

BEYOND TODAY

Envisioning a Better World Tomorrow

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Council of Elders: Scott Ashley, Jorge de Campos, Aaron Dean, Dan Dowd, John Elliott, Victor Kubik, Len Martin, Darris McNeely, Tim Pebworth (chairman), Mario Seigle, Rex Sexton, Paul Wasilkoff

Church president: Rick Shabi

Media operation manager: Peter Eddington

Managing editor: Tom Robinson

Senior writers: John LaBissoniere, Darris McNeely, Steve Myers, Gary Petty, Tom Robinson

Design production manager: Mitchell Moss

Senior graphic designer & illustrator: Matt Hernandez

Circulation manager: John LaBissoniere

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The Ten Commandments A Law for the Future

In our September-October issue, we examined the ongoing relevance of the Ten Commandments today and in the future when they will be universally applied in God's Kingdom.

I just read your Q&A on how Jesus and the apostles made clear that we must obey the Ten Commandments. The greatest mistake churches are making now is not helping people understand what we must do to get close to God. His rules are not suggestions. They are the key to drawing close to Him, living in His light, and becoming more like Him in our thoughts and spirit (as opposed to living in the flesh). I'm reading the Bible in its entirety now, paragraph by paragraph, as a former law professor and scholar, to get clear on what it says and what it does not say. We cannot depend on what others say about the Bible sometimes. That being said, I'm grateful for the wonderful help you give people online as they study the Bible. Your citations of the biblical text are very helpful.

From the Internet

A response to a letter to the editor about our teaching about the Trinity

I saw the email from Colorado and would like to tell you that you may have lost that reader, but I am here because you are the only people who reject the Trinity. I will be enrolling in the 12-lesson Bible study course. Thanks for all you do.

Reader in New Mexico

More responses to our media and free resources

I found the article "Persecuted for Righteousness" (July-August issue) more than just interesting. I spent my whole life as an agnostic because my parents and grandparents tried to teach me religion using Christmas and Santa Claus as the starting base. I was born in England in 1946 right after the war. I realized Santa was not real because I saw him in all the shops and street corners ringing his bell. Later in life after I got out of the Navy, I got involved with [a church I've since left that] didn't celebrate

Christmas, which was to my liking. I also found out they didn't believe the Trinity doctrine, the concept of an immortal soul and Easter. I never believed any of those doctrines, having never been brainwashed by any church. Your article confirmed that we both think the same. I would like to talk to any of your people because I have been looking for similar beliefs.

Reader in Texas

Do you know of a church or denomination that teaches/preaches/practices only the Word of God, from the whole counsel of God, according to what the Scriptures actually say, without any taint of Catholicism or man-invented theologies/doctrines/practices? I'm longing for teaching and study in an assembly/church of the unadulterated truth of the whole of Scriptures without the man-invented "isms." Thank you.

From the Internet

The United Church of God strives to derive all its teachings from the Bible, rejecting doctrines and practices that were introduced into mainstream Christianity in the centuries following the New Testament period. Those teachings that don't have solid biblical support—such as the replacement of Passover with Easter, the replacement of worshiping on God's weekly Sabbath with Sunday worship, the introduction of Christmas, or the formulation of the Trinity doctrine—we reject. So we would encourage you to visit ucg.org/congregations and reach out to the pastor of the congregation closest to you! He could answer any questions you might have. We hope to hear from you again soon!

I am 25 years old, and I live in Cuba. I just found out about this church while surfing the Internet, and I would like to know more about it: How are your meetings? Do the members all believe the same doctrine

worldwide, or are there differences from one place to another? How are they organized worldwide and at the congregational level? Is there a magazine in Spanish that I can subscribe to? Is there a Bible course I can subscribe to? Do you have or use a specific version of the Bible? If so what is it and where can I get it?

Reader in Cuba

We're so glad you discovered us and find our resources helpful! We do have a Spanish language magazine, as well as a Bible study course, and our congregations all teach the same doctrines. While we default to the New King James Version as a good all-around English translation, we don't espouse it or any other Bible translation as being the only "true" version, since any translation from one language to another by very nature has to make choices to balance understandable clarity for the end reader and absolute accuracy to the original source text. However, we do give an overview of how to choose a Bible translation on our website, which you can easily find at ucg.org/jf25. For anybody looking for a congregation, visit ucg.org/congregations to find the closest one, or get in touch with the nearest office listed on page 31.

Thank you so kindly for sending me some of your free Bible study guides. I really appreciate it. I am writing to you today to ask if it's no trouble to please send me the new Bible study guides, the ones shown on TV or any others you recommend. Thank you so kindly and God bless you all.

Reader in Queensland, Australia

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to Beyond Today, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or email btinfo@ucg.org (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).



A Turning Point to Ruin or Resurgence?

As we turn the page to 2025, it goes without saying that the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency four years after leaving office marks a dramatic change in world events. We also see populist movements gaining ground in other Western nations, as dissatisfaction with the ruling elites has been mounting.

Of course, we naturally wonder what this will mean going forward. The prestige of the United States in international affairs has diminished in key respects in recent years. People remain resentful of heavy-handed government, rising costs and endless wars, among numerous other complaints. Besides economic turmoil, key hotspots around the world threaten to balloon into wider conflicts, possibly even world war.

Yet now it seems there might be an opportunity to reverse course on some straining and perilous situations. Will that happen? Perhaps. America and other nations might be able to better handle certain crises for a while and experience a period of prosperity. It's happened before—as it did in the 1980s. But all was not right then, and it's certainly not now. Morals have plummeted in America and other Western nations, and that holds real consequences.

Proper management of domestic and foreign policy can lead to better outcomes. But anything can happen at any moment, catastrophe can strike from anywhere, and there's only one place to turn for any real sense of security at all—Almighty God. Even if we are at a time of reprieve or respite, that will not go on indefinitely.

In this issue of *Beyond Today*, our cover story surveys some elements of the world scene as the new U.S. administration prepares to assume power—yet it reminds us of where ultimate power lies, with God, highlighting our need to continually draw near to Him. We further consider a warning God delivered through the prophet Ezekiel to the Israelites, not just the ancient people of his time but their modern descendants—including, though most do not realize it, the American and British people and other nations of northwest European heritage.

Given the period of uncertainty before us, I'm reminded of a widespread publication from 1986 titled *The Rebirth of America* put out by the Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation. Near its conclusion is a powerful speech by Russell Clearman titled “Which Way, America?” The speech rehearses the country's founding as “One nation under God” and then asks what course it will follow—in words still highly relevant today, which those of other countries can also identify with.

Recounting some history, the speech then declares: “None but the fool could fail to see the hand of a sovereign God upon this golden land of the free. But today America faces a danger point. We must confess with troubled heart that America has forgotten God. She is rolling in luxuries, reveling in excesses, rollicking in pleasure, revolting in morals, and rotting in sin.

“What can we expect of a society in which passions are like riderless horses: in which there is a desolation of decency, in which love has become a jungle emotion, lust is exalted to lordship, sin elevated to sovereignty, Satan worshipped as a saint, and man magnified above his Maker?

“Today, the bleak winds of destiny are howling in protest to the way we are living. It is sheer folly to suppose that the strength and security of America lies in its vast economic resources, industrial prowess, scientific ingenuity, diplomatic skill or military might. Our real defense as a nation rests in the spiritual convictions, character and commitment of our citizenry. Our forefathers founded this nation upon the Christian faith and it will live so long as the Lord is our God . . .

“This same principle of dependence upon God is embodied in our National Anthem [last stanza]: ‘Blessed with victory and peace, may the heaven-rescued land, praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation!’

“Sin separates a nation from God! Sin separates this nation from God! But we are not without hope . . . From the very throne of God there comes this message to us, ‘Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool’ [Isaiah 1:18] . . .

“We must go to our knees in humility and prayer, in contrition and confession, in repentance and the forsaking of sin. We must go back to the cross, where the incarnate Son of God was cursed, condemned, crucified for man . . .

“The crisis is acute. The danger is imminent. Time is running out. Something miraculous must happen in the heart and soul of America . . . now, before it is too late. The choice is clear. It is repent or perish, revival or ruin, Christ or chaos. The question of the hour is: Which Way, America?”

Those elsewhere can ask the question of their own nations. May we all treasure the truth God gives, remain committed to Him and experience the blessings He bestows—while we yet have time.

Tom Robinson, Managing Editor
Beyond Today Magazine


A World in Transition ...to *What?*

The world has been teetering on the brink of escalating tyranny, war, social instability and economic calamity.

A new U.S. presidential administration and populist calls for change in other Western nations could lead to some pushback for a time.

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by Darris McNeely



There is a growing crisis in world events. War in Europe. War in the Middle East. Tension in Asia over Taiwan and China's growing military threat. Some major news sources, including *The Wall Street Journal*, have repeatedly warned that events are heading toward World War III! Others paint current tensions as a new Cold War.

The recent election of Donald Trump to his second term as U.S. president heralds a reset of such issues on the world agenda. As a candidate, he stated that he would end the Ukraine war, that Hamas would not have attacked Israel Oct. 7, 2023, and

that he would impose tariffs on goods coming into America. Whether he can stop the war in Europe, prevent a wider Middle East war or put up tariff barriers without a ripple effect of consequences creates big unanswered questions.

The world has dramatically changed since President Trump left office four years ago. We may be at a tipping point as to what any one man can do to influence global events. The world is experiencing a significant period of transition. What does that mean, what should you understand, and what should you do?

Keep watching, mindful of who's ultimately in charge

As war rages, world leaders are sleepwalking through dangerous times. Big changes are coming, and our lives will be impacted. But we don't know how rapidly things will proceed. There may even be a period of breathing room—time to focus more on a spiritual life that matters.

Jesus Christ spoke to these days: "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day [of calamitous upheaval at His return] come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. *Watch therefore, and pray always* that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36, emphasis added).

God is always the One to turn to, as He is directing events toward a final outcome, determining the world's leaders according to His purpose, as revealed in Bible prophecy: "And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with Him" (Daniel 2:21-22).

God determines the rise and fall of nations and great empires: "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (Acts 17:26).

Still today, nothing occurs apart from His watchful eye and ultimate oversight. That's encouraging. It's not just the endless cycles of history at work. Men may plot and plan, but God's designs win. "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:10-11).

Read on as we examine some significant events and conditions around the world. It's important to look at what's happening in the frame of a biblical worldview, including Bible prophecy.

A turning point in America

The election of 2024 was one for the history books. Two attempts on the life of Donald Trump stunned the nation. Trump's comeback and victory were historical, considering the political turmoil that began when he lost the 2020 election. Four years of political strife, cultural upheaval and international war left the world watching the outcome of

the race to see which direction America would take. People around the world carefully watch American politics. They are interested in presidential elections because the United States is the indispensable nation of the moment. Its economy drives the world. Despite myriad internal problems, America is still number one.

Trump's decisive victory, coupled with Republican control of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, gives him wide latitude to enact his agenda. It appears a majority of the American electorate has effectively said, *We don't like the direction of the country—we want change*. They turned to Donald Trump and have given him the reins of government with a mandate to do something different. What might we expect with this administration?

Coping with illegal immigration

The vote is a rejection of the past four years of public policy. One example is the porous southern border, where many millions have illegally entered the country. Along with many who sincerely seek a better life are members of drug cartels, criminals and some suspected of being terrorists planted as sleeper agents for future attacks on America. The impact on many communities is staggering, in some cases neighborhoods having been taken over by violent gangs.

Illegal entrants have committed serious felony crimes. One particular case of a man from Venezuela brutally killing Georgia nursing student Laken Riley provoked national outrage and fueled the debate over illegal immigration during the presidential race. Jose Ibarra was charged with and convicted of murder and other crimes in Riley's February 2024 death. Trump's promise to evict such vio-

lent illegal entrants resonated with many who see the dangers of the broken policy on immigration. It will be a difficult job to undo this catastrophe. The current unruly tragedy playing out at America's southern border threatens the social tapestry of many communities and the nation itself.

