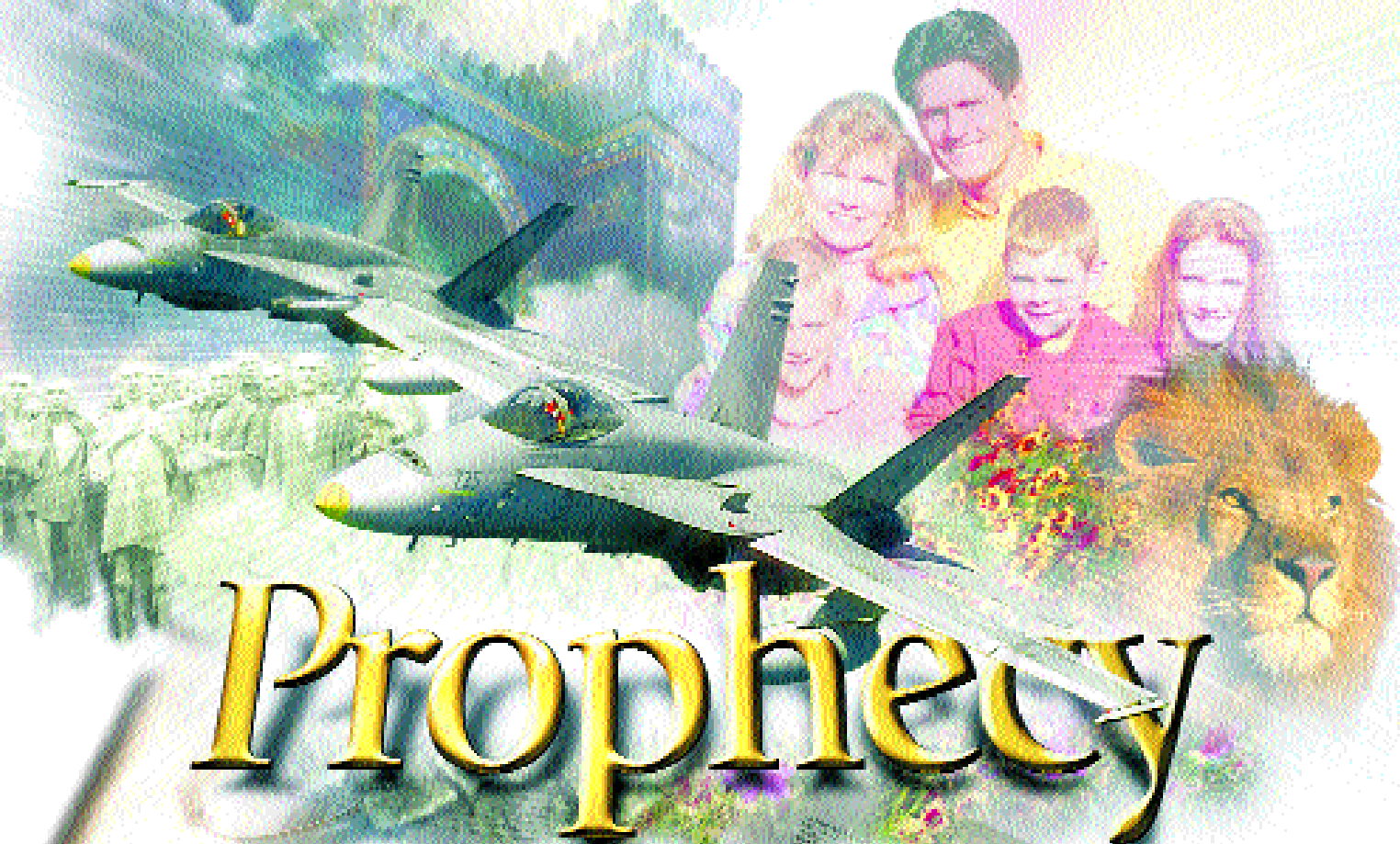


# The Good News

September/October 1999



## Prophecy

Can You Believe Your Bible?

Just What Is the Abomination of Desolation? • America's Moral Downturn  
Russia's Dangerous Nuclear Arsenal • How Can You Find the Right Church?

**T**rying to anticipate the future is big business. More Americans than ever invest their life savings in the stock market because faith in the nation's economic future is so high. Confidence in the Internet as the economic medium of the future drives a booming new information industry that reshapes the prevailing economic outlook. A cautious euphoria is the economic order of the day.

Amid the euphoria we should ask, How does God want us to view the future? Does He want us to approach tomorrow with an attitude of excitement and confidence?

He certainly does—but with a considerably different focus.

Almost 2,000 year ago Jesus Christ announced some good news about the future. His message, the gospel (good news) of the Kingdom of God, instills hope and confidence.

God intends for mankind to succeed and for the destiny He plans for all of humanity to become reality. But that is looking far into the future, far beyond today's economic euphoria.

Regrettably, most people are woefully unconcerned about the outcome of their existence, their ultimate future. Their primary concern is the possessions and standard of living they hope to acquire in the next few years.

Something is terribly wrong with this view. It focuses only on temporary belongings and achievements. This is a shortsighted way of looking at things.

We need to peer considerably deeper into the future. God has given us a wonderful tool for doing just that: prophecy. Bible prophecy has a positive purpose. It proves God exists and reassures those who put their trust in Him that their efforts are not wasted.

In this issue of *The Good News* we focus on Bible prophecy and how it can give direction to your life. Let us first understand who will have a direct hand in bringing many of the most important Bible prophecies to pass. Someone will be directly involved in making prophecy happen. That someone is Jesus Christ.

God has made available, through Bible prophecy, the crucial details of Christ's future deeds, especially His return to earth as its king. Here is a glimpse of the wonderful future of peace, prosperity and goodwill He will bring to earth:

"Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him. For He will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem their life from oppression and violence . . . and daily He shall be praised. There will be an abundance of grain in the earth, on the top of the mountains; its fruit shall wave like Lebanon; and those of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth . . . All nations shall call Him blessed. Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things!" (Psalm 72:11-18).

These will be some of the remarkable achievements of Jesus Christ when He transforms the world after His return. But Bible prophecy also reveals many obstacles must be overcome before that peaceful and harmonious era can begin.

At the beginning of the 1,000-year period (Revelation 20), Jesus will initiate corrective measures to alter people's attitudes—greed, arrogance and malice—that block their way to lasting peace. Persuading selfish and materialistic human beings to change their ways will be no easy task. But prophecy reveals God will accomplish it.

Are you looking beyond the difficult times? Do you have a clear vision of the wonderful future that lies beyond this era? God wants you to focus on the future with confidence and hope. A full understanding of the enormity of Bible prophecy is the key. Continue reading *The Good News* to discover more of the exciting, encouraging details.

—Roger Foster

*The Good News* (ISSN: 1086-9514) is published bimonthly by the United Church of God, an International Association, 5405 DuPont Circle, Suite A, Milford, OH 45150. © 1999 United Church of God, an International Association. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any form without written permission is prohibited. Periodicals Postage paid at Milford, Ohio 45150 and at additional mailing offices.

Publisher: United Church of God, an International Association  
Managing editor: Scott Ashley  
Writer-researchers: Jerold Aust,  
Roger Foster, John Ross Schroeder  
Copy editor: Dixon Cartwright  
Art director: Shaun Venish

#### Editorial reviewers:

John Bald, Bruce Gore, Paul Kieffer,  
Graemme Marshall, Richard Thompson,  
David Treybig, Lyle Welty, Dean Wilson

#### United Church of God Council of Elders:

Gary Antion, Aaron Dean, Robert Dick (chairman),  
Roy Holladay, John Jewell, Victor Kubik,  
Dennis Luker, Les McCullough (church president),  
Burk McNair, Richard Thompson, Leon Walker, Donald Ward

**Subscriptions:** Call (513) 576-9796 or write to *The Good News*, United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, or contact us at the office nearest you (see international addresses below). *The Good News* is sent free to all who request it. Your subscription is provided by the voluntary contributions of members of the United Church of God, an International Association, and others. Donations are gratefully accepted and are tax-deductible in the United States. Those who choose to voluntarily support this worldwide work are welcomed as coworkers in this effort to proclaim the true gospel to all nations.

**Personal contact:** The United Church of God has more than 350 congregations and 400 ministers in the United States and many other countries. To contact a minister, or to find locations and times of services nearest you, write or call the addresses listed or dial our fax information service at (513) 576-9794. You can access our World Wide Web site on the Internet at [www.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org).

Scriptural references in *The Good News* are from the New King James Version (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., publishers) unless otherwise noted.

#### International addresses:

**Australia:** United Church of God—Australia  
GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia  
Phone: 07 55 202 111 Free call: 1800 356 202 Fax: 07 55 202 122  
Web site address: [www.ucg.org.au](http://www.ucg.org.au) E-mail: [ucg@b022.aone.net.au](mailto:ucg@b022.aone.net.au)

**Bahamas:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box N8873, Nassau, Bahamas  
Phone: (242) 324-3169 Fax: (242) 364-5566

**British Isles:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box 4052, Milton Keynes, Bucks, MK13 7ZE, England  
Phone: 0181-386-8467 Fax: 01257-453978

**Canada:** United Church of God—Canada  
Box 144, Station D, Etobicoke, ON M9A 4X1, Canada  
Phone: (416) 231-9379, (800) 338-7779  
Fax: (416) 231-8238 Web site address: [www.ucg.ca](http://www.ucg.ca)

**Fiji:** United Church of God, P.O. Box 10-577, Fiji Phone: 723-678

**French-speaking areas:** Église de Dieu Unie—France  
B.P. 51254, 45002 Orléans Cedex 1, France

**Germany:** Vereinte Kirche Gottes/Gute Nachrichten  
Postfach 30 15 09, D-53195 Bonn, Germany  
Phone: 0228-9454636 Fax: 0228-9454637

**Italy:** La Buona Notizia, Chiesa di Dio Unita  
Casella Postale 187, 24100 Bergamo, Italy.  
Phone: 0039-035583474 Fax: 0039-035582140  
Web site address: [www.labuonanotizia.org](http://www.labuonanotizia.org)

**New Zealand:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box 22, Auckland 1015, New Zealand  
Phone: Toll free 0508-463-763

**South Africa:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box 4345, 2125 Randburg, South Africa  
Phone: 011 886-4650 Fax: 011 886-7610  
Web site address: [www.ucg.org.za](http://www.ucg.org.za)

**Spanish-speaking areas:** United Church of God  
P.O. Box 458, Big Sandy, TX 75755, U.S.A.  
Phone: (903) 636-4928

Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement Number 1487140.

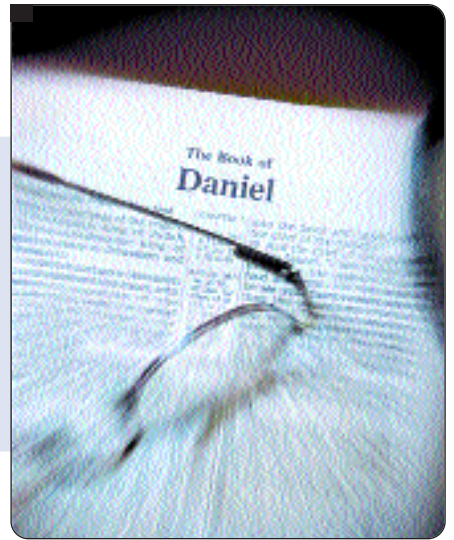
Address changes: POSTMASTER—Send address changes to *The Good News*, Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027.

# Table of Contents

## Cover Feature

### Can You Believe Bible Prophecy?

Can you believe in the Bible as what it claims to be—the inspired Word of God? Can we know for sure? Its pages issue a challenge to skeptics: Who but an almighty, all-powerful God can predict the future, then bring to pass what He has foretold? Are you willing to take God up on His challenge, to see whether prophecy indeed proves the Bible is the Word of God? . . . 4



Bible prophecy: what does it mean for you? 4

### Just What Is the Abomination of Desolation?

The Hebrew prophet Daniel, and Jesus Christ Himself, spoke of a coming "abomination of desolation." Who or what is this mysterious prophetic sign? A careful study of the Scriptures helps us understand their warning. . . . 9



The nuclear nightmare: far from over 20

### America's Moral Downturn: What Lies Ahead?

What happens when a nation's moral fiber unravels, when its people adopt an "anything goes" morality? Reports show disturbing trends in the moral outlook of the country's citizens and leaders. Have Americans considered the consequences? . . 14

### Has Jesus Christ's Olivet Prophecy Been Fulfilled?

Shortly before His death Jesus Christ described a series of events and conditions that would befall Jerusalem and its people. Have His predictions come to pass? Will they yet be fulfilled? Do His words hold deep meaning for our day and age? . . . 17

### Russia's Dangerous Nuclear Arsenal

Far from reducing the threat of a nuclear holocaust, the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought a host of new nuclear nightmares. Could a crumbling military infrastructure, low pay and demoralized troops usher in a catastrophe? . . . 20

### How Can You Find the Right Church?

What should you look for in a church? Using the Bible as a guide, what should you expect to find? How do most churches measure up to its description of the church? For that matter, what exactly is a church anyway? . . . . . 22

### Jesus Christ: The Early Years

For years critics of the Bible viewed the historical accounts of the Gospels as little more than a fraud. However, a wealth of archaeological discoveries paints a picture that confirms many of the details surrounding Christ's birth. . . . 24



What should you look for in a church? 22

## Regular Features

**World News and Trends** An Overview of Conditions Around the World . . . . . 12

**Profiles of Faith** Joseph and Mary: A Faithful Couple . . . . . 28

Photos: From top, photo illustration by Shaun Venish/Scott Ashley; © 1999 PhotoDisc, Inc.; photo illustration by Shaun Venish/© 1999 PhotoDisc, Inc. Cover: Photo illustration by Shaun Venish/© 1999 PhotoDisc, Inc. Digital Stock

# Bible Prophecy?

by Noel Hornor  
and Roger Foster

If you aren't sure whether the Bible should be trusted as the inspired word God, you belong to a significant majority. Surveys of Americans, Europeans and others repeatedly confirm that few know what the Bible says. The majority of those questioned could not even recall the names of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

Most people are familiar with some stories from the Bible but have limited knowledge and understanding of its content. Many who say they do not believe the Bible reject it without even reading it.

Modern educational systems lock out the Bible. Even religious leaders vigorously disagree on which and how much of its teachings apply to whom. Those who take the time to study it are in the distinct minority. It is little wonder biblical illiteracy is so widespread.

The Bible claims that it was inspired by God. It even quotes Him saying, "I am God, and there is none like Me, *declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done . . .*" (Isaiah 46:9-10, emphasis added throughout).

How credible is the Bible's claim that it can foretell the future, that it contains the very words of God predicting events long before they come to pass? Can we find reliable evidence to back up this statement?

On a more personal level, what evidence would make that claim believable to you? Are you prepared to accept the reliability of the

Bible if its claims can be documented and verified? If the Bible indeed predicts the future—and if God Himself will bring to pass what the Bible foretells—what are the implications for us of that demonstration of God's inspiration and power?

Believe it or not, it is prophecy, the most-scoffed-at part of Scripture, that is

one of the elements of the Bible easiest to check for accuracy. Many biblical prophecies have already come to pass. By comparing the Bible's predictions with what actually happened, we can test the Bible's reliability. We can discover for ourselves whether it should be regarded as the inspired Word of God.

An excellent example of where the Bible can easily be tested is prophecies foretelling the birth, life and death of Jesus Christ. Amazing details of His life and work were revealed and recorded by several writers centuries before He was born. The sheer number of these predictions, with their astonishingly accurate details, powerfully support the validity of Bible prophecy.

