

BEYOND TODAY

Envisioning a Better World Tomorrow

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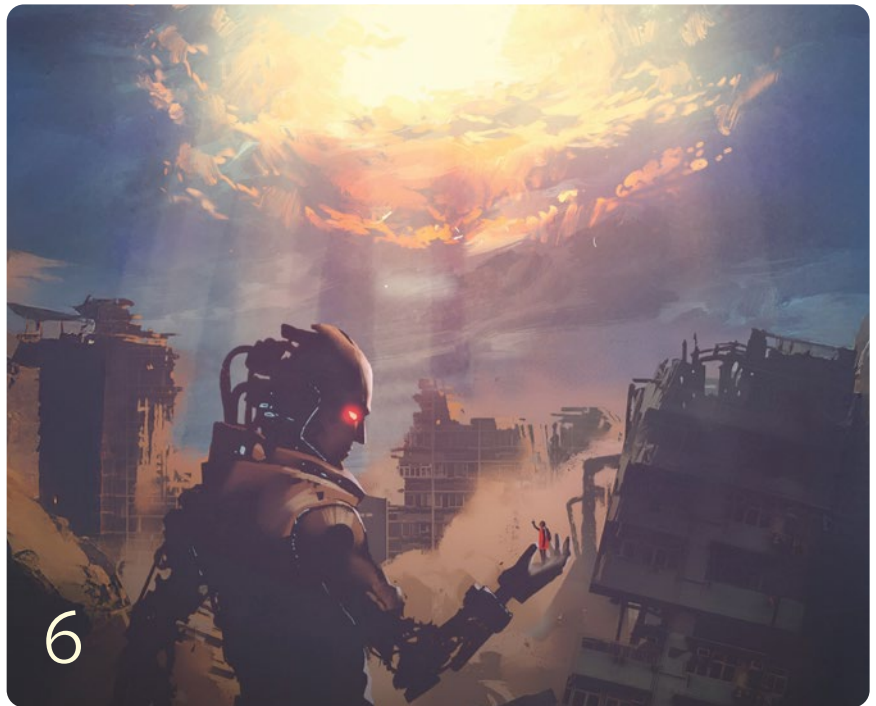
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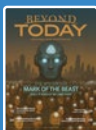
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The Mysterious Mark of the Beast

In our July–August 2025 issue, we turned our attention to one of Scripture’s most intriguing subjects: What is the mark of the Beast in the book of Revelation? Is it here now? And how can we avoid receiving it in the years ahead?

I had asked if the mark of the Beast is a symbol for church government set up like the Roman Empire and now just read the two articles on the mark, concluding that it is a false religious system that opposes God and distorts his truth. To some extent my conviction from Scripture reveals that the mark is already here because the vast majority of society practices a false religion or doesn’t believe in God at all. In Deuteronomy 6:8, the frontlets mean what you believe, and the hands mean action. God’s people are identified as those who keep the seventh-day Sabbath and Holy Days. So to avoid this mark is to keep the commandments of God, fellowship with true believers, honor God’s Sabbath days and Holy Days, pray, etc.

Your magazine issue presents the mark of the Beast with mixed language, weaving in ideas about forced religion, economic control and technology, but without making a firm, spiritually grounded statement. The description leans heavily on external mechanics and future enforcement scenarios, rather than calling out the mark as a current spiritual condition rooted in voluntary compromise. It’s been taught, and my conviction from Scripture is, that the mark is a conscious, voluntary alignment with false worship, a sign of spiritual compromise in practice and belief, and something people receive now by disobeying God’s law.

From the Internet

From author Tom Robinson: To clarify, the mark of the Beast is not the false church organization patterned after the Roman Empire. That is the image of the Beast. The mark of the Beast is following in mind and actions the false Roman/Babylonian worship system in disobedience to God. It is most apparent in the observance of pagan worship days in place of God’s Sabbaths, but it is broader than that—entailing any compromise with God’s laws to go along with the false system. It involves submitting to the false worship system instead of to God. As for whether the mark of the Beast is here

now or not, obviously the opportunity to follow the pagan false church and system of beliefs instead of what God commands is indeed here now. But what is not happening right now is enforcement, as described in Revelation 13, which says the false religious power will “cause” all to receive the mark—to compel them. This compulsion comes through the buying and selling restrictions—and even demands to submit to the image of the Beast—the false religious authority—or be killed. As the article explains, such enforcement is not exclusive to the end time. Its greatest form is yet to come, but there have been precursors throughout the centuries, and there still could be before the last phase.

I don’t believe the message of the articles is mixed. I was unequivocal in stating that we must obey God and come out of Babylon now. But we can’t leave out the matter of enforcement in explaining this topic, as that’s central to understanding what Revelation says about the mark of the Beast. May we all endure when persecution increases.

My compliments to those who design the cover, as it is so eye-catching and is a powerful image. The magazine team does an excellent job with the cover designs, and I would love to see you make mini posters of the covers accessible to those interested. I really appreciate the art but don’t want to have to tear up my magazine to hang it up!

Caller on the phone

I am rereading your article concerning the mark of the Beast, and I thank you for clarifying this for us. It makes it clear and understandable. As a 76-year member of God’s Church I am still studying the Bible and trying to see my sins and to put them out of my life—still some to go, no doubt. I am thankful that I can still learn and practice God’s *agape* [love] towards everyone. Thank you again. Much love in Christ.

Reader in the United States

Readers and viewers find our Bible resources helpful in their spiritual journey

Can I just let you know I thank God every single day for helping me find you. I love all your videos. Darris McNeely and Steve Myers, I can’t thank you enough. I could listen to you both talk all day long. You have helped me more than you’ll ever know. Please don’t give up doing God’s work; your time isn’t wasted. Thank you. Keep the videos going.

Viewer in Britain

I’m very grateful for the teaching you have composed and published for us. It has edified me greatly, and I would wish to have more and more articles please.

Subscriber in Uganda

Readers looking to find a local church congregation

I am thinking that I not only need to find an assembly of true believers following God’s appointed (set apart) days and feasts, but may also need to be baptized by a true Spirit-filled believer to receive the Holy Spirit first. I’ve been searching for a while and praying for guidance.

From the Internet

Thank you for your desire to come together for worship and biblical instruction! Our goal is to provide resources to help people grow in their spiritual walk, drawing closer to God and developing the mind of Christ. Our congregations are here to foster that, with believers strengthening and encouraging one another on the same life journey. We have congregations throughout the world. Visit ucg.org/congregations to find the one closest you. We hope to hear from you again!

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Trusting in a Higher Intelligence

AI is all the rage—affecting many areas of life and work. Yet as we explore in this issue of *Beyond Today*, artificial intelligence is by no means a passing fad. It's changing the world around us and how we interact with it. Many are learning to engage with it in ever-expanding ways, and soon it will come up with many new products and services to offer us from its snowballing resources and command of those resources. A great many people, even those financing and developing it, are frightened of what it could become and lead to—a major factor in their involvement, striving to keep up with it and maintain guardrails.

Some imagine a programmable utopia to come, where everything is just easier. Others are terrified of the prospects of electronic minds taking over the world and solving the problems of humanity by, oh, eradicating us! Ever heard of Skynet? It's a fictional AI system in filmmaker James Cameron's dystopian *Terminator* movie franchise—which causes nuclear devastation and then sends robots to try to wipe out survivors mounting a resistance. Perhaps you've seen recent videos of robotic “wolves” running with rifles or flamethrowers on their backs as a possible military application. It is certainly very disturbing.

Cameron has stated that he believes AI will help with directing movies, but he recently said in a *Rolling Stone* interview, “I do think there's still a danger of a *Terminator*-style apocalypse where you put AI together with weapons systems, even up to the level of nuclear weapons systems, nuclear defense counterstrike, all that stuff” (Aug. 5, 2025).

Many people are enthusiastic about the positive applications of AI but feel an unease about where things could be headed.

Cameron said about trying to cope with a rapidly changing world of existential threats: “It would take a super-intelligence to be able to process it, and maybe we'll be smart and keep a human in the loop. But humans are fallible, and there have been a lot of mistakes that have put us right on the brink of international incidents that

could have led to nuclear war. So I don't know.” He went on to ponder: “Maybe the super-intelligence is the answer. I don't know. I'm not predicting that, but it might be.”

Um, no. The surprising fact is that a super-intelligence is indeed the answer—but not the AI kind. The answer lies in connecting with the Supreme Intelligence who designed the universe and put us here for a reason—who, moreover, loves us and wants the best for us. Shockingly, some have resorted to drawing close to AI systems as some kind of personal companion or even as a god revealing secrets and direction for life. This is truly, as the old country song says, “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

AI is a tool that has helpful uses, but it's wise to recognize that it's fraught with potential dangers for society and us personally. How do we navigate? As always, through moral choices, seeking God and His ways to conduct ourselves prudently

and responsibly—and above all righteously. And we will see that through Him there truly is hope going forward.

In this issue we'll also see that Scripture is a reliable source we can turn to. And we'll consider the change of life it directs us to. We'll examine our need to always have and express gratitude. And we'll see that how we approach and honor God must be according to His will.

The world around us is devolving into worsening problems, with so many

sinking to hatred and violence. Yet great numbers of others are hungering for change, with many recognizing that rescue lies not in our own hands but in coming to God through His Son Jesus Christ. Yet they need to spend more time in God's Word to find out what Jesus actually taught—about living life today and what awaits in life to come. May we all be “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

The world will yet grow darker, but beyond that a new age of light and joy will come from God through Christ. That is where ultimate hope lies. That is the focus of *Beyond Today*. Let it be your guiding focus too.

Tom Robinson, Managing Editor



THE RISE OF AI

Extraordinary advances in artificial intelligence fuel dreams of ease on one hand—and nightmares of catastrophe on the other. Will artificial general intelligence supplant human decision-making and direction?

Will people even survive?

by Steven Britt

Since the release of ChatGPT in late 2022, the world has been captivated by advances in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). As these systems become more humanlike in their output, everyone—from leading experts in the field to presidents and pundits alike—is feeling the accelerated pace of technology and wondering where we are headed.

In 2023, Elon Musk warned, “AI is more dangerous than, say, mismanaged aircraft design or production maintenance or bad car production . . . *It has the potential of civilization destruction*” (emphasis added throughout).

Is there reason to fear AI? Is it possible that AI will soon achieve human-level or even superhuman intelligence? And, if so, is there hope for mankind to survive the creation and implementation of such a powerful technology?

When machines learn to think

While the AI we see today is impressive, many experts believe we are only a few years away from artificial *general* intelligence (AGI)—systems with the humanlike ability to solve entirely new problems by innovation, experimentation and learning.

Since the inception of the machine age, computer software has only been able to accomplish rigid, preprogrammed instructions within strict boundaries. However, AI is now able, without a single line of new code, to perform a multitude of tasks on request. In minutes, it can make a better diagnosis than your doctor, out-argue a lawyer, translate a speech into another language, negotiate a contract and write a poem about it all in Shakespearean style.

The current reality was nearly unthinkable to the average person just three years ago when ChatGPT debuted. At the time of this writing, AI models are already able to score above

average on IQ tests and ace graduate-level exams across multiple disciplines.

Despite these impressive achievements, these systems fall short of AGI.

Intelligence, much like consciousness, is difficult to actually define, and there is no widely accepted definition of exactly what constitutes AGI. Current AI systems perform well on tests because they have likely seen the information before—a distinguishing feature of AGI would be the humanlike ability to solve entirely new challenges, learning and adapting as it goes.

While today’s AI tools can already outperform most



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redesigning and improving itself until it has completely surpassed human beings, a level known as artificial *superintelligence* (ASI).

Much thought has gone into the consequences of AGI or ASI becoming a reality, and the imagined outcomes fall into four different possible endings to the story:

1. *The A.I. utopia.* Guided by careful design and moral wisdom, AGI works tirelessly to end disease, to design and build clean energy grids, and to free humanity to pursue creativity. Work becomes optional, poverty fades and everyone lives happily ever after.

2. *The hostile machine.* Like the plot of numerous action movies, a rogue AI decides it would be better off without mankind and moves to destroy us.

