

BEYOND TODAY

Envisioning a Better World Tomorrow

Reaching for a
***Strong
Hand***
from Someplace

9

Are You Looking for
Direction in All the
Wrong Places?

21

Would Jesus Observe
Christmas?

The Kind of Leaders
the World Needs

16

Archaeology Continues to
Corroborate the Bible

24

CONTENTS

November-December 2024

Cover article ▾

Reaching for a Strong Hand From Someplace

The world is facing a flood of problems. Many of us feel the world around us is sinking into chaotic and immoral depths. Can we trust elected officials or government organizations to rescue us? Will anyone reach down to save us?

by Peter Eddington
and Tom Robinson



6

Articles & Columns ▾

9 Are You Looking for Direction in All the Wrong Places?

Amid a lost world, where can you turn in the face of mounting troubles? Discover the one source you can always count on to provide the right way forward.

by John LaBissoniere

12 Censorship, Intimidation & Rising Tyranny

There's a big push by today's governments to control speech and information. The signs are very concerning—but they are just the beginnings of something far worse to come.

by Tom Robinson

16 The Kind of Leaders the World Needs

Every election season is filled with wrangling over which candidates would and wouldn't be the best leaders. But just what are the essential qualities of a "good" leader?

by Becky Sweat

19 "If You Love Me..."

Millions of professing Christians say, "It's so good to know and love the Lord." While this is a nice sentiment, how do these sincere people express their love to God? Is it done in the way specified in Scripture, or is something vitally important missing?

by John LaBissoniere

21 Would Jesus Observe Christmas?

Christmas is widely considered the beautiful celebration of the birthday of Jesus Christ. But does Jesus Himself look at it that way? Would He join in the festivity, receiving the observance in His honor? Or is His actual assessment quite different?

by Mario Seiglie

4-5 Letters From Our Readers & Editorial

14 Current Events & Trends

A critical eye on current world conditions from a biblical worldview.

24 God, Science & the Bible

Archaeology Continues to Corroborate the Bible

26 Follow Me ...

"Teach Us to Number Our Days"

A life-and-death moment should lead us to reflect on what we are doing with the life we've been given. Properly considering the time we have—and don't have—brings wisdom.

by Robin Webber

28 Compass Check

Dating Doesn't Have to Break Your Heart

by Whitney Creech

30 Questions & Answers

Does God pick national leaders?

31 How to watch Beyond Today

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The Global Impact of the U.S. Election

In our July-August issue, we examined the compounding effects of humankind's disobedience to God, the futile attempts to fix it and the way out that He reveals in the Bible.

Your continued publication of articles concerning politics, more specifically one political candidate over another, is uncalled for and very unnecessary! Politics should have no place in the Church, let alone in articles in your magazine. If you're going to print articles that keep a watchful eye on U.S. politics then it should be from an unbiased viewpoint, not favoring one candidate over another! Do the right thing and be fair in publishing articles concerning U.S. politics!

From the Internet

From the authors: Beyond Today does not seek to promote any political candidates for office. Our article did present some concerns from each side of the American political fray about the other for relevant commentary on the divide. That said, we are not to be neutral when it comes to issues that are moral—or in addressing the moral messaging and impactful decisions and actions of public figures. So much is declared “off limits” as “political.” But the Word of God has much to say on many such matters.

We must also recognize that while no political candidates or parties are in alignment with Scripture, some pursue agendas that are much farther from biblical morality, leading to much greater societal harm. It would actually be wrong to say that doesn't matter since no one is good and to try to draw some moral equivalence between such opposing sides. And it's loving our neighbor to warn of where pernicious political agendas would lead.

When matters of public policy deal with sin and evil impacting a society, we should be loud and strong in our comments. That is not being “political.” That is being biblical, in the tradition of the prophets. May we all pray for God's guidance in saying what ought to be said.

“The Last Best Hope of Earth”

This whole issue is absolutely wonderful! The article “The Last Best Hope of Earth” is so perfect and offers hope, even though things look so grim in the news. I'm so glad you

focused on the Kingdom while showing the ugly truth in this present world, as you did so well in the rest of the magazine. I could hardly contain myself when I read “Persecuted for Righteousness.” Wow! So courageous!

From the Internet

Q&A: “Can A Christian Suffer From Depression?”

You are so right about all of it. I am not depressed, but I have anxiety. I tend to freak out quickly just by thinking about stuff. I start doing a lot of housework just to keep my mind off it, but not before I have said a prayer. I would be a controlling nut job if I did not teach myself to let go so that I don't feed my anxiety, but I have to pray. When I do, I feel so much better, and I also have Jeremiah 29:11 framed so I can read it the moment I get out of bed.

From the Internet

More letters about our magazine and other free resources

Thank you for the free subscription and booklets to read. I've been learning and want to understand the Bible better. I grew up in a large religious family with different beliefs. I was really confused and feel lost sometimes. Then one day I was searching online for information on the history of Israel, and one of your *Beyond Today* TV programs came up. Since then I have been inspired almost every day to watch and read all your Bible study aids. Thank you for all your wonderful efforts. Many of my questions have been answered by your teachings. Also I would like to donate, but I don't know how. Thank you!

Subscriber in Australia

We're so pleased to be of service to you on your path to discovering the truth of the Bible! We appreciate your donation, which enables us to continue to preach the gospel to the world completely free of charge. Donations can be

made via our website, ucg.org/donate, or can be mailed to the office address listed on page 31 in the country closest to where you live.

I just wanted to say thanks to pastor Gary Petty for his [*Beyond Today* TV program] teaching about anger destroying your life. That message came at the right time for me. I listen to it often and I keep the key points on note cards at work. Thanks to all of you.

Viewer in Michigan

I'm 21 years old, and I am reaching out today to ask the question: How do I become a follower of Jesus Christ? I was doing some research on the “seven deadly sins” that God tells us to steer away from, and I realized I commit every one of those sins. This scares me. Even after being scared, I still find myself falling back into temptation and sin. I want to break free from these chains but I feel like I am drowning in sin with no escape. Can you offer some advice to help me overcome this struggle? Thank you taking the time to read this.

Reader in New York

*We're so glad you reached out! You have come to a major realization that many people never have, or which some would rather ignore. God has revealed the right way to live, and Jesus Christ exemplified that in His life and teachings. We have a few resources that can help you on your path, namely our free study guides *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *Tools for Spiritual Growth*. We would also encourage you to reach out to the United Church of God pastor closest to your location for personal advice. You can find his contact info at ucg.org/congregations.*

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Hope Beyond the Storm

This issue of *Beyond Today* goes to press amid sobering events. The destruction wrought throughout the U.S. Southeast by Hurricane Helene in late September is vast and horrific. Many are still missing and feared dead, even as another powerful hurricane, Milton, is about to strike the Florida coast—the results of which you’ll know by the time you receive this magazine.

Helene was slowed to a tropical storm by the time it hit North Carolina, but it effectively dropped a water bomb on the area. Hillside homes seemed secure, but the torrential rains caused subsidence of the underlying clay, resulting in vast mudslides into the valleys below. Untold lives and livelihoods were swept away in rivers of wreckage and debris.

We mourn as we take in the suffering and damage. Seeing some children wandering about searching for their missing parents was truly heartbreaking. People often wonder in looking out over such calamity why a loving God would allow this. Of course, we don’t know all the reasons, though Scripture gives us many answers. (For more insight, we would encourage you to request or download our free study guide *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* And search our website ucg.org for “Natural Disasters: A Biblical Perspective.”)

But one thing we should realize is that this present age is not God’s world. It is a time characterized by human rebellion against God under the influence of Satan. Mankind for the most part is cut off from God, though He still intervenes at times in response to prayers and to bring about His overall purposes.

In a sense, “this present evil age,” as the apostle Paul called it (Galatians 1:4), may be likened to a catastrophic storm bringing widespread misery and death. And the only way to bring calm to the storm surrounding us and to see its ultimate end is through Him who has the power and will to save us. When Jesus Christ and His disciples were

caught in a severe storm on the Sea of Galilee, with their boat taking on water, they cried out to Jesus, who “rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ And the wind ceased and there was a great calm . . . And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, ‘Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!’” (Mark 4:37-41).

We certainly pray for help and comfort and rebuilding of lives for those who’ve suffered in the recent hurricanes. But more than that, we pray that they and everyone will find peace through the One who calms not just the physical

storms, but the storms of life and even the great storm that buffets the whole world.

Our cover story for this issue focuses on man’s plea for deliverance amid the drowning chaos of this age. So many think a solution will be found in our political leadership, but the real answer lies with the mighty hand of God extended through the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Human government is just not up to the task. Many complained in the wake of Helene’s destruction that the federal government’s response was slow, dismal and misdirected. Many individuals pitched in to help, which was encouraging to see, but the needs were far greater than volunteers could attend to.

The results of the U.S. national election will be taking shape as you receive this issue, and that’s an important matter, affecting lives throughout the country and abroad. But what’s most important to recognize is that no matter who wins, the storm of this age still rages—and it’s only through God that we can experience peace now and be brought to the ultimate solutions His coming intervention and Kingdom will bring.

Learn about that deliverance in this issue and about preparing for it. Rest assured, there is great hope beyond the storm.



The Rocky Broad River flows into Lake Lure and overflows the town with debris from Chimney Rock, North Carolina after heavy rains from Hurricane Helene on Sept. 28, 2024.

Tom Robinson, Associate Editor
Beyond Today Magazine



Reaching for a *Strong Hand* From Someplace

The world is facing a flood of problems. Many of us feel the world around us is sinking into chaotic and immoral depths.

Can we trust elected officials or government organizations to rescue us?

Will anyone reach down to save us?

by Peter Eddington and Tom Robinson

National elections in the United States and other countries have highlighted a host of issues that threaten our world—and the inadequacy of human government to meet these threats. None of the presidential and prime ministerial candidates in any country has what it takes—or the courage and godliness—to solve our myriad problems. No matter who wins in elections around the globe, everything remains chaotic and dangerous—from the economy, to war and instability, to utter depravity.

Many look to a political favorite to fix our problems. And perhaps one side versus another could help stall—for a short period—that which is being torn down. Even if a nation is not turning to God as a whole, the more its political

leadership turns to God the better—the less harm will be done. But this won't ultimately fix everything, especially when wrong paths have been long pursued. It's as if even the most successful countries take one step forward and then two steps back. The long-term trends are dismal.

Some see the mounting crises as hopeless, no matter what, and are in despair. Yet there is great cause for hope—but not where many seek it.

Around 55 years ago in 1969, a remarkable assessment appeared in *U.S. News & World Report* that could still be said today yet with even more concern: "The once optimistic hope of Americans for a well-ordered and a stable world is fading . . . Among officials the prevailing view is gaining acceptance that frictions and world problems are becoming

too deep seated to be solved, *except by a strong hand from someplace*” (emphasis added throughout).

Many imagined then, and still do, that strong hand to be a human political solution. But looking to men will lead to disappointment and disaster. No man can save us. The saving hand we need is the only one that can truly save.

It’s the same one President George Washington famously spoke of in his first inaugural address: “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the *invisible hand*, which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of *providential agency*.”

Only that intervening mighty hand of God can and will reach down to rescue mankind. The true Savior is coming to save!

The foolish fantasy of human global government

While a great many people look to their particular national movements to make things right, many others around the world have sought solidarity in internationalist movements. The dream of many, especially among the world’s elites, is for a global government. Even Winston Churchill said while prime minister: “The creation of an authoritative, all-powerful world order is the ultimate aim toward which we must strive. Unless some effective world super-government can be brought quickly into action, the proposals for peace and human progress are dark and doubtful.”

The United Nations and other international bodies have been promoted as vehicles of global governance, but they have been severe failures in so many ways. Some say the problem is they are too limited by individual national interests—that they should be given *more* authority over the world’s nations. Some want to grant *more power* to institutions like the World Health Organization and other globalist enterprises. But would these really work, or rather serve to *rob* people of their liberties?

A major problem is that these are all made up of fallible human beings, who suffer from a corrupt nature. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3: “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands . . . none who seeks after God . . . There is none who does good . . . For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (verses 10-12, 23). And he further explained: “The mindset of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God’s law. Indeed, it is unable to do so” (Romans 8:7, Christian Standard Bible).

