

November/December 1999

# *The* Good News

What is the  
**Millennium?**



Waiting for the End of the World • Removing the Myths From Christ's Childhood  
What Should We Watch to Discern the Times? • Forget About Being Normal

Will humanity ever experience lasting peace?

As the countdown continues toward a new millennium, we seek assurance that the next century will bring an era of hope and promise, an oasis of peace in man's violent, troubled history. We hope new leadership, new technologies and new thinking will lead us away from our chronic dilemmas.

But we shouldn't hold our breath. The indications are not good. We find instead that the world is an increasingly dangerous place.

No sooner had the NATO bombing stopped in Kosovo than fresh blood flowed in an insurgency in the former Soviet republic of Dagestan and neighboring Chechnya, in a series of terrorist bombings in Russia, and in East Timor's move for independence from Indonesia.

Meanwhile, Communist China asserted its avowed right to instigate aggressive military action should Taiwan further assert its independence from the Chinese mainland. North Korea again threatened its neighbor to the south, and Indian and Pakistani soldiers skirmished over a disputed border region shortly before Pakistan's military leaders gained control of their government in a coup.

What is so unnerving about these developments is that many of these hostile neighbors are armed with nuclear arsenals and have the means and will to use them to achieve their aims should other means fail. The nuclear nightmare, far from being over, threatens to turn new corners of the globe into glowing ash.

Man's most valiant efforts to find peace in this century have been tried and found wanting. Horrified by the butchery of World War I, the world's leaders formed the League of Nations to try to forestall any such future bloodbath. But in less than a generation World War II set the world aflame again. This time leaders established the United Nations. United in name only, it has failed to halt the scores of wars that have erupted in the last half of this century.

Our collective record is far from encouraging. Left to ourselves, it seems the only peace we are able to find is the stillness and quiet of the grave.

Jesus Christ Himself predicted the inevitable outcome of our inability to find peace: "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22, New International Version).

Humanity, however, will not be left to itself—and for that we can be thankful. If it were up to us, human extinction, said Jesus, is the course we have unwittingly chosen. Nonetheless, our age will not end in the destruction of all human life.

As a new millennium approaches, we would do well to consider what the Bible reveals about our future. It, too, speaks of a new Millennium—not the third thousand-year period since the supposed birth date of Jesus Christ on our calendar, but the glorious future the world will experience under His reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

What does that future hold for us, our families, our loved ones? Through the prophet Isaiah, God gives us a glimpse into that coming world:

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:6-9).

In spite of our best efforts, this world will never come to peace by human attempts to outlaw war. In this issue of *The Good News* you can discover how humanity's impossible dream—a world of lasting peace—will become a reality.

—Scott Ashley

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J u s t   W h a t   i s   t h e

# Millennium?

by Don Henson

Excitement builds as we approach the dawn of a new millennium. But what's so special about a new millennium, and what should the new millennium mean to you?



# W

hat does the word *millennium* bring to mind? Futuristic, science-fiction images? Computer glitches? Horrifying prophecies of destruction?

A utopian fantasy world?

As the year 2000 approaches, the word *millennium* has been used so commonly that most people have even learned to spell it correctly.

What is the millennium? The word is derived from two Latin words: *mille*, meaning "thousand," and *annus*, meaning "year." *Millennium* simply means 1,000 years.

Many will mark the beginning of the third millennium on Jan. 1, 2000, although in reality, according to the calendar used by most of the Western world, it will begin a year later, on Jan. 1, 2001. We are fast approaching the time many assume will mark 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus Christ.

But is the birth of Jesus the only connection between the Bible and the millennium?

## Confusion about the Millennium

Many people have heard that the Bible talks about a period of worldwide peace known as "the Millennium," but they aren't quite sure what that means. The many views among denominations and religious teachers don't help clear up the confusion.

What is the Millennium described in the Bible? Is it merely a nice-sounding ideal or an allegory? Or is it a time the Bible describes as real? How will the Millennium come about? Does the Bible tell us where it will be? Can we know when will it come about? Let's explore the answers straight from the Bible.

Although the word *millennium* never appears in the Bible, it speaks specifically and clearly of a period of 1,000 years that will serve as the turning point for mankind. It reveals that during that time the world will finally achieve the elusive ideals of peace, prosperity and purpose. It is assuredly not merely a dream, wish or fantasy; the Millennium holds a sure promise of hope for humanity.

To understand the prophesied Millennium (not to be confused with the third millennium according to our modern calendar), let's set the stage by briefly describing events that will take place immediately before the beginning of this 1,000 years.

## A world in peril

Shortly before His death Jesus's disciples asked Him what events would occur before the end of the age and His return to earth (Matthew 24:3). Jesus warned that the future would bring religious confusion and deception, war, natural disaster, persecution and tribulation, even as the gospel would spread to all the world (verses 4-14). Then He told them that those who are watchful and obedient could be protected from the destructive events that would yet occur (Luke 21:18, 28, 36).

Jesus went on to prophesy that immediately before His return the world would be gripped by unparalleled difficulties so severe they would threaten humanity with extinction: "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22).

He said the time of turmoil would be followed by dramatic signs in the heavens, and

then He would return in power and glory. "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (verses 29-31).

From Paul's writings we learn that the

the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury" (verse 3). Verses 9-20 describe the abundance and prosperity this system will bring to the nations, and their shock and fear at its sudden destruction.

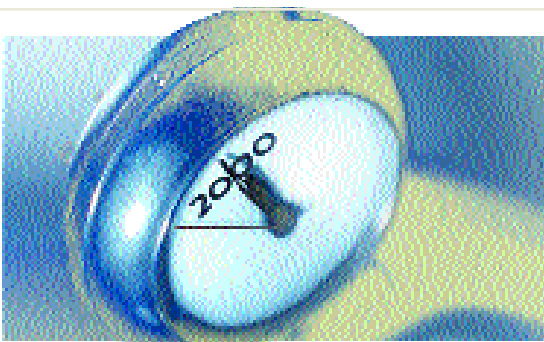
In a vain effort to protect their system, and because Satan has deceived them, the armies of the world will fight against Jesus when He returns (Revelation 19:11-19). Verse 20 describes the destruction of the political and religious leadership of this ungodly system.

Having destroyed Babylon, Jesus will deal with the unseen "god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4), Satan. "Then I saw an

beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4).

### The reign of the Messiah

Daniel 7 contains another prophecy of events that culminate in the establishment of God's kingdom. Verses 13 and 14 describe Jesus Christ being given this kingdom: "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him



Many people have heard that the Bible talks about a period of worldwide peace known as "the Millennium," but they aren't quite sure what that means. The many views among denominations and religious teachers don't help clear up the confusion.

gathering of "His elect" at the "sound of the trumpet" is the resurrection of faithful Christians: "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep [dead]. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

### Rejoicing or rebellion?

Jesus said the "tribes of the earth will mourn" at His return (Matthew 24:30). That statement seems odd, since you would expect that all would rejoice at His second coming. Why does mankind resist, rather than rejoice, when Christ returns?

Revelation 18 gives us more background information. This chapter describes the destruction of an economic, political and religious system called Babylon the great (verse 2). But before its destruction it will be the source of great wealth to those who are part of this pervasive system: "For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and

angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:1-2).

### The Millennium begins

The prophecy goes on to show that Satan is bound so he can no longer deceive humanity: "[The angel] cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished . . ." (verse 3). Although many Old Testament prophecies reveal what will take place during the Millennium, this is the first specific reference to a period of 1,000 years.

The "elect" gathered "from the four winds" (Matthew 24:31), who had received eternal life when Jesus returned (1 Corinthians 15:51-52), includes those who were persecuted because they refused to be part of the ungodly system the Bible calls Babylon. Now resurrected and having received God's gift of eternal life, they will rule the earth with Jesus Christ during this time.

"And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness of Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the

was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed."

Jesus Christ's return to establish God's Kingdom on earth will fulfill the prophecy recorded long before His birth: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Jesus will return to a battered and beaten earth. People will have endured a time of terrible tribulation, bloody battles and horrifying disasters. Zechariah 14 summarizes events surrounding Christ's return and the beginning of the Millennium.

Verses 1-2 discuss "the day of the LORD," the time just before His return when Jesus begins to intervene in world affairs and set the stage for His second coming. Verses 3-5 speak of His battle against the nations and His descent onto the Mount of Olives just

outside Jerusalem. Verses 6-9 describe Jesus' impact as He immediately begins to comfort earth's inhabitants and institute God's way of life.

The "living waters" mentioned in verse 8 symbolize the healing that will spread out to all lands from Jerusalem. "And in that day it shall be that living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and half of them toward the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur. And the LORD shall be King over all the earth . . ." (Zechariah 14:8-9).

## A world of prosperity and peace

The Millennium



is the first 1,000 years of the eternal Kingdom of God. The purpose of the Millennium is to establish God's government on earth and provide a way for every person, protected from Satan's deception and temptation, to prepare to receive an eternal inheritance in God's Kingdom.

Isaiah was inspired to record many prophecies of the Millennium. He summarizes the transformation of the earth after Jesus returns: "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 all nations shall flow to it. Many 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 shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He

shall judge between the nations, and shall 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 2:2-4).

Isaiah describes a world completely different from ours. Jesus Christ will rule over all the earth. People from all nations will seek to learn God's law and live according to it. As a result, society will have an entirely new orientation and approach based on godly values. Man's creativity and resourcefulness will be used for peaceful purposes instead of war and destruction.

Isaiah further prophesies that, not only will man's nature change for the better when Satan is removed from the

sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it" (Amos 9:13).

Those who are part of the resurrection that takes place when Jesus returns are also described as teachers who will give people guidance and direction in God's way of life: "And though the LORD gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, but your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left" (Isaiah 30:20-21).

Faithful Christians who prepare in this life for the Kingdom of God will reign with Jesus Christ in the Millennium. As kings,

*Isaiah prophesies that, not only will man's nature change for the better when Satan is removed from the scene, but even the nature of animals will be different: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them."*

scene, but even the nature of animals will be different: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den" (Isaiah 11:6-8).

A prophecy by Amos shows the earth benefiting under Jesus Christ's rule. The nations will be richly blessed. For example, crops will be so abundant that the preparations for the next year's will be slowed because the harvest hasn't even been completed. "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountain shall drip with

priests and teachers, they will have the privilege of assisting Him in governing and teaching mankind the way and the truth of God.

## A world filled with purpose

Why will the world be so different during the Millennium? God will provide what is sadly lacking in today's world. "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).

When people live according to the knowledge of God, they will experience peace and prosperity—the result of understanding the true purpose of life and how God intends man to live. It's difficult for us to grasp how negative an influence Satan is on our lives. We live in a world that lacks the knowledge of God, an understanding of His instructions

and the purpose of life. We can only try to imagine what the world will be like when it is saturated with God's truth and man is free to pursue the purpose for his existence.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant between God and humanity. Jesus established this covenant (Matthew 26:28), but, although Satan is present to spread his deceptions (Revelation 12:9), God has called relatively few to enter into that covenant.

During the Millennium, however, when Satan is bound and God fills the world with knowledge of Him and His ways, mankind as a whole will have an opportunity to enter into this covenant. "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt . . . This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: *I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:31-33; emphasis added throughout).

The promise of salvation through the New Covenant will not be limited only to descendants of Israel, but will extend to all mankind. In reference to Jesus' work of salvation, one of Isaiah's prophecies puts it this way: "Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Isaiah 49:6).

### **Eternal life offered to all**

Societies will be based on the law of God, which will be taught to all nations (Isaiah 2:3). People will learn to obey God from their heart, motivated by understanding, love, devotion and appreciation.

The apostle Paul wrote that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

As Jesus rules on earth during the Millennium, people will have the opportunity to learn about Him and God's plan for salvation. All will have the opportunity to come to see Jesus as their Savior, realizing they can enter into eternal life only through Him (Acts 4:12). Finally recognizing Jesus as Savior and King, people will honor, worship and obey Him (Philippians 2:9-12).

But what happens next? What about the rest of humanity, those who lived and died

without ever hearing of Jesus Christ or knowing God's plan for salvation?

### **Beyond the Millennium**

The Millennium helps us understand the future of those who have died in the faith, those who are alive when Jesus returns to earth and those who are born during the 1,000 years. But what about people who lived and died before the Millennium? How will salvation be offered to the billions who never heard the message of the gospel?

"But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished" (Revelation 20:5). When the Millennium is over, the "rest of the dead" will live again. They will have their opportunity for salvation too. (To understand more about this next and important step in God's plan, be sure to request our free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). These prophecies reveal that God will make His gift of salvation available to all who have lived.

### **Prophecy need not be confusing**

Confusion and misunderstanding about the Millennium abound, but the Bible is clear. The Millennium is the first 1,000 years of God's eternal kingdom. During that time Jesus will establish God's government, the world will be at peace, and mankind will flourish as the knowledge of God fills the earth. Humanity will come to understand and prepare for its eternal destiny in God's family and kingdom.

In His Word God has revealed much about the Millennium that strengthens our faith, sense of purpose and hope for the future. We hope that you will continue your study to learn of and prepare for your part in God's incredible plan for you.

