



The Good News

January/February 1997

UTOPIA

Humanity's Impossible Dream?

*The Crisis at the Close • Advice From Death Row
Aging With Grace • When Was Jesus Christ Born?*

Finding the Proper Prophetic Focus

“A time of troubles”—a phrase used by the late historian Arnold Toynbee to refer to a chaotic period in human history—is a phrase reminiscent of the biblical book of Daniel, in which the prophet speaks of “a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation” (Daniel 12:1). Toynbee was describing the wars and social disruptions at the end of one dominant civilization and the start of another.

More recent statements from political scientists reflect their fears of prolonged global disorder, clashes of civilizations and signs of a planet and its inhabitants in danger of terminal exhaustion. Daniel was recording an end-time prophecy when he wrote of an unequalled time of trouble. His was a message for the close of the age, descriptive of the cataclysm accompanying the triumph of good over evil.

Are we living in the time of the end of all things? As noted before in this magazine, the end of a century—not to mention the final years of a millennium—sees waves of pessimism. Society looks for signs of doomsday and finds them in the all-too-familiar pattern of human error, incompetence and conflict. But this time it does seem different. Are we indulging in just another cycle of apocalyptic speculation? Or is the world really going down and out? The truth is that no one can really know for sure that this present round of world troubles is the beginning of the end.

There is something to be said for prudently assessing the conditions of the world but avoiding the pitfalls of false prophecy. Intelligence and common sense should reign when we examine the politics among nations. Disappointments lie ahead for those with an overly active prophetic imagination.

So what can we know of the future? Between the religious crazy man on the street corner with his crudely lettered call to repentance and the pessimistic political scientist, can we find a balance? Is a sensible approach to prophecy possible? Can we tightly focus on the future? Are we even asking the right questions?

Jesus Christ, in His Olivet prophecy shortly before His crucifixion, mentions Daniel’s “time of trouble.” Jesus’ disciples had asked Him about end-time events and the sign of His return. They desired the kind of prophetic certainty that many seek today. Jesus warned of a time when “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). “Unless those days were shortened,” He declared, “no flesh would be saved” (verse 22). Yet He refrained from revealing any specific date. Rather He spoke of the need for personal spiritual alertness and vigilance.

When one of Christ’s disciples drew close to the end of his life, he wrote letters of farewell to his fellow believers. The apostle Peter distilled his experiences and passed along what he considered most important to the early Church. His is a timeless message that resonates across the centuries. Concerning apocalyptic events, Peter gives good advice. Be aware, he says, that “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat” (2 Peter 3:10).

As a reminder to all Christians, Peter asks a question: “Since all these things will be dissolved, *what manner of persons ought you to be* in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the day of God?” (verses 11-12, emphasis added). It is not the precise timing of events that matters so much, but the spiritual condition we find ourselves in when they do occur. So often our preoccupation is with *when* things will happen. The God of the Bible is far more interested in *our state of mind* so we will always be ready for His dramatic intervention.

“What manner of persons ought you to be . . . ?” That’s the right question. As *The Good News* enters its second year, we hope to help you find answers to that vital question and better understand the turmoil around us.

—David Hulme

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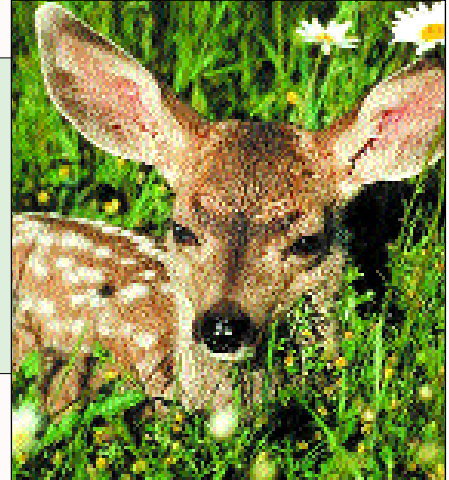
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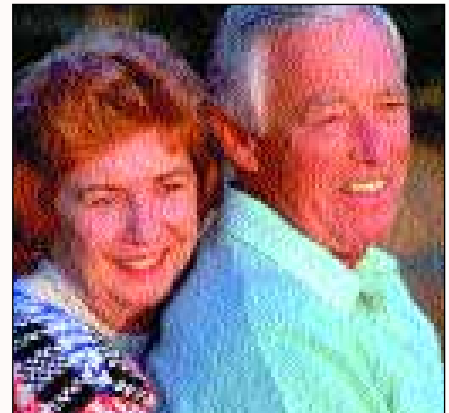
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UTOPIA



by David Hulme

During the late '60s, at age 21, I heard about a commune in the wilds of Scotland set in the Highlands by a beautiful loch. The inhabitants shared the daily tasks and managed the tiny village by contributing their talents and abilities for the common good.

Such a life was an appealing prospect in those days. Students in Europe were restless; in the United States they were protesting the Vietnam War. The world was a place to avoid if you were an idealist. Too many bad things were happening too fast, and the lure of an idyllic

commune was strong.

Yet something prevented me from making the trip that I envisioned, and I spent the hot summer months doing something quite different and much less idealistic—working shifts in a commercial bakery. Only a short time later I heard that the commune had broken up in debate and argument, another short-lived experiment in the pursuit of the ideal.

Is the perfect society just a pipe dream? Can the human race ever achieve the harmony, peace and tranquillity that has eluded it for centuries? The search

has already captured the imagination and attention of many generations. There seems no end to our desire for a world free from its ills.

The search continues

The search for utopia persists. As the new millennium approaches, the rhetoric of human escapism again rings in our ears. Some look for a new-age answer. Others eagerly anticipate the second coming of Christ at the turn of the century as though God is bound by human calendars. Still others expect human govern-

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Fantasy

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or Future Reality?

ment and human effort to bring about an earthly utopia.

The world beyond, absent the trials and tribulations of this age, is and always has been the paramount goal of virtually all believers regardless of their religious orientation. Echoes of utopia are to be found in the Buddhist Nirvana, the Hindu cosmic principle Brahman, the Jewish afterlife, the Roman Catholic beatific vision and the Protestant heaven.

The Good News anchors its outlook to the Bible. The magazine's writers try to convey, not the denominational bias of any one group, but the unvarnished truths as the biblical texts teach them. Too often this is not the popular path. Several years ago a magazine publisher well known to me said that he sought "to take God at His word."

What does the Bible say about the future world of God's making? Does its message encompass the popular religious concepts that most people suppose are found in its pages?

In conversation with this author he then added, "And not many people do that." Sadly, that has been the record of human history. Not only do many writers refuse to take God at His word, but they fail to reflect accurately what is in His Word.

What does the Bible say about the future world of God's making? Does its message encompass the popular religious concepts that most people suppose are found in its pages? Does it perhaps surprise us with its own account of a utopia that God promises will become a reality on the earth?

Foretelling peace and safety

The Bible is in part a prophetic book. Prophetic elements are found throughout its pages, in the Old and New Testaments. Not all prophecy concerns dire warnings of foreboding events. Many prophetic details in the

Bible are intensely positive and encouraging, portraying a promised time when all good things will be restored and tears and sorrow, crying, pain and death will be no more.

Descriptions of rebuilt cities, of children playing in peace and safety, of prosperity and abundance abound in the Bible. Are these nothing more than the vain hopes of frustrated and troubled people living in ancient times? Or are they the actual words of God, promises that He alone can and will fulfill?

The earliest New Testament writers viewed these as God's sure promises. The book of Acts, the record of the initial years of the fledgling Church, speaks of Jesus Christ, "whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets

since the world began" (Acts 3:21).

The first disciples of Christ believed that the ancient prophets of Israel had foretold the restitution of the world to a state of peace and harmony in accord with God's way—a return to the garden of God, that Edenic paradise of our first parents. The restoration was associated with the personal return of Jesus to the earth. What was it that the prophets had said that was so plain and clear to those early disciples?

A prophet's description of the future

One of Israel's foremost men of God was Isaiah. His prophetic messages illuminate the period from 740 to 681 B.C., a crucial period in the history of God's people. Isaiah addressed the problems that were consuming the nation from within. His message for Israel also contained a magnificent future



hope and the promise of a paradise on earth for all peoples.

Much debate has taken place about the literal truth of Isaiah's writing. Some scholars have suggested that the prophet's images of an ideal world are nothing more than symbols and metaphors. For example, in Isaiah 35 the prophet paints a picture of a revitalized land, formerly desert waste, where drought is no more and water gushes forth in abundance.

Some commentators have tried to con-

prophetic word to demonstrate his own ability to bring the future to pass.

The modern mind equates ancient thinking with primitive thinking. The language of critical scholarship reduces much of the Bible to quaint superstition and cultural and intellectual bias. How does the skeptic, who says we should give up on the "dangerous" idea of a divine utopia, face up to the following plain statement from the pages of Isaiah?

"This is what the LORD says—your

NEW NAME FOR AN ANCIENT CONCEPT



In 1872, when Samuel Butler wrote a satirical novel about English society, he called it Erewhon, reversing most of the letters of the word "nowhere." In an attempt to force change, Butler ridiculed existing conditions.

Erewhon was a book in the utopian tradition. Another Englishman, Sir Thomas More, had coined the term *utopia* in 1516, using it as the title of his work about an ideal society. His coinage came from the Greek words *ou* (not), or *eu* (good) and *topos* (place).

There was a vagueness about the word from the start. Was Utopia a good place or a nonexistent place? To complicate matters, Sir Thomas wrote in Latin. Had he chosen the equivalent negative Latin title, it probably would not have appealed. *Nusquam* (nowhere) just does not have the same ring to it as Utopia, so Utopia it was.

Of course, good or nonexistent, Utopia was not a real place. It was, as Butler later wrote, nowhere. Those who write about such imaginary societies usually recognize the unlikelihood of the radical changes they espouse. For this and other reasons utopia, utopian and utopianism have come to describe impossible idealized conditions.

The search for the perfect society has intrigued humanity from the beginning. The Bible records the ambitious efforts of the warrior king Nimrod to create the first cities on the earth. Like everyone with messianic pretensions, he no doubt tried to create the perfect conditions for human life.

Gathering followers about him, the "mighty hunter before the Lord" built the famous Mesopotamian city of Babylon, and three lesser known cities, Erech, Accad and Calneh. Then he traveled to Assyria, where he founded more cities—the capital, Nineveh, and Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen. At the dawn of recorded history these were major cities of the ancient world. We read about them in the 10th chapter of the biblical book of origins, Genesis.

Mankind has sought, but never attained, a perfect society ever since. Utopia is a dream that has never died.

strue such descriptions as some sort of vague spiritual blessings, but not all scholars do so. According to *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: "Though some interpreters take these statements as figurative of spiritual blessings, it seems preferable to take them as literal statements . . ." (John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Scripture Press Publications, Inc., Wheaton, Ill., 1983, 1985, note on Isaiah 35:5-7).

God challenges the skeptics

The literal application of prophetic words is a problem for many. In the end it is a matter of trust and belief that these are indeed the words of the Creator and not simply the wishful thinking of desperately optimistic men. Consider the challenge that God Himself lays down in the book of Isaiah: "Thus says the LORD . . . : 'I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God. And who can proclaim as I do? Then let him declare it and set it in order for Me . . . And the things that are coming and shall come, let them show these to them'" (Isaiah 44:6-7).

The implication is clear: The burden of proof is on the detractor of God's

Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers . . ." (Isaiah 44:24-26, New International Version).

These are powerful words and a serious challenge to the one who would deny their author. It is God's desire to save all the earth from the pain and suffering that has plagued humanity. "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22, NIV). These are not the words of a human being with no power to effect his promises.

Challenges to human survival

What kind of utopian world does this Being foretell? He speaks of a world that addresses all the stated threats to human survival. According to the Worldwatch Institute, civilization faces three imminent limits:

- The sustainable yield of the oceanic fisheries.
- The amount of freshwater in the hydrological system.
- The amount of fertilizer that existing crop varieties can effectively use.

With regard to the first limit, some years ago the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization determined that the oceans could not be fished annually at a rate of more than 100 million tons without peril. Recent reports tell us that the

because we humans have not shown a proclivity for putting back more into the system than we take out. Other methods can ensure adequate, even abundant food production, but we have rarely chosen those paths.

Divine solutions to human problems

The millennial prophecies of Isaiah and other teachers of ancient Israel reveal a God who promises an answer to all these challenges.

human growth and survival cited above? Is there a biblical answer? Hear the God of Isaiah reply: “The poor and needy seek water, but there is none, their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers in desolate heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water” (Isaiah 41:17-18).

Through the prophet Amos God tells us, “Behold, the days are coming . . . when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

God’s promises are sure

These prophecies, directed to ancient Israel, express the concern God has for the success of all humanity. With reference to the promised return of Jesus Christ, the New Testament tells us, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The utopian world of God’s devising will be one based on His law. God Himself says it will be a society void of violence and filled with right knowledge. “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). This will be the godly community we have



world’s 17 oceanic fisheries are being fished at or beyond their capacity.

When it comes to the second limit, the supply of freshwater, there is again a serious problem. Two thirds of the world’s freshwater from rivers and underground aquifers is used for irrigation. With the rise in population this means that, in areas where water is scarce, food production will give way to residential development. Las Vegas is a good example of the clash of residential growth and the needs of irrigation. Each month, about 4,000 people move to Clark County, in which Las Vegas is located. How will such water needs be met? Only by drawing down the amounts now allocated to food production somewhere.

In respect to the third limit, the fertilizer problem is simply this: In countries where fertilizer is already in heavy use, applying more does not produce more food. Present varieties of grain no longer respond to forcing by fertilizers. Scientists will have to develop new varieties that will produce more food in response to fertilizers or we will have to get used to less food. The choice is that critical,

Another ever-present danger to human survival is the threat of war. One of the most widely known biblical prophecies in our time is one that expresses our unfulfilled longing for peace. This desire is celebrated in words inscribed on the base of a statue outside the United Nations building

The utopian world of God’s devising will be based on His law, a society void of violence and filled with right knowledge.

in New York City: “We shall beat our swords into plowshares.” This universal expression of the yearning for peace was reiterated in the aftermath of some of this century’s wars. Dedicated in 1960, the statue is the work of a Russian artist, surely one to know the anguish of privation and sorrow resulting from war.

This kind of angst is exactly what the God of Isaiah promises to remedy in His world to come: “He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

What of the other imminent limits to

sought for so long—in fact, ever since the Garden of Eden.

The French mathematician and religious philosopher Blaise Pascal once proposed that we should bet on the side of God’s existence. If we are then proven right, we have lost nothing and gained immeasurably. Although Pascal’s is a tongue-in-cheek challenge for the skeptic, it is one that could start a person on the road to the only reliable and possible utopia.

Isn’t it time to look into the dozens of Bible passages where God describes a world that is a far cry from failed human communities? Hasn’t the time come to take God at His Word and believe in His promised utopia? *GN*

WHY A HUMAN UTOPIA WON'T HAPPEN

My children started watching it first. I happened to see it on television occasionally. Then I found myself drawn into this social drama by the endless manifestations of ever-evolving technology. *Star Trek*, created by Gene Roddenberry, is the popular space-odyssey television adventure in which man in the 25th century is expanding his philosophy and near-utopian coexistence among other, less-sophisticated, inhabitants of the galaxies.

It's an idea older than Plato that man can somehow engineer a civilization that brings peace, happiness and prosperity to all who can be persuaded to embrace its philosophy.

In *Star Trek* peace has been achieved on earth, and the goal is to expand the peace of "the Federation" to societies elsewhere in the universe. In the more recent versions of this television series, the officers and crews of various spacecraft contact numerous civilizations, usually those in lower stages of development, and succeed to one degree or another in spreading their gospel of peace.

The advanced moral arguments and self-control of

Much sorrow has come on the world because true believers wanted to experiment with and enforce their view of the way the world should be.

trained Star-Fleet Academy officers almost always prevail, conveying enlightened solutions to cultures in crisis.

The idea of a society in which evil no longer prevails and good reigns supreme has always been a part of human dreams. *Star Trek*, one of the later and more popular manifestations, has its appeal in its ability to take seemingly insoluble earthly problems, throw them into space, stir in a bit of technology and somehow find solutions.

We want solutions. In fact, most would choose to live in the perfect society if they could. The legacy of man's inhumanity to man has driven the philosophers among us to visualize a time and situation in which all the undesired elements of our society are removed.

Frustrated longing

But why hasn't the creation of any system or rule of any elite succeeded in producing a utopian society?

There is a fundamental reason for our inability to implement a system in which we can live in peace and happiness with ourselves, and few understand what the problem is.

The Bible reveals that humanity started out in an untainted society in the Garden of Eden. Our first parents made the decision to experience life without their Creator, who could have led them to their true human potential, which was to assume the righteous character of God. This godly character would have produced a harmonious and happy human state. The choice to seek happiness without reliance on God is characterized by Adam's and Eve's choice to partake of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

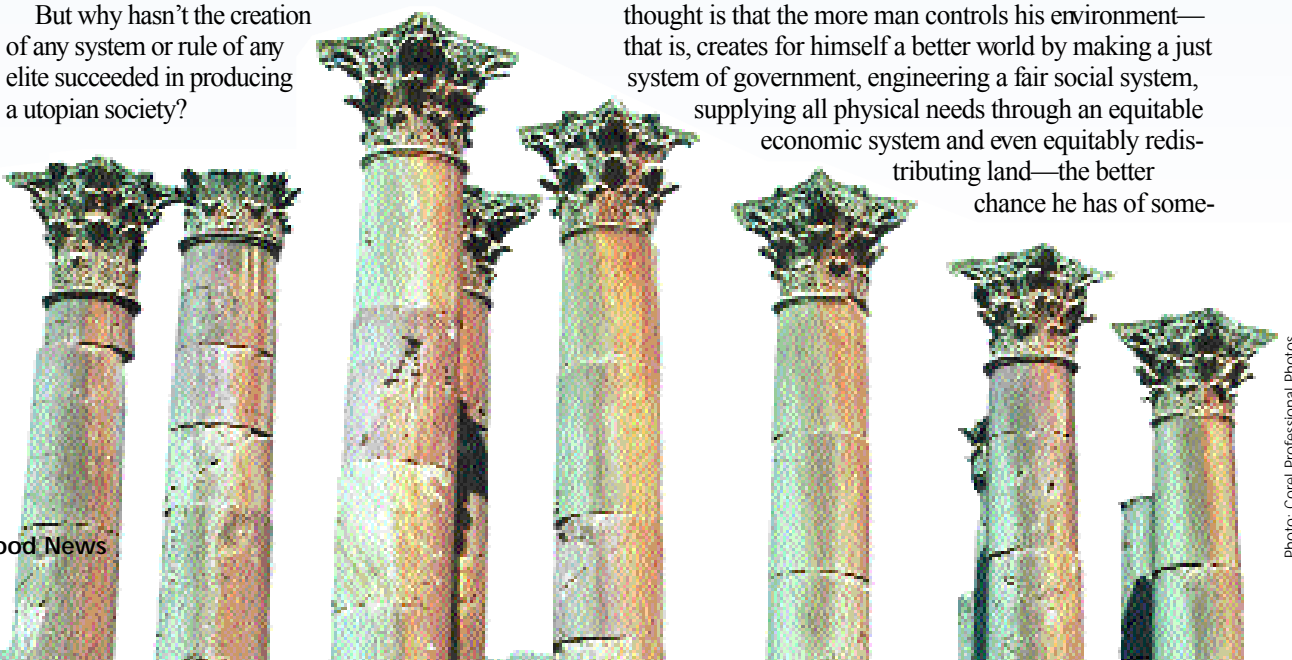
Our nature today reflects that ancient wrong choice. We want to *be* good and *do* good, but we can't find a way to change the basic nature within us that holds us in its grip. Paul confesses: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (Romans 7:18-19).

The shortcoming in utopian notions

This tendency to do wrong, of which Paul so eloquently writes, does not bode well for mankind's attempts to achieve the perfect society. History shows that we have not been able to achieve a society or implement a philosophy that has brought peace and happiness to the world.

Will these inherent desires of every man and woman ever become reality? Our future is indeed bright, but it can never be achieved by man alone because he is unable to implement the behavior necessary to create a utopian society. For a community to be an ideal place, the individual must be able to control the evil characteristics of his nature and always practice the good. This is fundamental to all utopian thought, but it has never happened.

Is it in us to direct our own nature? If so, then we should have done so long ago. Utopian ideas have always included restructuring our environment to effect a change in our nature. One of the underlying ideas in utopian thought is that the more man controls his environment—that is, creates for himself a better world by making a just system of government, engineering a fair social system, supplying all physical needs through an equitable economic system and even equitably redistributing land—the better chance he has of some-



how changing human nature for the better.

As Lewis Mumford rightly says in *The Story of Utopias*: “The more completely man is in control of physical nature, the more urgently we must ask ourselves what under the heavens is to move and guide and keep in hand the controller.”

The nature of the human mind must be controlled, and it must be controlled according to an agreed-upon standard. By whom, and by what standard?

If man chooses to live without the benefit of God’s revealed knowledge, man is left to devise his own societies, civilizations and philosophies—with the ever-present fear that visionaries will adopt the idea that the end justifies the means and resort to war and conquest to impose their visions upon less-enlightened people. Much tribulation has come on the world because true believers wanted to experiment with their view of the way the world should be.

Consider this: Only the Creator God is qualified to establish a standard and expect man to live by it. Since He made man, He knows *how* man ought to live to produce the right results.

Man was removed from the Garden of Eden and left on his own to forge a society because he made a fateful conscious decision that he wanted to be the master of his own destiny by deciding for himself what is right or wrong. However, he failed to realize he could never reach his destiny apart from his Creator; instead he has reaped the fruits of his own frustrated inability to perfect idealistic systems. In spite of his lack of success, man, instead of turning to his Creator, has persisted in the idea that his cumulative experience would let him evolve into a deepened being who would produce the society that would satisfy his longings.

The good news is that man will realize his dream. But God has His own ideas how this will happen.

