 9:6-7:

“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

If Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Prince of Peace, why does the world see so little of it? What part of the picture are we missing? If He truly is the Prince of Peace, how will peace come? Where is that hope in a world so devoid of hope?

The answer to these questions lies in a series of little-known festivals revealed long ago in the world's best-selling book—the Bible. God doesn't leave us in the dark about the solution to our many seemingly unsolvable problems. He has given us the key to understanding—though most have ignored or lived in ignorance of it!

We call *The Good News* “a magazine of understanding.” We want to share the understanding of God's great plan with you. That plan is what the mission of Jesus Christ was and remains all about. His work is central to it. And that plan—along with the *timetable* for carrying it out—is revealed through God's festivals found in the Bible.

In this issue we share with you the great hope of how the Prince of Peace will finally bring peace. Be sure to read it carefully!

—Scott Ashley, Managing editor

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### NORTH, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

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

### EUROPE

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

### AFRICA

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

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

Every year of His life on earth, Jesus observed seven annual festivals found in the Bible. Are these biblical celebrations valid today? If so, shouldn't we observe them? *by Darris McNeely*

**E**very single year, Jesus observed seven annual festivals, and so did His Church that followed. Have you ever heard of the Feast of Tabernacles? How about the Days of Unleavened Bread? Ever hear of the Day of Atonement?

These special celebrations are found in the Bible—and not only in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ, your Savior, not only observed these festivals, but *He is central to them*. When we observe these festivals, we are celebrating the mission and work of Jesus Christ—what He has done, what He is doing now, and what He will yet do. They are a key to developing a closer relationship with Him. And through them you can also learn how God is bringing

salvation to the entire world!

Jesus Christ is one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented figures in all history. He is certainly the most well known, but there's a lot to learn about His life, His teaching and His example.

It's essential to realize that Jesus kept these commanded biblical festivals as part of His worship of and teaching about the Father—and to understand that these festivals show Christ's central role in the process of salvation. It's vital that we see the biblical Holy Days in their proper New Testament perspective. That perspective points to Jesus Christ. Jesus, who sits at the right hand of the Father, is the main agent of God's plan of salvation for mankind.

At this point some of you may be thinking:

“But those are Jewish feasts. They have nothing to do with the New Testament or Christianity today.” That's a widely held belief—but it's *incorrect*. These festivals do not belong to the Jews alone. They belong first to God the Father and Jesus Christ. These are *God's* festivals. They are also commanded for Christians who desire to follow Jesus' example, and they have everything to do with Christ and His Church today.

Let's step through the biblical festivals and learn how Jesus is represented in each one. These festivals are grouped into three periods of the year, tied to the harvest seasons of the Holy Land. They provide remarkable insight into how God the Father, through Jesus Christ, will harvest people in His plan of salvation.

**Passover: “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”**

The first of the festivals is Passover, immediately followed by the Days of Unleavened Bread. The Passover was a

major part of the story of ancient Israel's Exodus from Egypt, but it's more than an Old Testament observance. We find that it's mentioned 28 times in the New Testament.

Now what is the New Testament Passover about? It's about the One who is so profound, so holy, so important, that without Him there is no hope for mankind—Jesus Christ. From the beginning, the Passover pointed directly to Jesus. He is our true Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). In observing the New Testament Passover (in the spring in Israel and the rest of the northern hemisphere), we understand the central role Jesus has in God's forgiveness of our sins. Scripture states, "And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5).

Many prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures foretold the life and death of a Messiah. Christ's death by crucifixion fulfilled many of these scriptures in incredible detail. It is one of the great proofs of the validity of the Bible and of who Jesus is. Just before Jesus' last Passover with His apostles, the Jewish high priest Caiaphas predicted that Jesus would "die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish" (John 11:50).

Christ's death, occurring on the Passover day, fulfilled the ritual of the slaughtered lamb, and it opened a new dimension of understanding to the festivals. Notice how the apostle Paul understood this New Testament application and taught it to gentile Christians in the city of Corinth:

## Do the festivals of the Bible belong to the Jews alone, or are they also commanded observances for all those who follow Christ?

"Therefore purge out the old leaven [a reference to the Days of Unleavened Bread, leaven being an agent that causes bread to rise during baking], that you may be a new lump [of dough, figuratively speaking], since you truly are unleavened. *For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.* Therefore let us keep the feast [of Unleavened Bread], not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8, emphasis added throughout).

In this passage referring to the first two annual biblical festivals, we see the essential role of Christ in our proper understanding and observance of these days.

Let's next look at the Days of Unleavened Bread.

### Days of Unleavened Bread: leaving sin by partaking of the true Bread of Life

The day after Passover begins the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, with a Holy Day on the first and last day. As with Passover, Jesus Christ is the central focus of this feast too. Christians observe this festival knowing that it's a time to focus on striving to put sin out of their lives and overcoming sin.

Leavening, for the purpose of the spring festival season, represents sin. Again the apostle Paul refers to it as "the leaven of malice and wickedness" (1 Corinthians 5:8). Other scriptures similarly identify leaven with hypocrisy (Luke 12:1) and false teaching. During this New Testament festival, leavening is portrayed as wickedness that Christians strive in their lives to overcome.

God's instruction for keeping this festival is to remove and not eat anything leavened for seven days, and to instead eat "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8).

The Days of Unleavened Bread tie deeply into something very significant revealed in this festival. You see, these days picture the promise Christ made that was to be fulfilled after He was raised to life. Jesus promised that He and the Father would make Their home in our hearts (John 14:23). In fact, it is Christ in us who is the hope of our future

glory in God's Kingdom (Colossians 1:27).

And as we eat unleavened bread during this festival, we are reminded that Christ, the "bread of life" and the "living bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:35, 51), is the ultimate example of the sincerity and truth the unleavened bread represents. Christians desire with all their being to have that Holy One living in them.

Observing the Days of Unleavened Bread also reminds us that it is not our own innate or self-generated righteousness that enables us to overcome sins. Rather, it is the righteousness that comes as a result of partaking of that Bread of Life, of Jesus Christ living His righteous life in the hearts of His people and empowering us to conquer sin.

As Paul writes, "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).

The New Testament observance of the Days of Unleavened Bread teaches us about the resurrected Christ who died for our sins that we may leave a life of sin and have the hope of eternal life through partaking of the true Bread of Life. It explains that by letting Christ live in us, we can be transformed. Only by taking on Jesus' character and nature can we truly overcome sin.

### Pentecost: Christ empowers His Church with the Holy Spirit

Now let's look at the next festival, the Feast of Pentecost, representing the firstfruits of the wheat harvest in Israel. It came seven weeks after an offering of firstfruits of the smaller barley harvest presented during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. These harvest celebrations were eagerly celebrated by the Israelites. They could be assured of food for their families when God's blessing was on them. Pentecost signaled a good year ahead for an Israelite.

In a special ceremony the priest would lift up two loaves of bread before God as an offering. The offering recognized God as the one who blesses Israel and gave them the fruit of the harvest. It was a great festival of both hope and joy.

According to Jewish tradition, God gave Israel the Ten Commandments on the day of Pentecost. But the Israelites did not have the Holy Spirit in them, so they failed to obey the immutable spiritual laws God had given them.

In the New Testament, we see a deeper and a more profound parallel to this. Jesus Himself was the first of the firstfruits, represented by the waved barley sheaf during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And His followers of this age are represented by the firstfruits of the wheat harvest of Pentecost.

When Jesus was about to ascend to heaven following His resurrection, the apostles were perplexed because their risen Lord was being taken from them. But Jesus had already promised them that He would not leave them as orphans (John 14:18). He promised that both He and the Father would come to the disciples by and through the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-23).

Jesus repeated this promise in Luke,



where He said, “Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry [or wait] in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

That power is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on the day of Pentecost, as we read in the second chapter of Acts. And suddenly with that event, the disciples became the Church of God.

No longer were they a dazed and bewildered group of men and women—they were now the firstfruits of the people of God, the first part of God’s harvest. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they would now be able to truly overcome sin. And through that same power, God’s Church would take the gospel to the entire world.

All of this was made possible because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He fulfilled His promise by empowering the Church with the Holy Spirit. As Christians today celebrate this festival, we are reminded of the transforming power of God’s Holy Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit we have hope and joy to carry out the same work Christ did while here on earth—the work of preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

We have covered three of the annual biblical festivals—Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Pentecost. We will now briefly cover each of the next four festivals, observed in the autumn of the year in the Holy Land and the rest of the northern hemisphere. As we examine them, we will again notice the pivotal role Jesus Christ has in fulfilling each one.

## **Trumpets: Jesus Christ returns and resurrects His followers**

The next biblical festival uses an interesting symbol—the blowing of trumpets.

Trumpets, whether metal instruments or rams’ horns, were used in the Bible for several purposes. They were used to call the people of God to assembly (Numbers 10:1-10). They were also used to announce the beginning of this Holy Day (Leviticus 23:24; compare Psalm 81:3-4). And trumpets were used to announce the coronation of a king (1 Kings 1:39-40).

All of these purposes find their ultimate fulfillment in the New Testament teaching that Jesus Christ will return to earth as King and assemble His people together at the sounding of a great trumpet blast.

Furthermore, the New Testament clearly shows that at what is called the first resurrection, with the blowing of a great trum-

pet, “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Paul writes: “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, 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.”

Another key scripture is Revelation 11:15: “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’” (English Standard Version).

The Feast of Trumpets pictures the time when Jesus Christ steps into our world and imposes His Kingdom in place of every human government. It also pictures the resurrection of what is called in the Bible the “dead in Christ” (1 Thessalonians 4:16) and the change to a glorified spirit life—becoming spirit beings in the family of God. Jesus stated that He Himself would raise His followers at this future time (John 6:44).

The Bible further shows us that Christ’s return will not be welcomed by the armies and the leaders of this world. In fact, the coming of Christ is accompanied by a time of war. The “kingdom of the world” will not willingly yield nor submit to Jesus Christ.

There is a reason the Lamb of God with a robe dipped in blood and wielding a sword will “strike the nations” (Revelation 19:13-15). The kingdom of the world is currently controlled by a powerful spirit being called Satan the devil. This evil being is the real power behind the scenes of all human folly.

Before the righteous reign of Jesus Christ can begin on this earth, Satan himself must be decisively dealt with. This next step in God’s plan is told through the next festival, the Day of Atonement.

## **Atonement: Christ sends Satan away and offers reconciliation to all**

The Day of Atonement is the most unusual of the Holy Days. It is a day on which God’s people do not eat food or drink any liquids. It’s called a “fast” (Leviticus 23:26-32; Acts 27:9). In ancient Israel, once a year on this festival a ceremony took place with the high priest and the offering of two specially chosen goats.

One goat was killed and its blood was offered within the Holy of Holies—that

sacred room within the temple where only the high priest could go on this special once-a-year festival. This represented the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the atonement of humanity.

The second goat was not killed. It was driven into the wilderness. This goat represents Satan, the one who rebelled against God and is the primary cause of sin and evil in the world. Satan is the one Jesus called a “liar” and a “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). His evil presence and influence must be removed from the human family before the peace of God’s Kingdom can begin.

While we do not observe the Day of Atonement today with the temple ritual of the two goats, we nevertheless focus on the great meaning behind this while we fast in drawing near to God. The Day of Atonement looks forward to the time when Christ returns to the earth. He will commission an angel to banish Satan into the bottomless pit (Revelation 20:1-3). Satan will not be allowed to deceive the nations for a thousand years.

This world will not know true peace until Satan, the ultimate deceiver, is put away. With this done, the eyes of mankind will be opened. The light of God’s truth will spread over humanity and a spiritual healing will come upon all peoples from all walks of life. At this time Christ’s sacrifice, as pictured by the slain goat, will begin to be applied to the world at large, as people repent and draw near to God, making humanity atoned or *at one* with Him.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the One who has offered His life in place of all mankind and has crushed the head of the serpent (see Genesis 3:15), is central to the ultimate fulfillment of this day. Now the real work of God’s Kingdom can begin.

## **The Feast of Tabernacles: Jesus Christ’s millennial rule over the entire earth**

After Jesus returns, the world will see a 1,000-year period of peace and prosperity (Revelation 20:1-6). The earth will be changed, not through the achievement of mankind, but through the power of God. The biblical festival called the Feast of Tabernacles pictures this time—which theologians often refer to as the Millennium (meaning simply 1,000 years).

Jesus is the key to understanding the Feast of Tabernacles. He observed this Feast while a human being, and He told His disciples to observe the Feast as well (John 7:2-14). In Old Testament times, the Isra-

elites would gather in Jerusalem and dwell in small huts or booths made from leafy branches of trees, and they would rejoice in the worship of God (Leviticus 23:40). And the Old Testament directly links the reign of Christ on the earth with the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles (Zechariah 14:16-21).

The book of Revelation tells us that Christ will reign on the earth for 1,000 years. And His reign will create what human government has not been able to accomplish for thousands of years—lasting peace, true justice and the opportunity for godly knowledge to flourish within the human family.

The prophet Isaiah foretells this period in many of his exciting prophecies. Let's note two of them.

Isaiah 2:4 says, "He [the Lord] shall judge between the nations, and rebuke



## These days are special to God because they reveal what His plan for mankind is all about.

many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation."

Isaiah 35:5-7 states: "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water."

These scriptures will be ultimately fulfilled when the One who sits at the right hand of the Father, Jesus Christ, returns to the earth.

### The Eighth Day: Jesus offers salvation to all

The three fall festivals we've covered so far—the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles—

all occur within a three-week period (days 1 through 21 of the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar). But there is one more festival the day after, and its meaning offers the greatest hope for all of mankind.

Have you ever wondered about those who died never having accepted Jesus Christ as Savior? What about them? Is there hope? What does the Bible say about this group of people? The meaning of the final biblical festival of the year holds the answer.

Following the Feast of Tabernacles is a final feast day (Leviticus 23:36). It's designated as an Eighth Day, distinct from the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles. Now this last of the commanded annual festivals has a profound meaning in the plan of God.

Many today worry about loved ones who died without receiving salvation through Jesus Christ. They fret and mourn over these loved ones who never repented of sin and never received baptism being lost, doomed forever in an ever-burning hellfire.

But God is a God of love. He will never allow any human being to be lost without first being given a fair opportunity to hear and understand the gospel. He will even yet offer salvation to those who have gone to their graves without adequate knowledge.

The prophecy of Ezekiel 37 speaks of a great resurrection of people who died without having understood God's great plan. While specifically showing what is to happen to Israel, it gives us understanding of what God intends for the entire human race as foretold in Revelation 20:5, 11-12.

Ezekiel writes: "I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great army. And they say, 'Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off'" (Ezekiel 37:10-11). The prophet is seeing, in vision, a resurrection.

But God then speaks comforting words to the Israelites: "Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves . . . then you shall know that I am the LORD . . . I will place you in your own land. Then you

shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it" (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

These verses, along with other biblical passages, tell us that a time is coming when those who died without the full knowledge of God will be given their opportunity for salvation. They will finally recognize Christ for who He really is—our Lord and our Savior. Non-Christians who lived their entire lives without ever hearing Christ's name, as well as those who professed Christianity but never really understood the truth, will be given the opportunity to both accept His sacrifice as payment for their sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Revelation 20 tells us of a resurrection at the conclusion of the 1,000-year reign of Christ—of "the dead, small and great" (verse 12). They will stand before Him and have the books of the Bible opened to their understanding. They will have the opportunity to confess belief in God and Christ and enter into eternal life.

Only those who ultimately reject God despite full enlightenment will be burned up in a final lake of fire.

The Eighth Day festival, then, pictures the time yet coming in God's timetable when those who have never had full opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will be raised from their graves and given the opportunity to truly learn the truth.

So the great meaning of this final festival is this: Every human being who has ever lived will receive the opportunity to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent. God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). (See also "Jesus Christ and the Great White Throne Judgment" beginning on page 14.)

The Holy Days of God give us an overview of God's great plan of salvation. The fulfillment of these days is dependent upon the One who became a man, who died for our sins, who now sits at the right hand of the Father, and who will soon return to rule the world. His name is Jesus Christ.

### What should we do?

What is it that people can learn by keeping these biblical festivals?

They can learn a tremendous amount. These are God's Holy Days. Think about that word—*holy*. We forget sometimes what that word really means. It designates something special to God, set apart by Him.

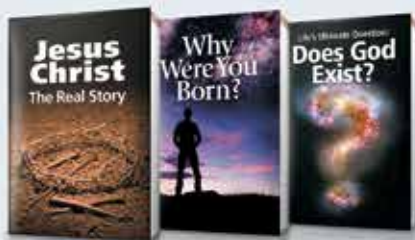
These days are special to Him because they reveal what His plan for mankind is all about. He maps it out for us to make it very

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clear that it all starts with Passover, pointing to Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us. We picture coming out of sin and becoming like Jesus Christ during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Pentecost pictures the Holy Spirit enabling those God has called to truly change.

The Feast of Trumpets gives us hope that Jesus will return and set all things aright. The Day of Atonement memorializes the time when Satan will be banished, prevented from influencing mankind, and the nations will at last come to accept Christ and His atoning sacrifice. The Feast of Tabernacles pictures Jesus dwelling with mankind and ruling over the nations for 1,000 years.

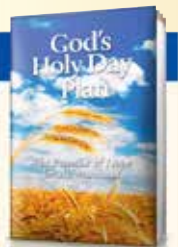
And then, at the end, we have the Eighth Day that makes it very clear that God wants to save everyone who is ultimately willing. All people of all past ages will have an opportunity to have the Bible opened to them. God's Word will come to life for them, and they will have an opportunity to choose life.

What an amazing blessing it is when you see how Jesus Christ fits into all of the Holy Days! It's something that everyone needs to check into.

You really need to examine your beliefs. Maybe you celebrate Christmas, Easter and other religious holidays but you're finding them lacking. Maybe you can tell something is missing. It's time that you ask some hard questions about what you've accepted and what you've been doing all your life in a religious sense.