The problem of massive immigration without cultural assimilation also besets other Western nations, having spawned a host of problems. But nowhere have such vast numbers of illegal immigrants come into a country on the scale of what has happened in the United States. (Search at ucg.org for articles specifically about this subject—and about other matters touched on here.)

Dealing with gender confusion

The growing promotion of transgender issues was another contentious issue of public policy. This onerous part of the sexual revolution seems to have sparked a backlash among a

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oversight. That's encouraging.



significant segment of Americans. Many seemed to find a collective voice saying, in effect, *enough of this madness—a man is a man, and a woman is a woman, and you cannot change this biological fact of nature*. Many are very troubled over the idea of biological males sharing women’s bathrooms and playing in women’s sports—which is dangerous for women.

God made the two sexes (Genesis 1:27; Matthew 19:4). Perverted efforts to mask what used to be clinically diagnosed as a mental disorder is an effort to undermine the natural order of life. That many have found the courage to say “no” is a positive sign, even if it may only be a temporary halt. This trans movement is fueled by evil spiritual powers working behind the scenes in the world to subvert God’s creation of humanity (see Ephesians 6:12).

Facing out-of-control debt

Government spending policy, which has caused the national debt to skyrocket, is a basic concern. Inflation is another. The price of basic commodities and services impacted enough of the electorate to register an overall negative vote against the administration in power.

America’s national debt is more than \$35 trillion. It has been called the most significant threat to national security. Think about that—more than the threat from any foreign power! Uncontrolled spending could end the world’s largest economy. Fiscal experts of every political stripe acknowledge this.

While the debt has increased, neither of the two presidential candidates, nor their respective parties, have seriously considered a plan to reduce the debt. Unless this debt is reduced, it will lead to a change in America’s status in the world, and it will impact our pocketbooks in ways we don’t want to consider. It’s a huge and looming problem.

President Trump’s choice for Treasury secretary, Scott Bessent, comes with a three-point plan to address this problem. The steps include cutting the budget deficit to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2028, spurring GDP

The impact of using nuclear weapons in Europe is unthinkable. This single event could galvanize Europe into a new creature.

growth of 3 percent through deregulation and producing an additional 3 million barrels of oil a day. Yet will this actually happen?

A growing eastern axis threat

President Trump will still have to face growing threats to America’s role in the world. Russia, China, Iran and North Korea are formidable powers. They do not wish America well and will continue to pursue their goal of replacing American leadership in the world.

The Middle East continues to simmer. The outcome of the current Israeli offensive against Iran and its proxies is yet to be determined. Many believe the question is when, not if, Israel will be allowed to take out Iran’s nuclear infrastructure—though this could draw Russia and China into the conflict.

Will President Trump resurrect the Abraham Accords to seek a peace among the Arab nations and Israel? Today’s Middle East is much changed from 2020. Israel will not return to the idea of a two-state solution, a centerpiece of Western diplomacy for decades.

(To better understand where events in this region are headed, read our free study guides *Russia and Bible Prophecy* and *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.)

European crisis amid Ukraine war

Many European leaders had a negative perspective of the first Trump presidency, and those views persist. They especially question Trump’s commitment to the NATO alliance and how he will handle the Ukraine crisis.

Trump argues that Putin would not have attacked Ukraine had he been in the White House. That’s questionable, as war of this magnitude, with a powerful nation like Russia sending forces into another state, is instigated at a higher level than national chancelleries and palaces. Spiritual powers influencing human governments are behind this war. More than a million people have been killed and injured, and the carnage continues. And hostilities will not end through mere personal diplomacy and a phone call. Moreover, Europe has changed through this war. What is stirring there will have a long-term impact on global affairs.

In late November, the war in Ukraine was escalated to a more dangerous level prior to Trump taking office. Both Britain and the United States authorized Ukraine to use ballistic weapons supplied by the two to strike deeper into Russia. Russian leader Vladimir Putin retaliated by striking Ukraine with a powerful intermediate-range ballistic missile, akin to an intercontinental one, stating: “The regional conflict in Ukraine . . . has acquired elements of a global character.” Putin upped the threat of using nuclear weapons to decisively win this war. In this high-stakes game, Putin seeks to extend psychological control over the West. “We are ready for any development,” he said. “If anyone still doubts this, it is in vain. There will always be a response.” Exacerbating the provocation, *The New York Times* ran a story exposing U.S. and other Western countries discussing possibly installing nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

The impact of using nuclear weapons in Europe is unthinkable. This single event could galvanize Europe into



U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and the U.K.'s Prince William meet among other leaders in Paris for Notre Dame's Dec. 7 reopening.

a new creature. It could awaken sleeping powers that once ragged across its landscape with war and destruction. The world is that close to a new geopolitical reality.

Europe is not a cohesive force that can protect itself. Since the end of World War II, it has relied on America to guarantee its safety against first the Soviet Union and now an aggressive Russia seeking to regain a former status. European nations have not spent the money to build their own armies to project adequate power to deter Russia. Should Ukraine fall to Russia, the obvious question is “What’s next?” The Baltics, formerly under Soviet control? Would Finland be a target?

Europe is facing a defining moment. Its leadership has failed to forge an identity for an ancient land containing the roots of ambition that reaches to the heavens. It waits for an event to burst the restrictive bonds imposed by God.

The ongoing press for a new global order

Trump’s election win will not deter one widespread movement—the drive toward a new world order. Since the end of World War II, global institutions have been

created to prevent another such war. First came the United Nations. Many other transnational entities followed—the World Bank, NATO, the International Monetary Fund and the International Court of Justice, to name a few. Every American president since 1945 has supported these institutions. Donald Trump was the first to raise questions about their purpose and legitimacy. His “Make America Great Again” slogan put a dagger into the heart of these world bodies. With Trump, American interests are first. All others are second. That position remains—and it may yet prove effective on the world stage.

If the U.S. economy is king, and if America stands with the other English-speaking nations in a more unified dynamic, this could forestall the time when the world is controlled by a different power. (See our free study guide *The Final Superpower* to learn more.)

This is where Bible prophecy and God’s control of history write the script. It would appear the period of ascendancy of America and other English-speaking nations is not yet over. The GDP of America alone far surpasses its nearest rivals, the European Union and China. The combined GDP of the five major English-speaking nations (the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) is nearly double that of the EU. Despite many internal moral, cultural and social ills, America still strides tallest among the nations as the preeminent power.

Bible prophecy shows this will change. America holds its position not because it is a paragon of righteousness, but because God made the nation great in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham to bless his descendants with great national wealth and blessings from heaven. This fact is a ray of good news in the moment.

While the world transitions to a new order, there remains a moment for all of us to consider what God tells us in the Bible about His guiding hand in history. Besides watching the world, we should also be watching ourselves to make sure we are living as God tells us to. The world at large, despite its changes, is not seeking the ultimate change that matters.

Be sure to read the next article, “God’s Urgent Warning Message to You” (beginning on page 10), to see what God says to today’s English-speaking peoples and to you personally. This is a moment for you to repent and believe the Bible’s message about salvation through Jesus Christ and the coming Kingdom of God. [BT](#)

DIVE DEEPER



It will shock many to learn that the preeminent role of America over the last century, along with the dominance of Britain before that, was foretold in the Bible. For the compelling truth about this, request or download our informative study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.



And to help see where we are on the prophetic timetable, also obtain our study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* Both are available free.

Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find them both.

God's URGENT WARNING MESSAGE to You

God sent an urgent warning message through Ezekiel to the nations of present-day Israel.
Discover what this prophetic message includes and why it has vital significance for you.

by John LaBissoniere

Among the Jewish people led into Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar's military forces in 597 B.C., the second of three major deportations, was Ezekiel, the son of a Jewish priest. While in Babylon, God called him into prophetic service, saying, "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and *give them warning from Me*" (Ezekiel 3:17, emphasis added throughout).

As a watchman, Ezekiel's was *not* to be stationed on top of a city wall to alert its residents of an advancing foreign army or another threat, as was the typical duty of a watchman in that day. Rather, he was to be a *spiritual* sentinel to warn people that disobeying God's commandments and refusing to repent would result in severe punishment.

Yet oddly enough, while Ezekiel gave God's announcement to the Jewish captives in Babylon (Ezekiel 3:11), his message was also intended for, as stated in various places, the house of Israel—a reference to the northern 10 tribes,

which had *already* been taken into captivity by Assyrian military forces *more than 120 years earlier!*

As his prophetic warning message applies to the last days, we should recognize that it's destined to reach the nations of *present-day* Israel and not just the Jewish people of today's state of Israel. It will surprise many to learn that the modern Israelites are primarily the people of the major English-speaking countries, including the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (see the study guide offered at the end of this article for the biblical and historical evidence).

Moreover, Ezekiel's message is ultimately important for *all* people. God wants you and everyone to come to comprehend the consequences of sin as well as understand the true gospel (or good news) of salvation and the coming Kingdom of God (see Isaiah 52:7-10; Mark 1:14-15). Those who respond to God's message by yielding to Him in humility, love and obedience may rely on His guidance and protection through

the prophesied frightful time of distress and destruction that will come on the entire world.

Forsaking God and hurtling toward destruction

Looking ahead, God foresaw a society that turned away from Him and His righteous biblical values and corrupted itself by ungodly, fleshly, materialistic behavior. As Ezekiel wrote, "The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is *exceedingly great*, and the land is full of bloodshed, and the city full of perversity" (Ezekiel 9:9). This passage pertains to contempt for law and order and the fostering of moral depravity. Again, the conditions Ezekiel decries are evident in today's nations—not just the original audience of his day. His message is for now.

God lays much of the blame for the damaging behaviors we see at the feet of both secular and religious leaders failing to strongly combat these evil influences. Complicit in this disaster have been radical and weak-willed presidents, prime ministers,

politicians, lawyers, judges, Supreme Court justices, university professors, corporate business leaders and leading figures in the media and entertainment industries. Rather than battling against profane influences, these endorsed and promoted them—including three U.S. presidents shamefully supporting and hosting sexually alternative “pride” events annually at the White House!

Through Ezekiel, God said the following about all secular leaders who permitted such egregious practices: “Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain” (Ezekiel 22:27). Even many religious leaders who should have steadfastly opposed such exceedingly damaging influences instead have capitulated to them by watering down eternal truths, delivering their flocks over to worldly impulses and actions, showing them to be false shepherds (John 10:12-13).

God through Ezekiel further declared about these impotent guardians: “Her priests have *violated* My law and *profaned* My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am *profaned among them*” (Ezekiel 22:26). He also stated, “The weak you have *not* strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost” (Ezekiel 34:4).

As a result, when church members realized that little or nothing was required of them, they decided they no longer needed the church to instruct and guide them and therefore left it behind. According to a Pew Research Center survey in March 2024, 80 percent of U.S. adults say religion has lost influence in public life.

As people forsook God and His commandments, they endeavored to find life’s purpose and meaning in possessions, pursuits, projects, politics

and popular people. But these idols, including anything placed before God, left them unfulfilled and empty.

Instead of a righteous, commandment-keeping society, in our age we see an expansion of what the apostle Paul wrote about the debased culture of his day: “Being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful” (Romans 1:29-31).

In abandoning godly values, many people in America and the other formerly blessed nations of modern-day Israel surrendered themselves to moral decadence, selfishness, greed, dishonesty, bribery, injustice, thievery, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual deviance, and violence. Of course, these iniquities are not exclusive to the contemporary nations of Israel, since the entire world is awash in sinful conduct (Romans 3:23).

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In a prophecy about *this present age*, Paul foretold that atrocious attitudes and behavior would escalate, as we see today (see 2 Timothy 3:1-5).