(You will find a partial listing of the many prophecies about Christ and references to their fulfillment in "Jesus Christ in Prophecy" on page 6. We urge you to look up each scriptural reference, including the prophecy and its recorded fulfillment, in your own Bible.)

## God's challenge to skeptics

God has long urged skeptics to examine prophecy as a proof of His existence and reliability. To those who in ancient times worshiped worthless idols rather than the true God, He issued this challenge: "Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so that we may know you are gods" (Isaiah 41:22-23, New International Version).

God recorded prophecy and its fulfillment to prove He is truthful and we can trust His





By predicting events centuries in advance, then insuring they come to pass, God gives us irrefutable proof of both His existence and the inspiration of His Word, the Bible.

words. By predicting events centuries in advance, then insuring they come to pass, He gives us irrefutable proof of both His existence and the inspiration of His Word, the Bible.

If we can demonstrate that God has already fulfilled many prophecies, it should be obvious that He also has the power to fulfill prophecies of the future. "Indeed I have spoken it; *I will also bring it to pass,*" He tells us. "I have purposed it; *I will also do it*" (Isaiah 46:11).

Since so much prophecy relates to conditions and events leading up to Jesus Christ's return—a time world conditions indicate may be quite soon—shouldn't we accept God's challenge? Wouldn't it be helpful to know what the Bible predicts concerning that time, and whether those prophecies are believable?

The prophet Daniel predicted, long in advance, many events that have already occurred. But some of his prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. Concerning some of those future prophecies, God told Daniel to "shut up the words, and seal the book *until the time of the end . . .*" (Daniel 12:4).

This verse indicates that certain major prophecies will be much more understandable to those who serve God as the time of the end approaches. Daniel also indicates that the prophetic meaning of certain world events and conditions leading up to the time of the end will be understood by the people of God even as they are occurring (Daniel 12:9-10; Amos 3:7).

The Bible presents itself as a trustworthy

guide in these matters. It has accurately predicted much of what we know as history. Similarly, it was written to help us understand what is yet to happen.

Let's compare several Bible prophecies to their fulfillments. Let's discover whether these occurrences are evidence that demonstrates that the Bible is indeed the Word of God and whether it is a trustworthy source of information critical to our future.

Some people have referred to Bible prophecy as history written in advance. Is it?

#### Daniel in the skeptics' den

The prophecies of Daniel supply many keys for establishing the accuracy of all Bible prophecy. Many of his prophecies are so specific that, if they can be demonstrated to be true, only the most prejudiced minds could continue to doubt and reason their way around them.

The actions of some skeptics are quite revealing. They do not even attempt to challenge the accuracy of the *content* of Daniel's prophecies. They don't dispute that they are astonishingly accurate. Rather than admitting that Daniel's words are indeed inspired, however, they resort to labeling his book a fraud.

How? They simply deny that the book was written in the sixth century B.C., as indicated by the historical events and internal evidence recorded in the book itself. Instead they claim it was penned by an unknown author sometime after 200 B.C., long after many events

prophesied in the book had already occurred. This, Daniel's critics conveniently allege, is the only plausible explanation for the book's startling prophetic accuracy.

Let's consider the nature of these critics' approach. They begin by disputing Daniel's authorship because he refers to himself in the third person in his early chapters.

However, as Gleason L. Archer Jr., professor of Old Testament and semitics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, points out, this "was the custom among ancient authors of historical memoirs" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 1985, Vol. VII, p. 4). Daniel was merely adhering to the accepted writing conventions of his time. In relating some of his personal feelings and experiences, however, Daniel did appropriately write in the first person (Daniel 7:15; 8:15; 9:2; 10:2).

The identity of Daniel's critics is also significant. The first person known to have questioned the authenticity of Daniel's authorship was the Greek scholar and historian Porphyry, who lived A.D. 233-304.

Porphyry is labeled by historians as a Neoplatonist, meaning he subscribed to the doctrines of the Greek philosopher Plato. What were his fundamental beliefs? "Porphyry is well known as a violent opponent of Christianity and defender of Paganism" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition, Vol. 22, p. 104, "Porphyry").

Since Porphyry was an enemy of Christianity, his objectivity is questionable when he

writes about Christianity or the Bible. Further, he revealed no factual basis for his opinion, and his view contradicts the testimony of Jesus Christ, who explicitly refers to Daniel as the author of the book that bears his name (Matthew 24:15).

The biblical scholar Jerome (A.D. 340-420) refuted Porphyry's contention. Thereafter no one took Porphyry's remarks seriously until many centuries later. "... He was more or less dismissed by Christian scholarship as a mere pagan detractor who had allowed a naturalistic bias to warp his judgment. But during the time of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, all supernatural elements in Scripture came under suspicion; and Porphyry's theory received increasing support..." (Archer, p. 13).

Scholars with liberal leanings still recycle these centuries-old arguments. Historian Eugene H. Merrill, professor of Old Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, says their beliefs are built on feeble evidence.

"... [Daniel's] rhetoric and language are emblematic of the naturalistic bias of the eighteenth century [B.C.], the efforts to have Jesus Dr. Merrill is only on the most subjective

and circular lines of evidence that the man [Daniel] and his writing have been denied historicity" (*Kingdom of Priests*, 1996, p. 484).

### Phenomenal prediction and fulfillment

The accuracy of Daniel's prediction of remotely distant events is spectacular. For example, he wrote the "70 weeks" prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27) in "the first year of Darius" (verse 1). The first year of Darius was 539 B.C. (Merrill, p. 486).

In this prophecy God specifies a period of 70 "sevens" or 70 "weeks of years," to complete the salvation of His people. A total of 69 of these "weeks of years" ( $7 + 62 \times 7 = 483$  years) specifies the period that would elapse from the order to rebuild the Jerusalem temple (Ezra 1:1-4) until the first appearance of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, 3½ years before His death. That decree was given in 457 B.C. (Archer, p. 114).

Exactly 483 years later (taking into account the fact there is no year 0 between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1) Jesus Christ began preaching in Galilee (Mark 1:1, 14). In this amazing prophecy, Daniel predicted "the precise year of Christ's appearance and the beginning of his ministry in A.D. 27" (Archer, p. 9). His death was also predicted in Daniel 9:26.

Daniel's final "week of years" (the 70th

week) was to be delayed until the time of the "abomination of desolation" mentioned by Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:15). At that time, says Daniel, "the horde of an invading prince will work havoc on city and sanctuary. The end of it will be a cataclysm, inevitable war with all its horrors. The prince will make a firm league with the many for one of the seventy [weeks of years]; and, with that one half [3½ years] spent, he will put a stop to sacrifice and offering. And in the train of these abominations will come the perpetrator of desolation; then, in the end, what has been decreed concerning the desolation will be poured out" (Daniel 9:26-27, Revised English Bible). (To better understand this prophecy, be sure to read "Just What Is the Abomination of Desolation?," beginning on page 9.)

### Nebuchadnezzar's dream

Daniel records another remarkable prophecy, his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, in chapter 2. In the second year of his reign the Babylonian king had a troubling dream that none of his counselors could explain. Babylonian culture placed considerable emphasis upon dreams, and Nebuchadnezzar was convinced this one was of great importance (Daniel 2:1-3).

His dream gives us a "disclosure of God's



## Jesus Christ in Prophecy

The introduction to the Jewish New Testament lists 52 prophecies fulfilled in Christ's birth, life and death as foretold in 81 passages in the Old Testament (pp. xxv-xxix). Although some prophecies were clear, many of the prophecies could not be understood at the time they were written, even by the prophets themselves (see Daniel 12:8-9). They came to be understood only in hindsight by the apostles and writers of the Gospels through the inspiration of God's Spirit.

Among other things, the Old Testament prophets predicted:

- He would come from the line of King David (Isaiah 11:1-5; Matthew 1:1, 6).
- He would be preceded by one who would announce His coming (Isaiah 40:3, 5; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 3:1-3).
- He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-20).
- His birth would occur in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1).
- His own people would reject Him (Isaiah 53:3; John 1:11).
- He would be betrayed by a friend (Psalm 41:9; John 13:18-30).
- The price for His betrayal would be 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15).
- A potter's field would be purchased with His betrayal money (Zechariah 11:13; Matthew 27:3-10).
- He would be slain as the silent Passover Lamb of God (Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 27:12; John 19:14-16).
- His hands and feet would be pierced (Psalm 22:16; Luke 23:33; 24:38-40).
- He would be condemned and executed like a criminal (Isaiah

53:12; Luke 22:36-37; Matthew 27:28).

- No bone in His body would be broken (Psalm 34:20; John 19:33-36).
- Exactly what His dying words on the cross would be (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34).
- His garments would be claimed by others by the casting of lots (Psalm 22:18; John 19:23-24).
- He would be buried with the wealthy (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:57-60).

Jesus Himself could not have controlled how all of these prophecies were fulfilled. No one can control the circumstances of His own birth, who his ancestors are and where he is born. Nor could He control the actions of others in betraying Him, putting Him to death and laying His body in the unused tomb of a wealthy man.

Yet these remarkable details were given through a variety of prophets from several hundred years up to a thousand years in advance. Even details of Christ's death by crucifixion were predicted by King David many hundreds of years before the practice of crucifixion became common as a method of execution.

Why this precise accuracy in foretelling Christ's birth, life and death? God was providing irrefutable evidence for all who would carefully consider these facts that His prophecies can be trusted.

Therefore we have every reason to conclude that, just as the details of Christ's birth, life and death came to pass exactly as predicted, so will the prophecies related to His second coming. We should expect them to be fulfilled precisely as they are revealed in God's Word.

plan for the ages till the final triumph of Christ” and “presents the foreordained succession of world powers that are to dominate the Near East till the final victory of the Messiah in the last days” (Archer, pp. 39, 46).

The Bible records that Daniel, under inspiration from God and without prior knowledge of the dream’s content, explained the details of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar: “You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image’s head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thigh of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay” (Daniel 2:31-33).

Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar his Babylonian Empire was represented by the head of gold (verses 37-38). The silver, bronze and iron-and-clay components of the image, or statue, represented three powerful empires that were to follow mighty Babylon (verses 39-40).

This divine interpretation of the dream provided Nebuchadnezzar as well as Daniel with an astounding preview of history. The dream occurred and Daniel interpreted it about 600 B.C. The image in the dream represented the sequence of great empires that would dominate the civilized world’s political scene for centuries. Notice how accurately it was fulfilled.

“The silver empire was to be Medo-Persia, which began with Cyrus the Great, who conquered Babylon in 539 . . . This silver empire was supreme in the Near and Middle East for about two centuries” (Archer, p. 47).

“The bronze empire was the Greco-Macedonian Empire

“After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. (Daniel 7:7, NKJV).

What does this description mean? It is a reference to the great power of the Roman Empire, which crushed all who opposed it. “Thus the superior power of the colossus of Rome . . . is emphasized in the symbolism of this terrible fourth beast” (Archer, p. 87).

What is the meaning of the 10 horns? The ultimate fulfillment of this part of the prophecy is yet in our future. “The ten horns appear to refer to an end-time revival of the Roman Empire . . .” (Archer, p. 25).

This concurs with Daniel 2:44, which obviously indicates that the second coming of Christ will occur in a time during which vestiges of the fourth beast, or kingdom, still exist: “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”

The greater part of these prophetic events, as detailed by the two dreams, has already been fulfilled. Babylon, the dominant power of Daniel’s day, fell (the circumstances are recorded in Daniel 5). It was succeeded, in turn, by the Medo-Persian Empire, the Grecian Empire of Alexander the Great, and the Roman Empire—just as revealed to and recorded by Daniel.

The fulfillment of these detailed prophecies dramatically

**The fulfillment of these detailed prophecies dramatically affirms the divine inspiration of the Bible. The odds against any person being able to accurately predict these monumental occurrences in the history of mankind defy all rational possibilities.**

established by Alexander the Great . . . The bronze kingdom lasted for about 260 or 300 years before it was supplanted by the fourth kingdom” (ibid.).

“Iron connotes toughness and ruthlessness and describes the Roman Empire that reached its widest extent under the reign of Trajan” (ibid.). Trajan reigned A.D. 98-117, and the Roman Empire itself ruled for many centuries.

The fourth empire was depicted as having 10 toes. The feet and toes are composed partly of iron and partly of clay, as verse 41 explains. “Verse 41 deals with a later phase or outgrowth of this fourth empire, symbolized by the feet and ten toes—made up of iron and earthenware, a fragile base for the huge monument. The text clearly implies that this final phase will be marked by some sort of federation rather than by a powerful single realm” (ibid.).

### **Another dream adds important details**

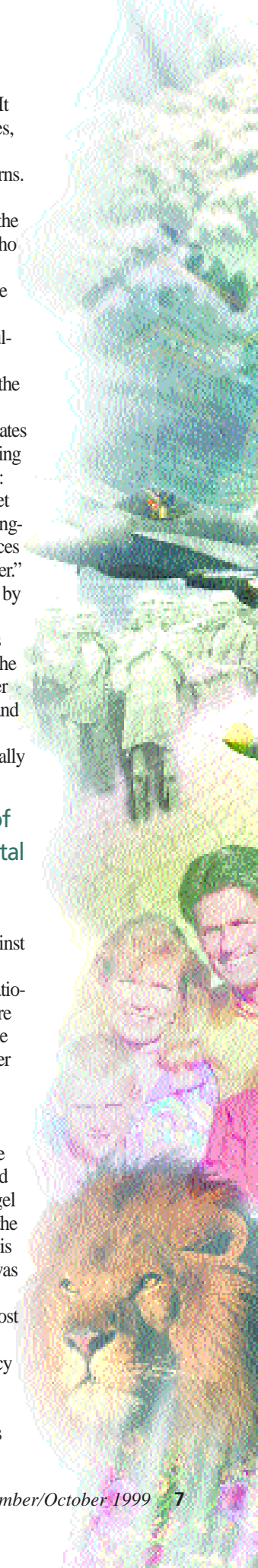
Additional aspects of this succession of empires were revealed to Daniel in a later dream. This time the four empires were represented by four beasts: a lion (Babylonian Empire), a bear (Persian Empire) and a leopard (Grecian Empire) and a fourth beast described as “terrible” and unlike the other three (Daniel 7:1-7).

affirms the divine inspiration of the Bible. The odds against any person being able to accurately predict these monumental occurrences in the history of mankind defy all rational possibilities. Therefore, Daniel’s statement that “there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days” (Daniel 2:28), becomes all the more credible.

### **The Bible’s most detailed prophecy**

Daniel 11 records another phenomenal prophecy. The chronological setting is given in Daniel 10:1 as the “third year of Cyrus king of Persia.” A “man,” no doubt an angel (Daniel 9:21), came to tell Daniel what would occur in the “latter days” (Daniel 10:14). The prophecy that follows is the most detailed in the Bible. The third year of Cyrus was more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. Yet this prophecy foretells events that would begin to occur almost immediately and will continue until the return of Christ.

The initial stages of the prophecy confirm the accuracy of the Bible because they are already fulfilled. They can be verified by a careful study of the Persian and Greek empires. It is unimaginable that any human being on his own could foresee such fine historical detail.



# The Prophetic *Perspective*

**T**he amazing scope of biblical prophecy can be properly appreciated only if we first understand the essential nature of its content. When the apostle Peter said, "For prophecy never came by the will of man" (2 Peter 1:21) he was not restricting the word *prophecy* to mean only predictions.

His use of *prophecy* in this context included everything these "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (same verse). Predictions were only a part of their messages. They also wrote about the state of nations and peoples, reviewed history and urged repentance.