Moreover, you should consider finding a church that observes these biblical festivals. These celebrations offer so much meaning and so much understanding. It's vital to comprehend what they represent in God's plan for you. Find out why many people are turning to what God's Word really says and come to understand how to truly worship Him! **GN**

## Learn More



Many people have never even heard of the Holy Days of the Bible, even though we clearly see Jesus Christ observing these festivals and His Church doing likewise after His death and resurrection. Why don't you look into them for yourself? Download or request our free study guide *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

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# Three Giant Leaps to Global Peace

Seven billion people do not know lasting peace. Yet the Bible tells us how the world will eventually enjoy God's lasting peace through three biblical festivals. These three small steps taken annually picture three giant leaps for humankind! *by Jerold Aust*

**G**eneral William Tecumseh Sherman, a famous Union general of the American Civil War, spoke out against the travesty of war in an 1879 speech at the Michigan Military Academy. He punctuated his warning with his now-famous quote “*War is hell!*”

Why is it that mankind still engages in wars to arrive at peace? We want peace, but we just can't seem to find it. As long as people continue to solve differences through arguments and war, we will continue to fail.

Yet your Bible tells us that international peace is in sight, revealed through three major steps or great leaps forward that will play out on the world scene—maybe in your lifetime!

## Game-changer for peace

God is a game-changer for good because He gets good things done perfectly. Try as we might, our human efforts just can't compare to what God is able to plan and do: “‘My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the LORD. ‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’”

“The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. *It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it. You will live in joy and peace*” (Isaiah 55:8-12, New Living Translation, emphasis added throughout). God's promised global peace is based on the return of the *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6-7), Jesus Christ.

The conventional wisdom of human

beings is seldom based on God's will. It's based on faulty human reasoning with often selfish intent.

God wants us to instead learn His way of peace today, something we can't do without His Spirit. “*They don't know where to find peace* or what it means to be just and good. They have mapped out crooked roads, and *no one who follows them knows*

**The first step to global peace will be God's removal of human misrule. The second step will be His removal of evil spirits now busily at work on earth. The third step will be the establishment of uncontested governance by the Messiah.**

*a moment's peace*” (Isaiah 59:8, NLT). Yet global peace is only three giant steps away.

## Three feasts that show the way

You can know the mystery to personal and global peace now, a great mystery kept hidden from humanity for nearly 6,000 years (Matthew 13:10-11). Three biblical festivals that occur in the autumn in Israel and the rest of the northern hemisphere reveal this otherwise hidden secret—the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. How can these festivals help you find peace? God's Spirit unlocks the grand mystery to global peace, given to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32).

The first momentous future step to global peace will be God's removal of human misrule. The second step will be His removal of evil spirits now busily at work on earth to wrongly influence mankind (Job 1:6-7; 1 Peter 5:8). The third step will be the establishment of uncontested governance over the earth by the Messiah, the Prince of Peace. God's peace will then come to

pervade the entire earth.

Let's take a look at each of these huge steps in more detail and talk about the biblical festivals that picture them.

## The Feast of Trumpets: overthrowing of wrong human rule

One key to understanding the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25) is discovering what trumpet blasts represent throughout the Bible. In biblical times a trumpet blast was often used as an alarm of war. But it was also used in times of celebration.

The book of Revelation foretells that seven trumpets will sound in sequence in the end time. Each one will herald cataclysmic events that will deeply affect hard-hearted human beings leading up to the Messiah's glorious return at the seventh and final trumpet.

This will be a time of jubilation at the proclamation of Jesus Christ as King (Revelation 11:15) and the resurrection of His followers at the last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). But, again, it will also be a time of catastrophe

and great war, the nations even attempting to fight Christ Himself.

Where does the urge to fight and destroy ultimately come from? Satan is its author. Initially an archangel of God, he brought about the first war when he rebelled against God and attacked to overthrow Him (Isaiah 14:13-14). God and His angelic forces defeated Satan and cast him to earth (Luke 10:18).

This powerful being had gone rogue: “You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you” (Ezekiel 28:15, NLT). When God later created human beings, Satan was aware of God's plan for us to become God's children (Hebrews 2:10) and to rule over angels (1 Corinthians 6:3).

Since Satan could not overcome God, he made it his goal to destroy humanity. How does he accomplish this? One of his methods is by influencing us to destroy ourselves through ongoing wars (James 4:1; Isaiah 14:6, 17). Satan is ultimately to blame for conflict leading to war and the lack of godly peace.



God is opposed to people determining to destroy one another in warfare (James 4:1-6). This is among the reasons God the Father will send Jesus Christ to intervene in human affairs at the end of the age. After waging war Himself to defeat those who oppose Him, He will at last bring an end to war.

God the Father will send Jesus back to save us from ourselves: "For then there will be great tribulation . . . and unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved [alive]; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22). For a period of time before Christ's return, divine judgment through great upheaval will devastate human governments. Then Christ will come at the last trumpet as the world's rightful Ruler and, at the end of a series of final plagues, will dispatch a great gathering of human tyrants and their armies at Jerusalem (Revelation 19:15, 17-18; 14:20).

But ending human tyranny is not enough, as it would return if the cause behind it were not removed. This brings us to the next great step.

### **The Day of Atonement: removal of evil spiritual influence**

Just like the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement is another of God's annual Holy Days (Leviticus 23:26-32). It depicts the time when Christ will remove Satan and his demons from their evil influence and rule over mankind (Revelation 20:1-3).

On this special spiritual day, God commands us to afflict ourselves for 24 hours, referred elsewhere in Scripture to fasting or going without food and water (assuming one doesn't have a health condition that prevents it). This is the only one of God's Holy Days observed this way. Fasting on Atonement reminds us that human flesh can't overcome Satan and the demons without God's help. Fasting with prayer draws us closer to God (Matthew 17:21).

The Day of Atonement also presages the day humanity as a whole is brought near to God in a time of deprivation to at last repent and truly receive Christ. It further looks forward to complete oneness with God when we won't have need of physical nourishment. God's resurrected children will exist as divine spirit, just like the resurrected Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:49-54; 1 John 3:1-3).

God's Day of Atonement, representing the removal of Satan and the demons and the offering of reconciliation with God through Christ to all peoples, fits between

the Feast of Trumpets, representing the time of judgment on despotic human rule, and the Feast of Tabernacles, prefiguring the time when global peace will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (see Isaiah 11:9).

Notice what will happen at Jesus Christ's return: "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him



## **God's plan of peace is embedded in these festivals and their awesome fulfillments to come.**

for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished" (Revelation 20:1-3).

After Satan's removal, global peace can at last begin to be established—symbolized by the next feast, as just mentioned.

### **The Feast of Tabernacles: Jesus Christ reigns on earth!**

Portraying the third great step or leap ahead in God's plan to bring peace to the earth, the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43) embodies God's peace. It boldly proclaims and rejoices in God's lasting peace that will follow Christ's second coming (Isaiah 9:6-7)—when all nations will be led to observe it (Zechariah 14:16-19).

During the 1,000-year period of Christ's peaceful reign (Revelation 20:4, 6), mankind will enjoy an international Garden of Eden: "So they will say, *'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the wasted, desolate, and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited'*" (Ezekiel 36:35; see also Isaiah 51:3).

Isaiah says of this time in a verse cited

earlier: "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). In that day, God's truth will be understood and obeyed on a global scale (Hebrews 8:10-11).

And there is yet another feast—the day following the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:36, 39)—which in its meaning extends the blessings of peace to those who have died without a proper understanding of God and His ways. They will be resurrected after the 1,000-year reign of Christ and given the opportunity for eternal peace in God's Kingdom (see Revelation 20:5, 11-12 and "God's Plan as Revealed Through the Resurrections" beginning on the next page.)

### **Global peace is coming**

Jesus promised His peace: "Peace I leave with you, *My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you*" (John 14:27). God's plan of peace is symbolized by and embedded in these festivals and their awesome fulfillments to come.

Jesus, His apostles, and the early Church all observed these feasts. You can observe

them too! "Blessed are those who do His commandments [including the observance of God's annual festivals], that they may have the right to the tree of life [eternal life], and may enter through the gates into the city [the New Jerusalem to come down from heaven]" (Revelation 22:14).

Observing God's festivals are small steps to take personally each year, but these signify giant leaps forward for all mankind. May God give you His peace *now* so you can help others enjoy it *forever!* **GN**

### **Learn More**



The Holy Days of the Bible are rich with meaning and purpose, revealing how God will ultimately bring peace to earth. But they teach us a great deal more as well—about how God is working out His plan to offer salvation to all of humanity! Download or request our free study guide *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. A copy is waiting for you!

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# God's Plan as Revealed Through the Resurrections

Despite common belief, people do not have immortal souls. Rather, God's ultimate purpose for our lives is that we be given eternal life in His family through a resurrection. In fact, the Bible reveals that there is more than one resurrection. *by Noel Hornor*

**T**he resurrection of the dead is listed in Scripture as one of the basic doctrines of true Christianity (Hebrews 6:1-2). This truth about life after death was spoken of in the Old Testament by David (Psalm 17:15), Isaiah (Isaiah 26:19) and Daniel (Daniel 12:2). Someday everyone who has ever lived will come to life again.

Jesus Christ Himself spoke of the future time “when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29, English Standard Version).

The unfolding of God's plan is revealed in stages. When a Christian is called, baptized and receives the Holy Spirit, he enters a time of judgment—of evaluation of his life. Judgment is now on the “house of God,” which is God's Church (1 Peter 4:17).

But as we'll soon see, there is more than one period of judgment revealed in Scripture, and more than one resurrection.

All of the pieces of the puzzle were not put into place until Jesus inspired the apostle John to write the final book of the Bible. It's titled *Revelation* because God *revealed* previously unknown teaching through it! It begins, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants” (Revelation 1:1). God gave the final inspiration through Jesus Christ of when and how people will be resurrected.

Let's review some common thinking about life after death in the New Testament era and see what the Bible actually teaches.

## Diversity of beliefs in Jesus' day

We need to understand some of the background of the religious world at the time

of Jesus to fully understand the Bible's teaching on this topic.

We know from the Gospels and other historical accounts that at least three main Jewish sects existed during the time of Jesus' ministry—the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes.

The Sadducees were primarily of the priestly class associated with the Jerusalem temple. They were wealthy, influential and generally corrupted by their greed. While they had the respect of the people due to their influence in the religious establishment, they were also resented because of their close relationship with the occupying Roman authority.

Pharisees were students and teachers of the law. The most influential sect among

the Jewish people, they placed emphasis on strict observance to both the written law of Moses and the oral tradition that had been passed down from the Jewish elders.

The Essenes, a group not mentioned in the Gospels, emphasized separation from the rest of society. They lived away from the towns and were uninvolved in the politics of the Sadducees and Pharisees. The people of the desert community of Qumran who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls appear to have been part of the Essene movement.

These groups had different theologies and philosophies, and the people of Jesus' day were influenced by them all. One of the topics debated among the sects was what happens after death.

## The doctrine of the immortal soul

According to the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, both the Pharisees and Essenes believed in the immortality of the soul, with rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked in a disembodied afterlife (*Antiquities of the Jews*, book 18, chap. 1, secs. 3, 5).

This belief was combined with the biblical teaching of the resurrection, as they also believed that the immortal souls of the righteous would ultimately imbue enlivened fleshly bodies to live forever (*ibid.*; and Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, book 9, chaps. 22-23).

They were correct in believing in the resurrection, but they were wrong in believing that the soul is immortal. This is still a common belief today—along with the idea that a good person goes as a disembodied soul to heaven at death and a bad person goes to hell when they die. But none of this is biblically correct. Scripture tells us that the soul doesn't live forever, but that it can and does die (Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Matthew

**A common belief today is that a good person goes as a disembodied soul to heaven at death and a bad person goes to hell. But none of this is biblically correct.**

28:10)—and that there is no conscious awareness in death (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10).

So if the immortality of the soul is not biblical, where did this doctrine come from? Belief in a separate soul and body was popular in Greek culture, and was taught by one of their most famous philosophers: “In Plato's thinking, the soul . . . was self-moving and indivisible . . . It existed before the body which it inhabited, and it would survive” after the body died (Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 1994, p. 32).

For several centuries after Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East, Greek culture and beliefs dominated that part of the world. When the Roman Empire succeeded the Greeks, they were highly influenced by



Greek culture and philosophy and adopted many Greek beliefs. The Greco-Roman influence rubbed off on the Jews in the time leading up to and during Christ's day.

## Jewish sects disagree about the resurrection

The Sadducees were different from the Essenes and the Pharisees in that they did not believe in an immortal soul or a resurrection (Josephus, sec. 4; Hippolytus, chap. 24). They believed only in the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—as the sole source of divine authority, and it did not specifically mention the resurrection.

Even though the resurrection was understood and revealed by biblical prophets such as Isaiah and Daniel, the Sadducees, because they didn't accept their writings as Scripture, rejected it. They thought of it as a new doctrine. "The Sadducees vigorously opposed the new doctrine of bodily resurrection. They held that 'when you're dead, you're dead'" (Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*, 1986, p. 61). We see in Mark 12:18-27 that the Sadducees tried to provoke an argument with Jesus over this issue.

The Sadducees had major disagreements with the Pharisees because the Pharisees believed in the resurrection. This is shown in the Bible when the apostle Paul appeared before the Sanhedrin.

Paul told the assembled group: "I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" And when he said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both" (Acts 23:6-8).

The Pharisees were closer to what the Bible teaches than the Sadducees, but their views were nevertheless warped—their understanding woefully incomplete.

## The Greek and Roman concept of death

The Greek ideas of death had become widespread in Jesus' time. The idea of hell being a place where the soul went after a person's death is rooted in the Greek concept of Hades as an underworld that was home to disembodied souls. The idea was that once a person died, the soul would live on forever in the darkness of Hades. It wasn't a pretty fate.

The biblical truth is far more just and merciful. According to Scripture, what ultimately happens to wicked people is destruction or annihilation—not eternal torment.

Recognizing that the idea of a loving and merciful God is incompatible with the idea of a divine Being who would torture people forever in an ever-burning hell, growing numbers of people interpret "hell" or even "death" as eternal separation from God. But they fail to understand the Bible's teaching about a destroying hellfire—called *gehenna* in the Greek of the New Testament.

Even though the Jews did not understand all of the truth, they were far better off because they had the parts of the Bible that had been written up to that time. But the Bible wasn't completed until Jesus gave the Revelation to John. Because of what is revealed in the book of Revelation, we can



## The idea of a loving and merciful God is incompatible with the idea of a divine Being who would torture people forever in an ever-burning hell.

more completely understand the fate of the dead and God's plan of salvation.

## The beliefs of Jesus' disciples

Most of Jesus' early disciples were not officially part of any of the sects of Judaism, but they believed in the resurrection. We see this illustrated in the Gospel of John. Jesus had come to visit Mary and Martha in the village of Bethany after their brother Lazarus had died. Jesus was going to resurrect Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus told Martha, "Your brother will arise again" (John 11:23). The word *resurrection* comes from *anastasis*. *Anastasis* comes from two Greek words—*ana*, which means "again," and *histemi*, which means "to cause to stand." Because of Jesus' miraculous working, through His Father's power, He was going to summon Lazarus from the

grave, and Lazarus would stand and walk again in a resurrected physical body.

What was Martha's belief regarding whether Lazarus would be resurrected? She said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). We don't know if she thought this because of Jesus' teachings or already believed it before hearing His teachings.

In any case, what she stated was basically in line with the Pharisees' belief system. The Pharisees believed that everyone would arise at the same point in time: "Jews who believed in resurrection believed that it would occur on the last day when God made the new heavens and new earth. It

would happen to everyone altogether" (Craig Evans and N.T. Wright, *Jesus, the Final Days: What Really Happened*, 2009, p. 89). Let's see what the Bible actually teaches.

## "The first resurrection"—God's faithful raised to eternal life

It's important to realize that God is not calling everyone to salvation in this day and age. That should be evident when we consider some key facts. Throughout ages past, many never heard the name of Jesus Christ or never even saw a Bible.

Many babies and children have died young, well before reaching an age when they are old enough to be accountable. Even today millions of people live and die without ever knowing anything about the true God or the Bible. What is God's plan for them?

Jesus plainly said that not everyone could come to Him (John 6:44), at least not at that time. But He also said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

God must call people to come to know Jesus Christ and receive His gift of eternal life through the resurrection of the dead. Over the centuries the mystery of the resurrection has been known to only a few.

"But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed!" wrote Paul (1 Corinthians 15:51, New Living Translation). A "secret"

in the New Testament is a hidden truth. Jesus is going to return at the sound of a trumpet, and “the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Notice that not all are raised to life at this time—only “the dead in Christ,” the true Christians who have lived and died over the centuries, with those who are still

a *second chance* for people to choose to follow God and Jesus Christ. Many billions of people have lived and died without ever having had an opportunity to truly know and understand Jesus Christ and God’s plan of salvation. For these people, their opportunity to know and submit to God in a day of judgment or evaluation is still coming.

As a Pharisee, he believed in the resurrection. After God struck him down he knew a lot more about it, and he came to personally know Jesus Christ.

Some years later, he had to convince the church at Corinth of the veracity of the resurrection. In fact, 1 Corinthians 15 is often referred to as the “resurrection chapter,” since that is its subject. Paul vividly describes a time when “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet . . . the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

Paul beautifully taught the Corinthian Christians of a future time when they and other faithful followers of Jesus Christ would literally be brought to life again and changed into incorruptible spirit.

The resurrection is one of Scripture’s key doctrines. It encapsulates the hope Christians have in a full redemption by God and Jesus Christ. It’s not simply a changing redemption in a metaphorical sense, but a fully realized redemption that includes a real transformation into a glorified member of God’s family for all eternity.

The apostle John assured early Christians that this change will be literal and profound: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” Not only will Jesus resurrect His followers to life, but they will be changed to “be like Him”—a truly wonderful hope for all who trust in God!