This article has only briefly discussed some of the many prophecies of the Millennium and Jesus Christ's coming rule on earth. To discover more of what the Bible teaches about this exciting new world, be sure to request *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. To better understand how the Millennium fits with God's plan as laid out in Bible prophecy, please ask for *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. Both booklets are free for the asking when you contact our office in your country (or the country nearest you) listed on page 2. You can also find these and many other booklets in the literature library of our Web site at [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org). **GN**

## **What Does Bible Prophecy Tell Us About the Millennium?**

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain . . ." (Isaiah 11:6-9).

"Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them . . . and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God" (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

". . . 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 . . ." (Micah 4:3-4).

"Many people 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 shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

"And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (Zechariah 14:16).

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

"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "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 . . . They shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them" (Amos 9:13-14).

# What Should We Watch to Discern the Times?

*What key trends should we expect to see when we compare the state of the world with prophecies in the Bible?*

by Darris McNeely

W

hat trends should we expect on the world scene over the next few years?

With the approach of a new millennium, an increasing number of people vaguely expect that Jesus Christ will return in

the near future. Should we expect Him to return soon?

*You will not understand the reports of unrest in Indonesia, problems of the Russian economy or astronomical pricing of Internet stocks without a grasp of globalization.*

*The Good News* is committed to spreading the announcement that Jesus Christ will return to establish the Kingdom of God (Matthew 24:14). The word *gospel* means “good news,” and it is from this message that *The Good News* draws its name.

But the Bible states that certain conditions must exist and specific events must come to pass before Jesus will return. Jesus Himself was clear about this, giving a detailed prophecy of end-time settings and events in the Olivet prophecy recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. (To better understand His predictions, be sure to request your free copy of *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*.)

What are some of these trends and conditions? Can we recognize them as they come into play?

At one point in His ministry Jesus’ enemies challenged Him to provide a sign that He was indeed who He said He was. Notice His response: “Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3).

He warned His challengers they should have been able to recognize that certain biblical prophecies were being fulfilled before their eyes. Dozens of long-standing prophecies were fulfilled in His birth, life and ministry, and many

more would be accomplished in events surrounding His death and resurrection. But these people remained blind and undiscerning, unable to recognize what was taking place.

What about us? Can we discern the signs of our times? What events should we watch in our world that will help us discern and understand?

Let’s consider three trends beginning to shape our future on a world scale. They are globalization, religious ecumenism and global power shifts.

## Increasing globalization

*New York Times* foreign-affairs columnist Thomas Friedman writes: “. . . If you want to understand the post-Cold War world you have to start by understanding that a new international system has succeeded it—globalization. That is ‘The One Big Thing’ people should focus on. Globalization is not the only thing influencing events in the world today, but to the extent that there is a North Star and a worldwide shaping force, it is this system” (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 1999, p. xviii).

You will not understand the reports of unrest in Indonesia, problems of the Russian economy or astronomical pricing of Internet stocks without a grasp of globalization.

Mr. Friedman elaborates: “. . . The globalization system [is] a dynamic ongoing process: globalization involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before, and in a way that is also producing a powerful backlash from those brutalized or left behind by this new system.

“The driving idea behind globalization is free-market capitalism—the more you let market forces rule and the more you open your economy to free trade and competition, the more efficient and flourishing your economy will be. Globalization means the spread of free market capitalism to virtually every country in the world. Globalization

also has its own set of economic rules—rules that revolve around opening, deregulating and privatizing your economy” (Friedman, p. 8).

He adds that globalization shapes “the domestic politics and foreign relations of virtually every country” (p. 7).

He lists six interconnected areas that make up this trend: financial markets, politics, culture, national security, technology and the environment. None of these considered alone could give a complete picture of what is taking place. But viewed together they add definition to the progress of the developed world toward a highly integrated network of relationships.

But the world is not just high tech, finance or politics. Important as these are to the health and welfare of nations, deeper rivers feed into the ocean of humanity. One of these is religion.

### **Growing ecumenism**

Religion has done more than any other institution to shape nations and influence people’s lives. Religion is a defining force for good and bad. Christ told His disciples to watch for religion under the guise of His name or authority as an end-time trend. The result would be deception (Matthew 24:4-5).

For all the faith that religions have generated in history, they have fueled untold division and schisms. The Christian world alone has been divided since 1054—nearly a millennium—into Western and Eastern segments. Since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, thousands of denominations have developed—along with a bewildering variety of religious ideas and beliefs.

The movement to unite the faiths is ecumenism. The movement to promote a worldwide religious unity and cooperation centers on the efforts of the current pope, John Paul II. His vision of uniting the factions of Christianity has resulted in gatherings of leaders from many faiths to pray and focus on common tenets.

The influence of the papal office across denominational lines is evidenced in a recent paper produced by a joint Anglican-Catholic commission that stated “only the Pope has the moral authority to unite the various Christian denominations” (Oliver Poole, *Electronic Telegraph*, No. 1448, May 13).

Slowly and incrementally various denominations are moving along the path of religious unity. We must understand that progress comes step by step. Lutherans and Catholics recently resolved their 500-year-

old rift over the doctrine of justification. It took 30 years of talks to reach the accord, but it represents a significant development considering that Martin Luther himself challenged this tenet. More recently nearly eight million American Lutherans and Episcopalians ironed out many differences and agreed they could share clergy and outreach programs and combine congregations where needed.

Revelation 17 describes a powerful and influential end-time religious, political and

*To wield the kind of influence this prophecy describes presupposes a high degree of cooperation between, or control of, many groups and denominations.*

economic system symbolized by a woman sitting on a scarlet beast with a name on her forehead, “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth.” She is depicted as holding in her hand a cup of abominations (a corrupt mixture of religious dogma) and is drunk with the blood of God’s faithful martyred saints (Revelation 17:3-6).

To wield the kind of influence this prophecy describes presupposes a high degree of cooperation between, or control of, many groups and denominations. The movement toward religious unity will be but one power shift to occur in the coming years.

### **Global power shifts**

The 10 years since the Cold War have seen dramatic changes. The Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, leaving a vacuum in Europe. The former Iron Curtain countries of Eastern Europe find themselves in varying stages of development.

Some, like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, are now part of NATO, the alliance formed as a Western bulwark against the old Soviet Union. Germany has reunited and plays a major political and economic role in the European Union and among the Western democracies. Yet, as we have seen in the Balkans, some nations have not handled the freedom from external control without resorting to age-old hostilities that have resulted in atrocities and bloodshed.

The introduction of the euro, the monetary unit adopted by most member countries of the European Union, has yet to impact the world economy. This does not mean it will not do so in future years. The launch of the unit last January is a milestone in itself. The transition to a single currency among

the members of the EU may yet trigger other social and economic reforms that will have far-reaching consequences.

Though the value of the euro has fallen compared with other currencies, we should not underestimate its long-term impact. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article pointed out that in 1985 the mighty British pound sterling had fallen to \$1.03. Today, at over \$1.80, it is considered a strong currency within a vibrant economy.

It takes years, not weeks, to sort out the

factors that ultimately determine the success of a new currency unit. If anything has been learned in the last 50 years of European history, it is that far-reaching change and progress toward any goal takes a long and circuitous route before achieving completion.

### **Russia-China alliance?**

It is also important that we watch and understand events in Asia. Relations between China and the United States are going through their worst period in years. Revelations of Chinese spying and the theft of sensitive information from U.S. nuclear-weapons laboratories have shocked those who understand what is at stake. Coupling the stolen secrets with the purchase of advanced American computer, missile and satellite technology in the past three years, China can develop, arm and launch weapons targeted at military and population centers in the United States.

A recent forecast by the Stratfor Agency projects: “Russia and China will be moving into a closer, primarily anti-American alliance in 1999. That process is the most important global trend today. It is well under way and is also intensifying” (*Stratfor’s Third Quarter Forecast*, June 27).

Two significant items need to be resolved between these nuclear powers. The first is the status of Central Asian republics, which are experiencing ethnic and religious unrest from Muslim groups within their midst. This is spilling over into Chinese provinces, causing problems for the Chinese leadership.

The Russian leadership is reluctant to get involved with these sticky disputes, but pressure is coming from elements in the Russian military and government to exert

*Continued on page 28*

# Waiting for the *End of the World*

by John Ross Schroeder

*As we approach the threshold of a new millennium, what does the Bible say to those who count on the end of the world occurring around New Year's Day 2000?*

A

rmageddon and Apocalypse are in the air. The turn of a new century and a new millennium intensifies a nervous eschatological impulse. Some expect the end of the world and Jesus Christ's return on Jan. 1, 2000.

Strange things are going on. For instance, a small Christian group moved to the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem, to help usher in the second coming. In a separate incident the Israeli government had to intervene and cancel a simulated Christian enactment of the events of Armageddon—a purported preview of the coming catastrophe. They deported members of another group whose leader predicted that he would meet a violent death in Jerusalem this December. Not long ago hundreds of members of yet another doomsday group disappeared into the remote mountains of Colombia.

Millennial madness is all the rage as 1999 draws to a close.

There have always been Christians who believed so intensely that they knew exactly when Christ must return that they tried to make it happen. How absurd this must seem to God. Christ is our Lord and Master—not the other way around (John 13:13).

Nonetheless, He did tell us to be alert to world events, trends and conditions that would precede His second coming (Luke 21:36), but we should approach them in a balanced and rational way—never attempting to set a date.

## **No man knows the exact time**

When it does occur, the return of Jesus Christ will take its place alongside such epochal events as the creation, Noah's flood and Christ's first coming. But God the Father has reserved to Himself the decision of the exact time it will take place. Even Jesus Christ Himself did not know when it would be (Matthew 24:36).

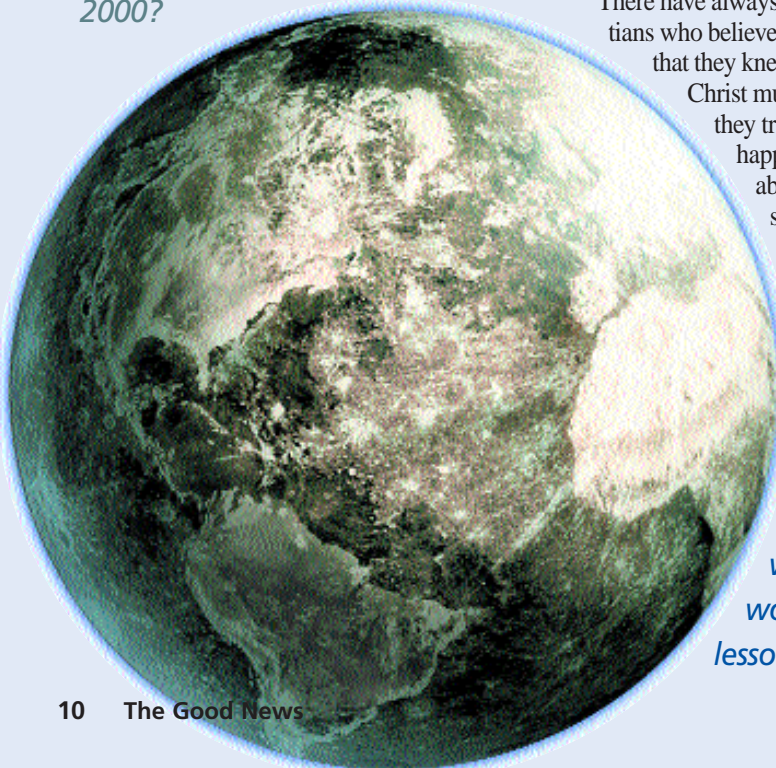
The disciples continued their persistent questioning after His resurrection to eternal life. They still wanted to know when. Christ gave them virtually the same answer He had previously: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Historically this reply has been hard for people to accept. Somehow we want to circumvent Jesus' own words and figure out some way to know exactly when.

Over the last nearly 2,000 years many have wound up with egg on their faces. From time to time the misguidedly zealous have set dates only to see them come and go without the appearance of Jesus Christ. One would have thought we would have learned the lesson by now.

Many, however, seem to be prone to this weakness. Even the early apostles weren't immune, thinking Christ would return in

*From time to time the misguidedly zealous have set dates only to see them come and go without the appearance of Jesus Christ. One would have thought we would have learned the lesson by now.*



their lifetimes. But later in life they came to a more accurate understanding (see 2 Peter 3; 2 Timothy 4).

To better understand God's thinking, let's take a brief scriptural look at Christ's first and second advents from the biblical perspective.

### Carefully planned far in advance

The first coming of Jesus Christ was a carefully planned occurrence. It did not happen by accident or just at a random time in history. The Bible tells us that "when *the fullness of the time* had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4, emphasis added throughout).

Other translations render this expression as "the appointed time," "the right time" or something similar. God establishes plans and timetables, and "the right time" is that particular period most suitable to His plan and purpose.

Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8; John 1:29), but the actual event didn't occur for several thousand years. Almost 2,000 years have passed since His death and resurrection. But, as Hebrews 9:28 reminds us, "Christ was offered *once* to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear *a second time*, apart from sin, for salvation."