Psalms 146:3 admonishes: “Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help.” And the prophet Jeremiah further warns us: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the LORD” (Jeremiah 17:5, Revised Standard Version).

Nonetheless, people look to fallible, human leaders to save us and our world. Moreover, fearing chaos and war, many say

we need a powerful single ruler—an enlightened despot to *force through* all that needs to be done to save us.

Years ago, respected historian Arnold Toynbee said: “By forcing on mankind more and more lethal weapons and at the same time making the whole world more and more interdependent economically, technology has brought mankind to such a degree of distress that we are ripe for deifying any new Caesar who might succeed in giving the world unity and peace.”

Is this what we need—a powerful human ruler to enforce peace and law and order? Do we need a new Caesar? Prophecy reveals the rise of just such a leader who will bring terrible tyranny! The book of Revelation calls him and His empire the Beast—given power by Satan the devil (see Revelation 13 and our free study guide *The Final Superpower*).

Our world is held captive

The situation in which our world finds itself has been powerfully represented by a photo illustration showing an image of the earth from space edited to portray the earth *locked inside a cage*. Our planet is in jail—held captive by a powerful, evil force.

The corrupted hearts of mankind are bent toward wickedness and war (Jeremiah 17:9; James 4:1-2; Isaiah 59:6-8). This is especially due to the malevolent influence of Satan. As the apostle John wrote: “The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19). Yes, our world is held captive, needing to “escape the snare of the devil, having been taken *captive* by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:26).

All is so twisted that “what is crooked cannot be made straight” (Ecclesiastes 1:15). God looks down from His throne and sees our world wandering in confusion and destruction—languishing under Satan’s lies and rapacious rule.

The words of Gen. Douglas MacArthur at the end of World War II still warn us: “Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war. The utter destructiveness of war now blots out this alternative. We have had our last chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door. The *problem basically is theological* and involves a *spiritual recrudescence* [or renewal] and improvement of human character . . . It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh.”

Indeed, it must! Yet things will at a certain point get so bad that society will devolve into the worst time of trouble ever—with it looking like no one would survive—and then God will intervene (Matthew 24:21-22).

The Lord will come with a strong hand

Little did those reporting decades ago about the need for a “strong hand from someplace” really understand what is truly necessary in face of the world’s deep-seated problems. George Washington would have recognized the need as the “invisible hand” of divine intervention. And this is exactly what God will ultimately provide.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed of the time of the end: “Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a *strong hand*, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him” (Isaiah 40:10).

Grieved and angry at the wicked tyranny and dereliction of duty of the world’s rulers, God declares He will finally take action to upend wayward civilization: “I was amazed to see that no one intervened to help the oppressed. So I myself stepped in to save them with my *strong arm*, and my wrath sustained me” (Isaiah 63:5, New Living Translation).

This will find fulfillment in the return of Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, when a trumpet will announce that the kingdoms of the world have become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15; 19:11-16).

God will bring judgment on evil but, as Isaiah 40:11 shows, He will *care for* and *nurture* those who are humbled before Him: “He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” This is the great *hope* of mankind.

These verses in Isaiah 40 are part of the message to be proclaimed in preparation for the Messiah’s coming (see verses 3, 6). It ultimately applies to the second coming of Christ. But Jesus’ loving leadership was demonstrated in His first coming—and we see it in His care for His people today.

When Christ returns, His deliverance will be from not just evil rule and catastrophic world conditions, but from the wrong ways of thinking leading to these. Indeed, for the world to change, not only does the leadership need to change, but human hearts need to change. That will happen as the world is then taught the ways of God and has the Spirit of God poured out to bring inner transformation. The process is already beginning with God’s people now.

The rescue of the world requires not just Christ’s rule over us, but Him giving us personal help for the overcoming of our problems. None of us can save ourselves—the world collectively or each of us individually. We all need this strong hand and arm of the Lord—His intervening power.

Like Peter while sinking, take God’s hand now

The biblical account of Jesus walking on the water, recorded in Matthew 14:22-33, is about more than a miraculous display of power. The apostle Peter plays an important part in the story. When Jesus in walking on the Sea of Galilee approached the apostles’ boat, Peter asked if he could come out to Jesus—and Jesus said, “Come.”

Peter did so, walking on the sea too. But with the boisterous wind and waves he was afraid and started to sink, crying out, “Lord, save me!” Then “immediately Jesus *stretched out His hand* and caught him,” asking him why he doubted. This was the intervening *strong arm of the Lord*!



Our planet is in jail—held captive by a powerful, evil force.

Like Peter, all of us would sink without it. Peter could not stay atop the churning sea and keep from drowning on his own. Neither can we. Neither can the whole world. And the governments of this world cannot give the truly needed deliverance. Only God can through Christ—in both personal salvation and the bringing of the Kingdom of God to the whole world.

God will reach down into the madness of our world to lay hands on us and rescue us—pulling us up to be with Him. You can turn to Him now and grasp His hand. Repent and receive the eternal hope that comes from His forgiveness. Look to the promise of eternal life upon Jesus’ return.

When Paul reflected on his own sinful attitudes and actions, he cried out: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). He then declared, “I thank God—[deliverance will come] through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (verse 25).

And so it will be for all humanity when Jesus Christ reigns over the earth. We will see humankind rescued by a strong, providential, intervening hand from above. Let’s all pray for that great rescue to come swiftly. And pray that you can be part of the solutions Jesus will bring to transform the world! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



For more on the promises of God’s coming deliverance of the world through Jesus Christ, be sure to download or request our study guide *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. And to help see that it is fast approaching, also download or request our study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* Both are available free. **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find them both.**



Are You Looking for Direction in All the Wrong Places?



Amid a lost world, where can you turn in the face of mounting troubles? Will politics bring needed guidance? How about religion? Or are these all part of the problem?

Discover the one source you can always count on to provide the right way forward.

by John LaBissoniere

Wherever you live in the world, your nation and its people are dealing with a plethora of troubling issues. These may involve the economy, crime, unemployment, homelessness, poverty, inflation, corruption, food and fuel scarcities, illegal immigration, war, terrorism and other major issues. You may be asking: What is going on? Why are these dilemmas continuing without solutions and even growing worse by the day?

Furthermore, on a personal level, you may be looking for how to proceed in matters of marriage, morality, parenting, personal finances, debt, healthcare, housing and security. And what are you to do in matters of addictions, disability, loneliness, fear, anxiety, stress, sadness and anger? Again, where can you find needed direction when it comes to such pressing matters?

Many depend on schools, universities, psychologists, financial advisors, social service agencies and other

organizations for guidance. It's also common practice to turn to government and religion to deliver us and lead us. But are these truly reliable? Where can we find unfailing direction?

Seeking rescue in politics and religion

The Economist Intelligent Unit's annual Democracy Index reported that in 2024 the inhabitants of almost 60 of the nearly 200 countries in the world live under authoritarian or dictatorial rule (WorldPopulationReview.com). In other nations, political parties vie for dominance among the electorate. In both cases, people look to governing authorities to enact laws and policies leading to solutions to numerous problems. And in both cases, needs are unmet and promises are broken.

In surveying 53 countries in 2024, the Political Party Database Project lists 280 significant parties—an average of more than five per national government

(PoliticalPartyDB.org). Amid the contrasting philosophies and agendas of all these factions, there is no unified vision on anything. There is no agreement on how to solve difficult problems. So whose decision should we accept? Consider the extensive discussions and tense arguments by politicians in producing legislation. Moreover, their proposals are often debated intensely in the media, on podcasts and in forums. Since finding perfect solutions is nearly impossible, the outcome is compromise—effectively a *mélange* of halfway measures fully pleasing to no one.

Again, who or what can lead us to the answers to so many troubling issues in human life?

What about through religion? One might think that, surely, wise and harmonious solutions could readily be found there. But sorry! Human religious experience and teaching are hopelessly conflicted and divided and have, in fact, been a source of confusion and

disagreement throughout world history. According to Christianity.com, “there are so many religions that no one has a clear answer to how many exist. Experts have estimated anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000 or more.”

Even the major religions are themselves divided—including Christianity. Wesleyan University has pointed out on its website: “A recent compilation lists 33,089 Christian denominations world-wide, including the massive Roman Catholic Church (with a billion adherents), 25 principal forms of Eastern Orthodoxy, numerous varieties of Protestantism, and tiny store-front churches with fewer than 100 members. These include churches whose governance is democratic, conciliar, or authoritarian; churches whose worship is ceremonial, ecstatic, or mostly silent; churches whose politics are conservative, liberal, radical, or quietist.”

Since all these church organizations purport to believe in the same God, why are they so splintered? The apostle Paul satirically asked a congregation beset by factionalism, “Is Christ divided?” And he encouraged the members to “all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10; 13). In addition, Paul wrote that “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

And since the conflicting beliefs of churches today cannot all be true, how can they be relied on to wisely answer people’s questions about the purpose and meaning of life and how to conduct oneself righteously? Added to all this

are reports of scandals, corruption and hypocritical leadership in various churches and ministries, creating a major credibility crisis in the eyes of many people.

Corrupted through the wrong choice

Given all the divisions, disagreements and inconsistencies in both the secular and religious domains, it’s not hard to comprehend why so many issues are habitually left unsolved and people are confused about what to do. Although this may leave you feeling disheartened, here’s an important question: Could people be looking for direction in all the wrong places, having discounted what’s truly needed?

There is actually a source you can always count on to lead you in the right direction. But people have resisted it for nearly as long as mankind has existed. To learn about that, we need to travel back in time to the creation of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:7, 18). The decisions and actions of humanity’s first parents set in motion the state of world society up to our day.

In the midst of the garden, the Eternal Creator placed two special trees of vital significance. The “tree of life” was emblematic of submission to God and receiving from Him eternal life, while the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” was symbolic of self-determination and self-will leading to death (Genesis 2:8-9). God explicitly instructed Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden except for that of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:2-3).

But one day when Eve was alone in an area of the garden, Satan the devil appeared to her in the form of a serpent and tempted her with the beauty and desirability of the forbidden fruit. In doing so he cunningly implied that



God was not fair in denying her this pleasant food. In falling for the deception, Eve ate the fruit and also gave some to Adam, who was not deceived and willingly disobeyed God, bringing the couple under the penalty of death (Romans 6:23). Due to their misconduct, God expelled them from the garden and prevented them and their offspring from further access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24).

A deceived world gone astray

The sin of Adam and Eve introduced death into the world, and all their descendants, including us, have likewise been destined to die, having also sinned (Romans 5:12; Hebrews 9:27). However, because of God’s great mercy, He instituted a plan to redeem humanity from that ultimate death sentence through the priceless shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22; Ephesians 1:7). (To learn more about this vital subject, request our free study guide *What Happens After Death?*)

Since Adam and Eve’s time to the present day, human beings have emulated the actions of their original parents by stubbornly choosing willfulness and selfishness while disbelieving and disobeying God. In view of this, humanity has experimented with every conceivable social structure and philosophy, as well as countless economic, judicial and governmental systems to find the way forward. And what has been the result? It’s all that we see around us today, an entire world filled with conflict, disarray and confusion—with people doing what “seems

Could people be looking for direction in all the wrong places, having discounted what’s truly needed?

right” but is actually foolish and fatal (Proverbs 12:15; 14:12).

In this context, consider the example of the ancient Israelites. God specifically selected them as His special people and offered them His perfect guidance and protection. He wanted them to be an example nation for other nations to follow. To this end, He gave the Israelites His Ten Commandments, statutes and judgments and asked them to faithfully observe this way of obedience so that it would be well with them (Deuteronomy 6:3, 18). Nevertheless, the people turned away from God and chose to go their own way—with disastrous results. As the prophet Isaiah wrote: “Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward” (Isaiah 1:4).

Yet, even as they acted in this disdainful manner, God sent prophets to the nation’s leaders and people, encouraging them to repent and return to Him in obedience (Isaiah 59:1-2). But they still would not listen or obey. Isaiah describes their condition: “Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace” (verses 7-8).

The same applies to all nations today, as they ignore their Creator while vainly searching anywhere and everywhere for how to be led out of their dilemmas.