*Read your Bible.* Prove the truth about the resurrections. Have faith that if you repent and obey God, you can receive the free gift of eternal life as a literal member of God’s holy, eternal family. Learn about the reward for those who repent and humbly serve God! You can live forever in the Kingdom of God. That is why God created you! **GN**

## Paul beautifully taught the Corinthian Christians of a future time when they and other faithful followers of Jesus Christ would literally be brought to life again and changed into incorruptible spirit.

alive at that time changed and raised with them (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

What will be the function of those who are changed at the sound of the trumpet? God gave the final pieces of the puzzle to John in a vision. He wrote about the reward of the saints: “Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:6).

This is plainly called “the *first* resurrection.” It will occur at the end of “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) when God will deliver His people through the coming of Jesus Christ.

When the Bible says that “the second death has no power,” it means that the saints will live for eternity. They will never be subject to death again after they are resurrected. Theirs will be a life of overflowing bliss, ecstasy and pleasure. God inspired David to write, “In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

### What about the others?

But what about everyone else? Notice this statement in Revelation 20:5: “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended” (New International Version). Those resurrected in this group are people who never completely understood the truth of God. Rather than them being condemned to eternal suffering or never awakening from the sleep of death, they will come to life again. This will be a resurrection to physical life, during which they will have the opportunity to repent and receive God’s Holy Spirit and then live forever.

It’s important to understand that this isn’t

Remember what Jesus told the unbelieving people of His time. While they rejected Him, He said that the people of past, sinful civilizations would have repented if they saw His great works. He concluded that “it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:24).

Along with “the rest of the dead,” the people of Sodom—a city destroyed by God for its evil—still have a time yet to come when they will have their opportunity to repent and follow God. They will at that time experience their ultimate judgment period. (Be sure to also read “Jesus Christ and the Great White Throne Judgment” beginning on the next page.)

Then there will be another resurrection to condemnation in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14-15). Those suffering this fate are people who despite sufficient understanding and opportunity, willfully turn away and spurn Christ, ultimately refusing to repent. Such a person will have effectively “trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace” (Hebrews 10:29).

Grace is God’s free gift! It includes forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. When we sinned, we in essence crucified Him, making it necessary for Him to die so that we might be forgiven. But once called by God and converted, *we must not crucify Him again.* This is what we do when we receive the Holy Spirit but knowingly turn away and reject God (Hebrews 6:4-8). Such people will die for eternity.

### Trust God’s promises of literal resurrection

The apostle Paul was struck down on the road to Damascus by the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:1-9). He had a personal encounter.

## Learn More

What happens after death is one of life’s great mysteries. But it need not be for you! God’s Word spells out what happens when we die, but few understand it. You need to read our free study guide *What Happens After Death?* Download or request your free copy today!



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# Jesus Christ and the Great White Throne Judgment

What will happen to those who've died without understanding God's truth? Will they yet receive the opportunity to be saved? Or will they be tormented in hellfire forever after being condemned in the last judgment? *by Vince Szymkowiak*

**W**hat will happen to people who are not Christians after they die? What about those who never even had a chance to hear about Jesus Christ and His message of the Kingdom of God? And what of those who never so much as saw a Bible, much less read one?

One school of thought puts them in an ever-burning hellfire, where they are tortured forever. Is this the case? What would this say about God, allowing people to suffer forever just because they were born into such circumstances through no fault of their own?

These are tough questions that require answers. Thankfully, the Bible reveals the wonderful future awaiting all people who have never been led by God to understand His truth—including those who have never heard of, much less accepted, Jesus Christ as their Master and Savior. He is in fact the only One through whom we can receive salvation (Acts 4:12).

The apostle John in Revelation 20 records his vision of a "great white throne" and a resurrection to life of "the dead, small and great [rich and poor, famous and infamous], standing before God" (verses 11-12). This passage goes on to say: "And the books were opened . . . And the dead were judged by the things which were written in the books" (verse 12).

As God the Father is still in heaven at this point in the vision, and since all judgment has been committed to Christ (John 5:22), it is evident that the One on the

great white throne here is Christ (see also Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Just what does the future hold for those who will appear before this throne of judgment?

### Doomed to an eternity of torture?

While there are various interpretations regarding the last judgment among those who profess Christ, it is widely believed that a judgment day is coming in which most of humanity will meet their Maker, who will be seated on this throne.

However, a common misconception is that on that day God will condemn all unrepentant sinners (meaning most who have ever lived) to ever-burning hellfire—and that everyone who did not accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior in their past lifetime will suffer in torment for all eternity.

Following this argument, we would have to conclude that all non-Christians who died before Christian missionaries reached them are now burning in hell.

It would mean that men, women and children who have professed religions other than the Christian religion, or no religion at all, will be tortured without end. This would include billions of Africans, Asians and others who lived and died without coming to know Christ. In this scenario, most people who ever lived will suffer eternally in an ever-burning hellfire, while only a few will be saved.

### "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

To illustrate this view, let's look at what

was taught by Jonathan Edwards, a famous 18th-century American preacher. Here is a quote from his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached on July 8, 1741:

"It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery . . . and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all.

"You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this *almighty merciless vengeance* . . . So that your punishment will indeed be infinite" (emphasis added throughout).

He even started out his sermon by specifically referring to the Old Testament Israelites. Of them he says, "They are now the objects of that very same anger and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell." He further states that God is "very angry with them; as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell, who there feel and bear the fierceness of his wrath."

Who knows how many millions—perhaps billions—of people have gone to their graves quite convinced that their loved ones, or perhaps they themselves, would meet a wrathful God who would condemn them to an eternal hellfire!

### An ever-burning hellfire is not biblical

But Jonathan Edwards was wrong. First of all, sinners do not face an angry God the moment they die. They go to their graves with no consciousness in death. Solomon stated this clearly in Ecclesiastes 9: "*The dead know nothing* . . . There is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (verses 5, 10).

And in Psalm 6:5 we read this statement to God: “For in death there is no remembrance of You; in the grave who will give You thanks?”

The dead will wait in their graves, unconscious and unaware, until at some time in the future they rise when Christ commands. In John 5:25, we read, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.”

A second area in which Edwards was wrong was in his acceptance of an eternally burning hellfire. This concept is not biblical. He did not properly consider such scriptures as Romans 6:23: “For the wages

and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.

“The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (verses 11-15).

Again, the typical misunderstanding of this passage is that an instant judgment is coming on humanity and that the major-

life that we might be forgiven of sin.

Let’s focus on the word “throne” in Revelation 20:11, considering that the throne of Jesus Christ, as with His Father, is a throne of mercy: “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Please note carefully the words here: “*throne of grace . . . obtain mercy and find grace.*” Any time we come humbly before the throne of grace, we come through a merciful High Priest to a merciful Father. And the Bible further shows that the billions of people cut off from God in the past will in the future resurrection actually be given an opportunity to fall on this great mercy, repent and, for their first time, be able to obey God and live by His laws!

### Facing an angry God or a merciful God?

When the small and great awaken to find themselves facing Christ’s throne, they will not at first realize they are standing before the throne of grace and mercy. They will actually feel hopelessness and doom. They will feel what is described in Ezekiel 37, a passage that parallels Revelation 20. There the prophet Ezekiel describes what the masses of humanity will think when they are resurrected.

In this chapter we see a picture of the destiny of the Israelites completely different from what Edwards preached. In this amazing prophecy, God is shown to be a very merciful God. This passage explains that for these long-dead people there is coming a physical resurrection to future life.

In vision, God places Ezekiel in a vast valley, essentially a massive graveyard: “The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones” (Ezekiel 37:1).

The next verse indicates these bones were from people dead a very long time: “Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry” (verse 2).

God asks the prophet if he thinks these bones will ever live again: “And He said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’”

Ezekiel admits he simply doesn’t know! “So I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, You know.’”

God plainly prophesies that a resurrection to physical life is about to happen: “Again



## The apostle John records his vision of a “great white throne and the dead, small and great, standing before God. And the books were opened . . . And the dead were judged by the things which were written in the books.”

of sin is death [not eternal torment in an ever-burning hellfire], but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Malachi 4:3 tells us that the unrepentant wicked “shall be ashes under the soles of your [righteous people’s] feet.” In other words, the fate of those who ultimately won’t repent is to be *burned up*—totally consumed by fire that leaves only ashes.

### Jesus Christ will judge all in mercy

Now let’s return to Revelation 20: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small

ity will burn forever and ever in hell. As Edwards put it, “There are but few saved, and . . . the *greater part of men* that have died heretofore are gone to hell.”

But a close reading of the Bible gives a completely different picture. For one, we must understand that the initial judgment here is not an instant condemnation but an evaluation period over the new lifetime of those resurrected—just as God’s people today are undergoing a time of judgment (see 1 Peter 4:17).

Also, God judges mercifully. Both God the Father and Jesus Christ share the character of having great mercy—the Father giving His Son and Jesus giving His own



He said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, "O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: 'Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.'"'

### A resurrection of the unfaithful

Here is a group of people who had lived all their lives without a saving knowledge of God the Father and Jesus Christ. However, instead of being condemned to hellfire, let's notice what happens:

"So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.

"Also He said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, "Thus says the Lord GOD: 'Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.'"' So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army" (verses 7-10).

These verses clearly show a resurrection to physical life. Even the breath of life is given to them! Now let's read verse 11: "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, "Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!'"

These resurrected human beings are referred to as the Israelites. They are depicted in a state of hopelessness and self-condemnation. But read what God says to them: "Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves.

"I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then [in this future resurrection] you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it," says the LORD" (verses 12-14).

### All of mankind offered repentance

Just imagine: Instead of eternally burning in hellfire, we read here of an enormous

number of people who are brought back to physical life! For the very first time, they will come to see Jesus Christ as He really is. Jesus will point them to God the Father. And they will be offered the most precious gift of all, God's Holy Spirit.

In declaring that He will give them the Holy Spirit (verse 14), God in effect is saying that they will be repentant over their sins and will be offered the opportunity for salvation! So again, a close reading of this passage yields quite a different picture from what we hear in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

## One day all people, regardless of race, religion or gender, will stand before Jesus Christ, and He will extend His loving hand to them and offer them repentance.

Furthermore, if God is going to save ancient Israel, He will also offer all of mankind salvation as well. We know this because the Word of God says repeatedly that God does not play favorites (Acts 10:34; 1 Peter 1:17). Regarding salvation, all peoples have an equal opportunity. Paul wrote: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Those who hold to the view that the majority of humankind is doomed forever simply do not understand the merciful plan of God. They have not clearly understood that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). How can the same God who desires all men to be saved hold you "over the pit of hell," as Edwards' sermon put it?

We also read that God is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). In the end the evil works of Satan, the enemy of humanity, will be defeated by the power and mercy of God. Human beings will come to understand the depth of the mercies of the Father and Jesus Christ as they at last learn God's truth, repent and choose to obey Him.

This will be the first opportunity for salvation for all those who had never, in their lifetimes in this age, even heard the name of Jesus Christ—the only name, as mentioned earlier, through which we can be saved (Acts 4:12).

Men and women who had lived in the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah will be offered their first opportunity to repent and accept Christ (Matthew 10:15). The

inhabitants of the ancient pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon will see and learn about Jesus Christ for the very first time too (Matthew 11:22). These puzzling passages become clear when we finally understand the timing of God's great plan.

### Where do you stand?

Do you consider yourself even a beginning reader of the Bible? Do you know enough to realize that God is a merciful God, yet One who will require us to "give account" to Him? (See Romans 14:12.) If so, then now may be *your* day of salvation.

Now may be the "acceptable time" (2 Corinthians 6:2) for *you* to learn about God and commit your life to Him!

God may be calling you to a closer relationship with Him than you have ever had in your life! God may be calling you *now* to repentance of past sins and acceptance of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Perhaps God is speaking to you the same words He spoke through Peter: "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40).

A time is coming when all people, regardless of race, religion or gender, will stand before Jesus Christ and have the choice to follow His righteous rule. Jesus will extend His loving hand to them and offer them repentance—a true change of heart and life to living by His every word.

But for those of us alive today whose minds God is opening to His biblical truths, there is no better time than *right now* to repent of our past ways of life and start following His ways. Now is the time to repent and call on Him through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior! **GN**

### Learn More

Are the dead really enjoying paradise in heaven or suffering in torment in hell, as many believe? What does the Bible really say? To learn the truth, download or request our free study guide *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*



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# Why Israel Matters

Jesus Christ told the multitudes they needed to discern their time. Can we discern our world and the time we are in and be moved to repentance and action? An important factor is recognizing the significance of Israel in Bible prophecy. *by Darris McNeely*

**W**hy is tiny Israel, a nation about the size of New Jersey with a total population of fewer than 8 million people, so often in the headlines?

As this issue was being prepared, Israel was once again slugging it out with Hamas-ruled Gaza, where terrorists fired more than 3,000 missiles at Israeli cities and towns, with Israel predictably launching airstrikes and a bloody ground assault in return.

Terrorists from Syria and Lebanon to the north and the Egyptian-ruled Sinai Peninsula to the south took advantage of the situation to lob a few rockets of their own at Israeli territory. And further to the east, leaders of the newly declared Islamic State threatened attacks while Iranian leaders repeated their view that Israel deserves annihilation while they continued their ill-disguised goal of attaining nuclear arms.

Let's step away from the tension of these threats and ask a critical question: Why does this small Mideast Jewish state, surrounded by hostile Arab neighbors, play such a significant role in the world?

The answer to *why Israel matters* is important to understanding a greater question about God's faithfulness in all He promises to

mankind. The answer involves understanding who the modern state of Israel really is and where it fits within Bible prophecy.

Make no mistake: There are key reasons the state of Israel matters today in the Middle East. We'll examine five.

## **Key reason 1: Bible prophecy requires the presence of a remnant of ancient Israel in the Holy Land.**

In Daniel 9 we find a prophecy known as the 70-weeks prophecy. It deals with the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem but also stretches into the time of the end before the second coming of Jesus Christ. Key parts of this prophecy speak of the "holy city," Jerusalem, and of rebuilding and restoring it.

Critical to this prophecy is verse 27, which speaks of the interruption of a prophetic week by an "end to sacrifice and offering" brought about by "one who makes desolate, even until the consummation which is determined is poured out on the desolate."

A forerunner of this end-time event occurred about 167 B.C., when an evil ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes offered swine's blood in the temple (Daniel 11:31). Jesus Christ referred to this in Matthew 24:15 as a

type or forerunner of another occurrence of such desecration prior to His second coming: "Therefore when you see the "abomination of desolation," spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place' (whoever reads let him understand) . . ."

These prophecies clearly indicate that Jerusalem is the setting for the events described. They specifically deal with the coming of the Messiah to Jerusalem and can only be fulfilled if there is a Jewish state in Israel controlling the city of Jerusalem. That's why 1948, the year Israel was reestablished as a state, is seen as such a pivotal date by students of Bible prophecy.

The presence of the state of Israel matters critically on this point alone. But there's more!

## **Key reason 2: The Jewish state is part of a larger biblical story.**

In the Bible the nation of Israel refers to the people of the 12 tribes who marched out of Egypt under Moses in the story of the Exodus and their descendants. The 12 tribes were descended from the 12 sons of the patriarch Jacob, whose name had been changed to Israel by God (Genesis 32:28). This is the Israel of the Old Testament.

But here is a key factor many people misunderstand. One of these sons was named Judah. His descendants were known as *Jews*, which comes from the name *Judah*. This is the origin of the Jewish people. However, Judah was *only one* of the sons and tribes. There were other sons of Jacob: Reu-



ben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Joseph, Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

The descendants of these 12 sons formed the 12 tribes that made up the nation of Israel, which we can read about in the biblical books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. King David ruled over this nation from Jerusalem. His son Solomon built the magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

But the tribe of Judah, or the Jewish people, were only one part of the larger nation of Israel. You don't have to be Jewish to be an Israelite!

So how did the Jews become so prominent, and why do we only remember this tribe, the tribe of Judah, today? It's a good question, and the Bible gives us the answer.

The Bible tells us that after the death of Solomon the nation went through a crisis under his son Rehoboam resulting in a division of the one nation into two. Ten of the tribes residing north of Jerusalem formed the kingdom called Israel. The main tribes of the south, Judah and Benjamin, formed the kingdom of Judah with its capital at Jerusalem.

The nation of Israel was never considered Jewish. It was the people of the southern nation of Judah who became known as the Jews. When we read references in the Bible to Israel, we are talking about either the united nation of Israel or the 10-tribed northern nation after the division. *Judah* refers to a different Jewish state.

We find an interesting scriptural episode that illustrates this in 2 Kings 16. It presents a story of conflict between these two nations—in fact, they are *at war with each other* here! A king named Ahaz reigned over Judah. Pekah was king over Israel. King Pekah of Israel formed an alliance with a neighboring king of Syria named Rezin and together they attacked Judah. Verse 6 says, “At that time Rezin king of Syria recovered Elath to Syria, and drave the Jews from Elath” (King James Version).

This is the first place in the Bible where the word *Jews* appears—and we find *Israel at war* with them! It's clear that they are a different nation. Yes, the Jews are descended from Israel, but they do not bear the national title of the kingdom or house of Israel.

So we see in Scripture a distinction between these peoples. Many critical Bible prophecies of the time of the end distinguish between these two nations, calling the northern nation the house of Israel or sometimes Ephraim—this being the name for the leading tribe among the northern nation—and calling the southern nation and its descendants Judah.

The ancient northern kingdom of Israel existed for about 200 years before falling captive to the Assyrian Empire. The people of the northern kingdom were forcibly removed from the land and scattered. They are known in history as the lost 10 tribes of Israel. But they are not really lost. God knows their identity today—where they reside among the world's nations. Furthermore, history and prophecy reveal much to us in this regard.

The nation of Judah to the south survived longer than Israel, but eventually it also fell—to the Babylonian Empire. Most of the Jewish people were taken to Babylon. Several decades later, a group of Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and the temple. A nation of Jews existed in Jerusa-

received it from his father Abraham.

