



# COMPASS CHECK

Helping you turn your spiritual compass toward God

# A Gift, Not a Right



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## COMPASS CHECK

*Compass Check* is a biblically based magazine for young people of the United Church of God, an International Association (UCGIA). Our name, *Compass Check*, refers to pointing your spiritual compass toward God. Our goal is to inspire readers to respond to the gospel message.

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

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Vol. 10, No. 3

United Youth Magazine | Winter 2024

## COMPASS CORNER

*Dear Compass Checkers,*

I hope this note finds you well and warm! By the time you read this, it will already be winter and some of you will have already seen snow.

Life is a long series of adventures as I see it. Some are more fun and eagerly anticipated than others, but even difficult times are a time of adventure. When you talk to your grandparents or anyone who's a little older, they often like to share with you stories of all the interesting things they've seen and done over their years.

But what happens when that adventure comes to an end? Do we wind up in heaven or hell? Do we simply stop existing? What exactly happens after we die? It's an age-old question, and one that we'll examine in this issue of *Compass Check*.

Speaking of questions, how do you answer questions about Christmas? What do you say when someone wishes you "Merry Christmas"—do you say thank you, nothing at all, or run and hide? (Hint: It's not the last one.)

One of the great things about our world is the freedom we have to practice our faith, even if others don't agree. But is that freedom a right, or a gift from God? And what happens when people don't accept your thoughts and ideas? How can you cope with the feelings of rejection? More questions worthy of consideration that we'll take a look at in this issue.

I hope you find this issue enlightening as we answer these questions and more. Get yourself a cup of cocoa, curl up by the fireplace and enjoy the read!



*Dan Preston*

*Editor of Compass Check magazine*



# WHAT TO DO ABOUT CHRISTMAS?

*With Christmas just around the corner, here's a collection of short articles that can help you answer some of the questions and conversations that inevitably arise this time of year.*

## *When People Say, "Have a Merry Christmas," How Should You Respond?*

**F**or those of us who do not celebrate Christmas, knowing how to respond to someone who might be sincerely wishing us well is difficult. Here are a few principles that are important to keep in mind:

1. Most people wishing us well about Christmas have no idea that Christmas is pagan in its origin, and are often unaware that we do not celebrate it.
2. There is usually not enough time to respond to that person by giving a short explanation of either the origin of Christmas or the fact that you don't celebrate it for reasons of conscience.

3. To most, saying "Merry Christmas" or "Have a happy Christmas" becomes so commonplace that it is very similar to saying "Have a good day." Most people say it out of obligation or common courtesy.

4. Simply respond as you might under ordinary circumstances, but be careful. When someone tells us "Have a nice day," we often automatically respond, "Thanks, you too." To do so after someone has wished us "Merry Christmas" wouldn't be appropriate. Instead, say something like, "Have a wonderful day."

## 3 Reasons I Don't Miss Out by Not Keeping Christmas

Perhaps you've never celebrated Christmas. A lot of people have the same question when they find this out. "Don't you miss out? I mean, don't you ever wish you kept Christmas?" It shouldn't bother you when people ask that. They're usually well-meaning and just don't understand how you can do without something that seems so good to them.

Here are a few points to consider when explaining why you don't miss out.

1. Christmas doesn't represent Jesus—Even though it bears the name of Christ, Christmas doesn't represent His life, His death, or what He does for Christians today. There's lots of info on UCG.org about what the holiday does represent, and it's obvious that Jesus is not the reason for the season.

2. Christmas is all about get; a Christian's life should be all about give—It might be called "the season of giving," but Christmas is an advertiser's dream come true. It seems like, even when intentions are good, Christmas brings out the greedy side in otherwise good people. But Christians are all about giving. Giving their lives to God and serving Him fully is right in the Christian job description. Christmas only gets in the way of that noble goal.

3. Christmas is a poor replacement for God's Holy Days—God gave people a wonderful set of fun-filled, meaning-filled and giving-filled Holy Days. These festivals give us a picture of God's plan for each person's salvation—way more meaning than Christmas! What's more, Jesus Himself celebrated the Holy Days, and He's our ultimate example of how to live.

## Keeping Family When You Don't Keep Christmas

Why does it sometimes feel wrong to say no to Christmas, even though you know you should? For many people, Christmas traditions are wrapped up in family. It's often the family's largest and most-anticipated gathering. Let's be honest—saying no to Christmas feels like saying no to family, right? All of the intellectual knowledge about the true origins of Christmas doesn't keep your heart from breaking when someone asks, "Don't you want to be with your family?"

Obviously, you want to be with family, so the question really becomes, "How do I maintain a relationship with

my family and be true to my beliefs?" It is possible, and it doesn't involve Christmas.

There are two points to consider. One, family relationships are about more than just a single day. And two, God has a bigger plan for family than most people realize.

How do you build a relationship with your family outside of trees, tinsel and presents? Some people join their extended family for lunch or dinner and leave before gifts and other Christmas traditions, and that works well for them. You might even try going over to spend additional time with your Church family, because, frankly, it can be very lonely to un-keep Christmas all by yourself.

Throughout the year, make it a point to spend time with family at other opportunities that are meaningful: Thanksgiving (in the U.S. and Canada), birthdays, a summer family gathering, and other special events such as graduations and weddings. Make an effort to see them more often so they don't feel you're pulling away from them. It's

Christmas you're rejecting, not them.