Scripturally both comings are connected and intertwined (Isaiah 61:1-2), yet a considerable time lapses between these two events. Both are enormously important steps in God's plan for humanity.

Consider the words of the apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus: "In Christ our release is secured and our sins forgiven through the shedding of His blood . . . He [the Father] has made known to us His secret purpose, in accordance with the plan which He determined beforehand in Christ, to be put into effect *when the time was ripe*, namely that the universe, everything in heaven and earth might be brought into a unity with Christ" (Ephesians 1:7-10, Revised English Bible).

Paul here speaks of a time that undoubtedly includes the second coming of Christ yet apparently extends beyond that crucial event.

### The divine timetable

We can be absolutely sure no major event in prophecy will occur without God's knowledge, if not His direction and partici-

pation. In looking back, crucial occurrences will have happened "when the time was ripe" (Ephesians 1:10) and not before.

The Bible makes it clear that God can guide and direct events to accomplish His ends. "For this was the plan of the One [the Father] who shapes the whole course of events to His appointed ends" (verse 11, Translator's New Testament).

God the Father will send Jesus Christ back to earth at precisely the right time. Unlike us, He can see the whole picture, everything that is happening in the world at any given time. He alone has perfect knowledge of the past and future.

In contrast, we can perceive only a part of the scenario. "We know in part and we prophesy in part," wrote the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 13:9).

Yet Christ told us to pray "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10), plainly telling us He wants us to eagerly and enthusiastically seek the time of His direct, decisive intervention in human affairs. In the meantime we are to take diligent care to see that our spiritual life is in order (Luke 21:29-36).

### Sober words of warning

We should carefully heed Jesus Christ's words of warning in the Olivet prophecy, given shortly before His death: "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect . . . Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it" (Matthew 24:23-24, 26).

If people would only understand and heed the words of Jesus Himself, they wouldn't be setting up residence on the Mount of Olives or trying to act out the events of Armageddon in advance. Truly the second coming will be a global event (verse 30). God's angels will gather His elect from anywhere on earth they happen to be (verse 31).

Jesus expects His followers to carry out His work of spreading the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 24:14) and sharing His truth and commandments with the world (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to wait for His return with faith and patience (Luke 21:19), knowing that "he who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13). **GN**

ANNOUNCING

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JAN. 10, 2000



# An Overview of Condi

In this last issue of 1999 we review the state of the world as the year draws to a close. Join us as we take a brief tour to spots on the globe that highlight a few of our beleaguered planet's problems.



## United States

Senseless, random violence made headlines around the country, most recently the September murder of seven people inside a Texas church.

Major stories also included the two high-school seniors who killed or wounded 35 students and faculty members at Columbine High School in Colorado in April, the deranged young man who shot 11 people on an Independence Day-weekend killing spree in Indiana and Illinois and the madman who gunned down three youngsters, two day-care-center employees and a postal employee in California in August.

The aftermath showed the now-familiar stunned reactions and the shocked embraces of weeping teenagers as they, along with other survivors and relatives, struggled to deal with yet another incomprehensible shooting outrage.

According to a recent report in *USA Today*, "556 people in 44 cities died in gun-related incidents from April 20 when 12 students and a teacher were shot to death in Littleton, Colorado, through September 1."

Another such survey showed that "last year about 2.6 million Americans [students] in grade six through 12 carried a gun outside school for protection or as a weapon, excluding hunting [game]."

Most of the mass killings are carried out by unsuccessful loners generally thought of as "losers" by the rest of society—frustrated outsiders who assume they have little to lose by expressing their murderous rage against various groups. Judaism and Christianity have been recent targets.

*Most of the mass killings are carried out by unsuccessful loners who assume they have little to lose by expressing their murderous rage against various groups.*

The United Church of God has published two free booklets, *Making Life Work* and *The Ten Commandments*, that show how we can structure our families in such a way that the conditions that produce these tragedies can be surmounted and avoided. Please request your free copies. (Sources: *USA Today*, *The Independent on Sunday* [London], *The Evening Standard* [London].)

## Colombia

The stereotypical image of Colombia is of a nation that supplies much of the world's illegal drugs. Yet civil war is probably this South American nation's main problem. For most of the last three decades a series of unsuccessful governments has fought a losing battle against left-wing guerrillas. Revolutionary forces control 40 percent of Colombia's territory.

This nation has known little peace this entire century. Tens of thousands have lost their lives and thousands more have been forced off their land. By some estimates civil war has displaced more than a million Colombians. (Source: *The Independent on Sunday* [London].)

## Africa

Some people seem to think that the HIV epidemic is all but over. Not true. AIDS remains Africa's deadliest killer.

Michael Adler is professor of genitourinary medicine at Royal Free College Medical School in Britain. He writes: "AIDS now results in more deaths than any other infectious disease in the world, having overtaken tuberculosis and malaria. It is the biggest cause of death in Africa (and probably the rest of the developing world). Currently 34 million people are living with AIDS . . . Sixteen thousand new infections with HIV occur each day."

Zambia and Zimbabwe are becoming nations of orphans. In Zambia one in five adults is infected with HIV. In Zimbabwe the government says that soon nearly a million children under 15 will have no mother. The nations of Sub-Saharan Africa account for 20.8 million cases of HIV (compare this with 500,000 in Western Europe).

AIDS is projected to kill 30 million Africans in the next 20 years. As *The Independent's* science editor observed: "The explosive threat of AIDS in Africa threatens to undermine the health and social improvements of the past 20 years, causing widespread economic collapse across the entire region." (Sources: *The Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Economist* [all London].)

## East Timor

Asia's 27th independent state has emerged in turmoil. Just when the Kosovo conflict seemed to settle down, East Timor exploded as a result of its tragic bid for independence from Indonesia after 24 years of occupation. This Asian area is yet another abode for a United Nations peacekeeping force.

For almost four decades Indonesia itself has been a dormant volcano under the rule of Gen. Suharto. In the aftermath of his demise the region is threatened with a fate somewhat like Yugoslavia's after Marshall Tito's death.

As *Time* magazine put it: "Thugs supported by the Indonesian military lay waste to East Timor—killing hundreds, rocking the government in Jakarta and ruining the country's reputation in the eyes of the world." Nuns and priests have been massacred. Some 150,000 Timorese are living like refugees. Meanwhile Western nations including Britain wonder about the wisdom of their generous arms supply to this area of the world. This is the ugly side of Britain's \$4.2 billion-a-year





# ions Around the World

weapons trade. (Sources: *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Times*, *The Metro* [all London], *Time*.)

## Britain

"Millions of Animals Now Worthless." "Prices Paid to Farmers Plummet to All-Time Lows." "No Cash for Sheep Farmers." Such headlines are not from the tabloid press; they represent stark reality. These newspaper accounts reflect the critical state of British agriculture. Farmers are losing money on almost everything they breed or grow. Only wheat is an exception to the trend.

*These newspaper accounts reflect the critical state of British agriculture. Farmers are losing money on almost everything they breed or grow.*

Income on the farm has plunged 75 percent in the last three years. Soon hundreds of rural communities could become virtual ghost towns and farms transformed into other uses. A recent \$255 million government aid program has failed to pacify angry farmers.

Overproduction and the cessation of substantial European Union subsidies are the main factors. Inevitably farms will be lost to families.

The possible long-term significance of these developments should not be lost on us. In a future national crisis, a country may need all of her agricultural lands, particularly if the nation is subjugated and threatened with starvation. (Sources: *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Times* [all London].)

## Russia

Many are the woes of Russia. Militarily the country is in the midst of an escalating war in Chechnya and conflict with Islamic forces in Dagestan (in the North Caucasus) that may be directly related to a spate of terrorist strikes in Moscow. Also, the latest of many charges of corruption—accusations of Russian money laundering through a New York bank—prompted *Newsweek* to state: "Virtually no one from the nation's business elite to President Boris Yeltsin to his major political opponents in next year's presidential elections seems untainted any longer by corruption."

Environmentalists are worried because of possible radioactive contamination from underground storage tanks around the Russian state. On the political scene there is growing domestic turmoil in Moscow as the capital city is witness to many ambitious power plays and increasing calls for the resignation of President Yeltsin. (Sources: *Newsweek*, *The Times* [London].)

## In summary

Earlier this year *Newsweek* observed: "Suddenly the world looks like a troubled, dangerous place again." Although the

troubles in the Balkans have settled somewhat, less-publicized areas continue in crisis. Consider, for example, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Though far away from the current attention of most of the world's news media, these two African countries are fighting the world's biggest war. (Up to 43 wars of varying degrees of intensity are being waged as we go to press.)

Many thousands have been killed, wounded or taken captive on both sides. China, Bulgaria, Russia and Romania are supplying fighter aircraft to these two opposing countries. Both have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on modern weaponry. Already poor countries, they are foolishly misspending their national substance at the expense of their citizenry. Surely national health and economics should be a more important priority. But, as *Foreign Affairs* stated, "a rising trend is the propensity of African states to invade each other."

Natural disasters in major population centers have recently made the news. Devastating earthquakes with much loss of life have recently occurred in Turkey, Greece and Taiwan. As a general sign of the times, Jesus Christ warned us that there would be "earthquakes in various places" (Matthew 24:7).

Space prevents us from a truly comprehensive panoramic picture of the world in any one article. But these events and trends suggest we still live in a dangerous and troubled age. One passage in the book of Revelation is particularly relevant in explaining the present state of affairs. "... The great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world..." (Revelation 12:9). We live in an age that has been seriously misled by Satan. In the ultimate sense he is primarily responsible for the tragic events in our troubled world.

Jesus Christ warned us that "[we] will have tribulation" (John 16:33). Though He originally spoke these words to His first disciples, they apply to our age as well. Christ called His own generation "adulterous and sinful" (Mark 8:38), an expression that fits our own age all too well.

The testimony of the New Testament is consistent. The apostle Paul described the world this side of the Kingdom of

*The apostle Paul described the world this side of the Kingdom of God as "this present evil age."*

God as "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). Another apostle, John, wrote that "the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19), reminding us of the one whom God holds ultimately responsible for the wayward human condition.

Today we anticipate events that will finally produce the final crisis, followed by the joyous beginnings of Jesus Christ's millennial reign on this earth (Revelation 20:1-6). In the meantime, one great responsibility we have is to warn our peoples of a coming great time of trouble unprecedented in all of world history (Matthew 24:14, 21-22; 28:18-20; Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:1).

—John Ross Schroeder



# What Is Berlin's Destiny?

*What will the map of Europe look like in the coming years?  
Is Berlin destined to shape the future of Europe?*

by John Ross Schroeder

**T**en years ago I was sent to Berlin at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. I witnessed the joyous pandemonium of many East Berliners as they flooded into the West. Citizens from both sides of the city warmly embraced and danced on top of the wall Nov. 9, 1989.

For nearly 50 years freedom of travel had been severely restricted—and not a few from the East lost their lives attempting to reach West Berlin.

## A different Berlin

But 10 years later we see a transformed Berlin—a city that has begun to resume its former role as capital of a powerfully reunited German nation. Cranes and other heavy construction equipment dot the city as it prepares to house the vast government offices and residences necessary to run the most influential nation in modern Europe.

A new multilevel railway passenger depot is to be built on the site of a relatively small station. The presence of some 100 cranes towering over the site is mute testimony to the seriousness of this superambitious project already hailed as the biggest and finest railway station in all of Europe. Indeed, Berlin is the biggest building site on the Continent.

Official business is already progressing. On Aug. 23 Gerhard Schröder began to govern Germany from Berlin, its historic capital. Throughout July, 40 containers packed with everything from fresh notepaper to vital historical records traveled over the busy railway route from Bonn, capital of the former West Germany, to Berlin.

For the first time since the Federal Republic of Germany was founded in 1949, parliament and government are, in the true sense of the phrase, coming home—but at an estimated cost of 20 billion marks.

Berlin is again becoming the fulcrum of a greater Germany. The focus of the nation's politics and decision-making has shifted east. The new capital is the crucial gateway to Eastern European markets. Between 1995 and



*Dozens of construction cranes towering over the site of Berlin's new railway depot symbolize the emerging strength of a reunited Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse.*

1997 exports to Poland increased by 60 percent, and East Europe as a whole has become Germany's second-largest export market.

## Future capital of Europe?

As *The Good News* has reported, last April marked the opening of the Reichstag as the new permanent home of the Bundestag, the German parliament. It comes eight years after the national governing body voted to relocate itself to the historic site of Berlin, a city founded more than 750 years ago.

The Reichstag was originally constructed during the 20-year reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888-1918) and has experienced a turbulent history. Its destruction by arson in early 1933 served as a pretext for the Nazi regime (1933-1945) to revoke the democratic Weimar constitution.

British journalist and author Neal Ascherson had also traveled to Berlin for a firsthand look at this burgeoning city. Here is his summation of its future: "Germany will be the heartland, the engine-room, of a United Europe in the 21st century. One currency, the Euro, will be run from Frankfurt, but Berlin may come to be the focus of

European culture and politics."