So the great national blessings were passed on to the sons of Joseph. In Genesis 49 we see a prophecy about the tribes of Israel in the end time, and regarding Joseph it says that his descendants would receive incredible blessings from God. When we look at the modern world to find nations who have fulfilled these promises we are drawn unmistakably to the major English-speaking nations, led by Great Britain and the United States. (To learn more, download or request your free copy of *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

When you understand the promises God made to Abraham and to his descendants and that much of Bible prophecy is directed specifically to certain modern nations such

## When you understand that much of Bible prophecy is directed specifically to certain modern nations, then you can begin to really understand prophetic keys that open the Bible to deeper understanding.

lem with their distinctive culture until the Romans destroyed the country. Descendants of this Jewish state, who were scattered primarily throughout the Middle East and Europe, founded today's modern state of Israel in 1948.

This modern Jewish state, called Israel, bears an ancient name but represents only a small part of the entire people called Israel who once lived in the land and to whom so many of the biblical prophecies apply. So where are the rest? The answer to this question is thoroughly discussed in our study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. We urge you to download or request your free copy.

### Key reason 3: The modern identity of Israel includes the Jewish state but also encompasses other nations.

In current discussion about Israel, the identity of the modern-day descendants of ancient Israel is overlooked. But it matters to our understanding of the conflict in today's Middle East and where it will lead. The state of Israel is tied in many ways to Great Britain and the United States.

A key to understanding this is found in Genesis 48, where Jacob (Israel) blessed the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, and said, “Let my name be named upon them” (verse 16). He gave them his name and passed on to them the promise of blessings he received from his father Isaac, who had

as America and Britain, then you can begin to really understand prophetic keys that open the Bible to deeper understanding.

When you understand that key prophecies are directed to nations and peoples who have received the physical promises God made to the ancient nation of Israel, you then begin to understand that there is a call to repentance—a call to change the way you live. *You have to do something.*

God calls all people everywhere to repent—and the English-speaking nations like Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States have a greater responsibility before God.

Our world is rapidly moving to the close of this age of human misrule under the influence of Satan the devil. A different world under the reign of Jesus Christ is about to dawn.

But before this world-saving event occurs, we must pass through an unparalleled time of trouble. Daniel the prophet spoke of the time just ahead of us: “There shall be a *time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation*, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book” (Daniel 12:1).

Here in one verse is the dire warning about the time of unparalleled world turmoil and the comforting message of deliverance.

We need to understand where we are today. We see in the Middle East a changing landscape because of the unrest occurring

in so many countries. In *The Good News* we have many times pointed out the threat from Iran as it develops nuclear weapons. We have kept readers abreast of the changing scene in Egypt. We have repeatedly discussed the importance of Jerusalem as the centerpiece of end-time prophetic events.

And we see America, Britain and the other English-speaking nations facing mounting challenges—economic, moral, political and military—in a shifting world order that in the end will lead to the rise of new leaders with a vastly different vision.

**Key reason 4: Knowing about Israel helps open up understanding of prophecy for our day—and with that comes the assurance of God’s faithfulness to all nations.**

God is bringing all history to a time of transition, to the age of Jesus Christ’s coming rule on the earth. God is then going to set up a restored, united Israel, far different from the tiny state of Israel today. The Jewish state is but part of one tribe, only part of the story of Israel. Of major importance regarding the Israelis and the Jews scattered around the world is the fact that they have maintained an identity rooted in the law of God. The seventh-day Sabbath, or *Shabbat* in Hebrew, along with the annual festivals of God and other parts of God’s law, have helped shape the identity of this people.

The Jews are a visible sign today that Israel exists. Israel, the nation of tribes with which God entered into a covenant relationship—and this includes Israel’s modern descendants—will play a key role in God’s plan for the future of all mankind.

In the biblical book of Romans, the apostle Paul tells the story of ancient Israel’s rise and fall and hope of restoration. Israel had a deep relationship with God. Their opportunity was to become an exemplary nation based on the law of God and His glory. God made special promises to this people and set them apart from all other nations. All of the physical promises were a type of the spiritual promises found in Jesus Christ, a direct descendant of King David.

But ancient Israel failed. As we saw earlier, they split apart and through a combination of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking they dishonored and disobeyed God—resulting in their defeat, captivity and exile. Over time most of Israel, with the exception of the Jews, forgot who they were.

Yet Paul’s desire and his prayer for Israel, his people, was that they would be saved (Romans 10:1). Even though ancient Israel did not obey the gospel, their rejection is not

total nor permanent. God has not cast Israel aside. Through Paul, God reveals that a remnant of Israel exists among today’s nations and by His grace they will be regathered.

Here, though, is the amazing and little-understood truth: Israel’s rejection of God works to His glory and purpose! All other nations and peoples, those the Bible calls the gentiles, have had an opportunity for this same relationship with God based on His eternal promises. In God’s time, *all* will have opportunity to know Him.

Paul says that blindness has come on Israel until the fullness of the gentiles has come in. In a magnificent piece of writing, he is inspired to show that Israel (all 12 tribes) and all the world will have an opportunity for salvation. All nations will have an opportunity to receive the full promises of God, both physical and spiritual.

Notice what Paul says in Romans 11:1-2: “Has God cast away His people? Certainly not! . . . God has *not* cast away His people whom He foreknew” (emphasis added).

Paul goes on to explain in verses 11-15 that by Israel stumbling temporarily, salvation is opened to the world. And by the Israelites’ being brought back into God’s grace in the future, all people for all time will be saved—“the reconciling of the world” (verse 15). All the tribes of Israel, not just the present Jewish state, will be united, and Paul says that “all Israel will be saved,” as God “will turn away ungodliness from Jacob” (verse 26).

When Israel is restored, all mankind will seek God. All nations will come to Jerusalem and learn of His ways (Zechariah 14:16).

So Israel definitely matters—and not just the Jewish state in the Middle East today. All the tribes, including many modern nations, matter to God and to the world.

In one last burst of inspired enthusiasm Paul exclaims: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” (Romans 11:33).

Understanding the identity of Israel is the key to understanding today’s world and the march of history toward the Kingdom of God. What God reveals about Israel shows us the enduring promises of God’s salvation for all the nations. Because He is faithful with Israel, He will be faithful in His promise through Christ to all peoples—including you and me. That is the good news of the gospel!

**Key reason 5: The state of Israel is a “place marker” in the Holy Land.**

The Jews, as the only widely acknowl-

edged tribe of ancient Israel, have a historic and prophetic claim to the land. The prophecies of restoration, planting and reaping the land will be fulfilled. The state of Israel is like a “place marker” in that historic, pivotal piece of land.

Through the prophet Amos, God says: “I will raise up the tabernacle of David which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old . . .

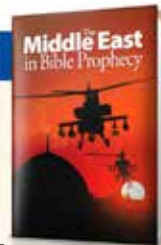
“The days are coming . . . when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them” (Amos 9:11-15).

Prime Minister Netanyahu’s recent speech at the United Nations was a clear statement of vision and intent for the nation. He said: “We date back nearly 4,000 years to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We have journeyed through time, we’ve overcome the greatest of adversities, and we reestablished our sovereign state in our ancestral homeland, the Land of Israel.”

It’s a remarkable story, and in spite of its current threats it will endure to the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. Major challenges and a time of great trouble lie ahead, but the nation will endure and see the time when the house of David will be rebuilt with all the tribes of Israel regathered.

Their presence and this truth is further proof of God’s faithfulness to His revealed intent to have all nations come to Jerusalem to learn the ways of the “God of Jacob” (Isaiah 2:3). Yes, Israel matters to the world today! **GN**

**Learn More**



The story of Israel is remarkable in so many ways. In spite of invasion, defeat, destruction, captivity and scattering, Israel has survived—thanks to the faithfulness of God to his promises. You need to understand the whole story. Be sure to download or request your free copy of *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy* and *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. Both study guides are free.

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# Islamic Caliphate Declared: What Does It Mean?

A new caliphate—a transnational Islamic state commanding the allegiance of all Muslims—has been declared by the leader of insurgents in Iraq and Syria. What does this portend for the rest of the world in the days ahead? *by Tom Robinson*

**O**n the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan this year, June 29, 2014, the al-Qaeda breakaway group ISIS or ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (i.e., Greater Syria or the Levant)—which has seized vast tracts of Iraq and much of northern Syria—formally declared the creation of an Islamic transnational state, or caliphate. In doing so, the group changed its name to just the Islamic State (IS), as the caliphate is to rule Muslims the world over.

The group’s chief, who’s borne the pseudonym Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was declared to be the new caliph or leader of the Islamic State—now Caliph Ibrahim. A spokesman for the group “called on those living in the areas under the organization’s control to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi and support him. ‘The legality of all emirates, groups,

states and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph’s authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas,’ [the spokesman] said” (“ISIS Declares Creation of Mideast Caliphate Across Iraq and Syria,” CBS News, June 29, 2014).

Baghdadi then called for Muslims to rally to his new state and to conquering the Christian West, saying: “Those who can immigrate to the Islamic State should immigrate, as immigration to the house of Islam is a duty . . . Rush O Muslims to your state . . . This is my advice to you. If you hold to it you will conquer Rome and own the world, if Allah wills” (quoted by Damien McElroy, “Rome Will Be Conquered Next, Says Leader of ‘Islamic State,’” *The Telegraph*, July 1, 2014).

### Longtime desire to reestablish the caliphate

The desire to reestablish the caliphate

is driven by the goal of joining all Muslims under a single rule—as in the days of Islam’s founder, Muhammad, and his immediate successors or caliphs in the seventh century. Under that rule everyone is to strictly adhere to sharia—Islamic law and jurisprudence—and follow the way of jihad or holy war to conquer the globe.

The caliphate was declared by a succession of Muslim empires over the centuries, the latest being that of the Ottoman Turks, which ended with World War I. Yet these are viewed as corrupt, and the desire of the Islamists today is to restore the initial “righteous” caliphate.

Islamist terror groups the world over, including Hamas, al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, the Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, etc., “all profess the revival of the caliphate, the regime that was installed by Muhammed’s righteous successors, the caliphs, and has become the iconic model to be emulated by all future generations of Muslims” (Raphael Israeli, *From Arab Spring to Islamic Winter*, 2013, p. xiii). (And see “20-Year Plan for a Global Caliphate” on page 22.)

During and after the Arab Spring uprisings

of 2011-2012, momentum seemed to be building toward the formation of a caliphate, particularly with the ascendance of a Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, to the presidency of Egypt. Yet with the military coup in Egypt last year that ousted Morsi and instigated a major crackdown against the Brotherhood, the momentum toward a caliphate appeared to have stalled.

But now, with millions of Islamic extremists across the Middle East still pressing for that Muslim dream, where one door closes another opens (although the door in Egypt is by no means truly closed, as the population there remains predominantly Islamist).

So what are we to make of this new development?

A number of Islamist groups and prominent clerics are not supportive of the declaration of the Islamic State, as it's viewed as premature and a cause for infighting between Muslim groups and states. But significant support has come in from far quarters. No doubt a great deal of blood will be shed over this among Muslims and between Muslims and the non-Islamic world.

## In a driving conquest ISIS has taken over sizable parts of Syria and Iraq, sweeping through in a brutal blitzkrieg.



In considering the matter we should ask: How did the new Islamic State come to be, and what are its prospects for success as a revived caliphate? Or might another group receive wider acceptance in the role? And does Bible prophecy tell us anything regarding such developments?

### The rise of ISIS and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

The al-Qaeda contingent in Iraq, headed up by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the mid-

2000s, went through several incarnations before eventually becoming the Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI, which came to be headed up by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2010, when American forces were withdrawing from the country.

The group's extreme brutality and killing of fellow Muslims created a divide between it and al-Qaeda's international leadership, which considered Zarqawi and his followers too extreme and criticized them for alienating people from the Islamist cause.

Furthermore, Osama bin Laden's successor Ayman al-Zawahiri maintained, as do many Islamist scholars now opposed to the current caliphate declaration, that a caliphate must follow the purification of the wider Muslim world, being then based on the consent of the public.

But, as Margaret Coker explains in *The Wall Street Journal*, Baghdadi and his supporters "reject this doctrine of an evolving religious and social consensus. They believe instead that a pure Islamic regime can be more swiftly imposed by force" ("The New Jihad," July 11).

affront to al-Qaeda, Baghdadi said he would follow Allah instead and maintained the ISIS merger, whereupon Zawahiri formally disowned the group.

ISIS went on to take over sizable parts of Syria and Iraq, sweeping through in a brutal blitzkrieg. It took to social media to demoralize resistance by displaying its extreme brutality. This tactic helped ISIS to wrest control of the large city of Mosul and its environs in June of this year when the Iraqi army had to retreat due to massive numbers of desertions.

The conquest of this area put huge amounts of advanced U.S. weaponry into the hands of ISIS, as well as hundreds of millions of dollars looted from banks—making it far wealthier than al-Qaeda ever was. And with U.S. forces now gone from Iraq, the new Islamic State has a great deal of room to maneuver. It thus seems poised to change the Middle East, if not the greater world scene, in a dramatic fashion.

### Striking fear in the hearts and minds of opponents

Joseph Farah, editor in chief of WND (the former WorldNetDaily), commented prior to the caliphate announcement: "Do I expect to see ISIS conquer the Middle East, North Africa, part of Europe and Asia in the 21st century? No, I don't. But I do expect to see enormous carnage and destruction and bloodshed as a result of this movement—far more, perhaps, than most other analysts project. There is a ferocity to ISIS that makes even al-Qaida uncomfortable. It has already captured more wealth and armaments, including chemical weapons, than all but a handful of countries in the world possess . . ."

"Brutality difficult for Westerners to even imagine is the modus operandi of ISIS. It calls for a scorched-earth policy against its enemies—which includes Christians, Shiites, Alawites, Jews, non-believers and all non-Sunnis. ISIS leadership advocates and practices barbarism designed to strike fear into the hearts and minds of its opponents and anyone who doesn't stand with them in their strict Shariah Sunni code.

"Already the ISIS marauders have crucified victims, beheaded them and conducted mass executions of Iraqi soldiers and civilians. No atrocity is beneath them" ("ISIS Rising—What It Portends," June 23, 2014).

Farah compares the speed of their conquest with the original march of Islam and even Alexander the Great. "The success of campaigns like that requires that superior

And in fact, this is the way the caliphate has been imposed in past centuries.

The struggle came to a head in April 2013, when Baghdadi declared a takeover of the Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda-linked rebel militia fighting against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, stating that it would be merged with ISI to form ISIS. The Nusra Front rejected the takeover bid and Zawahiri ordered Baghdadi to leave Syria and maintain operations in Iraq. But in a huge



## 20-Year Plan for a Global Caliphate

It's remarkable to see what's been happening in the world in light of the al-Qaeda master plan from back in 2000 for establishing a world-dominating Islamic caliphate in seven steps over the course of 20 years. This plan was revealed to the world in 2005 by Jordanian journalist Fouad Hussein in his book *Al-Zarqawi: al-Qaida's Second Generation*. He had spent time in prison with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who went on to head up al-Qaeda in Iraq before his death in a U.S. bombing strike) and interviewed a wide range of al-Qaeda members.

The plan was questioned and belittled at the time, but the timeline has continued on track in various respects despite setbacks for al-Qaeda and other Islamists over the years.

Here are the steps as reported in a *Der Spiegel* article dated Aug. 12, 2005 (Yassin Musharbash, "The Future of Terrorism: What al-Qaida Really Wants"):

- **"The First Phase . . . 'The awakening'** . . . supposed to have lasted from **2000 to 2003**, or more precisely from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 . . . The aim of the attacks of 9/11 was to provoke the US into declaring war on the Islamic world and thereby 'awakening' Muslims . . . 'judged . . . as very successful . . . The Americans and their allies became a closer and easier target.'"
- **"The Second Phase 'Opening Eyes'** . . . **[2003] until 2006** [the period this report came out] . . . [making the West] aware of the 'Islamic community' . . . [and] recruiting young men during this period. Iraq [was to then] become the center for all global operations, with an 'army' set up there and bases established in other Arabic states."
- **"The Third Phase . . . 'Arising and Standing Up'** . . . from **2007 to 2010** [which was yet future when this was written]. 'There will be a focus on Syria' . . . The fighting cadres are supposedly already prepared and some are in Iraq.

Attacks on Turkey and . . . in Israel are predicted . . . Countries neighboring Iraq, such as Jordan, are also in danger." (*The focus on Syria should be noted, though it did not become a great rallying point until the Arab Spring came at the end of this period.*)

- **"The Fourth Phase Between 2010 and 2013 . . . al-Qaida will aim to bring about the collapse of the hated Arabic governments . . . ' . . . lead [ing] to a steady growth in strength within al-Qaida' . . . [And] attacks will be carried out against oil suppliers and the US economy will be targeted using cyber terrorism."** (*Consider that the Arab Spring uprisings against various despots occurred in 2011-2012.*)
- **"The Fifth Phase** This will be the point at which an **Islamic state, or caliphate, can be declared.** The plan is that by this time, between **2013 and 2016**, Western influence in the Islamic world will be so reduced and Israel weakened so much, that resistance will not be feared. Al-Qaida hopes that by then the Islamic state will be able to bring about a new world order." (*This is when a caliphate was declared, in 2014. The al-Qaeda old guard sees this as premature but still has a window of a few years.*)
- **The Sixth Phase . . . From 2016 onwards** there will [be] a period of **'total confrontation.'** As soon as the caliphate has been declared, the 'Islamic army' . . . will instigate the 'fight between the believers and the non-believers.'"
- **The Seventh Phase . . . 'Definitive victory'** . . . The rest of the world will be so beaten down by the 'one-and-a-half billion Muslims,' the caliphate will undoubtedly succeed. This phase should be **completed by 2020**, although the war shouldn't last longer than two years."