You should be able to answer why you are choosing not to keep



Christmas. My answer is, "God has spelled out His Holy Days in the Bible and how to keep them, so now I keep those instead." God's holy festivals as described in Leviticus 23, illustrate the greatest story ever told—a story that features Jesus in the starring role. But His birth is only a small part of that story. Christmas misses most of the action and the dramatic conclusion. God has created special opportunities for you and your family to celebrate together throughout the year and remember the incredible story He is telling. **CC**

**FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ARE ABOUT MORE THAN JUST A SINGLE DAY. AND GOD HAS A BIGGER PLAN FOR FAMILY THAN MOST PEOPLE REALIZE.**



# HEAVEN HELL

*Or Somewhere in Between?*

*by Dan Preston*

**Y**ou've no doubt seen the images of heaven on TV and movies, a picture of serenity everywhere you look: Dad grilling burgers, junior playing fetch with the dog, little Susie and mom bringing out a platter of freshly squeezed lemonade for all to enjoy. Or maybe it was someone ascending into a bright light, where they entered through pearly gates and received a harp to play divine music, sitting on a cloud for eternity. Perhaps you have seen heaven depicted as a couple being reunited on the beach, embracing one another and then walking off into the sunset.

People have a lot of ideas about the concept of heaven. And while they sound very rewarding and might even contain elements of truth in them, the concept that most people have

of heaven today is not what the Bible teaches about life after death.

Likewise, the concept of the devil tormenting people with a pitchfork and all sorts of other sadistic devices in a fiery lair deep below the surface of the earth isn't found in the Bible either.

### **ORIGINS OF MODERN TEACHINGS**

So if these ideas aren't found in the Bible, where do they come from? For the Christian world, most of these ideas can be tied directly to the concept of an immortal soul. This idea teaches that there is a part of you that doesn't die at the end of your physical (or mortal) life, and that this essence goes on to live somewhere forever. Some people refer to this as their "ghost," another unbiblical concept.



Over many centuries with cultural influence from Babylon, Greece, Rome and teachers like Plato and Martin Luther, the modern images of heaven and hell began to form. In short, the idea became that at death, your immortal soul either goes to heaven as a reward for being good, or hell as punishment for being bad. The exact concepts of what heaven and hell likely vary from one person to the next in even the same church, but that's a big picture idea of what most modern Christians believe.

### **WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES**

First, it's important to understand what the Bible teaches about an immortal soul. While the Bible does teach the idea that one can live forever, that life does not begin immediately after physical death.

Jesus taught quite the opposite. He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). He goes on to say in verses 28-29, "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come



**THE CONCEPT OF . . . A FIERY LAIR DEEP BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH ISN'T FOUND IN THE BIBLE.**

forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

Did you notice how Christ said that people *will* live and *will* come forth to a resurrection? Christ speaks of these as events that lie in the future for those who are dead. If, immediately after our death, we go on to heaven and hell, surely Christ would have been aware of this and would have spoken of these events as having already occurred for those who have died.

Further understanding comes from what the apostle Paul wrote to the people of Thessalonica. Apparently, there was confusion even at that time about what happened after death. Paul clarifies by explaining, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

Virtually all translations of the Bible note that sleep here is a synonym for death. Paul is telling us that death is similar to a state of sleep and that those who have died remain in that state until the return of Jesus Christ. This stands in stark contrast to the idea of an immortal soul immediately going to heaven

*Over many centuries with cultural influence from Babylon, Greece, Rome and teachers like Plato and Martin Luther, the modern images of heaven and hell began to form.*

## When Are the “Rest of the Dead” Raised?

Some have been confused about the wording of Revelation 20:4-5. At first glance, it can appear that the “rest of the dead” that are raised at the end of the 1,000 years are in the first resurrection. However, from a logical standpoint, this makes no sense. How can they be first, if they aren’t raised until 1,000 years later.

This can easily be understood when we recognize that the first sentence in verse five is a thought about “the rest of the dead” that’s being interjected into the explanation of what happens to those who are resurrected first. In fact, some translations, such as the New International Version and New Living Translation, actually clarify this by adding a set of parentheses around this sentence. Thus, verses four and five are better rendered, “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection” (NIV).

or hell after death. Paul, who was taught directly by Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12), would surely have known better if this were not the case.

### WHAT DOES HAPPEN?

As we have seen, at death we go into a state somewhat like sleep. I remember once a tornado went through the area in the middle of the night. Howling winds and storm sirens blared, but I managed to sleep through it all. I had no clue until the next morning when my mom told me what had happened. Death is similar. “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). This essence of human life goes back to God, where it remains until He wakes us up. That occurs only at the return of Jesus Christ.

We can get further clarification on exactly how this happens. “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are

## What Happens in the Lake of Fire?

What happens in the lake of fire? It is sometimes imagined as a place of everlasting torment, much like what most people envision hell as today. The Bible nowhere indicates this. Part of the confusion comes from Revelation 20:10 where it says, “The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet *are*. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” You might notice the word “are” is in italics, meaning that it was added by the translators. Unfortunately, because the translators believed in the idea of immortal souls being tormented in a hell fire, the word “are” is used, indicating that the beast and the false prophet will be there forever. The word would be translated better as “were.” The reality is that the beast and false prophet were put into the lake of fire 1,000 years earlier (Revelation 19:20). Being mortal human beings, they both would have long since died by the time we read about Satan being cast into the lake of fire. It is only Satan (and his demons) that are tormented forever, as they are spirit beings.

alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

Paul explains very clearly that Jesus Christ will return to earth, and those who have died in Christ (died while living a life faithful to Him) will rise from the dead. In addition, those who are still alive at Christ’s return will join them, and they will



meet Christ in the clouds and remain with Him forever. This truly awesome event is referred to as the first resurrection.

If we have lived a life of faithful obedience, we will be raised back to life at the time of His return, not before that. Paul further explains that at that time we will be given a new spirit body that is far superior to our current physical flesh. “So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body . . .” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Of course, it should be said that not everyone will be awakened from

death immediately at the return of Christ. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Corinthians 15:22-23). The Bible teaches that some will not be resurrected to life until after the first 1,000 years of Christ’s reign on Earth. What happens to them?

### THE REST OF THE DEAD

There is a clear explanation of what happens to all those who aren’t a part of that first resurrection in Revelation 20. The first three verses explain that Satan the devil will be bound away, unable to influence mankind for 1,000 years after the return of

Christ. Beginning in verse four, we get a confirmation of what Paul explained in 1 Thessalonians regarding those resurrected at Christ's return, "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4). Clearly, this group of people will be doing more than floating around on clouds and playing harps. It says they will be reigning (ruling) with Jesus Christ for 1,000 years, commonly referred to as the Millennium.