The heart of the matter

Plato, in his *Republic*, wasn’t the first to write of ideal worlds in which no one suffered, in which only peace and prosperity were to be found. The prophets of the Bible envisioned a time during which a system would be universally instituted that would eradicate disease, hunger, war and injustice and replace them with health, plenty, beauty, security and righteousness.

Micah 4:1-4 paints an extraordinary picture of humanity’s future: “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.”

This isn’t just poetry from an ancient dreamer. This is only one of many depictions in the Bible of the literal new world made possible by God’s plan for all men and women. Notice that it has many of the elements of utopian thought: no war, a perfect government, security, fair ownership of land, standardized ethics. What’s amazing is everyone is pictured as agreeing to the ethics and wanting to learn of them and abide by them. This will be an achievement that would seem unrealizable to the philosophers.

This, of course, is the crux of the matter. The mission of utopianism is to encourage the hope that human nature is regenerative beyond the limits historically assigned to it. The core belief is that human nature still has not exhausted the possibilities for change and can change for the better, given enough time and the right conditions.

The Bible assures us that the opposite is true “because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Romans 8:7). This is the tragic fruit of rejecting God. Man cannot change his own tendencies to sin unless his nature is changed by a higher source. God’s process of regeneration of man includes the Creator setting man free from the hold of sin and empowering him to live according to a higher standard of righteousness (Romans 6:18).

Human nature changed

Micah’s prophetic picture shows man finally coming to grips with his own flawed nature so his actions and attitudes become beneficial to his neighbor. No need will exist for social or genetic engineering to create an environment conducive to produce this change in behavior.

God will change man’s behavior *from within* through His Spirit. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within

The good news is, man will realize his dream. But most have no idea how it will come about.

you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

He promises, “I will put My laws in their mind and write them in their heart” (Jeremiah 31:33). “They shall be my people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them” (Jeremiah 32:38-39).

When man’s nature is changed from within, man’s environment will also change. When man’s nature is changed from enmity toward God to one that seeks God, only then will the ever-worsening problems of society change for the better.

This biblical portrayal was given to humans by God Himself and is not the hopeful imaginings of the powerless men we find in utopian literature. This will be lasting. Mankind will face no more disappointments. This will not be an experiment. That’s the difference in God inspired visions and mankind’s hopeful notions.

This isn’t a dream. This is going to happen. *GN*

The Crisis at the Close

“We have reached a point of historic crisis.”

—Eric Hobsbawm, British author

by John Ross Schroeder

Weather has always fascinated people. Men and women observe the clouds, often noticing the subtleties of shade and color, and they easily discern the changing weather patterns.

When growing up in South Texas, I had plenty of time while driving a tractor on my father’s farm to watch weather patterns and even to fancy myself an amateur meteorologist. Keeping a watch on the weather seems natural to many of us.

Nearly two millennia ago Jesus Christ commented on this same predisposition: “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but *you cannot interpret the signs of the times*” (Matthew 16:2-3, New International Version, emphasis added throughout).

What was Jesus’ point? It was simply that our innate human desire to observe and analyze weather conditions ought to tell us something: that we can also observe and discern the signs of the times.

Storms building and dispersing

One thing about Texas weather

tors had altered the conditions.

Studious men and women sometimes look into their Bibles and correlate prophecies with trends on the international landscape. To them conditions can appear as if the end of the age is upon us.

But then the symptoms slip into remission, and the war clouds (or whatever signals seem obvious) dissipate. This happened during World War II when for a time Nazi armies seemed on the brink of fulfilling end-time prophecies concerning Europe and the Middle East. But conditions abruptly changed. The crisis passed.

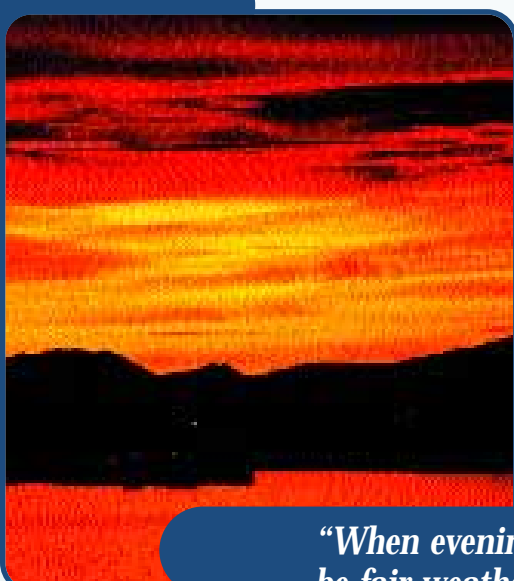
Today’s literal tempests or socio-political storms are rather easy to identify. The Cold War may be history, but many of the former U.S.S.R.’s nuclear weapons still exist. Though in a weak economic state, Russia remains well armed. Said an American policy maker, Sen. Jon L. Kyl, in a speech at the New Atlantic Initiative conference in Prague in May 1995, “If the Soviet Union is no more, then why do we need to spend billions more on defense—for example, in weapons research, long-range bombers or missile defense?” But Henry Kissinger, writing in *Newsweek* in June of 1996, reminds us that “Russia possesses 20,000 nuclear weapons.”

Armed to the teeth

The wielding of weapons is not a problem just among nations. Terrorist groups operating inside the boundaries of countries constitute a major civil concern because they exist outside the law and are generally armed to the teeth.

Researchers frequently discover new and better farming methods, but population growth still careens out of control in many countries least able to support such increases. Some are concerned that the earth houses far too many people in terms of our current track record in mastering global resources and world distribution. Said *The Times* (London) June 17: “A ballooning world population is taking such a heavy toll of the planet’s resources that it is putting the survival of humankind in jeopardy, according to a group of international experts.”

Concerning the environment, Professor David King describes the box canyon we have gullibly sauntered into: “The West is destroying the ecologi-



Parsons Technology Photo

“When evening comes, you say, it will be fair weather, for the sky is red . . . You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

I noticed was that sometimes the sky and the weather report both called for severe thunderstorms that never happened. The signs were there. The black, threatening cumulus clouds abounded. The sky was dark, and one could almost feel a rainstorm in the air. But the clouds dispersed, and the predicted storm failed to develop. Unseen fac-

A WORLD IN PERPETUAL CRISIS!

The remarkable characteristic of the crises of today is their continuity.”—David Burnett King, *American educator and author*

British author Anthony Sampson has written at least three “anatomies of Britain” in recent decades. The first two were useful, but his latest edition conveys a clear urgency. Even the title tells us that the focus has shifted into a higher gear—a crisis mode.

The Essential Anatomy of Britain: Democracy in Crisis includes a chapter containing an obvious warning to the British government to get its house in order. No such chapter appeared in the two previous editions.

It was British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks who wrote: “Today’s prophets, I realised with some sadness, are often not religious leaders but a small group of academics, who breaking free of disciplinary specialisation, have surveyed our age from the broadest of perspectives and brought back a report of imminent danger” (*Faith in the Future*, Dartman, Longman and Todd, London, 1995, p. 65).

Such prophetic voices have been sounding warnings for some time, pointing to the ominous signs on the world scene. Some are foretelling a crisis that will signal a massive change on our precious planet.

This is clearly reflected in the titles of several recent books. American author James Dale Davidson and his British counterpart William Rees-Mogg jointly titled their book, *The Great Reckoning*. Eric Hobsbawm warned us in *The Age of Extremes*.

David Burnett King notes in *The Crisis of Our Time*: “. . . There exists a profound feeling of unease . . .

we are passing through some sort of crisis, riding out a sea change that will somehow make the future very different from our past” (Susquehanna University Press, Selingsgrove, 1988, p. 17).

The real truth is that we are now approaching a transition period between two ages, our age and the one Jesus Christ called “the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). We now live at the end of a century of crisis, with world trends promising more in the 21st century.

Wrote Hobsbawm: “We know that behind the opaque cloud of our ignorance and the uncertainty of detailed outcomes, the historical forces that shaped the century are continuing to operate” (*The Age of Revolution*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994).

Hobsbawm shows that the earth cannot continue to bear the unwanted fruits of the darker aspects of modern technology forever. He continues: “. . . We have reached a point of historic crisis. The forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material foundations of human life” (ibid.).

As David King wrote: “The nature of crisis has changed. The remarkable characteristic of the crises of today is their continuity—they have moved in, it seems, to stay” (*The Crisis of our Time*, Susquehanna University Press, Selingsgrove, 1988). In this modern age, this wisdom is self-evident. **GN**

cal systems upon which its economic life depends. We are in a difficult position, forced to choose between the short-term interests of an economy that sustains us and the well-being of the natural world that will be needed in future to sustain us” (*The Crisis of Our Time*, Susquehanna University Press, Selingsgrove, 1988, p. 215).

What is missing to solve our dilemma is the wisdom and understanding to be found in the Bible, even though a few secular forecasters do not hesitate to draw upon the perspective of Holy Scriptures.

Wrote William Rees-Mogg: “The book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph. By listening to Joseph’s hint, the [Egyptian] Pharaoh rightly anticipated the seven lean years that followed seven years of plenty. From that date to this, it has always been true that the future belonged to

(ca. 535 B.C.), written by a great prophet of God who was in effect prime minister under kings spanning two governments ruling much of the then-known world.

Daniel 11 begins one of the longest, most detailed prophecies in the Bible. It commences with the first year of Darius the Mede, first monarch of the Medo-Persian Empire, and comes down to “the time of the end” (verses 1-40). The remainder of that chapter centers on a great power struggle in the Middle East.

The first verse of chapter 12 brings us to a crucial passage in this long prophecy: “At that time Michael [an archangel] shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time.”

But even before the time of Daniel, the prophet Jeremiah

Some find it difficult to comprehend how Jesus—the One who came to bring us abundant life—could also warn us about how bad conditions would ultimately become.

those who prepared for it” (*The Great Reckoning*, Sidgwick & Johnson, London, 1992, p. 35).

But how can you properly prepare unless you know in advance what is coming? This is where the Scriptures come in. Throughout the Bible we find a prophetic theme, in Old Testament and New. An unbroken thread of prophecy runs through the Scriptures from the first book to the last.

A time of great crisis

The Bible specifically warns us that an unprecedented time of universal distress is coming on planet earth. This period of world-jarring chaos is spoken of in several biblical books, written at various times by different authors.

Consider the book of Daniel



Photo illustration by Shaun Venish/PhotoDisc, 1996

wrote similar words of warning. “Ask and see: Can a man bear children? Then why do I see every strong man with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labour, every face turned deathly pale? How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it” (Jeremiah 30:6-7, NIV).

Until the 20th century mankind could not have grasped the awful portent of these words. Yet they are rendered even more ominous by the later warnings of Jesus Christ Himself in what came to be known as the Olivet prophecy, originally given on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem shortly before His death.

Some find it difficult to comprehend how Jesus Christ—the Savior of mankind, the One who came to sacrifice Himself for every sinner, the One who came to bring us abundant life—could also warn us about how bad conditions would ultimately become on earth in the epicenter of this unprecedented passage.

But He did!

A trial like no other

Matthew records these fateful words from the mouth of Jesus of Nazareth—the Christ, or Messiah: “It will be a time of great distress; there has never been such a time from the beginning of the

world until now, and will never be again. If that time of troubles were not cut short, no living thing could survive; but for the sake of God’s chosen it will be cut short” (Matthew 24:21-22, New English Bible).

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this prophecy. Except for the promised divine intervention, *human life would cease on earth*. The most horrifyingly surreal catastrophes as depicted in movies and television programs will come to pass, to the point that life will face extinction if not for God’s direct intervention to save it.

These are not our words, but the warning of Jesus Christ Himself. It is all too easy to read right over these verses and emphasize only those passages we want to hear, such as Christ’s miraculous healings and promises of forgiveness, mercy and peace (Matthew 6:14; 5:7; John 14:27), as important as they are.

Christ clearly told us that we are to

live by every word that comes out of the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). We are not at liberty to ignore biblical prophecies about horrors to come. Hiding our heads in the sand is not the way to deal with future troubles. Luke’s Gospel expresses this somberly worded warning by quoting Christ: “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written [in the Scriptures] may be fulfilled” (Luke 21:22).

These predictions herald a time like no other in the history of our already crisis-charged world while it hurtles inevitably toward the greatest crisis of all time, the one that James Moffatt called “the crisis at the close” (Daniel 12:9, Moffatt Translation).

When will it all happen?

But when? At what time will these things occur? Christ’s disciples posed the same questions: “Tell us when will these things be? And what will be the sign of

A WARNING TO BE ALERT

“To those who do not wish to understand, all news is a surprise.” —William Rees-Mogg, *Times (of London) columnist*

The main purpose of our regular features “Behind the Headlines” and “World News and Trends” is to keep *Good News* readers informed about the way the world is going, but always from a biblical viewpoint.

The contents of these features do not always reflect front-page news in the accepted sense. Often the news behind the news proves far more important in the long run. Veteran columnist and former London *Times* editor William Rees-Mogg tells us that “you can depend on the fact that normal channels of information will seldom if ever give you advance warning of major political and economic events.”

The main source for *The Good News* magazine is, of course, the Bible. Inevitably, then, almost all material appearing in “World News and Trends” and “Behind the Headlines” is written from the perspective of God’s purpose and plan for humanity as revealed in the Scriptures.

Somewhere from a fourth to a third of the contents of the Bible is prophetic in nature. Much of this eschatological material is profoundly connected with developments in world affairs. In that sense the Bible is always an up-to-date, vitally relevant book.

Regarding global trends and affairs, no section of Scripture is more applicable to our world than the Olivet prophecy, recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. That is where Jesus Christ Himself warns us to be vigilant about our own spiritual condition. He also describes conditions and events leading up to His second coming.

After describing the grievous state of the world to which He would return, Jesus Christ told His disciples, “But of that day or hour *no one knows*, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Mark 13:32, New American

Standard Bible throughout, emphasis added throughout).

But does the fact that we cannot know the exact time mean we should throw up our hands and forget about the whole scenario? By no means. Notice what Jesus instructs in the next verse: “Take heed, *keep on the alert*; for you do not know when the appointed time is” (verse 33).

He then compared Himself and His second coming to a man who traveled to a distant country, left his servants in charge of his property and asked the doorkeeper to “stay on the alert” until he returned.

Then Jesus Christ gives His warning to His disciples a second time. “Therefore, *be on the alert*—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming” (verse 35).

Next He warns His servants not to fall asleep on the job, followed by a third and final appeal emphasizing the importance of their task. “And what I say to you I say to all: *Be on the alert!*” (verse 37).

Luke emphasizes our personal conduct in his Gospel’s account. In it Jesus warns us to be diligent in keeping our personal spiritual house in order and shows us exactly the kind of distractions His disciples must avoid.

“Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day [of Christ’s return] come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth” (Luke 21:34-35).

The vast majority of people, says Jesus Christ, will be taken by surprise. This is partly because they will have little or no idea of the need for high standards of personal conduct. Of course, Christ wants His servants to avoid falling into this trap. So He tells all of us: “But *keep on the alert at all times*, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (verse 36). **GN**

Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

Jesus did give His followers some general indications (verses 4-35), but He pointedly avoided precision in terms of the time that would pass before these events occurred. “But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (verse 36). Later, after His resurrection, the disciples again asked Him when He would initiate a new age and the Kingdom of God would be established on earth. Christ replied, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (Acts 1:7).

Historically, many have been so anxious for the return of Jesus Christ that

manent. We get up in the morning, and the sun is rising as usual. We still have a home, we drive our familiar route to work, we get absorbed in the day’s routine, and life goes on as it always has.

All this, however, is not forever. We know, in moments of reflection, that our lives are not permanent. They will all come to an end, and “the living know that they shall die,” wrote King Solomon (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Bible prophecies are sure

In the same way, fulfillment of biblical prophecies is sure. God is the Sovereign of the universe and possesses the will and power to carry out what He says will happen: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like

some of the many traumas that will come to pass, Jesus Christ said, “When these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near . . . So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:28, 31).

The book of Daniel ends its long Middle East prophecy of chapter 11 with these strong words of assurance and encouragement: “And at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righ-

These predictions herald a time like no other in history as our world hurtles inevitably toward the one great crisis of all time—“the crisis at the close.”

they have been slow to accept His own testimony. This has led to much confusion and misunderstanding of prophecy. Too often down through history have some cried wolf.

Yet these end-time prophecies remain as valid as on the days they were originally spoken and written. They *will* come to pass—but in God’s good time.

A beginning and an end

Pulitzer Prize-winner and professor of astronomy at Cornell University Carl Sagan wrote: “There was once a time before the sun and earth existed, a time before there was day or night, long, long before there was anyone to record the beginning for those who might come after” (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, Century, London, 1992, p. 11).

“Before time began” was the way the apostle Paul put it (2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2). It is, however, enormously difficult for a person to imagine such a time, a period before the creation itself. Yet some scientists, and most important your Bible, speak of it as a surety.

Almost equally hard for humanity to grasp is the future laid out in the last four chapters of the Bible’s final book, Revelation. But a beginning leads to an end. A start leads to a finish. History can be described as linear in nature. From this perspective time does march on.

Our personal world can seem so per-

me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:9-10, NIV).

World conditions seem bad enough. The plight of humanity gets worse. Just watch the news on television or take a good daily newspaper. Occasionally read the kind of books mentioned in “A World in Perpetual Crisis” on page 11. They will help open your eyes to our afflictions as the 20th century draws to a close.

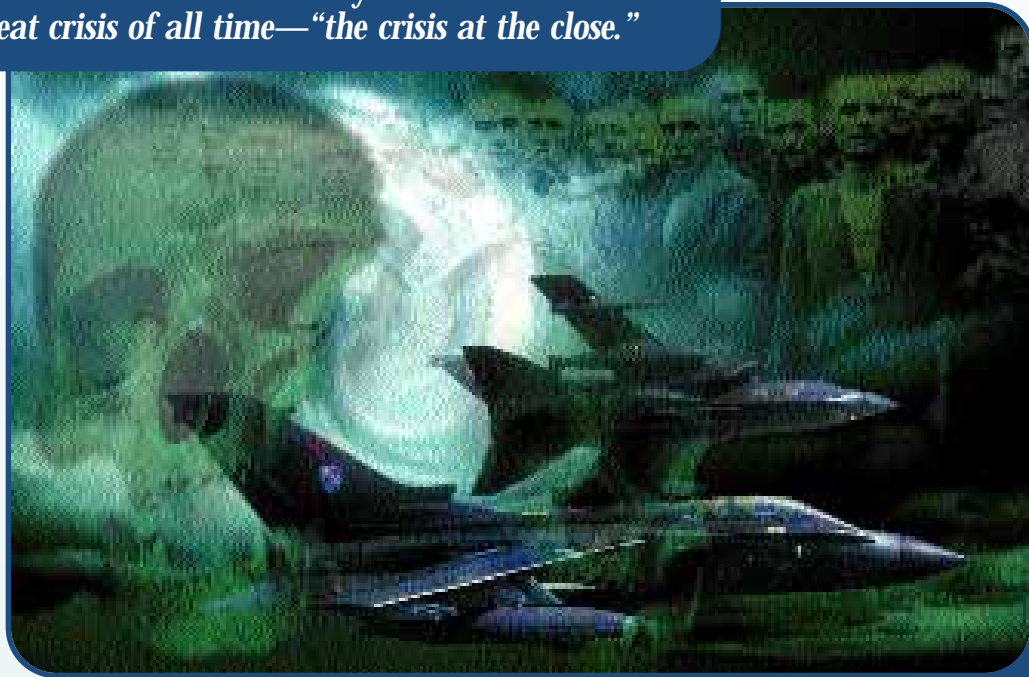
What lies beyond these great troubles should motivate us. After describing

teousness like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:1-3).

A call to true repentance

Why does it sometimes appear that the curtain is about to come down on the world stage—and then conditions rapidly change and it simply doesn’t fall? For centuries people have simply misread and misunderstood biblical prophecies concerning the time of the end. Leaders have arisen who have confidently predicted specific events, only to

Continued on page 16





An Overview of Conditions

Illegal-drug trade builds worldwide economic powerhouse

The trade in illegal drugs has grown to a \$500 billion annual business, according to a report by Freedom House tracking the meteoric rise of the trade. The market in cocaine, marijuana, hashish, heroin, opiates and other mind-altering substances accounts for 10 to 13 percent of global commerce, an amount equal to the world market in crude petroleum.



The influence of drug money has led to the rise of "narco states" in South America, so called because of the predominance of corruption on virtually all levels of government. Some Caribbean islands are, in essence, drug fiefdoms that are nothing more than huge financial laundering operations. Drugs are now produced in at least 31 nations, with drug money laundered in 33 countries.

In some areas illegal drugs are so widely available that they have attained a de-facto legal status. Authorities lack the resources—and sometimes the will—to dampen drug use. In some situations drug smuggling has grown simply too pervasive to stop. For example, customs officials in America

The market in cocaine, marijuana, heroin, hashish, opiates and other mind-altering and substances accounts for 10 to 13 percent of global commerce, an amount equal to the world market in crude petroleum.

inspect fewer than one in 30 ship containers arriving in the country and only a fraction of the 8,000 trucks arriving from Mexico each day.

Because of the vast amounts of money at stake, law enforcers hold out little hope of cutting off illegal drugs at the source or of eliminating suppliers. The only way to end this scourge is to curb demand, and that can come about only through a change in human attitudes. (Source: Gannett News Service.)

Conflict sharpens over European Middle East role

In the first half of this century European involvement figured heavily in the Middle East during both world wars and their aftermath. Arab oil and the formation of the state of Israel in 1948 assured a continuation of that interest right up to the present.

Recent setbacks in the Middle East peace process have brought about a sharp renewal of interest on the part of France, Russia and the European Union. President Jacques Chirac in particular has evinced a growing enthusiasm for an increased French role in the diplomatic process with recent state visits to Syria and Israel.

Whatever their individual motives, at least two or three European powers apparently believe that a diplomatic vacuum has been created by the perceived peace failures ostensibly brought about by the intransigence of a new right-wing Israeli government. This has caught America's eye, and, in spite of Irish foreign minister Dick Spring's assurances that the United States "must not believe Europe is trying to muscle in," the Clinton administration plainly does not want European diplomatic help at this time.