In other words, the Bible represents its prophets as spokesmen for or agents of God. The author of the book of Hebrews aptly expressed this when he wrote, "God, who at various times and in various ways *spoke* in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days *spoken* to us by His Son . . ." (Hebrews 1:1-2).

The job of God's prophets was to diligently represent God's point of view in everything they said. Advancing the cultural or political point of view of their people was simply not their calling. In fact, their messages were often highly critical of the behavioral and cultural trends of the people to whom they were sent.

Why is it essential that we understand the perspective of the prophets? It's mainly because of the way many modern scholars misrepresent them.

Far too often modern writers and teachers portray the prophets as nationalistic statesmen who merely reflected a gradually developing national consciousness in ancient Israel and Judah.

Nothing could be further from the truth. God send these prophets to ancient Israel and Judah to *critique* the prevailing national point of view, not reflect it.

God sent them to explain *His* perspective of the state of His people and the world in the past, present and future. They address the great dilemmas of humanity and explain how God will solve them. The culture they represent is the way of life God has taught from the beginning of mankind's existence.

Some elements of what follows are intricate, requiring close attention. But a comparison of the prophetic words with the historical record makes them clear.

The first 35 verses of Daniel 11 predicted, centuries in advance, the protracted wars and political intrigue between two political entities labeled the "king of the South" and the "king of the North." In secular history the various kings of the south were of the Ptolemy dynasty, ruling from Alexandria in Egypt. The kings of the north ruled from Antioch in Syria, often under various forms or combinations of the names Seleucus and Antiochus.

At this point the prophecy Daniel 11 takes on a different tone, shifting to "the time of the end" near the end of verse 35. To quote Dr. Archer again: "With the conclusion of the preceding pericope [extract] at v. 35, the predictive material that incontestably applies to the Hellenistic empires and the contest between the Seleucids and the Jewish patriots ends" (p. 143). (For a thorough explanation of this extremely accurate and detailed prophecy, be sure to request your free copy of our booklet *Is the Bible True?*)

## Interpreting prophetic evidence

Liberal and conservative scholars agree that all of Daniel 11 up to verse 35 contains strikingly accurate descriptions of the whole sweep of events from the reign of Cyrus to the

unsuccessful effort of the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes to stamp out the Jewish faith.

However, scholars differ greatly in their approach to the prophetic evidence. It is vital we understand the basis of those differences.

Dr. Archer explains that to some scholars the biblical "pattern of prediction and fulfillment [presents] compelling evidence of the divine inspiration and authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, since only God could possibly foreknow the future and see to it that his announced plan would be precisely fulfilled."

Others, however, take a vastly different view. Assuming God does not exist, they believe there can be no inspired prophecy or its divinely guided fulfillment. Like Porphyry, they must brand the books of the biblical prophets as fraudulent, claiming the only explanation for their startling accuracy is they must have been written after the fact. To think otherwise would require them to accept a divine Being who can foretell events down to their smallest details.

Some atheists admit they reach their conclusions because they simply do not want God telling them how to live.

For instance, Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) wrote of his bias: "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption . . . The philosopher who finds

no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics; he is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do . . .

"For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation . . . We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom . . ." (*Ends and Means*, 1937, pp. 270, 272-273).

Huxley admitted his reasons for rejecting a God who would tell mankind how to live. How much more plainly can it be said? Many of those who work so hard to challenge and deny the authority of the Bible do so because they do not want God telling them what to do.

## Will you trust such evidence of God?

What is your response to such evidence of God? Can you honestly accept its implications? Does solid evidence that much of Bible prophecy has been fulfilled precisely as it was written impress you?

In this article we have only scratched the surface of prophecies that have already been fulfilled precisely as predicted. You can trust Bible prophecy as proof of an all-knowing, almighty God who can foretell the future and then bring it to pass.

Bible prophecy is not simply a dry, dusty record of predictions fulfilled in history. Prophecy is *living*. Even now, many biblical prophecies are coursing toward their fulfillment. Based on the many past prophecies fulfilled in minute detail, we can be confident that God's predictions through His prophets *will* come to pass.

The stage appears to be set for many astounding prophecies to be fulfilled in our times. We would do well to heed the words of Him who tells us, "I have purposed it; *I will also do it*" (Isaiah 46:11). **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.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org).



# Abomination of Desolation?

*In one of the Bible's best-known prophecies, Jesus Christ spoke of a coming "abomination of desolation." What did He mean? Has that prophecy come to pass?*

by Gary Petty

**F**rom supermarket tabloids it is apparent people are fascinated with biblical prophecy. Someone's always coming up with a new interpretation of the beasts of the book of Daniel or of the mysterious cataclysms of Revelation.

Apart from the hyperbole and hysteria, people do have practical concerns about the intriguing prophetic statements in the Bible. We live in turbulent times. People are concerned about the state of the world. Some, almost instinctively, turn to the Bible—particularly the prophetic passages—for solace and insight.

Jesus Christ's Olivet prophecy, recorded for us in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, is one of the Bible's most familiar prophecies. In it Jesus warns of a coming time of unprecedented trouble. He advises people in Judea to flee when they see the "abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet" (Matthew 24:15).

What is the abomination of desolation? Can the Bible tell us its meaning? Is this prophecy only for the people of Daniel's or Christ's day, or is it a warning for a time yet ahead of us?

## The abomination of desolation in the book of Daniel

When Jesus spoke of the abomination of desolation, He was referring to Daniel 11:31 and 12:11. God revealed to Daniel that "there shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence" (Daniel 12:1, New Revised Standard Version). Then, in verse 11, Daniel learns that the abomination involves the cessation of daily sacrifices.

A key to understanding prophecy is the principle of *duality*—that some prophecies can have more than one fulfillment. This means a prophecy may be partially fulfilled but will not completely come to pass until a later time. To understand Christ's words we must look at three fulfillments—two historic and one future—of prophecies about the abomination of desolation.

When the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar invaded the kingdom

of Judah in 606 B.C., he took many of the most intelligent of the Jewish youths to Babylon to serve in his court. Daniel, who wrote the book that bears his name around 535 B.C., was taken to Babylon with the first of the Jewish captives and trained to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's government.

Daniel tells us Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by a dream of an image, or statue, of a man. The image had a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, stomach and thighs of bronze and lower legs and feet of iron and clay. Through Daniel God revealed to the king that Babylon was to be the first in a series of four great empires (Daniel 2). History shows these four kingdoms to be the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman empires. The head of gold represented Babylon, the chest and arms the Medo-Persia Empire, the stomach and thighs the Grecian and the lower legs and feet the Roman Empire.

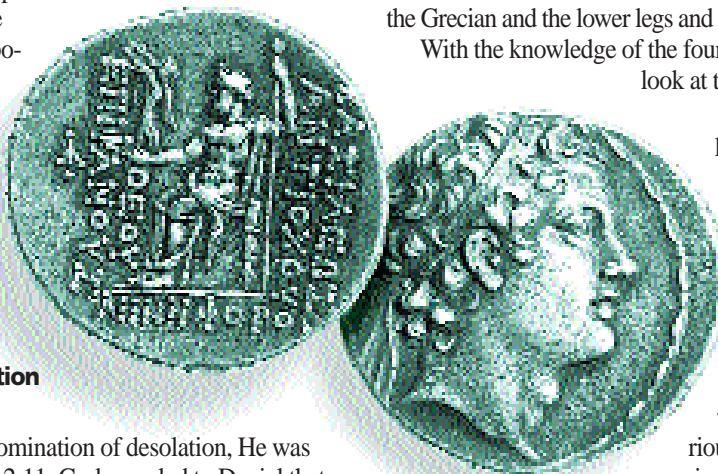
With the knowledge of the four successive empires in mind, let's look at the prophecy in Daniel 8.

Daniel had a vision of a ram with power to stand against all other animals (verses 1-4). A goat with a "notable horn" would destroy the ram (verses 5-7).

The goat's horn was to grow strong but would break off and be replaced by four horns (verse 8). Out of the four horns would come a small horn that would grow and invade the "Glorious Land," establishing the "transgression of desolation" (verses 9-14).

**Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple and halted sacrifices in 167 B.C. Antiochus's actions partially fulfilled Daniel's prophecy.**

How can we understand Daniel's vision? Besides realizing that prophecies can have multiple fulfillments, we should realize that the Bible often interprets itself. We read a little farther in Daniel 8 that God sent the angel Gabriel to reveal to Daniel the meaning of this vision.



## The prophetic dream fulfilled

In Daniel 8 we learn that the ram represents the kingdom of Media and Persia and the goat the kingdom of Greece. The goat's large horn is the first Grecian king, who was to precede four more kings (verses 15-22). This is a remarkable prophecy of events many years after Daniel's death.



## The second fulfillment of the abomination of desolation ended with the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans.

The Greeks, united under Alexander the Great, overthrew the Persian Empire in 331 B.C. Alexander, after conquering much of the known world from the eastern Mediterranean to India, died in his early 30s in 323 B.C. The Greek empire was thrown into confusion and finally divided among four of Alexander's generals:

- Ptolemy, who ruled Egypt, part of Syria and Judea.
- Seleucus, who ruled the other part of Syria, Babylon and the territory east to India.
- Lysimachus, who ruled Asia Minor.
- Cassander (Antipater), who ruled Greece and Macedonia.

Historians record that the four kingdoms rising out of Alexander's empire eventually coalesced into a northern kingdom ruled by the Seleucids and a southern kingdom ruled by the Ptolemies.

According to Daniel's vision, these four kings were to be followed by a "small horn." This horn was to take away the daily sacrifices of the temple (verse 11). Of course, at the time of Daniel's prophecy no temple existed in Jerusalem and no sacrifices were being offered; the temple had been destroyed in the Babylonian invasions several decades before Daniel recorded this prophecy.

However, shortly after Daniel wrote his book his fellow refugees from Judah were allowed to return to their homeland. There they rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple and renewed the temple sacrifices.

Daniel's vision then sweeps across time some 3½ centuries into the future, to 167 B.C. At that time one of the Seleucid rulers,

Antiochus IV Epiphanes, anyone continuing in faithful obedience to God was executed (verses 62-64).

Not content merely to stop the sacrifices, Antiochus desecrated the temple. ". . . A bearded image of the pagan deity [Jupiter Olympus] . . . [was] set up upon the Temple altar. The Jews popularly spoke of this as 'the abomination of desolation.' Greek soldiers and their paramours performed licentious heathen rites in the very Temple courts. Swine were sacrificed on the altar" (Charles Pfeiffer, *Between the Testaments*, 1974, p. 81).

Daniel (in Daniel 8:14) hears that these desecrations will continue for "two thousand three hundred days" or 2,300 "evenings and mornings" (New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, Revised English Bible and other translations). The temple service included a morning and evening sacrifice. Twenty-three hundred morning and evening sacrifices amounted to 1,150 days. Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple and halted sacrifices in 167 B.C. Judas Maccabeus resumed the sacrifices in 164 after cleansing and rededicating the temple. Many Jews commemorate these events with the Feast of Hanukkah.

Daniel 8 is a detailed prophecy of the first "abomination of desolation" affecting the temple sacrifices for 1,150 days. Antiochus's actions partially fulfilled this prophecy.

Notice, however, that Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of desolation also has a fulfillment at "the appointed time of the end" (verse 19, NRSV), "when transgressors have reached their fullness" and the king of the "abomination" rises against the "Prince of princes" (verses 23-26). This king is to fight against the Messiah, who comes to establish God's Kingdom on earth! According to Daniel 12:11, this end time "abomination" is to last 1,290 days—not 1,150 days.

## Second partial fulfillment

In A.D. 64 Jerusalem and Judea were again in an uproar. The Roman emperor Nero had begun slaughtering Christians in and around Rome. Rumors of war became reality in 66 when Roman soldiers killed thousands of people in Jerusalem. The Jews revolted. The legion sent to quell the rebellion was defeated.

Then, in 67, Vespasian invaded Judea with a Roman army. The Romans finally captured and razed Jerusalem in 70, but the Jerusalem church survived by fleeing the

Antiochus IV (Antiochus Epiphanes), invaded Judah (Daniel 8:23-27).

## The first partial fulfillment

The noncanonical but historical book of 1 Maccabees describes the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes:

"The king then issued a proclamation to his whole kingdom that all were to become a single people, each nation renouncing its particular customs. All the gentiles conformed to the king's decree, and many Israelites chose to accept his religion, sacrificing to idols and profaning the Sabbath.

"The king also sent edicts by messenger to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, directing them to adopt customs foreign to the country, banning burnt offerings, sacrifices and libations from the sanctuary, profaning Sabbaths and feasts, defiling the sanctuary and everything holy, building altars, shrines and temples for idols, . . . so that they should forget the Law and revoke all observance of it. Anyone not obeying the king's command was to be put to death" (1 Maccabees 1:41, 44-50, New Jerusalem Bible).

Punishment was swift and brutal. Women who had had their sons circumcised were killed and their babies hung around their

city before its fall. How did these early Christians know to leave Jerusalem?

Jesus had warned the inhabitants of Jerusalem of a future siege and destruction: “For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:43-44).

Luke’s version of the Olivet prophecy supplies another warning: “. . . When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near” (Luke 21:20).

Parts of the Olivet prophecy were to have two fulfillments. The first occurred in the lifetime of many of Jesus’ contemporaries who had rejected Him as Messiah. They lived to see some aspects of Christ’s prophecy come to pass with the siege and fall of Jerusalem. Other parts of His prophecy, however, have yet to be fulfilled. (See “Has Jesus Christ’s Olivet Prophecy Been Fulfilled?,” page 17.)

Just as the partial fulfillment of the abomination of desolation by Antiochus Epiphanes involved capturing Jerusalem and defiling the temple, so would the partial fulfillment of Christ’s prophecy in the first century involve similar events.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus describes the siege of Jerusalem as one of the most bloody in history. Famine and diseases wracked the weakened populace.

He also describes false prophets who, rather than commanding repentance, told the people God would deliver them. Josephus records strange events, including people seeing visions of soldiers and chariots in the clouds. On the Feast of Pentecost the temple shook and the priests “heard the sound as of a great multitude, saying, ‘Let us remove hence’” (*Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, Chapter V, Section 3).

In 70 Vespasian’s supporters called him back to Rome to become emperor. Titus finished the final siege of Jerusalem, then erected an idol on the devastated temple altar. Josephus claims 1.1 million Jews were killed and 97,000 enslaved in the war and siege (*Wars*, VI, ix, 3).

What of the followers of Jesus? Did they heed His warning to flee Jerusalem? Church historian Eusebius, writing in 324, records this bit of tradition: “. . . The members of the Jerusalem church, by means of an oracle given by revelation to acceptable persons there, were ordered to leave the City before

the war began and settle in a town in Perea called Pella. To Pella those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem . . .” (*The History of the Church*, 1965, p. 111).

The second fulfillment of the abomination of desolation ended with the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans. The temple was destroyed and the priesthood and sacrifices abolished, ushering in a situation that continues to this day.

However, Christ’s Olivet prophecy is primarily concerned with His second coming. After all, Jesus Christ gave this prophecy in response to the disciples’ plea: “. . . What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3). This warning still sounds for those who wait for Christ’s return!

### The future abomination of desolation

In Matthew 24:15 Jesus says the abomination of desolation will be “standing in the holy place.”

Paul tells us a major religious figure will arise at the time of the end. Notice 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4:

“Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day [of Christ’s return] will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.”

Christ will destroy this apostate leader at His second coming (verses 5-8), but not before he has deceived many with “power, signs, and lying wonders” (verses 9-12).

This description fits prophecies of the second beast in Revelation 13:11-14. Echoing Paul’s warning, Revelation warns that this leader will perform “great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven . . . And he deceives those who dwell on the earth . . .”