Considering how the moral foundation of the nations of contemporary Israel has eroded so profoundly, what does Bible prophecy reveal lies ahead if people refuse to repent of sinful behavior and to turn to God in humility and obedience? Jesus Christ spoke about a time to come when the entire world will be in great peril: “For at that time there will be great tribulation, the kind that hasn’t taken place from the

beginning of the world until now and never will again! Unless those days were limited, no one would survive. But those days will be limited because of the elect [God’s chosen, repentant people]” (Matthew 24:21-22, Holman Christian Standard Bible).

Will you heed God’s wake-up call?

Sadly, most people of today’s Israelite nations will not heed Christ’s warnings or those of His prophets. God told Ezekiel: “Son of man, I am sending you to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. For they are impudent and stubborn children. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD:’ As for them, whether they hear or whether they refuse—for they are a rebellious house—yet they will know that a prophet has been among them” (Ezekiel 2:3-5).

What more do Ezekiel’s prophecies say will happen from disobeying God and His commandments? “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because you have multiplied disobedience more than the nations that are all around you, have not walked in My statutes nor kept My judgments, nor even done according to the judgments of the nations that are all around you’—therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Indeed I, even I, am against you and *will execute judgments in your midst* in the sight of the nations’” (Ezekiel 5:7-8).

The warnings in the book should wake us up to how serious God is and how austere His punishments will be *unless* there is sincere repentance and obedience. He states through Ezekiel,

Make every effort to grow steadily in love, joy and faith through the power of His Holy Spirit within you.

“One-third of you shall die of the pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst; and one-third shall fall by the sword [military attack] all around you; and I will scatter another third to all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them” (Ezekiel 5:12).

Ezekiel further quoted God as saying: “Moreover I will make you a waste and a reproach among the nations that are all around you, in the sight of all who pass by. So it shall be a reproach, a taunt, a lesson, and an astonishment to the nations that are all around you, when I execute judgments among you in anger and in fury and in furious rebukes. I, the LORD, have spoken” (Ezekiel 5:14-15).

Furthermore, God directed Ezekiel to write: “In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste . . . The slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the LORD. Yet I will leave a remnant, so that you may have some who escape the sword among the nations, when you are scattered through the countries” (Ezekiel 6:6-8). God further relays that *dreadful adversity will occur by the hands of national enemies*: “I will bring the worst of the Gentiles, and they will possess their houses; I will cause the pomp of the strong to cease, and their holy places shall be defiled. Destruction comes; they will seek peace, but there shall be none” (Ezekiel 7:24-25).

Moreover, though God has blessed America and its brother nations with extraordinary abundance of food, note what will transpire: “Son of man, when a land sins against Me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out My hand against it; I will cut off its supply of bread, send famine on it, and cut off

man and beast from it” (Ezekiel 14:13).

And He further warns: “For I will make the land most desolate, her arrogant strength shall cease, and the mountains [nations] of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through. *Then they shall know* that I am the LORD, when I have made the land most desolate *because of all their abominations* which they have committed” (Ezekiel 33:28-29).

Understand that God’s chastisement is ultimately meant for deliverance. He told Ezekiel: “Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, *but that the wicked turn from his way and live*. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’” (verse 11).

You don’t have to learn the hard way

The fact is, you and others *don’t have to learn the hard way*. God says, “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). He also states to all who will listen and heed, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

And those who are baptized and converted must continue to draw close to God to *remain zealous*, since it is possible to let down and weaken through lack of spiritual diligence. This is why Jesus Christ said, “Constantly be on your guard so that your hearts will not be loaded down with self-indulgence, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, or that day will take you by surprise like a trap” (Luke 21:34-35, International Standard Version).

To avoid this condition, you must

study the Bible regularly, apply its instructions faithfully, build character continually, and maintain a close and enduring relationship with God through daily prayer. The apostle Paul reminded the brethren in Rome about the need to remain spiritually attentive by giving them this vital instruction: “*And 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” (Romans 12:2).

It takes effort to stay spiritually prepared, vigilant and faithful. Jesus said, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matthew 24:44). Those who sincerely desire to follow God’s way of life should make every effort to grow steadily in love, joy and faith through the power of His Holy Spirit within them (Philippians 1:11; Acts 13:52).

Sadly, as revealed through Ezekiel, the modern Israelite nations will suffer calamitous punishments, including being attacked, plundered and enslaved by malicious enemies. Their downfall will occur because the people have walked away from God in disobedience, effectively rejecting His blessings, guidance and divine protection. Of course, we pray that many will yet repent and turn to God in sincere humility and obedience.

The good news is that *you* can be one of those who can be protected from approaching difficult times—while preparing for Jesus Christ’s second coming. When He returns, He will reign as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” to govern the world in truth and righteousness (Revelation 19:16). And those who follow Him in this age will reign with Him in the age to come (Revelation 3:21).

Will you heed God’s urgent warning message to *you* today? He eagerly awaits your response! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



Many prophecies in the Bible are directed to the end-time descendants of ancient Israel. This includes not just the Jewish people but, surprising as it may be, the nations of northwest European heritage, foremost among these being the English-speaking peoples. To see what Scripture foretells about their future, be sure to request or download our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find it.**





Why Guilt Can Be Good

While guilt can be destructive, it can also be constructive—prodding us to address character flaws and seek God.

by Becky Sweat

What comes to mind when you hear the word *guilt*? It's usually viewed as mentally and emotionally unhealthy and destructive—something we should never focus on or give place to in our thoughts. Probably thousands of articles and books have been written about how to turn around, overcome, release, treat and let go of guilt.

But the truth is, guilt isn't always a bad thing. Often it can be helpful.

Think about what it means to feel guilty. The standard dictionary definition of *guilt* usually runs along these lines: "a sense of regret or responsibility for actions you believe were wrong, or over a negative outcome you think is your fault."

What you feel guilty about almost always relates to internalized, moral principles—standards or rules you know you should follow or obey but didn't. Your sense of guilt is the unsettled feeling of "I shouldn't have done that" or "I ought to have handled that situation differently," recognizing that what you did was wrong.

For Christians, guilt is often the result of having transgressed one of God's laws or precepts as outlined in the Bible. In other words, we feel guilt—or should feel it—when we sin. Maybe we know we should keep the Sabbath, but we don't. Perhaps we went back on a promise, gossiped about someone, or lied about a matter when we were confronted about it. Or we didn't tell the cashier about the item she neglected to charge us for in our shopping cart.

Most of us can relate to those examples. Romans 3:23 tells

us, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We've all violated God's laws and not always lived up to His moral standards, and have had reasons to feel guilt.

Human beings, of course, don't usually want to admit their mistakes. Some people will try to excuse their guilt by telling themselves, "What I did wasn't any different from what everyone else does," "I have my faults, but I'm an overall decent person," or "I've never deliberately hurt anyone."

But God wants us to acknowledge our wrongs and face our guilt—not suppress, deny or ignore it. There are plenty of biblical examples of God being pleased with people when they admitted their guilt and confessed their sins, and being displeased with human beings when they didn't. When we acknowledge our guilt, a lot of good can come out of it. Guilt can be constructive in these specific ways:

1. When it reminds us that there are definite rights and wrongs.

The way a lot of people relieve themselves of guilt is by rejecting all moral absolutes. Known as *moral relativism*, this philosophy is becoming increasingly common in modern society. Its adherents reject the existence of unchanging, objective standards for all of mankind to live by. They believe truth is something they can devise on their own, and that what's right or wrong varies from person to person and culture to culture. This is the thinking that goes: "What I did may have been wrong for you, but it was right for me."

It follows, then, that if you believe there are no absolute

moral codes—that God’s laws are not valid—then you cannot experience guilt when you’ve failed to adhere to them. Your conscience has been defiled (Titus 1:15), as you don’t think biblical standards apply to you.

However, if we feel guilt when we’ve broken one of God’s laws, it shows we have not gone the way of so many in society—that we still have a functioning conscience. Guilt can help us identify what laws we failed to adhere to and motivate us to develop a moral compass in line with biblically based values. The apostle Paul set an example for other believers in stating, “I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (Acts 24:16). Yet we know from reading Romans 7 that he stumbled at times. Having guilty feelings after we’ve sinned can help us see the value in obeying God’s laws and why they are necessary, which helps us develop a conscience.

2. When it moves us to accept responsibility for our actions.

Another way people avoid feeling guilt is to blame others for their problems. For example, we might show disrespect to our parents but don’t feel guilty about it because we consider them bad parents. We might steal supplies or inventory from our employer and think nothing of it because we think we’re underpaid. We might resent a coworker for getting promoted and feel we’ve been shortchanged and should have been given the position, so we bad-mouth him and feel no guilt in doing so. The trouble is, as long as we see ourselves as victims, we will never feel guilt for our misdeeds.

The same is true if we try to “sweep our offenses under the rug” and pretend they didn’t happen, or make excuses for why our behavior “really wasn’t that bad.” Not acknowledging our guilt is like ignoring the warning lights on a car dashboard; whatever is wrong will only create more pain the longer we refuse to deal with it. Our problems cannot be corrected until we take responsibility for what we did—and that requires acknowledging our guilt.

In contrast, when we feel guilty we will be more motivated to own up to our mistakes, willingly answer for our conduct and obligations, and bear the burden of what we have done. That is exactly what God wants us to do.

God says regarding Israel and Judah in Hosea 5:15, “I will return again to My place, till they acknowledge their offense”—or, as some translations render it, until they admit their guilt and take responsibility for what they did. Similarly, in Proverbs 28:13, we’re told that “he who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.” Guilt can be good when it pushes us to confess our sins and take responsibility for them.

It should be noted that it’s possible to admit guilt without feeling remorseful about it. I’ve heard people say things like, “I wear dresses that show too much skin, but what’s the harm in that?” or “I sometimes drink more than I should—

so what?” We need to make sure that when we admit our guilt, we’re not allowing ourselves to justify bad behavior as “acceptable.” Otherwise, we still won’t see any reason to address our wrongdoings.

3. When it prompts us to seek God’s forgiveness.

A guilty conscience can and should motivate us to seek God’s forgiveness. God is quite aware of our sins. He wants to know that we’re aware of them too, and that we are trying to overcome them and don’t want them to be part of who we are. Numerous passages throughout the Bible make it clear that God will forgive us when we are truly sorry for what we have done and ask Him for forgiveness.

As 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Psalm 32:5 states: “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.” Psalm 51:17 says we should have “a broken and a contrite heart” when we seek forgiveness, which essentially means that we are affected by guilt and deeply regretful for what we have done.

The Bible also makes it clear that without a sense of guilt, we won’t see the need to ask God for forgiveness, which is a serious mistake. Proverbs 14:9 tells us, “Fools make light of the guilt that needs atonement” (Knox Bible).

Realize, too, that “feelings of guilt” don’t always accompany the status of actually being guilty before God. Even if we don’t *feel* guilty, we can still *be* guilty. We should be willing to listen to even faint guilt pangs we may have, because they can help us see the sins we’d been oblivious to and nudge us to seek God’s forgiveness. And we should be studying the Bible to make sure we are living in complete harmony with His laws and principles.

4. When it drives us to repentance.

Not only can guilt help us see character defects, it can also be an impetus for us to make much-needed changes in our lives. Guilt can push us to examine ourselves, and prompt us to build right habits and stop doing what’s damaging to ourselves or others.

Biblically, the term for this is *repentance*—meaning a change of attitudes and actions that leads to a new direction in life. Repentance involves far more than just feeling sad about what we did. It includes correcting our behaviors and habits that do not align with God’s way of life.

The Bible clearly shows that there is a connection between guilt and repentance. In Acts 2:37, the people were “cut to the heart” (in other words, *they felt guilt*) after Peter’s preaching and asked, “What should we do?” The answer given was to repent (verse 38). In 2 Corinthians 7:10 Paul writes, “Godly sorrow [or appropriate guilt] produces repentance.”

Sometimes what we need to repent of seems rather

mundane, but it's still important to correct. I've known people whose guilt feelings about not returning shopping carts to the cart corral or being ultra-cheap when tipping waiters eventually motivated them to be more conscientious about returning shopping carts and being more generous with servers at restaurants—which are certainly positive developments.