Whether the fifth and sixth phases pan out remains to be seen, but the seventh can't happen, as Bible prophecy makes it clear that Islam will not come to dominate the world (though not for lack of trying).

In any event, more attention should have been paid to what Fouad Hussein wrote nearly a decade ago. It demonstrates that Islamists take the long view, realizing it will take decades to attain their goals. This thinking is foreign to Western leaders, who in their shortsightedness have grossly misjudged what's been happening over the past many years.

forces faint in fear of the coming hordes. You can see it's working already in Iraq" (ibid.).

### Is the new caliphate viable?

BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner gave a helpful analysis of the situation, dealing with the question of whether ISIS can maintain its rule and viability: "Analysts point out that seizing territory is one thing, governing it is quite another" ("Jihadistan": Can Isis Militants Rule Seized Territory?" July 8, 2014).

Despite its remarkable military success in the wake of its psychological warfare, "Isis has effectively been 'punching above its weight,' to use a boxing analogy," its numbers of between 10,000 and 15,000 fighters being low compared to competing forces. Gardner quotes a pan-Arab newspaper stating, "Isis' ability to control lands has been based on deals with local militants willing to do the 'ruling' for them."

He further notes that Baghdadi and his followers do not seem, on one hand, to have learned from the mistakes of their predecessors under Zarqawi in Iraq in their brutal treatment of the populace, which failed to

win hearts and minds. Regarding ISIS, "stories abound of harsh punishments imposed for the slightest of offences, women being confined to the home, public crucifixions, kidnappings and extortionate levies imposed on businesses . . ."

While Gardner on the other hand points out ISIS taking care of municipal needs like garbage collection, the mask of public service has since come off.

Gardner further states: "To succeed as a viable state, let alone as a transnational 'caliphate,' Isis will need access to oil and water." And ISIS/IS now has both, controlling refineries and major dams in Syria and Iraq.

Gardner argues that the new Islamic state is not going away: "The only force capable of permanently ejecting Isis will be the tribes in those regions [they rule], and they have little incentive to do so while the Syrian civil war rages on . . ."

"Which leaves the prospect of a violent, extremist, well-armed, well-funded and religiously intolerant militia becoming a permanent part of the Middle East landscape, a sort of de facto 'jihadistan.'" And, he notes,

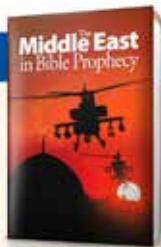
like Afghanistan it would also be a springboard for increased attacks against neighboring countries and the Western world.

### Several key advantages and others to carry on the cause

In spite of the denunciation received from some Islamic scholars and disapproval from al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations, this group nevertheless has much going for it in the Muslim world. One advantage is in the very declaration of the

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caliphate, as it's unlikely that a number of claimants would start declaring their own since that would minimize the whole idea of the pan-Islamic state.

Furthermore, the fact that ISIS/IS is actually carrying out major exploits and making massive gains, with the caliphate proclamation on top of that, can capture the imagination of the younger generation of jihadists.

As noted in *Newsweek*: "The brutal attacks of 9/11 were almost 13 years ago; many of the jihadist fighters on the front lines now were children then. They have grown up seeing Al-Qaeda on the defensive, with few successes of its own, while ISIS has stunned the world with its victories in Syria and Iraq" (Kurt Eichenwald, "Iraq's ISIS Is Eclipsing Al-Qaeda, Especially With Young Jihadists," July 7, 2014).

Indeed, at his site Intelwire author J.M. Berger points out regarding al-Qaeda that "one of its few practical remaining plays would be to squander the entirety of whatever resources it has left on an attack against the West, in the hopes of regaining its reputation" ("A New Day for ISIS," June 11). That should serve as a stark warning of great danger for the world even in the short term.

Since the proclamation of the new Islamic State, it has seen increasing voices of support by Islamists around the world. But even if the group falters in its bid to rule the broader Islamic nation, there are others who could still try to establish the caliphate.

There remains al-Qaeda of course. Then there's the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan—by which the caliphate potentially could acquire nuclear weapons. The Muslim Brotherhood still maintains a vast network of support in the Islamic world—and Egypt may yet eventually revert to rule by the Islamist majority, the economy there being presently in shambles. And Turkey's prime minister Recep Erdogan still dreams of a Turkish-led caliphate, as was the Ottoman Empire.

But with the caliphate already declared, a broad spectrum of Muslims from around the world may try to come together to help it succeed—and this could sway other Islamist leaders to support it. On the other hand, what some see as Baghdadi's big gamble in proclaiming the caliphate could backfire in a big way if things don't pan out for him. We will have to wait and see how matters develop.

As a preview of where things are headed, one of the first acts of the new caliphate was to issue a fatwa, or religious edict, ordering that "all women between the ages of 11 and

46 must undergo genital mutilation" (Agence France-Presse, July 24).

Again, it seems very likely that a lot of blood will flow because of the declared caliphate—both Muslims killing other Muslims and attacks being launched on non-Muslims.

### Turning to the only reliable source for advance news

In the face of these events, if we want to know where the world is ultimately headed, we must turn to the only sure source of knowledge about the future—the Holy Bible, the very Word of God. Bible prophecy does seem to say, in Psalm 83, that a confederation of Middle Eastern peoples will come together with the intent of destroying Israel—apparently involving Arabs, Palestinians, Turks and others in the region.

Moreover, Daniel 11 refers to an end-time "king of the South" who will instigate a conflict with a power to the north—a revival of the Roman Empire centered in Europe—with the Holy Land caught in between.

Might the confederation and southern power in these prophecies be a restored caliphate? It seems quite likely. After all, the principal unifying factor among all these peoples is Islam—so a new Islamic empire bringing them together is not at all far-fetched.

Is the current Islamic State that power? Its leaders are so extreme that gaining a mass following among other Muslims poses a great challenge. Also, it does not yet encompass Egypt, which the southern power in Daniel 11 seems to include or even be based from. And perhaps the Islamic State won't reach that far in its current form.

Yet it could be that, just as the European Union of today seems to be the embryonic form of the coming European superpower, so the current Islamic State could be the embryonic form of a much greater caliphate to come. These developments certainly illustrate the desire of millions of Muslims to establish a caliphate.

Note again particularly the goal stated by the Islamic State to "conquer Rome and own the world." It could well be that this long-held desire of Muslims will lead to the conditions described in the latter part of Daniel 11, where the end-time king of the South provokes the king of the North into an invasion of North Africa and the Middle East.

Momentous and dangerous times lie ahead. Stay alert and turn to God and His Word with all your heart. No matter what happens, He will see you through! **GN**

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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).

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# America's Precarious Position: Where Can We Look for Answers?

The United States faces growing challenges on many fronts, with no end in sight. How can the nation solve its problems? *by Mike Kelley*

**T**he United States finds itself in an increasingly hostile world. Still the world's only superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly 25 years ago, America seems beset by challenges and threats on all sides, no longer able to exert the influence it did just a few decades ago. Reports of the decline of American prestige and influence around the world are becoming more and more common.

Like it or not, the evidence is piling up. Following nearly a decade of struggle in Iraq that had that nation nearly stabilized, U.S. President Barack Obama followed the wishes of an increasingly war-weary public and withdrew all U.S. troops. Into that power vacuum flowed a devastating new threat—formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS and now called simply the Islamic State. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has declared a new Islamic caliphate based on Muslim sharia law (see “Islamic Caliphate Declared: What Does It Mean?” beginning on page 20).

Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki ignores American advice to broaden his government in an effort to avert disaster. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai thumbs his nose at U.S. calls for a new security pact. China's leaders tell America to get lost when it tries to intervene in disputes between China and Japan over small islands in the South China Sea. Russian President Vladimir Putin laughs at feeble U.S. economic sanctions following its annexation of the Crimea from Ukraine.

With problems seeming to careen out of

control on all sides, where does the nation turn for advice? Who could advise the president and Congress on the best foreign policy path to take?

### Advice from two leading diplomats

Two recent books by leading foreign policy experts attempt to offer helpful advice. Both authors, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Richard Haass, served in key foreign policy roles in recent U.S. presidential administrations, and both experienced major international challenges and crises.

Brzezinski, who was national security advisor under President Jimmy Carter, warns in his 2012 book *Strategic Vision, America and the Crisis of Global Power*, of the dangerous and fragmented world that will result if the United States ceases exercising leadership.

He spotlights two major shifts that threaten world stability. First, the dramatic shift in the world's center of gravity from the West to the East has directed attention away from America and Europe to the Asia-Pacific arena. Second, what he calls *the deterioration of American performance both domestically and nationally* presents a major challenge to American interests and the geopolitical stability of the world. America, he writes, must get out ahead of this crisis while it still can.

The first section of his book carries the ominous title, “The Receding West.” Brzezinski states that “the long-lasting political domination of the world by the West has been fading for some decades” (p. 7), and it's happened despite the breakup of the

Soviet Union in the early 1990s, which left America as the major global power.

The past 20 years, he says, have not been good to either the United States or Europe. “Few now expect the European Union to emerge as a serious global player while America's preeminent global status seems tenuous,” he states (p. 8).

And yet, as a recent *Wall Street Journal* article pointed out, the threats to America are not so much from emerging powers. Says *Journal* columnist Bret Stephens: “Here's something else that's strange: American pre-eminence isn't being challenged by emerging powers. The challenge comes from an *axis of weakness*. Russia is a declining power. China is an insecure one. Groups like ISIS and other al Qaeda offshoots are technologically primitive and comparatively weak. Iran is a Third World country trying to master 70-year-old technology” (“The Post-Pax Americana World,” July 7, 2014).

In other words, a still-strong America is being challenged by weak nations everywhere!

America still has major strengths, Brzezinski writes, which include its place as the world's leading economy. Its Gross Domestic Product of more than \$16 trillion still accounts for nearly 25 percent of world output.

Brzezinski points to other U.S. strengths—an entrepreneurial culture that spawns constant new discoveries and innovations, superior universities that attract some of the best students from around the world, a strong demographic base not overly skewed to the aged or very young. (And of course America still has vast military resources.)

But despite these strengths, Brzezinski sees major challenges for America. He



calls for the United States to take the lead in forging a “greater and broader” unity of the West, a Europe that would include both Turkey and Russia, which would act as a bulwark against what he sees as long-range threats from the Eurasian continent.

We proceed next to Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations since July 2003, who was also director of policy planning for the U.S. State Department and special assistant to President George H.W. Bush. In his 2013 book *Foreign Policy Begins at Home*, Haass argues for a reversal of the foreign policy that has evolved over the present and previous administrations.

Decades of foreign policy experience have convinced him that the United States is on a dangerous and unsustainable track in its dealings with other nations.

Challenges posed by a rapidly rising China, a nuclear Iran, North Korean saber rattling and continued Middle East turbulence must be dealt with. While stopping short of saying that America is in decline, he says the nation is overextended and calls for a “more discriminating” foreign policy that takes a more pragmatic look at what the country can and should seek to do in its relationship with other nations.

Based on this assessment, he calls for less emphasis on the Middle East and reduced commitment to the types of wars that have sapped American strength and treasure. It would be better, he argues, to devote more attention to the Asia-Pacific region, home to more than 60 percent of the world’s population. A China beginning to flex its economic and military muscle and a dangerous North Korea, he argues, demand more U.S. attention and resources.

Haass admits that where he departs the most from the foreign policy establishment is his prescription for America. The theme of his book is *American restoration*, wherein he calls for a redirection of resources away from international challenges and towards rebuilding America at home. As he puts it, “Restoration is not just about doing less or acting more discriminately abroad; to the contrary, it is even more about doing the right things at home” (p. 121).

Haass delivers a stinging rebuke over the huge U.S. national debt, now nearly \$17 trillion, and points to the rise in entitlements, the costs of the Iran and Afghan wars, and the huge \$787 billion federal stimulus of 2009 as the main culprits. The debt already threatens American competitiveness, and he warns that “the United States will be forced

to eat its seed corn to pay for its past and present” (p. 124).

While various problems facing the country such as poor overall educational achievement, crumbling infrastructure and lackluster economic growth must be addressed, the debt can be catastrophic and must be dealt with immediately. “The world,” he says, “is looking for a signal that the United States has the political will and ability to make hard choices” (ibid.).

What is truly remarkable is the degree to which these experts agree on America’s problems as well as proposed solutions. Both see China as a threat, although Haass is more optimistic about the long-range prospects for coexistence. Both agree that the growing nuclear threat posed by Iran must be removed, by force if necessary. Both call for a revitalized Europe, although Brzezinski ties that to a pan-European and Russian super-confederation that would be the main force working with America to promote peace and stability.

Perhaps most significantly, they recognize the clear and present danger of a United States that seems to be lying down on the job, lacking the will to exercise leadership that seems almost divinely ordained.

### The missing element—reliance on God

America would do well to follow the advice of these experts whose combined experience provides a vision for the nation’s continuing role in a dangerous world. But both are missing the key piece of advice that would give the United States the will and strength to turn itself around.

What they do not realize is that America has turned its back on the very God who gave America (and earlier the British Empire) tremendous power and wealth. For years this magazine has revealed the amazing fact that America’s national wealth, greatness and world influence are the result of blessings given to the biblical patriarch Abraham and his descendants millennia ago. (To learn more about the details, download or request our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

Brzezinski cites the worth of an America that stands as an example to the world—one that is, as he states in his introduction, “economically vital, socially appealing, responsibly powerful, strategically deliberate, internationally respected, and historically enlightened.”

All very true, but another element needs to be added: America should be the proper

moral example to the nations!

Beginning in the early 20th century, the United States came to be seen as the major force for stability and peace in the world. With the background of its Judeo-Christian ethic, America’s leaders called for national days of prayer in the face of domestic or international crises. Former U.S. presidents, from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln to Franklin Roosevelt, recognized that the nation should seek God’s wisdom and His will for guidance.

America and the world recently commemorated the 70th anniversary of D-Day. Many historians overlook the fact that President Franklin Roosevelt led the nation in prayer that day, asking for God’s intervention as the huge invasion force prepared to embark across the English Channel.

We would do well to remember the example of Solomon when he was newly crowned as king of Israel. He asked not for riches or wealth from God, but for the wisdom to serve as a wise ruler. Notice his prayer: “Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king . . . But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties . . . So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” (1 Kings 3:7-9, New International Version).

A nation that has turned its back on God is seeing God turn His back on it.

So the question becomes: Will the United States return to the Source of its blessings? Will its people turn from the pursuit of lawlessness and seek help from the One who could make the difference?

Expert diplomats may offer sound insights into *what* America needs to do in this present crisis. But national repentance would lead to God providing the *will and the strength* to do what needs to be done! **GN**

## Learn More

Where does the United States fit in Bible prophecy? Various smaller nations are mentioned by name, but where do we find America? It’s described in many prophecies, but you must know where to look! Download or request your free copy of *The United States in Britain in Bible Prophecy* to unlock the amazing story of the nation’s astounding rise and coming fall!



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# Current Events & Trends

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

## Apocalyptic prophecies drive fighting in Syria

Since it began in 2011, the war in Syria has killed more than 170,000 people. The conflict is typically viewed as merely a power struggle between President Bashar al-Assad and his rebel foes, mostly Islamists, as a consequence of the Arab Spring uprisings—with thousands of jihadists swarming in from other countries to help overthrow Assad and promote an Islamic state based on Muslim law. Yet while the Arab Spring was an instigator, it has played into a bigger picture.

Consider that, as Reuters reports, “Sunni and Shi’ite fighters on the frontlines . . . believe it was all foretold in 7th Century prophecies”—sayings, or hadith, of Muhammad “which refer to the confrontation of two huge Islamic armies in Syria, a great battle near Damascus, and intervention from the north and west of the country” (“Apocalyptic Prophecies Drive Both Sides to Syrian Battle for End of Time,” April 1, 2014).

The report continues: “If you think all these mujahideen came from across the world to fight Assad, you’re mistaken,” said a Sunni Muslim jihadi . . . ‘They are all here as promised by the Prophet. This is the war he promised—it is the Grand Battle,’ he told Reuters . . .

“On the other side, many Shi’ites from Lebanon, Iraq and Iran are drawn to the war because they believe it paves the way for the return of Imam Mahdi—a descendant of the Prophet who vanished 1,000 years ago and who will re-emerge at a time of war to establish global Islamic rule before the

end of the world . . .

“Both sides emphasize the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic state which will rule the world before total chaos . . . Hadith on both sides mention Syria as a main battlefield, naming cities and towns where blood will be spilled. Hundreds of thousands of people will be killed. The whole region will be shaken from the Arabian Peninsula to Iraq, Iran and Jerusalem, according to some texts. Saudi Arabia will collapse. Almost every country in the Middle East will face unrest. One statement says ‘blood will reach knee-level.’

“A widely circulated hadith attributed to Mohammad says Sham, or Syria [actually the broader

### The whole region will be shaken from the Arabian Peninsula to Iraq, Iran and Jerusalem, according to some texts.

Levant], is [Allah’s] favored land. Asked where the next jihad will be, he replies: ‘Go for Sham, and if you can’t, go for Yemen . . . (though) [Allah] has guaranteed me Sham and its people.’”

These are widely held motivations for the fighting in Syria. “Although some Sunni and Shi’ite clerics are privately skeptical of the religious justifications for the war, few in the region express such reservations in public for fear of being misinterpreted as doubters of the prophecies.” (Source: Reuters.)

## Hobby Lobby decision shows current conflicts

The American company Hobby Lobby won a Supreme Court decision concerning mandated medical coverage that was included in the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. The Bible-believing owners of Hobby Lobby felt that paying for abortion-inducing drugs such as the “morning-after” pill is morally wrong and unconstitutional under the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing religious freedom.

*The Economist* commented that another law aided in the Hobby Lobby decision: “A 1993 law, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, further requires that the government ‘shall not substantially burden a person’s exercise of religion’ unless doing so is the least restrictive way to advance a compelling government interest. By five votes to four, the court ruled that obliging closely held firms with religious owners to pay for their employees’ contraceptives violates that principle” (“Hobby Lobby: Believe It or Not,” July 5, 2014).