Since the first two fulfillments of the abomination of desolation involved the cessation of sacrifices, it appears that sacrifices will again be instituted before Christ’s return. Daniel 12:9-13 describes the abomination of desolation as occurring at “the time of the end.” Apparently once again sacrifices will be initiated at or near Jerusalem; armies again will surround Jerusalem, and

the sacrifices will be cut off—this time for 1,290 days.

### In the footsteps of Antiochus

An influential and powerful leader will play a pivotal role in end-time events. In addition to performing great miracles, he “exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thessalonians 2:4). His deceptive powers will be so great that most people will believe he is God’s direct representative if not a divine being himself.

God, however, calls him “the lawless one” (verse 3, NRSV). He represents a system that opposes God’s law. Antiochus Epiphanes, who engineered the original abomination of desolation, may well be the forerunner of this end-time “man of sin.”

Antiochus Epiphanes tried to stamp out worship of God and ruthlessly persecuted all who remained obedient to Him. Many prophecies tell us history will repeat itself. Many of God’s faithful followers will again be persecuted and murdered at the time of the end (John 15:18-20; 16:2; Revelation 6:9-11; 17:6; 20:4).

Revelation 13 describes an end-time religious leader who will “cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (verse 15). Government and religious powers will be brought to bear on those who see through this deception and are faithful to God. Christ’s end-time warning to Christians—“they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake” (Matthew 24:8-9)—will be fulfilled.

### A warning for today

Jesus encouraged His followers to “watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42). Understanding the first two fulfillments of the abomination of desolation, we can stay alert for coming prophesied events:

- Moves to reintroduce daily sacrifices in Israel.
- The rise of the “man of lawlessness,” a religious figure who claims to speak for God.
- Geopolitical events that will lead to armies amassing around Israel and Jerusalem.

God will send His Son to earth to save mankind from self-destruction. But before Christ’s return the world will suffer a “great tribulation” like no other time in history. Christians, however, aren’t left without information about end-time events. **GN**



# An Overview of Condi

## The growing danger of China and Russia

American network television anchorman Dan Rather soberly reminded newspaper readers recently that "the world remains a tough, dangerous neighborhood" and that big trouble may be brewing for the West in China and Russia. He concluded his article in *The Houston Chronicle* with a comment the two nations bear close watching, especially in the near future.

This year the news out of Beijing has not been good for the West. For instance, President Jiang Zenin asserts that socialism will defeat capitalism and China will continue its path under Marxism. The Chinese government frequently makes threatening noises against Taiwan, which the Western press used to refer to as Nationalist China. Beijing thinks in terms of "one China" and has sold Western countries on this concept. Even so, the West does not want Chinese unity with Taiwan if it involves military force from the mainland.

The disturbing news that China has the technology to build a neutron bomb greatly concerns Western nations. This type of nuclear weapon is designed to kill many people with deadly radiation while leaving inanimate objects—buildings, bridges, roads, etc.—intact. Beijing is supposedly making "final preparations to test-fire a new mobile intercontinental ballistic missile that the CIA believes will incorporate stolen U.S. missile and warhead secrets." And we thought the Cold War was over.

The Russian danger is similar. Consider a recent report from *The Times* (London): "American officials believe that Russia may have stolen some of the nation's most sensitive military secrets, including weapons guidance systems and naval intelligence codes, in a concerted espionage offensive

*"American officials believe that Russia may have stolen some of the nation's most sensitive military secrets, including weapons guidance systems and naval intelligence codes."*

that investigators have called operation Moonlight Maze."

Spying in cyberspace apparently is the means. American experts talk of a "digital Pearl Harbor." Hackers have entered U.S. systems from an overseas site. A White House official said, "It is impossible to overstate the seriousness of this problem. The president is very concerned about it."

Another cause for Western concern is the political, social

and economic sickness plaguing the Russian state. Cabinet members are changed and exchanged like a pair of gloves. Public health is in crisis, and the national economy is in tatters. The West fears severe economic pressures will tempt some to sell nuclear technology to unsavory nations and terrorist groups. Russia looks like fertile ground for more intrigue or worse.

Mr. Rather pointed out that both China and Russia "may not be headed for a new alliance against the West," but "vigilance in the West is needed more than ever, along with a willingness to consider the unthinkable." (Sources: *The Houston Chronicle*; *The Washington Times*; *The Los Angeles Times*; *The Times* [London], *The Express* [London].)

## TV negatively portrays fathers

*Father Knows Best* was a popular American television series several decades ago. But on television Father doesn't know best anymore. Fathers are often depicted as bumbling and incompetent, if depicted at all, according to a study from the National Fatherhood Initiative, a nonprofit organization that monitors media depictions of family situations.

The group examined 102 prime-time shows on five American networks and found that 15 feature as regular characters fathers of teen and preteen children. Of those 15, only four shows received a positive rating from the group, and two of those four shows were slated to be canceled.

Such biased depictions of fathers, and the absence of fathers from so many shows, are cause for concern because "a substantial number of young men are now growing up clueless about what their primary role in the future family will be: that of a father," said Don Eberly, the organization's chairman. "At a time when children badly need fathers, the networks portray them as missing, confused, aloof or completely uninformed."

Film critic Michael Medved described the entertainment industry's battle for your mind in his 1992 book *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*. "Hollywood no longer reflects—or even respects—the values of most American families," he wrote. "On many of the important issues in contemporary life, popular entertainment seems to go out of its way to challenge conventional notions of decency."

He added that the power of the entertainment industry "to influence our actions flows from its ability to redefine what constitutes normal behavior in this society."

Entertainers have "assumed a dominant role in establishing social conventions. The fantasy figures who entertain us on our TV and movie screens, or who croon to us constantly from our radios and CD players, take the lead in determining what is considered hip, and what will be viewed as hopelessly weird."

True at the time he wrote those words, they are even more true—and prophetic—seven years later. Some 2,000 years ago another writer—and prophet—cautioned us to think wholesome thoughts (Philippians 4:8). He warned we are engaged in a battle "not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against . . . the cosmic powers of this present





Albania

Zimbabwe

Bahrain

Cyprus

Burkina Faso

New Zealand

Jordan

Belgium

Argentina

Czech Republic

# ions Around the World

darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil" that try to influence our thinking and ultimately control our behavior. (Sources: *USA Today*, Philippians 4:8; Ephesians 6:12, New Revised Standard Version.)

## It may not be immortality, but it isn't bad

If you want to live longer, go to church, synagogue or other religious services regularly. That's the conclusion of a report in a recent issue of *Demography* magazine.

People who attend such services once a week live an average of seven years longer than those who never go,

*Regular churchgoers "have meaning in their lives, a better sense of control, can relate better to other people—which all have potential health benefits."*

researchers found. For 20-year-olds, those who never go to church services will die at an average age of 75, while those who attend regularly will live to an average age of 82. Blacks who attend services weekly live an average of 14 years longer than those who never go.

This research undergirds an increasing consensus that belief in the Scriptures and church attendance can be key indicators of better physical and emotional health as well as longer life.

Why the difference in longevity? Part can be explained by the fact that many churchgoers avoid unhealthy behaviors such as drunkenness, smoking, taking illegal drugs and engaging in sex with multiple partners.

But distinct differences remain even allowing for people with similar behavior and incomes. Researchers credit the personal relationships and sense of belonging people gain from attending religious services regularly. "People who attend church have friends to count on, a sense of their importance in the scheme of things," explained University of Colorado sociology professor Rick Rogers, one of the study's researchers.

Regular churchgoers "have meaning in their lives, a better sense of control, can relate better to other people—which all have potential health benefits," added Bernard Spilka, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Denver.

The Bible itself says: "Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 talk of the many blessings for living a life of obedience to God. Many of King Solomon's proverbs tell of the health and contentment that spring out of following God's way. Old and New Testaments alike speak of the importance of regular worship with others (Leviticus 23:1-3; Hebrews 10:24-25).

If you would like more information about the biblical way of life, please request our free booklets *The Ten Commandments* and *The Church Jesus Built*. (Sources: Ephesians

6:2-3, *Demography*, *The Rocky Mountain News*, *The Washington Times*.)

## Anglo-American marriage trends

According to the latest issue of *British Population Trends*, married couples will constitute a minority of the population before 2010. In the other direction, the rate of growth in cohabitation and illegitimate children is enormous.

Most Western governments have knowingly or unknowingly undermined the divine institution of marriage. Over the last 50 years their laws and policies have weakened nuptial bonds. While paying lip service to marriage, their philosophy has conceived the legal loopholes that have made divorce far easier and tax policies that penalize married couples.

Consider the words of Jack Straw, Britain's home secretary: "While marriages should be supported and strengthened, there are other kinds of families, including single-parent families, that do equally well for children." Do they? Juvenile-crime statistics show otherwise.

Wrote journalist Cheryl Wetzstein of *The Washington Times*: "Marriage in America has gone from better to worse, with fewer couples marrying and fewer still saying their lives together are wedded bliss, according to a report released on July 1 . . . As marriage has faltered, rates of divorce, cohabitation and bearing children out of wedlock have soared to record levels." (Sources: *Financial Times*; *Daily Mail* [London]; *The Washington Times*.)

## Why bad news in *The Good News*?

Speaking of the state of the world just before His return, Jesus Christ said our planet will experience "a time of great distress; there has never been such a time from the beginning of the world until now, and will never be again" (Matthew 24:21, New English Bible).

The United Church of God, whose members and supporters provide the financial backing for *The Good News* and other publications, proclaims the good news of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. This section of the magazine

*The world is filled with bad news. Yet the future holds incredible promise: Jesus Christ's return to establish the Kingdom of God.*

reports on some of the consequences of human behavior leading to the very conditions Jesus described: a dangerous world of chaos, confusion and apprehension in which man faces the terrifying possibility of extinction (verse 22).

The world is filled with bad news. Yet the future holds incredible promise: Jesus Christ's return to establish the Kingdom of God (Daniel 7:13-14; Revelation 11:15), ushering in a time of peace, prosperity and plenty during which all people will at last learn to live God's way of life. This truly is good news on which you can stake your future.

—John Ross Schroeder and Scott Ashley



Mauritania

Slovenia

Barbados

Angola

Malta

Jamaica

Lebanon

Djibouti

Greenland

Cambodia

# America's Moral Downturn: *What Lies Ahead?*

*Does morality matter? What are the long-term consequences when a nation's moral foundation crumbles?*

by David Treybig

**A**s the United States gears up for another presidential election, Americans turn their attention to the examination of people and values that are part of the process. Each candidate strives to capture a majority of the electorate's attention through his assessment of the state of the union and thoughts about how to improve the country.

History teaches us that the political process is sure to generate a lot of ideas—many of them in direct conflict with each other.

What is the significance of current thinking and trends in the United States and among its leaders? As the leader of the Western world, what happens in the United States affects the rest of the world as well. Its thinking, trends and culture invariably filter out to other countries.

Where is the United States headed, and how can we measure its progress?

Though most people judge nations by their finances (gross national product, imports, exports, taxes, cost-of-living indexes, inflation, interest rates) and sociology (human rights, personal freedoms, democratic structure, respect for minorities), the Bible reveals a broader and more accurate indicator of the condition of a nation and its people.

Some 3,500 years ago, while working with ancient Israel, God revealed an important principle that identifies worthy international leadership. To the Israelites, whom the Bible describes as examples for us (1 Corinthians 10:1-11), God said: "Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth . . . And the LORD will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the

commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them" (Deuteronomy 28:1, 13).

As a nation whose motto, "In God We Trust," adorns its currency, Americans have at least symbolically invoked God's blessings. So shouldn't they consider the advice and warnings He gave ancient Israel as applicable to them as well?

## What is morality?

The decision to do or disregard what God says is a moral issue. Although some may think of morality as simply an indicator of sexual values, morality is actually a much broader concept, encompassing *all* behavior. "Moral conduct" means one adheres and conforms to standards of right and wrong. Synonyms include ethics and righteousness.

But most people have rejected God's commandments as the eternal standards for human behavior. Some of the people most vilified in the mass news and entertainment media are those accused of "imposing their morality" (actually, biblical moral standards) on everyone else.

In deciding for themselves what is right and wrong, the vast majority of people follow the path of self-determination introduced to humanity by Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). Biblical morality, however, is based on God's standards, not the ever-shifting vagaries of human experience and reason. Godly morality identifies righteous people. The greater the morality of its citizens, the greater the morality and stature of a nation.

Jesus Christ spoke of two great commandments: Love God, and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). When we consider the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5), we readily see that the first four of the 10 embody the first great commandment: to love God. The last six

teach us how to love our fellowman.

Judged by these two great commands, how does the morality of the United States measure up?

America has been described as an unusual nation in that it has one of the highest levels of formal education in the world as well as one of the highest levels of religious faith. This view mirrors the observation by Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, who, upon visiting the United States in the mid-1800s, observed that the strength of America could be found in its churches. But what about today? Could the United States be considered a moral nation?

## Snapshot of American morality

Much like the cacophony of ideas in a presidential race, modern American morality is a bewildering array of conflicting values and trends.

Polls tell us most U.S. citizens believe in and pray to God, but the same polls tell us church attendance is declining. Many believe they can have a relationship with God on *their* terms. That is, they can attend a church if they want, but they don't feel compelled to do so.

In a similar vein, many feel they can select their own religious customs and forms of worship. This rapidly growing phenomenon has been described as "cafeteria Christianity" or, as one observer put it, "the Religion of the Sovereign Self" (*World*, July 17, 1993).

This self-oriented view of Christianity sees Jesus as a liberator of standards and rules. Some go so far as to portray Him as freeing mankind from a need to respect or adhere to the Ten Commandments. In the United States many hold the view that Jesus is there to forgive everything, so they are not all that concerned with commandment-keeping. They no longer feel obligated to put into practice the way of life God lays out in the Bible.

This incongruent idea—belief that one can love God while rejecting His commands—is prevalent in many nations beyond the borders of the United States. The trend is vividly illustrated in a recent report on Israeli Jews.

“Considering religious observances to be part of their national identity, 90 percent of Israeli Jews take part in the traditional Passover meal. Some 66 percent of Israeli Jews regard the Ten Commandments as valid, but 75 percent don’t think God will punish those who break them. Though it seems contradictory to a Western mind-set, many Israelis are quite serious about maintaining the continuity of their Jewish heritage even though they have no intention of obeying its rules personally” (*Religion Watch*, January 1997, p. 8).

In many nations religion is form without substance (see 2 Timothy 3:5).

Yet, even with the potpourri of ideas within Christianity and Judaism, many recognize a growing hunger, especially among baby-boomers now in their 40s and 50s, to go back to their roots. Will such motivation lead to a return to higher morality? Only time will tell.

Let’s consider a few more areas by which we can gauge the nation’s moral standards and practices.

### **The changing crime rate**

Perhaps no subject has been so universally accepted in the United States as the “get tough on crime” movement. Politicians duel in television ads over which candidate or political party is tougher on crime. In recent years the death penalty has been reinstated in many states, and the prison population is at a record level, a staggering 1.2 million. The result is that the number of violent crimes has been declining.

The question we should ask is whether this drop is because of increasing moral and legal behavior or simply because more habitual felons are now behind bars thanks to tougher sentencing laws and an enormously expensive prison-building binge.

Demographic factors—smaller numbers of young people of the age range most prone to commit crimes (late teens and early 20s) and baby-boomers who are finally growing up and acting responsibly—have also dramatically affected crime rates.

### **The family-values debate**

Virtually all politicians describe themselves

as pro-family. After all, a pro-family sentiment makes a great television sound bite. Nowadays family is used in so many ways most people are no longer sure what a candidate means when he uses the term.