Reports Robert Fisk from Damascus: "In a letter which has both angered and astonished the European Union, Warren Christopher, the United States secretary of state, has warned all 15 EU foreign ministers not to meddle in the U.S.-led Middle East peace process." Secretary Christopher referred to the present as a "delicate moment" in the process. This only adds to the foreign-policy differences America already has with the EU over Cuba.

However, the Middle East is destined to continue to play a major role in European and world affairs. The 11th chapter of Daniel foretells a great confrontation in the Middle East at the "time of the end" involving a major power in Europe, referred to as the "king of the North." Daniel 12 indicates that frightful world tensions will be followed by the second coming of Jesus Christ. One Bible translation refers to this panorama of events as "the crisis at the close" (Daniel 12:9, Moffatt Translation). (Source: *The Independent; Reuter.*)

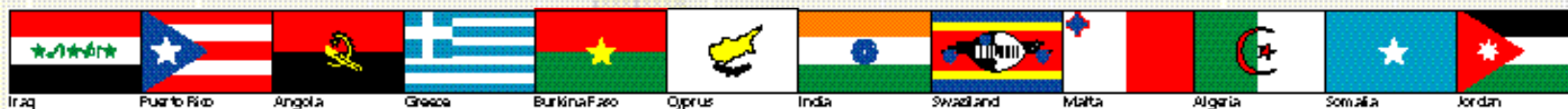
British rule over Gibraltar threatened

At the beginning of 1947 most of the British Empire was still intact, but the next 40 years saw a rapid unraveling of the empire on which it once could be said the sun never set. Threatened now are its vestiges.

The British fought a war to retain sovereignty in the Falkland Islands in 1982. Hong Kong is to be returned to China this year. And Spain has never been happy with the status of Gibraltar.

Recently Marcus Warren reported that "Britain's commander in Gibraltar could soon be taking orders from a Spanish officer, ending nearly 300 years of sole British military control of the Rock. A change in NATO's structure, now under discussion, to put a Spaniard above the British officer in the Mediterranean chain of command would be a huge propaganda victory for Spain, which has never recognised British rule of the tiny peninsula."

Ever since the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has struggled to find a new role for itself. Who would have thought that its very command structure could figure in the future of Spanish claims on Gibraltar? (Source: *The Sunday Telegraph.*)





tions Around the World

Major species in jeopardy

The creation epic in Genesis 1 mentions God making "great sea creatures" and "beast[s] of the earth." The epilogue tells us that "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (verse 31). What must God think of mankind's

What must God think of mankind's stewardship of the earth and that so many major animal species are now in danger of extinction?

stewardship of the earth (see verse 28) and that so many major animal species are now in danger of extinction?

Take the awesomely beautiful tiger as a case in point. Writes Stuart Wavell in *The Sunday Times*: "In the forests of the night, the tiger is facing extinction. Its last great stronghold in India is under siege by rich men who grind its bones to make their bread."

Scarcely 3,000 Bengal tigers remain in India (2,500), Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The Indochinese tiger is down to but 1,000, the Siberian 160, the Sumatran 400 and the South China tiger fewer than 50. Already extinct are the Ball tiger (gone since the 1940s), Caspian (1970s) and Javan (1980s). Reports from India estimate that Bengal tigers are killed at the rate of one a day. The earth boasted 80,000 tigers of all species in 1900. Fewer than 5,000 may remain.

In addition to the tiger, elephants are under siege in Africa and Asia. The white rhino is near extinction, with only about 7,500 left in Southern Africa. And, says one source, of the 11 great whale species, seven are on the danger list.

As far back as 1961 *The Daily Mirror* headlined the problem: "Doomed to Disappear From the Face of the Earth Due to Man's Folly, Greed, Neglect." Today illegal-wildlife trade rages out of control. (Sources: *The Sunday Times*; *The Independent*; *The Express*.)

Pope discusses evolution

Nearly 140 years after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the pope has recently written about the theory of evolution. Said a recent papal letter: "New knowledge leads us to recognise in the theory of evolution more than a hypothesis."

Yet the pope's version is something akin to so-called theistic evolution—the belief being that God somehow had a hand in the whole process. Pope John Paul II wrote about "spiritual readings of evolution" and spoke of "the spiritual soul" being "directly created by God."

Still, this latest papal revelation is a significant departure from the position of Pius XII in 1950. According to one source, he "claimed that Catholics must believe there was a literal Adam, a first man [from] whom all subsequent humans descend[ed]."

Even earlier in this century a French priest, Teilhard de Chardin, pioneered in the metaphysical study of human evolution, drawing on what was then known about early humanlike creatures and the fossil record. He wrote several

such books, with perhaps *The Phenomenon of Man* his principal work in that field. The Catholic Church, however, viewed his writings with suspicion.

According to a recent book review, the church has some 100,000 priests and 200,000 nuns. One wonders what they think of this latest letter. (Sources: *The Sunday Times*; *The Independent*; *The Independent on Sunday*; Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper & Row, New York, 1959.)

Sexually transmissible diseases plague America

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sexually transmissible disorders were the three most commonly reported infectious diseases in 1995.

Chlamydia, which the CDC began tracking nationally in 1994, was the infectious disease most commonly reported, with 477,638 cases. However, as noted by Dr. Denise Koo, CDC medical epidemiologist, that figure includes only the number of cases actually reported to the centers. Experts estimate that the true annual number of new cases is around four million. Gonorrhea was the second most commonly reported disease, with 392,848 cases. AIDS took the third spot, with 71,547 new cases reported to the CDC.

Chlamydia is transmitted by a microorganism acquired during sexual relations. It is often undetected because it usually produces few symptoms other than abdominal pain or a vaginal discharge in women and a burning sensation during urination or other discharge in men. If undetected and untreated, chlamydia can lead to more-serious problems.

Similarly, gonorrhea can lead to severe problems, including pelvic inflammatory disease, sterility and spreading of

The many biblical prohibitions against extramarital, premarital and homosexual relations are based on sound principles that protect mental, physical and spiritual health and serve to strengthen families and societies. When these laws are broken, human suffering is inevitable.

the infection to joints, muscles, heart and brain. Barring some medical breakthrough, AIDS still appears to be fatal to everyone contracting the disease.

The most ironic and tragic aspect of this epidemic is that the staggering social, financial and health costs of these diseases are unnecessary because they are preventable. The many biblical prohibitions against extramarital, premarital and homosexual relations are based on sound principles that strengthen families and societies. When these laws are broken, human suffering is inevitable. (Source: *Newsday*.)

—Scott Ashley and John Ross Schroeder



Crisis

Continued from page 13

see the specified dates come and go with nothing changed.

Another perspective on this subject is important to God, but not understood by most people. That is the spiritual dimension. The apostle Peter's words sum up God's concerns in dealing with humanity and carrying out His purpose: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, NIV).

Repentance is an important aspect of the great commission given by Jesus Christ to His followers as recorded in Matthew 24:14 and 28:18-20. Luke mentions specifically that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47, NIV).

Christ told His followers that a work will be done on earth—a message of both warning and hope to go out to a spiritually sick and chaotic world, proclaiming in full power the gospel of God's coming Kingdom. God wants many to be

GROWTH OF KNOWLEDGE PREDICTED IN THE BIBLE

"Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase" (Daniel 12:4). Daniel 12 concerns the "time of the end." So the Bible clearly predicts that an enormous increase in knowledge and travel would characterize this final age of man. But what kind of knowledge?

We have seen great progress in material knowledge, particularly in the almost instant transmission of knowledge and information. The Internet—that proverbial information superhighway—is alive with bits and pieces of data of every stripe.

America sits on the leading edge of the fantastic ability to transmit information from nation to nation, corporation to corporation, person to person. Wrote Joseph Nye and William Owens in *Foreign Affairs*: "America has apparent strength in economic power and military production. Yet its more subtle comparative advantage is its ability to collect, process, act upon, and disseminate information, an edge that will almost certainly grow over the next decade" (March-April 1996).

From God's point of view, however, growth in technical knowledge and information is not enough. Wrote the Hebrew prophet Hosea: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children" (Hosea 4:6, emphasis added).

This is the great conundrum of our age: massive growth in material knowledge coupled with an unbelievable paucity of spiritual understanding. Make no mistake about it. America and the other Western nations possess vast knowledge that has produced and increased untold wealth. But this prosperity is not being undergirded and supported by national obedience to God's great spiritual law, the Ten Commandments.

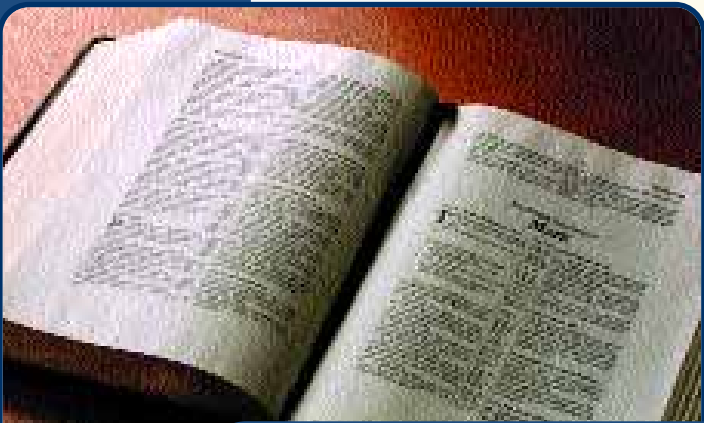
The authors of the above optimistic article titled "America's Information Edge" freely acknowledge in their conclusion: "The final and most fundamental requirement is the preservation of the kind of nation that is at the heart of America's soft power appeal. In recent years this most valuable foreign policy asset has been endangered by the growing international perception of America as a society riven by crime, violence, drug abuse, racial tension, family breakdown, fiscal irresponsibility, political gridlock, and increasingly acrimonious political discourse in which extreme points of view make the biggest headlines."

Their first paragraph begins: "Knowledge, more than ever before, is power." Yet, to maintain the power and strength of a nation, much more is required than mere material knowledge. Hosea continues his prophecy about knowledge with the solemn words, "The more they increased [in population and prosperity], the more they sinned against Me" (verse 7).

The Bible defines sin as the rejection of God's law (1 John 3:4). Unfortunately the fantastic

growth in technical knowledge is paralleled by an ugly growth in all kinds of evils. Every day the Western news and entertainment media broadcast an unceasing litany of these societal evils.

In the long run the only thing that will save humankind is a humble compliance with the spirit of these words spoken by our Creator nearly 3,000 years ago: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). GN



Christ told His followers that a work will be done on earth—a message of both warning and hope to go out to a spiritually sick world, proclaiming the gospel of God's coming Kingdom.

turned to righteousness, to experience genuine repentance. This is a vital part of this great commission!

To better understand this critical message, be sure to request our free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. You may contact us at the phone numbers or addresses on page 2. GN

When Was Jesus Christ Born?

by Mario Seiglie

The year 2000 is approaching, and excitement is in the air. Magazines and newspapers report on the celebrations scheduled for January 1, 2000, the purported beginning of the 21st century and the third millennium. Even though the new century and new millennium really begin January 1, 2001, it is a rare generation that can witness such an event.

The numbering system in our calendar was originally intended to reflect the years since the birth of Christ. Yet, before too much is said about this celebration, perhaps we should ask how accurate is the numbering system. Has it really been 1,996 years since the birth of Jesus?

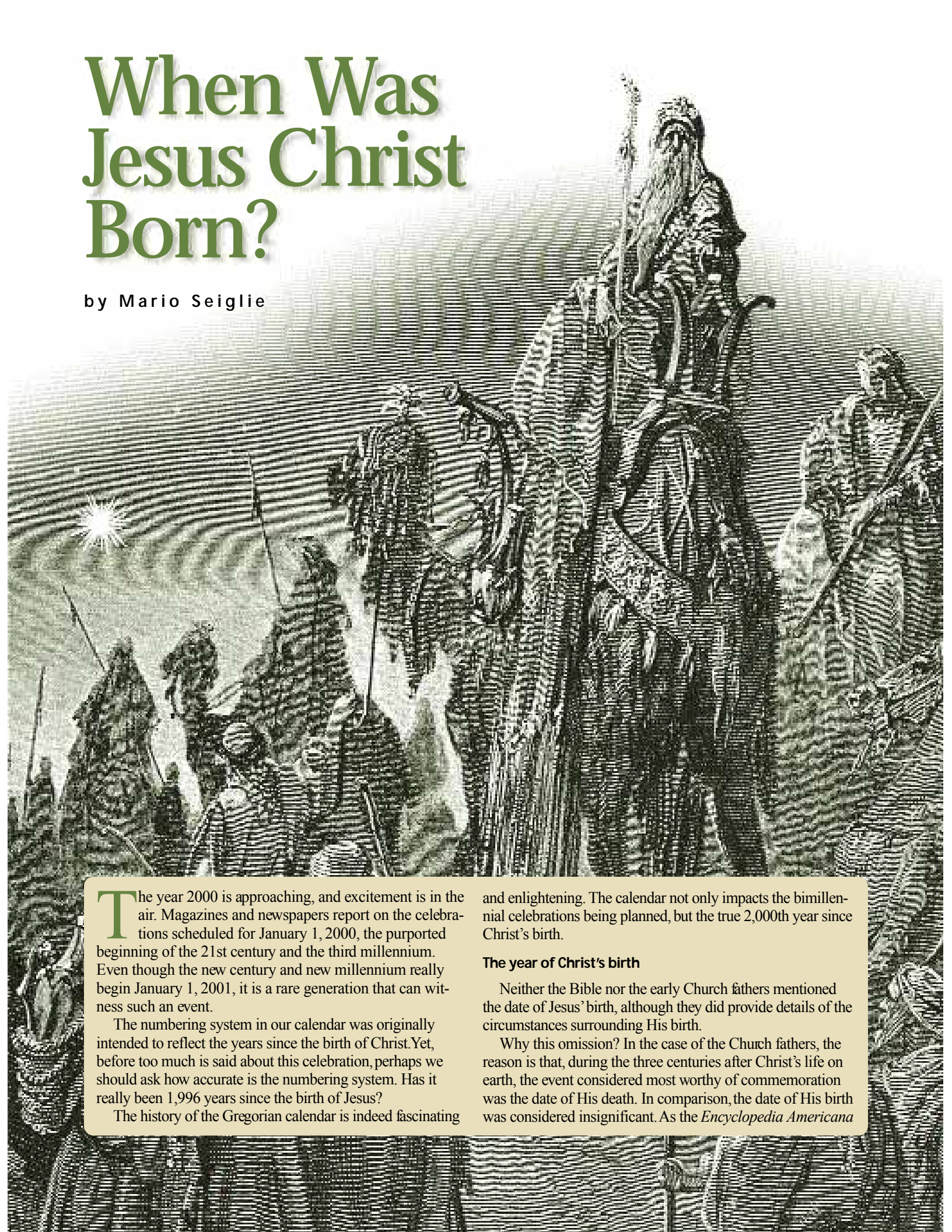
The history of the Gregorian calendar is indeed fascinating

and enlightening. The calendar not only impacts the bimillennial celebrations being planned, but the true 2,000th year since Christ's birth.

The year of Christ's birth

Neither the Bible nor the early Church fathers mentioned the date of Jesus' birth, although they did provide details of the circumstances surrounding His birth.

Why this omission? In the case of the Church fathers, the reason is that, during the three centuries after Christ's life on earth, the event considered most worthy of commemoration was the date of His death. In comparison, the date of His birth was considered insignificant. As the *Encyclopedia Americana*



explains, “Christmas . . . was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian church as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth . . .” (1944 edition, “Christmas”).

So how was the year determined for His birth? In 525 Pope John I commissioned the scholar Dionysius Exiguus the task of establishing a feast calendar for the

Christian history, no mention is made of the calendar date of His birth. Not until the year 336 do we find the first mention of celebration of Christ’s birth.

Speculation on the proper date began in the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the idea of fixing Christ’s birthday started. Quite a controversy arose among Church leaders. Some were opposed to such a celebration. Origen (185-254) strongly recommended against such an innovation.

Pachon . . . Furthermore, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi” (“The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, p. 333).

Later, in 243, the official feast calendar of the time, *De Pascha Computus*, places the date of Christ’s birth as March 28. Other dates suggested were April 2 and November 18. Meanwhile, in the East, January 6 was chosen, a date the Greeks had celebrated as the birth of the god Dionysus and the Egyptians as the birth of the god Osiris. Although pagans commonly celebrated the birthdays of their gods, in the Bible a birthday is never celebrated to the true God (who, of course, had no birth or day of origin) or any of His servants.

Surprisingly, not only is the traditional year for Christ’s birth off by several years, but His supposed December 25 birthday is also not at all based on Scripture.

Church. Dionysius also estimated the year of Christ’s birth, but through several errors in his calculations arrived at a date at least a few years later than the actual event.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Dionysius set the year of Christ’s birth as the 753rd year since the founding of Rome. However, this was an impossibility, since the Gospels record Jesus’ birth as occurring during the reign of Herod the Great, and thus He could not have been born later than the 750th year from the founding of Rome (15th edition, Vol. 4, p. 580, “Chronology”).

Herod’s death was recorded by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus and would have fallen in 4 B.C. Therefore, according to the adjusted calculations, Christ’s birth took place some four years before the traditional date. Counting forward from 4 B.C. for 2,000 years (one year has to be added because there was no year 0) yields 1996 as the true 2,000th calendar year after Christ’s birth. This might prove disappointing to the celebrants of the January 1, 2000, date, but they shouldn’t worry too much, since the tide of tradition has usually overwhelmed the facts of history.

Confusion over dates

Surprisingly, not only is the traditional year for Christ’s birth off by a few years, but His supposed December 25 birthday, widely celebrated as Christmas, is also off. Both history and the Bible give many strong indications against December 25 as the day of Christ’s birth.

Certainly, if the ancients had known when Christ was born, we would expect to find ample evidence of the celebration in early writings. Yet, in the first 200 years o

“In the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners who make great rejoicings over the day in which they were born into this world” (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1908 edition, Vol. 3, p. 724, “Natal Day”).

During this time eight specific dates during six different months were proposed by various groups. December 25, although one of the last dates to be proposed, was the one finally accepted by the leadership of the Western church.

A summary of the debate on the dates of Christ’s birth appears in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*: “Though speculation as to the time of year of Christ’s birth dates from the early 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria suggesting the 20th of May, the celebration of the anniversary does not appear to have been general till the later 4th century. The earliest mention of the observance on Dec. 25th is in the Philocalian Calendar, representing Roman practice of the year 336. This date was probably chosen to oppose the feast of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* [nativity of the unconquerable sun] by the celebration of the birth of the ‘Sun of Righteousness’ and its observance in the West, seems to have spread from Rome” (1983 edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 280, “Christmas”).

Around 200, when Clement of Alexandria mentioned the speculations about Christ’s birthday, he said nothing about a celebration on that day. He casually reported the various ideas extant at that time: “And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day . . . , the 25th day of

December 25 popularized

In Rome December 25 was made popular by Pope Liberius in 354 and became the rule in the West in 435 when the first “Christ mass” was officiated by Pope Sixtus III. This coincided with the date of a celebration by the Romans to their primary god, the Sun, and to Mithras, a popular Persian sun god supposedly born on the same day. The Roman Catholic writer Mario Righetti candidly admits that, “to facilitate the acceptance of the faith by the pagan masses, the Church of Rome found it convenient to institute the 25th of December as the feast of the birth of Christ to divert them from the pagan feast, celebrated on the same day in honor of the ‘Invincible Sun’ Mithras, the conqueror of darkness” (*Manual of Liturgical History*, 1955, Vol. 2, p. 67).

Protestant historian Henry Chadwick sums up the controversy: “Moreover, early in the fourth century there begins in the West (where first and by whom is no known) the celebration of December 25th, the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice, as the date for the nativity of Christ. How easy it was for Christianity and solar religion to become entangled at the popular level is strikingly illustrated by a mid-fifth century sermon of Pope Leo the Great, rebuking his over-cautious flock for paying reverence to the Sun on the steps of St. Peter’s before turning their back on it to worship inside the westward-facing basilica” (*The Early Church*, Penguin Books, London, 1967, p. 126).

If the date of Christ’s birth had been celebrated in early Christianity, there

would not have been the immense confusion of the dates and the ensuing controversy. Church historians of that time could have simply quoted the Bible for support or shown the examples of celebrations in the early centuries. But none did.

Simply speaking, the date chosen had nothing to do with biblical precedent and everything to do with ecclesiastical authority.

The *Encyclopedia Americana* makes this clear: "In the fifth century, the Western Church ordered it [Christ's birth] to be observed forever on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol [the sun god], as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed" (1944 edition, "Christmas").

What about the internal biblical evidence for the timing of Christ's birth? We can at least determine the probable season of His birth, and all scriptural indications argue against a December or other winter date.

When were shepherds in the fields?

Israeli meteorologists tracked December weather patterns for many years and concluded that the climate in Israel has been essentially constant for at least the last 2,000 years. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states that, "broadly speaking, weather phenomena and climatic conditions as pictured in the Bible correspond with conditions as observed today" (R.B.Y. Scott, Vol. 3, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, p. 625).

The temperature in the area of Bethlehem in December averages around 44 degrees Fahrenheit (7 degrees Celsius) but can drop to well below freezing, especially at night. Describing the weather there, Sara Ruhin, chief of the Israeli weather service, noted in a 1990 press release that the area has three months of frost: December with 29 F. [minus 1.6 C.]; January with 30 F. [minus 1.1 C.] and February with 32 F. [0 C.].

Snow is common for two or three days in Jerusalem and nearby Bethlehem in December and January. These were the winter months of increased precipitation in Christ's time, when the roads became practically unusable and people stayed mostly indoors.

This is important evidence to disprove a December date for Christ's birth. Note that, at the time of Christ's birth, the shepherds tended their flocks in the fields

night. "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields" wrote one Gospel writer, "keeping watch over their flock by night (Luke 2:8). A common practice of shepherds was keeping their flocks in the field from April to October, but in the cold and rainy winter months they took their flocks back home and sheltered them.

