

The Good News

September-October 2015

A MAGAZINE OF UNDERSTANDING



GOD's message: THE TIME IS NOW

Mind-Bending Truths About Your Future **9** • What Is Your Ultimate Purpose in Life? **12**
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BEYOND
TODAY
UNDERSTANDING YOUR FUTURE

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What Is God's Message for Us?

When I was a young boy I'd sometimes go out into our backyard on warm nights and stare up into the starry expanse. I wondered what it all meant. How far away were those twinkling pinpoints of light in the night sky? What were those worlds like? Was anyone else out there? How did it all come to be? Was there really a God who made it all? What did this have to do with me?

Years later I learned that I wasn't the only curious stargazer who had looked up at the sparkling nightscape and wondered about my place and purpose in the universe. The biblical King David had beaten me to it by about 3,000 years!

In Psalm 8:2-3 he recorded his own thoughts as he reflected on

Considering how insignificant we are in comparison with the vastness and greatness of the universe, why does God care about us?

the brilliant night sky of his time: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, *what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?*" (New International Version, emphasis added throughout).

Those are good questions to ask our Creator. What is man? Considering how insignificant we are in comparison with the vastness and greatness of the universe, why do You care about us?

Indeed, we might wonder about that question now more than at any point in human history—after all, we live in a world in which our very survival is at stake!

A thousand years after David wrote his questions to God, the author of the book of Hebrews—now well aware of the staggering sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah—quoted David's questions and began providing the astounding answers!

"What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet."

Then he gets to the heart of our place in the universe, our reason for being here: "In putting everything under him [mankind], *God left nothing that is not subject to him*. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

"*In bringing many sons to glory*, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family*. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Hebrews 2:6-11, NIV).

What do these powerful phrases mean—"God left nothing that is not subject to [mankind] . . . in bringing many sons to glory . . . both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family . . . Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers"?

Nothing could be more critical for you to understand about your future! Nothing else explains why you are here and why you were born! Nothing else offers you the real meaning and purpose of your life!

God has a message for you: *The time is now to discover the answers and begin living His purpose for you*. Learn the answers and how to begin in this issue!

—Scott Ashley, Managing editor



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The Great Battle for GOD

In our confused and chaotic world, one of the great battlefields is whether God is real and if His Word has meaning for us today. Few grasp that the same instruction mankind rejects holds the answers to our problems and to the greatest questions of life. *by Darris McNeely*

Our world is going through many unsettling and confusing changes. The Middle East is in crisis with nations at war. Islamic extremists outdo themselves in brutality and threaten to overthrow both Europe and America.

Europe is in crisis. Russia steadily extends its influence and power as it modernizes its military forces. China is likewise expanding its power and pushing its influence and control over regions once protected by the United States.

America is being pushed back in its historic role as a global military, economic and political superpower—while within American culture we see the traditional roles and rules of marriage, family and sexual identity going through radical redefinition.

What does it all mean? Where is God in

all this? And what is He doing in today's world?

A time of change and upheaval

You and I can both look around and know something major is happening. Our world has turned a corner and entered a time of change and upheaval. I honestly think we are standing at a moment in history like that of one of God's prophets—Habakkuk, who looked around at his time and his world and wondered as he saw scenes that unnerved him.

He saw wars among the nations and individuals. He saw social inequity and evil on a scale that greatly upset him. Justice for the people had been perverted. Anger and violence were rampant. The world was in turmoil. His nation, Judah, a people who felt they were "one nation under God," was

threatened. Everything was changing, and for the worse.

As Habakkuk prayed about what he saw, God answered him by saying: "Look around at the nations; look and be amazed! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it" (Habakkuk 1:5, New Living Translation, 2013).

Those words from God match up to what we see today. Each day I watch and read the news about events around the world. I read three papers a day on my smartphone and catch news reports from around the world on the Internet. Each night I watch at least one nightly newscast. I'm a news junkie. Like you I see a dangerous world.

And I am troubled.

I'm troubled in the sense that I grieve for the people who suffer from injustice, war and random acts of evil. I'm troubled, but I don't despair. I haven't lost hope for mankind and our future.

Let me tell you why.

God's plan and purpose

I know that God has a purpose for human

life. All life exists here by the act of a Creator God who designed and planned and then brought it into existence by His divine will.

From one man God created all the nations of the earth. He has set these nations in their places and determined their rise and fall on the world stage. He is guiding history to His planned conclusion. The events of our world today—what we see in our headlines from the Middle East, Asia and Europe—are progressing according to His plan laid down before the foundations of the age.

When I study today's world from the overview laid out in the Bible, I find it amazingly accurate. I take hope in realizing that what's happening was foretold. I know that there is a God who stands watch over the nations of the earth and that His purpose is being brought to pass.

Notice what God tells us about His plan and purpose in Ephesians 1: "All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual

money or goods to help if we're able. At length, nations rebuild, and life goes on.

Then we look at the unimaginable suffering that war and human wrongdoing inflicts on other innocent victims. Nothing pains me more than to see refugees fleeing from armed soldiers storming into a city or country and uprooting whole populations.

By myself, I can't do anything about suffering on that scale. Yet I see it like you do. And frankly, it's enough to make people wonder about this life and whether there is a God who knows and cares about people. Religion tries to provide answers, but sometimes religion itself gets in the way by being a chief cause of strife among people. It's no wonder that through the ages people have given up on religion or God as they see the problems facing people in the world!

But look again at Ephesians 1:4: "Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes" (NLT).

God's enduring love for mankind has

Without proper recognition and understanding of the true God, the world will see strife and suffering without end. This is the crux of the problem in our world.

But this is a battle that has been fought for thousands of years, though it will not succeed. Ever since Adam and Eve hid themselves from the presence of God in the Garden in Eden, people have challenged God's guiding presence in the world He created.

The good news is that God's eternal desire to share His glory *will* be realized. No human or spiritual obstacle will prevent it. Notice again from Ephesians 1:10 what God says: "And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth" (NLT).

We are approaching that time. God's plan, His great eternal purpose to share eternal life, will be fulfilled. Everything in this physical creation will be brought under the authority of His Son, Jesus Christ. This is wonderfully encouraging and comforting. God is in control. Life is not just random. The suffering and uncertainty of life is not all there is.

Coming to know this begins with understanding God—who He is and what He is.

***This is God's purpose.* It is the single most important piece of information you should know. So why do you not hear this today?**

blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes . . .

"God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth . . . and he makes everything work out according to his plan" (verses 3-11, NLT).

What's the purpose?

I read this passage quite often to be reminded that history has a purpose. Yes, even the evil and suffering that people and nations have experienced are for a purpose! I look at the news and see the same pictures you see—things that make me sad and angry.

When natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes and famine strike without warning, it's hard to imagine what people must suffer through. Your heart goes out to them, and you know there's little you can do. Through relief efforts we might supply

been in place since before the world was created. The reason this planet exists is because God loved mankind and planned a setting where He could create beings in His image. And the reason for this? Because *God wants to share His glory with others in a family setting throughout eternity.* His means to accomplish this in Jesus Christ. Through His sacrifice and life we can be holy and without fault in God's eyes.

This is God's purpose. It is the single most important piece of information you should know. So why do you not hear this today?

The battle over God

Let's face squarely this fact. A battle is being fought today to remove God and the Bible from all public discussion. In spite of the truth that religion still thrives in America and other parts of the world, there is growing public and cultural pressure to erode the knowledge of God in the public mind. God is being systematically dismantled in modern popular culture.

There is a reason for the ongoing problems in our world. It's that *we do not acknowledge nor fully understand God.*

Mankind refuses to accept God

But the knowledge of God is not well received in many places today. Let's read what the apostle Paul said about this in his letter to the Romans:

"But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God" (Romans 1:18-20, NLT).

As Paul demonstrated, we human beings have every reason to believe that God exists. A detailed and long look at what science knows about the universe inspires awe and wonder and realization that it could not exist apart from special creation by the great mind and act of God. Many scientists admit this obvious truth when they look at the heavens and see the immense scope and design of creation.

Yet atheism continues to grow in numbers and influence. In our day, like that of Paul, people will go to great lengths to deny God.



“Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles” (verses 21-23, NLT).

Here the Bible shows mankind’s obstinate refusal to worship God in truth. Idolatry in the ancient world took the form of stone, clay and wooden idols that could neither see, hear nor speak. Our modern world has idols of different forms, not the least of which is man himself. We worship ourselves, our powers, intellect and abilities more than we do God.

Reaping what we have sown

Paul continues: “So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other’s bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie” (verses 24-25, NLT).

One key truth of the Bible is that God has given this world over to its own ends. He allows human beings to go their own way in religion, government, philosophy and culture and to choose from both the good and evil fruits of physical existence.

This is why we have seen the huge swings in human progress through the ages. Today we have created a marvelous global world with the greatest achievements of science and technology. We’ve made great strides in lengthening and improving the quality of life. We live in the most prosperous period of human history. Yet the condition of mankind’s spiritual dimension exposes flaws that could quickly escalate to the point that human existence would be threatened with extinction. Spiritual truth is sadly lacking.

“That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved” (verses 26-27, NLT).

The biblical definition of marriage and family is being challenged before our eyes. With each passing year, morality is rede-



**From one man God created all the nations of the earth.
He has set these nations in their places and determined
their rise and fall on the world stage.**

fined, and even people who profess faith in the teachings of the Bible are willing to accept behavior and lifestyles the Bible defines as sinful. In fact, “sin” has all but disappeared from the discussion of morality in the public realm!

When Scripture says “they traded the truth about God for a lie,” you must understand this impacts the deepest spiritual truth about God. *God is building a family.* Through the human creation God is reproducing Himself.

“Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful . . . They know God’s justice requires that those who do these

things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too” (verses 28-32, NLT).

This description of the first-century world of Rome is remarkably similar to that of ours today. What is unnerving to consider is this: Paul here describes a completely pagan world that did not know the God of the Bible—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We might expect such a world to develop, apart from Christianity or without the aid of revelation from the Bible.

But look at our modern “Christian” culture today. It mirrors in many ways the first-century pagan world of Rome! We still live in a pagan world like Rome, but with modern conveniences!

The “civilized” Western world is on a path desperately trying to push God out the door, along with the Bible. It is at the heart of what we see in today’s ongoing culture wars. The question comes down to whether

we will accept God into our knowledge and life and base our lives on His Word.

All-out assault on the family

What do we need to understand in all this? We look at our world and realize we can't do much about the large problems. But we *can* do something *about our own lives*. We can begin to get a handle on the challenges we face. We begin by understanding *the purpose for our lives*.

I mentioned earlier that the traditional view of marriage and family is being radically altered today. Marriage and family has been under attack for a long time on multiple fronts.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s broke down cultural norms. The birth control pill allowed for immorality without consequences. Immorality led to rising rates of divorce. In the 1970s abortion became a legal right and fact of life.