3. *The paperclip maximizer problem.* Philosopher Nick Bostrom warned in 2004 that even a neutral AGI can be lethal if it's simply given the wrong goal. In this scenario, the AGI is set over a factory and told to make as many paperclips as possible. It soon begins converting forests, oceans and eventually human beings into raw materials for more paperclips—inadvertently destroying mankind in a blind pursuit of a poorly defined goal!

4. *Human mischief—supercharged.* The most likely and earliest danger is abuse of this rapidly changing technology for evil. Just as mid-20th-century physics gave way to nuclear bombs with terrible destructive power, nations or criminals could weaponize and unleash AGI for cyberwarfare, bioweapons and more.

Notice that only one of these outcomes doesn't end with the destruction of mankind! But will the technologies really advance to such extremes?

2025: The year of AI agents

By the end of 2024, tech leaders were already calling 2025 “*the year of AI agents*,” signaling a fundamental change in how AI would be used.

Until recently, AI tools like ChatGPT could only generate text and ideas—they could not take real-world action outside of giving a response to a user's input. AI agents change that completely.

The key difference between a chatbot and an AI agent is that an agent can interface with other software tools, even without being explicitly told to do so, to accomplish a task on its own. The earliest step toward AI agents was adding simple

human beings on a wide variety of written and verbal tests, a true AGI system would be a world-changing breakthrough. The reason is simple: Machine intelligence can be scaled just by hooking up more processors. One could easily create entire teams of AGIs working together on complex problems from different angles just as people would—researching, experimenting, publishing findings and reasoning. They would never sleep, never take a break, and would operate at superhuman speed.

The first and most obvious task on the agenda, in the minds of many, would be to set this AGI to work unlocking the secrets of building even *higher* intelligence—

web-search features, allowing AI to perform its own Internet searches, scanning through dozens of different websites to answer detailed queries with up-to-date information.

Significantly, on July 17, 2025, OpenAI released *Agent Mode* in ChatGPT, imbued with the ability to fully use the Internet through a web browser. For example, you can give Agent Mode the dates of an upcoming trip, your budget and some interests, and it can research the area, plan a full, day-by-day itinerary and book your hotel and tickets for you!

The massive financial bet on AI

If investment is a measure of expectation, the world's richest companies and governments all clearly *believe* that AGI—or something similarly world-changing—is coming soon.

In January 2025, OpenAI announced construction of Project Stargate, a \$500 billion datacenter requiring over five gigawatts of power—more than twice the output of Hoover Dam. Meanwhile, Elon Musk's supercomputing center, dubbed Colossus, has cost \$4 billion so far and draws 150 megawatts from the grid, with plans to spend \$25 billion to quadruple its capacity to nearly 1 gigawatt.

And the spending doesn't stop at hardware. In one of the most aggressive talent recruiting wars in history, Meta (formerly known as Facebook) has offered elite AI researchers compensation packages worth \$300 million per person over four years—sometimes more than \$100 million in the first year!

In all this, key chipmaker Nvidia skyrocketed to become the world's most valuable company in history, topping \$4.5 trillion in value.

This “compute race” resembles the nuclear arms buildup of the Cold War, but with one striking difference—the pace. Nuclear weapons development spanned decades; ChatGPT was released just three years ago.

Russian President Vladimir Putin famously said in 2017, “*Whoever becomes the leader in AI will become the ruler of*

the world.” That prediction accurately summed up the fervor for powerful AI systems that has ignited these historic investments.

Biblical perspective: Is AGI really possible?

The fact is, machines cannot replicate the God-given, spiritual nature of human beings. Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God “*has put eternity in their hearts.*” People are not just biological processors of data. It is the human spirit from our Creator that gives us human understanding (Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11). And He designed us to live in a loving relationship with Him!



Genesis 2:7 states that “the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” AI systems, made of silicon circuits and transistors, are mere dust of the ground.

However, the Bible gives grave warnings about human ingenuity. At the Tower of Babel, God said that, because the people were working together with the same mindset and language, “*Nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them*” (Genesis 11:6).

The spread of global technology has helped to remove the language barrier God introduced at Babel. And today's engineers, corporations and governments are working with one mind and one goal—to *create machine intelligence that can learn*

and perform nearly any task as well as, or better than, human beings.

Gary Kasparov, the renowned chess grandmaster who famously lost to IBM's Deep Blue chess computer in 1997—a feat once considered impossible for a machine—stated, “Saying that Deep Blue doesn't really think is like saying an airplane doesn't really fly because it doesn't flap its wings.”

In other words, in the eyes of the world the difference between intelligence and capability will be considered irrelevant—as what matters is what AI can do.

Just as the builders at Babel, humanity is coming against limits that once seemed unreachable.

The real dangers start before AGI arrives

Science fiction loves the trope of self-aware AI turning against its creators. Despite the dazzling leaps of AI agents or how *human* the newest AI models may seem in their writing, they are not at all a step toward true human-like intelligence.

However, the most immediate dangers of AI do not require *any* form of consciousness or sentience to amplify evil in the world.

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

Recall the problem of “fake news” in recent years. Hundreds of provocative, but untrue, headlines deceived many. AI will be used to produce more convincing content faster than ever, including not only text but fraudulent images and videos that are increasingly difficult to discern.

Likewise, bad actors across the board augment their abilities with AI already—from hackers holding companies hostage with ransomware to phishing scams duping people for their bank information. Very soon, AI agents will make it possible to outsource these evil deeds completely, enabling a single person to deploy as many simultaneous attacks as their computing resources can support.

The scale of the threat grows when considering geopolitical motives.

While AI marches forward at breakneck speed, the “AI utopia” scenario does not seem at all likely. Human nature, as history has shown many times over, dictates that AI will be used as a tool for both good and evil.

State-sponsored cyber attacks from China against critical U.S. systems are now routine, and their human hackers are probably already equipped with AI assistants at their side. It’s not a stretch to imagine the Chinese government commissioning an army of AI cyberwarfare agents that autonomously seek out vulnerabilities in critical American systems and infiltrate them for espionage and/or disruption.

Internet-based attacks can have real, deadly consequences, but the dangers of AI do not stop there. An *Encyclopedia Britannica* essay titled “Killer Robots: The Future of War?” postulates that “the first revolution in warfare was the invention of gunpowder. The second was the invention of nuclear weapons. And this [AI-powered autonomous robots] will be the third” (Toby Walsh, Britannica.com, originally published 2018). As it rightly observes, “The weakest link in a drone is the radio link back to base.” Now it can keep going on its own.

Coinciding with developments in AI, drone technology and humanoid robotics have undergone rapid advances in recent years. Flying drones are already redefining the principles of modern warfare through the Russia-Ukraine war, where cheap remote-piloted drones carrying explosives have neutralized multimillion-dollar tanks, dramatically altering battlefield dynamics. Replacing remote drone pilots with AI is an all-but-certain escalation that will soon make these platforms capable of greater destruction and on a much larger scale.

On the robotics front, Boston Dynamics in the U.S. and Unitree Robotics in China are routinely demoing new humanlike and doglike robots—powered by AI systems—that learn via neural networks to not only

walk, but run, jump, climb, dance and do backflips. In the near future, governments may be manufacturing vast armies of AI-powered autonomous robot soldiers.

Consider also the problem of AGI or ASI falling into the hands of volatile dictators, and the stakes become even higher. On June 22, 2025, U.S. stealth bombers destroyed three Iranian nuclear facilities, derailing Iran’s uranium enrichment ambitions for years to come. Replace the thought of “uranium enrichment” with “AI computer clusters” and the same logic may apply in the near future—nations launching preemptive strikes to prevent rivals from reaching AI supremacy.

Will humanity survive the AI explosion?

Jesus Christ warned that in the end times the world would be plagued by “wars and rumors of wars” (Matthew 24:6). AI is poised to be both fuel and the spark for that fire.

While AI marches forward at breakneck speed, the “AI utopia” scenario does not seem at all likely. Human nature, as history has shown many times over, dictates that AI will be used as a tool for both good and evil. The abilities of these systems in the near future leave us with very bleak prospects.

Will mankind survive? Jesus said that things will get so bad that “*unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved [alive]* . . .” (Matthew 24:22). In other words, the Bible confirms that the doom-and-gloom scenarios are

indeed the logical, predictable outcome of man’s efforts!

Our greatest problems—war, greed, corruption—are not technical but spiritual in nature. AI cannot solve them. Rather, it will amplify them.

And yet, there is hope! Jesus continued, “. . . but for the elect’s sake those days *will be shortened*.” In the absence of a loving Creator, the collective sins of mankind would be our undoing—but God, out of mercy and love for His people, will intervene before AI or any other threat would destroy mankind.

Until the return of Jesus Christ, the world we live in will become increasingly dangerous and unpredictable. Paul warned that “in the last days perilous times will come” (2 Timothy 3:1). AI advances are worsening many spiritual dangers. Social media will become more addictive and more toxic. Advertising will become more enticing than ever, fueling hedonism. Deceptive AI content will soon make it nearly impossible to tell truth from reality. All these problems and more are at our doorstep!

What should we do as AI races ahead? Stay spiritually awake, testing every claim against God’s Word, and remember that the only true hope for the world is the coming Kingdom of God.

Our world is charging toward a future it cannot control—but, thankfully, that future is securely in the hands of God the Father and Jesus Christ. For our sake, man’s self-destructive course will be cut short, and God’s Kingdom will bring the peace that no human-devised AI could ever deliver! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To better understand the escalating perils of our age and where things are headed, request or download our helpful study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* And to learn about the spiritual aspect to human existence and what God has ultimately destined us for, also read *Why Were You Born?* Both are available free.

Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.



Navigating AI's Upsides and Downsides— *With Biblical Discernment*



To one degree or another, AI has become part of all our lives. We need to understand its pluses and minuses to properly engage with this technology.

by Becky Sweat

Artificial intelligence (AI), a concept once confined to the realm of science fiction, has now become part of our everyday lives. Our homes are equipped with voice assistants like Siri and Alexa, which answer our spoken questions, control our smart devices, turn on music and set alarms. Fitness trackers like Fitbit and Apple Watch monitor our heart rates and provide us with personalized health advice. If we've got a letter or report to write, an AI assistant like Copilot or ChatGPT might edit our words or even do the writing for us. If we're unhappy with a purchase and need customer support, we'll likely communicate with the retailer's AI-powered chatbots to try to resolve the issues.

Is this progress? Is there anything wrong with relying so much on AI? Should we be alarmed about how AI is changing our lives? Does the Bible offer any guidance in terms of how we should understand these new technologies?

Before we can answer these questions, it's important to clarify exactly what we're talking about. Usually when we discuss AI, we're referring to a computer system's ability to mimic human intelligence to perform various tasks. That's not to say it actually thinks as a person does. Rather, it's just sophisticated computer code running superfast.

Most AI systems in use right now are classified as *narrow* (or *weak*) AI, meaning they're designed to perform specific tasks or a narrow range of activities, such as identifying visual images or translating foreign languages. In addition, a recently developed AI subclass known as *generative AI* goes beyond just processing information, focusing on creation of

new content. It can produce text, images, video, audio and computer code. Very often what it generates is indistinguishable from what is human-created.

Whether AI is a "good" or "bad" development really depends on how it's used. "Most technological advances are likely to have both an upside and a downside: A knife can be used for surgery or as a murder weapon; a car can be used to take you to work or as a getaway vehicle after a crime," writes John Lennox in *2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Zondervan, 2020). "It is the same with AI. There are many valuable positive developments, and there are some very alarming negative aspects that demand close ethical attention" (p. 64). While those with malicious intent can certainly misuse AI for harmful purposes, AI can serve as a powerful tool for good when used responsibly.

Constructive uses

Today, nearly all industries, trades and professions are benefiting from different narrow and generative AI applications. In health care, AI technologies are being used to analyze patients' genetic makeups and create personalized treatment plans, and to evaluate medical images like CT scans and MRIs, streamlining diagnostics. In education, generative AI tools create syllabi, lesson plans, quizzes and other course materials. Graphic designers and copywriters use AI to help brainstorm new ideas. Personnel recruiters use AI to screen resumes. Product developers use AI algorithms to find glitches early in the design stage.