This ruling demonstrates the ongoing cultural struggle going on in our modern world. For a good portion of America’s history, religion was at the forefront in the minds of most citizens’ worldview. Yet, over time, more and more secular mindsets have been making the laws and decisions for the nation.

God told a drifting nation, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways” (Isaiah 55:8). The owners of Hobby Lobby, in this case, have discerned that abortion pills are not right by God’s standards. We should be looking to God and His Word in everything we do. The only way we can know God’s thoughts is by studying the Bible and living the way of life He has outlined in the Scriptures.

This was a major win for religious freedom in America, yet it won by only a single vote. Thankfully, religious freedom is still a priority for some key decision makers. But it remains to be seen how long this will remain so. (Source: *The Economist*.)

## France at the center of a culture clash

*The Economist* reports that “the French breathed a collective sigh of relief on July 1st when the European Court of Human Rights upheld the country’s 2010 ban on the wearing of full-faced veils in public places” (“Why the French Are so Strict About Islamic Head Coverings,” July 6, 2014).

France has long been dedicated to fully embracing secularism in the public space, eschewing overtly outward displays of religion. For the past four years this has drawn the ire of many of France’s estimated 6.5 million Muslims. They argue that the banning of veils is an infringement of religious freedom and an act of persecution.

Whatever the popular views of the decision, it’s a telling look at the reality of the culture crisis facing France and Europe as a whole. Some in France hope for a “fully-French” Islam of the future—one based on integration and a moderate form of the religion. While many French Muslim leaders continue to promote the image of a moderate French Islam, perceptions within France can be quite different. A 2011 poll revealed that 68 percent of French citizens consider Muslims to be poorly integrated into French society, while millions more view Muslim communities as a threat to the nation (Nabila Ramdani, “European Poll: An Islamic Threat?” *Al-Jazeera*, Jan. 6, 2011).



This issue is much wider and much more encompassing than just a ban on certain types of traditional Islamic headwear. It’s part of an ongoing culture war in the Western world.

Will Islam and the West ever peacefully coexist? While Islam’s role in biblical prophecy isn’t entirely clear, what is clear is that a coming power led by what is called in the Bible “the king of the South” will emerge from what is currently known as the Islamic world. This king of the South is prophesied to be at war with another world power led by the king of the North.

The prophet Daniel foretold that “at the time of the end the king of the South shall attack him; and

the king of the North shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter the countries, overwhelm them, and pass through” (Daniel 11:40). This coming conflict is an important prophetic marker, as Daniel was clear in stating that it will occur “at the time of the end.”

When reading news about seemingly distant and unimportant details like the French ban on Islamic headwear, keep in mind that even small events and trends can be moving us forward in Bible prophecy. Stay alert and watch! (Sources: *The Economist*, *Al-Jazeera*.)

## Here's the marijuana you ordered

Two American states have legalized marijuana, and it looks like more will follow. A recent *Economist* article reported on a start-up marijuana delivery service in Washington state and further noted: "Dope-delivery services are also popular in states with stricter laws. In New York, dealing is banned but possession has been decriminalised. More than a dozen illegal delivery services now serve tokers [marijuana users] in Manhattan and Brooklyn" ("Why Pot Is the New Pizza: Dope to Your Door," June 21, 2014).

What is legal isn't always what is moral. Abortion has been legal in the United States since the 1970s, but clearly it isn't acceptable to God. Socially we hear the phrase "recreational drug use," which minimizes the seriousness of the matter. Using mind-altering drugs for "fun" is not safe.

What does God think about the use of such drugs? Our Creator has given us the ability to choose His way of life. He has never forced us. Our God-given minds, our ability to think and reason, distinguish us

from animals. The problem with such drugs is that we don't make sound decisions under their influence.

"The Bible doesn't condemn alcohol," one might argue. And God does allow the consumption of alcohol—but to a point. Scripture clearly prohibits drunkenness, which impairs reasoning. In a 2011 Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center study, "researchers observed that marijuana users performed poorly on the Iowa Gambling Task (IGT), which is a complex decision-making task in which participants make choices under ambiguous conditions and win or lose money based on their choices" ("Decision-Making Processes Blunted in Chronic Marijuana Smokers," press release, Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, June 21, 2011).

God wants us to make sound judgments in our life with a clear mind. Just because drug abuse is declared legal under man's laws doesn't mean that God approves of it.

Our Father has always given us the choice between life and death, blessings and curses—with the directive that we choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19). Our minds need to be clear to make sound judgments. (Sources: *The Economist*, Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center.)

## Assisted suicide gains legal traction

Long considered to be on the darker edge of the moral grey area, euthanasia or assisted suicide is gaining legal ground in many Western nations. The United Kingdom seems to be the next to take steps to make euthanasia more widely available.

Acceptance of euthanasia has been a fringe progressive belief for many decades, but public opinion is quickly swaying in its favor. Even Britain's *Economist* magazine, which has typically leaned conservative, has expressed support for the legalization of assisted suicide ("Easeful Death," July 19, 2014). A number of European nations and several American states have already either outright legalized the practice or have substantially loosened laws relating to euthanasia.

As with the Western world's increasing acceptance of abortion, the trend of legalizing assisted suicide reflects a society that increasingly has forgotten that life is a gift that comes solely from God. *The Economist* argues that "in a pluralistic society, the views of one religion should not be imposed on everybody." But the sanctity of life is not a religious view or a moral option—it is an absolute, universal truth embedded in the creation by God.

The Bible is quite clear that human life is sacred—for we are made in the very image of God as His children. God views the taking of life very seriously and holds all humanity to very high standards when it comes to how we work to preserve the lives of others.

All humanity is continually in the process of making choices, and those choices have real, lasting consequences. As noted in another story in this edition of Current Events and Trends, God instructed His people to make the right choice and to always choose the way that leads to life: "I call

## The sanctity of life is not a religious view or a moral option—it is an absolute, universal truth.

heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

As we continue on the godless path of determining for ourselves what is right and wrong, we can't expect God to continue to bless our nations. Life is sacred. Choose it and preserve it! (Source: *The Economist*.)

## The Israeli-Hamas fight continues

The latest war between Israel and Gaza proved to be one of the most violent and polarizing yet. Almost 2,000 people died after Hamas terrorists murdered three Israeli teens and began launching thousands of rockets at Israeli cities and towns. Israel responded with an intense campaign to destroy rockets, launch sites and tunnels throughout Gaza.



An Israeli factory burns after a rocket strike.

Hamas regularly sets up its rocket launchers in heavily populated areas, which led to devastating civilian casualties. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated on the TV program *Fox News Sunday*, "We are using missile defense to protect our civilians, and they're using their civilians to protect their missiles" (July 13, 2014). Hamas even ordered Palestinian civilians back to their homes after Israeli warnings to evacuate prior to bombings—on threat of punishment for collaborating with Israel.

The severe Israeli response didn't stifle Hamas' aggression. *The Economist* reported that "despite being besieged and the rising death toll, Hamas and fellow Islamists show no sign of changing course. They continue to launch . . . rockets at Israel every day, targeting towns and cities from south to north" ("Israel and Gaza: The Bloodshed Continues," July 21, 2014).

Six truces quickly broke down. Both Israeli and Gazan citizens adjusted to living in constant fear of sudden violence from above. Despite best intentions and efforts, peace will continue to be elusive. In fact, Bible prophecy reveals that human-established peace in the Middle East is impossible.

There is only one solution to the bloodshed and hatred in the Middle East, and it is not in politics or military might. It is in the return of Jesus Christ as King of Kings. His rule will bring about peace by removing the human governments that simply cannot find peace of their own accord (Revelation 11:15). As we pray for that Kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10), we should realize that peace and a cessation of suffering will be products of God's Kingdom and not mere human efforts. (Sources: *The Economist*, *Financial Times*.)

## How can you make sense of the news?

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





# Has God Lost Control?

Why does it seem like the all-powerful God is powerless in a world of hate, suffering and anxiety? You need to learn the amazing answer!

by Beyond Today host Gary Petty

**D**o you ever feel like your life is out of control?

You can sense it in society—angst, anxiety, anger. We're flooded with bad news. We turn on the television, and we're inundated with images of the most recent country to be hit by a tsunami or more violence in the Middle East. Our friends tell us of the stories they read about how the United Nations is going to take over the world. Radio talk show hosts rant about hordes of illegal immigrants and the collapse of health care.

Where is God in all this mess?

## A world spiraling out of control

Why does it feel like our world is out of control? Is God like an absentee landlord who lets his property deteriorate? Has He waited too long to intervene in world affairs?

Have you ever wondered why the loving, all-powerful God seems to be powerless in a world of suffering, violence, natural disasters and anxiety?

You want God to stop the madness, but it seems like things are getting worse all the time. On the world scene, the old political and economic institutions have become destabilized. They've lost all credibility. Institutions like the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union seem to have lost their ability to create peace and calm.

The religious institutions of mainstream Christianity used to supply a moral compass for Western society. But today, all too often Christian churches reflect the shifting sands of pop culture. Not only is behavior that was condemned in most pulpits a couple of decades ago accepted now, but disapproval of such behavior is considered hate speech.

And there is more and more to be concerned over. We worry about the economy

and our jobs. We worry about the effects of changing morality. We worry about the weather. We worry about government drones being programmed to spy on our everyday activities.

So we ask again: Where is God? Has He



Have you ever wondered why the loving, all-powerful God seems to be powerless in a world of suffering, violence, natural disasters and anxiety?

really lost control? If He hasn't, why is the world such a mess?

## God still has control

The Bible has the answers that can give you hope and faith. God is allowing this confusion to continue for only a limited amount of time, until He dramatically intervenes in human history and takes control. This is one of the great themes of biblical prophecy.

We're going to look at a crucial early prophecy. When you understand this verse you will know that God is still in control of history and the future.

History and the future seem like big ideas. How do they apply to the problems of your everyday life?

Maybe you're trying to hold down a part-time job and take care of two children. You're trying to make ends meet, worried about doctors' bills.

When you understand why the world is

out of control, and how God is going to bring security and real freedom to humanity, you can begin to allow God to bring stability and security into your life right now.

## God didn't lose control—humanity did

Let's go back to the beginning—the very beginning of the human race.

Mankind's parents, Adam and Eve, lived in the perfect environment. There was no con-



lict between them or between them and God.

God told our first parents that they could eat of all the produce of the Garden of Eden except the fruit of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 3:2-3). As long as they allowed the Creator of life to lead them, they lived without confusion or conflict. There was no depression, no emotional pain. Adam and Eve were secure, happy and truly free.

But they decided that they could *determine for themselves* good and evil. This is what is meant by their taking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan the devil—called here the “serpent”—introduced the idea that God was wrong to withhold this from them.

When talking about how life seems out of control you can’t take Satan out of the equation. The apostle Paul called Satan “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Humanity has essentially been kidnapped and deceived into adopting an out-of-control lifestyle.

Ever since Adam and Eve were expelled

from the garden, every human endeavor has been a mixture of good and evil. Every human government, economic system, educational system, and humanity’s concepts of morality and religion have been influenced by “the god of this age.”

Eventually, everything we’ve built is going to spiral out of control.

But the story ends in good news.

In the Genesis account of Adam and Eve we find a vital prophecy that foretells how, in the midst of all this chaos, God is going to take control of human history.

### Gaining control of your life

Every human being has effectively eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Our lives are out of control because, at the core of our spiritual being, every one of us is spiritually out of control. Nothing will be solved in your life until you understand that truth.

The problem may sound insurmountable, but it’s not. There is a way you can allow

God to take control of your life.

God has supplied a way out of this mess. It begins with your willingness to accept that you are part of the mess and are fatally flawed because you have been eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You must be willing to embrace that longing you have for a meaningful spiritual relationship with your Creator.

God has a plan for bringing the chaos of human history under His control.

### Jesus Christ is returning to take control of the world

The special prophecy of Genesis 3:15 foretold that a child born of woman would have his heel struck by the serpent but would crush the serpent’s head. This is the earliest prophecy in Scripture of the Messiah—first being killed (His stricken heel) but then ultimately defeating Satan.

The prophecy will find ultimate fulfillment after Jesus Christ returns to the earth. The story of the prophecy starts at the

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Syracuse ch. 15, 56, Sun 9 a.m.

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Greenville-New Bern-Washington ch. 34, 35, 38, 51, Sun 9 a.m.

#### Ohio

Toledo ch. 69, Sun 5 p.m.

#### Oklahoma

Tulsa ch. 44, 28, Sun 8 a.m.

#### Oregon

Eugene ch. 29, Tue 2 p.m.

Medford ch. 15, 95, Sun 5 p.m.

Milwaukie ch. 19, Tue 5:30 a.m. & 2:30 p.m.

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#### Texas

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Salt Lake City ch. 16, 29, Sun 8 a.m.

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#### Washington

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beginning of the book—at the beginning of the Bible—and it spans the length of Scripture. So let’s go to the end of the book to see how the story ends.

The book of Revelation contains divinely inspired visions given to the apostle John about an unprecedented time in human history. It tells of a time when all humanity will be spiraling out of control. This will be a time of greatly escalating wars, disease epidemics, earthquakes, and devastating natural disasters. Satan will then unleash his hatred on mankind. We will

will create a new society based on God’s ways.

Would you like to be part of what God is doing?

Then you must be willing to give control of your life to God. Let’s look at two things you can do to begin to allow God to take control of your life.

### Turning your life over to God right now

First, accept that the more you try to control your life, the more out of control it will become. The real problems are spiritual. Real solutions involve turning to God and,

realizes that he has sprained an ankle and broken several ribs. He can’t climb up. He can’t climb down.

Suffering from shock and pain the man cries out: “Is anybody up there? Can you hear me? Can you help me?”

After hours of crying out for help, the man finally sobs, “God, will you help me?”

Suddenly, the man hears a voice from above, beyond the edge of the cliff. “I am here.”

“Who are you?” the man asks.

“I am God. Don’t you believe in me?”

“Oh, yes I do!” the man yells with relief. “Please, God, save me.”

“Good,” God says, “Then let go and I’ll catch you.”

There is a long silence and then the man cries out, “Is there anybody else up there?”

Are you like this man? Or are you willing to give up control of your life and trust God and His ways, even if it means letting go? Are you willing to obey His law, His instructions, or are you a Christian only when it’s convenient or easy?

God is fulfilling Genesis 3:15 through the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus came the first time to defeat Satan, sin and death. He is returning soon a second time to remove the god of this age from power and set up God’s Kingdom on earth.

There was another tree in the Garden of Eden with fruit that our first parents did *not* eat. It was called the tree of life. This tree represents the eternal life God will give to those who give up control of their lives and return to Him through the work of Jesus Christ.

In the closing chapter of the Bible, John was inspired to write, “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life” (Revelation 22:14).

God *is* in control! Soon He will send Jesus Christ back to earth to stop the chaos, the wars, even the destructive forces of nature. It’s time for you to give up the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and eat of the tree of life! **GN**

## Would you like to be part of what God is doing? Then you must be willing to give control of your life to God.

be on the verge of human extinction.

It’s at this time of chaos, when the world has completely spiraled out of control, that Jesus Christ will step back into the story and restore sanity to mankind.

The apostle John was inspired to write: “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God” (Revelation 19:11-13). “The Word” is another name for Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14).

John continued: “And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (verses 14-15).

The prophecy of Genesis 3:15 hasn’t been completely fulfilled yet. God is in control. He is sending His Son a second time to remove Satan and set up God’s Kingdom on the earth. Jesus, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords,

as Jesus said, putting first things first: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things [daily life needs] shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

This involves heartfelt prayer in which you ask God to forgive you for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It involves a complete willingness to seek God’s desire for you and submit to His will because you want to be spiritually healed.

A second step in letting God have control of your life is that you need to trust in His goodness. This may be one of the most difficult steps for any human being.

Adam and Eve didn’t trust in God’s goodness. They thought that He was somehow holding something back, something exciting and pleasurable for them. They didn’t believe that God had their best interest at heart.

Do you really believe that God wants what is good for your life? Do you trust Him enough to follow His ways even if you don’t know the outcome or if it becomes uncomfortable? Do you trust God even if it means losing a job or having friends think you are silly for being religious?

There’s a tale about a man walking in the woods who falls over a cliff. Part way down he manages to catch himself on a tree branch. He looks over the situation and

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# How Do I Survive in This Crazy, Negative World?

Everywhere we look the headlines are negative, even scary. But God's plan is bigger and better than any bad news we see. *by Janet Treadway*

**A**re we going crazy yet with all the problems going on in Washington? I find myself trying to get away from the news these days. Sadly, though, I gravitate back to it because of my great need to know what's going on. I'm reminded of what the apostle Peter wrote about being watchful: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). So we must watch and be alert! I don't want to be caught off guard from lack of watching what is happening around me, but it can be so depressing.

I'm also reminded of a scripture that says God's people would be worn down. Daniel 7:25 foretold regarding a coming false religious and governing power: "He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints [those set apart] of the Most High" (English Standard Version, emphasis added). That is how an enemy operates! He wears us down so he can destroy us. It sounds like what is going on even today to some degree!

Now who has really been doing this? Who ultimately has been wearing the people down? We think of the powers that be as people—the government, various influential groups and institutions, our relatives, our bosses. But people are just puppets in the hands of the one who is really out to destroy and conquer. It's really Satan, the enemy of God, who is the enemy of all of us! He wears away at us through speaking against the Most High, watering down and destroying God's Word, and doing what he can to make life ever more difficult.

We need to keep the right focus to counteract his ceaseless onslaught.

We should recognize that what is going

on around us is what a godless society has chosen. Many do not want God in their lives! They don't want prayer in schools, they don't want the Ten Commandments posted in public places. They just don't want God involved! So they have chosen the way of Satan and elected the people that will best represent them.