Since some use family to describe any kind of living arrangement, the term is almost devoid of meaning unless one explicitly defines what he means by it. Since defining what a family is can be a controversial issue that can anger voters who don’t hold traditional views, some running for office are deliberately vague. Conservative candidates, noting trends that reflect a growing desire for traditional families, are more likely to address this issue.

Even though a small segment of society is pushing to redefine families, others are staunchly defending traditional values. A new Gallup Youth Survey “shows that the

## **Though most people judge nations by their finances and sociology, the Bible reveals a broader and more accurate indicator of the condition of a nation and its people.**

majority of American teens still live in a nuclear household: a dad, a mom, siblings, and a pet or two. Most Americans would like this model to continue to be regarded as the ideal.” Further, “there are strong signs that Americans are girding up to correct the problem of father absence and inattention. There is now broad support for a strong father role in the family” (*Current Thoughts and Trends*, March 1999, review of “Report on the Status Of Fatherhood in the United States,” George Gallup Jr., *Emerging Trends*, September 1998, Vol. 20, No. 7, pp. 3-5).

Along similar lines, family and consumer sciences—home economics—are making a comeback at institutions of higher learning. To explain this phenomenon, education professor Wanda Fox observed: “For a while, society placed less value on family life and became very career- and business-oriented. Now we’re realizing that we need both. These classes focus on decision-making skills, career planning, consumer economics, balancing work and family” (*Psychology Today*, January-February 1999, p. 13).

### **The abortion debate**

One of the best indicators of our society’s immoral emphasis on personal pleasure over respect for life and biblical instruction has been the increasing number of abortions performed each year. Now even this trend

appears to be reversing. “Although about 25 percent of all pregnancies in the United States end in abortion, the 1990s have seen a dramatic drop in the practice. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, which is closely aligned with Planned Parenthood, the number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44 is at its lowest in 20 years” (*Current Thoughts and Trends*, March 1999, p. 13, report of *Pastor’s Weekly Briefing*, Jan. 8, 1999, p. 1).

National attitudes also echo the statistical decline in abortions. “Another sign of slippage in support for abortion shows up in UCLA’s annual national survey of the attitudes of college freshmen. Support for legal abortion dropped for the sixth straight year. In 1990 it was 64.9 percent. Now it is a bare majority, 50.9 percent” (*U.S. News & World Report*, “The Joy of Sexual Values,”

John Leo, March 1, 1999, p. 13).

Mr. Leo identifies factors influencing this trend. They include the gruesome details that came to light in recent debates over partial-birth abortions, more-conservative attitudes toward premarital sex, the unwanted penalties of the sexual revolution and a growing respect for religion. Now “only 37 percent of Americans think premarital sex is acceptable” (*ibid.*).

### **National leadership lacking**

In contrast to other positive trends, the morality of far too many American leaders is shameful. The ancient prophet Isaiah’s lament, “O My people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths” (Isaiah 3:12), is true again. Although the media have bombarded us with the details of the president’s extramarital affairs and lying under oath to obstruct a sexual-harassment lawsuit, few understand the implications behind our nation’s willingness to overlook these immoral actions.

Although impeached by the House of Representatives, the Senate bowed to polls showing the American public wanted lawmakers to look the other way. The president’s defenders rationalized that, although the president acted irresponsibly, his actions were not impeachable. The White House put its spin on the events by telling the public it

should focus on the nation's economic prosperity and overlook the president's personal behavior, which was strictly a private matter that didn't affect his job performance.

This reasoning apparently swayed the majority of citizens. They don't seem to realize that history records leaders who, though immoral, brought temporary economic prosperity to their peoples. Bible prophecy tells us people will fall for this same reasoning—prosperity at the expense of morality—emanating from an end-time economic system called Babylon the Great (Revelation 18).

Of the effects of the presidential-morality debacle, psychologist and family adviser James Dobson notes our people collectively have compromised on an issue of major moral significance. "Change occurs in a crisis," he explained. "... When you go through a very emotional and difficult time, you come out of it different than you came in. I think the turmoil that has engulfed our nation in the past 12 months has had a profound effect on American culture" (James P. Lucier, "Dobson on Cultural Crisis," *Insight*, Feb. 8, 1999, p. 45).

Although many Americans appear to grow more conservative in their personal morality, they apparently have become more tolerant and accepting of immoral behavior in others. Why this conundrum? Perhaps it is because those who practice immorality constantly defend themselves by attacking others who disagree with their immoral lives. Consequently those who publicly advocate biblical values are ridiculed and labeled as hypocrites and backward, self-righteous bigots.

The message permeating our nation is that we must not judge the behavior of others, that we must remain silent in the presence of immoral behavior. Yet societies ultimately pay a heavy price for such passive acceptance of evil. When we fail to confront evil, it inevitably overcomes us. There is a cause for every effect. As the proverb says, "the curse does not come without a cause" (Proverbs 26:2, Bible in Basic English).

### At the crossroads

What is in store for the United States and other nations with the same moral quandary?

Many comparisons can be made between the United States and the ancient kingdom of Israel. The culture of both sprang from principles revealed in God's Word. But, as the years passed, both became less and less devoted to those principles, priding themselves in their tolerance of the ideals of others instead of the ideals of God. Therefore

God's response to the decline of morality in ancient Israel can be instructive for us.

Just as in days of the prophet Isaiah, many do not see the significance of our declining morality (Isaiah 44:18). Others recognize the disturbing signs that the nation is in a precarious position, facing difficult and profoundly significant choices.

Some among them believe the nation is positioned for a great religious reawakening. Such an event is possible. God does hear when people repent (Jeremiah 18:8; 26:13), and history records times of significant reversals of social decline, even in ancient Israel. But the reversals are usually only brief interludes in the progressively downward spiral of collective morality.

It is God's response to a people's rejection of His standards of morality that should concern us most. "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). God holds individuals and nations accountable for what they know. They are responsible for the knowledge He gives them.

In the United States a higher percentage of people claim to believe in the Bible as God's Word than is the case in any other major nation. Yet few practice what they claim to believe. Many voices from many sources point out a woeful disregard for God's instruction. Yet political leaders frequently assure Americans they are a "good" and "righteous" people. Most Americans seem to love to hear such praise, even if it is not fully deserved. God's standard for "good" is obedience to His laws. Few people live up to that standard.

### God's response to immorality

Notice what God says He will do to people who refuse to practice what He teaches them.

"But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

"Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. The LORD will send on you cursing, confusion, and rebuke in all that you set your hand to do, until you are destroyed and until you

perish quickly, because of the wickedness of your doings in which you have forsaken Me" (Deuteronomy 28:15-20).

We are experiencing, in season after season and year after year, one major weather catastrophe after another. This is how God first began to punish ancient Israel. But several decades of increasing local disasters did not bring about any lasting repentance. Finally God began to allow their enemies to whittle away their military and economic power. He gradually reduced them from the region's most prosperous nation to a vassal state of the ancient Assyrian Empire. But they still didn't learn their lesson. Finally God allowed the Assyrians to conquer Israel and take them into exile.

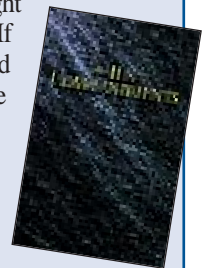
Could such a punishment come upon a nation as great and powerful as the United States? We must remember that God shows no partiality in His response to people (Deuteronomy 10:17; Romans 2:11). Even though God is patient with individuals and nations, wanting them to recognize their sins and repent (2 Peter 3:9), He eventually calls us into account for our actions.

God blesses those who love Him and keep His commandments (Exodus 20:6). But He also punishes those who don't (verse 5). The path we are following is the same path ancient Israel followed to its destruction. Those who think God will ignore America's moral decline are kidding themselves. If the nation collectively does not change direction, we may soon see the day that God will respond to America's moral decline in much the same way He did to ancient Israel's.

The Hebrew prophet Zephaniah offers a warning all people would do well to heed: "Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger" (Zephaniah 2:3). **GN**

### RECOMMENDED READING

There is a fundamental guide to conduct that defines right thought and character. If you'd like to understand and live by God's guide to human behavior, request your free copy of *The Ten Commandments*. It's free for the asking at the address in your country (or the country nearest you) listed on page 2.





# Has Jesus Christ's Olivet Prophecy Been **Fulfilled?**

*Jesus Christ gave a detailed prophecy of the future of Judea and Jerusalem in Matthew 24. What does history tell us about this prophecy's fulfillment?*

by **Bruce Gore**

**W**ith only a few short months remaining until the dawn of a new millennium on Jan. 1, 2001, talk about the end of the world is on the increase. This type of speculation is often voiced as one century ends and another begins, but interest is even more heightened with the approach of the dawn of a new millennium.

Talk about the end of the world as we know it is nothing new. In Jesus Christ's time His disciples were also interested in the end of their age, and they asked Him about it as they stood with Him outside the temple in Jerusalem.

In the Jerusalem of Christ's day, the temple was the dominant edifice, rising above the city to greet travelers arriving at one of the crossroads of the ancient world.

Several decades earlier Herod the Great had drawn up a grand plan to rebuild the temple and surrounding buildings. He even had 1,000 priests trained as builders so he would not be accused of having the temple built by "unclean hands." The construction commenced in 19 B.C. and was not completed until A.D. 63, well after Herod's death.

*Jesus Christ's disciples were stunned when He told them that the massive temple built by King Herod would be destroyed. This modern-day model, based on first-century descriptions and archaeological finds, gives us an idea of how the temple and its surrounding courts, walls, colonnades, platform and protective fortress appeared at the time. Seven years after its completion, the magnificent complex was razed by the Roman army in the battle over Jerusalem.*

## Jesus tells the future

Carefully crafted of marble and limestone blocks weighing as much as 20 to 30 tons each, the temple and its vast platform were imposing. The disciples were understandably shocked when Jesus pointed to the magnificent temple complex and said: "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2).

Disturbed by these comments, several of

the disciples asked Christ: "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (verse 3).

In Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, Christ's prophecy of what would come on Jerusalem is recorded for us. Much of what Christ told His disciples would happen indeed occurred within the next 40 years.

What did Christ prophesy would happen? Which of His words came to pass in subsequent decades, and which are yet to be fulfilled? Do His words shed light on events yet to come before His return?

## False prophets and teachers

Jesus began His explanation of events to come by cautioning, "Take heed that no one deceives you" (Matthew 24:4). This first, warning statement did not address the disciples' question directly.

"For many will come in My name,



saying, 'I am the Christ,'" He continued, "and will deceive many" (verse 5). This would not be an isolated or rare occurrence, He warned. Many would come, using His name and claiming to represent Him, and these false teachers would "deceive many."

Here and later in the prophecy He was warning of the coming of false prophets—false religious teachers. "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (verse 11). The New Testament mentions some of the many false teachers and leaders who attempted to take advantage of the unrest of the time and the hopes of people living under the domination of the Roman Empire.

Acts 5:36-37 records two such men: Theudas, leader of a group of 400, who "was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing," and Judas of Galilee, who "drew away many people after

robbers and impostors, who deluded the multitude" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XX, Chapter VIII, Section 5, emphasis added throughout).

Jesus Christ also warned that "false christians and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). These deceivers are different from those who preach Christ but add their own interpretations of His teachings. Indeed, some of the impostors would falsely claim to be the prophesied Messiah Himself. Some historians say that no fewer than 60 pretenders claimed the title of Messiah in the first century.

### Wars and rumors of wars

Christ continued with descriptions of other trends that would follow. "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See

spread over much of the area. Soon Jewish factions were fighting each other for control of the rebellion.

Not only was war waged in Judea, but unrest struck other parts of the world. Josephus describes the situation: "But now sedition and civil war prevailed, not only over Judea, but in Italy also; for now Galba [one of several men who laid claim to the throne in Rome when Nero committed suicide] was slain in the midst of the Roman marketplace; then was Otho made emperor, and fought against Vitellius, who set up for emperor also; for the legions in Germany had chosen him; but when he gave battle to Valens and Cecinna, who were Vitellius's generals, at Betriacum, in Gaul, Otho gained the advantage on the first day, but on the second day Vitellius's soldiers had the victory; and after much slaughter, Otho slew himself . . ." (*Wars of the Jews*, IV, ix, 9).



*From the Mount of Olives, left, Jesus of Nazareth predicted a series of great calamities to come on Jerusalem and its inhabitants in what has come to be known as the Olivet Prophecy. Even today the massive temple platform,*

*right, built by Herod the Great dominates the view of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. The disasters that befell Judea help us better comprehend Christ's warning of similar events to come to pass before His return.*

him" but whose movement collapsed after his death.

Later, Acts 8 records Simon Magus, a sorcerer with a popular following, attempting to buy the power of God's Spirit from the apostles. Peter soundly rebuked him for his self-serving attitude.

The apostle Paul, in epistles to the Corinthians, Thessalonians and Galatians, spoke of many other false teachers. Near the end of the first century, John in his letters wrote of the spirit of "Antichrist" that was already at work in his time.

This confusion seemed to reach a peak in the Jewish nation beginning in the early 60s. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, elaborates: "Now, as for the affairs of the Jews, they grew worse and worse continually; for the country was again filled with

that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (verse 6).

Many of the events and trends Jesus prophesied culminated in the mid-60s. Soon after the death of the Judean king Herod Agrippa in 44, unease increased as one corrupt Roman procurator after another ruled the region. These administrators, agents of the emperor, exercised little respect for the Jews' religious practices.

The final straw was the requisitioning of a heavy tribute of gold from the temple treasury. When the people protested this desecration of their temple, practices and beliefs, Florus, procurator of Judea, turned his troops loose on the populace of Jerusalem. As many as 3,600 were killed in a bloodbath, and the rebellion of the enraged Jews

As Christ had prophesied, conflict shook not only Judea but much of the mighty Roman Empire. He had also cautioned, "All these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (verse 6).

### Famine, disease and earthquakes

War is almost always accompanied by food shortages and diseases. Planting, harvesting and normal commerce are interrupted. Cities are often besieged and able to survive only on the food they have stored within their walls. Jesus spoke of the breakdown that results from warfare and social upheaval.

"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the *beginning*

of sorrows” (Matthew 24:7-8; emphasis added throughout).

The Roman army systematically isolated Jerusalem from the rest of the country, subduing one by one the surrounding towns and cities. When Titus, the Roman general, began the siege, he built an earthen wall five miles in circumference around Jerusalem to prevent escape and stop the nightly smuggling of food into the city. As food supplies were exhausted, the weakest began to starve.

Much of Jerusalem’s suffering came when the city’s inhabitants turned against each other, a consequence of their nightmarish circumstances. These attitudes, too, were prophesied: “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another . . . And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:10, 12).

Josephus also reported that, through their



**Victorious Roman soldiers hoist plunder from the temple, including the seven-lamp menorah. This reproduction of a frieze from the Arch of Titus, built in Rome to commemorate the Roman conquest, appears in Jerusalem’s Tower of David Museum.**

infighting, the factions destroyed their stores of grain and other provisions that could have been sufficient to feed them for years. Once these stores were gone, famine began its deadly march through the city. Some historians think more Jews died in Jerusalem by the hand of their own people than by the Roman soldiers.

### **Abomination of desolation**

Jesus spoke of another ominous devel-

opment. “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (Matthew 24:15-16).

About three and a half centuries after Daniel’s prophecy (Daniel 11:31; 12:11), in 168 B.C., Antiochus Epiphanes’ army entered Jerusalem, slaughtered many of its inhabitants and sacrificed pigs on the altar of the temple.