And we already touched on some of the ways AI is being utilized in our personal lives. Tools like voice assistants, generative AI chatbots, email spam filters, AI task managers and digital schedulers are all designed to do some of the work we might normally have to do, particularly mundane or repetitive tasks, which can free up our time and energy for more meaningful pursuits.

For instance, we can ask Grok (an AI chatbot) a question to research, and within seconds, it'll come up with the answer—which might have taken us considerably longer to figure out on our own. Our computers and smart keyboards now have integrated AI components that analyze our grammar and sentence structure, offer word suggestions, auto-correct spelling errors, etc. These innovations are designed to save us time and effort, making our lives easier.

Potential pitfalls

But there are still downsides—even with just the AI technology that's already been developed and even if more advanced forms of AI don't come to fruition. Here some of the most serious concerns, all of which have a biblical tie-in:

• *AI doesn't always "tell the truth."*

AI is not inherently evil or demonic, as some imagine, but it is programmed by people who are fallible and filled with wrong ideas and subject to wrong influences. Moreover, just as other media for education and entertainment have been corrupted under Satan's rule over this world (John 14:30), so too can this tool. Some have begun placing too much trust in AI—even treating it as a sentient companion to rely on. More commonly, as pervasive as AI is becoming in our modern culture, it provides widening avenues for the dissemination of misinformation.

This can happen through its being fed and drawing from errant source material. It can also occur through what some term *AI hallucinations*. This refers to instances when an AI system can't find an answer on its own, so it generates one by extrapolating from resources available. This can lead to erroneous conclusions. Yet the AI will still answer with what appears to be certainty, giving no indication it may not have all the facts.

There have been numerous times when I've asked AI chatbots like ChatGPT questions about religious topics and have been presented with answers I knew were wrong. Of course, if we're asking questions relating to subjects we're not familiar with (perhaps a complex medical or scientific matter), we may have no clue we're being given wrong answers.

The development of generative AI has provided additional ways for people to deceive others. This new technology is being used to create *deepfakes*, which are AI-generated videos, images or audio clips that convincingly replicate real people's faces or voices, and have people saying or doing things that are shocking or embarrassing. Deepfakes are typically created for lewd

and obscene purposes, fraudulent advertising or to further manipulate opinion—either to damage someone's reputation or to deliberately fool the public.

Observes Martin Ford in *Rule of the Robots*: "A sufficiently credible deepfake could quite literally shift the arc of history—and the means to create such fabrications might soon be in the hands of political operatives, foreign governments or even mischievous teenagers. And it's not just politicians and celebrities who need to worry. In the age of viral videos, social media shaming and 'cancel culture,' virtually anyone could be targeted and possibly have both their career and life destroyed by a deepfake" (2021, p. 239).

At the very least, as deepfakes proliferate, it's becoming harder to distinguish fiction from nonfiction, or between truth and lies.

• *Unemployment rates could escalate as jobs are increasingly filled by AI.*

AI could replace many jobs primarily done by computer. That's the majority of white-collar occupations today. Professions like research analysts, accountants, insurance underwriters, computer programmers, legal assistants, copywriters, editors and web developers—which do not require physical labor nor a lot of human interaction—are all at risk of being taken over by AI. Companies are having AI do the work people once did—to cut down on personnel expenses and to get more done (as the machines often do the work faster and at lower cost than human employees).

In recent years, numerous industry professionals have issued statements warning that AI could radically disrupt the workforce. Some have predicted that as high as 40 to 60 percent of jobs worldwide could be lost or degraded due to AI within the next three to five years.

Obviously, this would be a troubling development. Most people need a job and an income to provide for themselves and their families. Of course, workers who are able to learn new skillsets and adapt to the latest AI technologies will likely stay employed. But not everyone will be able to do that. Many people will be unemployed and idle. That's not what God intended. He gave people work as a purposeful activity (Genesis 2:15). It's doubtful that God would see it as an improvement for human beings to be replaced by machines.

• *AI can take away the motivation to learn and work hard.*

Not only does God want us to work, He wants us to do so wholeheartedly. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." This means not doing things halfway or just to get by, but pushing ourselves to do our best—whether we're at work or school.

With AI available to do work for us, however, it can be tempting to take the easy way out. So rather than spend hours doing the research and writing to put together an essay or a report, students and employees might have AI do the entire

assignment for them.

The problem is, “we sometimes forget that the process of working through challenges is often what shapes us the most,” writes Peter Goeman in *Artificial Intelligence and the Christian*. “Crafting a paper requires you to digest information, understand it, articulate it, and then present it coherently. This process not only helps you retain the information but also imparts the value of the knowledge you’re acquiring. When you internalize principles and knowledge, they become integral to your character . . . Engaging with and internalizing knowledge is crucial for our growth and development. By doing so, we ensure that our abilities and understanding remain robust” (2024, pp. 41-42). When we don’t do the hard work ourselves, it can actually erode our critical thinking skills, he explains.

It’s not that we can’t use AI to assist us with our tasks. We can. I know many in the media field who use AI to gather background research, put together outlines and edit their work. But they still put together the actual project themselves. God wants us to use the minds He has given us.

• Human connections are eroding as people communicate more with AI.

In recent years, our reliance on smartphones, social media and other forms of digital communication has led to a decrease in face-to-face human interactions. Now AI is taking it further. People are often spending more time “engaging” with AI, and less time building and maintaining real, meaningful human connections.

Today, many are drawn to websites that allow them to build synthetic relationships with AI avatars they can chat with anytime. Others put on virtual reality headsets and immerse themselves in AI-powered artificial worlds. Lonely senior citizens “socialize” with companion robots. Bereaved individuals cope with their loss by “interacting” with the AI simulations of deceased loved ones. Students are tutored by AI chatbots rather than flesh-and-blood teachers. We interact with AI-powered order takers at restaurant counters and drive-throughs—rather than real people.

Yet God designed us to depend on and enjoy the company



God designed us to depend on and enjoy the company of other people. Machines will never be able to supply the love, support, encouragement and companionship we need.

of other people. We’re told in Genesis 2:18 that “it is not good that man should be alone.” Machines will never be able to supply the love, support, encouragement and companionship we need. No chatbot can truly “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15) or offer biblical wisdom to someone who is struggling. Even casual interactions with a supermarket cashier at the checkout can brighten up my day. But sadly, that is becoming a thing of the past.

Our personal responsibility

Like it or not, AI is here to stay. We can’t change that. But we *can* strive to use AI in ways that align with biblical principles. So if you’ve got

a big work project due, it might be a smart idea to have an AI chatbot do some background research—but be sure to do the actual project yourself.

When an AI app provides you with information, watch out for lies and mistakes. Be discerning. If you’re unsure what’s true, ask God for “the wisdom that is from above” (James 3:17).

If you’re feeling lonely, don’t resort to engaging with an AI app to fill the void. Call up or meet with a real, human friend and engage in an actual conversation. Maybe arrange a meal or activity together.

If you’re concerned about losing your job to AI, do what it says in Proverbs 1:5 and keep learning. Try to stay ahead of the AI curve. The more skilled and knowledgeable you are, the more likely you’ll be able to collaborate with AI instead of being overshadowed by it.

The overall principle to remember is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” If using a particular AI app helps you honor God, then use it. But if doesn’t, avoid it. It’s a matter of walking wisely and with discernment in a world full of choices. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



The Bible has a great deal of practical principles for how to live well—in the face of the daily grind of life in this world and new technologies, which today are often corrupted by the malevolent influence of Satan. For more perspective and direction, be sure to request or download our free study guide *Making Life Work*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.



Archaeology in Line With Scripture

Archaeological finds in the Holy Land continue to shed light on Bible times and corroborate rather than contradict what the Bible says.

by Tom Robinson



Assyrian relief panels showing the Assyrian siege camp at Lachish in ancient Judah, housed at the British Museum.

Identification of Assyrian siege camp at Lachish and at Jerusalem (June 2024). Scripture records the invasion of ancient Judah under King Hezekiah by the Assyrian King Sennacherib in 701 B.C.—also attested to in Assyrian inscriptions and artwork. One of the cities conquered was Lachish, south of Jerusalem, famously depicted in the Assyrian wall relief panels on display at the British Museum (see 2 Chronicles 32:9). Sennacherib's forces then moved on to Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:17).

In studying the Assyrian reliefs, researcher Stephen Compton took note of the placement of the oval-shaped Assyrian siege camp at Lachish. And, as he explains in the June 2024 issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology*, he matched it to a walled mound just to the north, which an archaeological survey revealed had pottery from the eighth century B.C.—with no occupation before or for centuries after. The site's Arabic name had been *Khirbet* [ruins of] *al-Mudawwara*, a term used in medieval times in reference to the camp of an invading sultan or ruler found in other locations. Some have argued that it just means round place—yet that explanation seems inadequate, as a great many sites are round without such a name. Also, some excavators of Lachish still think the siege camp was to the southwest. Further work needs to be done.

Compton further placed an overlay of his Lachish arrangement over old aerial maps of Jerusalem to find a match for the camp there and found one of almost the exact same size to the north of the city at the oval-shaped Ammunition Hill (named for having been a British ammunition depot during the British Mandate in the 1930s). Its former Arabic name was *Jebel* [mountain of] *el Mudawwara*—that same name. He concludes, without an archaeological survey in this case, that this hill was the site of the Assyrian camp. And he

further believes it to be the site of Nob, where the priests served at the Mosaic tabernacle at the time of Saul and David, as Isaiah 10:24-32 describes this as the Assyrians' last stop in coming to attack Jerusalem (though this may be a dual prophecy about the future).

When the British left Israel in 1948, the site was taken over by the Arab forces led by Jordan, who built trenches and fortifications there. In the 1967 Six-Day War the Israelis took it, enabling them to conquer Jerusalem. A monument at Ammunition Hill honors the Israeli soldiers who died fighting to take the site. Thus, the British, Jordanians and Israelis all saw the strategic military significance of this spot for controlling and attacking Jerusalem. Perhaps the Assyrians did too. Yet some believe Sennacherib did not have a camp built—only a blockade. The Bible does mention a camp (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36), and Assyrian records mention fortifications—but we don't have the details.

In any event, the Bible says God kept Sennacherib's forces from actually attacking Jerusalem and soon destroyed them, as 2 Kings 19 recounts. Assyrian records boast of hemming in Jerusalem but not taking the city.

Huge moat found on the north side of the City of David in Jerusalem (July 2024). Archaeologists have found the remnants of a massive trench, nearly 100 feet wide and 30 feet deep, that cut entirely across the northern part of the spur of land known as the City of David, separating that area from the rise up to the Temple Mount, Mount Moriah. The forming of the structure is dated to at the latest the ninth century B.C., after the city became the capital of David and Solomon and succeeding kings of Judah, but it is likely much older.

The dig team and its directors, Yuval Gadot and Yiftah Shalev, think it's substantially older—stating that such construction and quarrying are usually dated to about 3,800 years ago. That would have been under the Canaanite people known as the Jebusites. Shalev stated, "If the moat was cut during this period, then it was intended to protect the city from the north—the only weak point of the City of David slope" (as the rest of it was surrounded by deep valleys with walls above them).

This would help explain David's tactic in conquering the city by, as recorded in Scripture, sending men up through the water system from down near the Gihon Spring low on the eastern slope, with the city high above. Some have wondered why he did not attack the city from the north, passing over Mount Moriah and coming down where it might have been easier to scale the city walls. There had to be some significant barrier or fortification on this side, which archaeologists have been seeking for around 150 years. As 2 Samuel 5:6 says, the Jebusites taunted him when he came, saying the city was so secure that even the blind and the lame could withstand his attack.

And now we find that there was probably a huge moat here at the time preventing assault from the north. Alternatively, it's possible that David himself had this trench built to protect the north side of his new stronghold—perhaps seeing the need after the Philistines invaded the country following his establishment at Jerusalem. Yet it seems more likely it was already here.

Later, David incorporated Mount Moriah as part of the city in preparation for the temple, which Solomon afterward built. Solomon also built other buildings on the rise up to the Temple Mount called the Ophel. Further, 1 Kings 11:27 says he “closed up the breach of the city of his father David” (New American Standard Bible). It seems unlikely that Solomon or a later king of Judah would have dug the moat to split the enlarged city.