This veteran journalist did not mince his words. He called Berlin "the monster from the Prussian sands." Right or wrong, this view from the British press is not unusual.

In his recent book *History of the Present*, another British author and journalist, Timothy Garton Ash, is more reserved in his assessment. "Even at one minute past midnight on 1 January, 1990 we already knew that this would be a formative decade in Europe. A forty-year-old European order had just collapsed with the Berlin Wall . . . Everyone was hailing a 'New Europe.'"

There is no questioning the fact that a united, fully sovereign Germany will be the richest and most powerful country in Europe. As Mr. Ash continued: "What matters now is for the new republic, *The Berlin Republic*, to concentrate on building Europe's future" (emphasis added). Even Bill Clinton has described Berlin as "the heart of a united Europe."

## British concern expressed at Chequers

On March 24, 1990, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain summoned a team

of experts, historians and specialists on Germany to a private meeting at Chequers (every British prime minister's country home, analogous to Camp David in the United States).

Timothy Garton Ash participated in this Chequers meeting and later gained access to a synopsis written by Mrs. Thatcher's private secretary, Charles Powell. At that time one particular sentence reflected Conservative Party concern about long-term German intentions:

"Some even less flattering attributes were . . . mentioned as an abiding part of the German character: in alphabetical order, *angst*, aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, inferiority complex, sentimentality." Although the report mentioned positive national characteristics as well, this single sentence is the one the British tabloids played to the maximum.

A few months later in the respected *Spectator* magazine, a British cabinet minister publicly labeled the European monetary system as a "German racket designed to take over the whole of Europe." So great was the outcry among British liberals that in effect this statement cost him his job.

### A personal view

Being of German heritage on my paternal side, with 19th-century ancestral roots in Oldenburg, I don't like to hear negative comments about the German nation or its national character. However, my mother's ancestry was British, and she felt so strongly about Germany (undoubtedly because of its role in World War I, 1914-1918) that my father had to agree before the marriage never to speak a word of German in the children's presence. Although it was his first language, he faithfully kept this promise.

Nonetheless my father kept me informed about West Germany's startling economic progress in the early '50s and ingrained in me a strong interest in Teutonic culture and practice.

Yet at the end of the day what counts is not personal feelings about a particular race or ethnic group, be it British or German, but what God's Word tells us of the future role of nations.

### Prophecy of the fourth kingdom

The broad, trunk-of-the-tree outline of prophecy is projected throughout the Bible. But several chapters in the books of Daniel and Revelation considerably narrow the focus of future world events. A governmental

## The Reemergence of the Reichstag

I briefly visited the site of the Reichstag in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. I was shocked when a German citizen grabbed me by the shoulders and blurted: "Do you see this building? This

Republic." Ironically the architect is British, Sir Norman Foster.

In 1995, when the conceptual artist Christo covered this building with more than a million square feet of silver-



is where all of Germany will be ruled from!" I silently retreated in disbelief, but the emotion of that moment has remained etched in my memory.

That was about 10 years ago. Today the Reichstag is the centerpiece of the new Berlin. It sets an architectural standard that should last well into the 21st century. The original building was torched in 1933.

According to *Newsweek* (April 19), the building's reopening in April of this year signaled "the coming of the Berlin

colored fabric and transformed the Reichstag into a stupendous gift box, it was described "as a powerful metaphor for the country's transition from West Germany's Bonn Republic to reunited Germany's Berlin Republic."

As an American observer expressed it: "If the architecture of the Reichstag represents a kind of Prussian hardness—Germany as it was—the wrapped version can be seen almost as an ideal symbol of the new Germany struggling to emerge from unification."

## A Decisive Decision

On June 20, 1991, the Bundestag decided to move the German capital from Bonn, where it had been for 40 years, to the traditional city of the German confederation after 1867.

An emotional debate preceded a close majority vote. The final tally was 338 in favor of Berlin and 320 for Bonn. Some observers said that this crux decision was

"the greatest in the Federal Diet's history."

An emotional speech by Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, a chief negotiator of the unification treaty, was thought to be instrumental in swinging the deciding votes. (Source: Lewis J. Edinger and Brigitte L. Nacos, *From Bonn to Berlin: German Politics in Transition*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.)

power referred to as a “beast” is mentioned in both books.

Daniel writes: “. . . I saw in the night visions . . . a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong” (Daniel 7:7). In fact, it was to be as “strong as iron” (Daniel 2:40).

Since history records no additional world empire between the disintegration of the Greek Empire (biblically identified as the third beast Daniel saw) and the rise of Rome, this fourth beast can refer only to the Roman Empire. Since the beginning of the Christian era, Europe has been the geographical area greatly influenced, if not governed, by the Roman Empire and its successors, both politically and religiously.

We should note that this fourth great empire, ruling the known civilized world at that time, was to superimpose its control over the territory of the three preceding empires. “And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron, inasmuch as iron breaks in pieces and shatters everything; and like iron that kingdom will break in pieces and crush all the others” (verse 40).

The Roman Empire was to experience seven resurrections. Six have already been documented in European history since the original fall of ancient Rome in A.D. 476. The seventh and final revival is yet ahead of us.

Daniel and Revelation tie together well. The latter book also mentions the fourth beast. The apostle John wrote: “. . . All the world marvelled and followed the beast . . . saying, ‘Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?’” (Revelation 13:3-4). This beast power assumes authority “over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him . . .” (verse 7).

Here is a future power of immense strength and might—the driving force behind a revived Roman Empire. Germany, as the most vibrant economic power in Europe, fits this prophetic description better than any other country within the territory of that ancient empire.

Biblical prophecy further indicates that this powerful combine will be composed of 10 nations or groups of nations (Revelation 17:3). But one authoritarian figure will be head of state over these nations—roughly within the historical-geographical territory of the old Roman Empire (verse 13).

### Which nation will dominate?

Conor Cruise O’Brien is a respected author of many books about nations who resides in the Republic of Ireland. Writing in the Oct. 31, 1989, issue of *The Times* (London), he warned: “The Reich is reviving.” Mr. O’Brien

saw “a reunited and powerful Germany as only a matter of time.”

Alvin Toffler is an American author and observer of world trends and events. His books include the best seller *Future Shock* and another influential work, *Powershift*.

Mr. Toffler and his wife, Heidi, have toured the world to talk with national leaders about significant shifts affecting regional power centers. In the January 1990 issue of *World Monitor*, he spoke of a “Berlin power center.” The article was headlined “Merging Germany: The Future.”

Following are some of Mr. Toffler’s predictions expressed in this article from 10 years ago:

“Despite many obstacles, the two Germans manage to reunify . . . They relocate the nation’s capital from Bonn to Berlin.”

“The combined two-Germany economy drastically overshadows those of France, Britain, Italy, leading the economic hegemony over Europe.”

“The [European Union’s] push for a common currency and a single European bank [now in Frankfurt] intended to enmesh Germany produces the reverse effect. By centralizing power, they give more not less power to whatever economy is largest.”

“Despite the urging of Western Europe’s leaders, the United States, driven by its budgetary deficits [no longer true] and international political pressures, radically reduces its troops in Europe, weakening NATO and further enhancing the relative independence and power of Germany.”

In the real world of international relations, the more economically sound nation—a reunited Germany—is destined to dominate in Europe.

### The emergence of German influence

When Yugoslav’s President Slobodan Milosevic finally decided to contact the outside world by making his initial offer to withdraw his forces from Kosovo, he didn’t send letters either to the United States or Russia. Instead he posted one to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany.

As Jacob Heilbrunn observed in *The Los Angeles Times* (June 6), “Milosevic’s decision to appeal to Germany is further confirmation of that country’s growing power in the center of Central Europe.” (Mr. Heilbrunn is a senior editor for *The New Republic* and has resided and traveled extensively in Germany.)

However, it must be said that the present German chancellor does not generally emphasize national power in his rhetoric and often talks of Berlin’s constructive, cooperative role

within a larger Europe. For instance, in his inaugural speech he spoke of “a grown-up nation that doesn’t have to feel superior or inferior to anyone, that accepts its history and responsibility—but is forward looking.”

Also, 45 years of communism badly crippled East Germany’s economy, and it has taken much longer than originally anticipated to revive the Eastern side’s economic fortunes. Yet the nation as a whole is just beginning to get cranked up economically. As *The Sunday Times* reported from Frankfurt: “After slumbering for years, Germany’s giant companies are on the prowl and pitting their might against European and American rivals” (Aug. 19).

Europe stands at a crossroads as to whether it will use its enormous human and natural resources for the benefit of humankind or for purposes that in the end will prove far more sinister.

And the prophecies of the Bible remain. One in the book of Revelation says: “The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as of yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast” (verses 12-13). This prophetic “beast” government will rule in opposition to God’s principles and laws.

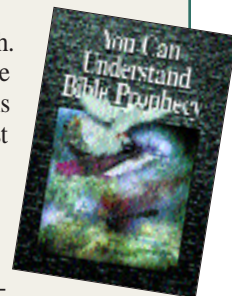
We cannot predict just how and when such a powerful force will emerge in the ancient land of the old Roman Empire. But Bible prophecy reveals that it *will* happen, with devastating results for the rest of the world. **GN**

### RECOMMENDED READING

This article has briefly discussed some of the many prophecies of geopolitical events that will shape the world before Jesus Christ

returns to rule on earth. To understand what the Bible reveals about this time, be sure to request your copy of *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. To understand how Jesus

Christ’s rule will transform the world, ask for *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Both booklets are free for the asking when you contact our office in your country (or the country nearest you) listed on page 2. You can also find these and many other booklets in the literature library of our Web site at [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org).



# Removing the Myths From Christ's Childhood

*Legends are legion about Christ's birth and childhood.  
Can the Bible help us separate fact from fiction?*

by Mario Seiglie

**W**hat do we know about Jesus' birth and early childhood? Two thousand years later myths shroud the history of the early childhood of Jesus Christ.

One fable has Jesus learning to do miracles from Egyptian magicians when His family fled to Egypt to escape King Herod's wrath. Another describes the young Jesus making pigeons of clay and impressing other children by making them come to life.

Millions of people believe Jesus was born on Dec. 25 and that He had no brothers and sisters and that his mother lived in perpetual virginity.

How can we separate fact from fiction? Is it important for those who believe in Jesus as their Savior to get the facts straight?

Jesus Christ embodied truth. Shouldn't His followers, then, insist on believing only what is true? Didn't He say: "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

Shouldn't we free ourselves from the legends and outright falsehoods that envelop the birth and life of Christ?

The Scriptures themselves provide facts that dispel many myths and errors which have crept into the accounts of His childhood. By carefully reviewing Bible prophecies and the four Gospels—narratives of Jesus' life—we can separate truth from error.

## **A birth predicted 700 years in advance**

The first thing to remember about the early history of Christ is that numerous prophecies predicted the manner, place and approximate date of His birth.

Some 700 years before Jesus was born, God prophesied through Isaiah that "the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). This prophecy was fulfilled with the birth of Jesus. "So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken

by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:22-23).

The birth of Jesus Christ to a virgin was predicted 700 years before the actual event. Even the miraculous circumstances of the Messiah's birth were foretold!

## **Time and place of predicted**

Not only was the manner of his birth predicted, but also the place. Four hundred years before Jesus' birth, God inspired the prophet Micah to announce: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2).

Was it evident that this was a prophecy of the birthplace of the Messiah? When King Herod heard that the wise men were searching for the recently born Jesus, he asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Messiah was to be born. The priests and scribes quoted the same verse from the book of Micah and said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet" (Matthew 2:5-6).

Even the time of Jesus' birth was roughly known through another prophecy. God had told Daniel by way of an angel: "Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until [the coming of the] Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks . . ." (Daniel 9:25). Therefore 69 prophetic "weeks" would elapse from the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem to the appearance of the Messiah.

Actually, in the original Hebrew, the text does not say 70 "weeks" but 70 "sevens," which can mean 70 groups of seven days, weeks or years. The time span of this extensive prophecy could

How can we separate fact from fiction? Is it important for those who believe in Jesus as their Savior to get the facts straight? Jesus Christ embodied truth. Shouldn't His followers, then, insist on believing only what is true?

not be 69 groups of seven days, or 483 days, roughly 40 months, nor 69 groups of seven weeks, or about 9½ years. The only other explanation would be 69 groups of seven years, or a total of 483 years.

John Walvoord discusses this prophecy in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: “Daniel was first informed that God’s program would be consummated in 70 ‘sevens.’ Since Daniel had been thinking of God’s program in terms of years (v. 1; cf. Jer. 25:11-12; 2 Chron. 36:21), it would be most natural for him to understand these ‘sevens’ as years. Whereas people today think in units of tens (e.g. decades),

This first coming of the Messiah would be a partial fulfillment of Malachi 3-4. The remainder of that prophecy will be completed only with Christ’s *second* coming. Many specific details of the coming of the Messiah were foretold. Nothing had been left to chance regarding Christ’s birth.

Daniel’s people thought in terms of sevens (heptads) . . . Seventy ‘sevens,’ then, is a span of 490 years” (*Logos Software*, 1996).