Other times, it's a more serious infraction. A friend went through a period in her life when she got so busy with work and other activities that she left no "quality and quantity prayer time." Instead, she tried to get by through saying short silent prayers in the car on the way to work.

"Finally I was feeling so guilty about it that it motivated me to cut back my work hours and other time commitments so I would have more time for prayer," she related. "I can't change the past, but I can work harder to make sure I don't repeat the same mistakes in the future. I know that's what God wants us to do."

5. When it prods us to apologize and make amends with others.

Guilt can also be constructive, even necessary, when we've treated other people badly. It's only when we genuinely feel regret or responsibility for hurting someone that we will be motivated to apologize to that person and take steps to restore the relationship.

This can be hard to do. Most of us don't like to admit when we're wrong. But the relationship will never be repaired and there will never be true harmony if the offending party does not take responsibility for the infraction and apologize.

The Bible confirms the importance of apologies in repairing damaged relationships. Jesus instructs us to make things right with those we've offended (Matthew 5:23-24). The apostle Paul said, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18). Being at peace often requires making apologies.

If we've truly reflected on how our actions or words have negatively impacted another person, we should also be seeking ways to correct the situation or to repair any damage we may have done. This might include replacing something we broke, investing time in activities to rebuild trust, being more attentive, or just "going the extra mile" in easing the offended party's burdens. It's the nudge of guilt that sends us in this direction of rectifying. Certainly God is well pleased when we strive to put things right. Matthew 5:9 calls peacemakers "blessed."

Not all guilt is constructive

While guilt can be constructive in all the ways just noted, it can also be destructive if the feelings of guilt are unwarranted. For example, we might feel survivor's guilt when a tragedy befalls others and we come away unharmed. Or others might make us *feel* guilty when they try to pressure us into doing things for them that we don't want to do, which are really *their* responsibility. Destructive guilt can make us feel frustrated



God wants us to pay attention to our guilt and to allow those feelings of remorse to drive us to repentance and a better relationship with Him and with other people.

and hopeless, and put us in an overall negative mindset.

The most serious way guilt can be misused is if we continue to wallow in our guilt and obsess over what we've done *after* God has forgiven us. This is not what God wants. God is a loving Father who, after we've repented of our sins, promises to forgive our iniquities, blot out our transgressions and cleanse us from a guilty conscience (Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 43:25; Hebrews 10:22). God desires to forgive us so He can reconcile us to Him. We will never be able to grow spiritually and overcome our sins like God wants us to if we won't let ourselves move on from the mistakes we made in the past.

Moreover, Christ died an excruciating death to pay the penalty for our sins. If we continue to "beat ourselves up" for our misdeeds, even after we've been forgiven, it's as though we are not accepting or acknowledging our Savior's sacrifice—when we should be incredibly grateful for it. Thankfully, God will help us in this. "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (1 John 3:20).

In closing, God wants us to pay attention to our guilt and allow those feelings of remorse to drive us to repentance and a better relationship with Him and with other people. Once God has forgiven us, we need to let go of that guilt. Addressing guilt pangs this way can only bring about very positive results. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



God wants you to leave wrong ways behind and develop a trusting, loving relationship with Him for all eternity. And He has laid out the pathway in His Word. To help you on this way, be sure to request or download our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find them.





Martin Luther King, Jr. on Christianity's Adoption of Paganism

It's well known that civil rights pioneer Martin Luther King, Jr., whose January birthday is marked by a U.S. national holiday, was a Baptist minister with a PhD. Not so well known is that he authored research papers presenting major pagan influence on mainstream Christianity.

by Tom Robinson

“I have a dream . . .” we recall as the lead-in to soaring oratory about racial harmony prevailing in the world, with people not judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. A Baptist minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. evoked the imagery in Amos 5:24 of justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream—looking to the day, as everyone should, when all God's children will be able to sing that we're “free at last.”

This pioneering leader of the civil rights movement in the United States is famous for his rhetoric, encouragement of nonviolent civil resistance and, sadly, for his assassination in 1968. Despite serious character accusations against him in recent years, he remains a revered historical figure, with his birthday observed as a national holiday on the third Monday of each January.

Yet here's a fact many are unaware of. Before his career in ministry, Dr. King was a seminary student who received high marks on research papers, published later, showing mainstream Christian doctrine and practice arising in significant respects from pagan mystery religions, especially Mithraism. He presented this derivation without concern, but it's highly

relevant to the matter of what constitutes true Christian practice and following God's will, as the Bible makes clear.

Assimilating the Great Mother and divine hero son

In his second year at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania (1949-1950), King wrote a research paper titled “A Study of Mithraism” about the worship of the Persian sun god and savior Mithras and then expanded on that with a broader examination titled “The Influence of the Mystery Religions on Christianity,” both citing numerous historians. These two articles are reprinted in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Vol. 1, 1992, pp. 211-225, 294-313 (available online at kinginstitute.stanford.edu).

In the second paper, King surveyed several of the ancient mystery religions that had been spreading when Christianity came on the scene, seeing them as important influences in Christian religious development. As he wrote: “That there were striking similarities between the developing church and these religions cannot be denied. Even Christian apologists had to admit that fact. Christianity triumphed over

King is certainly right that major elements of the pagan mysteries became part of what was actually a corrupted Christianity.

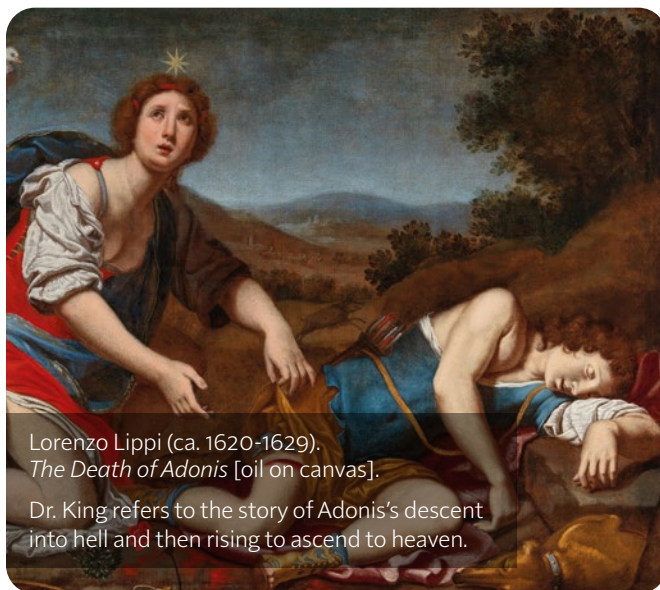
these mystery religions after long conflict. This triumph may be attributed in part to the fact that Christianity took from its opponents their own weapons, and used them: the better elements of the mystery religions were transferred to the new religion” (p. 296).

He saw that transfer as due in large measure to an influx of former pagans into the new faith: “The victory of Christianity in the Roman empire is another example of that universal historical law, viz. [or namely], that that culture which conquers is in turn conquered. This universal law is especially true of religion. It is inevitable when a new religion comes to exist side by side with a group of religions, from which it is continually detaching members, introducing them into its own midst with the practices of their original religions impressed upon their minds, that this new religion should tend to assimilate with the assimilation of their members, some of the elements of these existing religions” (ibid.).

He first turns to the cult of Cybele and Attis—the Great Mother goddess and divine hero son—which came into southern Europe via Asia Minor. “Attis was the Good Shepherd, the son of Cybele, the Great Mother, who gave birth to him without union with mortal man, as in the story of the virgin Mary. According to the myth, Attis died, either slain by another or by his own hand . . . Cybele mourned vehemently until he arose to life again in the springtime . . .

“In Rome there was a festival celebrating the death and resurrection of Attis. This celebration was held annually from March 22nd to 25th. The influence of this religion on Christianity is shown by the fact that in Phrygia, Gaul, Italy, and other countries where Attis-worship was powerful, the Christians adapted the actual date, March 25th, as the anniversary of our Lord’s passion . . .

“At this same Attis festival on March 22nd, an effigy of the god was fastened to the trunk of a pine tree, Attis thus being ‘slain and hanged on a tree.’ This effigy was later buried in a tomb . . . That night the priests went back to the tomb and found it empty, the god having risen on the third day from the dead; and on the 25th the resurrection was celebrated with



Lorenzo Lippi (ca. 1620-1629).
The Death of Adonis [oil on canvas].

Dr. King refers to the story of Adonis’s descent into hell and then rising to ascend to heaven.

great rejoicing. During this great celebration a sacramental meal of some kind was taken, and initiates were baptised with blood, whereby their sins were washed away and they were said to be ‘born again’” (pp. 298-299).

We can see elements here of what became the Good Friday–Easter Sunday tradition. King notes: “There can hardly be any doubt of the fact that these ceremonies and beliefs strongly coloured the interpretation placed by the first Christians upon the life and death of the historic Jesus. Moreover, ‘the merging of the worship of Attis into that of Jesus was effected without interruption, for these pagan ceremonies were enacted in a sanctuary on the Vatican Hill, which was afterwards taken over by the Christians, and the mother church of St. Peter now stands upon the very spot’” (p. 300).

King is certainly right that major elements of the pagan mysteries became part of what was actually a corrupted Christianity. But he goes off track in suggesting that the New Testament writers such as Paul were influenced by paganism in their presentation of the story and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Other cults from Syria, Egypt and Greece

After next turning to the worship of the god Adonis, who had a great festival in Antioch and a shrine at Bethlehem identified by Christians as the birthplace of Christ, King refers to the story of the god’s descent into hell and then rising to ascend to heaven, celebrated in a resurrection festival with the words “The Lord is risen”—noting similarity to Christ.

King states: “This coincidence had led many critics to suppose that the story of the burial and resurrection of Jesus is simply a myth borrowed from this pagan religion” (p. 301). He then bizarrely remarks, “Whether these critics are right in their interpretation or not still remains a moot question” (ibid.). This makes no sense, as the Christian faith would then be a lie. How is that a moot question—one that does not matter?

In both of his papers, he labels naive the argument some later made with respect to Mithraism about the devil creating a pagan imitation of the true religion to confuse people. Yet we should recognize that Satan did just that. Well before the time of Christ, he established in pagan religions the counterfeit of a dying and saving god along with various other prophesied features. Yet it should also be recognized that the mystery religions actually copied aspects of true Christianity as it spread, which further explains some of the similar storylines. It's not always easy to know if some pagan teachings and practices predate Christianity or came after.

But there was clearly much adoption of paganism by a growing Christian religion that was progressively abandoning its scriptural roots. The descent of Christ into hell is a case in point, King noting that “in fact the idea did not appear in the church as a tenet of Christianity until late in the fourth century,” giving rise to the view “that this idea had a pagan origin, since it appears not only in the legend of Adonis, but also in those of Herakles, Dionysus, Orpheus, Osiris, Hermes, Balder, and other deities” (pp. 301-302).

He next notes that “the Egyptian mysteries of Isis and Osiris exerted considerable influence upon early Christianity” (p. 302). He even traces the Christian festivals of All Saints and All Souls Day in early November (giving us today's Halloween) to an Egyptian feast of the dead and the resurrection celebration of Osiris, stating, “Thus Christians unconsciously perpetuate the worship of Osiris in modern times” (p. 303).

King further points out that “the myths of Isis had a direct bearing on the elevation of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to the lofty position that she holds in Roman Catholic theology”—assuming the role of “the lady of sorrows, weeping for the dead Osiris, and . . . the divine mother, nursing her infant son, Horus” (ibid.), motifs also seen in other pagan systems. He says that when Christianity triumphed, the statues and paintings of the pagan Madonna and child became Mary and Jesus. “In fact archaeologists are often left in confusion in attempting to distinguish the one from the other” (p. 304).