The good news is that God retains ultimate



control and is only allowing Satan to do what he is doing for the time being. While the world may be the puppet in Satan's hand, the fact of the matter is that Satan is the puppet in God's hands in terms of God fulfilling His overall purpose.

David, whom God had chosen to be king over Israel, also felt overwhelmed and in despair when pursued by the king he had faithfully served, Saul. And Saul wanted him dead! How would you feel if the ruler of your country sent forces to hunt you down and kill you?

David felt overwhelmed when he wrote

in Psalm 13: "How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" (verse 1). Did you know that the two-word phrase "how long" is mentioned 18 times in Psalms? In Psalm 13 alone it's mentioned four times.

David was really in despair. Yet the psalm ends with David restored to his confidence in God: "But I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because He has dealt bountifully with me" (verses 5-6).

We know that our hope is not in this world's governments. If it were, then we would all be doomed. Our hope is in the great Kingdom to come. Satan will be banished, and a new ruler, who loves and cares deeply for humankind, will take over. That Ruler, Jesus Christ, will reintroduce the Ten Commandments, the mandated laws we must live by. No vote will be taken on these laws. And their enforcement will be for our good, not political gain. The Government of God through Christ, based on love, will truly serve and help the people—not harm them. What a fair and loving world it will be!

In the meantime, we have to live amid the turmoil and watch the decline of our country. It can be overwhelming and discouraging to witness all that's happening around us. So it's vital that we focus on the big picture—that God's intervention and coming Kingdom are just around the corner.

As Paul wrote, "Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2). Trust in God, knowing that He is in control, that a new future lies ahead for all of mankind, and that allowing a distressing world for the present is part of His master plan.

David wrote beautiful words of encouragement for you and me: "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!" (Psalm 27:14). That is how we will survive in this crazy world. Our hope is for the loving, righteous King to soon return! **GN**



# Could God Be Calling You to Board the Spiritual Orphan Train?

Charles Brace's Orphan Train program helped thousands of neglected children begin new lives in stable, loving families. Similarly, God may be inviting you into His Church to escape the spiritual futility of this world and prepare for a magnificent future! *by John LaBissoniere*

“Orphan Trains” to adoptive family homes in farming communities. They journeyed in groups ranging in size from 3 to 35, accompanied by at least two adult representatives.

In the weeks prior to each trip, leading citizens in towns along the railroad route were contacted. Many agreed to serve on local committees to recommend potential adoptive parents. Moreover, notices of the train arrival times were published in local newspapers and on public bulletin boards.

When the train reached a town, the children were brought to assembly halls or other locations for potential families to meet them. Prior to a potential match-up, the adoptive parents had to pledge that they would care for the children as members of their family by housing, clothing and educating them in a morally upright environment. On agreement between the local committee and placing representatives, the children would then leave the group and go to their new homes.

The Orphan Train program was not without obstacles and setbacks. Some children found it difficult to adjust to their new surroundings and had to be moved to other homes. Nevertheless, many were genuinely loved by their new parents and went on to normal lives. For 75 years, from 1854 to 1929, the Children's Aid Society relocated between 120,000 and 200,000 children through its Orphan Train program to new homes across the United States and Canada.

## The spiritual condition of our world

What can you and I learn from this intriguing story? The disturbing circumstances of the New York street children could be equated with the *spiritual condition* of the citizens of our world. Although most people don't realize it, they exist in an abysmal state of spiritual poverty, aimlessness and ignorance (Hosea 4:6; Luke 9:25; Romans 10:3). You need to understand how this situation came about.

Long ago the archangel referred to as Lucifer in the Latin rendering of Isaiah 14 persuaded a third of the angels to join him in a violent insurrection against their Creator (verse 13). God quickly ended this

**A**imless, homeless and unloved. These words describe the condition of multiple thousands of children living on the streets of New York City in the latter half of the 19th century.

An Oct. 3, 1869, *New York Times* article described these youngsters as “a multitude . . . of little orphans or half orphans, or children cast out from their homes or who have been dropped here by the tide of emigration . . . or who have run away, or are the offspring of drunken parents” (quoted by Leanne Rivlin and Lynne Manzo, “Homeless Children in New York City: A View From the 19th Century,” *Children's Environment Quarterly*, Spring 1987, p. 26).

This situation arose because it “was a time of severe financial crises, panics and depressions that swept the nation, creating unemployment, poverty, and homelessness” (ibid.). A further factor was large waves of European immigrants.

Since a large number of these people had no financial means to travel into the country's interior, they often remained in the New York City area. There they sought work as unskilled laborers while living in congested tenement housing, which often lacked running water, ventilation and toilets.

Such conditions gave rise to thousands of children who wandered the streets in search of food and shelter. “Many sold matches, rags, or newspapers to survive. For protection against street violence, they banded together and formed gangs. Police, faced with a growing problem, were known to arrest vagrant children . . . locking them up with adult criminals” (*The American Experience*, [PBS.org/wgbh/amex/orphan](http://PBS.org/wgbh/amex/orphan)).

## Charles Brace and his proposal

Into this situation came Charles Brace, a young minister who had moved to New York from Connecticut in 1853. Shocked

by the sight of so many neglected children, he wrote in his memoirs: “When a child of the streets stands before you in rags, with a tear-stained face, you cannot easily forget him. And yet, you are perplexed what to do” (“The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them,” 1872).

Brace soon learned that while some children were true orphans, others were abandoned when one parent died or a family had grown so large that some children could no longer be cared for adequately. He also found that others were runaways from neglect, drunkenness or abuse.

The only alternative to children living on the streets was to place them in almshouses or overcrowded orphanages. Yet Brace argued that doing so stunted their mental and emotional development by perpetuating dependence on charity. He felt that education, work and strong family life were vital keys to helping children mature into self-reliant citizens.

As a result of his perspective and analysis, Brace founded the Children's Aid Society in 1853. His initial efforts focused on job training and placement. However, he soon realized that a better way to help the children was to physically move them “out of their surroundings and to send them away to kind Christian homes in the country” (ibid.).

Brace believed that if these youngsters could be moved to wholesome, peaceful family settings, they would have the chance to escape a lifetime of misery and emptiness. To accomplish his goal of relocating these young people, Brace began raising money and obtaining necessary legal authorizations.

## Orphan Train effort begins

His organization made arrangements for children to travel by what became known as



attempted coup d'etat by casting the rebellious angels, now demons, back to earth (Revelation 12:9; Isaiah 14:12).

The rebellious archangel became known as Satan, denoting an adversary or legal

“As the Scriptures say, ‘No one is good—not even one. No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one’” (Romans

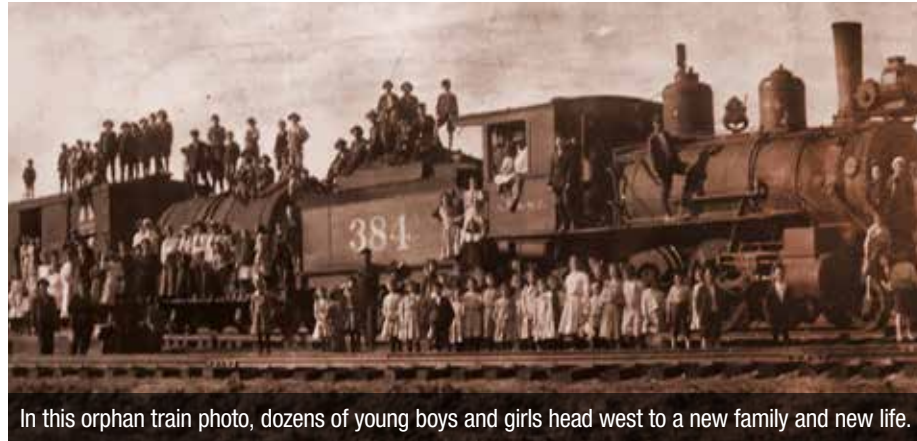
in 1926 when he rode the Orphan Train. Upon joining the Nailing family in unfamiliar rural Texas, he was apprehensive and even considered running away. However, soon he became at ease in his new home, later explaining, “There was a hominess here that I’d never known before.” He came to appreciate his new family so much that he willingly changed his name to Lee Nailing.

In a parallel manner, when God calls a person into His Church, He offers him or her the opportunity to transition from an errant way of life to one of true godliness. God may be calling *you* at this very moment. If so, through repentance, baptism and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as your Savior, through God’s Spirit you are to become His child and take on His family name, growing in harmony with Him until complete transformation into His likeness (2 Corinthians 6:18; Psalm 82:6; Ephesians 3:15; Luke 13:29; 1 John 3:1-3).

### Christ will not leave you orphaned

Although you will stumble at times during your Christian journey, you need to persistently strive through the power of God in overcoming the pulls of the flesh (verse 9). You must change to reflect the actions and attitude of Christ (Ephesians 4:15). You are to grow in faith, knowing that He will never leave you orphaned or abandoned (1 Timothy 6:12; John 14:18; Hebrews 13:5).

Charles Brace and his Orphan Train program helped thousands of forsaken, directionless children begin new lives in stable families. In the same way, God is calling a few people at this time out of a world of spiritual darkness and corruption into His Church and family. God’s spiritual orphan train is leaving the station to begin a journey to the greatest, most fulfilling life you could ever imagine! Are you willing to step onboard? *GN*



In this orphan train photo, dozens of young boys and girls head west to a new family and new life.

opponent—an accuser. He was not only fiercely antagonistic toward God, but also toward all human beings. In fact, since the creation of Adam and Eve, humanity has been dominated and brutalized by this evil being the Bible identifies as “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Satan is an immensely powerful yet invisible spirit being who “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). He stealthily hides his vindictive aims by presenting himself as “an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). To carry out his cunning work, he influences human leaders to unwittingly promote his fabrications. This includes religious authorities who naively teach doctrines that wholly contradict biblical instruction. “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13).

The citizens of this world are in fact the devil’s slaves and yet, incredibly, people have no idea this is occurring (Romans 6:16). They blindly accept and believe Satan’s falsehoods and heedlessly embrace his dissolute actions (John 8:44). They do all this while thinking they are accomplishing what is true and correct (Proverbs 14:12). Satan’s corrupt attitudes and behaviors saturate human societies completely (John 5:19).

### The consequence of Satan’s influence

However, as people carelessly follow the devil’s lead they are not without blame. The tendency in man’s corrupted nature is to dishonor and disobey God while exalting the self. This rebellious proclivity is not just a problem for a few individuals but *all* people.

3:10-12, New Living Translation). The egocentric nature of human beings makes them gullible targets for the devil’s distortions and lies.

What, therefore, is the consequence of Satan’s influence over you, me and every person? Just as the thousands of abandoned street children lived broken, aimless lives, *all* of humanity is *spiritually* adrift and destitute (1 Timothy 6:5). Furthermore, Satan has succeeded in pitting people against their Creator and each other (Romans 1:30). Should there be any wonder, then, that we see incessant conflict, evil, heartache and suffering in every corner of the world?

### God is calling some to board His “spiritual orphan train”

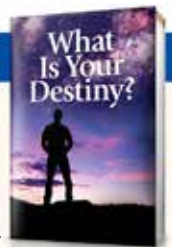
What should all this mean to you? God may be opening your eyes to the woeful spiritual condition in which *you* have been imprisoned. Although this may be hard to take, *you* have been part of the devil’s nefarious system—and *you still are* if you have not come to true repentance and conversion through Jesus Christ. But there is great news!

You don’t have to *remain* in Satan’s grasp (2 Peter 1:4). God offers you a way of escape to a new home and a bright, exciting future (2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:9). The young people who boarded the Orphan Trains were given the chance to join a new family. Similarly, God might be calling you to, in effect, board His “spiritual orphan train” to begin a transformation to a new life of righteousness in God’s own Church and family (Romans 8:16, 21; 1 John 3:1).

Alton Lou Clement was eight years old

### Learn More

God wants to offer you a fresh opportunity for a new life—but you have to be willing to take the first steps to make this a reality. How do you begin? Download or request your free copies of the study guides *What Is Your Destiny?* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. They’re waiting for you!



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Follow Me

# Wise Men Still Seek Him

Two thousand years ago, wise men journeyed far to seek the Messiah. Today other wise men and women can learn from their example as they too seek the Messiah and Son of God. *by Robin Webber*

**M**ore than 2,000 years ago, men of the East gazed upon the heavens and were drawn to a star. They were compelled by something beyond themselves to follow its light. Perhaps, even from their distant realms, 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).

They also might have pondered and acted on another prophecy found in Isaiah 60:1-3: “Arise, shine; for your light has come! . . . The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”

Their account, as given life in Matthew 2, is a story of practical step-by-step faith set in motion to encounter the revelation of that

years earlier. The people of Judea had been under the brutal Roman yoke for nearly three human generations. It was a time of darkness in which there was a bubbling to the surface of anticipation, not too far removed from desperation, for a special deliverer sent by the Almighty. And yet, God Himself appeared quiet in the arena of human affairs.

In one sense there was no secret regarding what was to transpire. God had shared many a verse about the coming of the Messiah. How often had the words of Isaiah 7:14 been read in Jewish synagogues scattered around the world proclaiming, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel”?

Had not the passage of Micah 5:2 offered

makes all the difference now in responding to what God sets before us.

## God chose to pitch a tent

As you read this column, autumn will be knocking on our door in the northern hemisphere. It’s in this season of the year—not the winter solstice time frame of Dec. 25—that the King of our lives was born as a human being (download or request our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* to see the biblical evidence).

And yes, there were proclamations of angels, visiting shepherds from nearby fields, the before-mentioned guiding star to lead the wise men to ultimately find their way to honor the promised Messiah. And while most of mankind missed that first coming, Immanuel came nevertheless. And at the right time—*God’s* time!

The apostle John, one of the Gospel writers, spells out in crystal-clear fashion how “the Word [who] was with God, and . . . was God . . . became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14).

It’s of note that the word “dwelt” here is translated from a form of the Greek word *skenoō*, which literally means “to dwell in a tent or temporary structure”—“to tabernacle.” John, writing under the inspiration of God’s Spirit, having just informed His audience in the first three verses of the eternal existence of God the Father and God the Word who became the Son, shares this grand statement—that God decided to “pitch a tent” within the wilderness of the human condition!

The one known as the Word surrendered His divine glory and might, choosing to enter time and space in an overcrowded village.

The apostle Paul shares how the silence of the preceding centuries was shattered when he comments in Galatians 4:2 that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman . . .” God wasn’t late, for the time was ripe! God not only created time but is its master. The

## What do these wise men of old have in common with us? We too have been summoned to appear before and worship the same King. How can we tap into their wise example?

star. Their unwavering purpose as recorded in Matthew 2:2 is summed up in their own words: “For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

These men weren’t foreign to the protocol worthy of a ruler and thus offered precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Child they had traveled far to see (verse 11).

What do these wise men of old have in common with us? We too have been summoned to appear before and worship the same King. How can we tap into their wise example of not only searching for this King, but in following His admonition to us of “Follow Me”?

### The voice of God quieted?

Let’s understand that at this point in the story there had been no new Scripture given since the time of the prophet Malachi 400

much hope? “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.”

Yes, the people of that time had much to consider! But comprehend? That was another matter.

Yet a time would come when all the pieces began to come together, and these wise men, with all their accumulated human knowledge, did the wisest thing of all. They:

- 1) Remained open to God’s lead,
- 2) Made sure they were available to follow the sign when it came, and
- 3) Were willing to go the distance wherever it led them.

This made all the difference then, and it



More than 2,000 years ago a group of wise men who were open to God's leading traveled far to honor the Messiah.

wise men would ultimately come to visit the Messiah—knowing perhaps only in part what was occurring, but most importantly *acting* on what they knew.

### How to follow—step by step

Let's consider some practical step-by-step points regarding their encounter with the young child Jesus that we can emulate in how we travel the spiritual journey set before us.

1) *Prepare to listen to God even in what humanly appears to be quiet times.* The quietness can seem deafening, but realize that this is when God is often at His busiest in preparing our future.

Let's face it: Being still is not our favorite pastime, and yet God says, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). The same God declares: "I am God, and there is no other, I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'" (Isaiah 46:9-10).

2) *Look for God's light where you find it and follow its lead.* Like the wise men, we don't travel alone. Yes, we would all like to view a miraculous star, but that may not be our lot in life. And yet, that guiding light—in the form of God's Holy Word, the Bible—may be resting on your table or sitting in your lap right now.

Consider how Psalm 119:105 encourages us to view God's daily message to us as we are reminded to acknowledge to Him, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Never underestimate the power of Scripture to guide us ever closer to the living Jesus Christ.

3) *Don't let anything or anyone distract you from the personal calling set before us by our Heavenly Father regarding what He's accomplishing through His Son.*

The jealous and murderous King Herod tried to trick the wise men into betraying the location of Jesus (Matthew 2:7-8) so he could kill Him, but they would have nothing to do with it and never came back to him—foiling the wicked king's evil plan (verses 12-13). So stay focused, be alert and

ask God to grant you wisdom as to whom you allow to enter your life and to help you to "be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16) in exiting harmful relationships.

4) *Grow in the spiritual habit of giving your best to the King of our lives.* We may not have gold, frankincense or myrrh to offer Jesus Christ, but God can make the widow's mite go a long way (Luke 21:1-4).

The bottom line is this: God doesn't want or need more *things*—He wants *you*. In His "wish list" for precious gifts, the words of the apostle Paul are right at the top: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

5) *Worship God no matter how small His goodness might be manifested to you at the time.* When the wise men visited Jesus in a house (Matthew 2:11) and found a little boy, they didn't see a conquering king.

It's one thing to acknowledge and worship God when His acts are larger than life, but quite another matter when we understand He is often discovered in the snowflake-sized matters of life. Remember God's admonition to the Jews who became demoralized by the size of the newly built temple in comparison to Solomon's grand edifice: "For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10).

Let's put on a new lens for life and understand that God's eyes don't always rejoice in what's simply big and beautiful, but will always rejoice in what is good, perfect and according to His will.