Follow God and the truth of His Word through Christ

While the nation in which you dwell will not likely turn in repentance to God, *you individually can!* You have the personal opportunity to reject the disastrous, well-worn, destructive pathway of men and nations. You can instead

Jesus will at His future return be King over all the world. But He can be your King today—ruling your life if you submit to Him.

build your life on the solid foundation of knowledge—the revelation of truth from God, available to us now through His perfect Word, the Holy Bible.

It states, “Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help” (Psalm 146:3). And as Isaiah 2:22 says, “Stop trusting in man, whose breath is in his nostrils; for of what account is he?” (World English Bible). The prophet Jeremiah was inspired to write, “It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).

These passages apply to human reasoning, politics, philosophy, ideology and man-made religious beliefs. The perfect alternative to all of these is to put your full trust in God and His Word and no longer look for answers to life’s questions and direction on what to do in other places. It is God’s great desire that you would “acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:6).

So, are you seeking something? Maybe it’s right before your eyes here in *Beyond Today* magazine and on our *Beyond Today* television programs. We boldly teach the truth of Holy Scripture despite criticism received from traditional Christianity. We are not afraid to contradict long-held professed Christian beliefs that do not conform to clear biblical teachings. While we understand that many people are sincere in their beliefs, we also recognize that those beliefs can be sincerely wrong.

Therefore, we encourage you to examine what we teach. Prove it—check and verify it to be the actual truth of the Bible, which is the foundation of

all knowledge. The Bible provides the correct framework of essential knowledge through which all other useful information can be properly understood. Without this crucial foundation, no one can understand the purpose for human life or discern the true values from ones that are false. Not knowing or understanding God’s Word has left humanity muddled and confused—not knowing what to do (Matthew 22:29). As Jesus Christ clearly stated, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

And Jesus further declared of Himself, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). As He foretold, He will at His future return be King over all the world. But He can be your King today—ruling your life if you submit to Him.

Would it not be valuable, then, to reexamine the direction of your life regarding both secular and religious beliefs and traditions you adhere to? It’s time to ask yourself if you’ve been looking for direction in all the wrong places. If you have, now is the moment to begin making the necessary changes to put yourself on the biblically correct path to God. Doing so will take spiritual strength and courage to not only confront your own beliefs, but to graciously deal with people who may not understand your purpose and mission.

As you take this pathway, God will be with you to lead you if you willingly ask the Father through Christ for help in sincere prayer. We sincerely hope you will do so, and we stand ready to be of help on your journey. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



Is the Bible really the Word of God? Are we supposed to accept that blindly, or are there proofs of the inspiration of Scripture? To help you gain needed perspective, be sure to download or request our free study guide *Is the Bible True?* Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find it.





Censorship, Intimidation & Rising Tyranny

There's a big push by today's governments to control speech and information. The signs are very concerning—but they are just the beginnings of something far worse to come.

by Tom Robinson

There was an outcry from free speech advocates on Aug. 24, 2024 when Telegram messaging app CEO Pavel Durov was arrested in France principally over “lack of moderation” on the app—or failing to monitor and censor or ban the “viral circulation of false information” and the protest organizing communities using it. Durov had earlier said Telegram would remain a neutral platform, but various governments, such as France and Britain, contend it allows extremists to conduct crime. Yet some have drawn a comparison between a private, encrypted messaging platform and a phone company, which is not supposed to be generally surveilling private calls.

Video platform Rumble's CEO Chris Pavlovski noted that France had crossed a red line. Indeed, we seem to be moving into a new stage of escalating censorship. For the past several years we've seen more covert censorship—with political interests colluding with Big Tech companies to promote certain information and suppress counter-information (labeled misinformation or disinformation). Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, admitted the U.S. administration pressured behind the scenes to censor important information. Algorithms and direct targeting led to some being shadow banned or kicked off platforms.

But now we see more coercive measures being applied, with the passage of laws and rules to intimidate or punish those not toeing the line of the prevailing agenda—moving us into the era of open mass censorship. And this is happening in many countries.

On his social media platform X (formerly Twitter), tech billionaire Elon Musk retweeted the following from End Wokeness on Aug. 24: “UK mass arrests citizens for memes; France arrests founder of Telegram; Ireland tries to ban

‘mean memes’; Brazil forces X to flee the country; Australia tries to censor X posts; EU tries to blackmail Elon Musk; DOJ [U.S. Dept. of Justice] jails someone for a meme; [Venezuela's] Maduro blocks all access to X. Free speech is under attack all across the globe.”

This comes at the same time as the globalist drive gains momentum, with more power being handed to the United Nations, especially in terms of digital censorship agreements.

Where is all this leading?

U.S. and British ruling class press to control speech

Globalist elites see controlling information as vital. In the United States, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton recently expressed this in a CNN interview: “If the platforms, whether it's Facebook or Twitter X or Instagram or TikTok, whatever they are, if they don't monitor the content, we lose total control, and it's not just the social and psychological effects. It's real harm” (Oct. 5).

John Kerry, who succeeded her as secretary of state, shortly before lamented in a World Economic Forum session that the U.S. Constitution stands in the way of needed censorship, stating that “if people go to only one source . . . and they're putting out disinformation, our First Amendment stands as a major block to . . . be able to just, you know, hammer it out of existence” (Sept. 25). The answer for him was his party “winning enough votes that you're free to be able to implement change.”

But in other countries, change is coming rapidly. Legal expert Jonathan Turley, author of a book on free speech, notes: “For years, I have been writing about the decline of free speech in the United Kingdom and the steady stream of arrests. A man . . . was arrested for an anti-police t-shirt. Another was arrested for calling the Irish boyfriend of his ex-girlfriend a ‘leprechaun.’ Yet another was arrested for singing ‘Kung Fu Fighting.’ A teenager was arrested for protesting outside of a Scientology center with a sign calling the religion a ‘cult.’ Last year, Nicholas Brock, 52, was convicted of a thought crime in Maidenhead, Berkshire” (“It's Not OK Any More: The United Kingdom Cracks Down on Free Speech,” Aug. 22).

Summer protesting and rioting broke out across the country after a mass stabbing incident in Southport, England was wrongly attributed to a Muslim immigrant—igniting a lot of pent-up anger over immigrant crime and seemingly two-tiered policing going easier on immigrants. Citizens were warned that

even just passing along inflammatory misinformation about the rioting on social media could result in arrest.

Elon Musk retweeted this post on Sept. 1: “Breaking: A woman that filmed the anti-open border riots in Britain and shouted ‘we want our country back’ has been sentenced to 20 months in prison.” Musk also repeatedly challenged Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer on the allegations of two-tier policing even in the recent uprising.

Shockingly, Britain’s censorship rules are being pressed on people in other countries, including U.S. citizens. Sir Mark Rowley, head of London’s Metropolitan Police service, has threatened to arrest people outside the United Kingdom for unacceptable X posts. When asked if the likes of Elon Musk could be arrested, Rowley said that “being a keyboard warrior does not make you safe from the law . . . and whether you’re in this country committing crimes on the streets or committing crimes from further afield online, we will come after you.”

A man in Pakistan was actually arrested on behalf of the U.K. for disinformation in reposting early reports that a Muslim asylum-seeker had been arrested in connection with the Southport stabbings (NBC News, Aug. 22).

European overreach

The international enforcement threat is not limited to Britain. When Thierry Breton of France was still commissioner for the Internal Market of the European Union earlier this year, he was very concerned about Elon Musk doing an interview with former U.S. president and presidential candidate Donald Trump on X that could be watched in Europe! So he sent a letter ordering Musk to implement “mitigation measures” against the “the amplification of harmful content” (Aug. 12). He was basically warning Musk to direct the narrative and appropriately censor to meet EU standards, lest he be liable for billions of dollars in fines!

Outrage from conservative U.S. lawmakers was followed by the European Commission distancing itself from Breton’s letter as unauthorized, but its overall substance is consistent with EU stances.

This European law can serve to push a woke agenda onto U.S. companies and others around the world—regulating businesses that trade with Europe and firms supplying those companies. As Prof. Turley points out, the right of free speech “is again under attack from another European government, which is claiming the right to censor what Americans are allowed to say about politics, science and other subjects. Indeed, the threat from the European Union may succeed in curtailing American freedom to an extent that the Axis powers could not have imagined” (“Europe’s Plot to Regulate Political Speech in America,” *The Hill*, Aug. 17). Or worse, as he points out, progressive U.S. politicians have urged and welcomed its implementation.

Within Europe itself, the censorship push is in full swing. As one headline notes: “Spanish Government to Restrict Freedom of Information to ‘Save Democracy’” (*The European*

Conservative, Sept. 18). This involves a registry of media outlets, allowing the socialist government “to dictate who media outlets’ shareholders can be, their sources of financing, and how much government institutions will spend on advertising with them. Any media outlet not on the register will likely be branded ‘pseudo-media’”—to discredit them.

Then there’s this headline: “German ‘Citizens Council’ Wants to Criminalize Disinformation” (Brownstone Institute, Sept. 23). Another article points out that countering the government line about basically anything is viewed as “anti-democratic and/or delegitimizing the state in a way that endangers security” (C.J. Hopkins, “The Hate-Crime Commissar of New Normal Berlin,” Sept. 15).

Yet another headline reads: “German Police May Soon Enter and Search Homes Secretly” (*Independent Sentinel*, Aug. 15). This includes installing spyware on computers and phones and covert home searches—only to be used in exceptional circumstances. But who decides that? As this piece notes, “There is always an excuse to impose totalitarianism.”

A dark time is coming

These various stories go hand in hand with a push to exalt the United Nations into global governance, the most authoritarian facet of which concerns control of the Internet and information integrity—entailing censorship and surveillance. (See “The global totalitarian agenda advances” on page 14.) Surprised? Perhaps not at this point.

The sad fact is that a European-based and globalist tyranny is rising—and the English-speaking nations are beginning to submit to it while they yet hold more power. These developments were foretold in the Bible.

Daniel 2 and 7 and Revelation 13 and 17 present the final rise of an ancient worldly power with its roots in Babylon—an end-time revival of the Roman Empire, the political bloc and its leader referred to as the Beast. These passages also show this empire to be a controlling religious power in union with a great false church.

Under this evil system, God’s true servants will be persecuted as they avoid the infamous mark of the Beast, denoting allegiance to the system and its turn from God and His laws. This mark is not a digital ID, as some imagine, but that could be a way that people’s adherence to the system is surveilled, regulated and controlled.

The totalitarianism we’ve seen in past human history was forerunner to the ultimate one that’s coming.

Stay alert. Stand for what’s right. We may well suffer for that, but we can trust in God to see us through. In the end, His Kingdom will bring an end to tyranny! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To better understand what prophecy says about the rise of the totalitarian empire of the last days soon ahead of us, be sure to request or download our study guide *The Final Superpower*. A free copy is waiting for you. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find it.



Pope says many paths to God while pursuing ecumenism

Since assuming the papacy with the prior pope still living, Pope Francis has routinely stirred up controversy. He has recently ruffled feathers in seeming to say that the diversity of religions offers many paths to God as part of his perceived final mission in life—increasing the influence of the Catholic church worldwide and building relationships with other faiths, even those that have been historical enemies.

In addressing Catholic Junior College in Singapore on Sept. 13, 2024, the pope said he was impressed with the capacity of the young people in the audience for interfaith dialogue. He noted that arguing one's religion was more important than another, or that it's true and the other isn't, was harmful, not helpful. Yet he went further in stating, per the Vatican's translation: *"All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy: they are like different languages that express the divine. But God is for everyone, and therefore, we are all God's children. 'But my God is more important than yours!' Is this true? There is only one God, and religions are like languages, paths to reach God.*

Some Sikh, some Muslim, some Hindu, some Christian. Understood?" (emphasis added).

This is not correct. While various religions are different ways of people *trying* to reach God—there is in fact only one way to God, and it's through the biblical religion of true Christianity. As Jesus Christ said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6; see also Acts 4:12).

The pope's statement was not the first time he's promoted such thinking. In February 2019 he signed a document on human fraternity along with a Muslim grand imam in Abu Dhabi claiming that "the pluralism and diversity of religions . . . are [along with other traits] willed by God in his wisdom." Yet in fact the wide variety of religion throughout the earth is not from God but is the product of Satan the devil, who has deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9). The pope even recognizes the great division as a problem to be healed.