The twin sins of immorality and divorce have had a devastating impact on marriage. Long before the rising tide of same-sex marriage of recent years, the family as God intended had been severely eroded.

All of this has served to hide from us the true purpose for our lives. Man is created in the image of God to become like God through a resurrection and change to a completely new existence—one of eternal life as divine spirit beings.

I know many of you feel you are a child of God and look on Him as a Father and desire a spiritual relationship with Him. Not to take anything away from your concept, but your Bible reveals much more about that than you have ever been told or thought!

When you look at what the Bible actually says about why you were born and why God has put mankind on this planet, it is *unbelievably astounding*. It opens your mind to another dimension of understanding that will utterly change your life!

This biblical truth is so amazing, and yet people who have read the Bible all their lives and try very hard to live by what it teaches don't fully grasp what it really says!

"You are gods"

Let's look at a few foundational thoughts from your Bible that show in unmistakable terms why you were born and the purpose and meaning of your life.

John 10 records an occasion when Jesus was talking with a group of Jews who thought they understood their own Scriptures. They accused Him of blasphemy and wanted to stone Him for claiming to

be the Son of God (verses 31-33).

Jesus challenged them in verses 34-36 by quoting from Psalm 82:6, which says, "You are gods"—applying to other human beings. He further told them to look at His works and believe that they might know that God was working in Him, in the flesh, on earth. Christ had come as the Word of God, and the Father worked in Him and He in the Father through a divine process that was opening the path of salvation for all humanity (John 10:36-38).

Here in this little-understood passage Jesus shows us the core truth of the salvation process and how we might have eternal life and live forever.

Jesus was the Son of God come in the flesh as the Son of Man to live a life of perfect righteousness. He came as the Lamb of God to die so that mankind might be redeemed from sin to God. And He came

You are created with the potential to become a divine child of God sharing in the glory Jesus Christ has through His resurrection. Your life today takes on greater meaning than you could ever imagine because of this truth!

to be resurrected back to spirit life at the right hand of God to show us the way to salvation and that you and I might have the hope of eternal life and live forever in the family of God.

By saying, "You are gods," Jesus was not making a light statement. It was profound. It is life-changing when you consider what it can do for your life today!

It means you and I can become a son of God. And to be a son of God means ultimately *a full, divine member of God's family—nothing less!*

"What is man that You are mindful of him?"

The book of Hebrews shows us more about what God is doing as a Heavenly Father. It tells us that He "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:2).

Jesus Christ's inheritance is far above the angelic realm. He has inherited all things and today sits at the right hand of God. Jesus was God and became flesh to become a Son of God that we might share that glory and honor with Him. Angels never had this distinction. Human beings are created for a different purpose—you *were created to inherit salvation*.

Hebrews 2:6 asks a key question of God:

"What is man that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You take care of him?"

The writer, here quoting from Psalm 8:4, is asking, "What is man?" Why should God have any concern or interest in this lump of physical existence called man?

Why would God be interested in your life or mine? Do you ever ask that question? Sure you have! You've wondered what this life is all about. You've likely asked if there really is a God and whether He knows you. We especially ask that in the dark moments of life—when we're frustrated or angry with the hand life has dealt us.

Hebrews 2:7 goes on to begin to answer the question, continuing to quote from Psalm 8: "You have made him [mankind] a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, and set him over the works of Your hands."

Mankind is created in the image of God,

which is different from angels. Human beings have been set over the earth. We are here to use this life to prepare for another greater life in God's family forever!

Hebrews 2:8 continues, "But now we do not yet see all things put under him . . ."

Just as Jesus Christ has inherited all things and sits as Lord and Master today, there stands before each of us the invitation to join Him in this inheritance.

Hebrews 2:10 continues, "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, *in bringing many sons to glory*, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through suffering."

Did you catch that? God is "*bringing many sons to glory*." Jesus Christ is the perfect captain of our salvation, and with His help we can be sons of God!

You are created with the potential to become a divine child of God sharing in the glory Jesus Christ has through His resurrection. Your life today takes on greater meaning than you could ever imagine because of this truth! Here is the purpose for your life. Here is the meaning of life. Here is the great mystery revealed!

"The whole family in heaven and earth"

We see this astounding truth confirmed in Ephesians 3:14-15, where Paul writes:

The Time Is Now

Jesus Christ came into Galilee preaching a powerful message: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). With this message and the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God was entering history and announcing in clear terms that the Kingdom was here in word and in the person of Jesus, king of that Kingdom.

God was inaugurating a new time in human experience. The message of the coming Kingdom of God, the Kingdom that would replace all earthly realms, was now being made known in the power of the Son of God, Jesus. Those who heard Christ’s message needed to receive a new mind and a new heart to fit that spiritual Kingdom.

The time is now for *you*. That same message given by Jesus Christ is before you. You have the opportunity to accept it and turn your life around. You can begin today to experience the life of the Kingdom. It will renew your life and invigorate you with meaning and purpose. The most important message you could hear is understanding why you were born. The truth of your life’s purpose will lift you out of the chaos and confusion we find in today’s world.

Look around at our world. You see the same conditions I see, and they should cause us deep concern. A recent Pew survey listed the conditions people were most concerned with. The top four were the surge of ISIS in the Middle East, Iran’s nuclear program, cyber-attacks on governments, on banks and on major companies, and the growing economic instability of nations. Territorial aggression by Russia and China were also significantly mentioned. These are all major problems that threaten global stability.

Not mentioned in this survey, but of critical importance, is America’s decline in influence and respect among nations. While the United States remains a major economic and military power, events of recent years have eroded an intangible factor the Bible calls “pride of power” (see Leviticus 26:19; Ezekiel 30:6). America’s power is based on moral integrity rooted in the foundation of God’s spiritual purpose and plan for humanity.

Spiritually speaking, America has lost its way before the Creator God,

and those who have eyes to see know that something is desperately wrong with its moral and spiritual compass. America’s moral and political decline reflect a rejection of God’s eternal laws governing all parts of life. God is not mocked. A day of judgment is coming. The time is now for America and the English-speaking nations to understand their foundations are cracked and could crumble.

The article “The Battle for God” discusses the prophet Habakkuk and his dialogue with God over the sins of his people. God shows the prophet that He is very much involved with the nations of that day and time. The international turmoil of that ancient period was accomplishing God’s purpose and plan. It was not occurring in a vacuum.

After time to consider God’s plan to rearrange the primacy of the nations, Habakkuk describes God standing among the nations and taking their measure. He is bringing a judgment on nations that have known His laws and moral teachings and turned their back on them. He is bringing judgment on those who have not kept God in their knowledge (Habakkuk 2:6, 12).

God’s Kingdom is coming, and you can prepare your life in advance. You can experience today the blessings and peace of that coming age!

The time is now for you to discern this time, this age and period in which we live, and understand what God is

doing among the nations. His purpose is being fulfilled according to plan, His Kingdom is coming, and you can prepare your life in advance. You can experience today the blessings and peace of that coming age!

The time is *now* for you to examine your faith and *begin to live it*. You may be concerned about the condition of today’s world—as we all should be—but you don’t have to live with fear and confusion about what will happen. You can live by faith, the living faith of God the Father and Jesus Christ. That true faith will help you live with confidence that God exists and can be involved in your life!

The choice is before you. Carefully read and consider what God offers you as described in the articles in this issue of *The Good News*. The message Jesus Christ preached about His coming Kingdom is always relevant and always at hand to give understanding and hope. Now is the time for you to seize this coming Kingdom and let it change your life!

“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named . . .”

The Father and the Son are a *family*, and they are bringing other children of God to glory, to share in that family name and existence. That is why the family—the biblical definition of family consisting of one man and one woman, bearing children and raising them to adulthood in a loving, nurturing family—is so important to mankind and the preservation and progress of human civilization.

To alter this design and purpose by any means—immorality, divorce, same-sex marriage or any other human design—hides from mankind the purpose and intent of human life. That is why we see so much social and cultural distress today. That is why life, even your life, can seem chaotic and confusing!

But you can do something about your

life. You can find out more, and you can begin to live your life according to God’s will and intent and begin to reap the blessings.

If you really want to understand why the nations are in turmoil and why the news headlines report so much unrest, injustice and evil, then you must get this picture in your mind. *God is measuring the nations and the people of the earth, and we are coming up short.*

We are living in a time of history when major events and trends are reshaping the world prior to a day when God will intervene to reveal to the world the fullness of His glory and His plan!

This is a time for you to consider your life in relation to the great God and His eternal plan of redemption for this world. It is time for each of us to consider our lives before the presence of God. It is a time to align ourselves with God—for you to let Him be the God of your life in a time of judgment.

God will bring judgment to this world. When He does, the great battle for God will be resolved. God will win and His truth will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea!

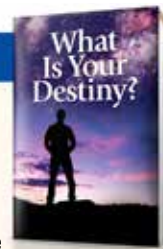
God speed that day, and may He help you better understand His purpose for your life! **GN**

Learn More

Many more biblical passages reveal the astounding truth that God is a family and that He wants you to be part of that family forever! But what will that be like? And how can you become part of that divine family? Where do you start? Be sure to request or download our free study guide *What Is Your Destiny?* today!

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Three Mind-Bending Truths About Your Future

Your world can be a chaotic and confusing place, at times making you feel like a fish out of water. How do you begin to deal with the problems? *by Steve Myers*

How many troubling, unresolved issues do you have in your life? We all have something we're dealing with. It could be loved ones struggling with unemployment, addictions and broken relationships. We've learned that issues go unresolved.

What's going to happen in life? That kind of stress and pressure around us can steal our hope and joy. If ever there were a time to be reminded of the consequences, it's now. There's a terrible cost to sin and wrong living.

Even though life's problems can seem overwhelming, the Bible's message about your future will bring life's troubles, sufferings, joys and experiences into beautiful clarity.

In particular, there are three absolutely *mind-bending truths* the Bible has to teach us about what God has in store for us. When you begin to truly believe these three things, God can begin to change your life for the better.

Like a fish out of water

Think about it for a moment: Have you ever felt like a fish out of water?

Living in this world without knowing God's plan is like being a fish out of water.

When my kids were little I liked to take them fishing. It wasn't serious fishing—just for fun, off the stream bank. On one “expedition” I remember catching quite a few small perch. Of course the kids couldn't just catch and release them. They wanted to take them home for supper! So I put them in a live-well basket to keep them until we were ready to go.

As we were fishing, my son got distracted. I looked over, and there he was trying to play with a fish on the shore. Of

We grabbed that little fish and put him back in the water, and, sure enough, the little fish's desperation was gone. Have *you* ever felt like a fish out of water?

course it was flopping and jumping all around. I came over and asked my son what was going on. He said he was teaching the fish to like it on the shore.

I told him it would be tough convincing the fish of that. In his little-boy wisdom, he reasoned that it would be good if the fish learned to like the land, as it would be easier to play with him.