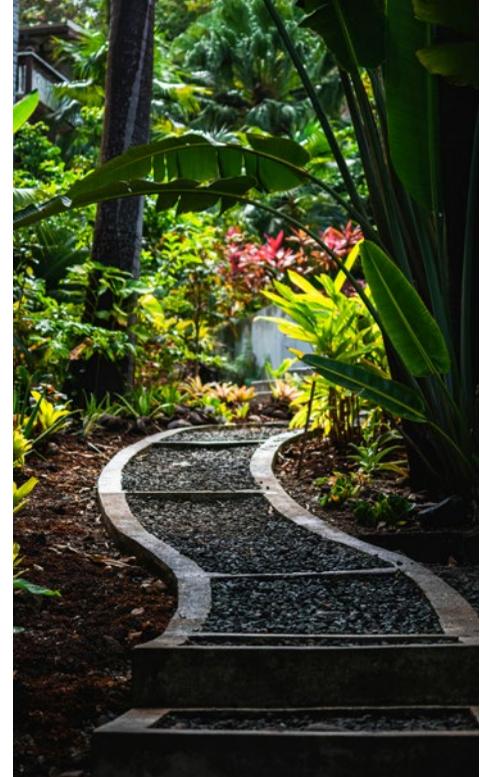
Next, we get some insight on what happens to those who are NOT resurrected at Christ's return. "But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished . . ." (verse 5—see "When Are the 'Rest of the Dead' Raised?" on page 7 for additional information regarding the wording of this verse).

These 1,000 years will be a wonderful time for humanity, free from the influence of Satan and under the rule of Jesus Christ and those He resurrects at His return. Life will flourish on earth. It's important to note that while many will be brought up in that first resurrection or otherwise converted to spirit being at Christ's return, not everyone will be. Many people will live on through the return of Christ as mortal human beings. It is during this millennial reign of Christ that they and subsequent generations will learn the great benefit of obedience to God's way of life.

Unfortunately, that time will come to an end. "Now when the thousand

years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them" (verses 7-9). At the end of the 1,000 years, Satan is loosed for a short time. The purpose in God allowing this is to see if those who have lived all this time without the influence of Satan and under Christ's reign will remain obedient to him. It's hard to believe, but Scripture makes it clear that many will not. God will then destroy them with fire, and they will remain dead forever.

That's a sobering thought, but it still leaves us with a few questions. We know about those who lived before the return of Christ and were faithful to God. They are resurrected to spirit life in the first resurrection. We know about those who lived as human beings and were not faithful to God. They are consumed by fire and die at the end of the 1,000 years. But what about everyone else? What about those who never really knew or understood God and died before Christ's return, which is likely the vast majority of all those who ever lived? Or, what about those who *did* know God before Christ's return, but refused to obey Him? And what about those who did not join in Satan's



rebellion at the end of the 1,000 years? What happens to all of them?

The Bible does not leave us wondering. "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works" (Revelation 20:11-13).

There's a lot to unpack here, but let's start by understanding whom these verses concern. We're told that *all* the dead are now standing before God. This would certainly include the "rest of the dead" we read about earlier in verse five. Imagery referring to those who died at sea or were in Hades (the ground) is used to accentuate the idea that no one will be left out. While we're not told explicitly, it's also possible this includes those who live through the 1,000 years and remain loyal to God, even after Satan's release, and might also be judged at this time.

So what happens to these people? The key is in understanding verse 12. We're told that

“books were opened.” This seems to indicate the books of the Bible. In other words, the truth the Bible teaches will be opened up to this group of people for the first time in their lives. They will finally be able to understand who God truly is, what His hope for them is, and how He expects them to live. After they are granted that understanding and *only* after they understand, they will be judged “according” to their works, or how they respond to this new understanding.

Following this, final judgment will be ren-

*Much of our society lives in fear of what will happen when they die. But the Bible is quite clear. Those who honor and obey God will ultimately inherit eternal life and never face the prospect of death again.*



dered. “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14-15). People will ultimately wind up in one of two places, written in the Book of Life or consumed in a lake of fire. Having your name written in the Book of Life corresponds to eternal life as a spirit being. Just as those in the first resurrection received eternal life, those who fail to respond to God will face a permanent death in the lake of fire.

“For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). “. . . for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (verse 10). Once this

final, permanent death comes, there is no further opportunity for a resurrection. The dead simply cease to exist, no longer experiencing anything, torture or otherwise (see “What Happens in the Lake of Fire?” on page 8 for additional information on the lake of fire).

### **A COMFORTING CONCLUSION**

Much of our society lives in fear of what will happen when they die. But the Bible is quite clear. Those who honor and obey God will ultimately inherit eternal life and never face the prospect of death again. Those who reject God will die a permanent death and cease to exist. While that’s not the outcome anyone wants, it is comforting to know that the Bible does not teach everlasting torment and torture for the wicked. (For more information on this topic, check out our free Bible study guides *What Happens After Death?* and *Heaven and Hell*.)

The truth is that what happens after death is far better than what most people imagine heaven to be. In addition to being reunited with those who have died living a faithful life, we will have opportunity to be joined with those who never really knew God. In His time, God will use his saints to teach all who have ever lived how they can have an eternal life of joy and peace, free of fear, pain and suffering. Let us live God’s Word faithfully so we can be prepared for this awesome future! **CC**



*Dan Preston is the editor of Compass Check and serves as pastor for the Charlotte an Hickory, North Carolina and Columbia, South Carolina congregations.*

# A Gift, Not a Right



*“We hold these truths  
to be self-evident,*

that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These famous words from the Declaration of Independence have long served as a cornerstone of American values. They are frequently quoted, revered, and debated, especially in moments of political and social turmoil. But as Christians living in a society shaped by these ideals, do we truly stop to consider what these words mean?