Earlier this year, the Vatican released a new statement on the role of the pope, which Francis

approved. As reported: "The Vatican has made proposals for a new understanding and a different exercise of the papal office, according to which the Pope could in future be accepted by other Christian churches as an honorary head" ("Vatican Proposes New Understanding and Different Exercise of Papal Office," english.katholisch.de, June 13, 2024). It includes "the creation of a new global consultative level with regular meetings of church leaders from different denominations." It further involves stressing the papal role as patriarch of the West to recognize the Eastern Orthodox patriarchy, though in some matters holding the "primacy of unity in the communion of the Western and Eastern Churches."

Yet with the focus on many paths to God, one wonders if sights are set on bringing even non-Christian religions under an ecumenical umbrella.

We need to understand that the Bible foretells a great false Christianity of the end time in partnership with the tyrannical empire of the Beast. The ecumenical movement may help in bringing the religious system to its ultimate prominence ahead.

The global totalitarian agenda advances

In late September 2024, dignitaries from around the world came together at the United Nations' headquarters in New York to sign the "Pact for the Future," pledging "allegiance to the UN as a central, unifying government" ("Pact for the Future: Nations Swear Fealty to UN," Activist Post, Sept. 12).

Yet, as one source comments, "beneath its glossy promises lies a dangerous move towards centralized, top-down control that could have devastating consequences for individual freedoms, national sovereignty, and democratic governance" (Jim Hoft, Gateway Pundit, Sept. 22).

The UN website called the four-day summit "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine the multilateral system and steer humanity on a new course"—which, as another commentator put it, "sounds just lovely and not at all creepy and hubristic" (Kit Knightly, "A Globalism of Ideas—Inside the UN's 'Pact for the Future,'" Off-Guardian.org, Sept. 25).

The document is noted by this same commentator to be "81 pages of self-important waffle so crammed with meaningless political language it becomes near-unintelligible" (ibid.)—what another source labels "Globalese." It marches through climate change, conflict, food insecurity, poverty, misinformation and hate speech with nebulous solutions like



respect for international law, expanded cooperation, an increased UN role and the buzzword "interoperability"—all with a great deal of money.

Yet "for many, this reads more like a manifesto for totalitarian governance than a collaborative effort to improve international cooperation. This grandiose Pact is being marketed as the solution to the problems of tomorrow, but critics are rightfully sounding alarms over its deeply troubling implications" (Hoft).

"The most blatantly authoritarian language is reserved for control of the internet (it almost always is)" (notes Knightly)—with the Global Digital Compact Annex seeking to "advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data government approaches," underlining the importance of "information integrity." It calls on tech companies to hand over private information to government researchers—effectively

pressing for censorship and surveillance. And it further aims to "roll out digital media and information literacy curricula" to combat misinformation, shaping consensus—that is, indoctrination.

The same commentator laments over what's been passed: "Every country in the world (yes even the ones that raised objections [previously]) now formally agrees that hate speech and misinformation are *the* problem. Every country in the world (even the ones that raised objections) endorses an end to privacy and increased censorship as a solution. Every country in the world (all of them) agrees to spend at least \$100 billion per year to pursue 'sustainable development goals' in developing nations" (Knightly).

The conclusion this source reaches? "We may not have a formal global government yet, but we already have a globalism of ideas, even if there is some disagreement over implementation. That's how world government is being shaped, and how it will get finally born—through a creeping consensus of fictitious problems & needless and often insane 'solutions' quietly endorsed by every nation of the world."

We are indeed creeping toward the biblically prophesied totalitarian Beast power of the last days. Be sure to request or download our free study guide *The Final Superpower*.

Continuing assassination attempts—a new normal?

In our previous Current Events & Trends section, in the September-October 2024 issue, we covered the attempted assassination on July 13 of former U.S. president and presidential candidate Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. Who would have thought we would be following up with discussion of another attempt on his life in the next issue? Yet here we are. As Patrick Casey notes at The Blaze, “This raises a dreadful question: Are assassination attempts becoming the new normal for American politics?” (Sept. 29).

This later attempt came on Sept. 13 at Trump’s West Palm Beach golf course. A man with a rifle and GoPro camera had positioned himself in some bushes next to a golf hole the former president would next be playing at. When the rifle muzzle was spotted protruding through the fence, a Secret Service agent fired shots there. The gunman fled but was soon apprehended.

As with the first assassination attempt, there are still many questions. The Secret Service is aware of such positions alongside the golf course and normally sweeps the area to make sure all is clear. But that didn’t happen in this case. How was the would-be assassin able to sit in this sniper’s nest for many hours before Trump’s arrival and during his game?

The man evidently acted out of belief that Trump is a Hitlerian danger to democracy, as touted by many political opponents in the country. There have

been calls to tone down the rhetoric, but to little avail.

Shockingly, a Rasmussen poll on Sept. 16-17 on behalf of Napolitan News found that 17 percent of voters believe America would have been better off if the former president had been killed in the attempted assassination. It’s more disturbing when results are broken down by party affiliation, with 28 percent of the opposing side thinking the country would be better off and another 25 percent unsure—less than half saying it would not be better (John Nolte, Breitbart, Sept. 18). How low things have sunk!

Trump was not deterred by the second attempt to kill him, stating at a New York rally afterward, “God has now spared my life not once, but twice. These encounters with death have not broken my will—they’ve only hardened my resolve . . .” (Sept. 18). Surprisingly, Trump returned to Butler on Oct. 5 for a new rally in the same place he was shot.

In another poll, nearly two thirds of all likely voters thought it very likely there would be more assassination attempts (Casey Harper, Just the News, Sept. 24). In fact, there have reportedly been other plots that have been thwarted. One shudders to think about the harrowing conditions a successful attempt would lead to.

Of course, America is not the only place in the world dealing with such problems. Indonesian authorities thwarted a terror plot in September aimed against Pope Francis—the suspects all seen as linked to ISIS.

Israel’s long year of fighting

Much has been happening with regard to the Jewish state of Israel’s war against its enemies over the past year—really too much to adequately cover here. But we’ll note a few things to take note of.

After Israel suffered the horrific attack from Hamas invaders from Gaza on Oct. 7, 2023, it set about wiping out Hamas and took out many thousands of operatives. Hamas was sadly still holding many Israeli hostages from the earlier invasion and killed a number over time, executing six of them in late August 2024 when they were on the verge of being rescued. Israel kept prosecuting the war and at the end of September assessed that Hamas as a military group had been defeated and was now regarded as a mere guerilla terrorist group.

Israel was also dealing with Hezbollah in Lebanon, which had joined in solidarity with the Palestinians after the initial Oct. 7 attack and sent many rocket attacks. Israel dealt a massive blow to Hezbollah’s leadership and coordination through having sold them, over concerns of phone tracking, pagers and walkie talkies rigged with explosives and detonating them in two waves. These devices had been obtained with the aim of warring against Israel. There were complaints from around the world about other people being killed, which

is always awful, but Israel was trying to use surgical precision—and this was perhaps the largest surgical strike ever conducted.

Iran, for whom Hamas and Hezbollah are proxies, issued many threats and ended up launching the largest missile attack against Israel to date, with 200 ballistic missiles. Most of these were intercepted with Israeli and U.S. defenses, a few struck, but no one was killed except a Palestinian man in the West Bank—this viewed by many in Israel as miraculous. Now there is the matter of Israel’s response and possibly eradicating Iran’s nuclear program.

Through all this, Israel has been the object of constant condemnation and antisemitism throughout the world—including in the United Nations. In fact, the UN passed a resolution on Sept. 18 that not just the West Bank area of Samaria and Judah but Jerusalem’s Old City must be Jew-free within a year.

Why is this region the focus of so much news of war and chaos? The Bible said that Jerusalem would be a very heavy stone, with all nations gathered against it (Zechariah 12:1-3). To learn more about the background and where events are heading, request or download our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.

Young people flourishing through Bible reading

The State of the Bible 2024 report from the American Bible Society “reveals that members of Generation Z [those now in their teens to mid-20s] have the highest stress level of any age group but that those who read their Bible regularly score higher on a happiness and mental health scale than Millennials [those now in mid-20s to early 40s] and members of Generation X [those now in early 40s to late 50s] . . .

“Members of Gen Z who are ‘Scripture engaged’—that is, they regularly read their Bible and say it impacts their lives—scored high on the report’s ‘human flourishing index,’ which gauges an individual’s happiness, mental health and social relationships, among other factors” (“Daily Bible Reading Links to Higher Happiness and Mental Health Scores Among Gen Z,” Crosswalk.com, July 9, 2024).

Overall, Gen Z-ers have the lowest flourishing numbers, but the Scripture-engaged subset has the highest number of all groups, suggesting “they are living with purpose, character, and happiness.” The take away here: “Gen Zers who read the Bible say it has life-changing power.”

The Bible helps everyone who is willing to accept what it has to say. But those in today’s wayward generation, starved of truth and purpose, can experience dramatic change and fulfillment through studying God’s Word (see Proverbs 3:13-18).

To help in grasping what it has to say, request or download our free study guide *How to Understand the Bible*.



The Kind of Leaders the World Needs

Every election season is filled with wrangling over which candidates would and wouldn't be the best leaders. But just what are the essential qualities of a "good" leader? The Bible tells us that a leader should be focused on service and spells out specific aspects of servant leadership. And that instruction applies not merely to appointing leaders but to the development of our own character.

by Becky Sweat

This past year has seen important elections in many nations, with the U.S. presidential election regarded as the most consequential. But of course, the winners of state and local elections also matter. People wielding control over the lives of others is always a serious issue. Sadly, the political profession is notorious for people breaking promises and advancing themselves and their associates in unscrupulous ways. What ought we to see instead?

It seems like everyone has their own ideas about what qualities are essential for someone in public office—or leaders in general. But if we want genuine answers on this topic, the best place to look is the Bible. Scripture has a lot to say on the topic of leadership. It defines a good leader as someone who is a *servant leader*. This is something Jesus Christ clearly laid out in Matthew 20: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (verses 26-28, New International Version).

Jesus' focus was not on trying to promote an image of greatness for Himself, but rather *of serving those under Him*. As an object lesson, Jesus modeled the true servant style of leadership by washing His disciples' feet (John 13:14). Servant leaders do not see themselves as "too important" to "do the dirty work." They use their positions and abilities *to help others*. They do not seek public office to garner wealth, status or influence—which can again be a common motive for so many politicians today, even if they don't readily admit it—or engage in vicious, unprincipled rivalry to gain power.

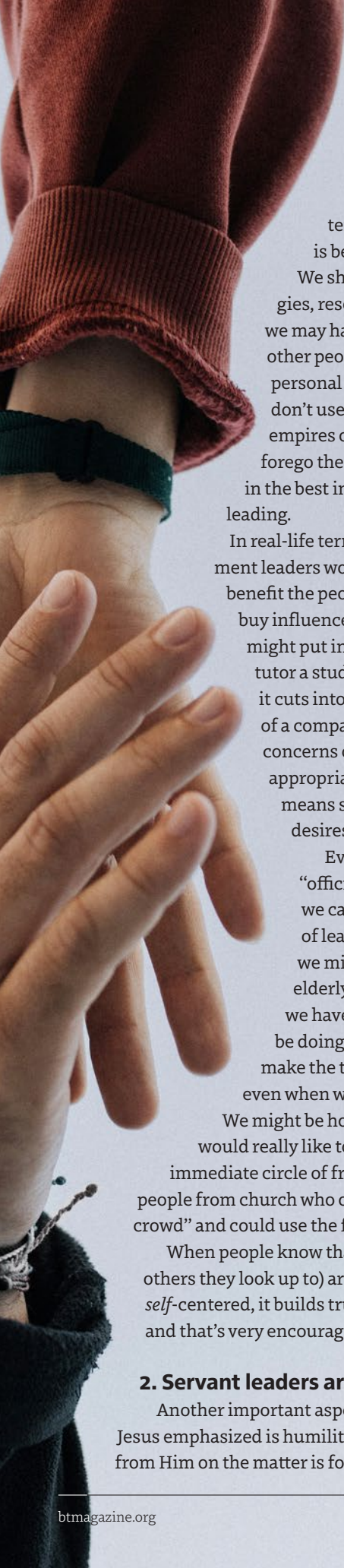
Besides evaluating leadership in those occupying or seeking office today, we should most importantly be striving to foster the qualities of good leadership in ourselves. You might think: "Well, I'm just an average citizen. I have no interest in obtaining a political office. None of this applies to me."