One commentary admits that, "as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flock were out in the fields; nor could He have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. This very ground the nativity in December should be given up. The feeding of the flocks by night in the fields is a chronological fact, which casts considerable light upon this disputed point" (Adam Clarke's *Commentary*; Abingdon Press, Nashville, note on Luke 2:8).

Another study source agrees: "These humble pastoral folk are out in the field at night with their flock—a feature of the story which would argue against the birth [of Christ] occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted it" (*The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary*,

"In the fifth century, the Church ordered Christ's birth to be observed on the day of the Roman feast of the birth of the sun, as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed."

Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1971, note on Luke 2:4-7).

The census described by Luke

Other evidence arguing against a December birth of Jesus is the Roman census recorded by Luke. "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered . . . So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem . . ., to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son . . ." (Luke 2:1-7).

The Roman rulers knew that taking a census in winter would have been impractical and unpopular. Generally a census would take place after the harvest season, around September or October, when it would not seriously affect the economy, the weather was good and the roads were still dry enough to allow easy travel. According to the normal dates for the census, this would probably be the season of Christ's birth.

One author states that this census "could hardly have been at that season [December 25], however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrollment, which necessitated the population's traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except in specially favorable years" ("Christmas at Bethlehem," *Holy-Days and Holidays*, Cunningham Geikie).

Luke's account of the census argues strongly against a December date for Christ's birth. For such an agrarian society, an autumn post-harvest census was much more likely.

The birth of John the Baptist

We can find still more biblical evidence against a December birth of Christ. John

the Baptist was born six months before the birth of his cousin Jesus. Just before Mary miraculously conceived Jesus, the angel said to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren" (Luke 1:35-36).

If we can determine when John was born, then six months later we will come to the approximate date of Christ's birth. Can we find evidence indicating the time of John's birth?

The Bible mentions that Elizabeth conceived shortly after her husband, the priest Zacharias, had finished serving his course

A NEW HYPOTHESIS PROPOSED

Recently some have proposed a new explanation to attempt to reconcile Luke's account of shepherds tending sheep in the fields with a December 25 birth of Jesus Christ. According to this theory, the shepherds were out at night in winter because they were caring for sheep destined for temple sacrifices: "Luke records that Jesus' birth was announced to shepherds in the fields. These may have been the shepherds who supplied the lambs for the temple sacrifices that were performed for the forgiveness of sin" (Life Application Bible, 1988, note on Luke 2:8).

What are the weaknesses of this hypothesis? First, Luke, who meticulously describes the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, mentions simply that the shepherds were out at night, as would be customary during the normal season from spring to fall. He carefully notes the two rulers of the time and the location, as well as the fact that the shepherds were tending their sheep in the fields at night.

If this had been winter, surely Luke, being the painstakingly accurate historian evidenced by his writing, would have explained the reason so his knowledgeable readers would not have been confused. Yet he doesn't explain extenuating circumstances at all. The account certainly cries out for an explanation from Luke for shepherds tending sheep out of doors in the dead of winter at night. Also of significance is that the argument about sheep for the temple was advanced only recently.

Let's look at what the Talmudic sources say regarding the temple-sheep argument. The Talmud, in Baba Kamma 79b-

80a, mentions a rule that prohibited overgrazing: "The rabbis taught: 'Flocks of animals should not be raised in Israel, but can [be] in the wooded areas or in Siria, and also where it is inhabited.' Another teaching says: 'No flocks should be raised in Israel, but can [be raised] in the wilderness area of Judea.' "

These prohibitions were measures to avoid depleting the agricultural resources of Israel, normally the valleys in which wheat and barley would be planted and sheep could ruin the soil. In upper Judea this was not a problem because no grains were cultivated there, and the Talmud expressly permitted grazing sheep close to towns, which would be the situation with Bethlehem. This restriction, which was concerned only with overgrazing, would not apply to the shepherds near Bethlehem.

Concerning the temple sheep, the Talmudic source is speaking of the Passover sacrifices and places the limit of finding the sacrificial lambs within one month before the Passover, meaning they would have to be determined in February or March. This is a far cry from the temple-sheep theory, which proposes that the sheep were grazing three months before the Passover, with their shepherds weathering freezing weather so the priests would have sheep available for Passover.

Notice also that in Luke's account many shepherds were out in the fields. Many shepherds would not have been with many sheep in December.

The argument regarding their being sacrificial sheep contradicts the plain sense of God's Word. *GN*

at the temple, called "the division of Abijah" (Luke 1:5, 8). This was six months before Mary became pregnant with Jesus. Back in King David's day, the priestly course had been separated into 24 turns, or divisions (1 Chronicles 24:7-19). These

During the festival season, all the priests would come to the temple to serve. Luke shows us that Zacharias's service was not during a feast season, since it was the division of Abijah that was in charge of the temple, and Zacharias was chosen

In the New Testament we find that, rather than celebrating His birth, the Church commemorated Christ's death through the biblically mandated observance of Passover.

began in the first month (1 Chronicle 27:2), March or April of our modern calendar, and, according to Talmudic and Qumran sources, rotated every week until they reached the end of the sixth month, when the cycle was repeated (beginning in September-October) until the end of the year

to present the incense offering.

The division of Abijah was the eighth division, or shift, which normally would take place close to three months after the start of the cycle in March-April. This would place Elizabeth's conception around June or, if it was Zacharias's sec-

ond yearly turn, around December.

The Bible does not specify which of the two shifts it was. Regardless, nine months after one of the two dates John the Baptist was born. This would place his birth in March or September. Six months later, Jesus' birth would have been around September or the following March. Whichever way it occurred, according to the time of the division of Abijah, a December birth for Christ is out of the question.

What was celebrated by the early Church?

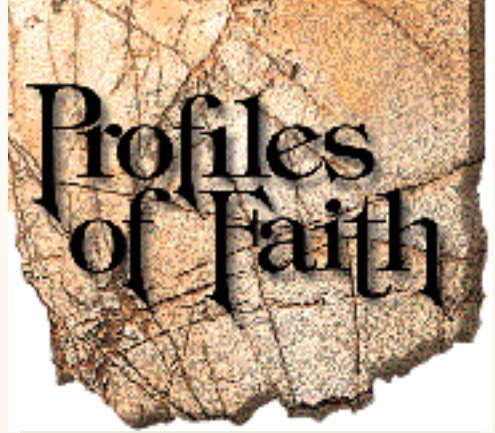
We find no command in Scripture by Christ or His apostles to celebrate His birth. In the 60 years of Church history after Christ's death recorded in the New Testament, we find that rather than celebrating His birth, the Church commemorated His death through the biblically mandated observance of the Passover.

Around 55 the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: "For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, 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).

Christ's Church through the ages has faithfully remembered His sacrifice by observing the New Testament Passover. Neither Christ nor the apostles indicated, by word or example, that we should celebrate His birth. On the contrary, the Bible carefully conceals His exact birthday. The early Church never bothered to invent and celebrate such a feast but focused on the biblical celebration that foreshadowed and commemorated His sacrificial death for us

Let us not fix on an artificially contrived date for Christ's birth at Christmas. If we follow Christ's instructions, we will annually commemorate His sacrifice "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God . . . This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:15-16, 19).

For more information about the observance commanded by Jesus Christ and the Paul, request our free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. Contact the address nearest you on page 2 of this magazine. *GN*



Shadrach, Meshach & Abed-Nego

Faith in God's Will

by Jerold Aust

The powerful guards began binding Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego with ropes, and within seconds they threw the young men into the furnace. One moment they were relatively safe, even held in great esteem as officials in the government of Babylon. The next moment they were brutally tossed headlong into what seemed certain death in an inferno.

What went wrong? These three had faithfully obeyed their God, but their obedience was not being rewarded. They faced an ignominious death in the prime of their lives, with no one there to plead their cause. What a waste for such talented young men to lose their lives at such an early age.

What lessons, if any, are we to find in this tragic scenario? What can we learn from the example of these young men?

The Scriptures vividly picture this event and describe the events leading up to it. King Nebuchadnezzar found himself in a psychological and political struggle to protect his pride and power as ruler of Babylon.

Some were determined to rid the kingdom of the influence of the young Jewish captives—Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach,

Abed-Nego and anyone else like them—who had been conscripted to serve their Babylonian captors when the kingdom of Judah fell. They would stop at nothing to see these young men removed from Nebuchadnezzar's government, even if it meant killing them.

By all appearances, their enemies had

One moment they were safe, held in great esteem as officials in government. The next they were brutally tossed headlong to their deaths into a inferno.

succeeded. These men knew that King Nebuchadnezzar had decreed the death penalty for any who refused to worship the enormous golden idol he had set up (Daniel 3:1-7). They knew that the young Jewish men remained faithful to their God and refused to bow to any idols. They brought to the attention of the monarch the three young men's disobedience to his decree.

Facing their fate

Addressing the young men, Nebuchadnezzar demanded: "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you refuse to serve my gods, or to worship the

golden image which I have caused to be set up? Although I've been told this, it is simply too hard for me to believe. Therefore I will give you another opportunity. You may save your lives if, after you hear my royal musicians begin to play, you bow down to the golden image and worship my gods. Your only alternative is to

be cast alive into a burning fiery furnace. Now what god, including yours, can deliver you out of my hands?" (Daniel 3:14-15, Amplified Bible)

King Nebuchadnezzar was not one to be trifled with. He—as a proud ruler with a temperamental and ambitious streak. Raising his anger could bring certain, painful death according to such Jewish sources as the Haggadah (narrative material in the Talmud and other rabbinical literature). This and other sources mention examples of his cruelty and brutality.





obey the king and live or disobey him and die.

Setting the stage

God had taken a direct hand in the events leading to the captivity of Judah and the circumstances enveloping Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. God had forewarned Judah through Jeremiah of the Jews' future captivity (Jeremiah 37). God had also mercifully provided two righteous kings to turn Judah back to Him: Hezekiah (ca. 715-687 B.C.) and Josiah (ca. 639-608 B.C.). Judah was fully aware of Assyria's captivity and removal of Israel (ca. 721 B.C.). Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah had occurred after ample warning (Jeremiah 37:6-10).

It was during the first of three invasions that Nebuchadnezzar took Daniel and the three other young Jews captive, removing them and others to Babylon (Herbert Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible*, 1961, p. 144). The time of Shadrach's, Meshach's and Abed-Nego's great trial had to be after Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, found in Daniel 2, in 603 or 602 B.C.

(Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1985, Vol. 7, p. 39). After that year the great crisis of the three young Hebrews took place (Daniel 3).

God's employ of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego should remind us that God possesses absolute sovereignty over all. God used the three young Jews to reveal this truth to King Nebuchadnezzar. The record shows the king habitually forgot that God was greater than any earthly ruler (Daniel 4:34-37). Shadrach (whose Hebrew name was Hananiah), Meshach (Mishael) and Abed-Nego (Azariah) were selected by King Nebuchadnezzar and prepared by God, as the apostle Peter later wrote, to "proclaim the praises of Him who called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

The three young Jews were among the best and the brightest of the kingdom of Judah, and they soon caught the attention of Babylonian officials. "Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his



Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he dared to the mouth of the burning furnace. "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here," he cried.

of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans" (Daniel 1:3-4).

God provides and protects

They were to be trained as administrators and assistants to serve in the Chaldean, or Babylonian, government. During their training, they were to receive a daily provision of the king's delicacies, including his wine. After three years they were to personally serve the king (verse 5).

Their selection for this training program brought about their first trial. They refused to eat the food placed before them. The biblical account does not tell us whether the meats were unclean according to biblical standards or if some other problem was evident. Regardless of the exact circumstances, with Ashpenaz's help they lived on an alternative diet for 10 days. The steward removed their assigned portion of

the king's cuisine and served them vegetables and water instead. As a result they grew healthier than those who consumed the royal delicacies. In their circumstances they began to see that their faith could triumph even in relatively minor trials.

Archer comments on this first trial facing the three: "At the very beginning of their career in a three-year program, the young Yahweh worshipers were faced with a clear-cut issue of obedience and faith. They were doubtless subject to intense social pressure from their classmates and teachers to do what everyone else was doing. Should they not accept the royal diet and thus avoid giving needless offense to their classmates or to the officials of the king himself? Worldly wisdom pointed in that direction. By their compliance they would please everybody. But they would not please God, to whom they were surrendered body and soul.

"So at the start of their career, they faced squarely their priorities and determined to trust God to see them through the perils of noncompliance and possible forfeiture of all that they had gained. By



their early refusal to disobey God, they prepared themselves for future greatness as true witnesses for the one true God in the midst of a degenerate pagan culture” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 1985, Vol. 7, p. 34).

Not only did God honor their obedience to Him and His laws, He also rewarded them with great favor in the king’s eyes. When the king interviewed them, they proved far wiser and of better understanding than all the magicians and astrologers in the realm (Daniel 1:15-17, 19-20). God had prepared Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego for the great trial that would soon test their belief, faith and obedience.

Facing the fire

As the three men faced Nebuchadnezzar’s interrogation, they naturally wondered about their fate. However, they lost no time responding to the king’s demand that they either worship the image or be thrown into the flaming furnace

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter,” they replied. “If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).

Their response serves as a striking example of faith. They knew God could deliver them from the certain death they faced, but they didn’t know if He *would* extend their physical lives. They relied on God’s wisdom and judgment and placed their fate in His hands.

They were firm in their determination to obey God’s command not to bow to an idol (Exodus 20:4-5). They would risk their lives before they would disobey God. They knew they were figuratively signing their own death warrant with their unapologetic response to the king’s demands.

The king didn’t know it at the time, but the three young Jews had a stronger power on their side than any power Nebuchadnezzar could yield. Nebuchadnezzar had made the mistake of defying God, boasting, “Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (Daniel 3:15, New International Version). He had unwittingly transformed his confrontation with these

young men into a contest with God.

Nebuchadnezzar had much to learn. Ungrateful, he had scoffed at the very One who had allowed him success in battle; therefore he was to undergo one humiliation after another until he was forced to acknowledge Israel’s God (Daniel 4). Still, facing public defiance in the name of the God of the Jews, Nebuchadnezzar apparently felt he had no choice but to order the immediate execution of the three men.

Furious at their rebuff, Nebuchadnezzar commanded their execution in the fur-

The three young men lost no time responding to the king’s demand. “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king,” they replied.

nace: “He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated” (Daniel 3:19). The three Jews were firmly bound and thrown like logs into the furnace. The flames blazed so hot that the guards who threw them in perished from the heat.

Unexpected events

The three young men were lost from sight as they tumbled into the flames. But then, what could this be? The bewildered Nebuchadnezzar saw not three but four men walking unbound and unburned in the flames. Even more astounding, in Nebuchadnezzar’s own words, the fourth person was “like the Son of God”!

Nebuchadnezzar came as close as he dared to the mouth of the burning furnace. “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here,” he cried (verse 26). The three men walked out of the furnace and stood before the astonished king and the crowd of officials. Not only were the three not harmed, but not a hair on their heads was even singed. Their clothing was undamaged, “and the smell of fire was not on them” (verse 27).

Nebuchadnezzar had witnessed a miracle. The Jewish fellows’ divine companion in the flames had delivered them from all harm. God had protected them in their literally fiery trial

Nebuchadnezzar made a quick about-face: “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who

trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God! Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this” (verses 28-29).

Faith forged in flames

Almighty God had allowed King

Nebuchadnezzar to learn another lesson of humility. He was educating Nebuchadnezzar to know that he was dealing with the King of the universe Himself (Daniel 4:37).

“Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in the province of Babylon,” concludes the biblical account (Daniel 3:30). In the New Testament, Hebrews 11:34 looks back on them as heroes of faith who “quenched the violence of fire”

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, we can exercise that same conquering faith, an assurance that leads to eternal life. The apostle Paul notes that, when we live by this kind of faith, “we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37).

Like these three young worshippers of the true God, in our own way we can exercise that same conquering faith that leads us successfully through life’s present problems—and ultimately to eternal life.

These courageous young men were willing to forfeit their lives for what they believed. The determination to live by faith, striving to resist and conquer sin in our own daily lives, is equally esteemed in God’s sight. The apostle Paul tells us that, when we live by faith, “we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37).

The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego is a dramatic testimony to some who truly were conquerors, willing to risk all for their love of—and faith in—God. **GN**

A Word Not Spoken

A word not spoken may be the choicest word of all.

by **Becky Sweat**

Donna had dragged me through every store in the mall at least twice. I was tired and had long since been ready to go home. So, when she showed me the new outfit she'd picked out, I decided to tell her exactly what I thought.

"You're just trying to get attention from the new guy in the office" I told her. "But it won't work. He likes women who are pencil-thin. You won't have a chance with him unless you lose 20 pounds."

Donna's eyes filled with tears. I wanted to reach out and pull back my words. Although my little speech may have been true, I was entirely wrong in saying what I did, because it was cruel.

Most of us at one time or other have blurted out words we wish we could take back. Numerous situations could be improved not so much by what we say, but by what we *don't* say.

Donna's eyes filled with tears. I wanted to reach out and pull back my words.

Questions to consider

Here are five questions you should ask yourself before you open your mouth to speak:

- Who am I helping?

Too often we let our emotions take over and speak out of anger or frustration. When my friend Connie grew suddenly distant after years of a close friendship, I tried to get her to talk.

After several failed attempts at getting her to open up, I became frustrated with the situation. Connie was no longer the fun, happy friend I wanted her to be. I decided to write her a letter and tell her how disappointed I was in her. Then, I don't know why exactly, I put the letter aside.

Not many days later Connie called me.

"I was wondering if you'd like to go out for lunch this afternoon?" she asked. "I've been under a lot of pressure lately at work, but I think things are finally getting back to normal."

Connie needed her friends to be patient with her. If I had sent her that letter and let her know how upset I was with her, it would have only added pressure to her already stressful situation and may have hurt our friendship.

Waiting patiently is a strategy too often over-

looked in our dealings with others. Too many times we're quick to tell it like it is, bludgeoning a friend with factual but unkind words to vent our own frustrations. Although we may feel a warped sense of satisfaction for a time, the result is almost always a scarred friendship.

Before you speak ask yourself: What am I trying to accomplish? If you honestly feel your words will build up and help another person, it's probably a good idea to speak. Otherwise, keep your words to yourself.

The urge to blurt

- Was I asked for my opinion?

Some people feel the need to blurt out dogmatic opinions about everything and everyone, even when no one asked and even when it comes to inconsequential, everyday matters.

It's a good idea to remind yourself that an opinion is just an opinion and not necessarily a fact. Your opinion probably can't be found in an encyclopedia or dictionary. It won't be the end of the world if others don't get to hear your beliefs on a particular subject. If your point of view is contrary to that of everyone else in the conversation, your ideas may start an argument.

It can be all right to share a controversial opinion or unsolicited advice, but why not offer it as an opinion instead of a dogmatic statement? Taking the time to be gentle and courteous in relationships breaks down the barriers. Offer to give another perspective that might help, another viewpoint that could balance out the picture.

Look who's talking

- Is it my place to speak?

Often we take it upon ourselves to speak up about a problem when someone else really should be doing the talking. I had a friend who thrived on telling me what she heard somebody say about me. She would say things like:

"Marie says you joke around too much at work."

"Colleen thinks you wear the wrong clothing styles."

"George thinks you and your husband are a bad match."

The only effect those observations had on me was to make me feel bad. I shouldn't have to change my taste in clothes to earn someone else's approval. If

Letters From Our Readers

Marie were sincerely concerned that I joke around too much, why couldn't she tell me directly?

I've made it a personal rule that, if someone tells me about a gripe he has with one of my friends, I don't repeat it. If what the person is saying could contain some truth, I urge him to tell my friend directly. If the complaint is just a different opinion or a reflection of insensitivity, my friend doesn't need to hear it.

But what if it's for her own good?

- Am I speaking the truth in love?

You may think another person needs to hear what you have to say, but just blasting her with criticism won't get your message across.

Marital problems arise when partners think they should be able to say anything that's on their mind without concern for the other. The idea that because another person knows you intimately you somehow have the right to say whatever you like is a destructive deceit.

to speak the truth with love.

Open mouth, insert cork

- Is the other person ready to hear what I have to say?

Your friend may be upset about a problem and your first impulse may be to open your mouth and tell him what you'd do if you were in such a situation.

The best thing you can do to help a hurting friend may be to keep silent and listen. Often all we need when we're in trouble is for someone to listen. We need to work out our own solution by talking through the problem. If as listeners we force our solutions on others, we lose them in the process.

Watch your timing. Three hours after your husband is involved in a serious auto accident is no time to tell him how bad his driving habits are. The day your friend tells you she's getting a divorce is not the time for sharing your opinions on what is needed for a successful marriage. Give your friend time to grieve, to recover from the hurt, to get her emotions



Intimacy does not eliminate essential courtesy. If anything, kindness is even more important in relationships in which intimacy has rendered each person more vulnerable.

Strive to share your thoughts in ways that come across as inoffensively as possible. If you take on the role of a human wrecking ball with no regard to other people's feelings, your comments will be taken as a personal assault. Criticism must be combined with genuine concern to be effective. We have to learn

back to normal. Keep quiet and let your friend do the talking.

Take time to think about the probable effects of your words before you open your mouth. If I had asked myself these five questions, I would have suffered only sore feet that day in the mall with Donna. Instead, I let my emotions get the best of me and scar the friendship. Make it your goal to use your words to improve situations and relationships. When your words would do harm, keep quiet. *GN*

This evening a friend of mine gave me a copy of *The Good News*, and I was wondering if I could receive my own subscription.

Slatedale, Pennsylvania

As a service to readers, The Good News will often carry subscription cards that readers can use to subscribe or give a subscription to another person. Subscriptions to The Good News are sent free to all who request them.

I read the article in the September/October issue of *The Good News* about the drought in Texas and several other states. It is a very good article, and I ask that you pray for us and that we make wise decisions in this crisis.

The article on worry seemed to fit me too. Now I can begin to be more constructive and worry less. Thanks for the many fine articles in *The Good News*.
Mexia, Texas

Thank you for sharing *The Good News*. Upon receipt of my first issue I sat down and read the entire magazine. The most meaningful articles for me were "If a Man Die, Will He live Again?" and "Archaeology and Genesis: What Does the Record Show?"