The recent presidential election has stirred deep divisions in our nation, and among the discontented, these lines are often invoked to justify anger, frustration, or even violent behavior. But in the heat of the moment, how many of us pause to question whether these words—especially the idea that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable rights—are truly self-evident? More importantly, are they truly rights given by God?

## **ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS**

The term “unalienable” (or “inalienable,” as we would say today) refers to something that cannot be taken away or surrendered. This concept suggests that the rights we possess are inherently ours, granted by our Creator, and cannot be revoked by any human authority. But is this really the case? Does life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness truly belong to us by right, or are they gifts from God, as the Declaration implies? Let’s explore each of these so-called “unalienable rights” in greater depth, starting with life itself.

# *Does life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness truly belong to us by right, or are they gifts from God, as the Declaration implies?*

## **LIFE: A RIGHT OR A GIFT?**

Is life something we are entitled to simply because we exist? Many people in modern society take life for granted, assuming it is a right that belongs to them. However, the Bible offers a different perspective. In Romans 3:23, we are told, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And in Romans 6:23, we are reminded that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” If life were truly a right, we would not need to speak of it as a “gift” from God. A gift, by definition, is something given freely and voluntarily, not something that is automatically ours. As the Bible points out, our sin separates us from God’s glory, and in that state, we deserve death. Life, then, is not a right we possess by virtue of our humanity; it is a precious gift bestowed upon us by God. Since life is a gift from the Father, it can be taken away at His will. No one else, however, has the right to take it. Life is sacred and valuable, for it comes from God, and as such, must be protected.

## **LIBERTY: FREEDOM OR BONDAGE?**

Next, consider the concept of liberty. The Declaration of Independence champions our right to liberty, but are we truly free to

do as we please? In reality, the idea of “freedom” is more complex than it first appears. Romans 6:16 teaches, “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?” This verse highlights a critical point: true liberty is not about being free to do whatever we want; it’s about being free from the bondage of sin. We may think we are free when we act according to our own desires, but in reality, we are often enslaved by our choices—whether to sin, materialism,

or other destructive behaviors.

In Christian terms, freedom comes not from acting according to our own will, but from surrendering our will to God. Galatians 5:1 encourages us to “stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” In other words, true liberty is found in obedience to God’s will. It is a freedom not from all law, but from the destructive power of sin, which leads to death. So, while we may have a form of civil liberty in this world, our ultimate freedom is found in Christ.



## THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: JOY OR FLEETING PLEASURE?

Finally, we come to the pursuit of happiness. The idea that happiness is an inherent right to be pursued at all costs is deeply ingrained in American culture. However, happiness is often fleeting and superficial. What makes one person happy—such as material wealth, personal success, or indulgence in earthly pleasures—may harm others or ultimately lead to emptiness. A person who pursues alcohol for the sake of happiness may temporarily feel happy, but this happiness is short-lived and comes at the expense of his health and relationships.

Joy, on the other hand, is something deeper and more lasting. Psalm 16:11 tells us, “You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Joy is not simply a passing feeling; it is a lasting, spiritual gift that comes from God. It is rooted in

**JOY IS NOT SIMPLY A PASSING FEELING; IT IS A LASTING, SPIRITUAL GIFT THAT COMES FROM GOD. IT IS ROOTED IN GOD’S PRESENCE AND IN THE RIGHTEOUSNESS HE OFFERS.**



John Trumbull (1832).  
*The Declaration of Independence,*  
*July 4, 1776* [oil on canvas].  
Yale University Art Gallery.

God’s presence and in the righteousness He offers. While it is not wrong to enjoy the good things in life, the Bible teaches us that our focus should be on pursuing joy, which is a lasting blessing from God, rather than fleeting happiness.

## THE GIFT OF LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

So, what does this mean for us as individuals living in a nation that champions the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? We should remember that these things are not inherently ours by right, as the Declaration suggests. Rather, they are gifts from our Creator. God has given us the gift of life, but it is ultimately His to take away. He has granted us the liberty to be free from sin, but that freedom is found in obedience to His will, not in the pursuit of personal desires. And He has made it possible for us to experience true joy, but that joy is found not in the temporary pleasures of this world, but in a relationship with Him.

Let us remember to be thankful for the gifts God has given us. These gifts are not guaranteed but are freely offered to us by a gracious Creator, and we must also acknowledge that they are not our inherent rights—they are divine gifts to be cherished and used in accordance with God’s will. And may we always seek true joy, not fleeting happiness, knowing that it is only in God’s presence that we find fullness of joy. **CC**



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# Is Anime Dangerous?



*Anonymous*

**W**hen I was a child, I loved to read a good story. I wasn't interested in true stories or other nonfiction; I wanted a story to take me away into a different world—a world of idyllic relationships and happy endings.

Fiction and fantasy are appealing ways to escape the trials, challenges and, sometimes, the restrictions and limitations of reality. Of themselves, fiction and fantasy aren't wrong. Jesus Himself told made-up stories that we call "parables" to teach His followers important lessons.

But can the fantasy world of cartoons, comics, anime and manga become dangerous? How can we recognize when the world of imagination and fantasy crosses a line from harmless to harmful?

When watching cartoons or anime we might be tempted to think that, since it's not "real," violence and sexual content are OK, but Jesus taught that wrong actions start with the thoughts in our minds (Mark 7:14-23). Those thoughts in our minds are "fed" by what we put *into* our minds. If we feed our minds on violence and perversion, we can eventually expect that violence and perversion to impact our actions.

## A TRUE STORY

Recently, Ingrid\* was kind and humble enough to tell me a very sad story about how her desperate desire for friends, and to fit in as a preteen, led from watching very innocent anime to an addiction to a very dark and perverted kind of anime. This in turn impacted her thinking and set her on a path to some very damaging—even devastating—life choices. Ingrid's real-life pain is an example of how very small steps may take us *away* from God and His way, and eventually leave a huge chasm between us and God.