Although Persian kings issued several decrees concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem, when fit into this prophecy most bring us close to the time of the appearance of Jesus Christ, either of His birth or of His ministry. Without going into detail, the main point here is that during Christ’s lifetime there was an expectation among the Jews of the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 11:2-3; Luke 3:15; John 1:40-41).

### Expectation of the coming Messiah

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, mentions the Jews had the belief that “about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth” (*Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, Chapter V, Section 4).

The Bible speaks of this expectation of the Messiah in Christ’s time: “And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel [the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies about the Messiah], and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents

brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God . . .” (Luke 2:25-28).

Even the learned Romans had heard of the Jewish prophecies of the coming Messiah, for they applied them to one of their rulers—a contemporary of Jesus, Caesar Augustus. Suetonius, a Roman historian, tells us the Romans turned the prophecies upside down: “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world. This prophecy, which refers to the emperor of

Rome, the Jews applied to themselves” (*Life of Vespasian*, 4:5).

Tacitus, another Roman historian, writes of the same belief that “there was a firm persuasion . . . that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire” (*Histories*, 5:13).

It was no surprise, then, to note the expectation of some and the dismay of others when a group of “wise men” came to Jerusalem searching for the newly born Messiah. They asked, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:2-3).

The Jews were filled with hope, but also with apprehension, for they knew of Herod’s ruthlessness when he perceived any threat to his throne. Their fears proved well-founded when Herod ordered the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem (verse 16).

### A prophecy continued

The Jewish people were well aware that the last Old Testament prophet predicted the coming of the Messiah to the temple (Malachi 3-4). They also knew God would first send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. “Behold, I will send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord,

whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple” (Malachi 3:1).

It is fitting, then, that the first scene of the New Testament, chronologically speaking, opens with the description of that coming messenger. The scene is found in Luke 1 and is actually a continuation of Malachi 3-4. It begins with the priest Zacharias in that temple hearing from an angel that he would father the very messenger (John the Baptist), who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. The four Gospels begin where the Old Testament prophecies leave off, continuing and complementing them and showing their fulfillment in the events around Jesus Christ’s coming.

This first coming of the Messiah would be a partial fulfillment of Malachi 3-4. The remainder of that prophecy will be completed only with Christ’s *second* coming. Many specific details of the coming of the Messiah were foretold. Nothing had been left to chance regarding Christ’s birth.

### Importance of genealogies

Other prophecies concerned the physical lineage of the Messiah. The official Jewish genealogies were kept in the temple. These perished when the temple and the archives in Jerusalem were burned by the Romans in 70. Since it was prophesied that the Messiah would descend from Abraham and David (Genesis 12:1-7; Jeremiah 33:15), it was necessary for anyone who claimed to be the Messiah to be able to verify his ancestry through these official genealogical records.

The Jews had a legitimate concern over genealogical records, for these determined who was an Israelite and who was not. If a man were of Abrahamic descent, these records would confirm his religious, hereditary and biological rights. If not, he was considered a gentile and wasn’t regarded as part of the Israelite nation or of its inheritance.

These records were also important to authenticate the Aaronic descent of the priests and those who claimed Levitical descent. We can see its importance in Ezra 2:62, when certain people claimed to be priests. “These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled.”

So in Jesus’ time if one claimed to be the Messiah he would have to prove

through his genealogy that he had descended from Abraham and David. To prove this was the case for Jesus, the Gospel writers placed His genealogies at the beginning of Matthew (Joseph's genealogy) and in Luke 3 (Mary's genealogy) for all to see and verify.

It would have been easy for Jesus' adversaries to have refuted His claims to be the Messiah by simply comparing his genealogies with the official records of the time and have shown this was not the case. Scripture doesn't record any instance of the Jewish leaders challenging Jesus on this point.

*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* points out: "Matthew's genealogy answered the important question a Jew would rightfully ask about anyone who claimed to be King of the Jews. Is He a descendant of David through the rightful line of succession? Matthew answered yes!" (*Logos Software*, 1996).

Once the official genealogical records were destroyed in 70, there was no way to confirm if one who claimed to be the Messiah was descended from David. Now no Jew can officially prove he is descended from Abraham and King David.

### The birthdate of Jesus

It is remarkable that, while the manner, place and genealogy of Jesus are carefully described in the opening chapters of Matthew and John, none of the Gospel writers mentions the date—or even the month—of His birth. There is no recorded celebration of the birth of Christ for the first four centuries. The first recorded "Christ mass" was not held until 435, when Pope Sixtus III conducted it in Rome.

Cambridge historian Henry Chadwick explains when and why Dec. 25 was chosen to celebrate the birth of Jesus: "Moreover, early in the fourth century there begins in the West . . . the celebration of December 25th, *the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice*, as the date for the nativity of Christ" (*The Early Church*, 1967, p. 126, emphasis added).

Dec. 25 was arbitrarily selected, not because Jesus was born on that day, but because it was already popular in pagan religious celebrations as the birthday of the sun. Gerard and Patricia del Re explain: ". . . The tradition of celebrating December 25 as Christ's birthday came to the Romans from Persia. Mithra, the Persian

god of light and sacred contracts, was born out of a rock on December 25. Rome was famous for its flirtations with strange gods and cults, and in the third century [274] the unchristian emperor Aurelian established the festival of Dies Invicti Solis, the Day of the Invincible Sun, on December 25.

"Mithra was an embodiment of the sun, so this period of its rebirth was a major day in Mithraism, which had become Rome's latest official religion with the patronage of Aurelian. It is believed that the emperor Constantine adhered to Mithraism up to the time of his conversion to Christianity. He was probably instrumental in seeing that the major feast of his old religion was carried over to his new faith" (*The Christmas Almanac*, 1979, p. 17).

The origins of Christmas cannot be traced either to the teachings or practices of the earliest Christians. The biblical feast days of Jesus Christ and the apostles were neglected by later religious leaders who instituted a new set of holidays in their place.

### Jesus not born in December

The Bible records two circumstances

The origins of Christmas cannot be traced either to the teachings or practices of the earliest Christians. The biblical feast days of Jesus Christ and the apostles were neglected by later religious leaders who instituted a new set of holidays in their place.

relating to Christ's birth that show that December—or any time during the winter—was a highly unlikely time for Christ's birth. These were the Roman census that took place at the time of His birth and the fact that shepherds were in the fields at night.

The Romans periodically conducted a census for taxation and military recruitment purposes. They were not done in winter, when the temperatures often dropped below freezing and the roads were muddy. A census under such conditions would have been largely self-defeating.

In the book *Holy-Days and Holidays*, author Cunningham Geikie explains: "This census could hardly have been at that [winter] season, however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrollment, which necessitated the population traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except

in specially favorable years."

Luke, in describing Christ's birth, tells us that shepherds were in their fields at night at the time Christ was born. "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). As the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* tells us: "The shepherds would take turns watching the flock at night to guard against wolves and thieves. The text does not indicate the time of year, although December would be an unusual time of year to be outside at night" (*Logos Software*, 1996).

*The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* adds regarding this verse: "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."

So, from the testimony of the Bible itself, a Dec. 25 date for the birth of Christ is unrealistic.

### Flight to Egypt

Sometime after the birth of Christ, Herod received the disquieting news about

the birth from the wise men. Since Herod wanted to destroy Him, he waited impatiently for the men to return so he could find exactly where Jesus lived and have Him killed. But an angel warned the wise men not to return to Herod.

"Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.' When he awoke, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod . . ." (Matthew 2:12-15).

Based on this account, some books speculate the young Jesus might have learned His miracles from the Egyptian magicians. Yet a careful reading of the text shows

*Continued on page 29*



# Forget About Being Normal

*Almost everybody wants to be considered normal.  
But what is normal? Should we always want to be normal?*

by David Treybig

*Experts who advise you to be normal may have the best of intentions. But first consider the difficulties of determining and applying what is normal.*

In the never-ending quest for success and happiness, families are bombarded with information about how a supposedly normal family manages. Everything from raising children to resolving conflict to how often mates should make love seems to be compared to somebody's idea of the norm. Although the collection of such data is generally compiled with the intent of helping dysfunctional families, many families find themselves confused about what is normal.

What is normal may differ from society to society, since societies and cultures differ. As a husband or wife or as a parent, have you ever wondered what is normal? If so, here is some advice: *Forget about trying to be normal.*

Experts who advise you to be normal may have the best of intentions. But first consider the difficulties of determining and applying what is normal.

One of the first things to understand is that *normal* is not a synonym for *stable*. Normalcy is ever changing. What is considered normal today will soon be replaced by what is normal in the future. Because *people* determine what is normal, every time societal values change *their opinion of what is normal* will change.

The family has changed profoundly over the past 50 years. What was considered normal barely a generation ago may be viewed as quaint or hopelessly outdated. Notice how the structure of American families has fundamentally shifted in recent years:

"The idealized norm of the modern nuclear family has given way to a multiplicity of family arrangements . . . The 1950's model of the White middle-class nuclear family headed by a breadwinner-father and supported by a full-

time homemaker-mother is currently found in only eight percent of U.S. households. Dual earning has become the norm for married couples . . . Through the influence of the women's movement and sheer economic necessity, nearly 70 percent of mothers of school-age children . . . are in the workforce. With a divorce rate at 50 percent, over one-third of all children will live, at some point, in a single-parent family. Since the vast majority of divorced individuals go on to remarry, step-families are expected to become the most common family form by the year 2000" (Froma Walsh, *Family Business Review*, Vol. VII, No. 2, summer 1994, Jossey-Bass Publishers, "Healthy Family Functioning: Conceptual and Research Developments," p. 176).

Other factors, too, influence society's definition of what is normal. Family structures can vary greatly across racial and ethnic lines as well as by income levels. Given the variables, determining what is normal has become almost hopelessly complicated. Adding to the confusion, interpretations of normalcy are often used interchangeably with terms such as *healthy*, *typical* and *functional*, which also have their respective meanings.

Still another issue is the desire of some small groups, often representing only a tiny percentage of society, to have their "lifestyle" choices recognized and accepted as normal. This definition of what is normal has been debated and stretched so many ways it is virtually meaningless.

But wait. There is more.

## **Four definitions of normal**

Recognizing that interpretations of what is considered normal vary considerably in

the social sciences, Froma Walsh has identified four perspectives to help people understand what other people consider to be normal. They are, she says, “normal as asymptomatic, normal as average or typical, normal as ideal or optimal, and normal in relation to systemic transactional processes” (Walsh, p. 176).

Realize that each definition, while helping define what is normal, also has its limitations.

The “normal as asymptomatic” view is a medical perspective of families who are considered normal and healthy if no health problems are apparent. Yet, as Dr. Walsh acknowledges, “healthy family functioning involves more than the absence of problems and can be found in the midst of problems . . . No families are free of problems” (Walsh, p. 177).

“Normal as average or typical” uses statistical averages to categorize families. If a family matches certain patterns, it is considered normal. Often a bell-shaped curve is used to define *normal*, with families in the middle range considered normal and those on the extremes viewed as deviations to be avoided. A weakness of this construct is that optimally functioning families—those that exceed the middle range or average—are categorized as abnormal.

The next approach, “normal families as ideal or optimal,” attempts to identify healthy families according to idealistic characteristics. Again this approach is open to interpretation. What is ideal, especially when social norms are constantly changing?

“Patterns that may not fit the standard deemed ideal may nevertheless be optimal for the functioning of a particular family” (Walsh, p. 178).

The last perspective, “normal in relation to systemic transactional processes”—in other words, determining whether the family functions successfully or not—attempts to identify the characteristics and processes that allow a family to function and survive. This theory assumes that healthier families use more management and survival skills and problem-resolution strategies and exhibit more flexibility in dealing with life’s problems.

In deference to this approach, Dr. Walsh believes it better to define failing processes as dysfunctional (not working) instead of labeling the family itself as dysfunctional.

A question to consider regarding the way families approach problems is “to what end it is functional and for whom? A pattern that

may be functional at one system level, or for a subsystem, may be dysfunctional for another” (Walsh, p. 180).

For example, avoiding conflict within marriage by ignoring it may work in the short run but later be the basis for divorce.

In other words, does the end justify the means? Should majority opinion decide what is right, or do timeless, eternal standards exist that families can follow that will not only produce right results but deal fairly with everyone involved? Here is where God and His revealed Word—the Holy Bible—can help.

### God's perspective on normalcy

God does not ask us to follow society’s standards of what is normal; He tells us to be *holy*. There is a profound and crucial difference between the two.

God wants us to be normal according to *His* standards, not someone else’s. In explaining this concept to ancient Israel, God said, “Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy” (Leviticus 20:7). He adds, “And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine” (verses 7, 26). The apostle Peter explained that holiness is determined by the things we do: “. . . As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:13-15).

Holiness entails *imitating God* rather than comparing ourselves to other people. As Paul explained: “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

Holiness is the eternal standard God commands His followers to aspire to. This principle has continued from the Old Testament to the New, from the Old Covenant with Israel to the New Covenant with spiritual Israel (Galatians 6:16) today. Members of God’s Church are called “holy brethren” (1 Thessalonians 5:27; Hebrews 3:1).