Please forward your free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, as offered in the magazine.

Des Plaines, Illinois

I received my first issue of *The Good News* and must tell you I just love it. I've read it from cover to cover and find the articles very well written and filled with lots of good news! I am now reading it for the second time.

Please send me the booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, which I'm very anxious to receive.

Gaylord, Michigan

Thank you for sending me your magazine. I enjoyed reading it very much. Could you send me the booklets *The*

Continued on page 31

Aging With Grace

Growing old can, and should, be a positive experience. Here's how you can make the golden years truly golden.

by John Bald

Face it. You and I are getting older. We don't like to admit it, but it is happening. We're not as young, fast or strong as we once were. Our memory likely isn't as sharp as it was a few years ago. The effects of aging have taken a strange toll on our bodies: altered the color of our hair (or banished large portions of it), slowed us down, made a lot of things sag. The whole process seems anything but graceful.

As a friend of mine once jokingly told me, there's one positive thing about growing old: It sure beats the alternative.

Actually there are many positive aspects of growing old, and the Bible recognizes that fact. In Leviticus 19:32 God commanded His people, "You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man . . ."

God gave this instruction to ancient Israel. To this people, recently freed from slavery, He revealed

guidelines to make a system of human society work and work well. The acts of respect and courtesy to be shown to the elderly were to teach the importance of honoring those who, by virtue of their age and experience, should have become assets to their community and possess reservoirs of valuable knowledge.

Since the over-60 group constitutes a significant part of society, it is important that members of that group react with their neighbors in a way that commands the respect the Scripture says should be paid to them. That respect must, of course, be earned, not forced.

How does this happen? How can we age gracefully, gaining the honor of others along the way?

God doesn't play favorites

We should understand that God has no favorite age-group. The Psalms tell us that a typical life lasts



Contrary to popular opinion, old is a beautiful word, albeit often misunderstood and maligned.

about 70 years (Psalm 90:10). People of all ages in the seven decades of this average human life span are successfully serving God. We are all responsible for doing what we can to make all our years valuable to God and our fellowman (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

Each stage of life has special joys and specific problems. If we are aware of the needs, realities and responsibilities of each, we will be much better equipped to function well and help others.

In later years a person's productive ability, especially the physical, will inevitably decline. This does not make him lazy. Aging is simply a natural occurrence, planned and designed by God. Therefore, as we grow older, it is not wise or accurate to make statements comparing our physical abilities with those of 20-year-olds: "I can do just as much work now as when I was 20" or, "I can outwork any dozen 20-year-olds."

It isn't realistic to expect that we can perform the same amount of physical work we were able to do when we were decades younger. Such comments will do nothing to command respect from younger people, who could be helped by the understanding and wisdom of those older.

Aging slows physical skills, but that's all right. God expects more from us than just our ability to perform physical labor.

We should take time and opportunity for refocusing on spiritual, intellectual and social values. Believe it or not, we should become sages.

Sagacity does not come automatically with the passing of years. The ability to render sound advice and judgments increases if those years are filled with broadening experiences, contemplative thought and profitable effort. That is why it is important that we both recognize the need for reflective thinkers and doers and make a concerted effort to fill the void.

Savvy senior citizens

An informed, knowledgeable older person who has the time, patience and skills developed by concerted effort and thought is invaluable as a source of knowledge. This is one reason SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives, a Washington, D.C.-based group of retired people who donate their time and expertise to help others start small businesses, can be so important to a community. Business skills, as all others, must be

developed over time.

(Call SCORE at [800] 634-0245, or find it at <http://www.senior.com/score.html> on the World Wide Web of the Internet.)

Long ago the poet Robert Browning captured the gist of the autumn of life when he wrote:

I'm growing fonder of my staff,
I'm growing dimmer in the eyes,
I'm growing fainter in my laugh,
I'm growing deeper in my sighs,
I'm growing careless of my dress,
I'm growing frugal of my gold,
I'm growing wise, I'm growing—
yes—old.

Browning captured much of the essence of aging, both the realities (which cannot be avoided) and the proclivities (which can and should be avoided). In so doing, he provided us with a valuable key to override our less-desirable natural tendencies during these years.

Wrinkles reproduce themselves. Lotions help but little. Sometimes we're surprised when everything works reasonably well. It would be wonderful to grow rich and stay healthy and enjoy one's every moment as we age, but that's not the lot of most of us most of the time. Retirement is not all recreation. Stoicism, silence, even complaining and pretending, only make it more difficult.

The importance of being cheerful

It is vital that we do cheerfully what we can—to see a need and fill it—within the limits of our skills and abilities. Consider a tragedy:

A young man says to an old man, "What is your greatest burden as you grow old?" The ancient one replies: "That I have nothing to carry." Let's try not to let this kind of misfortune befall us. Some things we can no longer do, but there is much we can give. Let's strive not to allow the aging process to stifle our ability to help others.

Life's memories can be beautiful, but many are not. Depression, losing friends and comrades, physical decline—the list goes on and on—can wear us down physically and mentally. It is not healthy to constantly relive our problems. We need to learn the appropriate lessons and try to live so that others, especially the young, are interested in what we have to say.

We do our credibility no good when we say: "When I was your age, we did it better

... " or, "You aren't old enough to remember that ..." We need to impart our knowledge in a way so that our young audience will want to know more of what we know. We need to convey our knowledge like effective teachers, not as faultfinders who demean their listeners. Getting this right is difficult but it is not impossible.

"The best is yet to come" is a cliché that is not self-evident to aging baby boomers, but don't allow the advancing years to shrivel your enthusiasm, example, courage and fortitude.

Contrary to popular opinion, *old* is a beautiful word, albeit often misunderstood and maligned. A house that has stood and sheltered for decades or centuries is honored. Antiques are valued. Even old cars draw attention because of their rarity and resale value. People fill in their years can grow to become antiques in the best possible use of the term—for their rarity, quality and ability to stand the test of time.

Time in a bottle

Carry your years confidently, as a container filled with information, knowledge and hard-won wisdom. Though infirmity might compel you to live with limited activity, keep your heart and mind alive with enthusiasm. As we age, we experience a diminution of energy, and things we do take a little longer. We have a tendency to allow interest and enthusiasm to decline. Be on guard.

Even if you must limit your activities more than you might prefer, find and keep your stride, even though your pace may be slower than it was. It is quite all right to saunter a bit. Enjoy the trip. Just stay in good humor so others will enjoy the trip with you.

Consider this stage of life as a sort of graduate course. List your plans for the day—books to read, friends to telephone, letters to write. In spite of the temptation to just sit there and soak up network programming, remember that television offers little of substance. The information gained from that source may provide little in the way of wisdom or experience worth passing on to others.

Strive to be a person who can impart wisdom and sound judgment to our youth. One definition of grace is "a disposition to be generous or helpful." With God's help, we can pass on the benefit of our experiences while we age gracefully. **GN**

Advice From

The headlines are filled with shocking stories of violent crime. What's behind it?

M

by Paul
Suckling

orning. I awake to the bright sunshine streaming through my window. I get up and brush my teeth, then wash my face and get dressed. I gaze out the window at a beautiful view: a rolling field with thick woods beyond. In the evening I watch the deer, so graceful, so peaceful, so beautiful. "I'm waiting on my breakfast to be brought to me. I have someone cook all my meals; I also have someone do all my laundry; when I get groceries they are brought to me as well. Some people say that I have it made.

"However, my life and home are not all that glamorous. My beautiful view is obscured by two eight-foot chain link fences, each with three rows of razor wire at the top and bottom. My bedroom is also my bathroom and my living room, and it's called a prison cell. I am a death row inmate, and my physical life will be over in a matter of months . . ."

So began a letter I received.

What's behind the headlines

We've all been shocked by headlines such as:

The temptation to rob and kill enticed Ron, and goaded by an acquaintance, he blew away several innocent people with a gun. For this senseless tragedy that has shattered many lives, Ron is facing execution.

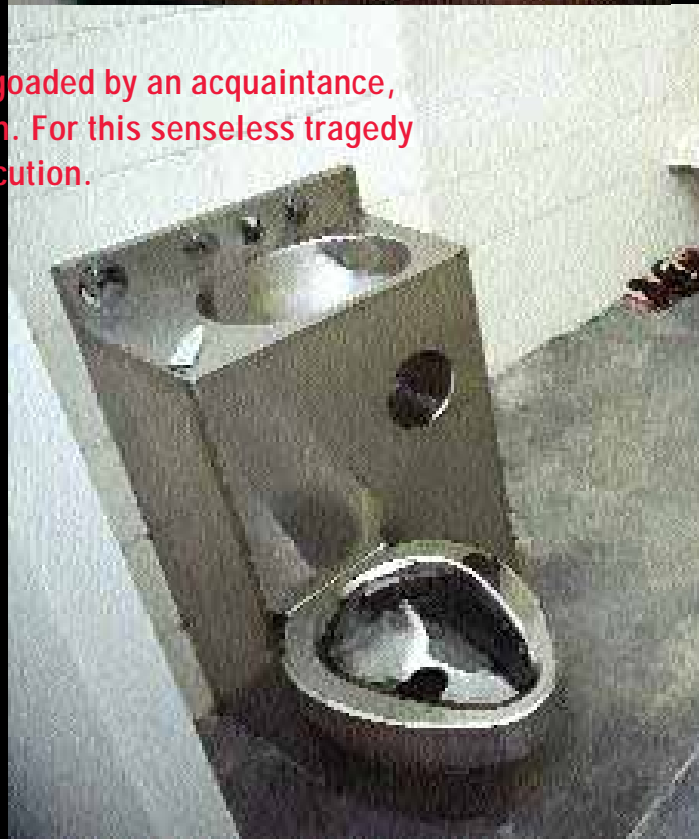
"Drive-by Shooting Leaves Three Dead," "Crime, Drugs Arrests, Violence All Increase," "City Sets Record for Number of Murders, Up 10 Percent in First Six Months."

News of crime is all too familiar. Even more sad than crime itself is that so many crimes involve young people.

One story is of two children, 10 and 11, who dropped a 5-year-old from a high-rise building because he refused to steal candy. In recent months even 6-year-olds have been suspected of murder or attempted murder.

Many youngsters are barely into their teens before they're challenged by their peers to do wrong. Numerous teenagers end up shattering the lives of family and friends. Some who commit murder grow old in prison, leaving only at death.

The consequences of these wrongheaded ways have come home to me through knowing Ron (not his real name). Before a recent job transfer to another state, once a month I drove almost four hours to a maximum-security prison to visit him. . I want to tell you about my



Death Row

How does it occur? Listen to the words of an expert—written from death row.



visits and the rest of the letter he wrote me—the first part of which is quoted above—to help anyone who could learn from his mistakes.

Simply visiting Ron is an experience in itself. When I arrive at the prison I park my car in the visitors' designated area. At the entrance I sign in, hand over my driver's license and receive a key to a locker in which I place most of the personal possessions I'm carrying. I'm allowed to keep only my handkerchief and some small change should I want to buy a soda or snack from a vending machine.

Then I walk through the first doorway; the steel door is promptly locked behind me. A guard stamps my hand with ink, showing that I'm a visitor. I remove my shoes and walk through a metal detector similar to those at airports. I retrieve my shoes and enter a small side room in which I am thoroughly searched by a guard. He even searches my shoes.

The guard scans me with a hand-held metal detector. I put my shoes back on and leave the room by way of another steel door, which he locks behind me. Another guard allows me into the visiting section.

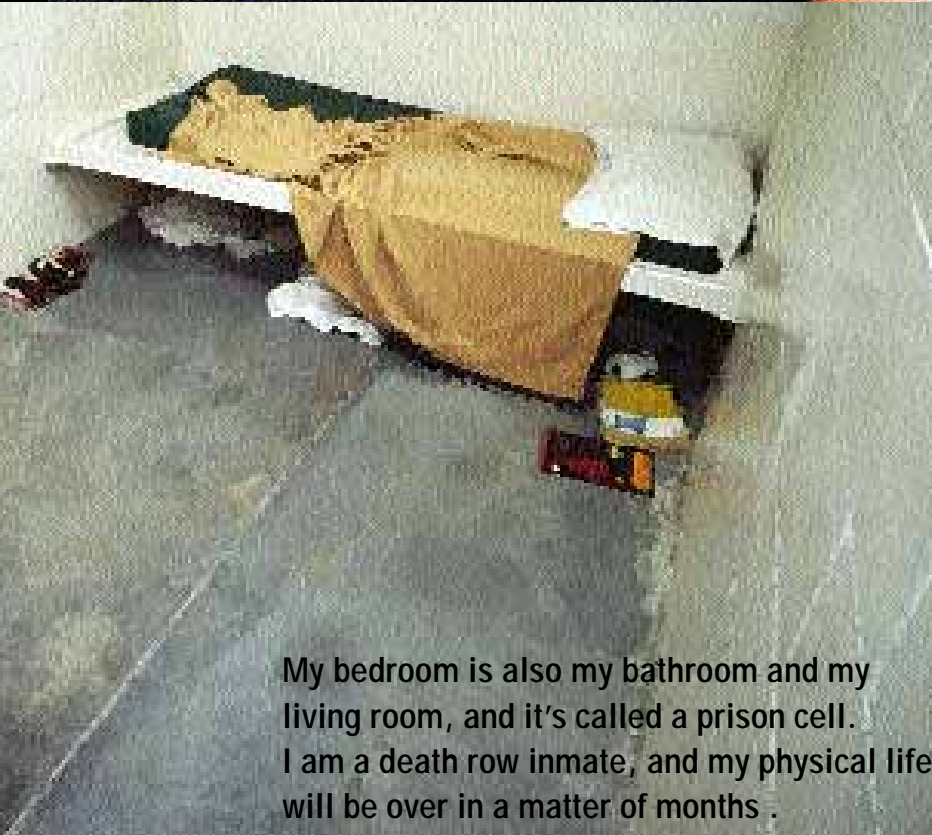
I await Ron's arrival. He eventually shuffles in after being escorted from his cell by an officer who has cuffed his hands behind his back and fastened shackles around his ankles. Ron steps into the opposite side of our cubicle, and the door locks behind him. The officer reaches into the cubicle through a flap in the door and unlocks Ron's handcuffs.

Bulletproof glass and several feet of space separate us. We pick up telephone receivers and begin talking to each other. For the next two hours, our conversation can cover anything and everything. We talk about crime, how lax the law is, teens and parents, what Ron did that sent him to prison, the Bible, his fears and thoughts, fishing television, the weather, prison food, other prisoners in adjacent cubicles.

I try to inspire Ron to seek God daily, including maintaining his relationship with Him through regular prayer.

Ron admitted to murder

Ron's case is going through its first official appeal. The details of the trial, including all the evidence, have to be examined to ensure that he received a fair trial in the eyes of the law. If the court decides that his trial was fair, then he has the choice



My bedroom is also my bathroom and my living room, and it's called a prison cell. I am a death row inmate, and my physical life will be over in a matter of months .

of continuing his appeals or awaiting his punishment—death by lethal injection.

Ron admits he is a murderer, and he is prepared to die. He can't explain why he killed. At the time of the crime he hadn't eaten properly for 20 hours, and he had been drinking and taking drugs.

The temptation to rob and kill presented itself, and, egged on by an acquaintance, he drew a gun and blew away several innocent people.

The murder and its related events have tortured the lives of the victims' families and loved ones. Ron's own family is distraught, and he faces the probability of execution within a few months.

What a waste of human life wrought by 10 minutes of madness. The suffering and hurt will never go away in this life.

How could this tragedy happen? What went wrong? How could it have been avoided?

Ron and I have talked at length about his life of crime. I asked him to write a letter to help young people avoid a life of crime. I'll share with you a condensed version of Ron's written thoughts:

Ron played a game with God

"If I were to talk with a group of teenagers, my first question would be: What is the top priority in your life, and why? Then I would ask them who are their role models, if they have any. I would

and possession of marijuana.

"Then I committed burglary and got three years of suspended time and three years probation, which I violated with another charge of receiving stolen property and grand larceny auto. I got a total of eight years and did three and one half years and made parole.

"During my time in prison I began to do Bible courses and really study the Bible and apply its teachings to my life. I paroled to a Christian halfway house, but it wasn't long before I was back to the drugs and drinking. I was told to leave the house. I moved in with an older woman and kept smoking pot and drinking. I had forgotten God. I had turned away from His Word.

Arrested before he could kill himself "On the night of this crime, at around 10:30, my friend mentioned we could rob the bar by the house. When the evening was over, several people were dead, and I would not realize what I had done until around 9 in the morning. At that point I was shocked. I never dreamed in a million years that I could have killed anyone. (No one who knew me could believe it, either.)

"The people who were murdered were

my life over to God, I am no longer scared of death. I know God has forgiven me, and I know that I will have eternal life.

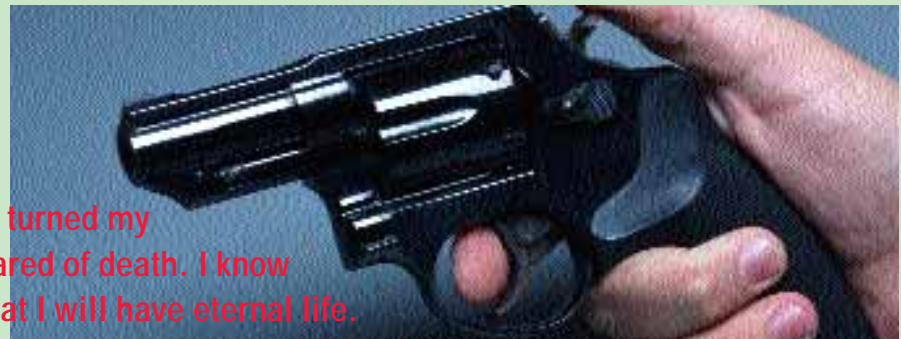
"What I am trying to say is that, no matter what you have done, no matter how bad you think you are, you can be saved with belief and true repentance. If you are willing to let God control your life, you will have the promise of eternal life, the Kingdom of God and total peace. Can you grasp that? Probably not, because in the crime-infested world you can't grasp what true peace is.

Ron's best advice

"As far as a role model, look to Jesus Christ. He is the perfect role model. As a matter of fact, if you would ask yourself what would Jesus do in every situation that you find yourself in no matter what the cost, you would notice a giant change in the way you do things. The bottom line is: Put God first in your life"

That is Ron's conclusion. I don't doubt that this prisoner on death row is a changed and different man, but what a price he is having to pay. Yes, he is remorseful, he is sorry for what he did, but no matter how

Now that I have truly repented and turned my life over to God, I am no longer scared of death. I know God has forgiven me and I know that I will have eternal life.



then go into my circumstances.

"I've always believed in God, but I never really took my beliefs too seriously. I played a game, just believing and leaving it at that. I started smoking pot at age 12 and started drinking at about the same time. During this time, from age 12 to 18, I got in with the wrong crowd—stealing, lying, cheating and hurting people. We got away with a lot of things, too many to list here.

"I got caught for breaking into a drug dealer's apartment and spent five weeks in a detention home. With the amount of drugs that I was doing during this time I was lucky to be alive. I went into the service but never gave up drugs or drinking, and from age 18 until age 24 I had a couple of run-ins with the law—drinking in public, driving under the influence of alcohol

and I couldn't find it in me to want to live with what I had done. After about 15 or so mixed drinks, I left my partner in crime sitting at a bar. I planned to go to the apartment and shoot myself.

"While walking home I ran into a friend and drank a little more and smoked some pot. Now I was really ready to end it. But, as I left to walk home, I got about a block and a half from my apartment and couldn't go any farther. I was emotionally and physically beat. So I sat down beside the building and passed out. The police woke me up an hour later and arrested me.

"After the trial I was sentenced to death and sent to prison. With a lot of encouragement I soon confessed my sins and admitted that I was powerless to change my life. Now that I have truly repented and turned

deep his regret and sorrow he cannot change the past and bring innocent people back to life.

In a recent article, "Kids Need to Know the Truth About Violence," Philadelphia Inquirer writer Claude Lewis tried to pinpoint the causes of violence among young people:

"Certainly, the disintegration of the family plays a major role. Far too many youth grow up without the basic training from their parents necessary to help steer them away from violence and murder. Instead, uncaring, overworked parents too often park their kids in front of TV sets where they receive the worst sort of training—frequent exposure on programs (including news programs) to heinous crimes, including murder, rape and armed robberies. Is it

any wonder that many of our youth believe they can solve their disagreements with guns, knives or baseball bats?"

Had Ron listened as a youngster to good advice, or refused that first ill gal drink or marijuana cigarette, perhaps this story would never have been told. Several people would be alive and with their families now rather than lying in their graves.

Will Ron's experience help you make right choices? The wrong way of life begins with small decisions. That's the way Ron's began, but his led him along the wrong road until he committed an act he never would have thought possible.

When I asked Ron about writing this article for young people and quoting his letter, he readily agreed, adding that he would do "anything to stop them opening the door to drugs, because once the door is open it's almost impossible to go back."

Advice from 300 young people

The book of Proverbs is full of priceless instructions for young people. I once asked a group of some 300 youths to select what they thought was the most helpful Proverb. The consensus was Proverbs 12:1: "Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid."

This is plain-spoken advice for children and adolescents to keep in mind as they grow up and mature.

Your parents and other adults you know, don't want you to be hurt or end up living a life of crime. No mother wants her son on death row. Another Proverb tells us that "a wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother" (Proverbs 10:1). It's not easy being the parent of a hardened criminal. Imagine the grief of parents realizing that their child, their flesh and blood is under a death sentence for taking the life of another human being.

We can all save ourselves and our families much heartache if we decide to follow the guidance of the great God when He inspired these words: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, New International Version).

When I visit Ron, I watch other families visiting other inmates in the same prison, including about 50 on death row. The pris-

oners can have physical contact with close family members once every three months. These visits take place in a special room, but the rules are strictly enforced that state: "Visitors and inmates may kiss and embrace upon entering and exiting the visiting area. Any other contact will result in the visit being terminated."