6) Last but by no means least: *Learn to express joy in the journey that God has prepared for you.* It can seem neverending and even become frustrating along the way as you sidestep your own "Herods" planted in your path.

Notice the words of Matthew 2:9-10, as the wise men reached the end of their mission with the star appearing above where the holy Child was: "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy."

Don't let anyone steal your joy, which is God's gift planted deep inside of you that no one should touch or rob—including yourself. Have you ever considered what a joy it is to seek after the living God and give Him the gift of yourself on a daily basis? Instead of waiting for Him to come to you, be like the wise men and seek Him out, knock on His door and show Him the personal joy you feel from realizing that He has chosen you to be a part of His divine purpose!

### Still following the star

There yet remains a beckoning star for wise men and women to follow after in today's world. In Revelation 22:17 we see Christ describing His role to us: "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star."

Why does the ascended Christ liken Himself to "the Bright and Morning Star"? It's a statement of assuring comfort! The morning star always appears at the moment when it's darkest and coldest before the dawn breaks.

Indeed, Jesus Christ is "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and "the way" (John 14:6) to help us grasp what God has in store for us to behold about Himself. That same Morning Star continues to beckon us with the message of "Follow Me" in the footsteps of the wise men of old who were:

- 1) Open to God's lead,
- 2) Readily available when the signal came, and
- 3) Willing to go the distance to seek after God in whatever form or manner He showed Himself.

In following Him today, may we all do likewise! **GN**

# Letters From Our Readers

## Appreciation for *The Good News*

I'm very much thankful to you for always sending me *The Good News* magazine. I really find it helpful and a vital source of information based on biblical principles and perspective of present issues facing our world today. Thank you for continuing my subscription. I am very much encouraged and thrilled whenever I receive your magazine and I always read it right away. I can really find the answers to life's major questions.

*Subscriber in Western Samar, Philippines*

Yours is the only reliable magazine on matters of Christian faith and of the present world we live in. Sometimes I read some articles over and over again. I cannot believe I was taught these things so differently. Please continue sending me your magazines—it's most appreciated! Enclosed is a small donation for your magnificent work.

*Subscriber in Cheltenham, England*

Thank you very much. Your magazine is informative and religious in nature and not politically motivated.

*Subscriber in Narra, Palawan, Philippines*

## Thanks for free booklets

I have read over 30 booklets so far and it has completely changed my life for the better. I have a much better understanding and things look clearer now than ever. These booklets are a Godsend.

*Internet reader*

I wanted to thank you for providing material that is free. I thirst for our Father's Word. I'm disabled and receive only a small amount of monthly income so I am unable to buy any publications. I absolutely love the Bible study lessons. Again, thank you for giving me an opportunity to receive your materials to have a better understanding. May God bless you much.

*Reader in South Carolina*

## Beyond Today TV program

I first saw your program on the TV this week. I didn't want to move until it was over—I wanted to hear all you had to say! This program on heaven and hell was very good information.

*Viewer in Minnesota*

This is the most wonderful magazine and booklets that have changed my life. It's a pity that you are not on TV in South Africa.

*Reader, South Africa*

*Current Beyond Today programs, plus hundreds of archived episodes, are available for viewing online at [www.BeyondToday.tv](http://www.BeyondToday.tv). They cover a wide variety of topics like those covered in *The Good News*.*

## BT Daily: "What Is the Soul?"

I am agnostic and am currently studying the Bible over multiple translations without a particular religion in mind. I just want to know what the Bible says in its pure form before I make up my mind about God. Your program is very true. When we really look at the Bible, many Christ-based religions are exposed as veering away from or contorting what the Bible actually says. That and also studying world history and doctrines of a number of today's prominent religions, it's easy to spot which are among the "false religions" the Bible mentions. Thank you for the uploads.

*Internet viewer*

*Interested viewers can watch our short BT Daily videos on biblical topics and current news and trends at [www.ucg.org/beyond-today/daily](http://www.ucg.org/beyond-today/daily).*

## Is the rapture real?

I was watching your program on TV, and I'm requesting the booklet *The Rapture vs. the Bible*. Your program is helping me understand the truth about what the Bible really teaches and not what people say it does.

*Viewer in British Columbia, Canada*

I am a Southern Baptist pastor who has some doubts about the rapture. I found

your article "The Rapture—a Popular but False Doctrine" [at [www.ucg.org/](http://www.ucg.org/) reprints] to kind of match what I have discovered. I would like to put a copy of this in my files for further study and reference and to use excerpts to help my congregation understand why I am leaning toward no rapture. This is a hard doctrine to dismiss because it has been so ingrained, but in all my reading of Scripture I just don't see it.

*Reader in Texas*

*Belief in the popular rapture concept is indeed deeply ingrained in much of today's religious teaching. But is it biblical? Interested readers can find the article "The Rapture—a Popular but False Doctrine" at [www.ucg.org/booklet/rapture-vs-bible/](http://www.ucg.org/booklet/rapture-vs-bible/). The Beyond Today program "Is the Rapture Real?" can be found at <http://www.ucg.org/beyond-today-program/doctrinal-beliefs/rapture-real>. Both examine how the popular rapture teaching doesn't square with the Bible.*

## "Bizarre new teaching" backed up in Scripture

I came across your booklets *The Ten Commandments, Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* and *What Is Your Destiny?* They're wonderful booklets, and what I am learning hit me like a thunder strike. What surprises me more is that as bizarre as the new teachings I'm learning initially appeared to me, you have convincing biblical scriptures to back them up.

Many of the doctrines I held to be true or biblical since I started attending churches are beginning to crumble in my face. Although I had never given them a critical look, I didn't guess that churches could be preaching or spreading false teaching. I would like to enroll in your *Bible Study Course* to learn more about your church and doctrines.

*Reader in Thailand*

## Donations from grateful readers

Enclosed is a small donation to help your ministry. Please keep sending me your great magazines. I enjoy them very much, and they have answered many questions for me.

*Reader in Ontario, Canada*

My responsibility of sharing the truth of our Creator and Saviour with others is made much easier when I can refer them to your magazine and booklets. Please accept this small contribution to cover the costs of those you've sent. I also introduced others to *The Good News* and the booklets. Your efforts are bearing fruit, and I am happy to do my little to support God's work in these last days.

*Reader in Queensland, Australia*

Please accept our tithe offering for God to use as He sees fit through your ministry and church. A big thank you to your church. I watch the *Beyond Today* programme on both Saturday and Sunday. It has helped me turn my life around for God, and I and my family are greatly blessed by God through your church and *Beyond Today* and the booklets I have received. God bless you all mightily and protect you all and your families.

*Viewer in Victoria, Australia*

## Where can I find a congregation near me?

I have just read your *Bible Study Course* lesson 12 on God's festivals. Is there a church near me where I can celebrate these days?

*Reader in Missouri*

I am an avid reader of your *Good News* magazine, and I want to get baptised. I am wondering where your closest congregation is to me so I can be baptised. Thank you for your time.

*Reader in Queensland, Australia*

*A current list of congregations around the world, along with contact information for the closest minister, can be found online at [ucg.org/churches](http://ucg.org/churches). For those without Internet access, contact our office nearest you on page 2 of this issue.*

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



# Questions & Answers

**Q: I have read your booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, plus other sources on the subject of the biblical Holy Days and festivals. But what I can't find is *how* to celebrate them. How do I properly celebrate these days?**

*Reader, Internet*

A: It's wonderful to see that you want to learn how to properly celebrate the festivals and Holy Days of the Bible. God's Word is very clear that these days are special to Him and that He expects His people to observe them. As shown in the booklet you mentioned, Jesus Christ kept the biblical Sabbath and Holy Days. The lead article of this issue, "Jesus Christ in the Biblical Festivals," shows how all of them teach us about Him and His role in God's great plan of salvation.

After His death and resurrection, the early Church continued to observe the weekly Sabbath and festivals of the Bible. Although specific details aren't given in every case, they had special worship services on these days since they are to be "holy convocations" (Leviticus 23:4).

A "holy convocation" is *a sacred assembly that God has commanded*. Today we conduct special services on the Holy Days, with sermons about the meaning and significance of the days, congregational hymns and Christian fellowship. Often several congregations will meet together in a central location.

As on the weekly Sabbath day, we do not do any of our customary work on the biblical Holy Days, as instructed in Leviticus 23.

The first of the annual biblical festivals listed after the weekly Sabbath in this chapter is the Passover, a memorial of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins, redeeming us from death. Accordingly, this period of the year is approached with deep spiritual introspection.

We commemorate the Passover on the evening of the 14th day of the first month of the sacred year (on the Hebrew calendar) with a service based on the apostle Paul's inspired instructions of 1 Corinthians 11:23-28 and the accounts in the four Gospels of the New Testament Passover that Christ instituted with His disciples.

This solemn evening service begins with a brief explanation of its purpose, followed by washing of one another's feet (based on Christ's example and instructions in John 13). Then the one conducting the service explains the symbols of the Passover—unleavened bread and wine—which represent the body and blood of our Savior. Each baptized member of the Church eats a small piece of the unleavened bread and drinks a small amount of wine, symbolizing that sacrifice on our behalf.

The Passover service is followed a day later by the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This seven-day festival starts and ends with an annual Sabbath day on which church services are held similar to the kind of services we hold on every weekly Sabbath. However, on each of the annual Sabbaths during this feast and the other festivals, the messages focus on various aspects of the meaning of the day we are observing. The messages provide guidance, encouragement and education to the membership, as well as help us worship God.

(These annual Sabbaths or Holy Days are also times that freewill offerings are collected during services—God having told the Israelites to present offerings during the annual festival seasons, as stated in Deuteronomy 16:16-17. Such offerings are not collected during weekly Sabbath services, though tithes and offerings can be sent in at any time.)

Specific to the Feast of Unleavened Bread is preparing for it by removing

from our homes all leavening agents and leavened products (bread products made with yeast, sodium bicarbonate or baking powder)—leavening during this week symbolizing sin. We also do not eat bread products made with leaven during the Unleavened Bread festival in keeping with God's instructions (Exodus 12:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). Instead we eat unleavened bread during this time. The spiritual picture is that we are to live a Christlike life by partaking of the true Bread of life—avoiding sin and taking in Christ's righteousness.

Two common commercial unleavened breads are Ry-Krisp and matzos (not all matzos products are leaven free, so one has to read the labels). Some members prefer to make their own unleavened bread to eat during this time.

As mentioned earlier, because the Holy Days are also Sabbaths, we are not to perform regular work on them, resting in the same way we do on every weekly Sabbath. (The Passover is a festival, but the Bible does not refer to it as a Sabbath. It is therefore permissible to work on Passover day following the memorial observance, particularly as it's a preparation time for the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.)

The evening that commences the Feast of Unleavened Bread is a special memorial of the Exodus from Egypt, picturing the deliverance from our past sinful lives, referred to as a "night to be much observed" (Exodus 12:42, King James Version). Groups gather in homes or other places for a fellowship meal, often with a discussion of the significance of the evening.

The Day of Atonement has a unique aspect to it, in that God instructs us to afflict ourselves, which refers in other scriptures to fasting—going without food and drink on that day (Leviticus 23:27-29; Isaiah 58:3, 5; Acts 27:9). Children and those with medical conditions for whom fasting could be detrimental to their health are not expected to fast in this way.

Most of the Holy Days are observed in local congregations or in a gathering of several local congregations, with the exception of the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles and the Eighth Day immediately following. Members and their families gather in centralized locations throughout the United States and around the world for the entire eight-day period. We observe this main festival season of the year with church services on each of the eight days along with the opportunity for fellowship and recreation outside of services.

This festival, foreshadowing the coming reign of Jesus Christ on earth, is to be a time of great spiritual and physical enjoyment for everyone (Deuteronomy 14:26), so sharing meals and having fun with fellow church members at area attractions is encouraged. And our celebration includes programs and activities for families, seniors, teens and young adults.

If you would like to find information on meeting with others on the weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Days, please contact our minister in your area. You can find his name and phone number at [ucg.org/churches](http://ucg.org/churches). We think you will find it encouraging and refreshing to meet with others at these holy times God has given us.

For others desiring a detailed explanation of the biblical festivals and why we keep them, we encourage you to read our study guide *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* (at [www.ucg.org/booklets](http://www.ucg.org/booklets)). We also publish a list of the dates for the Holy Days in 2014 and future years (at [www.ucg.org/resources/calendar/htm](http://www.ucg.org/resources/calendar/htm)).

Another article of interest concerning the keeping of God's Holy Days is titled "Are Biblical Holy Days for New Testament Christians?" You can find it online at <http://www.ucg.org/god039s-law/are-biblical-holy-days-new-testament-christians/>.



# God, Music & You

What if God went through your music player or cell phone? What would He find? Would He be pleased with the songs and content you downloaded? Would He be disappointed with your choices? Or would it be a mixture of both? *by Kevin Greer*

**W**e have radios in our cars and in our bedrooms. TV shows and movies have theme songs and background music to enhance the mood or introduce a scene. Businesses rely on music to cheer up customers in stores and elevators, and use cute jingles to form customer bonds with their products or services. Choir,

band and orchestra are taught at countless schools around the world. Music is a key part of our entertainment, even in unrelated events—the Super Bowl has one of the biggest annual concerts every year at half time.

What does God say about music? Where does music stand in your relationship with Him? If you are a Christian, what's your responsibility with regard to music? Have

you considered what your musical choices say about you?

## God knows you better than anyone

“O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Psalm 139:1-4).

Have your parents ever gone through your music player or cell phone? How did you feel at the time? Was it a pleasant experience?

What if God took a look? Here's a

news flash: God has *already* gone through your music player and phone—in fact, He knows what’s on everyone’s music list! Knowing all our thoughts and actions, He is well aware of the songs we listen to. And we ourselves need to think more about them!

**What should I do?**

The apostle Paul wrote about examining what we hear—“test [or prove] all things” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). As young people, we especially need to discern and weigh the message of the songs we typically listen to. We are then told to “hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (verses 21-22). A Christian should seek out and then

that we are to love God above all else and love our neighbor as ourselves.

If a particular song glorifies or condones the violation of any of these laws, it’s not a good choice for your playlist. Since the foundation of these principles is love, it’s easy to see why a song endorsing malice, hate, immoral sexual behavior (including sex outside of marriage), lust or greed would not be beneficial for Christian consumption.

Here’s an example of some positive biblical standards for music: “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report,

**Our music choices can shape or expose our character. Wise selections help build good character.**

cling to good influences and pure music. At the same time, we should distance ourselves from lyrics promoting sinful activity.

The apostle further said in Romans 12:1-2 that God’s followers are “holy,” meaning that we are sanctified—set apart for a special purpose by God. You are important to Him! All of us are. Therefore, we are not to be “conformed to this world”—that is, not to blindly accept worldly standards for music.

These societal norms have been influenced by Satan the devil. We are told to avoid them and to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Christians should gain a new perspective while growing closer to God, coming to understand more deeply how to apply His principles in our lives. The passage ends with a positive admonition: “Prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Prove your music. Does it fit with all of God’s standards, or are your choices bending to sinful values? Consider researching a particular song you enjoy. What are its lyrics—in full? What message or story is the songwriter and performers telling? Furthermore, search for and listen to godly music.

**A higher standard**

To find and hang on to music God would approve of, we need to use His standards to judge our music. His standards are laid out in His Word. The Ten Commandments give 10 spiritual principles we are to live by both in the letter of the law (exactly as worded) and in the spirit of the law (in the mind and intent). Jesus Christ summarized these in two great commandments, stating

if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Our music should be able to fit those descriptors. It’s up to each of us to apply those standards to our music. No one else can do it for you. This is a personal duty and responsibility!

**Why bother?**

But why do we need to examine and filter our musical consumption? Beyond the fact that God directs us to do so through biblical principles, we should realize that anything God tells us to do is for our own benefit.

Music, as sound, enters our brain and becomes part of our thoughts. These thoughts form the words we speak. Words evolve into actions. Over time, repeated actions create habits and patterns in our behavior. Habits come together and produce our character, which is who we are as people. Our music choices can shape or expose our character. Wise selections help build good character.

God is always with us and knows everything we do and think, including what songs we listen to. As Christians, it’s our own personal duty and individual responsibility to examine and judge our music. You and I alone can interpret and employ God’s benchmarks for music in our own lives. The standards you use must be based on God’s Word, not on personal opinion or worldly views. We do this out of obedience to God, and He has directed it for our benefit.

The next time you hear music while jamming to the radio or shuffling through your iPod, stop and ask yourself: *What am I listening to?* **GN**



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# God Has a Plan for All of Mankind.

## How Can We Learn About It?

**W**hat is God doing here below? What is His purpose and plan for all of us? Is there a way we can know what His plan is and how we fit into it?

What about all the people who have lived and died through the ages without ever having heard of God, the Bible and Jesus Christ? Are they doomed to the grave with no hope?

Most people celebrate Christmas and Easter, thinking these are the holidays God wants us to observe. Yet you can search through the entire Bible and you'll find that it calls for the celebration of neither.

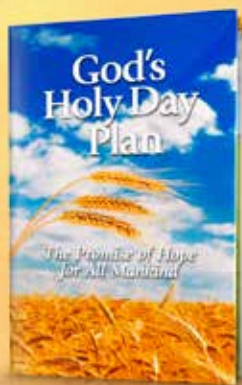
But God *does* reveal in the Bible seven festivals that teach us His plan for humanity through the ages. The Gospels record Jesus and His

followers observing these festivals. He was crucified on one of these festivals, Passover, and its symbolism foretold His death nearly 15 centuries before it happened.

The New Testament Church was founded on another of these biblical festivals, the day of Pentecost. The book of Acts plainly records the apostle Paul and the Church keeping these biblical festivals, and Paul wrote of how to keep them.

So why are these Holy Days, kept by Jesus, His apostles and the early Church, almost universally ignored by most people today?

These are important questions, and you need the answers. Be sure to request and read this eye-opening study guide today!



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