The apostle Paul explains that God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (Ephesians 1:4). Jesus Christ continues to work with the people whom God calls (John 6:44) so they may be “a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she [the Church] should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

Instead of settling for normal or average,

Jesus instructs us to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, New International Version).

How can we practice holiness within our families?

### Holiness within families

Family members who strive to follow God’s command for holiness make God’s values *their* values. When a lawyer asked Jesus about the greatest commandment of the law, He responded, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

These commandments embody respect for God and our fellowman. They include a focus that is outward, away from self. Instead of a preoccupation with oneself, God’s way is inclusive. When we live holy lives, we are concerned about God and other people as well as ourselves. The foundational principle of holiness runs throughout many biblical instructions for families.

God’s instruction that a husband and wife are to love and respect each other (Ephesians 5:21-33) for a lifetime (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:10, 13) is the ideal for couples and their children. Of course, this is best accomplished when both spouses are committed to holiness and its inherent mandate to consider others as well as themselves. Paul summarizes this principle when he tells us, “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4).

Concern for family members is also reflected in Paul’s instruction to fathers to avoid provoking their children “lest they become discouraged” (Colossians 3:21) and for mothers to “bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully” (1 Timothy 5:14).

The Bible contains much additional instruction on the way people can and should conduct their lives. To learn more about the principles that determine holiness and why God wants us to be holy, request our free booklets *What is Your Destiny?*, *The Ten Commandments* and *Making Life Work*. All can help you build a happy, stable family based on eternal values. Since God tells us to pursue holiness (Hebrews 12:14), why not forget about being normal? Be holy instead. **GN**

# Jesus Christ's Early Ministry

by Mario Seiglie

**I**n the September-October *Good News* we examined historical and archaeological evidence that helps us better understand the time in Judea when Jesus Christ was born and grew up in the household of Joseph and Mary. We continue with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

After briefly discussing Jesus' childhood, the Gospels go right into His ministry. According to Luke, "Jesus . . . began His ministry at about thirty years of age . . ." (Luke 3:23).

Archaeologists generally date the start of Christ's ministry to the year A.D. 27. "The beginning of Jesus' public ministry," writes archaeology professor John McRay, "is dated by synchronisms [chronological arrangements of events and people] in the Gospel of Luke (3:1-2). A date of A.D. 27 seems likely . . . The dates mentioned by Luke are rather well established . . ." (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1997, p. 160).

## Nazareth, Jesus' hometown

At first Jesus Christ's ministry centered on the hill country of Galilee and Nazareth, His hometown. "So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:16).

During the last century archaeological excavations have confirmed the New Testament description of Nazareth as a small, insignificant village. The Gospels record that one of the disciples, Nathanael of nearby Cana, quipped, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). So far archaeologists have found it to have been an agricultural village with wine and olive presses, caves for storing grains and cisterns for water and wine.

However, Jesus' ministry in Nazareth was short-lived. When Jesus entered the synagogue and revealed He was the Messiah, the townspeople rejected His message and tried to kill Him. "So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the

brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way. Then He went down to Capernaum . . ." (Luke 4:28-31).

The Bible reveals that some members of Jesus' own family did not believe in Him and were embarrassed when He cast out demons. At one point they thought He had lost His mind. "Then the multitude came together again [seeking healing], so that they could not so much as eat bread. But when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, 'He is out of His mind' . . . Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.' But He answered them, saying, 'Who is My mother, or My brothers?' And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother'" (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35).

Jesus ended His ministry in Nazareth with the words, "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country" (Luke 4:24).

## Relocation to Capernaum

Having been rejected in His hometown of Nazareth, Christ moved to Capernaum, one of the towns around the harp-shaped Sea of Galilee. This region had a large population sustained by a thriving agricultural and fishing industry.

"Their soil," wrote the Jewish historian Josephus, "is universally rich and fruitful, and full of the plantations of trees of all sorts, insomuch that it invites, by its fruitfulness, the most slothful to take pains in its cultivation. Accordingly it is all cultivated by its inhabitants, and no part lies idle" (*Wars of the Jews*, Book III, Chapter III, Section 2). Jesus drew many of His parables and illustrations from daily life and activities around the lake.

The site of Capernaum, which means "village

*Although the time frame is brief—less than a century—archaeology has much to tell us about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles.*



**This beautiful limestone synagogue in Capernaum was built in the fourth or fifth century on the foundation of an earlier first-century structure. The earlier structure was likely the very synagogue in which Jesus Christ taught.**

which closely follows the plan of the later limestone synagogue, must also be a synagogue, and very likely the one in which Jesus preached” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, November-December 1983, p. 27).

### **Peter's house discovered?**

Between this synagogue and the nearby lake, excavators discovered what many believe to be the remains of the house of the apostle Peter. Along with his brother Andrew, Peter made his living as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:18). Matthew records that Peter had a house in Capernaum in which Jesus healed his mother-in-law (Matthew 8:5, 14-15).

In 1968 the excavators of the synagogue investigated the remains of a nearby octagonal structure with mosaic floors. During the Byzantine period such structures often were constructed over what were thought to be significant religious sites.

Archaeologists dated the structure to the fifth century. Beneath it they found an earlier church that they dated to the fourth century based on writings and inscriptions on the walls. The central hall of this church “was part of an earlier house built, according to the excavators, in the mid-first century A.D.” (McRay, p. 164).

“The first century house was built around two courtyards with the outside entrance opening directly into one of the courtyards. A *taboun* (round oven) was found in this courtyard, which indicates it was used as the main family room. The southern courtyard may have been used for animals or as a working area. In either size or building material, the house is not unlike all the other houses found in Capernaum” (McRay, pp. 164-165).

In other ways, however, the house was distinctly different. At some point early in its history the house’s large center room had been plastered, making it the only house in Capernaum yet discovered to have plastered walls. The walls and floor were later replastered twice.

“During the mid-first century the pottery used in the room ceased to be of the typical domestic variety. Only storage jars and oil lamps were found after this point. Thus the use of the room must have changed from normal residential living. More than one

of Nahum,” was identified in 1838 and was extensively excavated during this century. What have archaeologists found?

John Laughlin, professor of religion at Averett College, Danville, Va., participated in excavations at Capernaum. He comments: “What is known indicates that at this time Capernaum was a small village located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with a population of probably no more than 1,000 people. The few architectural remains indicate the buildings were spacious and well constructed of dressed stones and large amounts of plaster. This suggests that the village flourished economically during Jesus’ time. Its location on the crossroads of important trade routes, the fertile lands surrounding it and the rich fishing available all contributed to its economic development” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, September-October 1993, p. 59).

### **The synagogue at Capernaum**

“Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths . . . Now He arose from the synagogue and . . . when the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them” (Luke 4:31, 38, 40).

Archaeologists have found at Capernaum the remains of a beautiful limestone synagogue dated to the fourth or fifth century. Yet what caused more excitement was the discovery in the 1960s that beneath this building was the foundation of an earlier synagogue built of basalt, which is common to that area, that apparently dates to Christ’s time.

The Gospels even include the detail of who built the synagogue in Capernaum. “Now when [Jesus] concluded all His sayings in the hearing of the people, He entered Capernaum. And a certain centurion’s servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, ‘for he loves our nation, and *has built us a synagogue*’” (Luke 7:1-5, emphasis added throughout).

It was a tradition among the Jews to build a new synagogue on the foundation of the older one. “Pottery found in and under this basalt floor,” explains archaeologist Hershel Shanks, “clearly dates the basalt structure to the first century A.D. or earlier. Since the site of a synagogue rarely changed in antiquity, this basalt building,

hundred fifty inscriptions were scratched on its walls in Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin from this time until the fourth century . . .

“Sometime after the first century two pillars were erected to raise the roof of the large central room, creating an impressively high ceiling. The fifth-century octagonal chapel was built with the center of its concentric walls directly over this room. Evidence now available suggests that this chapel was built over a first-century house which was set apart in the middle of that century as a public area. It was made into a church and at some point came to be venerated as the house of Peter. It would not be

lake. Why did dangerous storms sometimes arise on what normally should have been a large, placid inland lake?

“We do not realize,” explains biblical geographer George Adam Smith, “that the greater part of our Lord’s ministry was accomplished at what may be truly called the bottom of a trench, 680 feet below sea level . . . The cold currents, as they pass from the west, are sucked down in vortices of air, or by the narrow gorges that break upon the Lake. Hence sudden storms arise [for] which the region is notorious” (*The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 1931, p. 286).

Some who have doubted the biblical

than half an hour the placid sunshine had become a raging storm. This is what happened to Jesus and His disciples on certain occasions” (*Daily Bible Study Commentary*, Bible Explorer Software).

### Discovery of a fishing boat of Jesus’s time

A few years ago archaeologists excavated a fishing boat dating to around the time of Christ.

“An example of the sort of boat Jesus and the disciples used was found buried in mud on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee in January 1986,” notes archaeologist John McRay. “It is the first work boat found on an inland lake in the entire Mediterranean area. The boat, dating between the first century B.C. and the end of the first century A.D., was excavated that February and found to measure 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet high. It would have accommodated about fifteen average-size men of Jesus’ Galilee . . . Originally it had a mast for sailing and two oars on each side. Jesus and his disciples could easily fit into such a boat and their use is mentioned or inferred often in the Gospels” (McRay, p. 170).

Many details in the Gospels, such as fishing methods and the use of different nets, reflect an accurate description of Jesus’ time. When Christ said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea” (Matthew 13:47), He was referring to the most common method of commercial fishing in His day—using a seine.

Historian and Jewish fisherman Mendel Nun, who in 1993 had lived near the Sea of Galilee for 50 years, writes: “The seine, or dragnet, is the oldest type of net. Until recently, it was the most important fishing method on the lake . . . [The parable of the dragnet] exactly fits the function of the seine. It is spread into the sea, then dragged to the shore; in the process all kinds of fish are caught, which the fishermen sitting on the shore sort out. The ‘bad’ ones refer to the scaleless catfish, forbidden by Jewish law and not even offered for sale” (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, November-December 1993, p. 52).



*Jesus Christ spent much of the time of His ministry in Galilee. This view, from the traditional site of the Mount of the Beatitudes near Capernaum, looks south over the Sea of Galilee.*

prudent to apply the data beyond that” (McRay, pp. 165-166).

### Around the Sea of Galilee

The Gospels record even such detail as meteorological conditions around the Sea of Galilee. “Now when they had left the multitude, [the disciples] took [Jesus] along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling” (Mark 4:36-37).

Since most of Christ’s disciples lived around the Sea of Galilee, it is not surprising many of them were fishermen. The Gospels faithfully describe the life, work and occasional dangers of fishing in the

accounts of sudden storms on the lake have been caught by surprise. William Barclay notes: “Dr. W.M. Christie, who spent many years in Galilee, mentioned a company of visitors who were standing on the shore of Lake Galilee, and, noting the glassy surface of the water and the smallness of the lake, expressed doubts as to the possibility of such storms as those described in the gospels. Almost immediately the wind sprang up. In twenty minutes the sea was white with foam-crested waves. Great billows broke over the towers at the corners of the city walls, and the visitors were compelled to seek shelter from the blinding spray, though now two hundred yards from the lakeside. In less



**This ancient fishing boat, found in the mud of the Sea of Galilee in 1986, dates to the time of Christ. The boat is apparently typical of the fishing boats commonly used at the time and mentioned often in the Gospels. Several of the disciples were fishermen.**

Matthew 4:18 describes a different type of net. “And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen.” This refers to a cast net, which is used by a single fisherman. It is circular, some 20 feet in diameter, with lead sinkers attached to the edge.

“Like the seine,” comments Mendel Nun, “the cast net is an ancient device. Complete cast nets have been found in Egyptian tombs dating to the second millennium B.C. Two kinds were used in the Sea of Galilee, one for large fish and the other for sardines” (ibid., p. 53).

No wonder this Jewish fishing expert concludes about the Gospel accounts,

“I am continually surprised at how accurately the New Testament writers reflect natural phenomena on the lake” (ibid., p. 47).

### **The wedding in Cana**

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding . . . There were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece” (John 2:1-2, 6).

One of the curious parts of the wedding account is the mention of large stone waterpots. In the ancient world such large containers were normally made of pottery or wood. It was an enormous and expensive effort to carve large pots from stone. Was this a period when the purity laws were enforced to the point that these pots were common in Israel?

“Until recently this

question plagued historians of the era called the late second Temple period,” writes Israeli archaeologist Yitzhak Magen.

“Indeed, recent excavations have confirmed that Jews of all social and economic levels were deeply concerned with ritual purity in this period . . . Stone vessels were considered immune from impurity, and their popularity during this short period provides strong evidence of heightened interest in ritual purity among all Jews . . .

“Large vessels—sometimes made from stone blocks weighing almost 800 pounds—were manufactured on massive heavy-duty lathes. Some of these vessels . . . may have been used to store ritually clean water for washing hands, as illustrated in the New Testament story of Jesus’

transformation of water into wine at Cana, in Galilee . . . Stone vessels have been unearthed at more than 60 sites” (*Biblical Archaeological Review*, September-October 1998, pp. 49-50).