But what could be the abomination of desolation in the late 60s? According to Josephus, the Romans, “upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the buildings lying round about it, brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them . . .” (*Wars*, VI, vi, 1). So once again an abominable sacrifice was offered at the site of the temple, which did in fact lie desolate at the hand of these Roman soldiers.

Luke adds that another important event leading to the desolation would be Jerusalem’s encirclement by armies. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled” (Luke 21:20-22).

In 66, while suffering under the increasingly corrupt and oppressive rule of minor Roman regents and appointees, a segment of the Jewish population revolted. Cestius Gallus, military governor of Syria, took the Twelfth Legion to put down the Jewish rebellion. He plundered and burned the city of Zebulun in Galilee, then moved south to surround Jerusalem.

Remarkably, according to Josephus’s account, the Roman commander, after laying siege to the city, pulled his army back from Jerusalem. “It then happened that Cestius was not conscious either how the besieged despaired of success, nor how courageous the people were for him; and so he recalled his soldiers from the place, and . . . retired from the city, without any reason in the world” (Josephus, *Wars*, II, xix, 7).

Near this time, according to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, the members of the Church still living at Jerusalem received a sign, “given by revelation to those in Jerusalem who were ‘approved,’ bidding them leave the doomed city and settle in

Pella” (F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 1980, p. 375). Pella was on the other side of the Jordan River in an area of relative safety.

### **Signs in the heavens**

Luke’s account records Jesus Christ saying: “And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences [diseases]; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11). “And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring” (verse 25).

In 61 a great earthquake struck Phrygia, in Asia Minor, wreaking vast destruction. In 62 or 63 an earthquake near Mount Vesuvius in Italy destroyed half the city of Pompeii. (It was completely buried 17 years later, in 79.) From 66 to 70, according to Josephus, terrifying apparitions appeared in the sky around Jerusalem:

“Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year. Thus also, before the Jews’ rebellion, and before those commotions which preceded the war, when the people were come in great crowds to the feast of unleavened bread, on the eighth day of the month Xanthicus, (Nisan,) and at the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright daytime; which light lasted for half an hour . . .

“Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the one-and-twentieth day of the month Artemisius, (Jyar,) a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sun-setting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armour were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities.

“Moreover, at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner (court of the) temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, ‘Let us remove hence’” (*Wars*, VI, v, 3).

### **Terrifying turmoil**

Matthew’s account of Jesus Christ’s

*Continued on page 27*



# Russia's Dangerous Nuclear Arsenal

by Mario Seiglie

*In some ways we are closer to nuclear war than we were in the 1950s and '60s. Then, at least, the Soviet nuclear forces were well controlled and well paid.*

"R ussian military officers stared wide-eyed at the glowing image on their radar screens: an incoming missile on course to hit Moscow in 15 minutes . . .

One buzz went to the three nuclear code briefcases assigned to President Boris Yeltsin and his top two military officials. The officer carrying Yeltsin's case rushed to the President and flipped it open. On an electronic map inside, they saw a bright dot over the Norwegian Sea. Beneath the map was a row of buttons, offering a menu of attack options on targets in the U.S. On military bases across Russia, red lights flashed and horns blared, alerting the troops in charge of the country's strategic nuclear weapons to get ready to use them."

This may sound like another plot out of a Hollywood blockbuster, but it isn't. It really happened on Jan. 25, 1995. Then why are we still alive?

"Yeltsin and his military commanders, linked by phone, waited to hear whether an attack had been confirmed. About 12 minutes after the mystery missile soared onto the radar screens, military analysts could see that it was not heading for Russian territory. It turned out to be a Norwegian scientific rocket sent aloft to observe the aurora borealis. The Norwegians had dutifully notified the Russian embassy in Oslo, but the word was never relayed to the military. 'For a while,' says Sergei Yushenkov, a member of the Russian parliament's Defense Committee, 'the world was on the brink of nuclear war'" (*Newsweek*, "Nuclear Disarray" (May 19, 1997).

## Mix-ups common

In light of this scenario, Russia's announcement late last year that, in spite of its precarious financial condition it intended to deploy the Topol-M, should cause the world serious concern. The Topol-M is a powerful new intercontinental ballistic missile.

*U.S. News & World Report* asked in a headline, "Just When You Thought You Were Safe . . . Could a False Alarm Still Start a Nuclear War?" (Feb. 10, 1997).

Conditions leading to the possibility of potentially catastrophic mix-ups are becoming more prevalent. The *Newsweek* article reports that, because of the lack of maintenance of their nuclear arsenal, "the Russians might wrongly think they were under attack from the West and fire their rockets. This danger has greatly increased because the Russian early-warning system is not what it used to be. It has lost major radar stations in the new nations of Ukraine, Latvia and oth-

ers. Some of its satellite-tracking stations have gone to Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan. The high command is now partially blind, which increases its apprehensions, produces false alarms and makes good decisions harder.”

The *U.S. News & World Report* article describes human mistakes bringing us to the brink of disaster not once, but several times: “Human error is more than a theoretical concern. In the Norwegian case, Moscow had been notified in advance of the launch, but no one thought to pass word to senior military officials. In more than one instance, real launch orders have been transmitted by mistake during American nuclear training exercises. And in 1979, the inadvertent introduction of training data into the NORAD [North American Aerospace Defense] early warning system computer mimicked a large Soviet attack. Soviet leaders got the same treatment in 1983, as a solar storm duped early warning satellites into indicating a massive U.S. attack.”

Defense Minister Igor Rodinov goes even further in the *Newsweek* article: “Last year [1996], the nuclear strategic forces received 10.5 percent of the funds needed

independence, a retired senior officer in Moscow speculates, “The entire missile force in the area might cut itself off from the chain of command and control and get re-programmed to be able to launch at will.”

### **False sense of security**

Meanwhile, the world is being lulled into thinking everything is peachy when it's not. Another *Newsweek* article, from June 2, 1997, mentioned the mood in the United States: “The country has rarely felt so secure from the threat of war. The bomb silos on the Great Plains are on their way to becoming curious museums; to today's children, the three little triangles that denote bomb shelters might as well be an odd form of teenage graffiti” (page 4).

Yet, in some ways, we are closer to nuclear war than we were in the 1950s and '60s. Then, at least, the nuclear forces were well controlled and well paid. At that time only two superpowers were eyeing each other. Now a host of nations could detonate nuclear bombs. Russia still has an estimated 22,000 nuclear warheads and the United States 12,000. Last year was a bad one for Russia's economy, and the troops

simply a matter of minutes. The missiles' computer memory retains their former targets, and they can quickly be reprogrammed.

As long as Russia remains unstable economically and politically, a distinct military threat exists, especially because Russian possesses such a large nuclear arsenal. The rest of the world cannot breathe a sigh of relief, particularly the United States.

Based on recent developments, it appears the world's dangerous nuclear arsenal will continue to spread, especially as other nations, including India and Pakistan, join the nuclear club. Only recently the United States announced it would upgrade and modernize its nuclear missile systems so they would be in optimum condition beyond the year 2025. In spite of its economic weakness, Russia, along with other nations of the nuclear club, will attempt to do the same.

As we stand poised to enter the 21st century, the world remains dangerously overstocked with high-tech nuclear weapons, and they will be an even greater threat as less-stable and more-radical powers gain access to the technology.

Jesus Christ's prophecy in Matthew 24:22 seems especially sobering when we consider the threat facing our generation and the next: “And unless those days were shortened, *no flesh would be saved . . .*” (emphasis added throughout).

Our disregard of the continuing nuclear threat also brings to mind another warning by Jesus Christ: Don't assume the world is safe when it is not. He tells us to beware of the attitude that will prevail among mankind shortly before God's intervention in human affairs:

“But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

Conditions are not really improving on the nuclear front, especially as other nations such as Iran, Iraq and Libya strive to join the nuclear club. Governments and military planners are rightly worried about terrorist groups gaining access to nuclear technology and material. This is not the time to be lulled into a false sense of security. **GN**

## **As long as Russia remains unstable economically and politically, a distinct military threat exists. The rest of the world cannot breathe a sigh of relief.**

for maintenance. The result, he predicts, is that, ‘We may lose the entire system.’ The links between radar and headquarters, the computer management of missiles and the physical security of the warheads could all break down.”

To add to their woes, troops of the Strategic Nuclear Forces (SNF) are earning an average of \$100 to \$200 a month—when they are paid. The same article reports, “One major, who has served 24 years in the SNF and will retire in six months, did not see a paycheck for four months.” Another officer commented: “We're living in poverty. That's all you need to know.”

The *Newsweek* article concludes: “The potential is there for some form of nuke-napping—grabbing weapons for ransom or nuclear blackmail—or sales to rogue states or terrorists, or unauthorized launches by renegade commanders. Some Russians even fret about a nuclear civil war. If a region in Siberia were to declare its

have not seen their lot improved.

On the other hand, breakdowns in the strategic nuclear system were so alarming in 1997 that, at the urgings of Americans, some improvements took place in 1998 to increase the security of the nuclear arsenal. “Not all the news from Moscow is bad,” reports *Newsweek*. “Russia has sharply upgraded security at more than 30 sites containing fissile material” (May 25, 1998).

Yet many problems remain. How long will the underfed and underpaid forces go on without something giving? What about deficient radar systems? Will they continue to deteriorate as funds become scarcer? No one knows, but the dangers of mix-ups, accidents or thefts are real.

### **Nuclear threats**

Some think that, since Russia's warheads are no longer targeted at U.S. cities and military bases, the world is much safer. But this is simply not true. The difference between having missiles aimed or not is

# How Can You Find the Right Church?

Whether to attend church, and which one, are among the most important decisions we can make. What are key factors we should consider?

by John Ross Schroeder

**T**he choice of churches and denominations of churches has never been greater. A dizzying supermarket of brands awaits the potential churchgoer, particularly in the United States.

To put the puzzling choices in secular terminology, supply and demand drives the religious marketplace. According to *The Southern California Christian Times*, “more than one out of seven adults change[s] their church each year, and another one out of six attends a carefully chosen handful of selected churches on a rotating basis rather than sticking with the same church week after week” (December 1998). Brand loyalty doesn’t carry much weight.

If you were looking for a church, what would you look for? In America, where churchgoers are more fickle about their affiliation than in any other country, what do people look for in a place of worship?

Last year the George Barna research company surveyed American churchgoers about their preferences in a church. In the resulting report the top three factors were:

- Beliefs and doctrines.
- Mutual comfort and care among the members.
- The quality of the sermons.

Mentioned first were beliefs and doctrines. That is a good place to begin. From a biblical standpoint, certainly few if any other points could be as important. But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves. The first question to ask is, Should we attend church at all?

## What the Bible says

Most of our readers presumably have a great deal of respect for the Scriptures or they wouldn’t be reading this magazine. But, if you are not yet quite sure about the authority of the Bible over our individual and collective lives, we invite you to request our two free booklets *Is the Bible True?* and *How to Understand the Bible*.

The New Testament admonishes Christians to assemble together regularly. One epistle specifically tells us: “. . . Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the



assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The Old Testament expresses the same thought in the form of a command: “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a *holy convocation* [or ‘commanded assembly,’ New International Version]. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings” (Leviticus 23:3; emphasis added throughout).

In terms of choosing a church based on fundamental beliefs, observing God’s Sabbath is one of the most basic—so basic that it is enshrined as one of the Ten Commandments. (If you do not understand which day is the Christian Sabbath or are unclear on its purpose and intent, please call or write for our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest*.)

To sum up the importance of beliefs and doctrines, the Bible makes it clear that God’s Church keeps His law. It is described prophetically as a group of people “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17).

Its members do not try to get around or do away with the requirements of the biblical way of life. They follow the difficult, narrow and often unpopular way mentioned by Jesus Christ, not the broad, easy path that eventually leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Those who really want eternal life are pictured as living God’s way (verse 14).

## What is the Church?

Early in our study we should understand what the Church is and is not. We must first understand that the church is *not* a building. The glossary of the Translator’s New Testament plainly tells us: “‘Church’ in NT never means ‘building.’ It always represents either a group of committed Christians in any given locality [who] met to practice their religion, or the totality of these groups scattered throughout the world” (pp. 557-558).

The apostle Paul defines the Church as simply “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27). It is a *spiritual* organism, not a physical edifice or organization. Members of the Church go to the

building where they meet, or a congregation meets in someone's house if the numbers are small (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 1:19), but the Church is still the spiritual Body of Christ.

By way of an analogy, Paul likens the Church to the parts of the human body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). He shows how each part is dependent on the others. Yet "by one Spirit [the Holy Spirit] we were all baptized into one body . . . and have been made to drink into one Spirit" (verse 13). It doesn't make much sense for some of the membership to be separated from the rest of the Body, sitting alone at home while the rest of the Body worships together with other members of the Body.

### **The same care one for another**

The apostle Paul urged the Corinthian members to "have the same care one for another" (1 Corinthians 12:25). This is the second point mentioned by the Barna survey: mutual comfort and care.

This mutual care for one another is biblical. But it should always be remembered that our relationships with other members of the Church begin and end in our fellowship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3, 7).

We have fellowship with each other only in and through our spiritual relationship with the Father and Jesus Christ. The first four of the Ten Commandments express our love for God, the last six our love for humankind. The apostle John points out the folly of trying to have one without the other (1 John 4:20).

The Ten Commandments embody a basic spiritual law. If you break one, spiritually speaking you have broken them all (James 2:10). We express the love of God by keeping every one of the Ten Commandments (1 John 5:3).

Expressing proper love for the membership of the Church is an awesome responsibility on the shoulders of each member. After all, Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian Church (Matthew 16:18), did say, "By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, that you have love one for another" (John 13:35). It is of utmost importance that we extend warmth and friendliness to other members of the spiritual Body that is the Church, especially to visitors and new members.

### **Quality of the sermons**

The quality of the sermons is mentioned

as the third most-looked-for quality in the George Barna survey.

In the broadest sense this is also a supremely important point. The membership of the Church has a right to expect certain fundamental qualities from the elders' leadership. First and foremost is loyalty to the Bible and to the teachings and practices of Jesus that He taught the apostles—"the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (Acts 2:42).

In his teaching each elder must be "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Most other versions say "rightly handling" or "rightly explaining," which is

*"They want substance from their church; they want to make a difference in the world through their church."*

a better rendering, but perhaps the Revised English Bible has best grasped the basic sense of this passage when it expresses the need to "keep strictly to the true gospel."

The world's teachers expound many false gospels (Galatians 1:6-7; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Matthew 24:4-5). A British novelist made this comment about many 20th-century clerics: "The modern clergyman has acquired in his study of the science which I believe is called exegesis an astonishing facility for explaining things away."

Explaining things away is *not* a part of the preaching of a true servant of God. The ministry of the Word and prayer are his true priorities (Acts 6:4).

The apostle Paul urged Timothy: "Preach the Word; . . . correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." Why? "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:2-3, New International Version).

A faithful pastor will preach the truth of God's Word, not his own ideas. A true servant of God and His people "has a boundary set for him," explained one long-time teacher. "When he enters the pulpit, he is not an entirely free man . . . He is not at liberty to invent or choose his message; it has been committed to him, and it is for him to declare, expound and commend it to his hearers."

The importance of faithfulness to God's Word cannot be overemphasized. Much less important is the preacher's particular style of speaking or even his basic ability as an orator or teacher. Most who have received a genuine call to the ministry strive to improve their effectiveness as the years go by.

### **Yet another important factor**

One more factor is simply the ability of one's church to make a difference. Said George Barna: "They want substance from their church; they want to make a difference in the world through their church."