I thought for a moment on how to help

him understand. “We've got to put it back because it can't be what it's been created to be when it's out of the water.”

So we grabbed that little fish and put him back in the water, and, sure enough, the little fish's desperation was gone, it seemed to come to life, and it swam and swam. We couldn't help but smile.

I think my son realized then that no matter how long the fish flopped on the beach, it would never adjust to land. It would never fit in on the shore and couldn't be satisfied or happy. Even if the fish tried to believe it could adapt and learn to like it, it never could succeed. In fact, it would eventually die.

Time for a change of perspective

Here's the question: Do *you* feel like a

fish out of water?

Facing all the challenges of life—your problems, your jobs, your dissatisfaction and, yes, even your religion—can make you feel like a fish out of water.

Is it possible that God is telling you that you *are* a fish out of water in this world? In fact, yes!

You were created for a great purpose. You don't have to be like that fish. If it

seems like you're flopping and wiggling your way through life, it's time for a change. Don't let the world around you try to convince you to just blend or fit in and conform to its ways.

It's tough to be what you've been created to be when you're a fish out of water—not knowing your ultimate purpose.

That's why you need a more satisfying stream. This world is making you a fish out of water. It's a shoreline of disaster that wants to mold and shape us into something God did not intend.

But when you can finally answer the question "What's the point?" it changes everything. And these three mind-bending truths about your future will answer that all-important question.

Mind-bending truth #1— God is an extraordinary family

All Christians realize that God wants a close relationship with us. What you maybe haven't realized is just how close. You have a truly loving *Father*—a God who wants the absolute best for you. Notice how much He wants for us: "It has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2, emphasis added throughout). What exactly does that mean?

From the beginning God's purpose was to create an extraordinary family: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . . ' So God created man in His own image" (Genesis 1:26-27). There is no doubt that men and women are created in God's image and likeness. Why? *To be like Him*.

There's another important detail in that verse: "Then God said, 'Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness.'" There's *more than one* individual here. Now that's a mind-bender!

Did you realize that from beginning there were *two* divine Beings? There's God the Father and One the New Testament identifies as God the Word (John 1:1). The Gospel of John reveals that God the Word became Jesus Christ.

From the very beginning we see that the word "God" used in this passage is not just referring to the Father. In essence it's like a family name. Have you ever thought about the God family? God is a divine family made up of *more than one individual*—with God the Father and Jesus Christ both existing as God.

And note the relationship of Father and

Son. This points to the extraordinary *family* They have. It's all about family!

Mind-bending truth #2— God is producing spiritual children

As incredible as it may seem, God wants you and me to be part of His divine family in immortal glory—with us as His very own children!

Now that's a mind-bender! You may have been taught that you die and go as an immortal soul to heaven. That's a myth. If you'll take the challenge and check it out, you'll find that it's not what the Bible teaches.

But you can be sure about God's plan for you. His plan is about family—God is producing spiritual children. In a nutshell, your incredible potential is to be born into God's own family. You'll be *His child*, *having His attitude*, *His perspective*, *His character*, *His own divine nature*.



God gave us the human family as a representation of what He is doing spiritually. When you're born into a physical family, you're like your father—the same kind of being.

Think of it this way. We've all seen SUVs with the stick figure family decals. The characters represent dad, mom, son, daughter. Now you can get these little figures showing their interests or hobbies. So you have the soccer player daughter or the golfing dad, the football son, business mom.

When you're in the family, you're on the car window.

I recently noticed a neighbor's car had a change on the rear window. When their new little addition was born, sure enough, there was a little stick figure baby, with diapers and a stroller, added to the back window.

Here's the point: God gave us the human family as a representation of what He is doing spiritually. When you're born into a

physical family you're like your father.

When you're born into the God family, *you'll be like God*.

Looking at the car window, you can tell that the family goes together. The little ones aren't pets or some other kind of being—they are human beings just like mom and dad.

So for a moment, let's imagine looking at what God's car window might look like. The Bible reflects His window. It started at creation. Remember the story? God created night and day, sky and sea, land and plants, and stars and planets, sea creatures and animals too.

But have you ever noticed what God said as He created plants and animals? Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind; and it was so" (Genesis 1:24).

How did they reproduce? It says it was "each according to its kind." So lions produce lions and giraffes produce giraffes and flowers produce flowers and dogs produce dogs.

But here's the mind-bending truth: It's no different for mankind. After what "kind" were we created? People were created according to the "God kind"—not just to be physical beings. That's why God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." Consider that the first man Adam later "begot a son in his own likeness, after his image" (Genesis 5:3).

Literal sons and daughters of God

So God's purpose goes far beyond the

creation of mortal, physical, perishable human beings. He wants us to ultimately be a part of His spiritual family. In His Kingdom, we are to be like God—spirit members of His family.

If you think of it in terms of God's car window, it would have God the Father (the head of the family) and Jesus Christ—and our potential is be right there on the window too, a part of the divine family! We would not be the cat or the dog at the end of the line. We'd be full-fledged family members!

No wonder God also tells us, "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18). And *He really means it*. The Father wants us to be His full children, to transform us into the very kind of beings that He and Christ now are!

That family relationship—becoming children of God the Father—is the heart and core of God's incredible plan for mankind and for you! God wants to bring you into His eternal family forever as one of His offspring.

Have you ever noticed this mind-boggling passage before? God says this to us: "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High'" (Psalm 82:6).

God is making an amazing point from the fact that human children are like their human parents and like their brothers and sisters. They're all the same kind of beings—human beings. Now, what will God's children be like? God's children will be like the Father and like Jesus Christ their divine Brother. Jesus Christ is God the Son and is like God the Father—with the same kind of glory and power.

Can you grasp it? Scripture tells us that God's other children, resurrected and glorified, will be like the Father and Christ! That's talking about *us*. We will be the same kind of beings that the Father and Jesus are—divine beings!

If it weren't there in black and white, you might say that it's farfetched. But it's not. God is opening your eyes to truly see. Take note of all the biblical passages that prove it to be true. Here's another: "God is the One who made all things, and all things are for his glory. He wanted to have many children share his glory . . . Jesus, who makes people holy, and those who are made holy *are from the same family*. So he is not ashamed to call them his *brothers and sisters*" (Hebrews 2:10, New Century Version).

Did you catch the wording? What does

God want? He wants *many children to share His glory*. He wants many children who are made holy, *of the same family*—brothers and sisters of Christ. Isn't that the kind of family that you've always wanted? That's the ultimate Family!

This awesome future is the whole purpose and reason that God made mankind. It is why we were born. It's why we exist! Now to our third mind bending truth.

Mind-bending truth #3— Not just a little bit of God

We've established that the destiny of Christians is to be God's literal sons and daughters. But what does that really mean? Will we be just a little bit like God? Notice how the apostle Paul explains it. He says he was given the job to "reveal for all people what is the fellowship of the mystery . . . according to the eternal purpose" (Ephesians 3:9-11, Modern English Version).

Paul was writing about God's amazing purpose for you. God's plan reveals His awesome commitment to you. Paul says that the plan is so amazing and God's purpose so incredible that it causes Paul to worship: "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named . . . and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (verses 14-19, MEV).

What does that mean? Let's break it down. If you're named after God, what's your new family's last name? It would have to be God, right? And the Bible says Christians are named after God—meaning they have to be a full-fledged member of God's family.

And here's something really incredible: Your ultimate purpose is to be filled with all the fullness of God. What would you be in that case? You'd have to be a divine spirit being *like God*—glorified in His eternal family!

So this mind-bending part of the plan is that we won't be just a little bit of God—we won't be sort of, kind of, somewhat like God. The Holy Scripture—the very Word of God Himself (2 Timothy 3:16)—reveals that we will be filled with all the fullness of God. Not just a little bit, but with *all* the fullness of God.

The incredible reality is that God is building His family. In the Kingdom of God you can become *a literal son or daughter*. Imagine it: being like God—a full member of His spiritual family. No

wonder God is called our Father. He's fathering His own spiritual children.

That's why the apostle Peter writes, "He has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, so that through these things you might become partakers of the divine nature and escape the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:4).

Did you catch that priceless promise? We can be given *God's divine nature*. The Father and Christ will be at the top of the family forever, reigning supreme. We can be spirit-born members of His family. That's the mind-bending purpose for which you were created. It's the incredible truth as to why you and I were born! It is the ultimate potential destiny of all mankind. Your future can't get any better than that!

Grab hold of your amazing destiny today

God has an incredible purpose for your life. He doesn't want you to feel like a fish out of water. Your destiny, the reason you were born, is to become *an immortal member of God's family*.

The mind-bending reality is that God is a family. The Father and Jesus Christ will head up the family of potentially billions of divine children forever.

Today, we may be ordinary people, but we have an extraordinary heavenly Father. He is creating children with His own divine nature—His holy, righteous character—and giving us His family name.

So never underestimate the value of your life. You were born to become one of God's children. You were born to receive His nature and eternal life in His Kingdom.

This amazing truth should change your thinking and perceptions and the way you live your life today.

You were born to become an immortal child of God in His divine family forever. So keep looking to His Word to learn more of His plan for you! **GN**

Learn More

The Kingdom of God is a central, recurring theme of the Bible. And it has everything to do with your future! You need to understand God's incredible plan and purpose for you. Download or request your free copy of *The Gospel of the Kingdom* today!



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WHAT IS YOUR Ultimate Purpose IN LIFE?

Many things can get you down—trials and difficulties that get in the way of a vibrant life. But all that begins to fade away when you discover your ultimate purpose in life! **by Gary Petty**

I was with a group of friends recently who were discussing how stressed they were by the news. There was yet another Christian beheaded by ISIS militants. More politicians who offer no real solutions. Rampant health care issues. Then there are constant money worries—not to mention increasing violence, racism and the bizarre fixation people have with gender identity.

This stress is compounded by the speed of electronic information, advances in technology and constant changes in social norms. It's unbelievable how many people are willing to change the definition of marriage that has been the bedrock of the Christian family for thousands of years.

The result is that many people, no matter their age or economic status, live in a “personal bubble.” We try to stay in this bubble by concentrating on our own immediate pursuit of happiness. We can then pretend

that all the chaos and changes are outside the bubble and “don’t really affect me.”

Then reality strikes. Bad news, or some negative personal problem, breaks that bubble and we are overwhelmed with anxiety, fear and a sense that there is no meaning to life.

God doesn’t want you to live that way! He has something better for you.

I want to share with you a remarkable truth that few people know. It’s a truth that can change *everything* in your life. I’d like to help you discover your ultimate purpose in life.

The purpose of life is not just to be happy

Your life is worth more than you ever imagined! You have a very specific purpose in the universe.

The problem is discovering that purpose. It goes against the social programming you and I have experienced since childhood. We have been programmed to believe that the ultimate purpose in life is the pursuit of happiness.