Even such incidental details as the large waterpots mentioned in the Gospels have been explained by archaeological findings and discovered to have been in common use at the time.

### **Jacob’s well and Mount Gerizim**

“So he came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob’s well was there” (John 4:5-6).

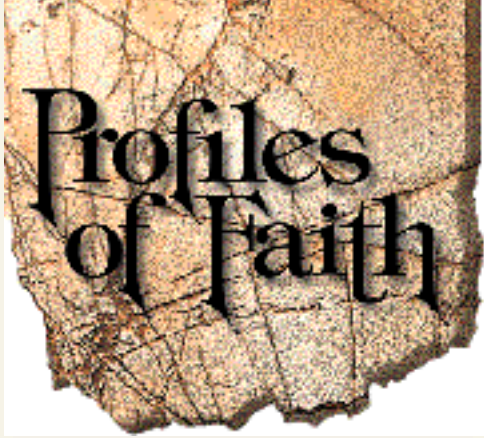
“Jacob’s well,” explains Professor McRay, “is one of the few sites whose identity is agreed upon by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans alike.” It is still in use. “During annual visits over the past twenty years,” he adds, “I have always found cold, refreshing water in the well” (McRay, p. 181).

Nearby, on the northern top of Mount Gerizim, archaeologists have found what appears to be the remains of the temple of Mount Gerizim mentioned in John 4:20. The building was 66 feet long by 66 feet wide by 30 feet high and was in the center of a large courtyard.

“The discovery of this monumental structure dating from the Hellenistic period on Mount Gerizim above Shechem, the chief city of the Samaritans,” comments *The International Bible Dictionary*, “has led the excavator to call the complex the Samaritan temple and the unhewn stone half cube the Samaritan altar of sacrifice [which present-day Samaritans still revere]. The remains of this altar would have been visible to Jesus and the Samaritan woman from Jacob’s well, as it is today” (*Supplement Volume*, 1976, p. 361).

So the scene from John 4 of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, with Jacob’s well and the temple of Gerizim as the backdrop, also reflects a historical setting.

Through these archaeological finds we have covered some areas of Jesus’ early ministry. In the next installment we will continue our study of His life and times. **GN**



# Mary & Martha

## *Lessons From Two Sisters*

by Jerold Aust

Jesus and His disciples arrived at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha about mealtime. It was Martha who invited them in. Nothing is said in the Bible account about the cordial greetings they exchanged, but an important lesson was recorded during that visit that should positively affect us.

Notice the exchange between Jesus and Martha: “She [Martha] had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.’ And Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken from her.’” (Luke 10:39-42).

Scripture doesn’t record whether Jesus’ response made a lasting impression on Martha’s understanding, but we can hope this spiritual lesson—so inseparably linked to our priorities—will favorably impact us.

What did Mary have that Martha needed? What was the “good part” Mary chose? Why will the good part that Mary chose remain hers forever?

In a world filled with distractions, the story of Mary and Martha can help you set your life in order.

### **Home away from home**

able in the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. The four weren’t just acquaintances; they were close friends.

Earlier, when Jesus had come to resurrect Lazarus from the dead, He showed great respect and love for Mary and Martha (John 11:3, 20-39). They spoke to Jesus as if He were a part of their immediate family. Jesus was so troubled by their anguish over their brother’s death that He was moved to tears before raising Lazarus to life (verse 35).

Luke’s account also shows the closeness between Jesus and this family. “Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house” (Luke 10:38). Jesus was at ease with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Their home, at Bethany just outside Jerusalem, might have been considered Jesus’ home away from home.

But, though Jesus felt a deep affinity for all three, their personalities and perspectives differed.

### **Martha’s view of life**

When we visit friends and relatives we have a good idea of how they think and act. Jesus was no different. He appreciated the differences among His three friends and felt comfortable enough to offer constructive advice as to their priorities.

Martha’s outlook on life was quite different from Mary’s. It is possible that Martha was older and that her age figured into her personality and perspective.

Martha’s words and actions depict her as practical and efficient. Nothing is wrong

with being practical and efficient if it doesn’t interfere with the more important things in life. If it does, it can become a problem. God recorded important examples for us in Scripture (1 Corinthians 10:11), so we can learn from Martha’s and Mary’s recorded actions.

Martha appears to be the leader and the more hospitable and social of the two: “Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house” (Luke 10:38).

### **Mary’s outlook**

“And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word” (verse 39). If one were to read no further, one could assume Mary might have been a little lazy, leaving the needs of hospitality and hostess to her gregarious sister. It was Martha who invited Jesus into their home. It was Mary who simply sat at Jesus’ feet, listening to Him talk. Who was the more hospitable, the more sociable? Who was more concerned about serving her Savior, Martha or Mary?

Maybe Mary was shy. But we should consider Jesus’ evaluation of Mary’s actions. “But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.’ And Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has



chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:40-42).

To better understand Mary’s actions, let’s read details in John’s account of that same visit.

“Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus [and the disciples] came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:1-3).

John emphasizes here that Mary was so humble, convicted and dedicated to Jesus and His teachings that no expense or personal act was too great or demanding for her to honor her Savior. This attitude, outlook and perspective is the kind of approach God desires in all His disciples. Jesus highly regarded Mary’s approach.

It is illuminating to contrast Mary’s reverence with Martha’s demeanor. Martha was so comfortable with Jesus that she openly included Him in her frustration. Her words “Do You not care?” and “My sister has left me to serve alone” show her frustration. For Martha to intimate that Jesus didn’t care whether Mary was not helping shows both a close relationship and considerable forthrightness. Martha didn’t suggest to Jesus that He ask Mary to help her; she told Him directly to “tell her to help me.” Martha put the onus of responsibility for serving a meal, to her perhaps the most important of all responsibilities, on Jesus.

Jesus responded forthrightly but tenderly: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41). Martha was fretting over something quite important to her: providing a meal for Jesus and His disciples. But how important was this compared with other priorities?

### Choices in life

Jesus continued: “But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (verse 42).

Jesus said Mary made a conscious decision between two alternatives: She chose listening to Jesus over preparation of a meal. This may sound strange to those who, like Martha, think meal preparation is more important than visiting. But couldn’t that



*“Then Mary took . . . costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the whole house was filled with the fragrance . . .”*

depend on who the guest is? The most pressing need in Martha’s eyes was that of preparing a meal for Jesus and His disciples. Mary saw this situation differently. She chose to listen to the wisdom of Jesus, her Savior, while she had the opportunity.

People make choices. They are a part of life. The prophet Moses declared: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Our daily choices affect our lives, and the end result of this life is determined by the choices we make every day. Jesus said Mary chose “that good part.”

### The good part we need

We have to make a choice as to whether we seek the good part. Jesus tells us our highest priority in life should be to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness . . .” (Matthew 6:33).

He also gives us guidance in how to do that: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God” (Luke 4:4; compare Deuteronomy 8:3). He adds, “The words

that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

For Mary, Martha, Lazarus and the 12 disciples, the Word of God was in their presence in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14-15). Apparently Mary knew that Jesus’ words were the most important needs of her life. Jesus recognized this when He reminded Martha that her life was taken up with many secondary needs, but her greatest need was that which Mary acknowledged: the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

The book of Hebrews tells us the importance of hearing and heeding the words of life: “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him” (Hebrews 2:1-3).

### The good part lasts forever

What did Jesus mean when He spoke of



which will not be taken

away from her”? (Luke 10:42). The apostle John answers this question: “All that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:16-17; compare 2 Peter 3:10-12).

God’s truth and laws will abide forever. Our bodies won’t last forever, for they must be replaced with spirit bodies. The spiritual knowledge we accumulate in this life will be ours forever, never taken away from us. But we must not allow physical needs and duties to consume us.

Like Mary, we need patient faith, that in a world hell-bent on destruction, filled with frivolous trappings and empty, momentary sensual pleasures, we can keep the good part forever: “Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12).

Mary and Martha were Jesus’ good friends. Martha stayed busy supplying her guests with things that made their visit more comfortable. She should be commended for seeing to the important needs of others.

But Jesus commended her sister Mary. Jesus noted, in effect, that Martha stayed busy with form, but that Mary concentrated on substance. He commended Mary for choosing the good part, the holy words, truth and faith of Jesus Christ, which will never be taken from her. We should follow Mary’s example and desire God’s truth above everything else. **GN**

### RECOMMENDED READING

What is faith? How can you have a loving, trusting relationship with

God? To see how you can develop such a relationship with your Creator, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *You Can Have Living Faith*. Please contact the office in your country (or the country nearest you)

listed on page 2 or access our Web site at [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org).



# Discern

Continued from page 9

control as a show of strength, with hopes of reviving some of the lost glory of empire. In the wake of Russian involvement in the Kosovo and Iranian crises of the past year, Western nations have cause for concern.

The second item is the desire to create a workable Russian-Chinese alliance that could provide a credible counterweight to American influence in Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Peripheral nations such as Turkey, Iraq, Iran, India and Pakistan, all of which have had recent conflicts, continue to be courted by China and Russia. A strategic alliance of these huge Asian nations would dramatically impact the interests of America and other Western powers.

The irony is that neither Russia nor China wants to seriously disrupt relations with America. Both need U.S. financial and technological assistance. America’s wealth and technology are a major plus for her continued

*Several dominant world powers are described in prophecies of the end time, but no power recognizable as the United States is among them.*

influence and dominance on the world stage. You might say the power created by this wealth is a shield that protects the cherished freedoms of the United States.

Yet Bible prophecy indicates a shift that will alter the balance of power among all nations. Several dominant world powers are described in prophecies of the end time, but no power recognizable as the United States is among them. America’s preeminence will come to an end. When this happens the stage could be set for the rise of an end-time economic and political system called “the beast” that the book of Revelation shows will dominate the world.

### From Babel to Babylon

All three of these trends can be linked into one overarching theme that runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Mankind has sought to build a global system operating against the will and purpose of the Creator God. In Genesis 11 we read of men’s attempt to create a city with a tower to reach into the heavens. Their goal was to make a name for themselves to prevent their dispersion throughout the earth.

There is strength in numbers and uniformity, and here was mankind’s first attempt at globalization. Understanding that nothing

would lie beyond the grasp of man, God thwarted this effort by confusing people’s languages, which brought their scattering over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:1-9).

Babel was an attempt to weld human society into one system. No doubt there were practical or seemingly benevolent reasons for doing so. But God knew that any such universal human culture built apart from His guidance would lead to tyranny.

Empires and systems of government have risen and fallen through the generations. Most have attempted to dominate the world or at least the known world of the time, from Alexander the Great in Greece to Adolf Hitler in this century.

The book of Revelation shows that at the end of this age humanity will make one final effort to revive the system that had its roots back in ancient Babylon. The Bible calls it Babylon the great. Revelation 18:3 shows it will be a planet-dominating system. “For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the

wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury.”

God, who foresees the future, warns His people: “Come out of her . . . lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues” (Revelation 18:4).

Jesus warned we should discern the times and understand the course of events. *The Good News* will continue to keep you informed on the major trends shaping today’s world. **GN**

### RECOMMENDED READING

Where is this world headed? Does

Bible prophecy give us any indications? Be sure to request your free copy of *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*. Please contact our office in your country (or the country nearest you) listed on page 2 of this issue. You may also read or download this booklet

from the literature library of our Web site: [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org).



# Myths

Continued from page 19

Jesus was in Egypt only a short time during his infancy—"until the death of Herod." A comparison of Roman and Jewish historical records and the Bible shows Herod died within months or at most a year or two of the birth of Jesus.

What did Joseph do when he heard of Herod's death? The Bible explains: "But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph

This verse explains that Jesus had four half brothers and at least two half sisters. Some have tried to say these brothers and sisters of Jesus were only "cousins" to bolster the claim that Jesus was an only child and Mary remained a perpetual virgin.

in Egypt, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead.' Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel . . . and dwelt in a city called Nazareth" (Matthew 2:19-21, 23).

We see Christ was in Egypt for only a short time during the first years of His life. He could not have learned anything from any Egyptian magicians.

## Christ's childhood years

Some point out that little information is in the Gospels about the childhood years of Christ. This is perfectly understandable since the focus of the Gospels is on His ministry beginning at the age of 30. Yet the Bible includes more about His youth than first meets the eye.

For instance, we know that during his youth Jesus kept Israel's religious feasts every year with his family. "His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast" (Luke 2:41-42).

We also know Jesus lived most of his life up to the age of 30 in the environs of Nazareth. "So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:16).

We see two things from this verse. First, Jesus kept the Sabbath day, going to the synagogue "as His custom was."

We also see that Jesus had grown up in Nazareth, because if Jesus had lived somewhere else he could not have "been brought up" in Nazareth.

Besides, He was well known in Nazareth for his profession as a builder and carpenter. When He began His ministry the people from Nazareth asked, "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" (Mark 6:3).

This verse not only explains what Jesus' profession was during his adulthood in

Nazareth, but that He had four half brothers and at least two half sisters. (They would be half brothers and sisters since Jesus had God as His father and Mary as His mother. The brothers and sisters had Joseph as their father and Mary as their mother.)