Presented next are the Greek mysteries of Eleusis—based on the myth of Hades or Pluto carrying away harvest goddess Demeter's daughter Persephone away to the underworld, where she must remain for part of the year as an explanation of the changing seasons (the temple at Eleusis commemorating Demeter's grief). Detailing Greek Christian rites, King states: “Now when we observe the modern Greek Easter festival it seems certain that it preserves the spirit if not the form of the old Eleusinian worship . . . So we might say that Eleusinianism was not blotted out by Christianity. On the contrary many of its forms and some of its old content has been perpetuated in Christianity” (p. 307).

The great impact of Mithraism

Finally, King comes to the influence of Mithraism, which



he had written about previously. Mithra or Mithras, a god of the sun and light, was initially a lesser god in the Persian pantheon who by Christ's day had come to be coequal with the supreme god Ahura Mazda. The worship of Mithras was very popular yet hindered, as King brings out in his earlier paper, by restriction to men—women being compelled to seek salvation elsewhere (with Mithraic temples often in juxtaposition to Great Mother temples).

In any case, despite rivalry with the growing Christian religion, many elements of Mithraism made their way in. King points out: “It was suppressed by the Christians sometime in the latter part of the fourth century A.D.; but its collapse seems to have been due to the fact that by that time many of its doctrines and practices had been adopted by the church, so that it was practically absorbed by its rival” (ibid.).

He mentions various parallels like belief in immortality, baptism, communion, a mediator between God and man, and even a beast slain at the end of the world. Yet he notes that all was not direct copying, acknowledging that baptism and a communion meal grew out of Jewish precedents (though what we see in mainstream Christianity is a corruption closer to Mithraism).

Like many others, King makes the error of stating: “The Hebrew Sabbath having been abolished by Christians, the Church made a sacred day of Sunday, partly because it was the

There was clearly much adoption of paganism by a growing Christian religion that was progressively abandoning its scriptural roots.

day of resurrection . . .” (p. 309). The fact is that true Christians continued to observe God’s Sabbath and did not shift the weekly worship day to Sunday—and the resurrection was not on Sunday. It was on Saturday (see our study guide offered at the end of the article).

He does, however, then give other reasons for the moved day of worship and the adoption of other worship days: “. . . But when we observe a little further we find that as a solar festival, Sunday was the sacred day of Mithra; it is also interesting to notice that since Mithra was addressed as Lord, Sunday must have been ‘the Lord’s Day’ long before Christian use. It is also to be noticed that our Christmas, December 25th, was the birthday of Mithra, and was only taken over in the Fourth Century as the date, actually unknown, of the birth of Jesus” (ibid).

Comparison between Mithraism and the developing Christian religion “became so evident that many believed the Christian movement itself became a mystery cult” (ibid.). Indeed, as King notes in his conclusion, “there can hardly be any gainsaying of the fact that Christianity was greatly influenced by the Mystery religions, both from a ritual and a doctrinal angle” (p. 311).

King is not troubled in his evaluation here, remarking especially on Christianity’s indebtedness to the mystery religions for paving the way for Christian missionary work and for being the source of important concepts. As he writes: “To discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing” (pp. 311-312).

But just what Christianity are we actually talking about here? It is definitely not the true religion of Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Free at last—through the truth

This is all very important in terms of what constitutes true Christian practice and what doesn’t. God had made it clear in the earlier laws He had given to Moses that His people were not to adopt pagan worship practices in the worship of the true God (Deuteronomy 12:1-4, 29-32). And Jesus made it clear that His followers were to adhere to the commands of Scripture and not push that aside through human traditions (Matthew 5:17-19; 15:3, 9).

The apostle Paul was not enamored with pagan ideas and practices, as he warned gentiles new to Christian faith against reverting to former pagan ways: “But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years [from former false worship]. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Galatians 4:8-11).

And his assessment of syncretistic blending of paganism with the teachings of Christ? “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry . . . The things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (1 Corinthians 10:14, 20-21).

“For,” as he later states, “what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial [Wickedness personified, the devil]? . . . And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? . . . Therefore ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord . . .’” (2 Corinthians 6:14-17).

Pagan religion was not absorbed by true Christianity, “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Rather, a false, corrupted Christianity emerged that replaced many elements of the truth with the lies of earlier paganism—a “mystery of lawlessness” that was already at work in Paul’s day (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

Here was the transformation of Christian belief into the ultimate successor to the pagan mysteries—which eventually took over the Roman Empire and has persisted from then until the end time as what Bible prophecy identifies as “Mystery, Babylon the Great” (Revelation 17:5).

Martin Luther King, Jr. did not understand this biblical reality. But what he and many others have uncovered has helped to identify what these passages are referring to. It’s only in coming out of the devil’s great deceptions that we can find true freedom at last.

As Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Look to the Bible as the source of your beliefs and practices—and reject the lies that sprang from pagan mystery religion. In Jesus’ words of John 4:24, learn to “worship in spirit and truth.” **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



There are many more connections between ancient pagan religion and modern Christianity than Dr. King exposed. It’s especially evident in popular Christian holidays. To learn more, request or download our study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* And to learn more about the true Christian religion, also obtain our study guide *The Church Jesus Built*.

Both are available free. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find them.

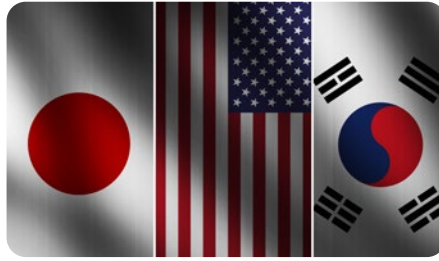


Calls for Asian NATO in the face of China's nuke escalation

In October 2024, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency released a new public intelligence estimate titled “Nuclear Challenges 2024,” giving an overview of nuclear-armed powers and rivals of the United States. The greatest attention is given to China, which is pushing a huge and rapid expanse of its nuclear arsenal. As of January 2024, China was estimated to have 500 nuclear warheads, while Russia and the United States are listed at around 4,400 and 3,700 respectively.

But it's estimated that by 2030 China will have “more than 1,000 operational nuclear warheads—most of which will be fielded on systems capable of ranging the continental United States.” It also seeks lower-yield nuclear weapons for more proportional response options.

In September 2024, just prior to that report, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party President Shigeru Ishiba contributed an article to the Hudson Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank titled “The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy.” In it he stated that “the creation of an Asian version of NATO is essential to deter China by its Western allies.” He also wrote that to deter the nuclear threat from China, as well as Russia and North Korea, this proposed body “must also specifically consider America's sharing of nuclear weapons or the introduction of nuclear weapons into the region.” And regarding the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, Ishiba said, “It is my mission to



raise the Japan-U.S. alliance to the level of the U.S.-U.K. alliance.”

Japan has not been militarized since it was defeated in World War II, the country's constitution preventing that—although it did commence a major defense build-up with policy changes made in late 2022.

Kim Jong Un of North Korea responded to the proposals in a fiery speech in November, stating: “The United States has already converted its alliance with [South Korea] into a nuclear-based one and created an ‘Asian NATO’ in haste by cementing its military ties with Japan and [South Korea].” He stressed the increasing threat from Washington justified accelerating North Korea's nuclear program and further decried the U.S. and other Western nations “using Ukraine as a shock force in the war against Russia,” part of expanding interventionism.

What does the future hold for this volatile region? We discuss what lies ahead for Russia and the nations of East and South Asia in our free study guide *Russia and Bible Prophecy*.

A daily walk or equivalent could add 11 years to one's life

A new study led by researchers from Griffith University in Australia and various institutions worldwide, published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, has found that walking could add 11 years to your life—specifically, walking 160 minutes a day at 3 miles per hour (or the equivalent exercise).

For an average person who's already somewhat active, the increase would be around five years—from about 79 to 84 years. But for those in the lowest 25 percent of activity, the life expectancy would go from about 73 to 84—11 years.

While our spiritual life is most important, the apostle Paul did say there is a measure of profit in



bodily exercise (1 Timothy 4:8). And he and others of his time did a lot of walking. Of course, none of us knows our time on earth, but we can make it a better experience—fitness giving increased energy for spiritual pursuits as well.

Huge uptick in Bible buying—a new “Great Awakening”?

The sale of Bibles in the United States really jumped in 2024. While overall book sales remained about the same as in 2023, the sale of Bibles increased 22 percent as of October!

Some religious leaders are even speaking of a “fourth Great Awakening”—referring to a return to religious faith—as a response to what people have been through over the past several years.

One person explained: “There have been three Great Awakenings in America, and a few smaller ones. I believe we are in the beginning of a fourth Great Awakening and it is a response to inflation (financial panic), pandemics (Covid), wars (global), and the sudden death of stability in America. There is no anchor in life better than the Anchor of Hope, and when the ship of life is tossed to and fro, faith awakens” (quoted in “Sign of Great Hope: Religious Leaders See a ‘Fourth Great Awakening’ as Americans Flock to Christianity,” Daily Caller, Dec. 3, 2024).

There's further mention of a resurgence of Christianity among young people—yet perhaps that's just *some* young people. A

Rasmussen poll in November 2024 found that 69 percent of U.S. adults consider themselves religious—24 percent *very* religious. These figures are unchanged from 2022. Yet for those under 40, only 48 consider themselves religious—and 17 percent *very* religious (while two years prior, 20 percent were *very* religious).



Some argue that we're not seeing a genuine religious revival so much as the rise of a populist Christian nationalist movement resisting the political left. Of course, many political issues are addressed by biblical Christianity. The key is to follow what God has to say, not be swept up in a political movement—or even traditional Christian teachings that are not truly biblical.

People buying more Bibles is a wonderful thing—if they will read and study what's in them. As God says, “My word . . . shall not return to me void” (Isaiah 55:11). It will have an impact. Let it guide you and change your life. To help, request or download our free study guide *How to Understand the Bible*.

Syria: from Assad's fall to regional power struggles

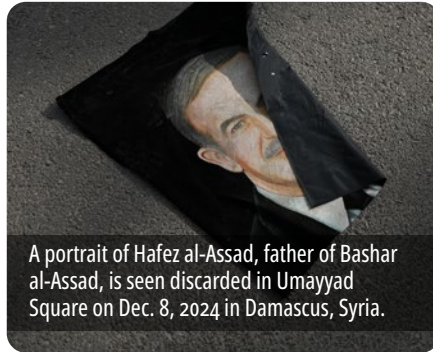
The world was taken by surprise with the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria at the hands of insurgents in early December 2024, a monumental turning point in a nearly 14-year civil war, leaving many questions about what the fallout will be.

One expert on the region, author Simon Montefiore, offers some assessment in *The Free Press* ("After Assad," Dec. 10, 2024). As he presents it, the end of Bashar al-Assad's brutal reign, which followed his father's, has unleashed a complex power vacuum. It had survived largely through external support from Russia and Iran. Yet the sudden collapse brings an uncertain future.

One of the new leading figures in Syria is Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, a former al-Qaeda affiliate and leader of the local Islamist faction HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham). It assumed control over much of Syria, including Damascus. While al-Jolani has recently softened his rhetoric in expressing respect for both Muslims and Christians, that could be a tactical move. His militant history leads some to fear a turn in Syria toward an Islamist state.

Russia, a key supporter of Assad, also finds itself a major political loser in the power shift. The collapse of the Assad regime represents a blow to Russia's

regional ambitions. Meanwhile, it's noted that the United States' role in the region is marked by the fallout of former U.S. President Barack Obama's failure to act on the "red line" with Assad's use of chemi-



cal weapons, as well as President Donald Trump's reluctance to engage further in Syria, U.S. influence being necessary to broker any lasting peace.

More locally, much depends on the positions of Turkey and Israel. Turkey, under President Erdogan, sees an opportunity to extend its influence over former territories of the Turks' old Ottoman Empire, including northern Syria—where he has been bombing Kurdish civilians, inviting Syria's new leaders to join him. Israel is of course concerned about

the rise in Syria of an Islamist regime.

Some have argued this as the beginnings of a ripple effect like the wake of the Berlin Wall coming down, with Iran's ability to prop up the enemies of Israel and the West having been weakened through Israel's past year of fighting (along with Russia being weakened through the Ukraine war).