I’m not saying that happiness is bad. We all want to be happy. Happiness is a gift from God.

But something happens to us when we believe that happiness is the only purpose in life. One result is that when we face job issues, health problems, conflicts in relationships, or when we watch the latest news story about terrorism, the fleeting feelings of happiness dissolve and we mentally and emotionally break down.

Albert Einstein said, “A life directed chiefly towards the fulfillment of personal desires will sooner or later always leads to bitter disappointment” (Letter to T. Lee, Jan. 16, 1954).

What happens when the bubble of happiness is burst by your boyfriend dumping you? What happens when you lose your job? What happens to happiness when you find out your best friend has cancer?

These kinds of difficult experiences are out of our control. The happiness bubble is broken, and what’s left is stress, grief and sadness.

But living a life with your ultimate purpose in mind gives you a chance to live beyond your own limitations—to love, sacrifice and give to others. Finding a life of meaning, of purpose, is the secret to dealing

with the stress and anxiety and hopelessness that can engulf our everyday lives.

So where do you go to discover your personal purpose? The answer isn't found in an aptitude test, college class or discovering your inner "god" or "goddess."

If there is a purpose to this life, we must find the answer with the *Creator* of life.

God reveals our ultimate purpose in the Bible

The Bible is *the story of everything*. It's about creation—and the Creator who made it all. It's about God's desire for children of His own—and humanity's desire to be independent from our Creator. It's the story of how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is working to bring us back to the Creator's family.

The Bible is about how *you personally* have a very specific purpose in the universe.

The apostle John wrote about that purpose: "Behold what manner of love the

free will is that we all make bad choices. You and I live in a world where billions of people make wrong choices every day.

The only way we can ever get out of this mess is to return to our Creator and discover our original purpose. That purpose is to be *His children*.

We can see this in his second point: "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that *when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*"

At the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, it states that human beings were made in the image of God. Thousands of years later John wrote that those who respond to God's call are offered a future in which we will be "like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

John wrote that we don't know exactly what we'll be like in this promised future, but *we will like God*, just as human children are like their human parents—the same kind of beings. The reason we don't know exactly what we'll be like is that our human minds cannot fully comprehend the infinite God. But again, He intends for us to be just like Him!

Can you begin to wrap your mind around your ultimate purpose?

The third point of this passage gives daily direction to this awesome purpose: "And everyone who has this hope in Him *purifies himself*, just as

the children of God. What does that mean?

Yes, God is offering you a future, but He is also offering you a fulfilling, meaningful life *right now*. You can have a *relationship* with God as your Father every day of your life.

God wants to have a personal, one-on-one relationship with you. The ultimate meaning in this life is about your relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. It's about being God's child *now* while looking forward to the promised future.

Regrettably, this good news gets muddled in much Christian preaching today. All too often Christian pulpits preach a health-and-wealth gospel, a cheap grace, a message of "Jesus loves you just the way you are" that leaves people remaining just the way they are and not becoming more like Jesus.

Remember what God inspired Jeremiah to write: "Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:12-13).

You must stop seeking your own purpose by attempting to stay in a bubble of pursuing your self-determined purpose and seek God's purpose with all of your heart.

Authentic Christianity isn't a tepid, half-hearted, law-ignoring, part-time, warm religious feeling. Authentic Christianity is about being restored to your original purpose. It's about transformation. It's about giving up *everything* to receive everything God will give you (see Luke 14:33; Revelation 21:7).

Authentic Christianity is about being restored to your original and ultimate purpose. It's about transformation.

Authentic Christianity is about breaking out of the natural human bubble of self-centeredness. It's about the dynamic force of God in your life, changing you, restoring you to your original purpose, facing life's difficulties with faith and hope. It's about finding happiness through loving others.

Understanding God as a family

When you accept this purpose, God truly becomes your Father. I've talked with many people over the years who have a difficult time relating to God as a Father because of abuse they experienced or the absence of their physical father. It may take some serious prayer and Bible study time—time contemplating how God is the perfect Father—before you can really come to experience Him as Father.

There is another relationship that can



The only way we can ever get out of this mess is to return to our Creator and discover our original purpose.

Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God . . . Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:1-3).

Let's look at three remarkable statements the apostle John makes in these verses.

First: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, *that we should be called children of God!*"

God created each of us for a reason. He gave each of us free will. The problem with

He is pure." This means that to fulfill God's purpose you must do something. We'll discuss this point a little later.

Our ultimate purpose is that God created human beings in His image because He wants children to live with Him forever! Not as pets. Not as angels. But as beings who are made in His image—*immortal beings who are like Him*.

This purpose involves an awesome, unbelievable future. It also involves your life right now.

Living your ultimate purpose starts today

The apostle John wrote that we are *now*

help you in understanding how you can be a child in God's family. It's explained in the New Testament book of Hebrews:

"Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself [Jesus Christ] likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Jesus Christ came to the earth to become like "the children"—meaning like you and me—to share in our experience as flesh and blood so that He can release us from death and give us eternal life.

The Bible reveals Jesus in His many roles—Messiah, Savior, Lord, Master, High Priest—and here as our Brother.

Do you ever feel too overwhelmed to approach the awesome God, who may seem so far, so great, so perfect, that you think, "Why would He even listen to me?" Remember that you have a Brother who sits at the right hand of the Father who helps bring you to Him.

God is an incredible family—and your Father and your Elder Brother are dedicated to helping you be a part of it.

Your part to play

If you want God's purpose for your life to become *your* purpose, then there is something you must do.

Your ultimate purpose has been given to you by your Creator. Nobody can make you accept that purpose. Many people, when they hear this message, will simply walk away from it.

But if you want God's purpose for you, what should you do?

The apostle Paul answered that very question in his letter to the Church in Ephesus: "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children" (Ephesians 5:1).

There was no part-time or convenient Christianity for Paul. He taught that true Christianity is nothing less than trying to walk like our

Father, act like our Father and think like our Father—to be "imitators" of our Father.

When I was a young teenager I walked into a hardware store in a small town and a man came up to me and asked, "You're Grover Petty's grandson, aren't you?" When I said yes, he proceeded to tell me how I looked like my grandfather.

The ultimate compliment anyone can give you is for someone to say: "You're a Christian, aren't you? I could tell—you act a lot like your Father."

If you want God's purpose in your life then your Christianity must be more than singing a few praises and throwing some money into the offering plate. Again, Paul said that we are to be "imitators of God as dear children." You must see yourself as someone whom God sees as a dear, precious, beloved child—a child who desires to be like his Father.

Paul then writes: "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma" (verse 2).

There are two things needed for a person to be a true child of God. First, you must accept that because of your bad choices and corrupt human nature, you are a distorted image of God. You need God's forgiveness, and that forgiveness is offered by God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul continues: "But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (verses 3-5).

What is Paul actually saying?

With free will, any of us has the ability to refuse God's offer and live for our own self-centered purpose. There's a terrible price

for refusing God's purpose—it is God's rejection of your being part of His family.

Listen to verses 6-8: "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light."

But how can any of us actually imitate God? How can we walk as children of light? We're too weak, too limited, too confused. It's not possible to be an imitator of God on your own intelligence, power or spiritual insight.

Earlier I showed that the first step in having God fulfill His purpose is to seek Him with all of your heart. You must accept that you need Him and that you are a distorted image of God. It is then that you can submit to the work of Jesus Christ as your divine Brother.

The next step is receiving power from God to have His purpose fulfilled in your life.

The apostle Peter spoke to a large crowd and told them about the work God is doing through Jesus Christ. When many people were moved to seek God with their hearts, Peter told them to repent, be baptized and receive the indwelling of God's Spirit (Acts 2:38).

If you don't know what it means to repent or have never been baptized, you need to read the Gospels.

Your life is worth more than you ever imagined! You have a very specific purpose in the universe. But you have a choice in that. The truth is that you don't have to respond to God's purpose. You can just keep going on the way you have been and ignore God's calling to be His child.

But be warned: Jesus told a parable about a man who invited people to a big banquet. The man spared no expense in preparing something that would be the absolute best for his guests. But when the man sent his servant to invite the guests, one by one they gave excuses for not being able to attend.

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The excuses seemed like good reasons to the people involved: “I need to take care of my property.” “I have a lot of work to get done.” “I just got married and need to spend more time with my wife.”

What the man was offering his guests was much more wonderful than what they wanted for their lives, but they lived in their little bubbles, selfishly pursuing happiness. They missed out. The host eventually rejected those whom he invited and asked others to attend his banquet instead.

God is offering you His best. He wants you to realize His ultimate purpose for you—to live as His child now and to be changed into His spiritual image forever in His Kingdom. He wants you to make *His* purpose *your* purpose.

Begin to realize your ultimate purpose now!

Will you seize God’s gift? Will you accept the invitation? Or will you find an excuse to pass it by?

In the light of what God is offering you, I have one simple question for you to answer: Are you willing to *give up everything* to *receive everything* God wants for you? God wants to give you a meaningful, fulfilling life. He wants to help you when you face difficult times. He wants you to have a more meaningful relationship with Him as your Father. If not you—who? If not now—when?

You and I were born to receive incredible spiritual *power* from God. It’s the power to overcome the suffering and problems of this life and be imitators of God.

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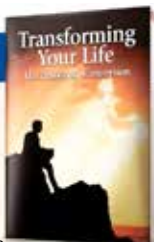
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Is Heaven Coming to Earth?

It may come as a shock, but people don't go to heaven as disembodied souls when they die. In fact, what the Bible shows us about our ultimate future is so much more amazing than most of us have ever dreamed! **by Gary Petty**

Have you ever wondered what it's like in heaven? People ask questions about heaven all the time. Will I know my loved ones when I get there? Will my dog go to heaven? Why can't my relatives who are in heaven communicate with me?

If you ask a child where heaven is, the answer will probably be, "That's where God lives."

And most people assume that the Bible says that when you die your immortal soul goes to heaven. Compare that belief with this truth of the Bible: "*No one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven" (John 3:13, emphasis added throughout)—this referring to Jesus Christ alone.

Sound surprising? Shocking maybe? It gets even more surprising: Did you know that the book of Revelation says that heaven is coming to earth?

What exactly does that mean? Keep reading!

The promise of resurrection

Most likely, you've been taught all your life that when you die, you as a conscious

soul will go directly to heaven.

So what's it like to go to heaven?

Well I suppose one of the first things you would expect to find in heaven are all the great men and women of the Bible, like Abraham—the father of the faithful—or Moses, or John the Baptist, or Mary the mother of Jesus.

But remember what the Bible says: Other than Jesus, *no one has ascended to heaven*. Even after Jesus' resurrection we're told that Israel's King David *has not* ascended to heaven (Acts 2:29, 34).

So what happened to him and all the great men and women of faith throughout history? When they died where did they go?