Ingrid has turned away from those unhealthy choices now, but she will continue to pay a price for certain decisions for many years yet to come. Importantly, she didn't *start* with watching very violent or perverted content. If, like Ingrid, you have made a series of media choices that have led to a downward spiral into a seeming abyss, I hope you will be encouraged to know that God will gladly welcome you back to Him. Jesus told not just one, but *three* separate parables about how God lovingly forgives our past sins when we turn back to Him (see Luke 15).

It may seem hard to work out what is good viewing,

*\*not her real name*

reading or recreation and what is bad, but the Bible has the answers (even though it's a really old book!) if you know where to look.

The Bible has some simple tests we can apply to all kinds of entertainment to work out whether they are suitable or not. Just because they're simple doesn't mean it's *easy* to do the right thing though! As you look carefully at what the Bible has to say, you will probably find you don't always like it. You may find your favorite movies or TV shows don't meet God's high standards, but if you stick to God's ways you will find His ways always best in the end, even if they're hard to follow.

Here are seven steps based on the Bible that can help you avoid media becoming a monster that takes over your life.

### STEP ONE: TEST ALL THINGS

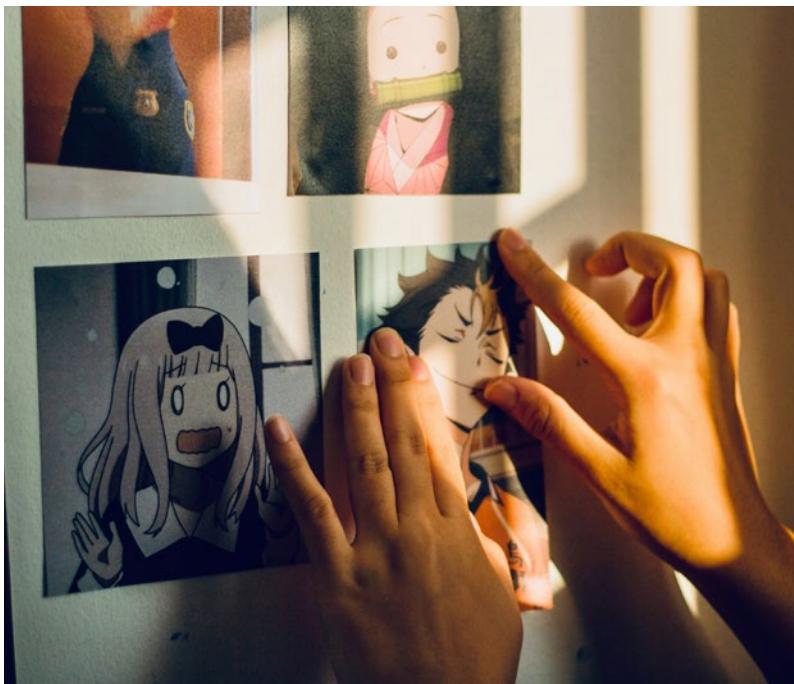
Firstly, these rules apply to all kinds of entertainment and recreation. Just like fiction and fantasy aren't necessarily bad, nonfiction and documentaries aren't necessarily *good*. The Bible says to "test *all* things." That's the first step. Whether it's a favorite cartoon or anime, a nature documentary, reality show, video game or other form of entertainment, the same rule applies: "Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain [keep away] from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

### STEP TWO: KNOW AND OBEY GOD'S LAWS

How do we know what is evil and what is good? The starting point is found in Exodus chapter 20 and Deuteronomy chapter 5—in what are known as "the Ten Commandments." The Ten Commandments tell us not to steal, lie, murder, worship idols and so on. But, Jesus Christ told His followers not to even *think* about doing bad things. Any entertainment that has us imagining *doing* wrong ourselves is a big "no." So, step two is to learn God's commandments and apply them!

Is giving up certain shows and forms of entertainment hard? Absolutely! You'll find that some very popular movies and TV series don't make the cut, and you'll probably have friends or family who try to get you to watch or participate in things that aren't right.

My friend Ingrid didn't set out to sin—she was lonely and wanted to fit in, and an entire realm of fantasy was there waiting to meet those needs. What Ingrid discovered, of course, is that imagination and fantasy can't fill the voids God created to be filled by relationships with Him and other people. That's where step three comes in.



*Just like fiction and fantasy aren't necessarily bad, nonfiction and documentaries aren't necessarily good. The Bible says to "test all things."*

### STEP THREE: PRAY FOR HELP AND GUIDANCE

We must pray and ask God for help, often! You'll need God's help in identifying what's right and wrong, and you'll need a *lot* of help in sticking with what's right. There are many temptations out there in the world of entertainment, and you'll find you won't be able to stick to the right path without God's help.

### STEP FOUR: READ THE WHOLE BIBLE

Get to know the *whole* Bible. There are more important rules and helpful instructions in the Bible than just the Ten Commandments. So, over time, to truly hold fast to what is good and keep away from evil, you'll want to get to know *all* of those instructions from God.

### STEP FIVE: BE READY TO REPENT (QUICKLY!)

Sadly, with so many temptations, you'll find that even when you've asked for God's help, you're going to sometimes make mistakes—even mess up very badly. That's where step five

comes in: be ready to repent (admit to God you've made a mistake, say sorry and turn around). This is another tough one. It's tough to admit to being wrong, but if you want to follow God there is *no* other way!

When I was young, I made a lot of bad choices in movies and TV shows. I still notice some of the consequences of that many years later when bits of movies pop into my head and send my brain on a negative loop of bad thoughts and emotions. I have had to repent many times—not only as a young person, but also as an adult. That's part of our walk with God. The sooner we repent of wrong choices, the sooner we can get back on track making right choices.