While declaring some feelings of joy over the fall of the brutality of the House of Assad, Montefiore warns: "But this is the Middle East. Anyone who remembers the Arab Spring knows that things can always get worse. And anyone who studies history knows that predictions are for fools."

Syria's future may involve further fragmentation into autonomous regions, each controlled by outside powers like Turkey, Israel and potentially the United States. The possibility of ongoing conflict remains high, as both local and international players jockey for influence.

For a better understanding of the background history of the region and where events here are ultimately headed, there is a reliable source to turn to—the Word of God in Holy Scripture. For much needed perspective, request or download our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.

"Gender-affirming care" for minors before the Supreme Court

On December 4, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments regarding Tennessee Senate Bill 1 (SB1), which bans puberty-blocking medication, hormone therapy, and surgeries for minors. Signed into law by Governor Bill Lee in March 2023, SB1 is part of a broader trend of over 20 states restricting transgender procedures for minors.

In April 2023, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other groups filed a lawsuit against the bill, claiming it violates the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, leading to the current case. Of course it does no such thing, that amendment concerning racial discrimination, transgender procedures being inconceivable until recently.

The Tennessee law cites health risks, including

sterility and psychological harm, and notes that many procedures are experimental with unknown long-term effects. When the attorney for Tennessee pointed out these terrible risks, liberal Justice Sonia Sotomayor shockingly replied, "I'm sorry counselor, every medical treatment has a risk. Even taking aspirin." This is outrageous—to equate the risk of stunting growth or cutting out body parts to taking aspirin!

How can a civilized society even imagine doing this to children? It is hoped that the justices, particularly the conservative majority, will stand on the side of right in this matter and uphold the ban. The ruling may wait until the summer, when decisions are often issued.

It's noteworthy that Britain, which is a more liberal society than America in many respects, has



banned puberty blockers in emergency legislation its High Court has ruled is lawful.

Transgender confusion strikes at the heart of God's creation of mankind as male and female and His purposes in that. To learn more, download or request our free study guide *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension*.

Watch A Biblical Worldview

A scripturally grounded take on today's headlines from United Church of God President Rick Shabi.

ucg.org/playlist/biblical-worldview





GOD'S FIRST GREAT COMMANDMENT

As Jesus explained, there are two great commandments fundamental to all others—considered here in two articles. The first great commandment is to love God with our whole being. Distinct from false religions of the past, God wants a close and deep relationship with you.

by Don Hooser

A legal expert among the Pharisees challenged Jesus with a question, testing Him, saying, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:35-36).

“Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your *heart*, with all your *soul*, and with all your *mind*. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is *like* it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39, emphasis added throughout). The accounts in Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28 add the word *strength*.

Above all of God’s many wonderful commandments, Jesus Christ declared two of them to be the *great commandments!* (The second of these will be discussed in the next article.)

God revealed these commandments long before—through Moses. The first is announced in Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second in Leviticus 19:18. Nine verses in Deuteronomy tell us to “love the LORD”!

Jesus said, “There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). He also said, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40). This is one of the reasons the great commandments are great! They encompass *all* of God’s many spiritual laws. For example, the first four of the Ten Commandments focus on how to love God, and the last six focus on how to love one’s neighbor (see Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14).

The two great commandments truly are *great!* In Matthew 22:36-38, the Greek word for “great” is *megas*, from which we get the English prefix *mega*, meaning enormous. The great commandments are of *enormous importance!*

The godly love presented in these commandments reaches out in deep and devoted care and concern toward others. And as made clear in the first great commandment, it is to be directed first and foremost to God.

Loving God with our all

Jesus likely spoke these Old Testament verses to the Pharisee in Hebrew. As presented in Deuteronomy 6:5, the first commandment requires that we love God with all our heart, meaning our feelings, yearnings and understanding, and with all our soul, referring to our being—physical life and consciousness—and with all our “very,” as the Hebrew *me’od* literally means. Some have rendered this odd phrasing as all our “oomph!”—expressing intensiveness, in terms of heartiness, earnestness and zeal. In translating this term into Greek, the New Testament writers used words for both mind and strength, as it connotes full intention and energy.

However, it’s unlikely that God meant for us to think of ourselves in these distinct parts. Rather, the emphasis is that we must love God with all that we are and everything we’ve got—totally, continually, thoughtfully and passionately *in every way possible!*

God emphasized that He is a *jealous* God, His jealousy aroused when His people show affection to other gods, which are false (Deuteronomy 6:15; 32:16, 21; see also Exodus 20:5; 34:14). This is not in the sense of envy but of devotion in protecting the closeness of the relationship. Imagine a husband who has no problem with his wife cheating on him. She would not think he really loved her. Just the same, God cares if we are unfaithful to our relationship with Him, showing His love for us. And His jealousy also guards us from harm.

God, both the Father and Jesus Christ, must come first in our lives. In Luke 14:26-27, Jesus said, as rendered in the New Living Translation, “If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else *by comparison*—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life.”

The Bible gives us many clear teachings on how to love God. Vital to loving God is obedience. “For this is the love of

God, that we keep His commandments” (1 John 5:3). Jesus likewise said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

When the Bible speaks of love, it refers to actions more than feelings—to showing love by doing. It’s not about acting on our feelings. It’s choosing to act on what God says, sometimes *against* our feelings, making personal sacrifices. In this process of striving to love God through obedience, one will come to *feel* love for God.

Fundamental to this is *gratitude*! We should be continually thanking and praising God for His countless blessings and benefits! To use some alliteration here: He patterned us after Himself, put us on the perfect planet for us, pardons our sins, is our provider and protector, and has a plan to give us perpetual life in paradise!

Many people may begin to obey God out of fear of future suffering. And then when they experience God’s blessings, they may obey out of desire for God’s rewards. Yet God ultimately leads us to progress beyond this—to come to experience an intimate relationship with Him wherein we obey, adore and worship Him out of deep gratitude and love.

This love does not come naturally to us

Under the influence of Satan the devil, human nature has been corrupted. (Search at btmagazine.org for “Human Nature: What You Need to Know” in the May-June 2024 issue.) No wonder God has to command us to love Him! Human nature is “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9; see also Romans 8:6-7; Galatians 5:19-21). We need the supernatural help of God to increasingly replace that nature with God’s nature (see Isaiah 55:6-9).

Furthermore, it’s not natural to love someone we cannot see, hear or touch. That’s why God “sent His Son” to reveal the Father (1 John 4:9-10; Matthew 11:27). Jesus exemplified the Father perfectly, stating, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:7-11).

The Bible, God’s “instruction book” for mankind, enables us to continually learn more about God and how to live. Man must “live . . . by every word of God” (Luke 4:4).

We also have the regular opportunity to learn about God from observing His other revelation—His marvelous creation (Romans 1:20-25).

As we come to intimately know God, we see that He is truly lovable! After all, “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and “we love Him because He first loved us” (verse 19).

Many find it difficult to love and trust God because of all the evil, tragedies and suffering we see throughout the world. Why does God allow it? It’s a reasonable question. Yet what is fundamental to God’s plan of salvation is that all human beings have personal *freedom*—the *liberty* to make their own *choices*. God could easily stop all suffering by making everyone into a robot. Instead, everyone must make decisions and choices, each of which can be good or bad. God urges each person to “*choose life*” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

A major cause of suffering is that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one,” Satan, the “tempter” and “ruler of this world” (1 John 5:19; Matthew 4:3; John 12:31). As a result, this dark world is full of hate! With God’s help, we must learn to withstand Satan: “Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

God’s plan will set everything right in the end. We recommend that you request and read our free study guide *Why Does God Allow Suffering?*

A unique commandment

When this first great commandment was given to ancient Israel, it was remarkable. Pagan gods, with people regarded as their slaves, were to be feared and served, but not loved. Furthermore, the pagan gods did not express love for people! The true God loves and wants to save everyone! (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

What’s also different about the true religion is that our God offers to put into our hearts the love He requires of us. He urges each person to trust in Him, repent of his or her sins, and make a total commitment in being baptized for the forgiveness of those sins. Then God gives the indwelling gift of His Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 3:19).

That gift of God’s Holy Spirit produces wonderful spiritual “fruit” within us that includes love, joy and peace! (Galatians 5:22-23). On our own, we would not submit to God’s ways. But He miraculously *transforms* us through putting into us His godly nature!

Please contemplate God’s divine plan. If God is calling you to be His disciple and son or daughter, please respond

God, both the Father and Jesus Christ, must come first in our lives.

to this most precious invitation! And then passionately nurture that loving relationship and grow evermore in love with God.

We are to seek first in life the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33)—which entails alignment with God and His ways, total harmony with Him. We must increasingly build an intimate loving relationship with God—a relationship only possible through Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Listen as God teaches and encourages us through His Word. Meditate on Him. Talk to Him daily in your prayers. Thank Him. Obey Him. Revere Him. Worship Him.

May all of us increasingly come to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength! **BT**

While we are to love God above all, that includes obeying His will in our love for other people. Be sure to also read the companion article, “God’s Second Great Commandment,” starting on the next page.



GOD'S SECOND GREAT COMMANDMENT

Having looked at the first great commandment on wholehearted love for God, we now consider the second, which Jesus said is “like it.” How may we love our neighbor as ourself?

by Don Hooser

After Jesus Christ stated the first great commandment, He said: “And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). The Contemporary English Version of Mark 12:31 translates it this way: “Love others as much as you love yourself.”

This second great commandment is almost as unique, revolutionary and contrary to selfish human nature as the first! (Please see the accompanying article, “God’s First Great Commandment,” starting on page 22.)

The second great commandment came from God through Moses (Leviticus 19:18). The chapter where it’s found gives some very important specifics about how to show love for others.

This commandment goes hand in hand with what we call the Golden Rule, stated in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31, often paraphrased as “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The command to love your neighbor as yourself is a summary statement for the last six of God’s Ten Commandments showing *how* to love our fellow human beings! (see Romans 13:8-10). Let’s consider more about what’s meant in this great principle.

What does it mean to love others as yourself?

Godly love is beautifully defined and described in “the love chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13! We would all do well to frequently review that passage! Notice that true love is humble, not prideful, selfish or self-centered. It is outflowing.

We must follow the examples of God the Father and Jesus Christ. They love everyone! (John 3:16). “He who does not love does not know God, for *God is love*” (1 John 4:8). Surrounding verses remind us that God sacrificed His own Son! And Jesus was willing to suffer an excruciating torture and death for us so that we can live—live forever! And think of Jesus’ example of showing compassion and love for everyone, including those with physical disabilities, those regarded as untouchables and other little ones of society. He was the perfect servant leader, caring for others!

Yet are we to also care for ourselves? Consider that the second great commandment assumes that we love ourselves! (and compare Ephesians 5:29). If we didn’t love ourselves, loving your neighbor “as yourself” would not readily follow!

The key is to understand what the Bible usually means by “love.” It is virtually the opposite of narcissistic people being “lovers of themselves” in a selfish

and self-exalting way, amid the other terrible traits described in 2 Timothy 3:1-7.

God designed all creatures, including human beings, with a kind of instinct to satisfy our own needs. We seek food when hungry, relief when hurting, sleep when sleepy, etc. In addition, good parents and other good influences teach us how to become healthy in body, mind, relationships, etc. All of this is the healthy love for oneself God intends. It is not selfish, egotistical or narcissistic. Moreover, in loving God we embrace His desire for us in creating us.

Keep in mind also that the better our physical and mental health, the more helpful we can be to others. Think of the instruction a flight attendant gives to all those who have a small child with them. If there’s a loss of oxygen in the plane, you’re to put the oxygen mask on yourself first and then on the child. The reason? Otherwise, you might lose consciousness while struggling to help your child! The lesson? If you love yourself enough to maintain good health, you are better equipped to help others! And you are valuing what God has given you.

Again, though, we are not to love ourselves alone but *others* as ourselves.