In one sense, *nowhere*. They went into death—a state of unconsciousness, having no awareness or understanding (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). The Bible compares death to sleep (Job 14:12; Daniel 12:2; Acts 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 20; 2 Peter 3:4).

On the other hand, there is a spirit in man that imparts intellect to the human brain (Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11). And this spirit does return to God in heaven at death (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 12:22-23). But as the previously cited scriptures show, the

human spirit does not have consciousness apart from the body. The spirits of the dead must be placed into renewed, enlivened bodies for consciousness to be restored.

Again and again the Bible refers to future *resurrection from the grave* as the hope of the dead.

Look at what Jesus said: "For I have come down from heaven not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and *I will raise him up at the last day*" (John 6:38-40).

Now what does Jesus mean when He says that He will raise someone up at the last day?

Jesus' resurrection foundational to the resurrection of others

The resurrection of Jesus as the Son of God is absolutely essential to the Christian faith. A central point of the Christian religion is the belief that Jesus rose from the grave, was seen by His disciples and ascended back to heaven to the throne of God. In fact, Scripture demands that Christians accept that Jesus died and then experienced a bodily resurrection after three days and three nights.

Jesus promises to return to earth for His

disciples both living and dead. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of God's promise to *resurrect His followers* from the dead. As the apostle Paul writes: "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

The resurrection of God's followers occurs during the "last days," when Jesus will return to earth to establish God's Kingdom over all of humanity.

This resurrection won't be to a formless existence as a disembodied spirit. It's a promise of a bodily resurrection to a life of eternal energy, creativity and goodness as a child of God. This future is more spectacular than the view of heaven as a place of eternal repose without meaning or personal purpose.

Three "heavens" in the Bible

The heaven we're talking about here is

It can also refer to what we call outer space—the realm of the moon, the planets, the galaxies—the physical universe (Exodus 32:13). This is the second heaven.

There are also references to heaven as the throne of God. The apostle Paul wrote about a vision of paradise that he calls the "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). This "third heaven" is a reference to the incredible realm where God exists in all of His majesty and power.

The third heaven is where most Christians believe they will go consciously to immediately after they die. Again, however, the Bible says no one has ascended into heaven except Jesus. Yet as mentioned at the outset, heaven is coming to earth.

Third heaven the home of spirit exclusively

Before exploring that further, let's try to get a little bit of an idea of what the third heaven is like. The apostle John recorded

cious stones when light shines through them and reflects off of their many facets. John was looking at a shining Being he could only describe as shining the way that light reflects off the facets of precious stones!

He continues: "And there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads" (verses 3-4). John saw God surrounded by 24 powerful spirit beings.

"And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices . . . Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around His throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back" (verses 5-6).

The third heaven. Paradise. The throne of God. It's a spirit dimension so magnificent, so majestic, that it is beyond human comprehension! I can't imagine what John actually saw. It's a place reserved for spirit beings only.

So what does it mean that God is bringing His dwelling place to earth?

The return of Christ in power and glory

God's plan to bring His throne—the "third heaven"—to earth is in two stages. These stages are revealed in the last chapters of the book of Revelation.

Revelation 19 describes Christ's second coming when He returns in power and glory.

John writes: "Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war" (Revelation 19:11). This is Jesus Christ, and He is not coming back in a weak, limited human form. He is coming back in all the glory of God. He is coming to bring God's Kingdom to earth. It's a great irony that the Prince of Peace, in order to bring happiness and peace to the world, has to fight the very beings He created—because they don't want to submit to His rule!

John writes, "His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns" (verse 12). This is the description of Jesus Christ in glory in the third heaven—and how He will be when He returns to earth.

"He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, fol-



The first and second heavens are places we can see and explore. The third heaven is the realm where God exists in all his majesty and great power.

what the Bible calls the "third heaven." What does that mean?

A word study of "heaven" in the Bible reveals that some uses of the word are actually plural—"heavens." That's because in the Bible the term heaven can refer to *different places*.

In Scripture, heaven can refer to our planet's atmosphere where we see the "birds of heaven" or where the "windows of heaven" open to bring rain (Genesis 7:11). Nearest in proximity to us, this is the first heaven.

visions he received of heaven and the future in the book of Revelation.

He writes, "Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne" (Revelation 4:2). This is that third heaven Paul was also given a vision of. It's the place where God lives in awesome majesty and glory.

John further writes, "And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance" (verse 3).

What does this mean? Think about pre-

lowed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (verses 12-15).

Jesus Christ is coming back to a rebellious humanity. But He is also coming back to *save* humanity. It’s at this time when Jesus fulfills His promise to His followers that they will be “raised up” or resurrected.

A resurrection here on earth

It’s shocking to most people to find out that a person doesn’t immediately go consciously to heaven when he or she dies. As we’ve seen, those who die are unconscious and unaware of the passing of time. When a Christian dies, his or her next conscious moment is the resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus returns, where will He be?

Revelation 20 explains how Christ will set up His Kingdom on earth for 1,000 years. Then what will Jesus’ followers be doing on earth for the 1,000 years that they’ll be with Him?

How about occupying thrones? John wrote about those who are resurrected at Christ’s return: “And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4).

To be a Christian today is to anticipate being with Christ in the future on earth, serving Him in saving humanity. Incredible, isn’t it? Christ will establish a new one-world government and one-world religion of worshipping the one true God. That may not be a popular idea, but that’s what the Bible says Jesus is going to do. And He is going to change everything. He is going to heal the environment, erase poverty, create a new educational system, institute an economy that is fair for everyone, and offer salvation to a broken and decimated humanity.

God is calling those who want to participate in this future! To receive that future you must accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. But more than that you must also accept Him as your Lord, Master and coming King. That must happen in your life *now*. And you must be daily living by the values and teachings of His Kingdom!

What will keep you from this future? Your desire for money and status? Your boyfriend or girlfriend? Your anxieties? How about your unwillingness to repent and give your life totally to your Creator?

I wrote at the beginning that heaven is coming to earth. Christ is going to rule on

earth for 1,000 years. But that doesn’t mean that the third heaven—God’s dwelling place—will be on earth yet. So when does God’s throne come to earth?

God’s dwelling place with man

The end of the book of Revelation gives us a remarkable vision of the time after the 1,000-year reign of Jesus Christ.

John states: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:1-2). This includes the throne of God the Father.

John says, “And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men’” (verse 3). God will live with His children!

“And He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (verses 3-4).

Heaven is coming to earth. A new heaven and a new earth. And this happens after the 1,000-year reign of Jesus Christ and the time of judgment of all mankind—you can read more about all of this amazing future in Revelation 19, 20 and 21.

Choose this amazing future today

If you want this future to be your future, then there are three things that you have to begin to do *right now*. And this is just the beginning, but this is where you start.

First, *you must accept Jesus Christ as your Savior*. You must accept that you have been living a life filled with ideas, actions and religious beliefs that are opposed to God’s future. You have to accept the death of Jesus Christ as the substitute for what you deserve before the holy law of God—which is the law of His Kingdom.

Second, *you must accept Jesus Christ as the Lord and Master of your life right now*. There are lots of people who claim that they have accepted Jesus as Savior, but they still live by the values of Satan’s kingdom—the world right now. We are called to live by the values and laws of *the Kingdom of God*. This means that the Bible must become the foundation of your decisions, of your behavior every day. Christianity isn’t just about accepting Jesus as Savior. It’s also about *living by*

His teachings and living as He did.

And third, *you must accept Jesus Christ as your coming King*. This has to be more important than all your political ideas, all the ideas of whatever nation you live in, and all human philosophies.

Sometimes people ask me about my political affiliation. You know what I tell them? I tell them I’m a monarchist.

People are taken aback by that. The truth is that all human political parties and governments will someday collapse. They will fail, and they will submit to Christ as King. We have to live our lives as monarchists looking for that return—looking for and living for our King.

We are to live our lives every day in anticipation of and preparation for the coming of our King.

Your future can be eternity in the family of God, enjoying an entire universe God wants to give to His children. God’s future that He wants for you and for me is greater than anything we can imagine. It is a future when heaven comes to earth.

God’s purpose in calling us and bringing us to salvation is a preparation for a greater work that He will do through those who are part of that Kingdom. And it really does help us understand what we have to do today and to retain focus, purpose, and mission in our lives.

For now, God is changing the world one person at a time. I need to let it begin with me. You need to let it begin with you.

It may be a bit shocking to find out that the Bible doesn’t teach that we go consciously to heaven immediately upon death. But what it does teach is astounding!

Heaven on earth? Yes! God is going to create a new heaven and a new earth and bring His very throne and presence to earth. He created humanity, you and me, to be His children in His family forever! **GN**

Learn More

Few people really understand the incredible future God has in store for His faithful followers. Surprisingly, it’s not a leisurely life in heaven, as so many assume! The Bible has much more to say on this crucial subject, and we’ve prepared a free study guide to help you understand. Download or request your free copy of *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*

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God's Annual Festivals

Foreshadowing Great Events to Come!

Many Christians assume that the festivals God gave to Israel are outdated. Yet the early Church continued to observe them. And the book of Revelation graphically portrays their fulfillments. *by Jerold Aust*

Why do most Christians avoid the festivals God commanded ancient Israel to observe in Leviticus 23 and other passages? After all, Scripture shows that these feasts are going to be observed by all humanity when Jesus Christ returns (see Zechariah 14:16; Isaiah 66:23; Hebrews 8:10). Still, many Christians consider them to be either mere Jewish holidays or simply outdated.

What if you discovered that God clearly expects that His festivals are to be observed? Would you do so? It may surprise you to learn that a seamless thread involving these festivals runs throughout Scripture—from the law where they were given to the book of Revelation.

Though the apostle John wrote it down, the actual Author of Revelation is Jesus Christ on behalf of God the Father (Revelation 1:1). This final book of the Bible reveals what God, through Christ, has done over the past 2,000 years, is doing today, and will do in the future beyond today (Hebrews 1:2; Revelation 11:17-18; Zechariah 14:16).

Christ prophesied that the autumn feasts listed in Leviticus 23:23-39—that is, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles and the Eighth Day that follows—will be fulfilled in the latter parts of Revelation. Should you be observing these festivals today?

Does your church keep the feasts Jesus kept?

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* tells us that Jesus, the apostles and the first-century

Christians actually observed the ancient “Jewish” festivals, not Christmas or Easter:

“The earliest Christians *did not* immediately dissociate themselves from the observance of the Jewish feasts. *Many references in the NT [New Testament] indicate that Jesus and His disciples, as well as the early Palestinian Christian communities [that is, those in Judea and Galilee], observed the Sabbath and the major annual festivals*” (1967, Vol. 5, p. 867, “Early Christian Feasts,” emphasis added throughout).