Broadly speaking, this is another way of saying the Church is commissioned to take the good news of the Kingdom of God to the world and faithfully teach others God's way of life as Jesus commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20). Any church that is not dedicated to performing this task is seriously falling down on the job. Jesus Christ said, "You shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:20).

According to Mr. Barna, the sad truth is that "the Christian Church has stagnated, largely due to its comfort with routines and rituals that are neither challenging nor relevant for millions of people."

Many prospective churchgoers do desire to do a work in the world. They would like to find a church actively fulfilling Christ's command to spread the gospel in our age. But they may need some vital background knowledge to rightly evaluate which groups and organizations are obediently following Christ's command.

Of course, there is a great deal more to the overall story. The Church is a big subject well worth studying in much greater detail than can be done in any single *Good News* article. That is why the United Church of God has published an extensively researched booklet simply titled *The Church Jesus Built*. This is one of the most important booklets we have ever published.

Also, to understand the message Jesus taught, and which He commanded His Church to proclaim, please request your free copy of *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Both booklets are available free of charge by contacting our office nearest you or through the literature library of our Web site at [www.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org).

How to find the right church will entail some serious Bible study on your part. It is not a decision you should make quickly or lightly. You should search out a church that fits the true biblical model. **GN**

# Jesus Christ: The Early Years

by Mario Seiglie

**T**he *Good News* has traced some of the many historical and archaeological findings that confirm and clarify the biblical record of the Old Testament, a record that spans some 4,000 years. We continue that survey into the New Testament era.

How much has archaeology confirmed about the New Testament period? Are the many names mentioned in the New Testament real people? Can their existence be verified by credible historical evidence other than the Bible?

Although the time in question is much briefer—less than a century—archaeology has much to tell us about the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth and His apostles. As we examine this period, the physical evidence supporting the biblical record multiplies. Let's begin this fascinating archaeological journey into the New Testament world.

Appropriately, the Old Testament ends with God's promise to send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. In Malachi, apparently the last prophetic book of the Old Testament to be written, the final two chapters record a dramatic prophecy: "'Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of Hosts" (Malachi 3:1).

It should come as no surprise that the story flow of the New Testament begins where the last of the Old Testament prophets leaves off—with the arrival of the messenger foretold by Malachi. This shows a continuation from the Old to the New Testament, bearing in mind that a few hundred years had passed in the interim.

At the beginning of Luke's gospel, an angel tells Zacharias the priest about the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi. The messenger prophesied by God in the Old Testament would be his son John (the Baptist), who would prepare the way for the Christ. The angel told him: "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John . . . He will also go before Him in the

spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:13, 17).

Thus, at the start of Luke's gospel, the stage is set for the first coming of the Messiah.

## Herod the mighty king

One of the first people to appear in the New Testament account is King Herod. Matthew takes us to the court of Herod the Great: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him . . .

"Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also'" (Matthew 2:1-3, 7-8).

Was Herod a real figure, and was he the king at this time? Yes. Secular history and archaeology have confirmed his existence and reign beyond a doubt. He is known in history as Herod the Great. Under the Romans this non-Israelite king had ruled the province of Judea (most of the area of the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah) for almost 40 years when Jesus Christ appeared on the scene. Herod was a great builder and left his name on many monuments. He was a famous figure in Jewish and Roman history.

John McRay, archaeologist and Wheaton College professor of New Testament, summarizes Herod's reign: "Archaeological excavations have uncovered a surprisingly large amount of evidence pertaining to Herod the Great . . . Herod the Great was an Idumean who, in 41 B.C., was granted provisional rule of Galilee by Mark Antony [the friend

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



**The Jerusalem temple** was but one of the enormous construction projects of Herod the Great. The partial model above, from Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum, shows how the southwest corner of the temple platform and the magnificent staircase that provided access to the

temple from the lower city likely appeared in Jesus Christ's day. Large areas of the platform's massive retaining walls are still visible today, most notably at the Western Wall, right, now dominated by the Dome of the Rock, built by Muslims on the former temple platform.

of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra's last lover] . . . In 30 B.C. Octavian (Caesar Augustus) affirmed Herod's rule over Judea, Samaria, and Galilee . . . Herod remained in power until his death in 4 B.C.; thus Christ was born in Bethlehem prior to that date" (*Archaeology and the New Testament*, 1997, p. 91).

One of the main reasons Herod is referred to as Herod the Great has to do with his extensive and exquisite building projects. F.F. Bruce, former professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester in England, says, "Had Herod done nothing else, he would have made a secure niche in history for himself as a great builder" (*New Testament History*, 1972, p. 20).

He is known to have initiated construction projects in at least 20 cities or towns in Israel and more than 10 in foreign cities. Two inscriptions pertaining to Herod have been found in Athens. One reads: "The people [erect this monument to] King Herod, lover of the Romans, because of his beneficence and good will [shown] by him." The other said: "The people [erect

this monument to] King Herod, devout and lover of Caesar, because of his virtue and beneficence" (*ibid.*, p. 92).

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, confirms Herod's great construction projects outside Israel: "And when he had built so much, he shewed the greatness of his soul to no small number of foreign cities . . . And are not the Athenians . . . full of donations that Herod presented them withal!" (*Wars of the Jews*, Book I, Chapter XXI, Section 11).

Of his notable building achievements inside Israel, six are generally acclaimed as the most notable: (1) his renovation of the temple and expansion of the temple platform in Jerusalem; (2) Herodium, his palace-fortress near Bethlehem, encased in a manmade mountain; (3) his magnificent palace at Jericho, equipped with a swimming pool more than 100 feet long; (4) Masada, a mountain fortress where he built two palaces (the site was later immortalized as the last holdout of the Jews in defense of their country against the Romans); (5) Caesarea, a manmade port city built under his supervision that became the official head-

quarters of the Romans; and (6) Samaria, the capital of the former kingdom of Israel, which he rebuilt and renamed Sebaste.

Of the six, all except Herodium and Masada are mentioned in Scripture.

From studying the remains of Herod's vast building programs, archaeologists and architects have nothing but praise for the beauty, massiveness, ingenuity and practicality of his projects. For instance, at the base of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem archaeologists discovered, among other massive foundation stones, one block that weighed 415 tons. In comparison, the largest blocks in the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt weigh only 15 tons, and the megaliths in Stonehenge, England, weigh only up to 40 tons.

### Herod the cruel king

Herod was known not just for his great building, political and military skills but for his great cruelty. The Bible gives us an indication of his utter disregard for human life in its record of his reaction to hearing of the birth of Jesus.

Having heard that a "King of the Jews"

had been born, Herod was greatly disturbed by this potential threat to his power and throne (Matthew 2:1-3). When his scheme to identify the newborn Messiah failed (verses 7-8, 12), Herod lashed out violently.

“Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under [the approximate age of Jesus], according to the time which he had determined from the wise men” (verse 16).

The massacre in Bethlehem was not out of character for Herod. A.T. Robertson, chairman of New Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, shows us Herod’s savagery. Dr. Robertson describes Herod’s cruelty even toward those in his own family:

“Those familiar with the story of Herod the Great in Josephus can well understand the meaning of these words. Herod in his rage over his family rivalries and jealousies put to death the two sons of Mariamne [his wife] (Aristobulus and Alexander), Mariamne herself, and Antipater, another son and once his heir, besides the brother and mother of Mariamne (Aristobulus, Alexandra) and her grandfather John Hyrcanus. He had made will after will and was now in a fatal illness and fury over the question of the Magi. He showed his excitement and the whole city was upset because the people knew only too well what he could do when in a rage over the disturbance of his plans” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Bible Explorer Software, 1997).

The New Testament description of Herod the Great is thus confirmed by what historians and archaeologists have found concerning his rulership, building projects, political strength and uncontrollable wrath toward anyone threatening his kingship.

### Caesar Augustus’s census

Luke, the meticulous historian, introduces other famous personages in his account of the birth of Christ. “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.

So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city” (Luke 2:1-3).

Caesar Augustus, or Octavian, was Julius Caesar’s adopted son. He ruled the Roman Empire for 57 years (43 B.C. to A.D. 14) and established an era of peace and stability that would facilitate the growth of Christianity.

Archaeologists have made great progress in discovering how and when a Roman census was taken. Ancient papyrus census decrees have been found for the years 20, 34, 48, 62 and 104. These show they normally took place every 14 years, although local counts at times were taken more frequently.

A papyrus in the British Museum describes a census similar to Luke’s account, taken in 104, in which people were ordered to return to their birthplaces. It reads: “Gaius Vibius Mazimus, Prefect of Egypt: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their provinces to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census and may also attend diligently to the cultivation of their allotments” (Frederick G. Kenyon, *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*, 1907, plate 30).

For many years some scholars had doubted the Bible’s accuracy since they thought Luke had erroneously referred to another Quirinius who ruled a decade after Christ’s birth. But now the biblical account has been confirmed by further evidence.

Researcher Randall Price writes: “Some recent archaeological evidence has provided new insights into the time and place of the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke gives the time of birth with a specific reference to a census decreed by Quirinius, the governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). While inscriptional evidence reveals that there was more than one ruler with this name, a Quirinius within the time frame of Jesus’ birth has been found on a coin placing him as proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from 11 B.C. until after 4 B.C.” (*The Stones Cry Out*, 1997, p. 299).

### Joseph’s occupation in Nazareth

Once Herod died, Joseph and Mary

brought Jesus back to Israel and returned to their home in Nazareth. Joseph was a skilled craftsman who worked not only with wood but with stone masonry.

“The Greek word *tekton*, translated ‘carpenter’ in Mark 6:3, has the root meaning of ‘artisan,’ that is, a skilled worker who works on some hard material such as wood or stone or even horn or ivory . . . In Jesus’ day construction workers were not as highly specialized as in today’s work force. For example, the tasks performed by carpenters and masons could easily overlap” (Richard A. Batey, *Jesus & the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus*, 1991, p. 76).

Jesus learned the trade from Joseph and lived in the area of Nazareth most of His life. Although Nazareth was a small Galilean village of no more than a few hundred inhabitants, Joseph and Jesus likely found steady work in the city of Sepphoris four miles away.

About the time of Jesus’ birth, Herod Antipas—son of Herod the Great and ruler over Galilee who would later order the execution of John the Baptist—chose Sepphoris as his capital. “For more than three decades while Jesus grows up in nearby Nazareth a huge construction project continues, as Sepphoris rapidly becomes the largest and most influential city in the region . . . Joseph and Jesus knew of the construction of the new capital and would have been acquainted with artisans and other workers employed on the site” (Batey, p. 70).

Recent archaeological excavations in Sepphoris show it to have been a bustling, prosperous city during the years Jesus grew up in nearby Nazareth. This historical record helps us better understand the background of Christ’s teachings, which included illustrations drawn not just from farming and animal husbandry, but also construction, rulers and nobility, the theater, government, finance and other aspects of city life.

In the next article in this series we will continue with important background information that helps us better understand the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. **GN**

# Prophecy

Continued from page 19

prophetic words continues: “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” (Matthew 24:21).

Indeed, great distress and tribulation did come. In late summer of 70 Titus’s army broke through the remaining wall that protected Jerusalem. The magnificent temple, completed only seven years earlier, went up in flames as Titus’s war machines pounded the Holy City into rubble.

Between 600,000 and one million men, women and children perished in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. The survivors were taken prisoner, and many of these ultimately died for the entertainment of the crowds in the Roman circus in Caesarea.

## Future fulfillment

Many scholars recognize duality in Bible prophecy, meaning that many prophecies have an initial fulfillment as well as a later one. Jesus Himself alluded to this principle when He cited the prophecy of “the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet” (Matthew 24:15). The Jews of His day well understood that Antiochus Epiphanes had desecrated the temple,

fulfilling this prophecy some 200 years earlier. Yet Jesus made it clear this prophecy would be fulfilled again.

The events of A.D. 66 to 70 are a foretaste of what must yet happen. What was the question asked by the disciples? “What will be the sign of *Your coming, and of the end of the age?*” (verse 3).

That Christ did not return then proves that the events cited above were not the primary fulfillment of His message. The decades after Christ’s death did not immediately precede the time of the end. God’s plan for humanity was not yet ready for completion.

## Some prophecies not yet fulfilled

A closer examination of Christ’s words shows that they were not all fulfilled—indeed *could not* have been fulfilled—at that time. He warned that the time leading up to His return “will be a time of great distress; there has never been such a time from the beginning of the world until now, and will never be again. If that time of troubles were not cut short, *no living thing could survive*; but for the sake of God’s chosen it will be cut short” (verses 21-22, New English Bible).

In Christ’s day mankind did not have the means to threaten literally every human life on the face of the earth, as opposed to just those in the Roman province of Judea.

Now, however, we see the frightening possibility that “no living thing could survive”—that human life could be exterminated in several ways undreamed of when Jesus first gave this warning almost 2,000 years ago.

Jesus Christ knew His Church would have much work to do: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and *then* the end will come” (verse 14). The apostles would begin that work. Christ said that, after receiving the Holy Spirit, they would “be witnesses to [Him] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Many more books of the Bible—comprising what we know as the New Testament—would be written. Many more people would hear the gospel of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus Christ taught. Many more will *yet* hear that same message!

Then and only then, when the time is right in God’s great plan, will He send His Son in power and glory to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Hundreds of verses throughout the Bible proclaim that incredible truth.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away,” said Jesus (Matthew 24:35). Every word of Jesus Christ’s prophecy will ultimately be fulfilled. **GN**

## When Will These Things Happen?

**W**hen will the remaining prophecies of Matthew 24 be fulfilled? Only God knows the exact timing of these events. “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (verse 36). They will take most of the world by surprise.

Jesus’s prophecy shows that the Middle East is a vital area to watch, and this region is clearly a flash point for end-time events.

However, some of the things Jesus said would happen appear to be no different from what has transpired there for the past 19 centuries. It is easy to assume things will continue as they always have. But one day circumstances there will change the world forever.

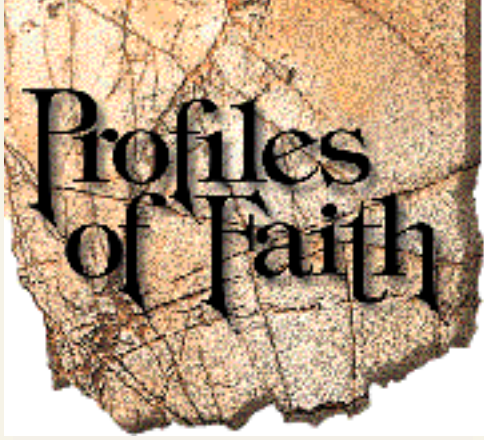
The prophecies of Jesus Christ, however, are not limited to the Middle East. The conditions He described will affect virtually all of humanity. “But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (verses 37-39). In Noah’s day all except the patriarch’s immediate family carried on with life as usual. As Noah labored away, those around him ate, drank, married and generally

did as they pleased—until the rains came.

The apostle Peter, as he awaited his own execution for his part in proclaiming the good news of Christ’s return, wrote about people who would lose sight of and ridicule the certainty of that coming event. “Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’” (2 Peter 3:3-4). Peter warned Christians not to allow their hope and prayers for Christ’s return to grow dim (compare Matthew 24:48-51).

Jesus admonished us to stay vigilant and spiritually ready. “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming,” He warned (verse 42). He advises us to be busy doing His work. “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing” (verse 45-46).

How important is it that we focus our attention on living as God wants us to live, doing the work God wants us to do? For those busy doing God’s work, He promises that their efforts will be rewarded. “I say to you that [the Master] will make him ruler over all his goods” (verse 47).



# Joseph & Mary

## *A Faithful Couple*

by Jerald Aust

**G**od directed the archangel Gabriel to deliver messages to two couples: Zacharias and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph. Elizabeth and Mary were cousins.