While feelings matter, *love* refers throughout the Bible primarily to one’s actions. Even when we don’t *feel* like

loving certain neighbors, we must *act* in a way that demonstrates love toward them. John, known as the “apostle of love” for how much he wrote about it, emphasizes obedience to God plus kindness and service to others as the essential elements of godly love (see 1 John 2:4-6; 3:11-18). Also, *acting* in a caring way toward others leads to *feeling* more loving.

God expects us to think and act like compassionate caregivers, caring about the needs and benefits of others as well as our own. Furthermore, a godly person will go beyond and sacrifice if circumstances demand, putting another person’s need ahead of his own (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

The Bible teaches that each of God’s people should exercise a special love for his spiritual “family.” Jesus exhorted His disciples to “love one another,” specifying, “as I have loved you,” and declaring, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Paul wrote, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10; see also 1 John 3:10-18; 1 Peter 4:8-10). Yes, have special focus on fellow believers, but don’t forget the “good to all.”

Who is my neighbor?

When John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world,” it means *everyone* in the world! (compare 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). God expects us to imitate Him and love everyone as we have opportunity (Ephesians 5:1). Loving God’s other children is an essential element of expressing love for our Father.

A scholar of scriptural law interrogated Jesus about the two great commandments and then asked the question, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). This Jewish legal expert was hoping for two things. He wanted to discredit Jesus, plus he wanted excuses for not loving various people. Many people feel like being “neighborly” only to people they like, or who have the same religious beliefs or interests or ethnicity, or who live in the same neighborhood, etc.

Jesus answered his question by relating the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). This story must have seemed shocking and repulsive to this Jewish scholar, as Jews looked on Samaritans as alien and despicable. The parable depicts Jewish religious figures as unwilling to help a traveler from Jerusalem lying in the road after an attack by robbers, while a Samaritan is presented as compassionate, kind and generous to the victim, despite being of a rival religious and ethnic background.

We can guess what the priest and Levite in the parable might have been thinking. Many in that day, as at other times, commonly assumed a person’s suffering was a deserved punishment from God. Furthermore, priests and Levites might have thought their religious pursuits too important to be side-tracked—or they just didn’t want to take on any additional burden or inconvenience.

The Samaritan in the story did what was needed for the one who was attacked, and the legal expert had to admit that the one who accepted the fallen stranger as a neighbor in

terms of the commandment was the only one actually who kept the commandment.

Love even our enemies?!

Jesus went yet deeper in His Sermon on the Mount, declaring: “But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you” (Luke 6:27-28). He followed with the Golden Rule: “And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise” (verse 31; see verses 32-36).

This means we must even love people who are not lovable or nice. God knows *we* do not always live as we should. Our hope should be that all people will eventually receive the grace we have received—that all people will repent of their sins, receive God’s forgiveness, and ultimately be blessed with eternal life!

Loving others requires our willingness to forgive (Matthew 6:12). Jesus said, “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (verse 15).

That does not mean instant reconciliation apart from needed changes. God is a God of justice as well as of mercy. He inspired Amos to write, “Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate” (Amos 5:15). Hate the sins, desiring that the sinners be brought before God’s wise judgment—yet also that they will repent to receive His mercy.

God punishes people in various ways for wrongdoing, but He always does it out of love for the person’s betterment. “For whom the LORD loves He chastens” (Hebrews 12:6). God expects governing authorities to maintain law and order (Romans 13:1-7). True love includes “tough love” at times. The Bible clearly teaches that parents should discipline their children for wrongdoing—as part of loving them.

When Christ, the perfect Judge, returns to earth, He will administer rewards and punishments, and the earth will experience true justice and peace! In the meantime, our main responsibility is to love, seeking and hoping the best for everyone.

This message of love is throughout Scripture. It was introduced in the Old Testament. Yet Jesus’ command to love “as I have loved you” greatly elevated the understanding and practice of true godly love.

Always remember to follow Christ’s example of joyfully obeying the two sublime great commandments. As laid out in Luke 10:27: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’” **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



The two great commandments are broad and encompassing—as are the many other biblical laws that “hang” on them. Principal among these are the Ten Commandments, which explain in greater detail how to love God with all our being and how to love our neighbor as ourself. To help learn more about applying these laws in your life, request or download our free study guide *The Ten Commandments*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find it.



“Loose Lips Sink Hearts”



We can do great damage in coming to hasty conclusions about people and passing those on to others. Jesus teaches us to proceed in wise judgment and love.

by Robin Webber

“Loose lips sink ships” is an American idiom warning against unguarded talk. The phrase originated on posters during World War II. That simple but profound messaging was part of a campaign advising military personnel and citizens alike to avoid careless talk that might undermine the war effort. The purpose of such wartime posters was not merely to thwart potential spying but to clamp down on rumors that might lead to discouragement, frustration, labor strikes or anything that would stifle national cohesiveness towards victory.

You might wonder what a war-time slogan has to do with heeding Jesus Christ’s invitation of “Follow Me” (Matthew 4:19, emphasis added throughout). Allow me to be frank: We also are in a daily battle with our own human nature that can blow up everything around us by what proceeds from our lips. A blast of selfishness can do more than sink ships at sea. It can sink hearts and drown relationships between family members, neighbors, coworkers, fellow congregants and even

people we have never personally met.

Consider Jesus’ instructions in a somewhat familiar but too often neglected scriptural passage—the “go to your brother” verses in Matthew 18:15-17. Here Jesus states: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother” (verse 15). Jesus is sharing the spiritual reality that, in geometric terms, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

Now let’s be honest—how often do we practice what our Master teaches here? Or do we carelessly go around sharing negative information with everyone but the individual in question? Realize that our Heavenly Father and His Son are also a part of our audience as to whether we “walk the walk” or merely “talk the talk.”

All of us must strive to be more careful in drawing conclusions about others and in what we say about them.

Exemplifying righteous judgment and love for one another

Let’s take a deeper look at verse 16:

“But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established”—the next step being to take the matter before recognized spiritual adjudicators.

Jesus was here reiterating a principle given earlier. Deuteronomy 19:15 clearly states that a single witness was not sufficient to convict: “One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.” This God-given formula towards true justice is also found in Numbers 35:30 and Deuteronomy 17:6, driving home the point.

What is the significance to us as disciples of Jesus Christ in focusing on this background in the Old Testament to bring it forward to our time? God’s wisdom defines love and justice in a balanced and equal manner for all. And here we see His urging of precaution to ensure the well-being of all—the victim as well as the accused. King David proclaims in Psalm 145:17-18: “The LORD is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works. The LORD is near to all who

call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.”

God gave these instructions about righteous and fair judgment and safeguarding of reputation as the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River into the Land of Promise. This was not only for themselves but for them to serve as a collective witness to pagan people around them of the great and righteous God who had delivered them. Their daily example was to show that His ways work and work best to rescue humanity from

Israelites as “the Rock” (Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18, 30-31). And as the apostle Paul explained of the One who led them to the Promised Land, “that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Here we have clearly defined throughout the Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth came as the ultimate Lawgiver and spiritual Deliverer enabling people to cross more than mere seas and rivers, but to cross through death into life. Today He guides His disciples to be “light” to all who are in our sphere

encounter is Proverbs 18:17: “The first one [*one witness*!] to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him.” God instructs us to wait and verify a matter with more than one individual and remember that “in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14)—lest we thwart the spiritual reward of allowing patience to have its perfect work (James 1:4).

Allow me to share a proverbial story about a man with the habit of gossiping and spreading false information. He desired to mend his ways and sought guidance from his pastor. He openly confessed and felt horrible, but what could he possibly do to make amends? His pastor told him, “Go and place a feather on the front porch of every house where you’ve shared your words and then return, and I will share the next step.”

The petitioner gladly took off and did accordingly, thinking the worst was over. He returned and asked, “What now?”

The pastor told him, “Now go and pick up each feather that you placed and bring them to me.” The man’s countenance went pale. He looked down sheepishly and said, “That’s impossible, for by now those feathers have scattered to the four winds.” The minister said: “And so have your words! Now go and take this lesson with you.”

Until next time, let’s take heed of the righteous wisdom of the One who bids us, “*Follow Me*”—in how we perceive matters and come to balanced and loving conclusions and in sharing what we know or think we know about others. We will thereby become part of the solution rather than the problem. Remember that Jesus has called us to reflect and spread His light and not to experience the futility of collecting feathers! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



As followers of Jesus Christ, we must understand that He was far more than just a great wise man and prophet. To help better see this, be sure to download or request our free study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find it.



We also are in a daily battle with our own human nature that can blow up everything around us by what proceeds from our lips.

“the law of the jungle,” which is to strike first and fast for personal survival.

God had Moses share His purpose to ancient Israel in stating regarding God’s commands and principles: “Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?” (Deuteronomy 4:6-7). Down through the ages, Israel was called to be a light to the gentiles, other nations (Isaiah 49:6).

Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15 of God sending a Prophet like him from among Israel’s descendants—One they were to heed. This was a prophecy of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:20-23). Yet He would not be merely a man. Rather, the Lord who was praised and spoken of as being Deliverer and divine Lawgiver—the “I Am” (Exodus 3:14)—would later become flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, now returned to divine glory as the exalted risen Christ (John 1:1-3, 14; 8:58; 17:5). He was referred to by the

of influence. Again, this greater and second divine Moses figure echoes what we read above in Deuteronomy 4:6-8 in directing His disciples today to “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). And that includes the practice of righteous judgment and love for one another (John 7:24; 13:34-35).

“Have you heard?”

You might say, “Well I haven’t been in court in recent times, so how could this matter of witnesses affect my response to God, neighbor or even a stranger?” There is a phrase that often lands in our ears by a so-called “well-meaning person” that goes like this: “Have you heard?” It’s at that moment of stimulus that your heart makes a decision as to what to do with that *solo* “hearsay.” Do we run with it, or put on the brakes to a screeching halt in our hearts? So often on impulse we can become judge, prosecution, jury and, dare I say, executioner in the courtroom of our mind.

A simple proverbial phrase that should be our starting blocks of



The Unadvertised Side Effects of Pornography



by David Cobb

Modern culture is filled with pornography—it’s everywhere. Sexually explicit images and videos are easy to find on the Internet and in many other places. But that’s only part of the problem. Images and videos that reveal just a bit less, often referred to as “soft porn,” are literally everywhere. Sexual themes and imagery are very common in movies, television and magazines and on the Internet. It’s inescapable.

The rampant use of sex in media and easily available porn make life very difficult. Young men and women who are learning to embrace God’s way of life must strive to resist their harmful effects! God created sex to be a blessing when used rightly. But the wrong use of sex makes it a curse, filling life with negative consequences.

How can we maintain a healthy and balanced view of sex with so much pornography around us? We can’t eliminate porn from the culture around us, but we can definitely *choose our response* to those influences. Jesus said that to fight against the dark and sinful aspects of their culture, Christians must put effort into living their lives in the light (John 12:35). This means filling your life with actions that are true and right.

A clear understanding of how consuming pornography differs from the right use of sexuality is one of the most powerful aids to resisting its dark temptations. It is possible to choose a better path, filled with light.

Consider three common myths about pornography versus the truth of right sexuality:

MYTH #1: PORNOGRAPHY IS HARMLESS AND FUN

Much of society doesn’t see pornography as a serious problem. Like many other forms of sin, it’s often passed off as “just something that people do.” Some go further in passive acceptance, treating it like childhood mischief that should just be overlooked. Sadly, many openly accept it, believing it’s an acceptable way to “have a little fun.”

In reality, porn is wrong at its very core. This means that there are no right or acceptable ways to use it and only negative outcomes if you do. The list of harmful effects includes:

- Unrealistic sexual expectations
- Relationship instability/unhappiness
- Difficulty expressing yourself
- Difficulty relating to others
- Anxiety and/or depression
- Sexually transmitted diseases (if you act on what you see)

Ironically, both participants and consumers of pornography are at high risk for these undesirable effects and many others. Despite being made to seem glamorous and highly desirable, working in the “sex industry” or consuming its products has very painful results.