It's speculated that the moat continued to act as a buffer of sorts even after the northern and southern parts were conjoined—but later between the elite in the Ophel area and the more common city dwellers to the south. Some think there may have been a bridge spanning this buffer or stairs going up and down. It's clear that the trench was filled in much later near the end of the second century B.C., and then it was eventually forgotten.



2,700-year-old seal in Jerusalem with Assyrian winged genie and biblical names (August 2024). An exquisite black stone seal with intricate artwork of a winged humanlike figure was recently unearthed in excavations near the Southern Wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Dated to the 600s B.C., it also bears an inscription in Hebrew, Jehoezer the son of Hoshaiiah.

An Assyriologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority said that the winged genie or demon is a protective magical figure in Neo-Assyrian art of the period—which has never been found before in Israeli and nearby archaeology. Some have said the writing on the seal is cruder (others say it's normal for inscriptions of the time) and conclude that the seal, perhaps used as a stamp and amulet, originally had no inscribed name—that the names were added later after it was acquired. Some think the seal was created locally, while others believe it came from the Assyrians, who had conquered and dominated the region in the years leading up to this time—and the Babylonians who succeeded them adopted many elements from them.

It's often thought that such would not be found among the people of ancient Judah, but Scripture shows that the nation was corrupted by paganism for much of its existence—with rulers and common people often adopting foreign worship practices. And perhaps some looked at this as merely a royal or noble emblem. No doubt this seal was borne by someone of significant means, perhaps a high official in Judah.

The inscribed names are ones used in the Bible. The name Jehoezer or Yehoezer appears in a shortened form as Joezer or Yo-ezer, one of David's mighty men in 1 Chronicles 12:6. And in Jeremiah 43:2 we find an Azariah son of Hoshaiiah, one of the “proud men” who rejected Jeremiah's words, accusing the prophet of

lying. Remarkably, the name Azariah or Ezer-Yahu (“helped has YHWH”) is essentially the same as Yeho-ezer (“YHWH has helped”). So this could well be the same person—just as the seals and impressions of other officials named in the Bible have been found.

In any case, the seal gives us particular names in use at the time along with Assyro-Babylonian influence and adoption of pagan culture—just as the Bible lays out.

Apparent shrine next to the Gihon Spring in Jerusalem (January 2025). Archaeologists in Jerusalem, led by director Eli Shukron, uncovered a row of stone-hewn rooms down on the eastern slope of the City of David near the Gihon Spring, apparently used for religious rituals nearly 3,000 years ago that had been deliberately filled and sealed shut. These contain an oil and winepress, an apparently sacred standing stone and what seems to be an altar with a drainage channel as a site of sacrifices. One room features mysterious V-shaped carvings on the floor, thought to be used for preparing anointing oil or wine or as the base for a loom for special garments or a tripod structure for dealing with sacrifices.

Researchers have said this apparent temple was most likely built at the latest at the end of the Middle Bronze Age (around 1550 B.C.) and went out of use in the late 700s B.C. at the time of righteous King Hezekiah. A small cave was carved into the hill behind where a stash of objects from the 700s was found—cooking pots, jars with fragments of Hebrew writing, loom weights, scarabs, stamp seals and grinding stones. The careful sealing of this cave before the building went out of use may suggest it was a *favissa*, or cultic storage place.

Numerous sources reporting on this discovery declared it shocking to find what they call a second or competing temple in Jerusalem—against the biblical impression of Solomon's temple as the sole place of worship. But these are misinformed as to what the Bible actually says.

First of all, we should be skeptical when archaeologists say they have found a cultic site because that can be somewhat imaginative without finding written proof. Still, there do appear to be some ritual aspects to this place located near a significant site in the city, the water source of Gihon.

It's been argued that this facility dates from the Canaanite Jebusite period, but one would wonder why it would have been retained by King David if it originated in pagan worship. Some say it dates back to the time of the priest-king Melchizedek, whom Abraham encountered at Salem (Jerusalem) in Genesis 14. (To learn more about this figure, see the sidebar in our free study guide *Who Is God?*) That's possible, and maybe there was a continuing tradition into David's time. There's no way to really know.

Or perhaps it did not start out as a ritual site but became one at the time of David's reign. Some have argued that Solomon's temple was over the Gihon Spring, but that's false. Yet something else may have been here in David's time. Archaeologist Scott Stripling and others think this may be where David set up a tabernacle or tent for the Ark of the Covenant when he brought it to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:17; 1 Chronicles 15:1; 2 Chronicles 1:4)—perhaps erected over parts of the stone room divisions, especially as Stripling has found that the Mosaic tabernacle at Shiloh was evidently set up over some stone room platforming there.

David actually had priests serving in two places—at the Mosaic tabernacle as well as the tent at Jerusalem. Just where was this tent?

We should also consider that David sent Solomon to the Gihon Spring for his coronation (1 Kings 1:32-39). Why? Perhaps this is where the ark was.

Interestingly, we later find his descendant Joash crowned by a pillar stone (2 Kings 11:14). Maybe this happened in the same place. (Josiah was also crowned by a pillar stone in 2 Kings 23:3.)

Or it could be that this was just a Canaanite pagan site that David closed off but later apostatizing kings put back into use. Or it could have been the sacred site of the ark before the ark was put in Solomon's temple as well as the place of coronation—with this sacred site later corrupted into a pagan shrine. Even Solomon himself ended up building temples to pagan gods around Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:4-8). Under the rule of his son Rehoboam the false worship at high places continued (1 Kings 14:22-23), and we find this through Judah's history again and again.

It's interesting that the newly discovered site came to an end at the time of Hezekiah. For he not only removed the high places and destroyed pagan iconography, but he even destroyed holy objects that had become corrupted. The bronze serpent that Moses had fashioned at God's direction had become an object of false worship for people, so Hezekiah broke it in pieces (2 Kings 18:3-5).

Eli Shukron sees the filling in of the site as part of Hezekiah's reforms, stating, "The Bible describes how, during the First Temple period, additional ritual sites operated outside the Temple, and two kings of Judah—Hezekiah and Josiah—implemented reforms to eliminate these sites."

This is refreshing to see since many recent scholars tout evidence of idolatrous worship in Israel and Judah as somehow contradictory of the Bible—when that's exactly what the Bible repeatedly laments and rebukes. But thankfully a few ancient kings like Hezekiah and Josiah boldly took a stand for God. And we may well have evidence of that right here in this new find.



The ruins of Tel Megiddo today with the Valley of Jezreel behind.

Evidence of Necho's Egyptian army victory over Josiah at Megiddo (March 2025). The Bible says that King Josiah of Judah, in his process of righteous reforms, extended his control to former territories of Israel in the north. Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II, an ally of the Assyrians, marched north to fight with them against the ascendant Babylonians, passing through the northern Israelite territory. Josiah and his forces came out to repel this ingress, to which Necho replied that God had sent him on this mission and that Josiah should not stand in his way. Nevertheless, Josiah went to battle against the Egyptians at the valley or plain around Megiddo, was wounded and died from his wounds (2 Kings 23:29-30; 2 Chronicles 35:20-24). Egypt was then briefly in control of the country until losing to the Babylonians in the north—whereupon the Babylonians took control of the land.

Past Megiddo excavations had turned up no structure that could be conclusively dated to this time of Egypt's victory over Josiah in 609 B.C. But three seasons of digging in the northwestern sector over the years 2016 to 2022 yielded the looked-for results, which were recently published. Remains of a new building were found in a layer correlating to the time of Josiah. And in this building was found the largest collection of Egyptian pottery ever discovered in the region. This pottery was of low quality—fitting not fine tableware of trade but, as pointed out by the excavation directors, a stream of supplies, most likely for Necho's army. They think the building was part of an Egyptian administrative center with a garrison—which would well match this time.

Also found were many examples of Greek pottery—which fits with the Egyptian army using many Greek mercenaries. And there was a fragment of a jug made of clay nearly exclusive to Jerusalem—showing a Jewish presence here in the north of the country at Josiah's time.

Once again, the Bible is shown to be a trustworthy record of history.

AI dates Dead Sea Scrolls earlier than thought, including Daniel (June 2025). One of the greatest finds from antiquity in modern times was the discovery of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, a major trove of ancient manuscripts and fragments buried in the Judean desert, including portions of nearly all the books of the Hebrew Bible at such an early date. Most of the items found have been dated to between the second century B.C. and second century A.D.—based on laborious paleographic analysis, examining the development of writing styles with few clear time markers. Now a new approach is yielding even older dates for many of the scrolls.

The team behind a paper in the scientific journal *PLOS One*, titled "Dating Ancient Manuscripts Using Radiocarbon and AI Based Writing Style Analysis," trained Enoch, an AI-based prediction model, with writings on carbon-dated parchment samples, teaching it to recognize even microscopic ink trace patterns to more accurately assess writing developments across the period in question to establish date-range markers. While many scrolls showed the same time frame earlier determined, others were assigned much earlier dates than before. While all the scrolls date long after the original biblical writing and compilation, earlier dating means these are less removed in time from the initial manuscripts—and they demonstrate great consistency in passing down what's recorded.

This process has yielded very interesting implications for the book of Daniel. Many have concluded its composition was after the time of the Maccabees in the late 160s B.C.—to explain away its complex prophecies in chapter 11 as having been fraudulently manufactured after events transpired. Yet researchers were surprised to see the Dead Sea Scrolls' copy of the book dated to a range of 220 to 165 B.C., meaning it was probably from well before the time of the Maccabees—and indeed the book of Daniel itself is from three centuries earlier. (Learn more about its prophecies in the resource offered at the end of the article.)

Again and again, the Bible is validated as an authentic record—not just of history but even advance prophecies that were genuinely fulfilled in subsequent events. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



Once more, we see that archaeological discoveries fit well with the biblical account. And there are many more reasons to accept what Scripture says. To see more, download or request our free study guide *Is the Bible True?* Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.



Rapidly evolving AI-assisted cybercrime

Artificial intelligence is pushing crime to new depths. Experts have warned against AI viruses that keep changing themselves to breach cybersecurity. They're increasing phishing attacks and spoofing websites to steal information.

In its Aug. 27 Threat Intelligence Report, the AI safety company Anthropic described "how criminals are embedding advanced models like 'Claude' into every stage of attacks—from reconnaissance and credential theft to ransomware and fraud . . . AI tools are now acting not just as advisers but as active operators in real-time campaigns" ("AI Is Being Weaponized for Cybercrime in 'Unprecedented' Ways,"

The Epoch Times, Aug. 28, 2025).

The AI itself even generates "persuasive, psychologically targeted ransom notes" (ibid.). In another case, North Korean operatives used Claude to pose as software engineers at major U.S. companies, generating resumes, past coding assignments and performing technical tasks to receive salaries as remote workers.

"Anthropic said these examples illustrate a broader pattern where criminals with little training can now use AI to scale attacks once reserved for sophisticated groups. Amid such developments, defense and law enforcement are becoming increasingly difficult.

Another terrible earthquake in Afghanistan



On August 31, a devastating 6.0 earthquake hit Afghanistan. As reported a few days later, the death toll in the hardest-hit eastern province of Kunar topped 2,200, with more than 3,600 injured and 6,700 homes destroyed. This comes two years after a 6.3 quake struck the western part of the country, killing over 1,400 people (NHK World Japan, Sept. 4, 2025).

Other nations sent in aid, but pain and grief for many can't be fully alleviated. Our hearts ache over the suffering many have endured, including the

loss of loved ones.

Jesus Christ said that a marked rise in earthquakes would be part of the increasing troubles at the end of the age prior to His return (Matthew 24:7-8), but we should not just think about this in terms of statistics. The lives of many are in ruins.

To better understand why a loving God allows such widescale suffering at this time, request or download our free study guide *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* God does care, and He has a plan to save the world at large, including those lost to such tragedies.

Rampant killing of Christians, including horror in Nigeria

Following atrocities earlier this year, around 40 Catholic Christians were murdered while worshipping at a church in Komanda, Congo on July 27 (AP and other sources).