These statements are biblically accurate. Yet what follows is not. Notice carefully how this Catholic resource justifies the changes made to the Sabbath and annual festivals:

“This observance had been invested by

weekly or annual Sabbaths found in Leviticus 23. Jesus was perfectly at one with His Holy Father, working His will and finishing His work (compare John 17:21; John 9:4; 17:4, 21). And Jesus remains the same throughout time (Hebrews 13:8). Had He changed God’s law, including the Fourth Commandment about the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8-11 and God’s other delineations of holy time, He would have sinned (1 John 3:4), and we would have no Savior (see 1 Peter 2:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Recall Jesus’ impassioned and unequivocal statement to His disciples regarding God’s laws and Sabbaths: “Don’t suppose that I came to do away with the Law [including God’s Sabbaths] and the Prophets. I did not come to do away with them, but to give them their full meaning”—teaching the meaning through word and perfect living example (Matthew 5:17, Contemporary English Version). He then said: “I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the

It may surprise you to learn that a seamless thread involving these festivals runs throughout Scripture—from the Law where they were given to the book of Revelation.

Christ with a new dimension, however, since He proclaimed His own superiority to the Law and oriented it to the eschatological [or end-time] events. It remained for St. Paul to proclaim the Christian’s independence from the Jewish festival calendar (Col. 2:16), and with the fall of Jerusalem and the growth of the Church outside Palestine, *the Judeo-Christian festival observance ceased except among sectarian groups*” (ibid.). This rationale is misleading and wrong.

Jesus would never, could never, nor did He ever, change God’s laws regarding the

smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality” (verse 18, Common English Bible).

Additionally, the apostle Paul didn’t abolish or repeal God’s laws in Colossians 2:16, as the above resource contends. Instead he confirmed them. Paul stated here, “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths.”

It’s commonly thought that he was telling the Christians of Colossae to disregard Jewish criticism over their not following Jewish observances. But the reality was just



the opposite. This was a gentile congregation that had not participated in such observances before. The truth is that Paul was telling the Christian converts to disregard outside criticism over how they were now observing these occasions. (See “Colossians 2:16 Shows Gentile Christians Observed the Biblical Holy Days” in our free study aid *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, available at our website or by mail.)

As we saw, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* identifies those who continued to observe the biblical feasts as *sectarian*—the word here implying narrow-minded smaller groups who don't follow the teachings of a larger denomination.

Yet Jesus said that His Church would be small: “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, *and there are few who find it*” (Matthew 7:14). He also said that He would honor those who honor Him (John 12:26) and call those great who do His will and teach others to do the same (Matthew 5:19).

Many Christians today prefer a comfortable and conformist Christianity, one without persecution. Contrast this with Jesus' teaching: “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

Does your church keep the feasts Jesus and His disciples kept?

What are the New Testament feasts?

In considering this, let's address festival observance in the New Testament, and then we'll see the correlation in Revelation.

The Catholic reference work quoted above admits that Jesus, the apostles and the early Church observed God's Old Testament feasts in the New Testament. Leviticus 23 lists them. The first three come in the spring in the land of Israel—the feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread and Pentecost. The last four occur in the transition from late summer to early autumn—the feasts of Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles and the Eighth Day. Let's identify all these in the New Testament in stepwise progression.

Jesus died on the Passover day. And the apostle Paul admonished the Corinthian church to keep the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread that followed: “Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our *Pass-over*, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us *keep the feast*, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the *unleavened bread* of sincerity and

truth” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

Luke, who wrote one of the four Gospels and the book of Acts, used *the Feast of Unleavened Bread* as a significant time marker: “And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during *the Days of Unleavened Bread*” (Acts 12:3).

After Jesus' resurrection, His disciples kept *the Feast of Pentecost* (Acts 2:1), the very day on which they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many Christians observe this feast today, at least in name. (The festival was not called Pentecost in its listing in Leviticus 23:15-22. Yet the name was taken



In Revelation 8, we see angels blowing the final seven trumpets that fulfill the meaning of *the Feast of Trumpets*.

from a word that occurs here in verse 16 in the Greek translation of the Old Testament meaning “fifty” in the phrase “count fifty days”—that is, from an earlier grain offering to determine when this feast was to be observed.)

The Feast of Trumpets is not specifically mentioned in the New Testament but the loud noise of trumpets as a herald of Christ's second coming is. The book of Revelation presents seven trumpets being blown by angels leading up to Christ's return. And 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4 state that Jesus will come and His followers will be resurrected at the last trumpet. It makes sense that the early Christians would have observed this festival in anticipation of these future events.

Luke presents the apostle Paul referring to *the Day of Atonement*, a commanded fast day, as a time marker, this day being still significant to Christians: “Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now

dangerous because *the Fast* was already over, Paul advised them . . .” (Acts 27:9). This occasion also looked forward to future events, as we will see.

Paul seems to refer to *the Feast of Tabernacles* when he departed from Ephesus: “*I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem*; but I will return again to you, God willing” (Acts 18:21). In not naming the feast, Paul may have been following the convention of referring to the Feast of Tabernacles as simply “the Feast,” as it was the greatest of all the feasts in terms of festivity, celebrating the end-of-year harvest (see Deuteronomy 16:16-17; Leviticus 23:39).

Observing this festival will be required of all nations when Jesus returns: “And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem [in the end time] shall go up [to Jerusalem] from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to *keep the Feast*

of Tabernacles” (Zechariah 14:16).

The true greatness of this feast rests in what it pictures—the great spiritual harvest of human beings under the reign of Jesus Christ, when the nations will be led to salvation.

The Eighth Day following the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles is a separate and distinct feast, it being the last of the seven annual feasts. Though distinct, its placement immediately following Tabernacles shows its continuance in the prior feast's themes. Here we find pictured the culmination of the global Eden-like environment for the salvation of the greatest numbers of human beings ever—when all who ever lived without a proper understanding will be resurrected to be taught God's truth and given the opportunity to be saved. Your Bible presents this period as *the Great White Throne Judgment* (Revelation 20:11-13).

The number seven in Scripture symbolizes completion, while eight signifies going

beyond that—in the sense of being overfull or to “super-abound” (E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, 1979, p. 196, “Eight”). The saving of billions of people in the future fits with this symbolism. (See Ezekiel 37:18-25, which refers to Israel being saved first, but Scripture includes gentiles as well—Romans 9:22-26).

The fact is, this feast and all of the biblical feasts were and are significant for all nations, not just the Jews. They were observed by Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early Christian Church, just as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* confirmed. And they will be observed during Christ’s coming reign over the world.

Yet most churches today fail to acknowledge these celebrations that are found in Scripture and instead follow traditions of substituting other worship days rooted in false religion. As Jesus warned the religious leaders of His day, “It is useless for you to worship me, when you teach rules made up by humans” (Mark 7:7; CEV).

Now let’s see how the autumn feast days will be fulfilled, as revealed in the Bible’s last book.

Time of war and drawing near to God

The later chapters of Revelation show the fulfillments of the four fall feasts found in Leviticus 23. May God open your eyes to see and your ears to hear.

As already mentioned, the Feast of Trumpets represents the calamitous events leading up to Christ’s return and the resurrection and change of His people into immortal glory.

Trumpets were sounded in ancient Israel as an alarm of war (Jeremiah 4:19). The seven trumpets of Revelation warn humankind that Christ is returning to wage war on murderous tyrants to save humanity from itself, when He will “destroy those who destroy the earth” (Revelation 11:18; compare John 18:36).

In Revelation 8, we see angels blowing the final seven trumpets that fulfill the meaning of the Feast of Trumpets: “And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets . . . So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound” (verses 2, 6). Four trumpets are blown in Revelation 8, while the fifth and sixth trumpets are sounded in chapter 9.

The seventh and final trumpet is blown in Revelation 11:15, whereon it is announced that the world’s kingdoms are taken over by God’s Kingdom. This is glorious good

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news, and trumpets were also blown in biblical times in glad celebration, such as at the coronation of kings. We are also told of this time ahead that “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, *and with the trumpet of God*. And the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Yet while this event of great joy occurs, seven last plagues and more warfare follow. Under demonic direction, the forces of two major military powers, the Beast power (Revelation 13:1-8) and the kings of the east (Revelation 16:12-14), will converge in the land of Israel.

They will then march to Jerusalem to fight the returning Jesus—and, as laid out in Zechariah 14 and Revelation 19, they will lose the battle.

This brings us to the next Holy Day, the Day of Atonement. The vanquishing of human enemies will be followed by the overthrow of the evil spiritual forces influencing the world.

As mentioned, the Day of Atonement is a fast day (Leviticus 27-28, 32). God commands His people to fast and pray in order to focus their faith on His deliverance of them from wicked spirits who roam this world (see Matthew 18:21; 1 Peter 5:7; Ephesians 6:12; Job 1:7; Matthew 4:8-9).

Atonement is fulfilled in Revelation 20: “Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while” (Revelation 20:1-3).

The incarceration of Satan and the demons is a major aspect of the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, fitting with this day's ceremony of banishing a goat into the wilderness in Leviticus 16 (see “What Does the Day of Atonement Have to Do With Jesus Christ?” beginning on page 23). With the removal of these evil spirits, widespread repentance will occur and peace will begin to spread throughout the world (Isaiah 14:6-7). This leads us to the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Peace and joy throughout the world

The Feast of Tabernacles depicts a future global Garden of Eden (see Amos 9:13; Ezekiel 36:35). For the first time in human

history, all nations will prosper in peace under the rule of Christ and His saints (that is, His followers of this age then glorified). Notice Christ's overview of this fulfillment in Revelation 20:4-6:

“And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them [see 1 Corinthians 6:2-3; Revelation 2:26] . . . who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. *And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years*. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished [in fulfillment of the Eighth Day].

“This [at the beginning of the 1,000 years when Christ returns] is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (see also Revelation 5:10).

At the end of this 1,000 years Satan will be released for a brief period, during which he will instigate a final rebellion against God. But fire from God will consume those who participate. Satan and his demons will then be cast into the lake of fire and taken out of the picture for good (Revelation 20:7-10).

Then, *after* the short season of Satan's final rebellion, comes the Great White Throne Judgment, typified by the Eighth Day.

Again, the Eighth Day follows the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles. This “extra” day may appear to be just an extension of the seven-day feast. Yet it is a separate and distinct holy feast that symbolizes the time of salvation for billions of people!

God sanctioned the Eighth Day as a time for His people to assemble before Him: “For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. *On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it*” (Leviticus 23:39).

Christ's imagery of the fulfillment of the Eighth-Day festival as described by John fits here perfectly: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God [compare Ezekiel 37:1-14], and books were opened [books of the Bible opened to understanding and as the basis for judgment].

“And another book was opened, which is

the Book of Life [Philippians 4:3]. And the dead were judged according to their works [over a period of time after God reveals His truth to them], by the things which were written in the books [see John 12:47-48].

The sea gave up the dead who were in it [resurrection to physical life as Ezekiel 37:1-14 shows], and Death [a great enemy, 1 Corinthians 15:26, 54] and Hades [the grave] delivered up the dead who were in them.