To Zacharias Gabriel said: “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John . . . [He will] make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:13, 17).

To Mary Gabriel relayed this message directly from God: “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! . . . Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David” (verses 28, 31-32).

Much of the Bible is about Jesus Christ. Only a small portion of the New Testament discusses His parents—Joseph, His stepfather, and Mary, His mother. Yet the New Testament’s details about their lives help enhance our understanding of these two honored parents.

### **Joseph: Jesus’ stepfather**

James Hastings’ *Dictionary of the Bible* clarifies Joseph’s lineage: “Every Jew kept a record of his lineage, and was proud if he

Joseph was ‘a son of David’ (Matthew 1:20; Luke 2:4). His family belonged to Bethlehem, David’s city, but he had moved to Nazareth” (1988, p. 529).

Some Bible readers wonder why the Gospels give two genealogies for Jesus. The simple answer is that Matthew records Joseph’s ancestors, and Luke records Mary’s. Both could trace their ancestry back to David and from him back to Abraham, fulfilling the prophecies that the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:16) and David (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

Joseph was a carpenter. The Greek word is *tekton*, which was used of a versatile and skilled builder or craftsman who worked with various materials including wood and stone. Jesus, having learned the trade from Joseph, later used analogies based on His experiences at Joseph’s side to explain man’s relationship to God and His coming kingdom.

Note one such example: “Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat

against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it” (Matthew 7:24-27; RSV). Friends and acquaintances of Jesus knew He understood exactly what He was talking about.

Some months after Joseph’s betrothal to Mary, he discovered she was pregnant. Joseph erroneously assumed Mary had been unfaithful to him, but Joseph’s subsequent actions tell us much about his character and nature.

“. . . When [Jesus’] mother Mary was going to be married to Joseph, before they came together the discovery was made that she was with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph, her husband, being an upright man, and not desiring to make her a public example, had a mind to put her away [break their betrothal] privately” (Matthew 1:18-19, Bible in Basic English).

As an honorable and humble man, as well as faithful in his observance of the Israelitish ordinances and feasts (Luke 2:21-24, 41), Joseph thought it best to quietly spare Mary and her family disgrace by giving her a bill of divorce, breaking their betrothal.

However, after he had been informed of the truth by an angel (Matthew 1:18-25), he treated Mary kindly. “On being summoned to Bethlehem by the requirements of the census, he would not leave her at home to suffer the slanders of misjudging neighbors, but took her with him and



treated her very gently in her time of need” (Hastings, p. 529; compare Luke 2:1-7).

### Little mention of Joseph

Joseph is mentioned only a few times in the four Gospels. Only one incident of Jesus’ childhood is preserved in Scripture. Luke 2:41-50 records that, when Jesus was 12, His family attended the Passover feast in Jerusalem, as was customary (Leviticus 23:1-2, 4-8). However, at the end of the Feast, as Joseph and Mary journeyed back to Nazareth, they realized Jesus wasn’t among their group.

Jesus had lingered in Jerusalem, although they had assumed He was traveling safely with relatives and acquaintances. After a full day of travel they began to look in earnest for their son, not finding Him anywhere.

Reflect for a moment on the trust that both Joseph and Mary placed in their 12-year-old boy. How many of us would feel comfortable leaving a son or daughter of that age alone on a long trip home, assuming he would travel safely among faithful family and friends? Yet Joseph and Mary showed great confidence in their firstborn. This incident shows how times have changed as well as the confidence of two faithful parents in their teaching and training.

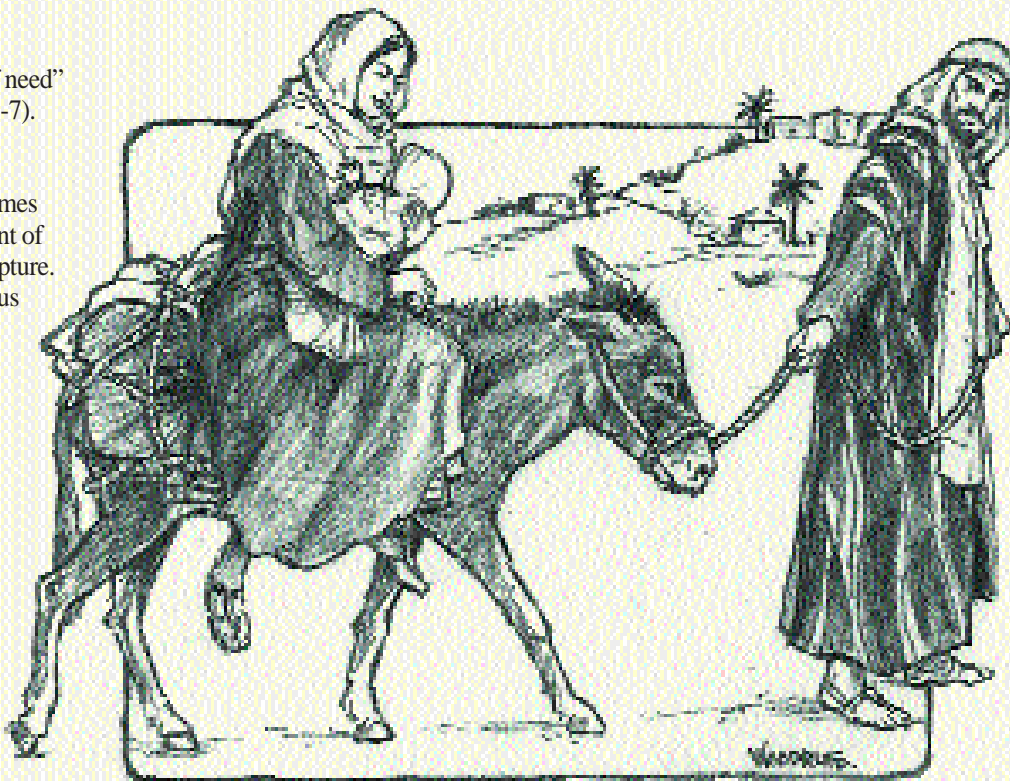
The worried parents returned to Jerusalem, where eventually “they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46).

The men who listened as young Jesus discussed God’s law with the teachers “were astonished at His understanding and answers” (verse 47), as were Joseph and Mary when they came upon the sight of some of the nation’s most respected religious authorities listening intently to their 12-year-old son.

Mary’s reaction was likely a mixture of worry and relief: “Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously” (verse 47). From this we see Joseph was obviously a concerned father.

### What happened to Joseph?

James Hastings discusses why no mention of Joseph is made after that Passover feast in Jerusalem: “Joseph never appears in the Gospel story after the visit to



*Joseph obeyed God and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt until the death of Herod, that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”*

Jerusalem when Jesus had attained the age of twelve years and become ‘a son of the Law’ (Luke 2:41-51); and since Mary always appears alone in the narratives of the public ministry, it is a reasonable inference that he had died during the interval.”

This seems the most likely scenario. Although the Gospels do not give Joseph’s age, Joseph was probably older than Mary. Perhaps he died before Jesus began His ministry.

Although the Scriptures give us only a few glimpses of Joseph, they tell us he was a kind man and a loving father. Perhaps no greater compliment can be paid to him than that of Jesus Himself: When He tried to give mankind a better conception of the love and character of God, He used the term *Father* to express our Creator’s loving relationship toward us.

### Mary, mother of Jesus Christ

Although more is said of Mary than of Joseph, not many scriptures are dedicated to the mother of Jesus.

Mary was of the tribe of Judah and a descendant of David, hence of the royal line. Sometime around 4 B.C. Mary was living in Nazareth. She was unmarried, betrothed to Joseph.

At the appropriate time in God’s plan

(Galatians 4:4), He began fulfilling His promise of the ages: “At this time the angel Gabriel came to her with a message from God, and announced to her that she was to be the mother of the long-expected Messiah—that by the power of the Holy Spirit the everlasting Son of the Father should be born of her (Luke 1:26-35; comp. Rom. 1:3)” (Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 1972, p. 702).

The angel also informed Mary her cousin Elizabeth was within three months of delivering a son (Luke 1:36), whom the Bible identifies as John the Baptist.

Mary decided to visit her cousin. As Mary entered her house, Elizabeth confirmed God’s revelation that Mary was to give birth to the Messiah: “Then she [Elizabeth] spoke out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord’” (Luke 1:42-45).

Mary stayed with Elizabeth three months, then returned home (verse 56).



discovered Mary was with child and, having been assured that her conception was of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25), he took her as his wife. The time for tax enrollment came shortly thereafter.

### **Bethlehem, birth and blessings**

Mary accompanied Joseph to Bethlehem to be enrolled for taxation purposes. It was during this time that Jesus was born and lay in a manger (Luke 2:1, 7). As instructed by Scripture, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21; Genesis 17:12).

Mary and Joseph were faithful to God

*Though Joseph and Mary were entrusted with the responsibility and blessing of overseeing the childhood of God's own Son, the family relationship doesn't stop there. Jesus Christ has included others—you and me—in His spiritual family as His brothers and sisters.*

and His Word. On the 40th day after the birth of Jesus, Mary presented herself with Jesus for their purification in the temple (Luke 2:22-24). “The poverty of Joseph and Mary is alluded to in the mention of their offering, ‘a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons’” (Unger, p. 702; compare Leviticus 12:8).

During Joseph’s and Mary’s visit to the temple in Jerusalem, Mary met Simeon and the prophetess Anna. Simeon thanked God for His promise that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). Simeon took the infant in his arms, thanked God and declared the prophecy that through Christ salvation would come also to the gentiles and glory to God’s people Israel (verse 32).

The aged prophetess Anna (probably more than 100 years old) also “gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (verse 38).

### **Herod’s murderous plot**

Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem, where an angel warned them Herod planned to kill Jesus. “Wise men” from the East had seen the star marking Jesus’

heard these things, he and the people of Jerusalem were troubled.

Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes to determine the place of Jesus’ birth. They told him Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem. Privately, Herod asked the wise men when the star had appeared. He then deceptively instructed the wise men to find the newborn Messiah “that I may come and worship Him also” (Matthew 2:8). But the wise men were divinely warned in a dream that they shouldn’t return to Herod. Instead, they should return to their native land by a different route (verse 12).

At that time an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. “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” (verse 13). Joseph obeyed God and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt until the death of Herod so the Scripture would be fulfilled that stated: “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (verse 15; compare Hosea 11:1).

When Herod realized the wise men would not return to him, he responded brutally to the threat to his power. Herod put to death the male children in and around Bethlehem, from two years old and younger (verse 16). The prophet Jeremiah, writing hundreds of years earlier, had predicted this calamity: “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15).

After Herod’s death an angel appeared in a dream to Joseph while he was still in Egypt: “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” (Matthew 2:20).

When Joseph and Mary returned with Jesus, God again warned Joseph in a dream not to go to Bethlehem and the surrounding area, but to move to the region of Galilee (verse 22). “And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was

spoken by the prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” (verse 23).

Luke summarizes the childhood of Jesus: “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:40). Joseph and Mary continued to exhibit their humble, faithful approach to God.

After the mention at the time of the Passover feast in Jerusalem when Jesus was 12, Joseph isn’t mentioned again in the Gospels. Mary is mentioned four subsequent times.

### **Portrait of a believing mother**

In the first subsequent mention of Mary, she was in the nearby Galilean town of Cana, where Jesus and His disciples were invited to a wedding feast. When the wedding celebrants ran out of wine, Mary mentioned the embarrassing predicament to Jesus (John 2:3).

Jesus replied that this wasn’t a matter He should be concerned with. Nevertheless He responded to her unspoken request. Mary told the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. He replied by turning some 150 gallons of water into fine wine. Mary learned faith and patience from this miracle.

The second mention of Mary was when she and Jesus’ brothers were with Him in Capernaum at a public gathering (verse 12). While He was talking to a large group of people, someone informed Him His mother and brothers wanted to speak with Him.

Jesus responded with a great spiritual truth: “‘Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother’” (Matthew 12:48-50). Doing the will of God makes us part of God’s family, a brother or sister to Jesus Christ.

Incidentally, this passage demonstrates that Mary went on to have additional children after Jesus was born. Mark 6:3 names four half-brothers—James, Joses, Judas and Simon—plus an unspecified number of “sisters.” Jesus obviously grew up in a family with at least six siblings, the natural children of Joseph and Mary. Two, James and Jude (Judas), later came to accept that their elder half-brother was indeed the Messiah and went on to write the biblical books that bear their names.

The third later mention of Mary was



## Who Are We?

when she and John were standing near the feet of Jesus as He was crucified. In spite of the pain and anguish Jesus was enduring, He thought of his mother's welfare: "When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple [John] whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!'" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:26-27). Mary's firstborn son never slighted His responsibilities, as this touching example illustrates.

Finally, after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, we find Mary, with other faithful followers, praying together. His disciples "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14).

We are introduced to Mary when an angel tells her she would miraculously conceive and give birth to the promised Messiah. At the Bible's last mention of her, Mary is left to our memories in faithful prayer to God, awaiting her son's return.

Although God entrusted Joseph and Mary with the responsibility and blessing of overseeing the childhood of His own Son, the family relationship doesn't stop there. Jesus Christ has included others—you and me—in His spiritual family as His brothers and sisters (Matthew 12:48-50; compare Hebrews 2:11). Through Him many more will share in God's promise: "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18). **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.



## Who's Behind The Good News?



**W**ho is behind *The Good News* magazine? Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide *The Good News* free to anyone who requests it.

Simply put, *The Good News* is provided by people—people from all walks of life, from all over the world.

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

We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought: the wonderful *good news* of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43, 8:1). Gospel means "good news," and from this *The Good News* gets its name.

The message Jesus brought truly is good news: the answer to all mankind's problems. Through the pages of *The Good News* and various booklets (also free) we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution and threaten the very survival of humankind.

We are committed to taking that message to the entire world, sharing the truth of God's purpose and plan for us as taught by Jesus Christ. Jesus also told His followers, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). He freely shared this message with us; we freely share it with all who ask.



Jesus also commanded His followers to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). To fulfill this command, the United Church of God has congregations and ministers around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship.

For locations and times of services in your area, write or call us at the addresses listed inside. Visitors are always welcome.

**F**or additional information, you can use your computer to access our World Wide Web site on the Internet. The address [www.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org) gives you access to general information, back issues of *The Good News*, booklets and more.



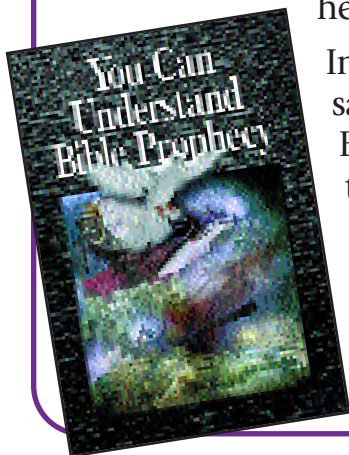
**United Church of God**  
*an International Association*

[www.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org)



## Where Is the World Headed?

Today's headlines are filled with troubling news—war, famine, natural disasters, new and baffling diseases, environmental catastrophes and governmental scandals. The litany of suffering, tragedies and bad news is relentless. Where is the world headed? Does Bible prophecy give us any answers?



In *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*, you'll discover what the Bible says about where the world is headed. Learn the major themes of Bible prophecy and God's overall plan for humanity. Find out why the world is in the condition it's in—and what it means for you. For your free copy, write or call us at our office in your country (or the country nearest you) at the address listed on page 2 of this issue.

**United Church of God**  
*an International Association*  
[www.ucg.org](http://www.ucg.org)