Some have tried to say these brothers and sisters of Jesus were only "cousins" to bolster the claim that Jesus was an only child and Mary remained a perpetual virgin. Yet the Greek term used here is the normal word for "brother," *adelphos*, whereas the Greek term for cousin, *anep-sios*, is not used here (though it is used elsewhere in the New Testament, in Colossians 4:10).

The Bible contains many other instances of clear references to the literal "brothers of the Lord" (Matthew 12:46-47; John 2:12; 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19).

As for the supposed virginity of Mary after having given birth to Jesus, both Matthew 1:25 and Luke 2:7 call Jesus her "firstborn Son" (*prototokos*). They do not use the term "only child" or "only son" (*monogenes*), although the term for an only son is used elsewhere in the Gospels (Luke 7:12). Clearly, the use of "firstborn Son" to describe Jesus means other children were later born to Mary.

## Facts or fiction?

Another persistent myth tells of Christ doing miracles as a child. This goes back to legendary stories told of Him during the first centuries.

Yet this contradicts the biblical account,

for we read in John that the first miracle done by Jesus was turning the water into wine in the wedding feast in Cana. "This beginning of signs [miracles] Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed Him" (John 2:11).

If Christ had performed miracles before this time, under the inspiration of God, John could not have written that the miracle at Cana was the beginning of signs or miracles performed by Jesus Christ.

When all is said and done, there is sufficient information in the Gospels to dispel the myths that have crept into the extrabiblical accounts of Christ's life through the centuries. Most of His life as reflected in the Gospels deals with His ministry, because this was the time of His public teaching. His early life is briefly mentioned to confirm that He fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah and to establish the background for His all-important ministry.

One of the responsibilities of a Christian is to believe and faithfully transmit biblical teachings in all their purity and to avoid all falsehoods. It is important to get the record straight about Christ's life. It is the only way we can follow the biblical principle that "no lie is of the truth" (1 John 2:21). **GN**

## RECOMMENDED READING

How did Dec. 25 come to be celebrated as the date of Christ's birth? What do Santa Claus, reindeer, mistletoe, holly and evergreen trees have to do with the birth of the Savior of mankind? How did these come to be associated with one of the world's most widely celebrated holidays?

To better understand the origins of Christmas, and how and why this celebration was substituted for the feast days of the Bible, be sure to request your free copy of *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?* Please contact us at the address in your country (or the country nearest you) listed on page 2 or access our Web site at [www.gnmagazine.org](http://www.gnmagazine.org).



by Robert Berendt

**Y**ears ago I taught high-school chemistry, trigonometry, physics and math. I knew students who were in their last year of school before going on to college or trade school or some other form of education to equip them for a productive and satisfying life.

I knew from my own experiences that stress and pressure would accompany each student for the rest of his life, and I wanted to do the best I could to help him succeed.

Life has many moments that tax our abilities to the limit. As a teacher I wanted to be sure the students could meet each challenge.

When times of pressure and crisis come, we do not have the luxury of time to develop the skill and character we need to handle them at that time. We develop skills, knowledge and character over the years rather than in an instant.

The vital ingredient that helped me determine how the students were developing was the need from time to time to test their skills and knowledge. Tests tell the students where their knowledge may be weak. Tests boost the confidence of a student by showing that he really does understand the material. Tests show the instructor the weaknesses or strengths of students. Tests also reveal where an instructor may not have been clear enough.

### Success under pressure

Tests become a vital tool in another area. Tests place the student under pressure. In the chemistry classes I taught, my students had to take a final exam prepared by the board of education. The test largely determined the students' final grade and thus influenced their plans for their careers. Some students resented this type of test, and all the students I knew grew nervous when this test came around.

Susan was a good student—not brilliant, but a good student. She planned to go to college, but tests were a mountain for her. She had studied and I knew she could pass, but her nervousness and fear made her stay up for 48 hours with no sleep in the days leading up to the exam. On the last evening before the test she planned to stay up all night to study.

When a friend of hers told me her plan and I had seen how tired she looked, I phoned Susan and told her not to study at all but get a good night's sleep. I knew a tired mind would not react well under

pressure, and she likely would do

worse, not better. She took my advice and aced her exam the next day.

Her fear and the pressure she felt had lowered her

confidence. Her performance would have been affected. She went on to college and a successful life.

Another student, Bill, was average. His study habits were not so good, and he, too, felt the great pressure of the coming chemistry test. Feeling the pressure, Bill did study, but not enough.

As I was taking the roll the morning of the exam, I noticed Bill was not there. Test time came, and I asked a friend if he knew where Bill was. The friend confided in me that Bill stayed home because he feared the test. I phoned Bill's home and he answered. He was healthy and well, but the pressure on him was too great.

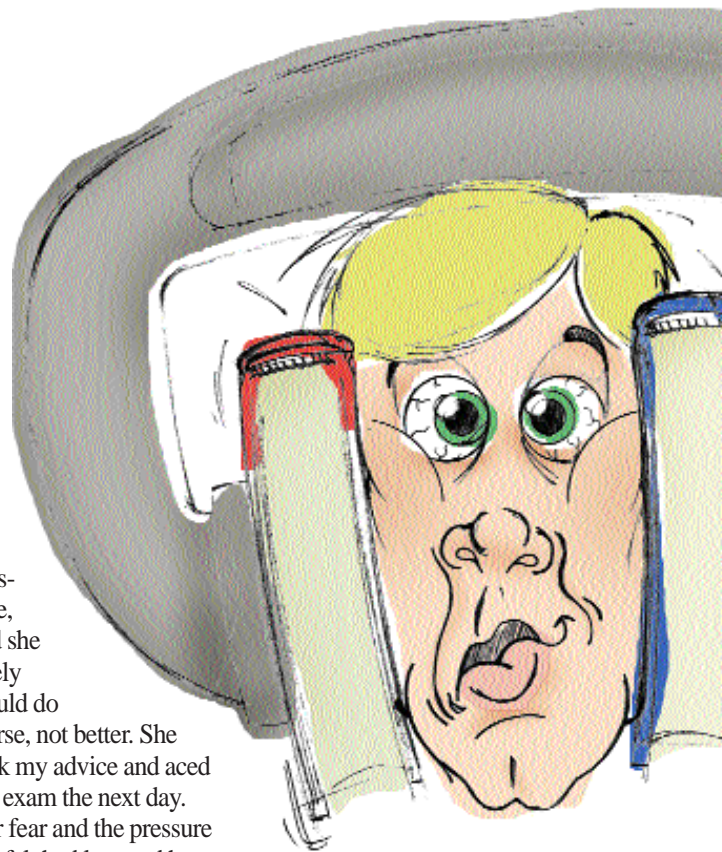
I bluntly told him to come down right then, even though he would be starting late. He did, and he passed the final exam. Years later at a class reunion Bill thanked me for that phone call. He had received his high-school diploma and landed a good job in the oil industry. He needed that passing grade in chemistry.

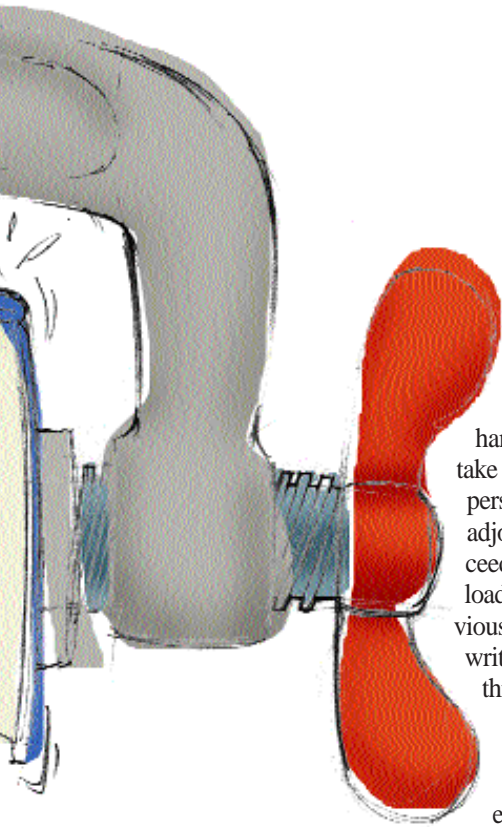
There are many stories like those of Susan and Bill. There are also stories of students who confidently took the test and handled the pressure. All of these experiences are stepping stones and building blocks of life.

### A different reaction to pressure

It is sad when we read of students who fail to learn the lesson and respond in a way that builds good character. Many of them struggle through life until they finally learn the lessons they should have learned earlier, or their life becomes a constant routine of avoiding pressure and responsibility. That is surely not a route to a pleasant or enjoyable life.

Oxford is England's most famous university. One of its top students, Roxanne, became president of the students' union. She was intelligent and headed for a wonderful future. She had a busy and enjoyable life on campus.





But for her, too, the pressures of tests were great. Exam time came and she complained about a hurt hand. She was allowed to take the exam by typing into a personal computer in an adjoining room. She proceeded to cheat. She downloaded an essay she had previously written rather than write the required essay for this exam.

Cheating cost her dearly. Her reputation was damaged; she was expelled from the university; and her future was badly

marred in many aspects.

She hurt her family and friends. Most of all, she hurt herself.

### **Pressure is a fact of life**

Too often students are allowed to make excuses to lay studies aside and wallow happily in their lack of understanding. Parents sometimes support those excuses. Lack of preparation and study—lack of a proper work ethic—is the greatest cause of fear and trepidation for those facing test times.

Final exams mean pressure. That is part of their purpose. Stu-

*You can learn more from tests  
than you might think.*

dents go on to become doctors, teachers, ship captains, firemen, policemen, farmers and the like. All will eventually be faced with difficult decisions.

When a doctor is faced with a difficult operation, he cannot excuse himself by saying he doesn't feel ready for it. A fireman cannot say he feels under stress because he helped fight a fire yesterday so he should be able to skip this call. Students need to learn to handle pressure because they will be under pressure all their lives.

Running away or cheating is not the way to learn the lessons that lead to successful living. Proper preparation and having a willing attitude are the best approach. Exams help us learn to keep events in perspective while we sweat it out in an atmosphere in which decisions can bring success or failure.

### **Solid steps for success**

Hard work, determined study, good habits of living and working are all ingredients for success as a student and later as an adult. Maybe you've heard students complain about homework, yet their study habits were clearly counterproductive. Some students have told me they study best with loud rock music on the radio, when parked in front of the television, when eating snacks and so on. At least their stories show great imagination.

Parents, teachers and other adults need to pay attention to helping young people. They are forming habits and mental attitudes that will help or harm them all their lives. Adults should be there to teach self-discipline, self-control and self-confidence. Such confidence is built upon a solid work ethic. Exams, after all, are to show what you know and reveal gaps in your knowledge. Exams are not to be feared; they are to be used.

When considering the value of tests, we should consider that the greatest teacher of all is God the Father. He knows the value of testing far better than any human teacher. He knows we need to develop the character that pressure and self-control yield. He knows our lives will be filled with challenges, confrontations, decisions, stress and pressure. He wants us to be ready when those tests come.

The Scriptures tell us God tests us to see whether we love Him above all else (Deuteronomy 13:3). He knows that if we truly love Him we will keep His commandments even under pressure and stress. Psalm 26:2 shows David looked forward to being proved, or tested, by God. Why? Because he had prepared and was ready for tests. Notice what he said in verse 1: "I have walked in my integrity, I have also trusted in the LORD; I shall not slip." His confidence was built on learning, self-control, facing pressure and making sound decisions.

We will make errors and mistakes throughout life. The important thing is that we learn from them and not repeat our mistakes. Pressure is part of life, and exams and tests are vital tools in helping us prepare for the pressures of living. Another school year is here, another year of opportunity to develop your mind, to learn and put into practice the skills you have developed. Look forward to your learning years and remember that the broad and easy path that so many

# Do You Know the Real Christmas Story?

With the Christmas season fast approaching, do you know the origin of modern Christmas customs and this celebration's connection to Christianity? Take the following short quiz to assess your knowledge.

- 1 True or False? The first Christmas was observed by Christians in 4 B.C. at the birth of Jesus Christ.
- 2 True or False? The custom of giving gifts for Christmas originated with the exchange of gifts among the wise men.
- 3 True or False? The growth of Christmas around the world is one of the best indicators that the world is becoming more Christian in its outlook.
- 4 True or False? The Christmas tree and mistletoe come from Christian tradition.
- 5 True or False? The Bible gives us permission to adopt any holiday customs we choose so long as they are done to honor Christ.
- 6 True or False? Putting Christ back in Christmas is the best way to honor God at this time of year.
- 7 True or False? Christmas is God's favorite celebration.

The correct answer to all of the above questions is *false*. If you missed some, you need to understand the real Christmas story as explained by history and the Bible in our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*

Too many people go through life thinking they are honoring their Creator through Christmas celebrations.

For many it is the most joyous time of the year. But, before you celebrate another Christmas season, why not consider what God thinks about this holiday? As a serious Christian, don't you think it's time you considered His view?



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