Once I watched a boy of about 12 trying to measure his hand against his imprisoned father's through the glass in the cubicle section where regular visiting takes place. The boy wanted just to have some sort of close contact with his father. His mother later told me that she and her son had been coming to see her husband for 10 years.

I thought then how sad that this lad had grown up knowing his father only this way—a few hugs every three months and a weekly telephone conversation while gazing at his dad through reinforced glass. The boy's father is awaiting the result of his last appeal for his death sentence for murder. One day not long from now that boy will likely pay his last visit to his father.

Will Ron's letter, and this account of life in prison, prevent one young person from ending up on death row? Society continues to suffer the awful consequences of choosing its own violent way—broken families, broken lives, broken hearts. Will you be any different?

Be happy while you're young

One of the wisest men who ever lived penned some wonderful words for youths when he wrote: "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9, New International Version).

The same man added: "So, remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting . . . Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth" (Ecclesiastes 11:10; 12:1, New American Standard Bible).

Neither you nor I alone have the power to change the social conditions around us very much. The real changes will only come when Jesus Christ returns and establishes God's Kingdom. However, in the meantime we can decide to make a difference by living our lives the way God shows us in His Word. **GN**

Letters From Our Readers

Continued from page 25

Gospel of the Kingdom and God's Holy Day Plan—The Promise of Hope for All Mankind. I would enjoy reading any other material you might have about the Bible. Could you also tell me if you have a Bible study course?

Indianapolis, Indiana

Your booklets have been mailed. In addition to the two you mentioned, three other booklets are available, free to any who request them: What Is Your Destiny, The Road to Eternal Life and Sunset to Sunset—God's Sabbath Rest. Booklets on a number of other biblical subjects are in production and will be advertised in The Good News when available.

We do not currently offer a Bible study course, although we are researching the possibility of producing one.

I really enjoyed reading the Sept./Oct. issue of *The Good News*, and would like to have other issues that might be available. Also, I would like to find a congregation in my area.

Holland, Michigan

A limited number of back issues of The Good News are available and have been sent to you. The complete text of all issues of The Good News, and booklets published by the United Church of God, are available through our World Wide Web home page at <http://www.ugc.org/> on the Internet.

The United Church of God has more than 300 congregations and more than 450 ministers in virtually all U.S. states and many other countries. To find the congregation nearest you, contact us at (818) 294-0800 or the phone or address nearest you listed on page 2 of this issue.

You may also access a list of congregations and ministers through our World Wide Web home page. Visitors are welcomed at any of our congregations.

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space.

Write to us at:

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Box 661780, Arcadia, CA 91066-1780.

Discover the Road Less Travelled.

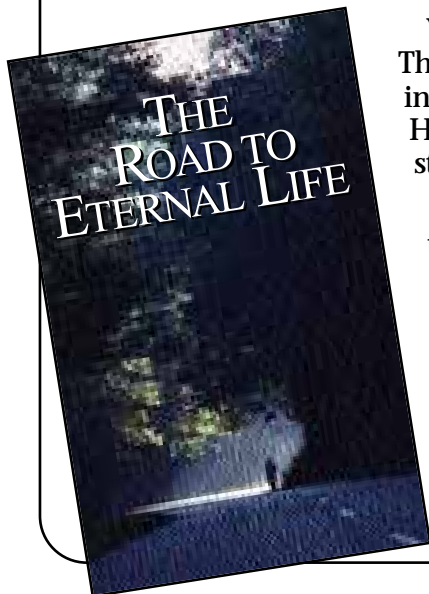
What lies beyond this life? Does something else await us? Is life only an all-too-short span on earth, with nothing but eternity on either side of our brief physical existence?

These are vital questions with important ramifications for what you do *now*—today, tomorrow and the rest of your life!

You don't need to wonder what lies beyond this life. You can *know*. The Bible is very clear that your Creator has a plan for you—an astounding purpose that few have ever heard or understood. And what's more, He tells you exactly *how* you can attain that amazing future He has in store for you!

We've prepared a guide for you. It will give you a different perspective on life's journey, and show you a road very few take.

The Road to Eternal Life will help you understand the incredible truth about the future God has planned for you—and how to get there! Write for your free copy at the address nearest you inside the front cover of this issue.



United Church of God
an International Association

The Gospel From Abraham to Paul

Do you understand what the gospel really is? Many have never really comprehended this most important truth.

by Greg Sargent

A gross misunderstanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ has kept sincere students of the Bible from comprehending other biblical teachings for centuries. A proper understanding of the message Jesus brought is necessary for an accurate understanding of the whole Bible.

The apostle Paul not only pronounced a curse on anyone who would teach a gospel different from the one he taught; he pronounced a double curse. Obviously important to Paul was that people correctly understand the gospel; he felt it vitally important that it not be misunderstood, twisted or distorted.

To help our understanding of the gospel, which is simply an old word for “good news,” let’s take a journey through God’s Word, beginning with God’s promise to Abraham and ending with Paul’s experiences while in jail. This excursion through the Scriptures will show us the undeniable meaning of the gospel.

Four verses only

The gospel is best understood when the rest of the Bible is used to describe it. Yet some insist on defining it through only one brief passage of four verses: “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Paul stresses that he is declaring the gospel to the

church in Corinth, that he preached that same gospel to them before and that they received it from him. Paul had heard the gospel from Christ personally (Galatians 1:12, 15-18). What the Corinthians received, and what Paul received, is the gospel.

Which gospel did Paul receive?

Did Paul teach the entire gospel in these four verses of 1 Corinthians 15? Is the gospel only a message about the death of Jesus Christ for our sins, His burial and His resurrection?

In writing to the Galatians, Paul said he marveled at how quickly they had turned from the grace of Christ to a *different* gospel, a *perverted* gospel. He twice pronounced a curse on any, including even angels from heaven, if they taught any gospel other than that “received” by the Galatians from himself (Galatians 1:6-9).

A cursory biblical search of the word *gospel* can be confusing. The “gospel of God” or the “gospel of the grace of God” is used nine times in the New Testament. We find “gospel” used by itself on more than 60 occasions, connected with Jesus Christ more than a dozen times and as part of the terms “gospel of the kingdom” or “gospel of the kingdom of God” five times.

Paul used *gospel* in every letter he wrote to the churches and to the ministry, except his letter to Titus. The writers of the Gospel accounts—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—used the word only some 17 times. The books of Hebrews and Revelation and the general epistles combined use the term only six times. If we want a solid understanding of what the gospel is, we certainly have to refer to Paul’s writings, in which he used the term more than 70 times.

The apostle Paul not only pronounced a curse on anyone who would teach a gospel different from the one he taught; he pronounced a double curse. Obviously it was important to Paul that people correctly understand the gospel.

In This Section . . .

The Gospel From Abraham to Paul

Exactly what is the gospel spoken of throughout the Bible?

The Danger of Being Double-Minded

What is double-mindedness, and could it affect your life?

Does It Really Matter What You Believe?

Beliefs determine actions—sometimes with dire consequences.

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To grasp the full story, we need to begin with the first record of the gospel being taught. We find this information in a New Testament quote from an Old Testament passage appearing in Paul's letter to the Galatians. As a percentage of the book's size, the term *gospel* is used more often in Galatians than in any other book in the Bible.

The gospel to Abraham

"And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'" (Galatians 3:8).

Did you catch what this says? The gospel was *preached to Abraham*. As a foundational statement for the gospel, this is significant, since it shows that the gospel was known from an early time, and it was spoken to Abraham directly by God.

As we study this subject, we find two elements frequently repeated:

- Nations will be blessed.
- The blessing of the nations comes through Abraham.

The quote we just read in Galatians comes from Genesis 22:18: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." The blessing was not to come from Abraham himself, but from the "seed" of his body, his offspring.

This passage records a second time that God appeared to Abraham through an

angel. The first occurrence is found in

Genesis 12, when God told Abraham to leave his father's country and go to a land He would show him. God promised He would make of Abraham a great nation and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

becomes clear in Stephen's narrative: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it [the land] to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him" (Acts 7:2-5).

Although Abraham had no child, no seed through whom the promised blessing could come, God promised the land to him as his inheritance. Abraham was to inherit and possess the land God allowed him to live in, through Abraham's promised seed. Paul told the congregation in Rome that Abraham was promised to be "heir of the world" (Romans 4:13).

These verses make it clear that the blessing promised Abraham included the inheritance of land, a heritage ultimately circling the world.

But, while Abraham lived, he didn't inherit one square foot.

Another passage that clearly concerns this blessing can be found in Hebrews 11:8-13: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance . . . By

Abraham's seed. What is this seed, and why was it necessary? How would this promised seed bring about an inheritance to a dead Abraham?

First we need to establish who is the seed of Abraham. The line of Abraham has spanned 42 generations by the time we come to the New Testament. Galatians 3:16 makes clear that the promises were made to Abraham and to *one* seed, "who is Christ?" Christ is the seed of Abraham.

Jesus Christ is the "heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2). When we become Christ's, "then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

In Galatians 3:18 we find that God gave the inheritance to Abraham as a promise, not because of a law. God looks at an inheritance the same way we might look at an inheritance from our earthly parents. Their property was theirs—they earned it—yet they are pleased to give it to their children. They may have specified certain conditions in their will, but the inheritance was not earned through any efforts of the children.

Our inheritance from God differs from an earthly inheritance in two significant ways:

- We will perish, never to live again, unless God forgives our sins.
- Unless God resurrects our mortal bodies to immortality, our spiritual inheritance is of little benefit.

Problems solved

Paul explained to the Galatians how these problems can be overcome—how the penalty of death has been nullified and how we can become inheritors forever. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us . . ." Paul explains that this "curse" is the death penalty, which Christ freely took on Himself for us (Galatians 3:13).

Why did Jesus Christ do this? Paul explains that our Savior assumed the death penalty so that "the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles [all nations] in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (verse 14).

Paul describes the prospect of our living again because Christ took our death penalty upon Himself. Because of this, he writes, we can be raised to immortality because we receive, through faith, the promised Holy Spirit.

Paul added when he later wrote to the Ephesian church that we are marked "with

A twisted gospel teaches that the Kingdom of God is already here. Perverting the gospel brings a double curse because it robs us of forgiveness of sins and our inheritance of God's Kingdom.

angel. The first occurrence is found in Genesis 12, when God told Abraham to leave his father's country and go to a land He would show him. God promised He would make of Abraham a great nation and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

The gospel was the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his seed. So far we don't know what the blessing is, and we don't know who the seed is. But let's take one step at a time.

Land, inheritance, world

Thousands of years later, in the early days of the Church, Stephen was on trial before the Sanhedrin. There he related the story of Abraham, and the promise given to Abraham

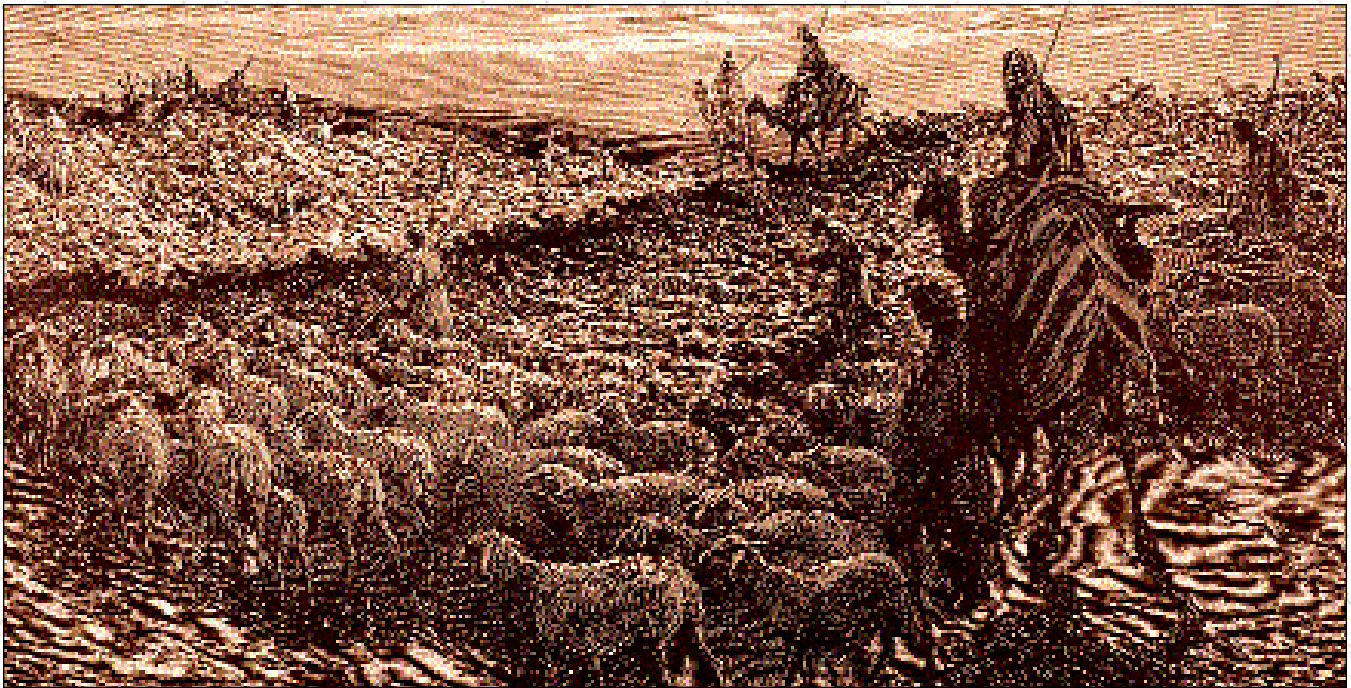
faith he dwelt in the land of promise . . ." Abraham, along with Isaac and Jacob, "died in faith, not having received the promises." They "waited for the city" whose "builder and maker is God."

The gospel message is in part about land; it's a message about inheriting the world. And it's good news about a world whose builder and maker is God.

Through Abraham's seed

Now we come to a seemingly insoluble difficulty. Abraham has an inheritance coming, but he's dead. How, then, can he possibly receive this inheritance, of which he never in his lifetime received "even enough to set his foot on"? (Acts 7:5).

Let's look more closely at the promise of



Abraham leaves his homeland in obedience to God's command to go to a land He would show him. God promised He would make of Abraham a great nation and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, [which] is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . ." (Ephesians 1:13-14, New International Version).

To the congregation in Rome, Paul explains that we are Christ's if we have the Holy Spirit—that, just as Christ was resurrected from the dead, we will be raised to immortality through that Spirit (Romans 8:9-11).

No wonder Jesus Christ said Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing His day (John 8:56). Christ fulfilled the promise to Abraham.

Back to Corinth

Paul's definition of the gospel didn't change when he wrote to the Corinthians. In the letter to Corinth Paul describes the good news using different phrases but conveying the same message, the same two elements that he wrote about to the Galatians. First, Christ (the seed of Abraham) died for our sins. Second, He rose from the dead to receive the blessing of His inheritance, the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 20-24).

The resurrection to an inheritance is a major theme of 1 Corinthians 15. Note how often the words *resurrection*, *rise*, *rose*, *risen*, *raise* and *raised* appear—a total of 23 times. Paul goes to great lengths to describe how many people witnessed Christ's resur-

rection (verses 5-8), the importance of Christ's resurrection (verses 12-19), the order of the resurrections (verses 20-28), the moral implications of Christ's resurrection (verses 29-34) and the bodies of the resurrected dead (verses 35-49).

Confirming and defending the resurrection

Let's approach the study of the gospel from an entirely different standpoint to prove that the gospel is really about a resurrection through Jesus Christ to inherit the Kingdom of God. Paul told the Philippian church that he was in prison because of the gospel, that he was defending and confirming the gospel while in chains (Philippians 1:7, 16-17). Scripture records why Paul was being judged. What did he defend and confirm? Did his defense have anything to do with the hope of the promise to the fathers, an inheritance or a resurrection through Christ?

Before Ananias he said that "concerning the *hope* and *resurrection of the dead* I am being judged!" (Acts 23:6, emphasis added throughout).

Before Felix he said, "Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me . . . I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead . . . Concerning the *resurrection of the dead* I am being judged

by you this day" (Acts 24:13, 15, 21).

Before King Agrippa, Festus said concerning Paul's accusers: "When the accusers stood up, they . . . had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive" (Acts 25:18-19).

Before the king, Paul said, "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers . . . For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that *God raises the dead?*" (Acts 26: 6-8).

Inheritance in God's Kingdom

Continuing with King Agrippa, Paul recounts his conversion and the mission Jesus Christ gave him. Paul was told "to turn [the gentiles] from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (verse 18). Paul told the Colossians the same thing that he prayed they would receive knowledge, wisdom and spiritual understanding by God's power since they had been delivered from the "power" of darkness and were then subject to the power of the Kingdom of the Son of God (Colossians 1:9-13).

We are not already in the Kingdom of God. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom. But we do have the power of

Continued on page E15

The Danger of Being Double-Minded

The apostle James warns against being double-minded. What is double-mindedness, and what are its consequences?

by Kevin Epps

In his New Testament letter, the apostle James twice uses the term *double-minded* (James 1:8; 4:8). Being double-minded is a problem that can damage Christians and can manifest itself in several areas of their lives.

The Greek word translated “double-minded” is *dipsuchos*, from *dis*, meaning “twice,” and *psuche*, meaning “mind.” James uses it to describe someone who is divided in his interests or loyalties, wavering, uncertain, two-faced, half-hearted. We will see double-mindedness as a theme throughout his letter.

Even godly men in the Bible sometimes lapsed into double-mindedness. John, who baptized Jesus Christ, saw the Holy Spirit descend upon the Savior “in bodily form like a dove” and heard a voice from heaven declare, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21-22). Yet, after landing in prison, where he would ultimately be beheaded, John sent men to Christ asking, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” (Luke 7:19-20).

John the Baptist was human, and we humans begin to doubt when God seems not to respond to our prayers during a crisis. Even though John’s words reflected doubt, Christ described him as greater than any prophet born before him (Luke 7:28). We should be encouraged that, as we humbly seek God’s will and way of life, He promises to remember us according to our victories in the faith, just as He considered John the Baptist.

Praying with doubt?

The first area of double-mindedness James addressed concerns how we pray (James 1:5-8). James describes one who is dubious and indecisive in prayer as “a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

Doubt and irresoluteness in our communication with God short-circuit our relationship with Him. Before asking God for anything, we should first ask ourselves questions that directly bear on our prayers:

- Is what I am asking according to His will? The apostle John tells us why this is important: “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him,

that if we ask anything *according to His will*, He hears us” (1 John 5:14, emphasis added throughout).

- Are my attitude and life in tune with the will of God? John stresses the role of obedience: “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, *because we keep His commandments* and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

- Are my motives self-centered or God-centered? James says be careful what you pray for: “You ask and do not receive, *because you ask amiss*, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

If we can answer yes to the first two questions and “God-centered” to the third question, then we should have no problem staying single-minded in prayer. Of course, we can’t earn or force a particular response from God. God responds to us according to *His* mercy and righteousness, not ours.

Hearing without doing?

James’s second warning concerns the double-minded hearing of God’s Word (James 1:22-25). He shows that double-mindedness can creep into our attitude, and he admonishes his readers to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (verse 22). The follower of Christ should feel happy after reading God’s Word, but reading the Bible should be a means to an end, to becoming Christlike. We should go beyond just *feeling* good to actually striving to *be* good. A pleasant, satisfied feeling can deceive us into thinking we have accomplished something when we haven’t.

The story of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ to His mother, Mary, has inspired many, and rightfully so. Yet few are motivated by the story to follow Christ’s example and will.

Luke 11 tells the story of a woman so moved by the words and miracles of Jesus Christ that she exclaimed, “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!” But Christ responded with another perspective: “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (verses 27-28).

Christ talked of imprudent people whose lives are

James uses the term “double-minded” to describe someone who is divided in his interests or loyalties, wavering, uncertain, two-faced, half-hearted. We see double-mindedness as a theme throughout his letter.

not built on the Rock. Everyone “who hears these sayings of Mine and *does not do them*” is “foolish” (Matthew 7:24-26, emphasis added throughout). Conversely, those who want to *obey* Christ will “do” His sayings.

Although no one can earn salvation by anything he does, we can lose our salvation by being “hearers only” (Hebrews 2:1-4).

Biased fellowship?

Our fellowship can mirror our double-mindedness, wrote James. Do wealthy church members receive special treatment when they “come into your assembly”? (James 2:2). The Greek for *assembly* is translated elsewhere as “congregation” and “synagogue.” James addressed the conduct of Christians in their assemblies.

In some congregations in James’s day, the rich apparently garnered more respect and qualified for better seating than did the poor. As a result, James admonished congregations not to show “partiality among yourselves” (verse 4) by having people’s seating arrangements follow some ranking or pecking order of wealth or status.

James was aware of the problems that can result from hypocritical, two-faced fellowship, because he was indirectly involved in a conflict between the apostles Paul and Peter (Galatians 2:11-16). Peter showed partiality in fellowship when “certain men came from James” (verse 12). These verses show that Peter was as subject to human weakness as the rest of us. In this instance he “would eat with the Gentiles; but when they [Jewish believers sent from James] came, he withdrew and separated himself [from eating with the gentiles], fearing those who were of the circumcision.”

Sadly, “the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.”

Peter grew into a great leader and man of God, but in this instance he strayed from a lesson Jesus had taught him years before through a vision. “In truth I perceived that God shows no partiality,” Peter learned at the time of the revelation. “But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:34-35).

In the Greek theater, actors would speak (*krinomai*) from behind a mask (*hypo*). Together the Greek words for *speak* and *mask* form *hupokrisis*, from which we get our word *hypocrisy*. Are we ever so swayed by peer pressure that we figura-

tively wear masks around certain people to stay in their good graces? We must be vigilant to avoid straying outside the proper boundaries of being “all things to all men” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22) to the point of contradicting ourselves or, worse, contradicting God.