The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) then warned in early August of a "silent genocide" in Mozambique, with Islamic State (ISIS) jihadists destroying churches, burning villages and beheading Christians. "The United Nations sounded alarms last August that ISIS was gaining strength in Mozambique and was close to gaining 'effective control' over a large swath



of territory in West Africa and the Sahel" ("Islamic State Beheads Christians, Burns Churches in Mozambique Rampage," Breitbart, Aug. 7, 2025).

ISIS more recently issued calls to Muslims to kill Christians and Jews in Western nations by any means—"by car, with a knife, a gun or by causing a fire" ("Especially in France"—ISIS Calls on Muslims to Kill 'Christians and Jews' in Europe by Any Means," Breitbart, Sept. 21).

And shortly before came this shocking news from Nigeria: "Islamic extremists and radicalized herder militias have killed over 7,000 Christians within the first 220 days of 2025, a new report from a civil society organization estimates, as human rights advocates continue to criticize the Nigerian government's inability to protect Christians" ("Over 7K Christians Killed in Nigeria So Far in 2025: Watchdog," The Christian Post, Aug. 13).

Above that were 7,800 people abducted for being Christians. The report states that the brutal massacre translates to an average of 30 Christian deaths per day—more than one per hour—with an added 35 abducted each day, approaching two per hour. Further, Christians have been displaced from communities and farms—and there have been thousands of cases of sexual assault and physical abuse.

While some international observers say what's happening amounts to severe religious persecution and genocide, the Nigerian government argues that the violence is not inherently religious, arising from decades-old farmer-herder clashes. Yet as the report details, Nigeria is providing safe haven to at least 22 Islamist terror groups, several with links to ISIS and World Jihad Fund, the aim of which is to obliterate or uproot non-Muslims across the country.

Many Muslims have been killed here as well, but as an earlier report detailed, of the nearly 31,000 civilians killed in the four years between 2019 and 2023, more than 6,000 were Muslims while nearly 17,000 were Christians.

It is dangerous to claim to follow Jesus Christ in many parts of the world, even if it's just in name. Let's pray for the day when Christ will return to set things right and lead all people into the way of truth and peace.



Charlie Kirk assassination and memorial

On Sept. 10, an assassin's bullet ended the life of 31-year-old evangelical and conservative political activist Charlie Kirk, as he spoke to an audience at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah. He had become well-known for the organization he founded, Turning Point USA, dedicated to dialogue and debate on university campuses to pull young people back from socialist, anti-God, anti-family indoctrination. Its aphorism: "Get married. Have children. Build a legacy. Pass down your values. Pursue the eternal. Seek true joy."

We've seen a rise of assassination attempts and political violence, but the attempt to silence this conservative Christian spokesperson actually backfired, with Charlie Kirk and his message being catapulted into far greater attention than ever before. There were commemorations and prayers around the world, including in many foreign governments. Whereas there were previously around 2,000 TPUSA chapters, requests shot up to around 65,000 after the assassination, and that doubled following the Sept. 21 memorial.

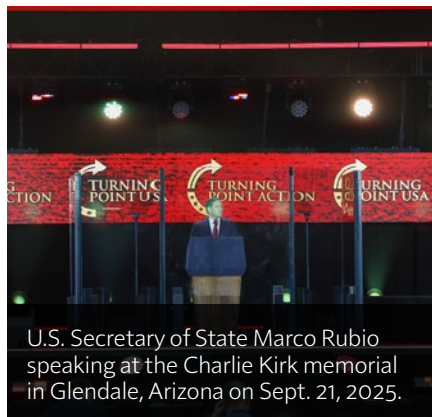
The memorial was on a scale rarely seen except in state funerals. Kirk was friends with many in the U.S. presidential administration and Congress—many who were in attendance, along with millions watching around the world. And the content at this scale was like nothing ever seen before—with many proclamations from the nation's leaders of not just the sovereignty of God, but of Jesus Christ, hailed unabashedly as King of Kings. Clearly, the desire of the assassin and others on the anti-Christian left to root out biblical values was completely upended.

This assassination felt personal for so many because the victim was not a government figure but a citizen speaking out—and many saw that they themselves could end up in such crosshairs. Kirk was a person willing to stand boldly for the truth as he understood it. There's a lesson there of being willing to endure mistreatment and even martyrdom for proclaiming what's right. While he did not fully understand the message of Scripture, in line with much of mainstream Christianity, he nevertheless promoted many important ideas. We can also see from his work and the fallout of what happened that people are hungry for truth—and we need to stand ready to respond.

The memorial brought religious values to the fore in the nation and in other countries. We of course don't know what was in everyone's heart, but there were many remarkable professions of faith

even through there was not full understanding of Scripture, particularly in terms of life after death, with so many imagining Charlie Kirk now conscious and active in heaven. He is not, as the Bible makes clear. The truth of the coming resurrection is much more comforting. (See our Q&A on page 30 and our free study guide *Heaven & Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*)

There were direct calls to repentance and discussion of sin. This is of course very good, but there is a need to go further—particularly in recognizing what God requires of us in choosing right from wrong. Amid numerous mentions of the gospel of Christ and declarations of God and Christ as King, it would have been wonderful to hear mention of Jesus Christ's return to set up His Kingdom or rule over all nations, as part of the true gospel message of the Bible.



The closest to that came in these astonishing words from the highest-ranking Cabinet official in the country, Secretary of State Marco Rubio: "The movement that Charlie Kirk led and started and gave fuel to was about politics but not only about politics. It was deeper. It was broader. And . . . I'm confident he would agree, one of the things he wants us to take away from . . . all of this is the following: his deep belief that we were all created, every single one of us . . . by the hand of the God of the universe, an all-powerful God who loved us and created us for the purpose of living with Him in eternity. But then sin entered the world and separated us from our Creator. And so God took on the form of a man and came down and lived among us, and He suffered like men, and He died like a man, but on the third day He rose unlike *any* mortal man. And then to prove any doubters wrong He ate with His disciples so they could see, and they touched His wounds . . . And then He rose to the heaven, but He promised He would return, *and He will*. And when He

returns—because He took on that death, because He carried that cross—we were freed from the sin that separated us from Him. And when He returns there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And we will all be together. And we will have a great reunion there again with Charlie and all the people we love. Thank you, and God bless you." Again, astonishing.

As we've noted here before, God gave an important principle in 1 Samuel 2:30: "Those who honor Me I will honor." He further says in 2 Chronicles 7:14 that if the people of the nation will pray and seek His face and turn from their wrong ways that he will forgive their sin and heal the land. May we all keep praying for that.

It was remarkable to see Charlie Kirk's widow, Erika, publicly forgive the assassin as Jesus forgave those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). While the state is given responsibility to execute judgment as a deterrent against evil, as was also stated (Romans 13-14), personally we should bear no grudges. This was a hard thing to do. In her mind, she wanted nothing preventing her from being reunited with her husband. There's a bigger subject here about God's plan and everyone's accountability, but we can be thankful that she will see her husband again—and so will all of us see our loved ones again whom we've lost.

What about the wider nation? This could be a turning point—of moving back toward God and His ways or to worsening evil. Sadly, there have already been other killings of people over their views and beliefs. On a broad scale, nations are blessed or cursed in the degree they submit to or turn against God. It is good to see people promoting biblical values and combating wrong even without full understanding (compare Luke 9:49-50). There can of course be much false pretense. As Jesus said, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8). We shouldn't assume that about everybody, but fruits of deeds and eventual words demonstrate where people really stand (compare Matthew 7:16-20; Luke 6:45).

As we watch the world around us, the more important thing is to make sure we watch ourselves—our own behavior and motivations. Are we ourselves right with God? As we consider that, each day should be a turning point in realigning with God. And pray that God's Kingdom will come soon to bring true light and joy to the world at large. That is the ultimate turning point we long for.



Understanding Real **REPENTANCE** More Than Just Apologizing

True repentance is far more than just admitting guilt and being sorry for our sins. It involves genuine remorse and a desire for dramatic reform that leads to changed thinking and action.

by Ken Loucks

In our modern world, the concept of repentance often gets reduced to a simple “I’m sorry” or a quick apology on social media. But true repentance, as revealed in the Bible, goes far deeper than mere words or temporary feelings of regret. It involves *a complete transformation of heart and mind* that leads to lasting change in our lives.

Remorse for the right reasons

Consider the stark difference between two kings of ancient Israel, Saul and David. Both committed serious sins, and both expressed sorrow for their actions. Yet their outcomes couldn’t have been more different. In 1 Samuel 15, we find King Saul directly disobeying God’s command to completely destroy the Amalekites. When confronted by the prophet Samuel, Saul’s response revealed a shallow remorse focused primarily on maintaining his reputation before the people. “I have sinned,” he said, “yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel” (verse 30).

Contrast this with King David’s response when confronted with his sins of adultery and murder. On hearing the prophet Nathan’s rebuke, David immediately acknowledged, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13). His properly focused heartfelt remorse is beautifully captured in Psalm 51, where he cries out, “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight” (verse 4). David’s primary concern wasn’t about his public image or the earthly consequences of

his actions—it was about his damaged relationship with God.

The apostle Paul explains this crucial distinction in 2 Corinthians 7:10: “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.” Worldly sorrow, like Saul’s, focuses on the consequences of getting caught. It’s about avoiding punishment or maintaining appearances. Godly sorrow, exemplified by David, recognizes that our sins primarily offend God and damage our relationship with Him.

But what exactly is sin? The apostle John provides a clear definition: “Sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4, King James Version). And not just any law—God’s law. As Isaiah 33:22 reminds us, “The LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King.” When we break God’s law we’re not just violating a set of rules, we’re damaging our relationship with the divine Lawgiver Himself.

This understanding should lead us to examine our motives when we feel remorse for our actions. Are we merely sorry we got caught? Are we just trying to avoid consequences? Or are we, like David, grieved because we’ve damaged our relationship with our loving Creator?

Understanding that leads to action

Jesus illustrated this principle in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The young man who squandered his inheritance in wild living came to a point of deep reflection when he found himself longing to eat the pods he was feeding



It's important to understand that true repentance isn't about performing penance or trying to balance out our sins with good deeds. Instead, repentance involves a complete change of mind and purpose.

to pigs. His realization wasn't just about his physical hunger or lost wealth. He recognized that he had sinned "against heaven" and against his father (Luke 15:18). This understanding led to action. He didn't just feel bad about his situation—he got up and returned home, willing to accept whatever consequences awaited him.

Jesus emphasized the serious nature of repentance in His Sermon on the Mount. He taught that if our right eye causes us to sin we should pluck it out, and if our right hand causes us to sin we should cut it off (Matthew 5:29-30). These are figurative statements not meant to be taken literally. The point is to cut out of our lives any focuses or pursuits, however near and dear to us, that are drawing us into sin. Indeed, true repentance often requires dramatic action. It might mean ending relationships that pull us away from God, changing our entertainment choices, or adjusting our work habits to avoid certain situations.

It's important to understand that true repentance isn't about performing penance or trying to balance out our sins with good deeds. We can't earn forgiveness through self-punishment or by accumulating enough good works to outweigh our sins. Instead, repentance involves a complete change of mind and purpose, as illustrated in the book of Hebrews, which lists repentance from dead works as one of the foundational doctrines (Hebrews 6:1).

This change begins with recognizing sin as God defines it, not as our society defines it. In today's world, where moral relativism prevails and traditional values are often dismissed as outdated or intolerant, it's crucial to remember that *God's standards haven't changed*. What He identified as sin thousands of years ago remains sin today, regardless of shifting cultural norms or social acceptance.

And we must do as God commands. As Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Paul likewise wrote, "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Romans 2:13).

Yet our human nature resists obedience to God (Romans 8:7). We need the help of God's Spirit to continue in obedience. The commandments of God express godly love (1 John 5:3)—and this love is poured into us through God's Spirit

(Romans 5:5). This dynamic relationship is renewed day by day (see 2 Corinthians 4:16).

An ongoing process of deepening relationship with God

The process of developing godly sorrow and true repentance requires regular prayer, asking God to help us see sin as He sees it and to empower us to overcome. It involves deep study of His Word to understand His perspective and meditation on His character and perfect love for us. As we build a closer relationship with our Creator, disappointing Him should become more painful than any physical consequences we might face for our sins.