### **STEP SIX: REPLACE THE BAD WITH GOOD**

We must put good things *in* to keep the bad things *out*. In Philippians 4:8, the apostle Paul wrote that we should think about good things. He said: “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

The things you watch and read are naturally what you will think about, so it's *very* important to make those *good* things. As you get into reading the Bible, you will notice it tells the stories of some big mistakes and sins—and their consequences.

Is that verse telling us we shouldn't read the Bible? Definitely not! Filling your mind with “good” things doesn't mean you can only watch YouTube videos of cute kittens. Ideally, what you watch, read or participate in should inspire and encourage you to do good (by *God's* definition of good!) in your own life.

If a show, book or activity leaves you



*We must put good things in to keep the bad things out. The things you watch and read are naturally what you will think about, so it's very important to make those good things.*

feeling lustful (really desiring what you know is wrong), angry, bitter, resentful or with other negative emotions, that's a good sign you need to review what's going into your mind. If you fill your life with God's Word, good, healthy relationships and meaningful activities, then mental “junk food” will be far less tempting. Have you ever tried to resist your absolute favorite junk food when really, really hungry? It's super hard, right?

### **STEP SEVEN: REACH OUT FOR HELP**

Finally, get help from someone you trust—even before you get onto the wrong track. That person may be a family friend, relative, pastor or leader in your church or community—just make sure they are generally living by a godly

standard themselves! And don't expect anyone to be perfect. Every human you look up to will let you down sometimes.

Choosing someone who will encourage you to stay close to God, who sets a good example themselves and who willingly admits their mistakes, can be invaluable in your life!

### **FOLLOW GOD'S PRINCIPLES**

Can the fantasy world of cartoons, anime, comics and manga become dangerous? Yes, when they contain images or ideas that are opposed to God's way. True safety and peace come from following the laws and principles God has given us in His Word. God has given each of us the tools to identify what is good. May we each use the tools God has given us, and use them wisely. **CC**

A high-angle photograph of a person walking across a vast, light-colored tiled plaza. The person is a small silhouette in the upper left corner, moving towards the right. The tiles are arranged in a grid pattern, and the lighting creates long, soft shadows.

# IF YOU FEEL LIKE AN OUTSIDER

## *You're in the Right Place*

*by Kourtney Kovanis*

**F**eeling accepted and finding your “tribe” are common themes today, and they have been for most of history. Humans have a powerful drive and desire to be social and

Encouragingly, the Bible actually has a lot to say on the subject of feeling rejected. As it does in so many ways, the Bible shows how God can take something painful and messy and use it for good.

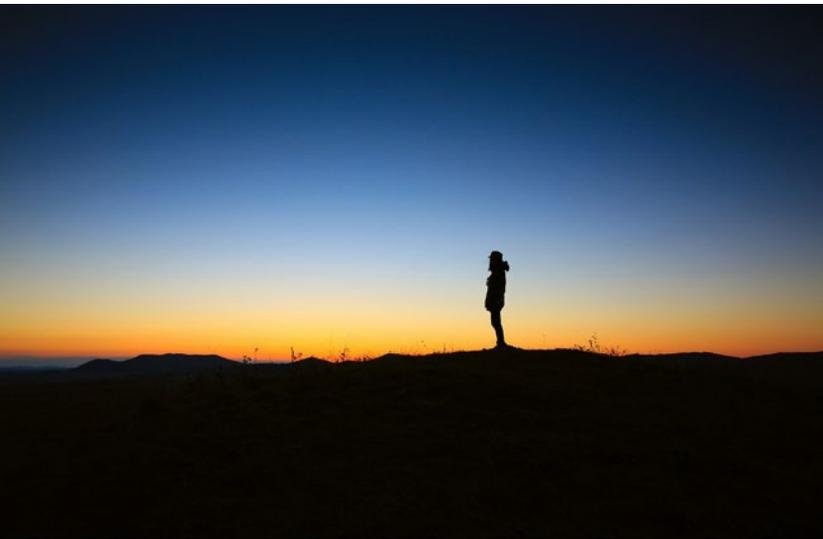
The story of Leah is one example. Leah is the sometimes overlooked counterpart to her sister Rachel. Leah’s father Laban tricked Jacob into marrying her, even though he was already in love with and planning to marry Rachel (Genesis 29).

Although we don’t get much dialogue from Leah in the Bible, we can tell a lot about her emotional pain and feelings of rejection by how she names her children:

“When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, ‘The LORD has surely looked on my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me.’” (Genesis 29:31-32).

It seems Leah dealt with feeling unloved, undervalued and unwanted. Emotional distress like that can cause pain similar to physical injury. An article on [psyche.com](http://psyche.com) sheds more light on the subject:

*“As the social psychologist Mark Leary explains, the ‘hurt feelings’ of rejection arise when an event suggests to you that someone*

A silhouette of a person standing on a hill, looking out over a landscape at sunset. The sky is a gradient of blue and orange, and the horizon is dark.

fit in with a community. The opposite is also true. When we aren’t included, feeling misunderstood and rejected can cause us intense pain.



**As Christians we're called to be like Christ and live in the way He lived. Sometimes we have to stand out awkwardly and uncomfortably from the crowd.**

*doesn't value their relationship with you as much as you want them to. If you've been through any of these rejection experiences and have suffered, you are far from alone. All of us suffer in these situations.*

*"In fact, humans are built to suffer when we experience rejection—when our fundamental need for belonging is denied. In conversations about rejection, a word you hear frequently is 'pain.' Brain imaging research suggests that the pain of rejection and physical pain are actually processed in similar ways by our brain."<sup>1</sup>*

A book called *The Women of the Bible Speak* by Shannon Bream gives some helpful commentary and explanation about what we can learn from Leah and how she expressed and handled her feelings of rejection:

*"Leah's lot was a difficult one, but notice what she says about it: the Lord saw her misery. These words are similar to those of Hagar, who, like Leah, was also rejected. Both of them cried out to a God who truly saw them, almost certainly in a way that no human eyes ever did. Hagar was 'unseen' because of her slave status, and Leah felt 'unseen' because she felt unloved, or at least less loved than Rachel. But the God who saw Leah knew of her distress and had mercy" (42).*

Leah's story continues: "Then she conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.' And she called his name Simeon" (Genesis 29:33). In Hebrew, Simeon means "he who hears." Leah felt heard by God and acknowledged in her pain. Although she likely felt rejected by her husband, she found, in God, someone who saw and heard and came to her aid.