Jesus Christ sets the ultimate example of not being a “respector of persons” (Acts 10:34, King James Version). This old English phrase doesn’t mean we shouldn’t respect anyone. A modern translation makes the meaning clear, that we

John, who baptized Jesus Christ, saw the Holy Spirit descend upon the Savior and heard a voice from heaven declare, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.” Yet, after landing in prison, where he would ultimately be beheaded, John sent men to Christ asking, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”

should follow the example of God, who “shows no partiality.” Jesus proved His impartiality by sacrificing His life for everyone, regardless of rank or privilege.

Ironically, when certain men sent by the Pharisees acknowledged that Jesus Christ did “not regard the person of men” (Matthew 22:16), they were speaking from behind a mask themselves because their motive was to “entangle Him in His talk” (verse 15). Needless to say, they failed.

Romans 2:11 confirms that “there is no partiality with God.” Our Creator impartially judges us (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17).

Selective obedience?

Next, James targets double-minded keeping of the law (James 2:8-13). For centuries the Christian world has been of two minds concerning God’s law. Its double-mindedness has resulted in the breaking of “the royal law according to the scripture” (verse 8). The Old Testament records God’s giving of the royal law, which is summarized in Leviticus 19: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 18).

How does one break this law of love? A common way is the breaking of even “one point” (verse 10) of the royal law.

James goes from discussing the royal law of Leviticus 19:18 to enumerating the Ten Commandments. He cites two of the Commandments: the seventh, “Do not commit adultery,” and the sixth, “Do not murder” (Exodus 20:13-14). He calls the Ten Commandments “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25)

The royal law, the perfect law of liberty, shows mankind the way to express love. When we read the 10 points of this law as summarized in the Commandments, we notice that the first four reflect love toward God and the last six depict love of our fellowman; that is, the love of our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; James 2:8).

James shows the double-mindedness of embracing one point of the Ten Commandments while breaking another point of this law of love. Notice that the breaking of one

point of the law is the same as breaking the “whole law” (verses 10-11).

God’s law expresses His will

Jesus Christ prophesied a time after His return when He will say to many who cry out to Him, “Lord, Lord.” He will reply to some who say this: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:21-23). Regardless of how much one believes in Him, Christ said that only “he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (verse 21) will enter His Kingdom. Here God’s will and law are spoken of together, because His law is an expression of His will.

James warned against inconsistency in our obedience to God. It’s much easier to pay lip service to the broad expression of God’s royal law—love (Leviticus 19:18)—than to embrace the specifics of it (Exodus 20:1-17). After all, without specifics each person decides for himself what love is. The Bible, however, plainly defines love: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

What sin do you hate the most? Stealing? Lying? Adultery? God wants us to hate *every* sin. He wants us to hate the breaking of any of the Ten Commandments, as well as anything else that is not “pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

Faith without works?

Double-minded faith (James 2:14-26) is not the wavering in one’s belief in God.

Continued on page E15

Does It Really Matter What You Believe?

Beliefs determine human behavior, and history shows that if beliefs are wrong the results can be catastrophic.

by Mario Seiglie

Have you ever heard someone say that, as long as you believe in Jesus, everything else doesn't really matter?

According to the Bible, those who know God should hold to beliefs based on His laws and not compromise. "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4).

Why is what we believe important? Our beliefs are of consequence because they determine in great measure the decisions we make. Our decisions, in turn, decide the way of life we lead.

If our decisions are based on God's laws, then we can resist the pressures to conform to the standards and values the world imposes on us. We can live in the world, yet not take part in its sins. We can avoid the breaking of God's laws that so often takes place in society.

God's commandments should determine what we believe, and they should certainly make a difference in the decisions we make. As Christ taught, "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Consider, for example, the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). This command appears straightforward, yet most of traditional Christianity has come to interpret this commandment as allowing Christians to fight "just wars."

How just-war concept gained acceptance

The idea that a war could be just was not widespread among Christians in the first three centuries. However, after Emperor Constantine converted to Roman Catholicism in 325, religious and civil governments were firmly linked. The secular and the religious had an empire to defend, so religious leaders concluded that a Christian could take up arms and fight for the emperor and the Church.

The Christian world came to accept the notion that Christians could sinlessly wage war. British historian Paul Johnson describes how this idea entered the Roman Catholic Church and later the Protestant churches. He is, by his own admission, a practicing Roman Catholic and one who recognizes the shortcomings in the church's past.

Johnson traces the doctrine of just wars and justified Christian violence against others back to Augustine, the bishop and 4th-century theologian: "Of course the times were horrific. The late [Roman] empire was a totalitarian



U.S. Navy sailors salute a fallen comrade in a World War II military cemetery. Why have nations that profess to be Christian waged war against each other?

state. State torture . . . was in fact employed whenever the State willed . . .

"Augustine was the conduit from the ancient world . . . If the State used such methods for its own miserable purposes, was not the Church entitled to do the same and more for its own far greater ones? He not only accepted, he became the theorist of, persecution; and his defenses were later to be those on which all defenses of the Inquisition rested.

"For the first time, too, he used the analogy with the State, indeed appealed to the orthodoxy of the State, in necessary and perpetual alliance with the Church in the extirpation of dissidents . . . Here, first articulated, is the appeal of the persecuting Church to all the authoritarian elements in society, indeed in human nature . . .

Differences in West and East

"This stress on violence was particularly marked in the West. Eastern Christians tended to follow the teachings of St. Basil, who regarded war as shameful. This was in the

original Christian tradition: violence was abhorrent to the early Christians, who preferred death to resistance; and [the apostle] Paul, attempting to interpret Christ, did not even try to construct a case for the legitimate use of force. Again, it was St. Augustine who gave western Christianity the fatal twist in this direction. As always, in his deep pessimism, he was concerned to take society as he found it and attempt to reconcile its vices with Christian endeavor. Men fought; and always fought; therefore war had a place in the Christian pattern of behavior, to be determined by the moral theologians.

could violence be justified: it was particularly meritorious when directed against those who held other religious beliefs (or none). The Dark Age church merely developed Augustine's teaching. Leo IV said that anyone dying in battle for the defense of the Church would receive a heavenly reward; John VIII thought that such a person would even rank as a martyr" (Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 116-117, 241-242).

Christ said love your enemy

Is this how Jesus Christ viewed the

tury the world has witnessed the tragic spectacle of two world wars, each taking millions of lives, fought principally among nations claiming to be Christian.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia sums up the teaching of Jesus Christ: "... The religion of Jesus is essentially a call for peace rather than war. The New Testament traces war to the selfishness and greed that dominate people (James 4:1). The early Christians were taught that the true warfare takes place within the individual; the base passions of the flesh war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11). The armor of



Millions of professing Christians participated in World War II, and many went to their deaths fighting and killing others of their same religious affiliation. Millions of civilians also lost their



lives in indiscriminate bombing and shelling. The relatively few who resisted suffered persecution, imprisonment and death for obeying God's command not to murder other human beings.

"In Augustine's view, war might always be waged, provided it was done by the command of God. This formulation was doubly dangerous. Not only did it allow the existence of the 'just' war which became commonplace of Christian moral theology; but it discredited the pacifist, whose refusal to fight a war defined as 'just' by the ecclesiastical authorities became a defiance of divine commands. Thus the modern imprisonment of the conscientious objector is deeply rooted in standard Christian dogma. So is the anomaly of two Christian states each fighting a 'just' war against each other.

"What made the Augustinian teaching even more corrupting was the association in his mind between 'war by divine command' and the related effort to convert the heathen and destroy the heretic... Not only

Sixth Commandment's prohibition of murder? Certainly not! He clearly explained in Matthew 5:43-45: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies [not kill them, even in self-defense], bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you..."

Throughout the centuries, courageous Christians remained true to this command of Christ, in spite of persecution and the threat of death. Meanwhile, those involved in wars—always described as "just" by leaders on both sides—often became the pawns of the particular government to which they were subordinate and on whose behalf they were forced to fight. In this cen-

the Christian is the armor of God, intended to enable one to stand against the forces of wickedness in this present darkness (Ephesians 6:10-17)" (Vol. 4, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 1018).

Decision time in prewar Germany

What would have happened if we had lived in the Germany of the 1930s and our system of beliefs included the acceptability of just wars? Johnson relates a candid account of practices among the Christian-professing groups of that time, those whose systems of belief produced revealing results:

"Despite the attempts of both Protestant and Catholic clergy to delude themselves, Hitler was not a Christian, and most of the

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Christian Living: Ordeal or Adventure?

*Perhaps you've marveled at great feats of physical endurance.
But many lead lives of daily, often-unrecognized adventure!*

by Larry Greider

Until 1953 no human being was on record as having set foot on the summit of Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain. Several expeditions from various countries had tried, but all had failed to reach the top of the 29,028-foot Himalayan giant.

In the fall of 1952 some Swiss climbers made their second attempt at Everest with an impressive expedition that included some of the world's best climbers. They had the finest and latest provisions—lightweight down parkas and mummy sleeping bags, equipment fashioned from aluminum alloys and canisters of oxygen.

Yet, in spite of the collective experience and sophisticated accoutrements, the Swiss team failed. The towering mountain, which sits on the border between Nepal and Tibet, was shrouded by inhospitable weather; light air starved the climbers' lungs; and their footing was ever unpredictable.

Early in 1953 the British Everest Expedition completed plans to conquer the legendary peak. Could they succeed where others had failed?

Ascent to achievement

The expedition included climbers Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay and numerous porters. Before the climb came extensive training and preparation. The participants determined the best strategy and allowed for alternate courses of action. Everyone seemed ready and determined to succeed.

The climbers prepared for a dangerous journey, yet, as they began the ascent, the challenge grew much tougher than anyone had

expected. Snow blindness, frostbite, exhaustion and other difficulties thinned the ranks. Discouragement crept in. Danger increased the closer they got to the top.

Then the expedition considered turning back en masse. After all, any step could give way to a hidden crevasse. A blinding snowstorm could mean the death of everyone. A few of the climbers, however, stayed optimistic. Their vision was to reach the summit, and they were determined that nothing would deter them.

Finally, on a May morning in 1953, climbers Hillary and Norgay set out alone from Camp 4 on the mountain's south side. They were within several hundred steep yards of the summit. This was to be the most momentous day of their lives.

One by one those few last yards became the most demanding and risky steps of the climb. One wrong step or movement could bring about a disastrous, fatal fall. But, driven by a clear vision of victory, the two men persevered step by step over the slippery ice. Finally their dream burst into reality: They reached the summit. Exhilaration warmed their cold bodies. Their goal was accomplished. In a few days newspapers the world over would boldly proclaim their triumph.

What makes people go through such hardship and sacrifice? Hillary and Norgay, and subsequent successful climbers, endured agony in the name of high adventure.

The Christian life as high adventure

This magnitude of adventure parallels the Christian way of life. Yet some of God's people see their calling as a burden to bear. For a few, God's way of

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life looms as an ordeal to be endured rather than an adventure to take delight in.

The apostle James exhorts, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (James 1:2). What is there about a difficult situation to rejoice in? What kind of attitude finds joy in illness, family rejection or the loss of a job?

On the surface, little in such situations seems positive. No wonder James encourages us to look at our circumstances from a different perspective and always as a positive step in our continuing adventure, the Christian life. We should look forward to the exhilaration of victory at the end of our struggle, because that is exactly what awaits a true Christian.

We rarely picture great adventure as strolling down a country lane on a summer's day. Could such an outing be pleasant? Yes, but could it also pose a challenge? Hardly, unless the country lane lies in a war zone or angles up the side of the world's highest peak. The larger the potential danger and the greater the odds against accomplishment, the greater the thrill of victory.

In the same way, Christian living presents a challenge. We are locked in a struggle: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Jesus Christ issues us this challenge: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

The whole world, deceived by Satan, is opposed to the way of life God reveals (Revelation 12:9). We stand as a small army against great odds. The wrong influences of the world are everywhere, and we must

battle against them as well as our own human nature. We must, with God's help, fight the evil one himself—Satan the devil—who, with his legions of demons, determines to inspire us to forfeit the crown of life God has in store for us.

Certainly the Christian way of life, like any other adventure, demands resolute struggle against great obstacles.

Willing to endure

High adventure requires a willingness to undergo difficulties. Every mountain climber knows that an expedition demands physical sacrifice. Several days of dangling from ropes, sleeping and eating in cramped spaces, suffering frostbite and enduring bone-chilling cold go with the territory. These are but a few of the costs of heading for the top.

Paul's Christian life was one of hardship. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 he enumerates some of his experiences: "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches."

In Luke 14:28 Jesus cautions His followers to count the cost of living His way

of life, even if the cost could include their very lives. Christians must be willing to undergo difficulties to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus warned that he who is not willing to "bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (verse 27).

Anticipation of victory

An adventure comes with the expectation of victory. No leader of an expedition of mountain climbers can afford to expect anything but success. Negativism erodes esprit de corps. The vision of victory can be lost.

Although the Christian's way of life is no cakewalk, we must never lose sight of the attainability of our victory.

God reminds us to be confident of our triumph, that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). We can go boldly before the throne of grace, knowing that our elder Brother has already reached the peak and holds the rope for us.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, compares our struggle to a sportsman's. Athletes, he writes, compete for "a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown." Our reward is much greater than any we could win from any competition in this life, and knowledge of this certainty should motivate us. "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection . . ."

Paul expected victory. We should count on it as well. We have Jesus Christ on our side, and with Him everything is possible (Philippians 4:13).

A Christian needs the attitude of an adventurer. View every inch and every foothold as progress. Consider each bruise and scrape a part of the price for our ultimate triumph. Continue the struggle for the supreme accomplishment: becoming a son of God.

No adventure is greater than the life of a Christian. See you at the top! *GN*

How Do You Know It's Bad?

When faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles and difficulties, keep in mind that things may not always be as they seem.

by Wayne Speed

Whenever I'm going through a trial, I remember a folk tale that goes something like this:

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a very old but very wise farmer. He lived alone, except for his son and their old plow horse. One day his son, after he had finished his chores, forgot to lock the gate to the stable yard. That night, while they lay sleeping, the old horse ran away into the forest.

The next day the villagers, having heard what happened, came to console the old farmer.

"Oh, this is bad," they said. "This is very bad."

"How do you know this is bad?" the farmer said. "How do you know?"

Several days later the old plow horse returned, followed by 10 beautiful horses.

Later, while training one of the new horses, the farmer's son fell and broke his leg. When the villagers heard this, they came running to tell the farmer:

"Oh, this is bad. This is very bad."

"How do you know this is bad?" the farmer asked. "How do you know?"

After a few days the local warlord came to the village. He took all the young men off to war except for the old farmer's son, left behind because of his broken leg.

Analyzing God's promises

I like that story. It has helped me through many difficult times. A statement in the Bible is similar in sentiment to that old folk tale. I find it encouraging when times get tough. It says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good . . ." (Roman 8:28, New American Standard Bible).

We have read that scripture many times. Yet too often we think it says, "God works it out once in a while." But it doesn't say God works it out only sometimes; it says that all things work together for our good. We should underline that statement in our Bibles.

Continue reading that verse. Strings are attached. It says all things work together for good "to those who love God." Here is a prerequisite for receiving God's promise: All things work together for good *to those who love God*.

How do we love God? Is it only a warm,

indistinct, fond feeling? No, the Bible clearly defines love of God as the keeping of His commandments (1 John 5:3). Demonstrating our love for God by keeping His commandments is a requirement for us for this statement to apply to our lives.

This verse, however, isn't over. The verse in its entirety reads, "All things work together for good to those who love God, *to those who are called according to His purpose.*"

Here is a second condition. God does not promise to make all things work together for good for just anyone. This promise is for those who have been called according to His purpose.

Proving Scripture true

Let me tell you how that old story about the farmer and his son and Romans 8:28 have proven true in my life. Ten years ago I owned and operated a company that enjoyed a certain measure of success. I lived the American dream. I thought I had it all: money, a big house, nice cars, a swimming pool, even a few airplanes. Life was good.

But it didn't stay that way. My business started to go downhill. I tried everything I could think of to stop it, but the business deteriorated to the point that I finally had to sell it for a fraction of what it was worth.

I thought: This is bad. This is very bad.

But how did I know this was bad? How did I know?

The story isn't over yet. I tried unsuccessfully to get a job. Someone offered me a job selling silk plants on the street. I smiled to myself. I didn't want to insult him, but that was not what I had in mind. With all my business acumen, I was not going to waste my time peddling artificial plants. So I sent the man away. I was going to be a business manager.

I applied for jobs all over town. I expected the phone to ring any minute because I knew business owners throughout the valley had to be looking for managers.

I waited, but the phone didn't ring. I ran out of money. I had to sell my expensive toys—my cars and airplanes—just to make the mortgage payments on my house. Things got so bad that my electricity was about to be shut off in the middle of a hot Arizona summer.

That's what I learned by sitting on that street corner. God took a bad situation and turned it into something good. He called me for a purpose, but, because I was so blinded by pride, I was no longer useful to Him as a tool. He had to take me out, set me on the side of the road for three years and let me think about what I had been doing.

I had to do something. So I called the gentleman who offered me the job selling silk plants on a street corner. I asked him if the job was still available. He said it was.

Time out to think

Two days later I was sitting on a street corner in 110-degree heat with my silk plants while I watched air-conditioned cars zoom by. I sat there for three years trying to figure out why I was there.

In hindsight I see that God acted just like a parent. When a child is out of control you may tell him, "Sit here a while and think about why you're here and why

the ugly secret about pride: You don't know you have it because it's so deceptive. You're blinded by it. The more pride you have, the more blind you are. When you are full of pride and somebody tells you what your problems are, you don't listen.

As I reflected on what I had been through, I realized what had happened many times while I was still operating my first business. Others told me repeatedly that things were going wrong and warned me that I had better change or I would lose my business. I was too proud to listen. I lost it all.

That's what I learned by sitting on that

My business started to go downhill. I tried everything I could think of to stop it, but the business deteriorated to the point that I finally had to sell it for a fraction of what it was worth. I thought: This is bad. This is very bad.

you're not able to play with all of the other kids."

That's how I felt. God took me out of circulation because I was out of control. He put me on the street to sit and think about where I was going and why I was there. I was being taught a lesson.

I learned a lot sitting on that corner, and I'd like to share a few things I learned with you.

Because I was sitting on the corner for up to 10 hours a day with nothing else to do—cars stopped only occasionally—I opened my Bible and studied it deeply once again. I wasn't as busy now as I had been when I had my own business. Now I had plenty of time to think about what I was reading.

I read the 8th chapter of Deuteronomy. God, it seemed, was describing me. He did everything but mention my name. I saw the promise that, if I would do what God tells me to do, He would bless me beyond measure. That's where I was before my business went under. God had given me all those blessings.

But I also read a warning in Deuteronomy that I had never seen before—a warning that, after I received His blessings, I should have considered how I acquired them and remembered who gave them to me. God's Word warned me not to think I had acquired all those blessings through my own expertise, knowledge and understanding. I was not to take the credit for them.

My struggle was with the sin of pride. I hadn't even realized I had pride. That is

street corner. Mine was a humbling experience, but it was something I had to learn. God was doing what He promised in Romans 8:28. He took a bad situation and turned it into something good. God called me for a purpose, but, because I was so blinded by pride, I was no longer useful to Him as a tool. He had to take me out, set me on the side of the road for three years and let me think about what I had been doing.

Another hurdle

I began to feel resentment toward God. I would think to myself: I'm doing everything I'm supposed to be doing. Why isn't God blessing me?

I would say to myself: This is bad. This is very bad.

But I should have asked myself: How do I know this is bad? How do I know?

I learned much in those three years. God provided just enough income for me not to starve. After three years the market for silk plants began to dry up, at least for me. Others who were selling the plants were still making a fair amount of money, but I wasn't. I prayed for God to provide me with enough income so my family and I would not go hungry.

Again I reflected on what I could do to bring in income. I had some truck-driving experience. Maybe I could go back to driving a truck for a living.

I applied for a commercial driver's license. When I went to take the test, I discovered that the driver had to supply his own truck. The license I applied for was

for a tractor-trailer rig, so I had to find such equipment in which to take my test.

I looked all over town, but at first I couldn't find anyone who would rent me a tractor-trailer. I finally found one, but it required a \$7,000 cash deposit up front. I didn't have \$7, let alone \$7,000. I said to myself: This is bad. This is very bad.

Another idea

I had another idea. I went to the driver's-license office and asked if it were a common problem that people wanting to take a driving test could not afford the vehicle they needed to take it in. The licensing people replied that that indeed was a frequent problem.

The wheels in my mind started turning. I asked these government employees if they would endorse me if I got a truck and insurance and rented the rig to people who needed to take the test.

"Sure," one of them said. "You will be supplying a need."

I approached an old friend and told him my idea. He offered to lend me a little money to get me started. I bought a 25-year-old truck and put an ad in the newspaper. The phone began ringing. I rented my truck to drivers so they could pass their test.

I soon realized that I enjoyed teaching people. When drivers rented from me, I could sense their apprehension about taking their test. I started coaching them. I told them what they needed to do and showed them how to pass the exam.

When they passed, I felt exhilarated that I had been able to help somebody do something that he otherwise might not have been able to do. It gave me a new zest for life. Finally God had given me something I could do that I enjoyed. I was excited about working again.

All went well for two years. Then one day a supervisor in the motor-vehicle department decided he would put me out of business by insisting that I become licensed to operate a truck-driving school. That was out of the question for me, because it would require millions of dollars to buy buildings and trucks.

End of the line?

My situation looked bleak. To add insult to injury, the supervisor further insisted that I go directly to the official who issued licenses to truck-driving schools. I went to his office with my heart

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Why Tithe in the 20th Century?

Is tithing obsolete, hopelessly out of date in today's world, or does it teach timeless principles and lessons? You need to understand God's perspective on this vital issue.

by Bill Bradford

Today we live in a world that cries out for spiritual direction and answers to deep-seated and often intractable problems. But ours is also a selfish and materialistic age. Nearly all of most people's resources goes for material goods and services to make life better for themselves and their offspring.

Yet God asks for something additional from those He is calling. He asks us to recognize the importance of *spiritual* needs and values as well as physical. God wants us to communicate priceless spiritual knowledge to a darkened and deceived world.