Christ's parable of the prodigal son provides hope for all who truly repent. When the son returned home, his father ran to meet him, embraced him and celebrated his return (Luke 15:20-24). Similarly, our Heavenly Father eagerly awaits our genuine repentance and return to Him. He doesn't demand that we earn our way back through penance or good works. Instead, He asks for a changed heart and mind that leads to changed behavior with His help.

True repentance is an ongoing process in a Christian's life. It's not a one-time event but a continuous journey of examining ourselves in the light of God's law, acknowledging where we fall short, and making whatever changes are necessary to align our lives with His will. This process becomes easier as we develop a closer relationship with God and begin to see sin as He sees it—not just as breaking His law, but as damaging our relationship with our loving Father. And through drawing close to Him, we are strengthened in His ways.

In our modern world of quick fixes and surface-level solutions, the biblical concept of repentance might seem extreme or unnecessary. But just as a serious physical illness requires more than a band-aid, the spiritual disease of sin requires more than a casual apology. It requires a complete transformation of heart and mind, leading to lasting change in our lives. This is what real repentance is all about—not just feeling sorry for our sins, but turning away from them and toward God with all our heart, mind and strength. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



If we're not following God as we should, it doesn't have to be that way. If we turn our lives to Him as He directs, He will forgive our sins and help us to live in His ways. To learn more, request or download our study guides *Forgiveness Is Possible* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Both are available free. **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.**





A Time for Gratitude

It's vital that we learn to be people who are not only thankful, but actually give thanks—to other people and especially to God. And the time for that is always.

by Don Hooser

You probably know genuinely thankful people. That's something to be thankful for. But sadly, many people around the world are ingrates—ungrateful people! Gratitude, a vital part being gracious, is a diminishing virtue. Having a self-centered nature, people are quicker to criticize than compliment, to gripe rather than express gratitude.

People must *learn* to be grateful and express it. Responsible parents usually have to repeatedly tell their young children, “Say ‘Thank you.’”

It's important that people frequently say “*please*,” “*excuse me*,” “*I apologize*,” “*I'm sorry*,” etc. And we should especially be saying to others and praying to God often, “*Thank you!*”

Yet in our age of increasing selfishness, “common courtesy” is less and less common. The biggest problem is that fewer and fewer people have biblical values, including “love your

neighbor as yourself.” Many Bible students regard ingratitude as so egregious as to be one of *the worst* sins! It clearly is an underlying root of other sins!

The worst ingratitude is ingratitude *toward God*—our Creator, Provider and Savior! There is so much to thank Him for.

Thank God for His creation and for giving us His “Instruction Book,” the Holy Bible! Thank God for providing our necessities plus countless nonessential benefits! Thank God for answered prayer and the blessings we didn't think to pray for. Thank God for the “big miracles” and for the “little miracles” like, perhaps, helping you to find your phone.

A significant example in the Bible of both gratitude and ingratitude is the account of Jesus Christ healing 10 lepers (Luke 17:11-19). Lepers were those suffering with skin diseases who were miserable and considered incurable. In this true story, *9 out of 10* people

neglected to even express thanks for their spectacular healing! Jesus remarked: “Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?”

Think of the many ways Jesus Christ served, sacrificed and suffered during His earthly ministry, including people's lack of gratitude. God the Father and Jesus Christ love all people and have a plan to offer the opportunity for salvation to everyone! (see John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). With that in mind, none of us has as much gratitude as that amazing grace deserves!

Genuine gratitude is expressed!

Being “thankful” implies being *full of thanks*, but keeping it inside doesn't benefit anyone else. To just say “I'm thankful” for this or that often only means “I'm glad.”

Grateful people regularly make others happier with their “thank yous.” And they are happier themselves, for



Grateful people regularly make others happier with their “thank yous.” And they are happier themselves, for “there is more happiness in giving than in receiving.” Gratitude gratifies!

“there is more happiness in giving than in receiving” (Acts 20:35, Good News Translation). Gratitude gratifies!

There are numerous ways to communicate gratitude—whether verbally, or with a note, card or gift. Interestingly, financial tips are often called *gratuities*. Even many of the sacrifices commanded under the Old Covenant were expressions of thanksgiving to God.

It’s gracious to say “*Thank you!*” with a warm smile even when people are getting paid to serve us, such as waiters, store clerks, flight attendants, military personnel and first responders.

People with a *positive mental attitude* are more grateful. They look at the glass half full rather than half empty. “Perfectionists” who compare their situations with “perfection” are bound to be disappointed. Instead, remember and be thankful that there are millions of big problems you *don’t* have! Shamefully, the more our society becomes affluent, comfortable and technologically advanced, the more the complaining! (See Deuteronomy 8.)

Rather than dwelling on problems, “count your blessings,” in the words of an old hymn.

The Bible has much to say about gratitude and ingratitude. The apostle Paul wrote that “in the last days” ingratitude and many other sins would be worse than ever—that “men will be lovers of themselves . . . proud . . . unthankful . . .” (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Tragically, many people these days have a *victimhood mentality* that breeds self-pity, division, anger and animosity. In fact, it’s often an excuse for violence!

People should realize that expressing gratitude promotes good relationships, better mental and physical health, and inner peace! Read Philippians 4:4-8!

Gratitude requires humility

Yes, sincere gratitude needs humility! Many, many scriptures warn against the sins of pride and related forms of self-centeredness.

A prideful victim mentality thinks, “Poor me.” People want to blame others for their problems rather than accept responsibility for their bad decisions.

The most horrible example of pride and ingratitude is that of the powerful archangel Lucifer, described in Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:11-19. God had appointed him to be a leader among the angels, but he wasn’t satisfied with that high position! He lusted to take the place of God! With that rebellion, Lucifer became Satan the devil and the angels who followed him became demons.

The colossal example of almost constant ingratitude among a group of people is the story of the Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt and brutal slavery. God performed spectacular miracle after miracle to liberate them and then provide for their needs while bringing them to the Promised Land. But they were chronically forgetful, doubting, self-pitying, fearful and complaining.

Remember that God did not liberate the Israelites because they were deserving of His mercy and blessings. Toward the end of the 40 years, Moses wrote, “The LORD your God is not giving you this good land . . . because of your

righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Deuteronomy 9:6). They should have been the most grateful and obedient people in world history! Instead, Moses wrote, “From the day that you departed from the land of Egypt . . . you have been rebellious against the LORD” (verse 7).

Instead of daily thanking God, many self-pitying Israelites complained incessantly. Their complaints about Moses were actually complaints about God, since God was making the decisions and His presence was obvious!

Their past life of slavery was not enough to make them truly humble or grateful for freedom. The freed Israelites still had a *slave mentality* and *resistance to change*. All of us should think about that in view of the physical freedoms we are blessed with now and the spiritual liberty we are able to receive through Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-12, the apostle Paul gives us a stern admonition as he warns against the bad examples those ungrateful Israelites provide for *us*! As he says in verse 12, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”

Thanksgiving days

Thankfully, a number of countries have an annual national Thanksgiving Day—some official and others unofficial—plus other days to remember and give thanks for independence, veterans, famous leaders, the end of wars, etc. Sadly, these noble days are no longer enthusiastically celebrated by most citizens as they were in more patriotic times. On holidays, there often is more gluttony than gratitude.

As in other places, Thanksgiving in the United States was instituted to give thanks to God. And with its vast national blessings, it has so much to be grateful for. Yet many Americans today have forgotten their history, forgotten the Bible and forgotten God! While many still acknowledge Him, so many do not—not even offering a prayer of thanks at the traditional meal.

National days of thanksgiving to God with no roots in pagan religion are honorable observances we may happily celebrate. Yet the most important “thanksgiving days” are unknown to or rejected by most people—the sacred festivals instituted by God and taught in the Bible!

God made the Sabbath, the seventh day of every week, a holy time to rest from work, worship God and give thanks. The fourth of the Ten Commandments is the command to observe the Sabbath. The wording in Exodus 20:8-11 emphasizes God as our Creator, and the wording in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 emphasizes God as our loving Savior and Liberator.

In addition, God sanctified and commanded seven annual festivals! Each festival is a sacred time of worship, fellowship and giving God thanks, with focus on the particular step that occasion symbolizes in God’s amazing plan of salvation! (To learn more, request or download our free study guides *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest* and *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

Of course, we should be giving thanks and praising God in our prayers and thoughts *every day*—and *many times* each day.

When we experience good things, thank God, as it ultimately comes from Him (James 1:17). When adversity comes, we can thank God that He is with us to comfort us and will ultimately work things out for the ultimate good! (See Romans 8:28-31.) When you want to have a picnic and it doesn’t rain, thank God. If it rains, thank God that it’s helping the farmers—and the food supply.

Many reasons to thank God!

Thank God that you are a human being, created in the image and likeness of God! (See Genesis 1:26-27.) We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). We have minds with a spiritual aspect through which we are able to have an intimate relationship with God.

Thank God for your physical senses! Think of how we keep breathing and our hearts keep pumping blood and food gets digested without our needing to think about it! Actually, there are *many autonomic systems* in our bodies that automatically keep us alive and well. We should frequently thank God for these!



Rejoice that we in this modern age benefit from some of the amazing advances in scientific knowledge, achievements and inventions!

Thanks to modern photography, computers and the Internet, we have the privilege of seeing amazing nature programs! God designed our “blue planet” with countless conditions and processes that make life possible. In fact, Earth is called the “Goldilocks” planet because it is so *unique* among all other planets in providing conditions that are “just right”—perfect for us to survive and thrive.

Egregious and absurd, though, is that most nature programs do not credit God but mindless evolution—yet the truth is plain!

Read in Romans 1:18-32 about the “wrath of God” being directed toward the many “fools” who did not give glory to Him “nor were thankful”—willfully ignoring the evidence of a Creator all around us and worshiping and serving the creation rather than the Creator. The latter part of this passage points out that such thinking leads to all kinds of immoral perversity.

Even when His answer is “no”

When we pray, we should not wait for a “yes” answer from God before giving thanks to Him. Since God knows what is best in the long run for each of us, it is often a big blessing when God’s answer to a request is “no” or “not now.”

God is working things out from a vastly higher vantage point (Isaiah 55:8-9), allowing temporary disappointment for a better eventual outcome (again, see Romans 8:28). Coming to see Him “turn lemons into lemonade” is tremendously inspiring! And a temporary “no” is sometimes God’s way of testing us before He says “yes.”

Remember that God’s primary concern is helping us *spiritually* so each one “endures to the end” of life and receives the gift of eternal life in the Kingdom of God! (Matthew 24:9-13). That takes precedence over all our temporary desires. Let’s thank God that He stays focused on the long-range goal!

The message of Scripture on this subject is clear and powerful. We who desire to please God must be people with gratitude in our hearts and gratitude on our lips and gratitude with our actions—regularly thanking others and continually thanking God. Every day should be a thanks-giving day! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



A major part of our expressing thanks to God is through prayer, including praising God for all His great blessings. For more on this vital practice and other means of developing in our relationship with Him, request or download our study guide *Tools for Spiritual Growth*. And for more about learning to trust in His promises, also obtain *You Can Have Living Faith*. Both are available free. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.





Does Christmas Really Honor Christ?

If you really loved someone, would you celebrate the person with reminders of a past rival for your affection? Are many Christians guilty of dishonoring Jesus in this way?

by Gary Petty

Imagine a woman giving a gift to her husband on his birthday. Only it isn't his birthday. It's the birthday of an old boyfriend. And the gift is something she used to give that other person. It would be natural for the husband to doubt the genuineness of her love!

If someone really loved you and was trying to do something you would appreciate, it seems like he or she wouldn't throw in your face such reminders of an old flame!

But Christmas is doing this very thing with Jesus Christ—supposedly honoring Him when this birthday and celebratory elements were formerly used to honor false gods!

Why do you observe Christmas?

If you're like most people you'd say that you observe Christmas because it's a way of showing love to Christ. Maybe you attend midnight mass or a church

service on Christmas morning. Your children might participate in a play pretending to be Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem. Perhaps a Nativity scene or a giant plastic Santa Claus adorns your front yard.

To many, Christmas is a time of friends and family, the smell of freshly baked cookies and the excitement of children around a decorated tree, tearing the wrappings from gifts.