We also have a God who knows and sees and hears us, and will come to our aid. He knows when we are suffering, and wants to help us. You can call on Him if you're feeling emotional pain and ask for comfort, love and mercy.

Even more, we have a God who can empathize with us, He knows the pain of rejection and the feeling of being an outsider. Jesus chose to go through rejection and isolation so that God's plan could be fulfilled. In her book, Shannon Bream goes on to say:

*"Leah knew what it was to be rejected, a sorrow Jesus also knew. He was despised and mocked. He warned His disciples that He would 'suffer many things and be rejected by this generation' (Luke 17:25). God Himself has inhabited the grief of rejection. That Jesus came to this work through Leah's offspring is a wonderful picture: God waits for us not only in the places of beauty and popularity, but also often in the places of brokenness*

<sup>1</sup> [psyche.co/guides/how-to-handle-rejection-so-that-you-can-heal-and-move-on](https://www.psychology.com/guides/how-to-handle-rejection-so-that-you-can-heal-and-move-on)

*and rejection, the darkest valleys and the ugliest messes.” (The Women of the Bible Speak, 49).*

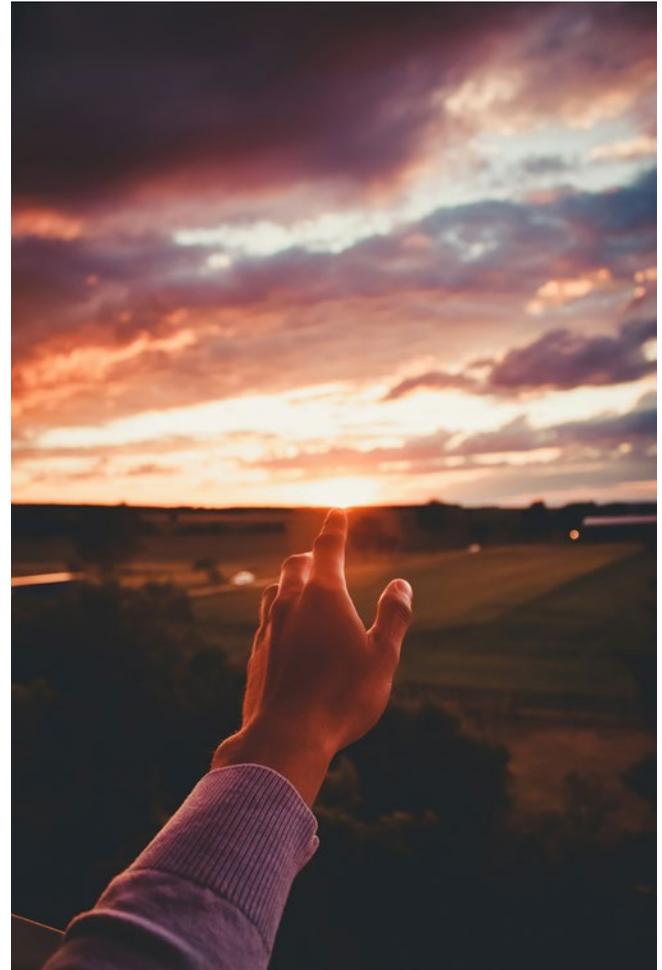
So, in the times we feel rejected, trust that God is there to help. Know that Jesus walked the difficult path before you. He was rejected not because He did anything wrong, but because of the weaknesses and limitations of others around Him. Isaiah 53:4-5 says, “Yet it was our weaknesses He carried; it was our sorrows that weighed Him down . . . But He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins . . .” (New Living Translation). Jesus was willing to take on the emotional pain of rejection and isolation so that our sins could be forgiven.

As Christians we’re called to be like Christ and live in the way He lived. Sometimes we have to stand out awkwardly and uncomfortably from the crowd. There are times when standing up for the truth will put a spotlight on us. It may feel strange to stand up against the ways of this world, but it’s important to get comfortable being uncomfortable. Getting outside our comfort zone is the only real way to grow. And remember that you always have someone who’s got your back:

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31, New International Version).

Leah dealt with the pain of rejection and, in spite of it all, continued to praise God for the blessings she did receive. And God saw her, heard her and included her

***In the times we feel rejected, trust that God is there to help. Know that Jesus walked the difficult path before you.***



as a key member of His plan. She was the mother of Judah, through which King David and eventually Christ were born.

God is known for taking what humans reject and using it for His glory. God is with you; He hears you and sees you; and He’s preparing you for greater things to come. **CC**



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# COMPASS CHECK

United Youth Magazine

*United Church of God  
P.O. Box 541027  
Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027*

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# DID GOD DESTROY NATIVE TRIBES AS PUNISHMENT?

*by Mitchell Moss*



James Earle Fraser (1894).  
*End of the Trail* [plaster].

## “USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE. DON’T SUGARCOAT THE PAST. USE TERMS LIKE GENOCIDE,

ethnic cleansing, stolen land, and forced removal to reflect actions taken by colonizers,” says one bullet point in the “Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgment” produced by the Native Governance Center. Indigenous land acknowledgments are statements read aloud, typically at the beginning of a group event, listing the native tribes who at one time before European settlement lived on the land on which the event is being held.

On the one hand, we may have a sense of national pride for what our nation stands for and the good it’s done, so it can feel uncomfortable to think about our national story in terms of “genocide, ethnic cleansing, stolen land, and forced removal.” On the other hand, the facts of history are plain for anybody to read, and if we believe all human life is precious, then the ugliness on display during episodes such as the “Trail of Tears” requires acknowledgment.