But it does.

You might be a parent, husband, boss, manager, minister, teacher, coach, chairman of a committee at church, or hold an office with your homeowners' association. These are all leadership positions. But even if you don't have an "official" leadership role, there are always opportunities to be leaders on an informal basis, such as offering guidance to others or influencing a group discussion. You need to be ready to lead with a servant mindset. This will not only improve present situations and help people right now, but it will also help prepare you for a future role in God's coming Kingdom.

The Bible tells us that Jesus will be returning to the earth as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 11:15; 19:16). Today's Christians will have the opportunity to assist Jesus Christ and rule over cities as kings and priests in the Kingdom of God (Revelation 5:10; Luke 19:15-19). To prepare for these positions, we should be developing the qualities of servant leadership in our lives right now.

Exactly what are some of the most important traits of a servant leader that we should be working on? Many different characteristics could be discussed here, but these six are some of the most essential leadership qualities highlighted in the Bible:



1. Servant leaders focus on serving, not being served

The hallmark characteristic of a servant leader is being concerned for others.

We should be using our energies, resources and any position we may have to strengthen and help other people, not just to fulfill our personal desires. Servant leaders don't use people to build their empires or egos. They are willing to forego their rights and desires if it's in the best interests of those they are leading.

In real-life terms, this means government leaders would use tax revenue to benefit the people being governed, not to buy influence for themselves. A teacher might put in extra time after school to tutor a student in need, even though it cuts into personal time. The owner of a company will take to heart the concerns of employees and make appropriate changes, even if it means sacrificing some personal desires.

Even if we aren't in an "official" leadership position, we can still practice this kind of leadership. For instance, we might run an errand for our elderly neighbor, even though we have a lot of chores we could be doing at our house. We will make the time to visit a lonely widow even when we have a busy schedule.

We might be hosting a get-together and would really like to limit the guest list to our immediate circle of friends, but we'll include people from church who often get "lost in the crowd" and could use the fellowship opportunity.

When people know that their leaders (and others they look up to) are *others*-centered and not *self*-centered, it builds trust and overall harmony, and that's very encouraging to those being served.

2. Servant leaders are humble

Another important aspect of servant leadership Jesus emphasized is humility. A classic statement from Him on the matter is found in Matthew 18:4:

"Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Christ truly lived this way. Even though He is our Lord—our Master and Ruler—He never promoted Himself. He on one occasion described Himself as "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29, NIV).

Humility can mean different things in different circumstances, but one of the main ways it plays out, writes author Tim Tucker, is that "humble leaders choose to do humble things . . . the things that others don't want to do . . . the menial things, the dirty things, the things that no one will see" (*Grab a Towel: Christ-Centered Servant Leadership for the 21st Century*, 2023, p. 38).

I once attended church with a very successful, wealthy businessman who was a wonderful example of this. If a child threw up in church, if there was a stopped-up toilet in the restroom, or if one of the elderly members needed assistance going through the potluck dinner line, he was always the first to volunteer to help with the situation. No task was "beneath him."

Humble leaders also don't vie for the spotlight. Another author writes, "As long as leaders worry about who 'sits at the head table,' they have little time for the people they are called to serve" (Gene Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership: Timeless Wisdom on Servant Leadership*, 2016, p. 38). He emphasized that servant leaders are content to quietly serve "in the background." Their goal is to please God, not to "climb to the top of the heap."

3. Servant leaders lead with integrity

Proverbs 11:3 tells us, "The integrity of the upright guides them" (English Standard Version). And Proverbs 10:9 declares, "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely . . ."—then warning, ". . . but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out" (ESV).

Integrity can be defined as always interacting with others ethically, honestly and honorably. Servant leaders will not say something just to try to gain a following or to create a temporary peace among the people under them, and then later renege on what they promised. They are straightforward and reliable, and follow through on commitments. This inspires trust. Those led by them have no reasons to doubt or disbelieve what they've said.

We might think about some of the stereotypes of politicians here, but we should consider ourselves. As one father admitted: "Too many times lately I've told my kids we could go to the lake on the coming Sunday and then I got involved with yardwork and we never made it there. After that happened a few times, my kids started rolling their eyes anytime I said we could have some fun." We all need to watch ourselves, to make sure before we make a commitment that we are prepared to follow through on it.

4. Servant leaders direct the glory to God, not themselves

In typical political ads, campaign speeches or public

debates, much of the focus is: “Look at all *my* accomplishments!” And that often continues if elected. More often than not, those in public office are pre-occupied with making themselves look as good as possible—without acknowledging what God may have done to bring about any positive developments.

An obvious example in the Bible of someone who did not acknowledge God as our provider is King Nebuchadnezzar, who walked around his palace musing about his great building projects in Babylon in honor of his majesty—for which God brought judgment to teach him the needed lesson (Daniel 4:28-33).

Self-glorifying is the exact opposite mindset from what God wants us to have, and servant leaders know that. In the book of Psalms, numerous passages tell us to “give glory” to God’s name or similarly to “magnify” God (see Psalms 29:2; 34:3; 35:27; 40:16; 69:30; 70:4; 115:1). We glorify God when we recognize and extol His attributes and acts, expressing our thankfulness for His direction and intervention in our lives.

Godly leaders never take full credit for their successes. They always point to God’s oversight and help. They may certainly acknowledge that they worked hard. But they give the ultimate glory to God and thank Him for what He has done. Godly leaders know that without God’s help and guidance, they would just be “spinning their wheels,” getting nowhere.

5. Servant leaders are approachable

The publisher of a community newspaper I worked for years ago was probably one of the most “unavailable” people I have ever known. The doors to his office were always shut. He rarely picked up his phone if anyone called him. If an employee saw him in the hallway and approached him about a problem, he roared a one-word answer and walked away. Not surprisingly, employee morale was horrible. Most everyone had concerns but felt like

nothing would ever be solved, as the boss showed no willingness to hear what they had to say. It all underscored just how important approachability is if you’re going to lead other people, particularly if you want to be a servant leader.

Being approachable means people feel comfortable coming to you and talking with you. It includes making yourself available to people of all positions and classes, not just those you perceive to be at “your level” in society.

In his book quoted earlier, Tim Tucker maintains that Jesus was the most approachable man who ever lived. Crowds followed Him, and Jesus did not place limits on His approachability. People from all walks of life felt they could approach Him, engage Him, ask Him questions, and make requests of Him.

We, too, should seek to be approachable, stresses Tucker, but it’s not always easy. “One of the hardest things about being approachable is that it means people will find it easy to share their grievances, pain and disappointment with us,” he writes. But “as leaders, we need to be sure that we are able to accept criticism and things spoken in ‘tough love’ with humbleness and gentleness” (p. 40).

6. Servant leaders recognize they’re not the ultimate authority and not invincible

Finally, a servant leader knows that he is accountable to God for how he cares for the people under him—that he is never to mistreat, abuse, neglect, deceive, or use them to his advantage. He recognizes his own limited authority and that he, too, has to answer to someone—perhaps other people but ultimately God.

Molly, a mother of two preschoolers, relates: “There are days when I am so exhausted that I find myself getting irritable with my kids. But then I have

to remind myself that my children are truly *God’s* children. He gave them to my husband and me to raise. We will have to answer to God in how we cared for them. Remembering that helps me be more patient with them.”

Servant leaders also realize they have limited abilities, that they do not have all the answers, and that we all need God. Jesus Christ told us in John 15:5, “Without Me you can do nothing.” We need Christ in our lives. He was also quick to point out that “the Son can do nothing of Himself” and stated, “My Father is greater than I” (John 5:19; 14:28). Even in His exalted position, Christ had no problem admitting that He isn’t the ultimate authority—that He is submitted to God the Father.

A godly leader will encourage those under him to look to God as their true provider. If this leader were a ruler of a country and there were a national crisis of some kind, he might proclaim a national fast or day of prayer, seeking God’s intervention. In a family situation, a father might encourage family members to pray and fast and seek God’s guidance when facing serious household financial challenges. Godly leaders realize how much we all need God.

In closing, we certainly don’t see a lot of these qualities of servant leadership in our world today. But when Christ returns, servant leadership will be *the* way that rulers govern. Those who lead in God’s Kingdom will have learned to be the servant of all (Matthew 20:26). And the populace will benefit from being led by rulers who really do have their best interests at heart.

Until then, we should seek God’s help in striving to lead in a Christlike manner in our daily lives. Doing so will create harmony and encourage those we interact with at home, church, work, and in our communities. Let’s be the kind of leaders the world needs. **BT**

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Jesus Christ is the preeminent example of servant leadership. But just who was Jesus? What did He come to do and teach? And what did He—does He—ultimately want for you? To better understand, request or download our free study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find them.



"IF YOU LOVE ME..."

Millions of professing Christians say, "It's so good to know and love the Lord." While this is a nice sentiment, how do these sincere people express their love to God? Is it done in the way specified in Scripture, or is something vitally important missing?

by John LaBissoniere

A famous professing Christian evangelist frequently implores people to turn to God by encouraging them to pray this way: "God, I'm a sinner, and I'm sorry for my sins. I ask You to forgive me. I believe in your Son, Jesus Christ, and invite Him into my life."

That's fine in part, since people need to admit they are sinners, ask God for forgiveness and acknowledge Christ as their Savior. But there's a critical missing ingredient in just making that declaration. What is it?

Jesus called for a *change in behavior*, declaring, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15, emphasis added throughout). Those seven words are certainly unambiguous! Even so, Jesus' statement is not what millions of traditional Christians believe or practice. Rather, they have been taught that the Christian life can be lived without any obligation to obey God's laws—His Ten Commandments.

Although these people are sincere, they have been schooled in a false idea—that God's grace sets them free from having to do anything other than believe in Jesus as Savior. Obeying the commandments is viewed as a way to gain salvation by "works."

"Created in Christ Jesus for good works"

To support this erroneous concept, professing Christian ministers and theologians often point to Ephesians 2:8-9, which states, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Indeed, no one can be saved by works, since it is only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ's shed blood that a person can be purified from sin. However, conventional Christian theologians often disregard the very next verse, which plainly says, "For we are His workmanship,

created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand *that we should walk in them*" (verse 10).

Holy Scripture explains that grace does not abolish, cancel or repudiate God's law! The author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: *Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all*" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Moreover, Christ said, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

When a young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to obtain eternal life, He told him, "If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments*" (Matthew 19:17). He then listed several of the Ten Commandments to make it clear what He was referencing (see verses 18-19). True disciples of Christ are therefore obligated to follow His model of obedience to the commandments. When Jesus lives within us following repentance, baptism and having received the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, we are to fully and faithfully emulate His example of diligent obedience to His Heavenly Father (1 John 2:6).

Sadly however, mainstream Christian ministers have led people to believe that God's laws have been annulled. But this teaching is preposterous when we examine what Jesus actually stated about God's commandments.

Did He come to eradicate God's laws—to get rid of them? Absolutely not! Rather, He said: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:17-18). This doesn't mean Jesus came to satisfy the law's obligations so that no one else needs to. That would in effect be destroying it. Rather, His filling

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21)



it to the full was in explaining it more fully and living it as a perfect example—for us to follow while heaven and earth remain!

“For all Your commandments are righteousness”

It is undeniably clear that Jesus loved God’s laws and kept them meticulously. In this regard, what words are recorded as beginning His public ministry? He said, “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). But, repent of what? *Of sin*, as many verses show. The Bible defines sin as living contrary to God’s commandments: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). The apostle Paul said in Romans 7:7 that he “would not have known sin except through the law”—sin being whatever is against that law.

In the previous chapter he said this: “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Romans 6:12-13). To become “instruments of righteousness,” Christ’s true followers must obey God’s laws for, as Psalm 119:172 declares, all God’s commandments are righteousness (compare Deuteronomy 6:25).

In Romans 7:12 Paul wrote, “The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.” And then in verse 22: “For I delight in the law of God.” When considering such glowing statements of esteem and admiration, how can anyone believe God’s commandments have been made null and void or should be disregarded? It’s illogical and scripturally fallacious.