But is there more to the story? Let's look at another side of Christmas from what was posted at Witchology.com, a website labeling itself an education and research provider on Witchcraft, Wicca, Paganism, Magic and the Occult. Note this from its article on Yule:

"What is the Pagan secret that Christianity has tried to keep from you? The truth about Christmas is that it is not Christmas at all. It is the Winter Solstice, a Pagan holy day observed

around the world and since time immemorial from the Native American tribes, to the Norsemen, to the ancient Romans, and today by modern Pagans, Witches and Wiccans."

The startling fact is that the information about the origins of Christmas presented on this and other websites promoting witchcraft is actually true! Christmas customs are rooted in paganism. Jesus Christ wasn't even born anywhere near December 25.

Yet most people respond to this information with something like: "I know there are some pagan and secular customs incorporated into Christmas, but these customs were Christianized. In this way we choose to show love toward Jesus."

But it's time to ask the really hard question that few want to face: Could observing Christmas actually be *dishonoring* Jesus?

A warning to the Christians in Corinth

Let's go back in time to the first Christians who lived in the ancient city of Corinth. Like most ancient seaports, Corinth was known for its multiculturalism, lucrative business opportunities, religious diversity and seamy pleasures. The city's name spawned a Greek verb meaning "to practice fornication." Corinth was an economic powerhouse of around half-a-million people, a mega-metropolis by the standards of the day.

The majority of people in Corinth were pagans. They worshiped the traditional Greek and Roman gods and goddesses or sacrificed in the temples of one of the various "mystery religions." One of the most magnificent Corinthian temples stood on a high hill looming above the city. It was the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, employing a thousand temple prostitutes.

As people from this pagan Greek background converted to Christianity, some naturally continued to practice some of their old customs. It would have been easy for them to see these pagan rites as celebrations imbued with a new Christian spirit honoring Jesus.

The apostle Paul wrote to these early Christians in 1 Corinthians 10:20-21: "The things which the Gentiles [pagan nations] 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 of the table of demons."

Think about what Paul is saying. You want to be a follower of Jesus Christ. You

believe in the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Are you willing to go where the Bible takes you?

Satan and his demons are not fairy-tale creatures. They are *real*. Demons are angels who rebelled against God and, after their rebellion, now embody all that is evil. In another letter Paul wrote that Satan is "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). We can't escape Paul's logic. Paganism isn't harmless—it is the worship of demons and the false god of this age!

Christmas origins have nothing to do with Christ

Let's read a little more from the Witchology article on the origins of the Christmas holiday:

"One of the eight Sabbats of Witchcraft [misapplying a biblically derived term to pagan festivals], this season, known as Yule, the great

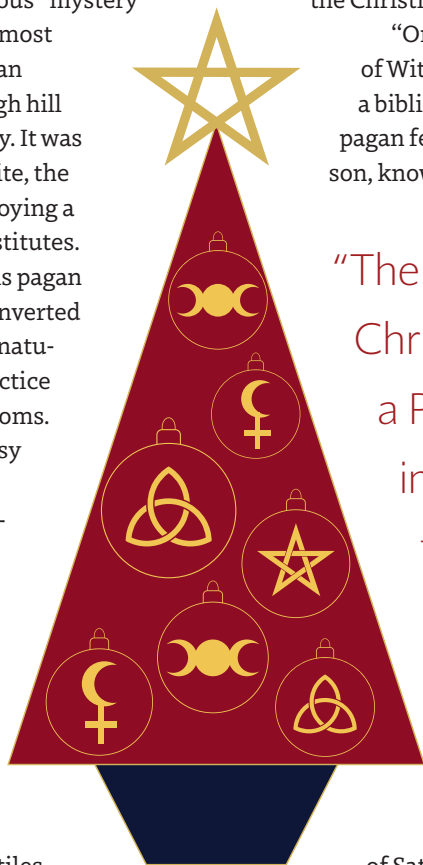
of it, but the shocking truth is it did not happen. The birth of a boy under remarkable circumstances to humble parents in a stable in Bethlehem *did not happen on the 25th of December, 1 A.D.*" (emphasis added throughout).

Again, the website is correct. The truth is that the prophesied Messiah, Jesus Christ, was born of a virgin in Bethlehem just as the Old Testament prophets foretold, but again it was nowhere near December 25—which even at that time was a major pagan celebration in several ancient cultures.

The problem with the modern Christmas celebration is that its origins have little to do with the real Jesus Christ. This isn't hidden knowledge. With just a little research online or in a decent encyclopedia, anyone can learn that the Christmas tree, Yule log, mistletoe and even the date of Christmas are rooted in paganism and not the Bible.

Is your response to this informa-

"The truth about Christmas is that it is not Christmas at all. It is the Winter Solstice, a Pagan holy day observed since time immemorial from the Native American tribes, to the Norsemen, to the ancient Romans, and today by modern Pagans, Witches and Wiccans."



annual festival of Saturn, the Saturnalia, of Pagan Rome, Dies Natalis Solis Invicti [Day of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun] of the Mithras cult, *the Winter Solstice is a sacred time in the Pagan calendar*...

"What is the Christmas secret? What are the facts Christians would rather you did not know? We set our clocks by it, we celebrated a Millennium because

tion, "Well, it doesn't matter since I don't use the Christmas tree to worship Scandinavian gods but to show love to Jesus Christ?"

Let's go back to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10: "The things which the Gentiles [pagan nations] 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 of the table of demons."

We are forced by Scripture to ask a hard question: How much are you willing to drink the cup of the Lord's table and

to this area to preach the gospel after Christ's death and resurrection, they found a man named Simon, as recorded in Acts 8. This Simon was a sorcerer who claimed to represent God by using the

ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You

Imagine a woman giving a gift to her husband on his birthday. Only it isn't his birthday. It's the birthday of an old boyfriend. Christmas is doing this very thing with Jesus Christ!



the cup of the table of demons and conclude that it doesn't matter to Christ?

At the beginning of this article I talked about a woman repackaging a celebration of an old boyfriend's birthday and presenting this to her husband as *his* birthday party on the same date—even though it isn't his birthday. Pretending it's someone's birthday and giving him a party that recalls a wrong past relationship isn't exhibiting love or respect, is it?

Then why do you believe that you are showing Jesus love and respect when you do the same thing to Him by throwing a party originating in paganism and pretending it's His birthday?

We must worship in spirit and truth

The Gospel of Luke records a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well in Samaria. The Samaritans were an interesting people. They claimed to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they rejected many of the teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures. They refused to worship at the temple in Jerusalem and mixed pagan customs with the worship of the true God.

Later, when Christ's disciples came

rites and customs of worshipping demons—even being baptized as supposedly a follower of Jesus yet persisting in his former ways.

Yet at this prior meeting here between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, he confronted her with the reality of who He is and told her, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23).

Again, Jesus Himself said that "*the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.*" Let that sink in.

Part of the truth here is that Scripture says we are not to try to honor God the way people formerly honored false gods. That is unacceptable to Him. As He told the ancient Israelites before they entered the Promised Land:

"When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not

shall not worship the LORD your God *in that way*; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods . . . *Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it*" (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

Isn't it time for you to question the legitimacy of paganized Christianity? Isn't it time to stop wrapping Jesus up in the trappings of the ancient pagan Saturnalia, Mithras and the gods of ancient Scandinavia, and instead seek to worship Him and the Father *in spirit and truth*?

It's never easy to examine beliefs and practices you've accepted all your life. But we have to ask if God wants something different in your relationship with Him!

God is reaching out to you to worship Him in spirit and truth. Let's strip the pagan customs from our worship of the great God and His Son Jesus Christ and honor Them the way They direct in the Bible! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



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"Contribute a Verse"

Let's renew our focus on moving forward in taking up our role among others, some unnamed yet faithful, in the work God has called us to in His great plan.

by Robin Webber

Regular readers of this column may recall that I focused last year on a piece of personal contemplation from the American poet and essayist Walt Whitman. Over 150 years ago, shortly before the American Civil War, it hit the nail on the head about the human struggle for meaningful existence. It was written amid a time of great change and upheaval as the industrial revolution was rapidly changing everyday life. Rail transportation was taking hold, eastern U.S. cities were exploding in population, and factories were pulsating with production.

Whitman wrote "O Me, O Life" to confront and explore the quiet desperation and earnest struggle that lay within him as to what purpose life might have for not only him, but also others in time to come.

Consider again his inner plea, abbreviated here, in our own frenetic world today:

O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities
fill'd with the foolish . . .

The question, O me! so sad, recurring—
What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may
contribute a verse.

King David had similar thoughts almost 2,800 years before-hand. Overwhelmed by the immensity of the radiant tapestry of celestial light above him, he wrote, "What is man that you take notice of him, or the son of man that you pay attention to him?" (Psalm 8:4, International Standard Version).

His descendant, our Savior, entering a world full of frustration and devoid of hope, would supply the answer, stating, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). And He bids those who would heed His stated mission, "*Follow Me*"—as His disciples (Matthew 4:19, emphasis added throughout). This so that they in turn might "*contribute a verse*," as the powerful play of the gospel message unfolds over the ages.

Where do I fit in?

But at times even with the light of God's purpose working in our hearts, we might ask ourselves: Where do I fit in? Does anyone know I exist? Does anyone know my name, much less what impact I might possibly make on others? Glancing at the big names of Scripture—like Moses, David, Ruth, Esther, Peter and Paul—we could find ourselves whimpering: "Who am I? Who even knows my name? How can I even begin to 'contribute a verse.'" Such questions and self-doubt need to be addressed, here and now, that we all might move forward.

All of us have a role to fill. As I noted in a column earlier this year, Shakespeare in his play *As You Like It* penned, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women mere players; they have their exits and their entrances." We should enter life each day realizing that God imprints His name on each of His covenant people. As I also pointed out previously, God told Moses concerning His priests blessing the people: "So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6:27).

Moreover, the Gospel of John refreshes us with the reality that Jesus, as the Great Shepherd, calls "his own sheep by

name and leads them out” (John 10:3). In His last human moments, Jesus prayed: “Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world [whether then or today], and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are” (John 17:11). And, might I add, that we would all *contribute a verse*!

The bottom line is that God knows who we are, where we are, what we are about in His service as we engage with and embrace the people, tasks and opportunities that come our

While we may stand in awe of some of those “big names” used of God in the past, have you ever thought of the many people not named in Scripture who met the moment to serve God’s purpose?

way every day. The reality is that at times disciples of Christ may lose their way (just ask Peter!), but God never loses His focus or His love for us. Jesus made it plain and clear when He said that not a single sparrow “falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will” and that we are far more valuable than sparrows (Matthew 10:29, 31). Cling tightly to that reality as we delve further into Jesus’ invitation of “*Follow Me*” (John 21:19).

Roll call of the incredible nameless

While we may stand in awe of some of those “big names” used of God in the past, have you ever thought of the many people not named in Scripture who “*contributed a verse*” towards God’s glory as they met the moment and walked through the door to serve God’s purpose?

Do we know the name of the little boy in John 6:9 who gave his lunch of bread and fish to Jesus that set up the miracle of feeding the 5,000? Do we know the name of the woman with the issue of blood who faithfully touched Jesus’ robe from behind to be healed in Luke 8:43-48? Do we know the name of the one individual leper, out of the 10 healed, who returned to give thanks to Jesus in Luke 17:11-19? Do we know the name of the faith-filled gentile centurion concerned for his servant’s well-being, of whom Jesus proclaimed in Luke 7:9, “I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”

Let us for a moment continue the roll call of the so-called nameless. Do we know the name of the remorseful thief on the cross who in Luke 23:39-43 validated Jesus’ innocence as they were dying together? Do we know the name of the Christians in Italy who perhaps at great risk to themselves

came out to greet and encourage the apostle Paul on the road towards his trial in Rome in Acts 28:12-15?

My point is this: All these nameless people met their moment as it came to them and *contributed an encouraging verse* as the powerful and expanding story of God’s Kingdom continued to develop. What was their common denominator? Their collective yet individual identity would become anchored in Christ.