Making it more difficult, the issue is politicized, so each side of the debate shouts down the other with no room for nuance. It’s tempting to make a blanket pronouncement either way—America is evil, irredeemably racist and must be dismantled; or, the natives had it coming, they were not a righteous people and God torched them for good reason.

Did God destroy native tribes using European settlers to punish them for their idolatry? Let’s look at the Bible to see what we can discern from its examples of

divine judgment, to guide how we can think about this topic as Christians.

### UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL POWERS AND HUMAN AUTHORITY

In Daniel 10, we get a glimpse of the spiritual reality behind the physical nations on earth, when an angel visited Daniel and told him, “I have come because of your words. But the *prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me* twenty-one days; and behold, Michael, *one of the chief princes*, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia” (Daniel 10:12-13, emphasis added throughout). The “princes” referred to are spiritual powers working behind nations. What was true then is still true today. God is sovereign over everything (2 Chronicles 20:6), yet for now He permits certain spiritual powers to hold sway in the world, under the direction of Satan whom Paul refers to as the “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4). This fallen world does not operate according to God’s laws and design.

This allowance doesn’t mean God is absent. While He may permit these powers to influence nations, God can and does intervene according to His purpose, though at times in ways we may never discern. Most importantly, God chose the nation of Israel to be the one nation chosen out of all nations to have Him as their spiritual leader—and they would be a kingdom of priests to Him (Exodus 19:6). The Old Covenant defines

that relationship between God and His nation, and He specifically wanted them to be a model for other nations to look to as an example to follow.

Outside of that unique covenant with Israel we see hints of the spiritual powers at play in the events of history—the story in Job 1-2, for instance, where Satan approaches God’s throne and accuses Job; and the vision of the lying spirit in 1 Kings 22:22, where God allows a spirit to lie through the mouths of false prophets in order to persuade the king of Israel to go to war.

At another point, Daniel told the king of Babylon that God “removes kings and raises up kings” (Daniel 2:21), which doesn’t mean every ruler is in place by God’s design, but that if He wants something to happen, He’ll make it happen. Later in Daniel 8, He foretells just such events, where He explains how Greek and Persian empires will fight, overpower each other and splinter. This foresight indicates that He is not completely hands-off, letting the spiritual powers run completely amok, but is working within history to fulfill His ultimate purposes, even if the details are beyond our current understanding.

This means that we can look at the European colonization of the Americas and conclude that it’s a story of humans inflicting suffering and death on other humans under the influence of spiritual powers, whose goals are to cause harm to God and His creation. It’s the same picture of violence that the Bible paints over and over again.

However, it’s also true that God allowed these events. Tragically, entire communities and cultures were devastated. This doesn’t mean God sanctioned all actions taken by humans during this period. But rather, He allowed the events to unfold within the scope of His greater plan. Understanding the New Covenant helps us see the

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picture of that plan in greater clarity.

## THE NEW COVENANT REALITY

In Acts 17:24-31, Paul made a startling claim: “[S]ince we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone . . . In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but *now he commands all people everywhere to repent*. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:24-31, New International Version).

This message of repentance and judgment signaled a shift: God’s invitation to a covenant relationship was opened to everybody on an individual basis—not only to Israel on a national level. All humanity now has a path to reconciliation with Him through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That’s one aspect of the promise made to Abraham—that through him, all nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 18:18). The blessing is the outreached hand of God to redeem each and every person from sin, and from the influence of Satan the devil who deceives the whole world (Revelation 12:9).

Jesus’s sacrifice was a fatal blow to the kingdoms of Satan and his princes, which is unfolding in stages through time for His called and chosen ones. The old story of nations at war is now spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:11-13), where each person God calls is a soldier whose very purpose in life is to beat back the darkness of Satan, like a light on a hill. As more disciples are called, creating a spiritual Body of believers who live anywhere and everywhere, their light defeats darkness wherever they have influence. And ultimately when Jesus returns, that light will blanket the entire world.

In the meantime, though, those spiritual powers are still at work in the

world at large. We are all born into that world, yet as Christians our citizenship is in God’s coming Kingdom (Hebrews 11), and we’re called to embody His Spirit in the here and now, producing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) as a living example. This is what we are doing when we pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done” (Matthew 6:10): asking to be agents through which His will is accomplished in this world—to preach the gospel in all nations and make disciples (Matthew 28:19).

On the flip side, Jesus warned that those who live by the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26:52), a call to reject violence and understand the value of every life created in God’s image. As followers of Christ, we do not condone the killing of anybody. Our calling is to bear witness to the gospel of the Kingdom of God, including the message of repentance from dead works, not to justify human evil.

(The Church also teaches that the United States is uniquely blessed in this era of history as fulfillment of promises made to Abraham, reading blessings in Genesis 48:19. The study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* goes into this teaching further, which you can find at [ucg.org](http://ucg.org).)

## A FUTURE AND A HOPE FOR ALL PEOPLE

The story of the Bible is how God’s creation was corrupted by sin, and how God is working to redeem it through Jesus Christ.

God has a purpose for all mankind and seeks to bring “many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10). Ultimately, all those native tribespeople will be given the opportunity for redemption, same as everybody else (see *Heaven and Hell* article on page XYZ for more on this topic).

So we see this issue not as Americans trying to either defend the actions of the



settlers from the past, nor demonizing them as irredeemably evil. Instead, we see it as citizens of God’s Kingdom who use God’s Spirit to rightly discern good and evil, acknowledge historical wrongs no matter when or where they took place, and advocate for the values of the Kingdom of God.

This divine calling is not easy, but it is our responsibility. In humility and faith, we can walk as witnesses to His truth, and be the instruments through which His love and light are shared with others.



*Mitchell Moss is the design production manager for Compass Check. He and his wife Dana love traveling, particularly in Italy, where the tailoring is soft, the people are warm, and the gelato is cold and never-ending. They live in Cincinnati with their two sons/future legends.*