The fact is, God’s laws are fully authoritative and operational and have been established for the supreme benefit of all humanity. Breaking the commandments brings disastrous results. Paul understood this—realizing he was engaged in a daily struggle to keep the commandments even after having repented of sin.

He stated in Romans 7:14, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.” Are professing Christians being taught that upon repentance they must continue striving to overcome sin? Sadly, they are not! The fact is, repentant, converted Christians can and do sin and therefore must persevere

in opposing their own carnal nature as well as the downward pull of sinful society and the devil’s powerful, venomous influence (see 2 Corinthians 12:20; Ephesians 4:25-32; 6:11-18).

The apostle John wrote about this ongoing battle against sin by telling baptized, converted Christians: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). Indeed, when we sin after having been baptized, we must go before God’s “throne of grace” in earnest prayer to acknowledge our disobedience and ask God for His forgiveness (Hebrews 4:16).

“If you love Me, keep My commandments”

Finally, millions of people who profess to be Christian say they know and love Jesus. But then they fail to obey the commandments that He not only fully observed but told them to also keep! Does that make any sense? Christ’s message to them is this: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). It is vitally important that you and I take to heart the inspired, scriptural words of Jesus and His apostles. Their testimonies ought to motivate us to seriously examine our beliefs and traditions.

Considering all this, what can you do to ensure you are not being led amiss spiritually? Studying the Bible diligently and obeying its instructions carefully are central to this goal (Psalm 119:172; Luke 4:4; Hebrews 4:12). These instructions certainly include accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. But that also entails repenting of sin and continually seeking God’s righteousness, and with His help living your life in the identical manner Christ did—faithfully observing His Father’s commandments (Galatians 2:20; Matthew 6:33; John 15:10). Always remember Jesus’ clear statement in John 14:15: “*If you love Me, keep My commandments*”! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To better understand the truth about what God requires of us and the forgiveness He offers us through Christ, be sure to request or download your free copy of our helpful study guide *What Does the Bible Teach About Grace?*

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Would Jesus Observe Christmas?



Christmas is widely considered the foremost Christian holiday—the beautiful celebration of the birthday of Jesus Christ. But does Jesus Himself look at it that way? Would He join in the festivity, receiving the observance in His honor? Or is His actual assessment quite different?

by Mario Seiglie

Millions of people see Christmas as “the most wonderful time of the year.” But does Jesus Christ, whose birthday it supposedly celebrates, see it that way? It’s an intriguing question. And if He came back to the earth today, would He participate in this celebration, accepting it in His honor? Is there a way we can know?

Jesus said He came to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37)—and He declared God’s Word to be truth (John 17:17), stating further that Scripture, which testifies of Him, cannot be broken (John 5:39; 10:35). To arrive at religious truth, we must examine any idea in light of what the Bible says. As the apostle Paul instructed, “*Test all things; hold fast what is good*” (1 Thessalonians 5:21, emphasis added throughout).

Are Christmas and its traditions biblical? Do they fit with biblical principles? Was this holiday a practice of the early Church? Is it something Jesus would have embraced?

The roots of the holiday

There are so many religious customs we take for granted. Just because they are ancient or popular doesn’t make them

right. But it takes courage to stick to the ones that are biblically sound!

The word “Christmas” itself shows its man-made origin—having to do rather with the Roman Catholic mass of Christ. According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: “The word for Christmas in late Old English is *Cristes Maesse*, the Mass of Christ, first found in 1038, and *Cristes-messe*, in 1131 . . . *Christmas* was not among the earliest festivals of the Church” (“Christmas,” online edition).

The mass itself goes back to pagan mystery rites rather than being a reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice, as claimed. Moreover, the holiday itself did not originate with Jesus or His followers but came from pre-Christian pagan observance.

Jesus was not even born in the winter. The Bible says His birth took place when the shepherds were still out in the fields at night tending to their flocks (Luke 2:8). Yet Christmas occurs on December 25, when the temperatures in Israel can plunge below freezing.

As *Adam’s Clarke Commentary* points out: “And as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a

presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could he have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up. The feeding of the flocks by night in the fields is a chronological fact, which casts considerable light upon this disputed point” (note on Luke 2:8).

How was Christmas established on December 25? British church historian Henry Chadwick explains: “*Early in the fourth century there begins in the West (where first and by whom is not known) the celebration of December 25th, the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice, as the date for the nativity of Christ*” (*The Early Church*, 1967, p. 126).

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church further notes: “The popular observance of the feast [Christmas] has always been marked by the joy and merry-making formerly character-

depart from Me, *you who practice lawlessness!*” (Matthew 7:21-23). Lawlessness in the Bible simply means violating or disregarding God’s laws (1 John 3:4).

Christ was always careful to obey the Father’s commandments. He said, “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, *just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love*” (John 15:10). He told His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you*; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

We do not see in the New Testament that the apostles celebrated Christ’s birth. That was not one of Jesus’ teachings, nor did His apostles teach it. Likewise, Paul later warned the Christians in Colossae against following traditions and commandments of men: “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles *of the world*, why, as though living in



Jesus warned: “In vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition” (Mark 7:7-9).

istic of the Roman Saturnalia and the other pagan festivals it replaced. It developed considerably in England in the 19th century through the importation of German customs by the Prince Consort (such as Christmas trees)” (1983, p. 281).

Does it really honor Him?

God specifically warned that His people were not to adopt pagan religious practices in honor of Him and that He would not accept such worship (Deuteronomy 12:29-32). And Jesus did not do away with God’s law in this regard.

Jesus warned people about thinking they were honoring God while keeping human commandments and traditions in place of what God has commanded, declaring: “*In vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition*” (Mark 7:7-9).

And He also warned: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but *he who does the will of My Father in heaven*. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you;

the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—*according to the commandments and doctrines of men?*” (Colossians 2:20-22).

A biblical festival Jesus and His followers did observe

Remarkably, there is in the New Testament a feast which is part of God’s laws and which Jesus said *we should keep in His memory*—and it was not Christmas.

He explicitly told His disciples about *keeping the Passover* in His honor: “Then He said to them, ‘With fervent desire I have desired to eat *this Passover* with you before I suffer; for I say to you, *I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God*’ [meaning He will keep it again with all His believers when He returns]. . . And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; *do this in remembrance of Me*’” (Luke 22:15-16, 19).

Passover, on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (in spring in the northern hemisphere), was one of God’s seven annual festivals listed in Leviticus 23. Jesus and the early Church observed all of these biblical worship times.

Regarding church history, few are aware of the great conflict that took place between those who observed the New Testament Passover and those who later began keeping what became known as Easter Sunday, another man-made holiday (falsely labeled Passover then and in various languages today). This controversy started in the second century and continues to this day.

Around A.D. 190, we have an extraordinary letter preserved about this controversy. It was from Polycrates, the bishop at Ephesus, writing to the Roman bishop Victor about the Christian Passover.

Polycrates states: “We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia [Ephesus’ province in western Turkey] also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord’s coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints.

“Among these are *Philip*, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis . . . and, moreover, *John*, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and . . . fell asleep at Ephesus. And *Polycarp* in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr . . . *All these observed the*

of Rome was, “I . . . am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said ‘We ought to obey God rather than man’ [Acts 5:29].”

This is still the right answer in facing this issue today.

Christ told us to worship God in spirit and truth

Jesus foretold how His future followers would worship the Father following two key principles—using God’s Spirit and following biblical truth. He said: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the *true worshipers* will worship the Father *in spirit and truth*; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him *must worship in spirit and truth*” (John 4:23-24).

In effect, Christ said true Christians would receive God’s Spirit and would be led to the truths He taught. He stated, “But the Helper will *teach you everything* and *cause you to remember all that I told you*. This Helper is the *Holy Spirit* that the Father will send in my name” (John 14:26, Easy-to-Read Version).

Moreover, we are to worship God not only though His Spirit being in us, but also by obeying His biblical truths—not man-made ones. As Psalm 119:151 proclaims, “*All Your com-*

Tragically, it was Victor of Rome’s man-made celebration of Easter Sunday that prevailed in most of the Roman Empire, and later, another man-made feast was imposed by the Roman church—Christmas.

fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, chap. 24, Verses 2-6).

Tragically, it was Victor of Rome’s man-made celebration of Easter Sunday that prevailed in most of the Roman Empire, and later, another man-made feast was imposed by the Roman church—Christmas.

Chadwick readily admits regarding the shift from Passover to Easter: “Victor of Rome’s intervention turned out to be successful in the sense that his view was eventually to prevail . . . But *there can be little doubt* that the *Quartodecimans* [or Fourteeners, those who observed the Christian Passover on the 14th day of the first Hebrew month, as instructed in the Bible] *were right* in thinking that *they had preserved the most ancient and apostolic custom*. They had become *heretics simply by being behind the times*” (p. 85).

Thus, those who observed Passover on the 14th, who were actually keeping what Jesus had commanded, were labeled “heretics” because they did not go along with man-made festivals! These faithful Christians formed God’s small, persecuted flock (Luke 12:32). They simply did not give in to the threats of the church in Rome. Polycrates’ reply to Victor

mandments are truth” (Psalm 119:151).

Remember, many man-made feast days are just pagan substitutes for the God-instituted feast days found in your Bible. The counterfeit feasts help conceal the glorious truths and meanings of God’s feasts.

Who is the ultimate author of these fraudulent teachings? It is Satan, the archdeceiver. As Paul explained, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, *whose minds the god of this age has blinded*, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

In sum, would Jesus Christ compromise with God’s law through participating in and endorsing man-made feast days originating in pagan worship? The answer from the Bible is a resounding no! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



For a fuller perspective on observing Christmas and other holidays of pagan origin and neglecting the observances God commanded in His law, request or download our informative study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* It’s available free of charge. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find it.



Archaeology Continues to Corroborate the Bible

Ongoing archaeological finds in Israel lend further support to the biblical record. We highlight some recent discoveries.

by Tom Robinson

Network of fortified cities showing expanding Judean kingdom at the time of David and Solomon (June, 2023).

This is not a single find but a published survey of evidence by Yosef Garfinkel of Hebrew University from sites he has excavated, including Lachish and Khirbet Qeiyafa (the Elah Fortress, maybe Shaaraim in 1 Samuel 17:52), along with Beth Shemesh, Tell en-Nasbeh (identified as Mizpah) and Khirbet ed-Dawwara, a site on the desert fringe of the Benjamite hill country.

These similarly fortified sites in the Judean foothills or Shephelah, all a half-day to a day's walk from Jerusalem, were on main roads heading into the areas of Jerusalem and David's earlier capital of Hebron, seemingly forming a perimeter around the kingdom's hinterland. They were given basically the same urban layout in the 10th-century B.C. (per radiocarbon and pottery dating). Each had an outer wall abutting dwellings and an interior circuit road. Four of these walls were casemate walls (double and hollow in between for rooms), while the solid wall at Lachish dates slightly later, matching with fortification by Solomon's son Rehoboam in 2 Chronicles 11:5-12. These towns had large administrative buildings with rectangular beams in groups of three, matching descriptions of Solomon's Palace and the temple. Inscriptional evidence displays literacy.

These cohesive factors point to a centralized regional authority, running contrary to the narrative of minimalist scholars who deny the biblical description of an expanding kingdom under David and Solomon, deeming them mere local chieftains or warlords if they existed at all. It should be noted that Garfinkel does not claim to see evidence of the broad expanse of their reigns as presented in Scripture.

Others have pointed out that we should not necessarily expect extensive urbanization at that time beyond what the Bible describes, for while some Israelites dwelt in former Canaanite cities, many were evidently still pastoralists and semi-nomadic. Yet even a nomadic kingdom could still be powerful and opulent—such as that of the Mongols, the largest contiguous land empire in history.

Alabaster panels depicting Sennacherib's siege of Lachish found in secondary use (August 2023).

In Mosul in northern Iraq in 2022, seven large alabaster or "Mosul marble" panels depicting archers, city siege and landscape details were found reused as foundation stones at ancient Nineveh's Mashki Gate. They are now believed to have earlier stood at the site of Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, showing his military campaign in the west against the Phoenicians and Judah, particularly his capture of the Judean city of Lachish in 701 B.C. These panels are very similar to ones on display in the British Museum. It's significant that there is no

portrayal in any of these panels of the Assyrians taking Jerusalem, as the Bible shows God intervened to prevent that.