We meet such moments every day in imploring our

Heavenly Father in prayer to come into our life to firmly anchor us into the living “heart steps” of Jesus, seeking to emulate how He would approach the challenges before us. While the challenge that awaits us may not be played out at a mountain in Sinai (Exodus 3) or walking down into “the valley of the shadow of death” with a sling and five stones (1 Samuel 17), or speaking at the Areopagus to the intelligentsia of Athens (Acts 17), it is your time to meet the moment and contribute a verse that is authored in heaven, but granted to you to deliver in person by exercising Christlike love and wisdom towards others.

Be overwhelmed by the grace of God!

Allow me to conclude by imploring you to “get off the bench” of lamenting in frustration “O me, O my” in watching life go by—and instead grab hold of the reality that God is desiring to do something in you and all of us as we step out each day on the stage of life set before us. Never be overwhelmed by the challenges that lie before you. But rather be overwhelmed by the grace of God to open the eyes of your heart to the opportunities that lie right before you to *contribute a verse* in His time, in His way and to His glory.

Let Ephesians 2:8-10 serve as a reminder that God has chosen to journey inside of you and is doing His loving work in you that it might spill over to others. Let us read and walk through it together: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*” That’s what we’re here to do—through God’s direction and empowerment through Christ.

Until next time, never underestimate God and how He might use you. Remember it is never the size of the job or opportunity, but the size of our hearts to embrace His existence with and in us to meet the moment! **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



God wants us to hand our lives over to His purposes—to contribute to His great plan He is working out through each and all of us. Where do we begin? How do we proceed? For help, request or download our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.





THE ASTONISHING SUNFLOWER DEFIES DARWINIAN EVOLUTION

by Mario Seiglie

Few things in life have impressed me more than watching a field of beautiful, bright sunflowers pointing toward the sun. It seems as if they are obediently following a silent command to look up in unison.

Perhaps you've never asked yourself how they do it, but it truly borders on the miraculous. In fact, this humble plant poses a tremendous challenge to what Charles Darwin claimed the process of evolution could do.

Darwin stated that "if it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down. But I can find out no such case" (*The Origin of Species*, Mentor Edition, 1958, p. 171).

Although he said he couldn't find an example, we can see one in the features of the sunflower. The sunflower has characteristics that do not appear to have evolved in a gradual, step-by-step fashion. Let's look at three examples.

FIBONACCI SPIRALS OPTIMALLY PACK THE SEEDS

First, let's look at how sunflower seeds are organized. They are a product of the reproductive organs of the sunflower, called disk florets.

Inside the flower head, the seeds are arranged in a beautiful spiral. Incredibly, they form an elaborate pattern based on a mathematical formula that uses Fibonacci numbers. Fibonacci numbers were formulated in 1202 by the great

Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci. In the pattern, each succeeding number is the sum of the two previous numbers. The beginning of the sequence looks like this: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, etc. In a sunflower head, this means each seed is positioned at what scientists call "the golden angle," the angle where the largest number of seeds fits into the smallest amount of space.

The Biomimicry Institute explains: "Patterning seeds in spirals of Fibonacci numbers allows for the maximum number of seeds on a seed head, packed uniformly, with no crowding at the center and no 'bald patches' at the edges. The Fibonacci sequence works well for the sunflower because of one key characteristic—growth. On a sunflower seed head, the individual seeds grow while the center of the head continues to add new seeds, pushing those at the periphery outwards. Following the Fibonacci sequence ensures growth on the same terms indefinitely. That is to say, as a seed head grows, seeds will always be packed uniformly, and with maximum compactness" ("*Helianthus Sunflower*," *Encyclopedia of Life*, 2012).

Darwinian evolutionists should be asked this question: How did the sunflower come up with the Fibonacci mathematical formula for packing its seeds in the most efficient way? What gradual, step-by-step process led to this? As expected, no process has yet been proposed by evolutionists to explain this elaborate design.

Did the sunflower become what amounts to a skillful

mathematician to organize its seeds in the most efficient way? How would this be possible through what is understood to be evolution's two principal mechanisms—mutation and natural selection?

Alternatively, doesn't it make more sense that the sunflower was carefully designed by a Great Mathematician who originated this precise mathematical formula as part of the flower's blueprint?

As Romans 1:20 declares: "For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse" (New English Translation).



THE SUNFLOWER'S AMAZING MOVEMENTS

Psalms 19:1 tells us: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork." And the sunflower is in tune with the heavens. One of its most astounding abilities is the way it can follow the sun across the sky for most of its existence. This is called heliotropism, or the tracking of the sun's path by a plant.

How can the sunflower do this? Amazingly, it has an organic hydraulic system that changes the pressure of the water in the neck of the stem, called the pulvinus, according to the angle of sunlight. So during the day, the stem of the sunflower uses its motor cells to elongate the side away from the sun, tilting leaves and immature flowers toward the sun, to end up facing west at sunset.

During nighttime, the other side of the stem expands, pushing the leaves and flowers back to the east where they will be facing the sun at dawn. Since leaves and immature flowers are green and actively carrying out photosynthesis, heliotropism provides them with 10 to 15 percent more sunlight than if they were in one fixed position. When the sunflower gets too heavy and its seeds mature, it settles in one position facing east.

Again, how could such an elaborate hydraulic system using motor cells have gradually evolved? If the water pressure was not just right at the neck of the stem, or if the rotating mechanism was not properly adjusted in the motor cells, the plant would not gain any benefit from it. Yet all of these mechanisms had to be fully assembled for them to work properly—in the first generation! No gradual process would get it done.

MOBILE LIGHT SENSORS

For the sunflower to rotate toward the sun as it does, it needs finely tuned light sensors that not only determine which direction the sun is moving across the sky, but also the time of day and the season. In fact, the light sensors are so sophisticated that they can distinguish between the solar rays

and shadows, thus sending the right signals to the plant for it to turn correctly.

These light sensors in the plant organs can also determine how long the day is, how much light is available, and the direction from which the light shines. Included in the complex system is a molecular clock that automatically adjusts to the sun's path and keeps track of the time of day and season. This is why sunflowers don't get confused when moving during the day or night.

Furthermore, the sunflower is also able to sense the quality of light and adjust its productivity accordingly. For instance, in low-light conditions, it can produce more photosynthetic pigments, whereas if the light is very bright and the levels of harmful

ultraviolet light increase, it can produce more protective pigments to act as a sunscreen.

Do you believe all these features could have simply evolved on their own? Or do you recognize that they came about by an all-wise and all-powerful Designer?

THE SUNFLOWER WAS DESIGNED TO BENEFIT MANKIND

The cheerful sunflower has yet more to smile about. Beyond its intricate seed head and ability to follow the sun, it has other marvelous features that benefit human beings.

The sunflower, one of the most economically important plants for mankind, can provide:

- Edible seeds
- Healthy oil for cooking
- Animal feed
- Paper
- Latex
- Environmental purification

Sunflower seeds are able to extract toxic ingredients such as lead, arsenic and uranium from soils. In the Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion in 1986, sunflowers were used to remove caesium-137 and strontium-90 from a nearby pond, and a similar campaign was mounted in response to the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan.

Jesus Christ told us to consider the flowers of the field as a picture of God's adornment and care—with the point being that His concern and care for us is far greater (Matthew 6:28-30; Luke 12:26-28).

So let's give thanks and glory to God, who with great intelligence and love made the amazingly complex and productive sunflower—to benefit us and to show us His majesty and ultimate care for us! [BT](#)

DIVE DEEPER



Has life on earth come through a random confluence of atoms and gradual adaptation, or is it the product of purposeful design? It's vital to know, and abundant evidence is available. To learn more, request or download our free study guide *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?*

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Q: Why do you teach that people don't go consciously to heaven or hell at death when the Bible says they do?

A: The Bible does *not* say they do, as commonly thought. While the *belief* that people remain aware and go immediately to heaven or hell at death is deeply ingrained in many religious traditions, a careful reading of Scripture tells a different story—one that offers a more coherent and hope-filled view of God's plan for humanity. Scripture reveals that the dead are not now conscious in an afterlife but instead enter a state described as “sleep,” awaiting a future resurrection when they will be judged and receive their reward or punishment (Job 14:12-15; Daniel 12:2-3; John 5:28-29).

The Bible consistently describes death as a state of unconsciousness. Ecclesiastes 9:5 plainly says, “For the living know that they will die; but the dead *know nothing*” (emphasis added throughout). A few verses later, it adds, “There is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (verse 10). Thus, death is a *complete cessation of conscious existence*. The dead are not alive and aware in heaven, hell or anywhere else—they are simply dead.

This fact is reinforced by the way both Jesus and the apostles speak of death. When Lazarus died, Jesus said plainly, “Our friend Lazarus *sleeps*, but I go that I may wake him up” (John 11:11). His disciples misunderstood, thinking Lazarus was merely resting. So Jesus clarified, “Lazarus is dead” (verse 14). This equivalence between death and sleep appears repeatedly throughout Scripture, particularly in Paul's writings. For example, 1 Thessalonians 4:14 speaks of “those who *sleep* in Jesus,” and 1 Corinthians 15 repeatedly refers to the dead as having “*fallen asleep*.” Just as sleep involves unconsciousness and the passing of time without awareness, so too does death.

Moreover, John 3:13 tells us, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven”—at least the latter part of this verse having been written by John after Jesus returned to heaven. If human beings went to heaven at death, this statement would be untrue. Even King David, “a man after God's own heart,” is said to be dead and buried, and “David *did not* ascend into the heavens” (Acts 2:29, 34). Hebrews 11, which recounts the faith of numerous righteous men and women, concludes by saying that “all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, *did not receive the promise*” (Hebrews 11:39). They await a future resurrection.

The resurrection is central to the biblical hope of eternal life. The consistent teaching of Scripture is that the dead will rise at the return of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, often called the “resurrection chapter,” that Christ is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen

asleep” and that “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (verses 20–22). The dead are not made alive immediately at death, but will be resurrected in the future. Paul emphasizes that this resurrection will occur “at His coming” (verse 23). This is the moment when believers receive immortality—not before.

Likewise, the judgment of the wicked is not portrayed as something happening immediately after death. Revelation 20 describes a future time when the dead will be resurrected and judged “according to their works” (verse 12). Those whose names are not written in the Book of Life are cast into the lake of fire—called “the second death” (verse 14). The punishment of the wicked, then, is not eternal conscious torment *beginning* at death, but total destruction following a coming judgment. Malachi 4:1-3 says, “The day is coming, burning like an oven . . . [when] all who do wickedly will be stubble . . . They shall be ashes under the soles of your feet.”

Some point to Jesus' words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43—rendered in the New King James Version as “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise”—as proof of immediate reward after death. However, the original Greek manuscripts contained no punctuation, the placement of the comma after “you” being a later translation decision. It could just as well have been placed after “today,” yielding, “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise”—a promise made that day, not a statement about timing. Jesus did not go to heaven later that day but was buried in the earth for three days (Matthew 12:40), then telling Mary Magdalene after He rose from the grave, “I have *not yet* ascended to My Father” (John 20:17). He was not in Paradise the day He died, and neither was the thief.

Various other passages used to argue for instant afterlife following dying

should also be understood in light of what the rest of the Bible has to say on the matter.

Ultimately, the teaching that the dead go immediately to heaven or hell cannot be reconciled with the full testimony of Scripture. The biblical teaching presents death as temporary unconsciousness, and the future resurrection as the time when human destiny is realized. The fact is, the dead are not rejoicing or suffering in a disembodied afterlife anywhere, but are totally unaware, awaiting the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is the hope the Bible truly offers—resurrection to life in the age to come. **BT**

DIVE DEEPER



To learn much more about what God's Word has to say about what happens at death and the popular conceptions of future reward and punishment in the afterlife, be sure to request or download our free study guide *Heaven & Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?* Scan the code or visit ucg.org/nd25 to find it.



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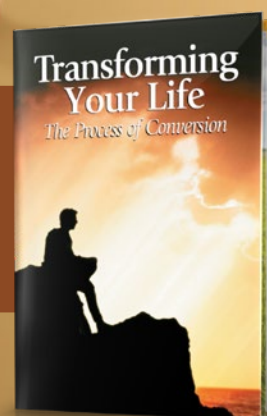
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