The purpose of the Church today

God is working out His glorious plan in which all humanity will have the opportunity to receive eternal life beyond the grave. An aching spiritual and emotional void exists that only the teachings and spiritual values of God can fill.

The Church of God still has an enormous work to do. Jesus Christ commissioned His people to take the gospel to the whole world, to reach every nation with the wonderful truths He has revealed and to instruct those God calls in His way of life (Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20).

Throughout the 20th century the information and entertainment media—publications, radio and television—have played important roles in this mission of preaching the gospel. So, as before, the Church has been faced with the question of how God wants this work to be financed. By carefully and conscientiously examining the Bible as a whole, we see ample evidence that a consistent financial method is addressed in the pages of Holy Scripture, and that method is tithing.

So let's face these questions: Should you as an individual tithe? What is the scriptural basis for the practice of tithing? And, perhaps most important, in what spirit and attitude should you tithe? Let's take a brief survey of the key scriptures.

What do we mean by tithing? The word *tithe* comes from an Old English word meaning "tenth." Tithing, then, means merely the practice of "tenthing," or simply giving back to God 10 percent of one's increase (see Leviticus 27:32). Tithing is simply a form of giving, which is a godly practice (Matthew 19:21).

It is in fact a form of worship in which we show

God respect: "Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9-10).

We need to understand this important facet of our relationship with God. We need to ask ourselves whether our actions say, "I will give Him my heart, I will give Him my praise, I will give Him thanksgiving, but I will not support His work financially."

Tithing in biblical history

Before the Israelites entered the land God promised to give them, He told them: "All the tithes of the land, whether of the seed of the land or the fruit of the tree, is the LORD's. *It is holy to the Lord*" (Leviticus 27:30, emphasis added throughout).

What gave God the right to claim 10 percent of everything they produced from the land? His claim is based on a simple and an often-overlooked truth: He owns everything!

This fundamental premise is repeated in the Bible. "The earth is the LORD's and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1; see also Exodus 19:5; Job 41:11). The tithe is simply the divinely ordained *degree* to which He expects us to give back to honor Him and to acknowledge that He gives *everything* to us.

The first account in the Bible of this ancient practice of giving is found in Genesis 14:18-22. Abraham, after his defeat of four kings, tithed on the spoils of the war to Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High. Abraham obviously understood that tithing was an appropriate way of honoring God with one's physical possessions.

This example shows several important principles we can apply today. Abraham, whose exemplary life of service and obedience to God caused God to describe him as the father of the faithful (Romans 4:11), was not forced to tithe. He gave willingly and voluntarily as an act of great humility. He showed respect and reverence for God, and to Melchizedek, who was both "king of Salem" and "priest of the Most High God" (Hebrews 7:1). Jesus Christ, the King of all the universe, serves in this royal and priestly office today (Hebrews 6:20), and to tithe is to show Him appropriate honor.

This example also demonstrates Abraham's

The Church of God still has an enormous work to do. Jesus Christ commissioned His people to take the gospel to the whole world, to reach every nation with the wonderful truths He has revealed and to instruct those God calls in His way of life.

enormous personal integrity and character. He chose to keep his promise to God rather than give in to the temptation to use the spoils of his victory for himself (Genesis 14:22-23). Abraham understood the premise for giving a tithe to God: He is Possessor of heaven and earth (verse 19). Abraham recognized that he was blessed by God Most High, who made his victory and all his blessings possible.

Human short-sightedness

We humans tend to think that what we possess is because of our human efforts. God recognizes this tendency in us and told Moses to warn the Israelites not to think to themselves, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.” Instead they were to “remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18). They were to serve God “with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything” (Deuteronomy 28:47).

Tithing is, first and foremost, an act of worshipful recognition of God as the source of our existence and all blessings and providence. Jacob, in following the example of his grandfather Abraham, recognized this. When God reconfirmed to him the promises He had made to Abraham, Jacob promised God that “of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You” (Genesis 28:20-22).

The practice of tithing was later incorporated into the covenant with Israel as a written and codified law. The tribe of Levi, which was not given an inheritance of land from which the Levites could derive increase (Numbers 18:23), was to receive God’s tithe of the agricultural produce in return for their ecclesiastical service to the nation. The Levites, based on what they had received in tithes from the people, in turn tithed to the priestly family of Aaron (Numbers 18:26-28).

Over the years that followed, payment of the tithe was carelessly neglected, with devastating consequences. By Nehemiah’s day the whole system of godly worship had crumbled and decayed. Temple worship and observance of the Sabbath were seriously compromised (Nehemiah 13). Because there was no financial support for the Levites, they had returned to their fields to support themselves (verse 10). God’s system of worship was all but abandoned.

Nehemiah recognized that restoring the tithe was crucial to restoring godly worship. He strongly corrected the nation for its fail-

ure to tithe (verses 11-12) and restored the practice of tithing (Nehemiah 10:37-38; 12:44), which in turn enabled the Levites to carry out the work of God that they had originally been designated to perform (Numbers 18:21).

Today the practice of tithing plays a vital role in the overall system of godly worship within the Church. It encourages humility before God. It encourages us to properly evaluate the use of all our physical resources and thus ensures a more balanced and proper approach in our relationship with God. Neglecting to practice tithing will negatively impact a proper, biblical system of worship with far-reaching consequences both for ourselves and the Church.

Malachi 3:8-10 provides another example of how God views a failure to tithe diligently. Written near the time of Nehemiah’s struggle to set the nation of Judah aright, the context shows this also has an end-time application. In this passage, God corrects the nation in the strongest terms. Failure to tithe, He says, is tantamount to *robbing* Him, and the disobedient are consequently cursed. Yet God also promises that renewed obedience in tithing will result in blessings from Him,

As recorded in Matthew 23, only days before His death Christ plainly confirmed that tithing should indeed be practiced, along with sincere adherence to the “weightier” spiritual matters the scribes and Pharisees were obviously neglecting.

so abundant that “there will not be room enough to receive it.” God is serious about His laws and His commitments to us and, of course, about our commitments to Him.

Tithing in the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament and the experience of the early Church, we should consider several important points. First, the emergence of the Church did not herald a radical departure from the practices of the nation of Israel. Not until several decades after the founding of the New Testament Church does the book of Hebrews record a clarification of the impact the new spiritual administration of Christ had for the Church and the existing priesthood. Even here it is apparent that most laws relating to Israel were not *annulled*, but were sometimes different in their *application*.

For decades the Church was regarded by the gentiles as merely another sect of the Jews, but one that believed in the deity of Jesus Christ. The Church is the spiritual

equivalent of physical Israel and is even called “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). Because of lack of obedience, the opportunity for salvation for that time was extended beyond the nation of Israel and offered to others—those who would be called into the Church from all nations (Matthew 21:43; 1 Peter 2:9-10). This new *spiritual nation* would provide the obedience God desired, through a converted heart.

No sharp break in application of laws and principles from the Old Testament came about. Indeed, the New Testament had not yet been written, and it is acknowledged that the Church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

The teachings and specific examples from the Old Testament, we are told, were written for the benefit of the New Testament Church (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11), therefore we should pay close attention to them. In a prophecy of the time setting of Christ’s second coming, we are admonished to “remember the law of Moses, My servant” (Malachi 4:4). It was God Himself who gave His law for Israel

through Moses. That law and the proper application of its principles has continuing relevance for members of God’s Church.

Instruction from Jesus Christ and the apostles

Jesus Himself clearly upheld the practice of tithing. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, *without leaving the other things undone*” (Matthew 23:23). As recorded here, only days before His death Christ plainly confirmed that tithing should indeed be practiced, along with sincere adherence to the “weightier” spiritual matters the scribes and Pharisees were obviously neglecting.

The Israelites supported the tribe of Levi for its service at the temple by giving the Levites God’s tithe. This support provided the means for Israel to worship God and be taught according to His will. In the New

Testament the followers of the gospel message gave monetary and other aid to Jesus, to His disciples and, later, to other laborers in the Church to support them in doing the work Christ had given His Church to do. Examples of such giving, and principles relating to it, are found in New Testament passages such as Luke 8:3; 10:7-8; 2 Corinthians 11:7-9; and Philippians 4:14-18.

In early New Testament times tithes continued to be given to the priests as long

God doesn't leave it up to us to decide how to worship Him. He defines the basics of how we are to worship Him, and honoring Him with a portion of the increase He gives us is clearly a part of the worship He commands.

as there remained a temple and a priesthood to support. However, the book of Hebrews describes a change in administration as the New Testament Church—the spiritual temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22)—replaced the physical temple in importance.

Tithing abolished in Hebrews?

Hebrews 7 first relates how Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek, king of Salem and God's priest. Melchizedek and the offices he held are used in this passage as a type of Jesus Christ Himself. With the later establishment of Israel as His nation, God established a different priesthood, and tithes were given to the descendants of Levi, who served as this new priesthood (verse 5). As the administration changed, the recipients of the tithes also changed. The book of Hebrews demonstrates how the practices and principles relating to the physical temple, sacrifices and priesthood now apply to the new High Priest, Jesus Christ (verses 22-28).

Far from this section of Scripture stating that tithing is abolished, its thrust is primarily to support the return to a priesthood "according to the order of Melchizedek" (verses 15-17). This new priesthood of Jesus Christ is vastly superior to the priesthood of Levi in every way. It necessitated a "change of the law" (verse 12) relating to the priesthood, because the law God gave by Moses to Israel included no instruction regarding a High Priest coming from Judah (verses 13-14).

This change of the law had to do with a change in administration. It meant that the administration of tithing would change with this new priesthood—from that of Levi to that of Melchizedek (Christ). Thus

members of the Church today continue to tithe *even though* the Levitical priesthood has ended, just as Abraham tithed to Melchizedek *before* the priesthood of Levi was established.

Paul drew on an analogy to demonstrate that, as those ministering in the temple were supported by the offerings given at the temple, so those ministering in the Church should receive support from the Church. "Even so the Lord has *com-*

manded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel," he wrote (1 Corinthians 9:13-14).

A matter of faith

When you tithe you are aligning your attitude and actions with universal principles originating with God, the great Giver (Matthew 10:8; 19:21; 20:28; Luke 6:38; 12:32; Acts 20:35). Tithing reflects the unselfish, giving nature of our Creator and Provider. Through willing and cheerful giving (2 Corinthians 9:6-8), we honor God while supporting the physical means of preaching the gospel.

It should be noted that anyone who gives a tithe should do so willingly. Although God equates withholding tithes with robbing Him (Malachi 3:8-10), He does not force anyone to tithe. Tithing is giving. *Voluntarily* (from Latin) and *willingly* (from Anglo-Saxon) are identical in meaning and refer to actions made by our own decisions.

As with all obedience to God's laws, whether we tithe or not will always be based on our own decision. The Church today is not under the Levitical administration of Israel. Under that administration tithing related to a physical nation. Today the Church is a spiritual organism, a borderless community of believers scattered throughout many nations. Today, as was the case with Abraham, no humanly legislated penalty is imposed if we do not tithe. Rather, failure to tithe incurs its own penalty on each of us and diminishes our potential for effective service and responsible stewardship in God's eyes (Luke 16:10).

Making a decision to tithe is a matter of faith. For most of us just the necessities of life consume almost all of our income. Stepping out in faith to tithe—and in this way

supporting the work of God of preaching the gospel and nourishing the Church—is a scriptural obligation none of those called by God can afford to neglect. But God will surely bless those whose faith is actively backed up by good works. And they will be active participants in the most important enterprise on earth, that of proclaiming the wonderful news of the Kingdom of God to this chaotic and war-weary world.

Tithing is a universal principle not restricted to a particular covenant, one that relates to each of the major administrations of God as He has worked with people through the centuries. Tithing applies to all people today. God doesn't leave it up to us to decide how to worship Him. He defines the basics of how we are to worship Him, and honoring Him with a portion of the increase He gives us is clearly a part of the worship He commands.

Deepening our relationship with God

Our faith to tithe is founded in the realization that God owns everything, including ourselves, and that we recognize Him as both our Creator and the great Giver of all good things.

In giving back to God a tenth of our income, we enter into a special relationship with our Creator and owner. We dedicate ourselves to serving Him and financially supporting Christ's commission to preach the gospel and nourish the Church. In return He promises to bless us. Tithing, then, is an intensely personal matter between you and God—a way of demonstrating the depth of your commitment to, and relationship with, God.

God devised the practice of tithing so we can learn to give of our possessions to further His interests on earth. By tithing we express appreciation to God in a small but tangible way for the abundance of His possessions that He allows us to use for our material benefit. Finally, we learn to become, as He is, a giver of what we own for the benefit of others.

We see tithing, then, as the opposite of a selfish approach to life. God stands prepared to support this generous approach by, in turn, blessing us. He invites all to take Him up on His promise: "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it'" (Malachi 3:10). *GN*

Double

Continued from page E5

Rather, double-minded faith is believing in God without performing the actions, or the “works,” that reflect that belief. James wanted his readers to know that faith means more than just belief in God. Every Christian should be aware that “faith without works is dead” (verse 20). James challenges us to show tangible evidence of our beliefs: “Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith *by* my works” (verse 18).

Belief is not enough, he says. “Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (verse 19). It is much easier to tremble at the thought of God’s existence than it is to fear to disobey God. A classic example is ancient Israel. The Israelites quaked with fear before God’s awesome presence when God gave them the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:18-19). But, when they could no longer see the evidence of God’s nearness to them, they fabricated a golden calf (Exodus 32) while they should have been trembling at the explicit instructions God had revealed to them.

Of Abraham’s example of faith, James poses a question for every Christian: “Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” (James 2:22).

Unbridled tongue?

Have you ever tried to keep from saying the wrong thing but you just couldn’t,

James warned against inconsistency in our obedience to God. It’s much easier to pay lip service to the broad expression of God’s royal law—love—than to embrace the specifics of it. After all, without specifics each person decides for himself what love is.

and an inappropriate comment just popped out of your mouth? Of course, you have.

If with our tongue “we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men” (James 3:9), then we’re speaking out of both sides of our mouth and are, therefore, double-minded (verses 1-12). James calls the tongue “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison,” because abusive conversation can undermine the powerful influences of prayer, the inspired reading of God’s Word, the impartial treatment of people, and faith with works.

Before passing along information that could hurt someone, we should ask ourselves: Does this need to be said, or do

I just want to say it? Would more harm come by saying it or not saying it? If it needs to be said, am I sharing it with the right person?

Imagine how the news and entertainment media, politics and our social lives could be enhanced and improved if we were to first think things through the way James thought them through.

“For we often stumble and fall, all of us. If there is any one who never stumbles in speech, that man has reached maturity of character and is able to curb his whole nature” (James 3:2, Weymouth New Testament). Our conversation—our speech—speaks to our spiritual maturity or lack of it.

From the heart

Before examining the words that flow from our mouth we should examine the thoughts of our minds and hearts, for, as Jesus said, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34).

We cannot always control what we hear, but we can control what we hold dear in our hearts. Each day Satan, the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), relentlessly inspires a multitude of improper thoughts. We must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, New International Version).

We are bombarded with “corrupt” communication (Ephesians 4:29) from coworkers, fellow students and acquaintances. Movies and magazines transmit

values, morals and behavior far removed from those God expects of His followers.

Nevertheless, we must assimilate God’s words and ideals; they must become a part of us; we must keep them in our minds and hearts. “Purify your hearts, you double-minded,” counsels the writer of the epistle (James 4:8). We should pray without doubting, read God’s Word with great care, fellowship without bias, have faith while consistently keeping God’s law, and speak edifying words that inspire friends and brethren to honor God.

With single-minded attention to God’s will as shown in His Word, we can draw near to God and He will draw near to us. *GN*

Gospel

Continued from page E3

God’s Kingdom within us, the Spirit of God, by which He will raise us to eternal life.

Again to Agrippa, Paul explained that the repentant could “receive forgiveness of sins [the first element] and an inheritance [the second element] among those who are sanctified by faith in [Christ] . . . To this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead . . .” (Acts 26:18, 22-23).

The whole of the Bible confirms the story of the gospel. The Law details the account of the gospel given to Abraham. The Prophets foretell the coming of the Christ to fulfill the promises. The Writings proclaim Christ’s return to restore the Kingdom to spiritual Israel.

The books of the New Testament likewise record witness of His message as well as His death, burial and resurrection so we can also inherit the Kingdom of God. From the beginning and throughout the book of Acts, Christ told His apostles to proclaim their witness of His resurrection so the world would understand that He brought the fulfillment of the promise to the fathers (Acts 1:8; 4:2, 33; 13:31-33).

What the gospel is

Paul received the gospel; in turn he gives it to us. Polluting or wresting the gospel twists our thinking. A distorted gospel teaches that repentance is not really necessary because Christ did everything for us and nothing other than belief is required of us. A twisted gospel teaches that the Kingdom of God is already here and our reward is to go to heaven when we die. Perverting the gospel brings a double curse because it robs us of forgiveness of sins and our inheritance of God’s Kingdom.

The gospel is the promise of an inheritance to Abraham through his seed, Jesus Christ. It is the gospel of God, Jesus Christ, grace and the Kingdom of God knit together in one beautiful package: grace through Jesus Christ so that we can inherit the Kingdom of God for eternity when we are resurrected.

Let’s all praise God for His promises and, as Paul wrote in Philippians 1:27, let our conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ. *GN*

Beliefs

Continued from page E7

members of his movement were avowedly anti-Christian. Of course Hitler was sometimes deceptive. He never officially left the [Catholic] Church . . . Neither the Evangelical [Lutheran] nor the Catholic Church ever condemned the Nazi regime . . . At no point were Catholics given, either by their own hierarchy or by Rome, the relaxation from their moral obligation to obey the legitimate authority of the Nazi rulers . . . nor did the bishops ever tell them officially that the regime was evil, or even mistaken . . .

“Of 17,000 Evangelical [Lutheran] pastors, there were never more than fifty

Such is the sobering story of convictions—or a lack of them—and their results. God’s commandments—including “You shall not murder”—stand in stark contrast against the deception of society’s values.

serving long [prison] terms at any one time. Of the Catholics, one bishop was expelled from his diocese, and another got a short term for currency offences. There was no more resistance, despite the fact that, by summer 1939, all religious schools had been abolished . . .

“Both the state churches urged Germans to obey the Führer and fight for victory . . . Pius XII advised all Catholics everywhere to ‘fight with valor and charity’ on whichever side they happened to find themselves . . .” (Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, pp. 485-490).

The only churches that did not participate in backing Hitler’s regime and his war were those that kept the Sixth Commandment as expressed by Jesus Christ: Warfare is abhorrent to Christians, and they must be willing to accept persecution for standing firm in their beliefs.

Johnson describes the fate of those who steadfastly refused to participate in war: “Only free sects stuck to their principles enough to merit outright persecution. The bravest were the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who [in Germany] proclaimed their outright doctrinal opposition from the beginning and suffered accordingly. They refused any cooperation with the Nazi state which they denounced as totally evil. The Nazis believed they were part of the international Jewish-Marxist conspiracy. Many were sentenced to death for refusing military service and inciting others to do likewise; or they ended up in Dachau or lunatic asylums. A third were actually killed; ninety-seven per

cent suffered persecution . . .” (ibid., p. 489).

A few brave clergy, Catholic and Lutheran, did oppose the Nazi regime. They paid a high price, suffering imprisonment and, for some, execution for their resistance.

Humans fight the Prince of Peace

How important are our beliefs? History demonstrates that our beliefs determine our actions. The supreme irony of the doctrine of just wars will reveal itself when, as prophecy shows in Revelation 17, the nations of the earth will be deceived—so deceived that they will send out great armies in a final war they will call just.

But against whom will they fight? Verse

14 says they will fight against the returning Jesus Christ! In preparation they will be gathered together at Armageddon (Revelation 16:16).

As *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* explains: “The teaching of Jesus is strongly directed toward peace and peace-making. The kingdom of God needs no force to establish or maintain it. The peacemaker is blessed (Matthew 5:9), and the enemy is to be met with love and good deeds instead of hate and violence (Matthew 5:43-44; Luke 6:27, 35). The ethic of Jesus is the antithesis of the warlike mood, and, if universally accepted, would create an ethos [prevailing guiding beliefs] in which war was impossible” (Vol. 4, Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 801).

Such is the sobering story of convictions—or a lack of them—and their results. God’s commandments—including “You shall not murder”—stand in stark contrast against the deception of society’s distorted values.

Along with the frightful events that will engulf the world just before Jesus’ return, the Bible describes a group of people who stand out because of their commitment to obey God: “Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12).

God’s people resolve to remain faithful to His commandments and their faith in Jesus Christ regardless of the cost. As we can see, it really does matter what we believe. **GN**

Is It Bad?

Continued from page E11

in my throat. I remember saying to myself: This is bad. This is very bad.

But how did I know it was bad? How did I know?

The story wasn’t over yet. As I walked into the office and introduced myself, the man said he had heard a lot about me and was wondering when I would come to see him. My heart sank. Now I was certain it was all over. He asked what I wanted to do. I explained that the supervisor at the department had insisted that I be licensed to run a truck-driving school.

He assured me that he, not the supervisor, had the full responsibility for those decisions. Again he asked what I wanted to do.

I explained to him that I wanted to help drivers pass their tests. He said the industry needed someone like me, and he would help me get my license.

I was astounded. What had appeared to be a disaster was turning into one of the greatest blessings of my life. In May 1995 I was licensed by the State of Arizona to operate a truck-driving school. A dream I could never have imagined was coming true.

That old folk tale has proven real to me. Many times I have said to myself: This is bad. This is very bad. But circumstances turned out pretty well.

Romans 8:28 says God will work things out for us. He will take care of

God doesn’t say that bad things are not going to happen. But He does say that, when bad things happen to us, He will use them for our ultimate benefit.

things. He looks after us. God doesn’t say that bad things are not going to happen. But He does say that, when bad things happen to us, He will use them for our ultimate benefit.

Remember God’s promise. God is faithful, not just for me, but for everyone who demonstrates his love for Him by keeping His laws and who is called according to His purpose. God’s promise is for real.

The next time something happens in your life that makes you think: This is bad. This is very bad, ask yourself: How do I know this is bad? How do I know? **GN**