And they were judged, each one according to his works” (Revelation 20:11-13; James 2:20-26, concerning faith and works).

Note that judgment here is not an immediate sentencing but an evaluation over the new lifetimes of those resurrected—just as those in God's Church today are judged over the course of their lives (compare 1 Peter 4:17).

Will you keep the feasts Jesus kept?

Given important understanding of the fulfillments of the last four feasts, the big question is: Will you keep the feasts that Jesus kept? Most who identify as Christians won't—for now. But beyond today, everyone will. All of God's feasts will be kept after Christ establishes the Kingdom of God on earth, as symbolized by the Feast of Tabernacles.

God's feasts in Leviticus 23 portray the salvation of all humankind for all time. Jesus Christ, His apostles, and the early Church of God faithfully kept them—understanding that they pictured great events yet to come. Now God has revealed the meaning of these occasions to you.

The fall feasts in Leviticus 23 are fulfilled in the later chapters of Revelation. May you hear and heed God's call to observe His festivals as part of the condition of obedience He has set for you and all people to remain in his plan of salvation—both for now and forever! **GN**

Learn More

God's festivals as revealed in the Bible teach us many astounding truths about His plan and purpose for humankind. Beyond those mentioned in this article, many other passages show us a great deal more! Be sure to download or request your free copy of *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.



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What Does the Day of Atonement Have to Do With Jesus Christ?

What does an ancient Old Testament ceremony involving two goats have to do with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? Furthermore, are Christians to fast on this Holy Day? *by Vince Szymkowiak*

One of the more mysterious chapters in the Old Testament is Leviticus 16, concerning the 10th day of the Hebrew seventh month, the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 23:26-32). Chapter 16 discusses a series of animal offerings for this occasion, including that of two goats with roles determined by lot, and Israel's high priest entering the Holy of Holies of the physical tabernacle. It also commands a fast on this day.

Ultimately, Leviticus 16 points to the dual roles that God our Father gave to Jesus Christ to become both our High Priest and ultimate sacrifice for our sins, as well as pointing to the complete removal of the source of sin.

A sinless High Priest

We read in Leviticus 16:4 that ancient Israel's high priest was to bathe himself on this occasion, then put on his priestly attire. In verses 5-6 we read that he was to offer a bull as a sin offering for himself and his own family. This is significant in that it shows that no human being is without sin, not even the earthly high priest (see Hebrews 5:1-3). As a man, he too needed forgiveness; he needed to be washed clean so that he could perform his priestly duties.

But Jesus Christ, our true High Priest sent from God, never needed forgiveness (Hebrews 3:1; 7:26-28). He "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Satan could never plant any of his evil nature in Him (John 14:30).

Israel's high priest was to wear "the holy linen tunic and the linen trousers," and "be girded with the linen sash" (Leviticus 16:4). This is similar to the clothing Christ wore when He appeared to the apostle John in a vision. Jesus was seen standing "in the midst of the seven lampstands . . . clothed with a

garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band" (Revelation 1:13). Some commentators note that the word translated "garment" here denotes priestly attire.

Two goats—one for the Lord, one for another

Next, the high priest was to deal with the two goats. One would represent the Lord and the other, often called the "scapegoat," would represent something else. He cast lots to determine which each would represent (verse 8).

Note verse 9: "And Aaron shall bring the goat on which the LORD's lot fell, and offer it as a sin offering." This goat, which



Jesus died for our sins, as pictured by the sacrifice of the first goat. The second goat, representing Satan, was banished into the wilderness as a picture of his future fate.

represented the Lord, was sacrificed as a sin offering. It clearly stood for Jesus Christ, the ultimate sin offering who was slain for the sins of the whole world.

Since two goats were involved, many think both goats were to represent the Lord. But notice the contrast here in verse 8: "One lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat"—or for *Azazel*, some Bible

versions leaving the Hebrew word here untranslated. Clearly, only one goat was to represent the Lord. The other goat was not.

Note verse 10: "But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat [or *Azazel*] shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, and to let it go as the scapegoat into the wilderness."

So this goat was *not to be killed* as the goat for the Lord was. The high priest was to "lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall *send the goat away* into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness" (Leviticus 16:21-22, New International

Version, emphasis added throughout).

This sending away into the desert is part of the reason for translating *Azazel* as scapegoat, or goat that escapes. But many scholars identify *Azazel* as the name of a demon inhabiting the wilderness.

It stands to reason that *Azazel* is one in stark contrast to the Lord—indeed,

the ultimate enemy Satan the devil.

Christ bore our sins to the cross in order to pay the ransom price for them through His own blood (and the resurrected Christ was portrayed by the high priest presenting the slain goat's blood before God). In contrast, Satan bears the blame for sin as he was the first to lead mankind astray in the Garden of Eden and continues to deceive



humanity today (2 Corinthians 11:3). And he is the tempter (Matthew 4:3)—enticing the world into sin.

The high priest placing sins on the live goat and having it driven away parallels the future of Satan and his demons at Christ's return. They will be removed at the outset of Jesus' reign over the nations, as John describes in Revelation 20:1-3:

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished . . ."

Jesus died for our sins. But Satan will bear blame for his role in our sins and be banished. And with the instigator of sin removed, the world will more easily be led to atonement—"at-one-ment," meaning to be at one—with God.

Consider that if the live goat represented the resurrected Christ, then this would mean the sins Christ bore on the cross are placed back onto Him after His resurrection. Clearly this is not what happened.

And there is another distinction scholars have noted. We see that the *Azazel* goat was to be driven from the camp of Israel. In other words, this goat was not to dwell with humanity again. This banishment fits with Satan's future. Yet it is the exact opposite of the role of Jesus Christ, who has promised to be with His people forever. "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5).

Jesus as High Priest and perfect sacrifice for all mankind

In Leviticus 16:17 we read of Israel's high priest: "There shall be no man in the tabernacle of meeting when he goes in to make atonement in the Holy Place." The high priest did this atonement work *alone*. Christ, too, did His work alone. Earlier, His disciples "all forsook Him and fled," Mark 14:50. Indeed, He felt so totally alone that he cried out to His Father: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). At that point, Jesus alone bore the sins of all humanity.

And in His awesome sacrifice Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial system God gave to Israel (see Hebrews 9:13-14). The animal sacrifices on Atonement and those at other times ultimately pointed to the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10:4 states: "Because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." And in verses 8-10 we read: "First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them'—though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' *He sets aside the first to establish the second.* And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (NIV, 1984).

These verses plainly state that the sacrificial system is not necessary today—that we have the one sacrifice for us we need, that of Jesus Christ. Indeed, to His Father He "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26). This one-time sacrifice of our great High Priest once and for all is more than sufficient to pay for the sins of all of humanity.

Today, however, Jesus' sacrifice and priestly work is properly accepted with repentance by only a few. But after He returns, all mankind will come to truly understand what He has done for us.

It's interesting to note that Jesus' sacrifice is portrayed vividly in the spring feast of Passover, the day on which He actually died, as well as in this fall Holy Day of Atonement. Our free study guide *God's Holy Day Plan* points out: "The Day of Atonement and Passover both teach us about the forgiveness of sin and our reconciliation with God through Christ's sacrifice. However, Passover concerns the redemption of the firstborn and thus applies most directly to Christians whom God has called in this age, while Atonement carries universal implications."

Christ's sacrifice and intercessory work as our High Priest allows us to come before God's throne continually (see Hebrews 4:14-16)—to enter the Holy of Holies in a spiritual sense—and cast Satan out of our lives now. But this will not be experienced by all Israel and the world at large until widespread repentance following Christ's second coming and the full banishment of Satan from the world scene (as pictured in the fall feasts).

An observance to keep today—with fasting

In Leviticus 23:27 God commanded ancient Israel: "This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month [i.e., Atonement], you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all" (see also verse 31; 23:26-32). This meant they were to fast—to go without food and water—for a period of 24 hours.

Psalm 35:13 says that King David humbled himself with fasting. The word "humbled" is *anah* in the Hebrew, which is the same word we find in Leviticus 23:27, translated as *afflict*. Thus, to afflict one's soul or being refers to the humbling process we go through when we fast. This day of fasting is for the purpose of humbling ourselves before God in a repentant and obedient frame of mind—to practice self-control with God's help as we seek Him.

This time of fasting is not for the purpose of appearing to other people to be righteous (Matthew 6:16). Fasting as a display to others is hypocritical and vain. Scripture tells us that we are to fast only for the glory of God (Zechariah 7:5).

Fasting typifies the kind of humble, repentant and obedient attitude we as Christians must have. Christ promised that in the ages following His first coming, His disciples would fast on occasion (Matthew 9:15).

In fact the Day of Atonement is still mentioned long after Christ's death and resurrection as "the Fast" in Acts 27:9. Paul and his gentile companion Luke were still observing this Holy Day by fasting. Many biblical commentaries acknowledge that verse is indeed referring to the Day of Atonement. Certainly, if Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, observed this day, then Christians today should follow his example (1 Corinthians 11:1) and observe this day as well.

Leviticus 16 is a remarkable chapter in portraying two of the major roles of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament high priest typified the role of Christ as our ultimate High Priest. And the goat which was slaughtered was a type of the one great sacrifice our loving Father gave for the entire world, so that, in the words of John 3:16, "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." GN

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Utopia: Is It Humanly Possible?

Will mankind ever live without war, grief and suffering? Is world peace even possible? If so, how will it happen? *by Beyond Today host Darris McNeely*

Have you ever longed for a place where peace and human harmony is not just a dream? A place where people worked together, shared together and genuinely cared for one another? There's a town in the heart of the United States formed for this very purpose. Did it work? Did people create a utopia in a place they called New Harmony?

Around 200 years ago, this town in what is today Indiana was carved out of the wilderness of the American Midwest by a religious group called Harmonists. They set out to build a self-sufficient community.

Their community lasted 10 years. The town and its buildings were sold to another group who also sought to create a perfect utopian society. This second venture failed in less than three years.

What happened? Why did these human efforts to bring about world peace and equality fall short of expectations? Why did these noble efforts fail? Let's look at both communities that existed on this spot and learn why they didn't work. The lessons learned here apply to every other human attempt to create a perfect society.

Human attempts to create paradise

The Harmonists—a German fundamentalist group—came to the Indiana wilderness in the summer of 1814. They were led by a charismatic leader named George Rapp. Rapp had begun to preach that Jesus Christ's return was imminent and that he and his followers, to be properly prepared for the second coming, needed to remove themselves literally into a wilderness and create a place of preparation in fulfillment of Revelation 12:6.

In this place, the Harmonists believed they could create something revolutionary—a place where people could live together in peace, love and perfect unity. Harmony

to these people was a place where the essence of God's Kingdom on earth could be achieved.

Harmonists interpreted the early Church of the book of Acts as a communal society where all material goods were shared in common. They modeled their town on this belief. New Harmony was a town where members held common shares in the profits of their work.