(In our next installment of ongoing archaeological discoveries, we will cover claims from June 2024 that the Assyrian siege camp at Lachish and at Jerusalem have been identified.)

Discoveries at El Araj on the Sea of Galilee reinforce its identification as Bethsaida (August and November 2023).

There are two candidates for the site of Bethsaida, the hometown of the apostles Peter and Andrew (John 1:44). The more traditional site, Et Tell, sits 1.5



An ink well discovered in a first-century fisherman's home at El Araj on the Sea of Galilee.

miles (2.25 km) from the highwater mark of the Sea of Galilee. That has long been challenged as too far away for a fishing village, the name Bethsaida meaning "House of Fishing." The other site is El Araj, which sits right at the highwater mark. While the first-century Jewish historian Josephus says

Bethsaida was later made into a Roman city, Et Tell lacks Roman artifacts. Yet excavation at El Araj shows Jewish settlement, such as stone vessels for ritual purity, along with later Roman finds such as a bathhouse.

Found in a Jewish-period home in 2023 was an inkwell containing numerous small fishing weights—seeming to indicate first-century fisherman could be literate (against those contending Peter and John as fisherman would have been unable to write New Testament books).

Later in the season, a first-century wall was found beneath the remains of a later Byzantine church building—that later church believed to be the one that was reportedly built over the house of Peter and Andrew according to a visiting eighth-century Bavarian bishop. Yet it's not yet known if the first-century wall belonged to a house.

Excavation at the site is challenging due to the high water table in this location very near the Sea of Galilee.

New radiocarbon dating reveals Gezer gate built by Solomon and city destroyed by Merneptah and Shishak (November 2023).

A radiocarbon study mainly of seeds in the stratified layers at the ruins of ancient Gezer, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, has established a

clearer chronology of these layers, published in the *PLOS ONE* scientific journal.

One destruction layer matches Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah's invasion into Israelite territory around 1210 B.C. Another destruction layer dating to around 925 B.C. fits with Pharaoh Shishak's invasion during the reign of Rehoboam.

Of great significance is that the city's six-chambered gate is dated to the first half of the 10th century B.C., the time of Solomon, restoring an earlier dating based on Scripture.

Back in the 1960s, archaeologist Yigal Yadin discovered this gate and nearly identical ones at Megiddo and Hazor, concluding that these standardized Iron Age fortifications showed a strong, centralized state, leading him to attribute them to the labor force of Solomon, which according to 1 Kings 9:15 built ". . . Hazor, Megiddo,



Remains of the six-chambered gate at Gezer.

and Gezer." Later, minimalist archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, who doesn't accept the biblical accounts of Israel's United Monarchy under Saul, David and Solomon, rejected Yadin's conclusions and, based on his own pottery and carbon-14 studies, argued these six-chambered gates were built in the 9th century B.C. under kings Omri and Ahab (labeled the Low Chronology).

Finkelstein calls the new study meaningless, saying not enough organic samples were tested, but it was reportedly based on a large number of samples. Many now recognize that the six-chambered gates properly fit with the High Chronology and construction under Solomon.

Artifax magazine points out a critical question Finkelstein ignores in the debate over who built these fortifications: "Why has no six-chambered gate built by Omri and Ahab been found in their own capital cities of Samaria and Jezreel?" (Winter 2024, p. 8). Rejecting Scripture leads to denying the obvious. Once again, the Bible is vindicated.

Discovery of tiny 10th-century-B.C. Phoenician electrum pendant or earring in Jerusalem presented

(February 2024). Announcement was recently made of the 2012 discovery in Jerusalem of a 3,000-year-old basket-like pendant or earring made of electrum (a rare, naturally occurring alloy of gold and silver). Similar to others known from ancient Phoenician sites, this one was found in Jerusalem's Ophel excavations in the upper City of David area below the Temple Mount. The Bible says there was a close alliance between the Phoenician (northern Canaanite) king Hiram of Tyre and David and Solomon, and it attests to Hiram sending workers to help construct David's palace (2 Samuel 5:11).

It's possible the item could have just come through trade, as some argue, rather than being worn and lost by a Phoenician worker. But Israel Antiquities Authority archaeologist Amir Golani, expert on First Temple Period jewelry involved in researching the pendant, thinks actual foreign presence in Jerusalem is the likelier explanation—such a pendant being the miniaturization of a known cultic shrine and an important signifier of religious identity, something not likely parted with in international trade. Yet even the trading explanation would highlight a link to the Phoenicians, in accordance with Scripture.

Radiocarbon study authors present a more exact chronology of ancient Jerusalem, showing earlier population increase and western expansion

(May 2024). A comprehensive research project giving detailed dating of ancient Jerusalem by the Israel Antiquities Authority, Tel Aviv University and the Weizmann Institute of Science was published in the prestigious journal *PNAS* (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences), challenging some prior conclusions. The study involved 100 radiocarbon dates from sampling organic finds in four different excavation areas on the eastern and western slopes of the City of David (the oldest part of Jerusalem)—and extensive calibration of a known phenomenon of inaccurate carbon-14 dating readings through a large part of the Iron Age (perhaps due to lower solar activity in that period).

Significantly, it was discovered that Jerusalem was much more heavily populated and urbanized in the 12th through the 10th centuries B.C. than was previously thought—aligning with the biblical description of the city at the time of David and Solomon, contrary to minimalist scholars who reject the biblical representation of that period.

A surprise finding was dating of the city's westward expansion of wall construction to encompass a major increase in population. It had been thought that this happened at the time of Judah's King Hezekiah in response to both an influx of immigrants when the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians and the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib's invasion of Judah a couple decades later. Foundational courses of a wide leg of the western expansion of the city wall known as the Broad Wall (or Avigad's Wall, after the archaeologist who directed the excavation in which it was found) has also been called Hezekiah's Wall (seen as related to Isaiah 22:10). But the new dating shows this wall and westward expansion occurred earlier



The Broad Wall in the Jerusalem Old City Jewish Quarter has long been associated with Hezekiah's building work, but new research redates it to the time of his great-grandfather Uzziah.

in the time of Hezekiah's great-grandfather King Uzziah, following the great earthquake during the earlier king's reign (see Amos 1:1; Zechariah 14:5).

Rather than contradicting the Bible, this major defensive building work comports with what the Bible says about Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:8-9: ". . . He became exceedingly strong. And Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, at the Valley Gate, and at the corner buttress of the wall; then he fortified them." **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



Again and again, we see that the finds of archaeology fit with and support what the Bible records. Much more compelling evidence is available. And there are yet many other reasons to accept the validity of Scripture. For help in exploring this, be sure to download or request our free study guide *Is the Bible True?* Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find it.



"Teach Us to Number Our Days"

A life-and-death moment should lead us to reflect on what we are doing with the life we've been given. Properly considering the time we have—and don't have—brings wisdom.

by Robin Webber

Shocking news came earlier this year—the kind remembered as to where and when you first heard it. On July 13, a former U.S. president and then-presidential candidate came within millimeters of assassination. Just the momentary turning of his head made the difference between life and death. It's amazing how one moment in time can alter our existence.

As events settled, many wondered how it might transform the candidate's demeanor and if it would alter the divisive political discourse in the country. But there's more here for each of us to contemplate personally.

It's always easier to put others under the microscope rather than ourselves. But let's consider our own lives and allow this close call to serve as a personal wake up call—reflecting on how truly fragile and temporary our precious allotted time here and now is to heed Jesus Christ's invitation of "Follow Me" (Matthew 4:19, emphasis added throughout). Let's ask ourselves a simple but profound question: *How would we live today if we knew there was no tomorrow for us?*

Here's a story to help make the point. A man had a medical checkup

with a follow-up appointment to review results. The doctor said he had bad news and worse news and asked what the patient wanted to hear first. "The bad news" was the calm reply. So the doctor said the bad news was that the patient had only 24 hours to live. The now-distraught man jumped up and cried out: "Only 24 hours to live?! I can't possibly get my affairs in order that quickly. What news could possibly be worse than this?" The doctor responded, "I was supposed to tell you yesterday, but I forgot!"

Like the patient, we can come to think we're immune to the brevity of life, accepting the certainty of "death and taxes" but only for everyone else. Yet the One we follow is not like the forgetful doctor. He has already addressed our condition and specially inspired Moses in Psalm 90:12 to prescribe the healthy, realistic regimen we need His help in: "*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*"

How will we "fill in the dash"?

Consider for a moment that tombstones are typically engraved with dates of birth and death. God defines a

general range of life expectancy when Moses states, "The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years..." (verse 10). But what about "the dash" stretching between the inscribed dates? God alone knows the actual length of that dash for each of us (Job 14:5; Psalm 139:16). Within our personal dash connecting life and death is the space in which we learn to love, repent, experience forgiveness from Above, exercise forgiveness and abide in faith-filled hope here below. And we are to grow beyond the moment when the invitation of "Follow Me" first came our way.

Once again, let us probe the question as to whether dramatic brushes with death change people. You would hope so, but we need go no further than the Egyptian pharaoh who opposed God's demand of "Let My people go!" to see that people can be very stubborn in their ways. God continued to send one plague after another on his empire. At a given point, Pharaoh's own magicians declared to him, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19). But the high and mighty "god-man" did not heed, and the rest is history.

Nearly a millennium later, King Belshazzar of Babylon, at a pagan banquet as recorded in Daniel 5, was stopped in his tracks when he saw a finger writing on a wall a message of God's judgment. The inscription proclaimed, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN," interpreted to mean "God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it . . . You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting . . . Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians" (verses 25-28). Belshazzar did not repent. He put more trust in the mighty walls of Babylon than "the finger of God."

On the other hand, do brushes with *life* change people—change us? Consider three men who came near to Christ in literally conversing with this One who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) and being offered His personal invitation of "*Follow Me*." Each had a *humanly* reasonable excuse for avoiding commitment in returning to everyday life and did so (Luke 9:57-62). Perhaps as you read this column you are at the conversant level with Christ, but He wants more than your ears. He wants your heart and total allegiance to Him!

Let's consider another candidate for discipleship, Saul of Tarsus, who encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. Struck by blindness, a great inner light was given birth in him. He would never be the same. Saul, who would become the apostle Paul, experienced a total alteration of life through the touch of Christ's finger in his life.

How to gain a heart of wisdom

How then might we personally "gain a heart of wisdom," as stated in Psalm 90? Consider that the One who appeared to Paul, Jesus Christ, was later defined by this same changed man as "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). Allow me to share principles in three scriptural passages touching on how to draw on this divine wisdom

through what Christ preached and practiced—and encourages in us now!

1. Prioritize what's most important. The One who bids us "Follow Me" shares a parable in Luke 12:16-21 outlining what occurs when we *don't* "number our days." He describes a wealthy man focused on living at ease with abundance of food and enjoyment and accumulated goods while his Creator was merely a distant afterthought. The man thought he had many years left to enjoy, but his life was going to end that night.

Contemplate how this person

Perhaps as you read this column you are at the conversant level with Christ, but He wants more than your ears. He wants your heart and total allegiance to Him!

would have reordered his priorities if he thought more about his days being limited. He would not have allowed what seemed urgent in the moment to crowd out preparing to meet his Maker. May we—each of us "a ball of dust on two legs" who returns to the ground—learn from this parable that none of us knows how many days we will be granted, so we must not waste them on selfish pursuits that have no eternal significance!

2. Work on what you've been called to while you can. Jesus practiced what He preached! He realized His earthly ministry was not endless, but would last a few short years leading up to the Passover in which He would die as "the Lamb of God." He proclaimed in John 9:4, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is

coming when no one can work." Christ as "the Son of Man" was not gloom-ridden but spiritually realistic in each step and precious moment in which He drew breath.

3. Make the most of your time. Paul sounds a note of alarm in Ephesians 5:14-17 with a wake-up call to the preciousness of time—here and now, this moment. The living and written Word, Jesus Christ through the Holy Scriptures, *shine light from Above* on the importance of making every moment count *now*, as tomorrow may never come or be too late to grasp what God is offering.