TRUTH #1: WITHIN A PROPER MARRIAGE, SEX IS BOTH HARMLESS AND FUN

It is God's design that a man and woman should "become one flesh," both physically and spiritually, within a loving marriage (Genesis 2:21-25). He didn't create sex as an unfulfilling duty meant only for procreation. Rather it's also an intensely enjoyable way to forge a unique and lasting bond between husband and wife. Within the safe boundaries of a committed, loving marriage, sex is only a blessing from God and "He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

MYTH #2: PORNOGRAPHY SHOWS WHAT SEX IS LIKE

It's natural as a young person to want to learn about sex and what it will be like. Viewing porn is the last place you'll find accurate answers! In reality, most pornography is a carefully scripted production that is staged, rehearsed and edited. As a result, like many other forms of media, it is filled with acting, exaggeration and partial reality.

Very bluntly, the average person's experience with sex is likely to be very different from what pornography portrays. Those differences between what you see in pornography and what actually happens in normal life cause real problems. Instead of preparing you to enjoy sex rightly, it robs you of the true joy of sex that God intended.

In porn, sex is purely physical, and the participants are portrayed far more as objects that serve your desires than as people who should be loved. Here's a reality check—people don't like to be treated as things! Your future husband or wife won't stand for the kinds of behavior that pornography promotes, and they shouldn't.

TRUTH #2: THE BIBLE'S WISDOM—NOT PORN—PREPARES YOU FOR A FULFILLING SEX LIFE

This may surprise you, since society is obsessed with a negative focus on what the Bible says *not* to do with regard to sex. However, sex is ultimately an exchange of actions and emotions *within a relationship*. God's Word specializes in relationship success, especially where outgoing love and concern for others is concerned.

Sexual fulfillment depends far more on the individuals expressing love and concern for one another than on any physical aspect of the act itself. If you want to learn how to enjoy sex, learn how to have a happy marriage. When a husband and wife's actions toward one another are based on godly character, physical blessings of intimacy will follow naturally.

In addition, be aware that when the time comes within marriage, there are many truly informative sexual education resources available. These can provide very direct and helpful information, without any of pornography's undesirable side effects.

When you as a young person have questions about sex now, ask your parents. It may surprise you how much they know! They can help cut through the confusing and incorrect information so

prevalent in society. Much more, they would be glad to help you understand how to apply God's design in your life now, to prepare for the blessings that He intends in the future.

MYTH #3: PORNOGRAPHY SATISFIES SEXUAL DESIRE

In reality, pornography doesn't satisfy anything—physically or emotionally. In fact, it only leaves you *more unfulfilled*, in deeper and more dangerous ways. The belief that porn can provide the same outcomes that we were designed to desire from sex itself is ridiculous.

Pornographic material is the "gateway drug" of sexuality. Consuming a little often leads to consuming more and more, even to the point of addiction. Such material does not provide a "substitute" or "alternative," as some claim. Rather, it makes the consumer *more* likely to engage in illicit sex—with even more negative consequences added on.

TRUTH #3: WRONGLY USED SEX NEVER SATISFIES

Society likes to pretend that in humans sex is a purely physical need. Like the need for food or for sleep, or the animal instinct to procreate—you just fill the need however you want to fill it, the reasoning goes. This simply isn't true. Human history is filled with the negative physical and emotional consequences of this philosophy. Don't be fooled. Sex satisfies only when it is rightly used.

The apostle Paul wrote: "For this is the will of God . . . that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel [or body] in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust . . . that no one should take advantage of and *defraud* his brother in this matter" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-6, emphasis added). And he further warned: "Flee sexual immorality . . . He who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18). And of course it harms our minds as well, as other passages show.

These statements sum up the problem with pornography. It's an enormous, tragic fraud that hurts everyone who participates.

The temptation to consume pornography is unavoidable and strong. *Don't give in!*

As young men and women whom God is calling, you can resist and rise above the temptation with His help. God created sex to bless your life with true physical and emotional fulfillment.

It's worth the wait. Choose not to settle for an unsatisfying and harmful fraud. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



It's best to avoid exposure to pornography. But if you or someone you know has become ensnared and is struggling with this serious problem, request or download our free study aid *Overcoming Pornography Addiction* for help in breaking free of its enslaving chains.

Scan the code or visit ucg.org/jf25 to find it.



Q: You say Christians shouldn't celebrate Christmas and Easter because of their pagan origins. But what about minor occasions like those coming up in late winter—Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day and Mardi Gras. Aren't these just harmless fun?

A: Scripture makes clear that we are not to adopt pagan worship practices as part of our worship of the true God (Deuteronomy 12:29-32). Yet what if one engages in these not to worship God, but just for amusement? God wants us to remove all vestiges of pagan worship from our lives (see verses 1-4). There are, of course, various customs of ancient pagans that did not originate in their worship—which would be fine to emulate. But if something originated in pagan worship, we must refuse.

Let's consider the occasions mentioned above, the details here being easy to confirm through web searches and standard encyclopedias.

Groundhog Day (Feb. 2): It might seem innocent, but it comes from the pagan Celtic celebration of Imbolc in honor of the spring fertility goddess Brigid and the winter goddess Cailleach, the old hag—different forms of the mother goddess. Marking the half-way point between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, it remains one of the Wiccans' or witches' eight high sabbats today. With days lengthening, it observed the returning of the light, fires being lit to encourage that. And it involved weather divination. A bright day—indicated by shamanistic observance of badgers or other small animals poking out of holes to see their shadow—meant the winter goddess was deciding to abide in the world the six weeks or 40 or so days until the spring.

The word Imbolc meant either “in the belly,” for fertility, or a “washing” or “cleansing,” symbolizing purification for spring rebirth. It's thought to be associated with the purification rituals of the Roman Februalia festival, from which we get Valentine's. This day of Imbolc with its ritual lighting was absorbed by the Catholic Church as Candlemas, claimed to be the day when the baby Jesus was presented at the temple 40 days from His supposed birth at Christmas—but that's false. When German immigrants brought the observance to Pennsylvania in America, they swapped in the groundhog as the animal to use in the weather divination. Consider also that this is still a worship day for witches and for many Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans and Methodists.

Valentine's Day (Feb. 14): This was the Roman Februalia, as mentioned, named after leather straps from a sacrifice meant to purify the people from their past year's sins. The straps were used to strike women to make them fertile. This is where we get the month name February. It became part of the Lupercalia at mid-month in honor of Lupercus, a form of Faunus or Pan, god of shepherds and fruitfulness. The festival also honored Rome's founders Romulus and Remus who

had been nursed by the she-wolf or lupa in the cave at the base of the Palatine Hill that was known as the Lupercal, which is where you get the god and festival name.

This festival was a time of drawing names for pairing off for immoral sexual unions, and of course this was related to the love god Cupid and his mother Venus. There also seems to be a relation to the ancient hunter of wolves, traceable back to the mighty hunter Nimrod in the Bible, perhaps the original Valentinus or “strong man,” as the name means. Some claim that St. Valentine was actually a later priest who performed secret marriages who was martyred. Others have argued that it commemorates, at least in part, the early gnostic teacher Valentinus, with his blasphemous divine bridal chamber ritual of sacred sex. St. Valentine's Day is still a worship occasion for many Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans.

Mardi Gras (shifts between Feb. and March). Meaning “Fat Tuesday” in French, it's the final day of gorging and partying before Ash Wednesday starts the 40 days of Lent until Easter, with partial fasting from some things, particularly meat. It comes at the end of a celebratory period called Carnival (supposedly meaning “remove meat” or “farewell to

meat”). The day is also called Shrove Tuesday, referring to being “shriven” or absolved of sins through confession and penance before going into Lent.

Lent is a form of an old English and Germanic word meaning spring season, perhaps from the days “lengthening.” It approximates the period of purification following Imbolc and the Lupercalia to the spring equinox. While we see 40-day fasts in the Bible, they are not in associ-

ation with approaching the biblical spring festival season. On the other hand, we do find such lengthy fast periods preceding various pagan resurrection festivals.

Mardi Gras participants go into a “bead lust” to get necklaces of colored beads being handed out, engaging in inappropriate behavior to acquire more as part of drunken debauchery. There are many parallels with ancient pagan celebratory behavior. This day is still observed by many Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists as including self-examination and repentance and prayerful commitment before the fasting starts (in some cases repenting for reveling excesses earlier that day).

Thus, it's clear that all these observances originated in pagan worship. They are still considered worship days by some, but many observe them as fun time unrelated to religion. Is it acceptable for us to participate in them? Certainly not—per the verses we've seen and numerous others. Don't just blindly go along. We need to extricate ourselves from all such customs. God detests them, and we should too. **BT**

We need to extricate ourselves from all such customs. God detests them, and we should too.

DIVE DEEPER



To learn more about what's wrong with observing such occasions—and what God wants us to celebrate instead—be sure to download or request our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

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Malawi: P.O. Box 32257, Chichiri, Blantyre 3, Malawi | Phone: +265 (0) 999 823 523 |

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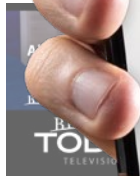
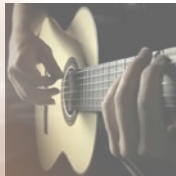
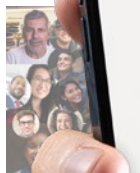
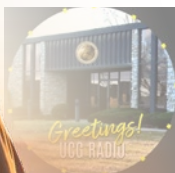
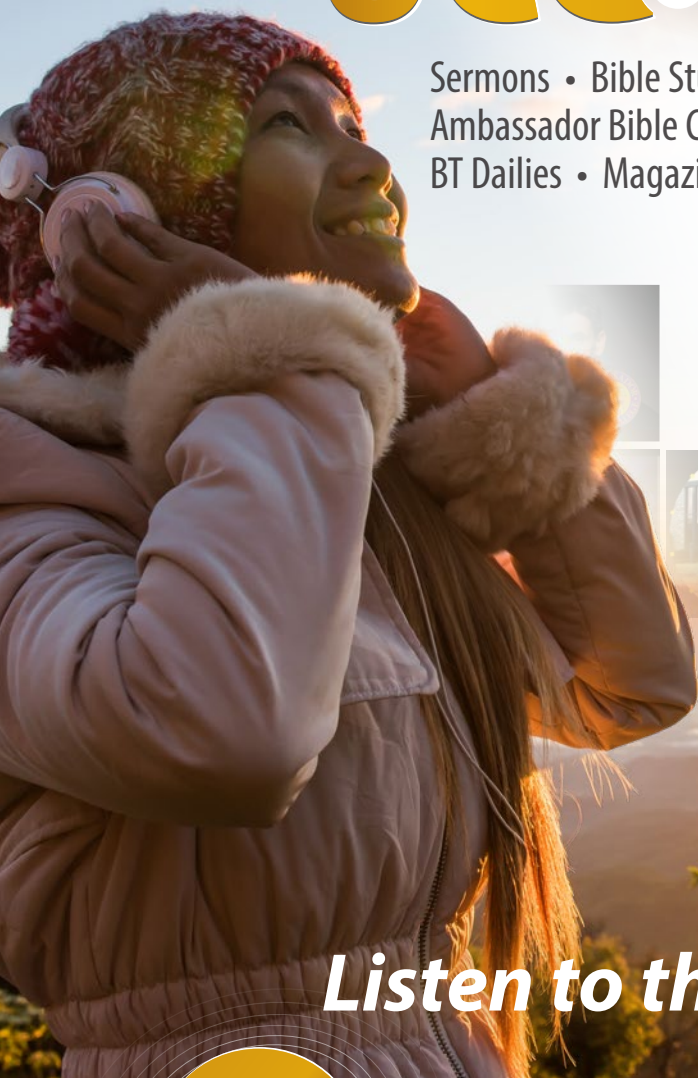
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