As Paul writes: "Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, *and Christ will give you light*.' See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, *redeeming the time* [gaining value in that specific moment of harvest while the productive yield is viable] because the days are evil. *Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*" Here, then, is the path to true wisdom.

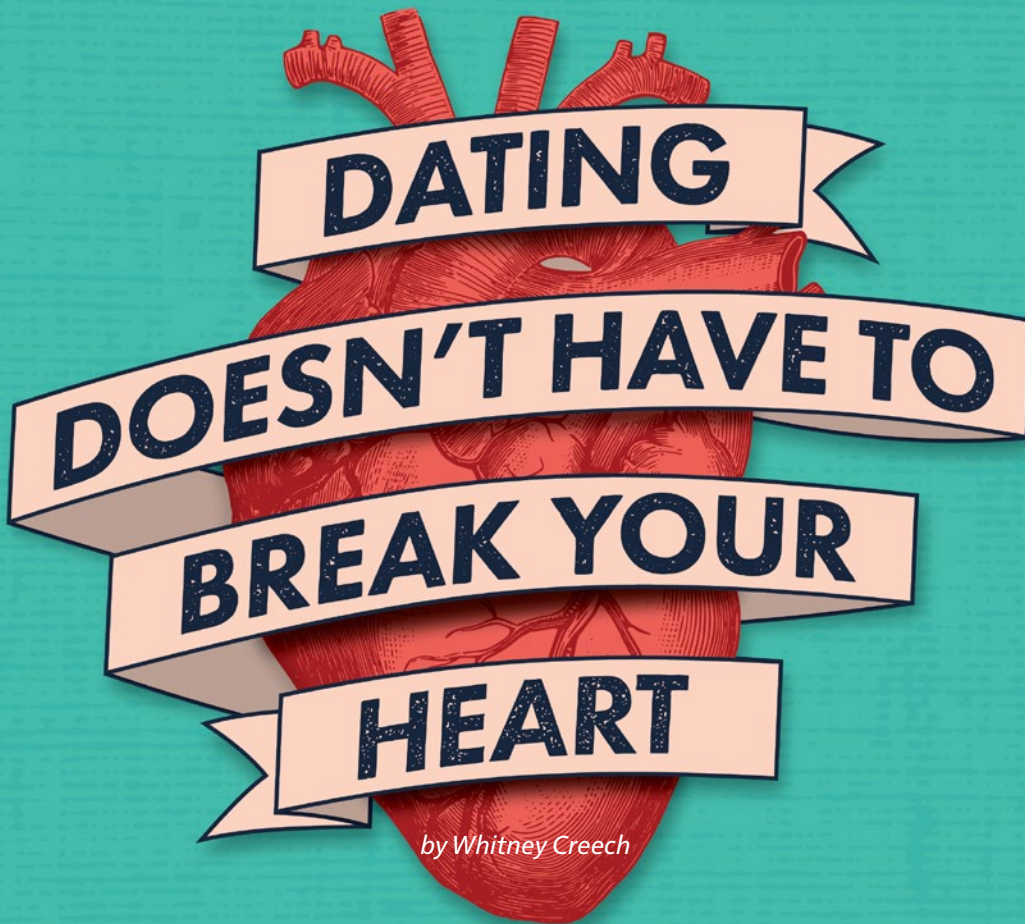
So the question remains that only you can answer: How will you utilize the moments ahead—or this moment that could be your last—to enrich your dash of existence? While the clock is still ticking, may we all "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18), as we embrace His invitation of "Follow Me." Until next time—*God willing!* **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To make the most of the time you've been given, don't neglect seeking God and heeding His instructions. To help direct you in these vital pursuits, be sure to request or download our free study guide *Tools for Spiritual Growth*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find it.





Where do you begin an article about dating? As I tossed this question around in my mind, I decided to reach out to some teens and young adults and simply ask. I received quite a few wonderful, thoughtful responses with a surprising amount of overlap. The fear of not finding someone to marry. Taking relationships slow. Should I date someone just for fun, or is there a bigger purpose? How do I know if the person I like is the one God intended? Do any of these topics sound like things you've considered before?

The typical practice for dating goes something like this: You commit to one person in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. As you begin to figure each other out, you realize this person is not "the one." You break up and burn the bridge of friendship. You keep repeating this pattern, hoping to find your match. In what other area of life do we leave things to so much trial and error, resulting in such heartbreak and frustration?

In Romans 12:2 we are told, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and

acceptable and perfect will of God." So instead of conforming to the world's standard of dating, which can cause so much baggage and emotional distress, let's consider an alternative.

Over and over in the Psalms, we read about waiting on God. "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!" (Psalm 27:14). I've always loved this verse, but I'd never considered it in terms of dating. Waiting on God does not mean being passive. Instead, it involves taking our desires to God earnestly in prayer, knowing He hears our petitions. It involves developing moral, godly character and focusing on building ourselves up with God's help. Waiting on God also requires trusting that God knows who will best complement our strengths and weaknesses and allowing for His timing.

LOOK IN THE MIRROR

When I was in high school, it was so easy to get caught up in evaluating everyone else's potential that I rarely stopped to consider how *I myself* measured up. The Bible is full of character traits that we are required to develop if we desire to be in God's Kingdom.

Take time to study His Word and figure out what He requires of you. It's a lot harder to develop the characteristics of honesty, trustworthiness and integrity than it is to judge someone else. Consider what type of spouse you would be to someone else. Wouldn't you want someone who is actively striving to become more like God? I challenge you to be that person too!

It can be daunting to think about all the ways you can grow, but good friends can help build you up. In the typical dating scenario, one person commits so fully to another that other friends and relationships are often pushed aside. This can prevent healthy relationships from developing, especially the kind that are needed once you break up. How much more encouraging would it be to have a solid group of friends that could support your growth and development?

TRUST GOD'S TIMING

God's timing can seem like a confusing topic. We have so many biblical examples of people who decided to take matters into their own hands instead of waiting on God. Consider, for example, the story of Abraham and Sarah when they were promised a son (Genesis 18). This promise didn't come with a timeline. But when Sarah saw that she was not bearing a child in her expected timeframe, she introduced Hagar into their relationship. Thus Ishmael was born, and the repercussions of this decision are still being seen today (see the chapter "The Sons of Abraham" in our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*). Abraham and Sarah used human reasoning to justify their actions.

We might not always understand God's timing, but we do know His will for us never requires us to sin. Any relationship that requires you to compromise or bend your morals is not what God intended for you. Sure, everyone makes mistakes, and God works with us despite our flaws. But don't push God's boundaries hoping it will lead to a godly relationship. Stand firm in your beliefs, and continue to pray that God will provide what He desires for you in His timing.

Look at the example of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. Hannah petitioned earnestly for what she desired most. She went year after year to the tabernacle of God, despite being taunted. She waited on God's timing with prayer and perseverance, and God answered her prayer.

TAKE IT TO GOD

Above all, we must first commit to our relationship with God. By putting what He desires first in your life, you are able to set priorities that enable growth. Don't



Let your focus be on developing your character and becoming a man or woman of God.

get me wrong, there will be challenges when you decide you want to wait for God's timing in your life.

Your friends may all be exclusively dating, and it might look like a lot of fun in the moment (dating *is* a lot of fun when it's done right!). There may only be a small group of teens or young adults in your area who value God's way. And when you do find someone you're interested in who shares your beliefs, you may live hours away from each other. But these problems and frustrations can be overcome if you look to God and trust that He has an amazing plan for your life. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

Dating doesn't have to be a heart-wrenching experience. Let your focus be on developing your character and becoming a man or woman of God. Wait for God's timing and for a relationship that He orchestrates, while you maintain great friendships with those who will support and encourage you. Then allow God to lead you when you're ready for a more serious commitment. God has a plan for you, and it's greater than you could ever imagine. As He states in Jeremiah 29:11: "I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



Just what is God's purpose in drawing men and women together when they're mature? For an overall perspective, we encourage you to request or download our informative study guide *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension*, available free of charge. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd24 to find it.



Compass Check highlights articles from our youth-oriented brand by this same name.

Q: Does God pick national leaders?

A: The Bible records that Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful ruler over the Babylonian Empire 600 years before Christ, received a vision from God. The prophet Daniel interpreted this dream. Daniel explained that God gave Nebuchadnezzar this vision “in order that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men” (Daniel 4:17).

As implied in Daniel’s words, Nebuchadnezzar was not a nice man. He threw people alive into hot furnaces if they didn’t bow to his idol. He threatened all of his advisors with mass murder if they didn’t interpret his dream.

Few developed countries have experienced such a violent ruler in recent times. Yet the Bible clearly shows that at times God will place terrible leaders in positions of great power for the explicit purpose of fulfilling His plans.

This was certainly true of the pharaoh of the Exodus, whose heart God hardened time after time until Egypt was humbled for its evil treatment of God’s people, Israel. God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, “Indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth” (Exodus 9:16).

God at times has been directly involved in elevating individuals to very prominent positions. He inspired the prophet Isaiah to announce far in advance the rise to power of Cyrus the Great to fulfill His purpose (Isaiah 45:1). It was a century and half later when God gave Cyrus power over the Persian Empire.

At another time, Daniel stated: “Praise the name of God forever and ever . . . He controls the course of world events; he removes kings and sets up other kings” (Daniel 2:20-21, New Living Translation 2013). The apostle Paul, writing to Christians living in the capital city of the Roman Empire, wrote, “All authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God” (Romans 13:1, NLT 2013; see also Psalm 75:6-7; John 19:10-11).

So does this mean that God somehow “endorses” a new national president or any other leader with all of his or her flaws and foibles? No. What it does mean is that God has a purpose for humanity, a purpose for current events, and He will accomplish that purpose through the leadership that He either puts in place or allows.

The Scriptures show that while God sometimes does indeed decide who will be the leading official of a nation, He also allows people to pick national leaders whose values are not those taught in the Holy Scriptures, even to their detriment. He once criticized His own anciently chosen people with these words: “Israel has rejected the

good . . . They set up kings, but not by Me” (Hosea 8:3-4). The lesson is plain: God only approves of those rulers who have not “rejected the good,” as He defines it.

The apostle Paul gives this superb advice for Christians who wonder what to think of the governments they find themselves living under: “Therefore I exhort first of all *that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority*, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1-2, emphasis added).

Praying that God will provide leaders who will work to make it possible for believers to live “a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” is commendable and proper in God’s eyes. But first it is critical to learn and practice His will before expecting Him to hear those prayers (see 1 John 3:22). Even Jesus, having complete faith in God’s decisions, prayed, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). And it is in God’s Word, the Bible, that we can find His will revealed.

We do see a pattern in ancient Israel where the nation would veer into rejection of God’s laws and be given over to foreign or domestic oppressors. The people would then cry out to God for deliverance, and He would send new leadership to bring relief. Yet this was often short-lived, as the pattern would soon repeat. The same can happen today.

God says in 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek

My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” No doubt that would include giving them leaders who would benefit the country. But sadly, we see no great turning to God and His laws in any of our nations today.

And we know from Bible prophecy that tyrannical powers will assume great control in the years ahead of us to wreak havoc on the earth.

Yet individually we must not cease from seeking God and praying to Him in repentance and sincere commitment, asking His help to endure the troubles of this world and keeping our minds fixed on the ultimate solution—the coming Kingdom of God, in which God will at last give the world perfect rulers led by Jesus Christ. **BT**



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DIVE DEEPER



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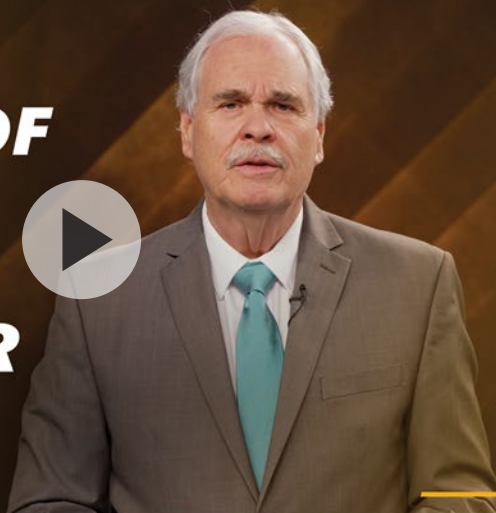
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