Labor was communally organized. They had full employment. People rotated jobs to learn all the trades and to avoid boredom.

All the essential trades needed to build and maintain a 19th-century town were represented—stonecutters, masons, bricklayers, carpenters, weavers, spinners, shoemakers, tailors and blacksmiths. They also had the skills needed to plant and process food from the fields to the tables of the town.

They were committed to universal education. Their approach was decades ahead of any other public school system in America.

They taught their children about how their society would be completely different—they would live in a perfect society. They shared a vision of a society working together in peace and harmony, preparing for the return of Jesus Christ.

In many ways those of this community of believers succeeded in their efforts. They created a sanctuary that allowed members to pursue their version of Christian perfection. For most of a decade they lived in a stable environment while they waited for the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of human history.

Paradise lost

The Harmonists, though, had one significant belief that had a built-in problem. To prepare for the golden age to come following Christ's second coming, Rapp interpreted certain biblical passages to mean one should remain celibate—no sexual relations. While this was not strictly enforced,



For most of a decade the inhabitants of New Harmony lived in a stable environment while they waited for the second coming of Jesus Christ and the end of human history.

it did lead to an inevitable backlash.

In 1824, Rapp decided to sell New Harmony and lead his followers back to Pennsylvania to create a new settlement. Christ had not returned as he predicted, and like any movement built around failed prophecy, the leader saw a need to renew the commitment of the faithful through

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the idea of creating a new life with a new town. On May 24, Rapp left the town with the first wave of his people and never returned.

One of the followers carved this final thought into the stairwell of his home: "On the Twenty-fourth of May 1824 we have departed. Lord, with Thy great help and goodness, in body and soul protect us."

So what happened? Why did this group fail to create the perfect society? A close look at the Harmonists shows a group of sincere people who in 10 years at New Harmony accomplished a great deal. They left their mark on Indiana and American history. But the community had to deal with the basic problems of human nature, even in this protected environment.

Even though they sincerely believed they were being prepared for the second coming of Jesus Christ, their effort to create the Kingdom of God on earth in advance of the reality fell far short.

Another attempt to create paradise

Ironically, Rapp and his Harmonists sold their town to another utopian visionary, Robert Owen. The story of Owen's New Harmony is unsurprisingly similar to Rapp's. Despite best intentions and best efforts, the lesson we learn from New Harmony is that mankind is unable to engineer the perfect society.

Both Rapp and Owen failed in their goals. They did not create the Kingdom of

God on earth. Why didn't they succeed? Why have countless other humanly devised utopian concepts of social and government order been so unsuccessful?

Only God can create paradise

Part of the answer can be found in the very name given to these ventures. It's the word "utopia." This word is formed from Greek roots literally meaning "no place." It is used to describe human dreams of a good or perfect environment. The reality is that there never has been a place on earth where human beings created a perfect peaceful community—in spite of the many noble efforts to do so.

Can we ever achieve a community of peace? The good news is that the Bible shows us how peace *will* come to the entire earth.

Isaiah 26 tells us: "O LORD, we have waited for You . . . For when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness . . . LORD, You will establish peace for us" (verses 8-9, 12, emphasis added).

Notice also what's written in the book of Acts. Peter was inspired to encourage repentance and conversion so that "your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven and earth must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His

holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:19-21).

Here is the key to understanding why human efforts to build a perfect utopian society have failed. Here is the revealed truth of how it will be done—through Jesus Christ returning to earth to rescue mankind from oblivion and to create harmony through the just rule of the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah foretold a paradise on earth

The prophet Isaiah further foretold: "He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

It's one of the most impressive images from the Bible—a man taking his sword and, instead of running it through his enemy, beating it with a hammer into a farming tool. He then takes his spear and turns it into a pruning hook to use in the orchards and vineyards, tending crops.

Another passage in Isaiah describes a kingdom of peace in which even the nature of wild animals is tamed: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

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"The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:6-9).

These are powerful scriptures. And many others tell of a time when the desert shall blossom like a rose (Isaiah 35:1) and the streets of cities will be safe for children and the elderly (Zechariah 8:5).

God's desire is to set up a paradise where He will have a relationship with man based on trust, good will and love. This is what God desires more than anything.

The key to peace—a change of heart

Why did the Harmonists' efforts fail to build a religious utopia? What will be different in God's Kingdom?

Any and all human efforts to create a perfect society fail because of one critical element—human nature.

God has a solution for this problem. Notice what God says through the prophet Ezekiel: "Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God" (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

Only the Eternal God can change man's unyielding, hard, stony heart. And He will do that very thing!

God will change mankind's very nature and replace it with His own. That is the key. Human nature will have to be fundamentally changed before peace can break out within the human family. That change is based on a willing choice by each person to admit a need for God and then submit his or her will to God's will in every aspect of life.

God has given us freedom of choice. He commands people everywhere to repent, to change and to choose life. Once people do, God can begin to create a paradise on earth—the establishment here of the Kingdom of God.

This process needs to begin in your life now. You can decide to live *today* by the teachings and way of life God will establish

within His coming Kingdom. Jesus paved the way for this change when He said: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15).

He showed us the way of life He desires us to have. We need to be striving with His help to live that way now if we want to enter His Kingdom.

Peter explained that God has given us "exceeding great and precious promises" so we "may be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

What is that divine nature? It's the very mind and character of God! It's the way He thinks, believes, judges and acts. That virtuous, righteous nature—that change of heart—is produced by God's Holy Spirit! And that Spirit can dwell in you following the process of repentance leading to baptism (Acts 2:38).

The coming paradise of God

Various utopian experiments, such as that at New Harmony, have sought to improve mankind and create a peaceable environment. Peace has been sought on every scale and by virtually all forms of belief. All attempts to accomplish the goal have failed. But God's effort to bring peace will *not* fail. It will succeed—through Jesus Christ and the establishment of God's Kingdom.

If you believe in God and His Word, then you must believe His promises. God is faithful, and He alone has the power to bring paradise to earth. The good news is that *He will!* **GN**

Learn More

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Who's Behind The Good News?



Who's behind *The Good News* magazine?

Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide *The Good News* free to all who request it. Simply put, *The Good News* is provided by *people*—people from all walks of life, from all over the world, as enabled by God.

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

We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought—the wonderful *good news* of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). That message truly is good news—the answer to all the problems that have long plagued humankind. Through the pages of *The Good News*, dozens of helpful study guides (also free) and our *Beyond Today* TV program, we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution



and threaten our very survival.

We are committed to taking that message to the entire world, shar-

ing the truth of God's purpose and plan for us as taught by Jesus Christ.

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Current Events & Trends

by Milan Bizic, Rudy Rangel and Tom Robinson

European right-wing extremism still on the rise

Germany has traditionally been a bastion of economic and social stability in the increasingly troubled eurozone. It also continues to be the leading state in the European Union, with France alongside it.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel remains one of the most powerful and influential leaders in the world, and Germany holds a great deal of sway among its NATO partners and in the United Nations. Modern Germany has built its leading position on strong, responsible fiscal policies and relative internal peace. Yet with such a checkered past in terms of racial violence, that peace can be fleeting.

While racial tensions and violence will continue to be an issue in Germany, where some still harbor resentment over the two World War defeats in the past century, neo-Nazi groups are upping the ante in terms of spreading terror among immigrant populations and asylum seekers.

Der Spiegel, Germany's top newsmagazine,

recently reported on the resurgence of racially motivated violence and harassment in parts of the country: "Germany these days is a nation split in two. On the one side is a populace that is showing greater solidarity with refugees than ever seen before . . .



German police and demonstrators clash at a neo-Nazi anti-immigration protest in April 2015.

The other half of the country is extremely difficult to tolerate in some places.

"Racist violence is on the rise. The German Interior Ministry registered 173 instances of criminal right-wing offenses against accommodations for asylum-seekers during the first six months of this year, almost three times as many as during the same period the previous year" ("Is the Ugly German Back? Flames of Hate Haunt a Nation," July 24, 2015).

Europe in general is an increasingly unsafe place for some minorities, including European Jews, who are facing a wave of anti-Semitism even in generally more tolerant places such as France, let alone more traditional hotbeds of discrimination such as Greece. This world is currently under the sway of Satan, who hates human beings and does all he can to inspire us to destroy ourselves (2 Corinthians 4:4). Thankfully, Satan will at last be deposed, his rule brought to an end, when Jesus Christ returns to usher in a new era of peace for all mankind. (Source: *Der Spiegel*).

Islamic radicals provide resources to gain support

One way Islamic extremists groups gain support from people is through providing public aid. Recently *The Wall Street Journal* reported: "Radicals from [a group in Pakistan called] Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat [ASWJ] have dug wells as part of their campaign to deliver public services and solidify support. The water isn't clean, but it is better than nothing, and grateful residents come to fill up buckets" (Saeed Shah and Syed Shoaib Hasan, "In Pakistan Extremist Group Expands Its Reach," July 30, 2015).

This is a Sunni Islamist group that has been under an unenforced ban by the Pakistani government since 2012. There's still a massive gap in the ideologies of Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The ASWJ is against the Shiites and has been very active against them.

It may be a mystery to many in the West how average citizens would align themselves with radicals they know to be dangerous. Many in the West aren't struggling every day for resources like water for survival. When groups like the ASWJ come into a village and provide a necessity of life, it's hard to reject them.

Supplying resources is not the only way these groups can be active. "ASWJ claims a presence in every district in Pakistan. Its leaders deliver public speeches, its followers organize rallies and its members are candidates in elections. In Orangi [a town in the metropolitan area of the capital city, Karachi], it runs dozens of madrassas, or Islamic schools."

It may be hard for the local villagers to recognize this as a political move, but that's exactly what it is. These groups need support and allies, and the way to achieve that is by providing for those in need.

We see the same tactics with other terrorist groups. As was noted about Hamas in the *Los Angeles Times*,

Turkey joins fight against ISIS but targets Kurds

IISIS continues its devastating march across the Middle East, and the list of nations picking up the fight against its brand of Islamic extremism is growing. Turkey's government, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is among those which have pledged to help in the fight against ISIS.

However, the actual result of Turkish military intervention hasn't been exactly what its Western partners expected. While Turkey did assist the United States in conducting airstrikes against key ISIS strongholds in Syria, it's also begun an airstrike campaign against Kurdish forces in the region. While the Turks and Kurds have no love lost in their nearly centuries-old, on and off conflict, this is quite problematic as the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) has become an ally in the global effort against ISIS.

The PKK continues to be both an asset and a liability for anti-ISIS forces, as the Kurdish militants are simultaneously considered terrorists by America and the European Union as well as acting as an effective buffer against continuing ISIS expansion.

The Wall Street Journal reported on the fallout from

the recent Turkish-Kurdish violence: "After endorsing the strikes on the PKK in Iraq, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said . . . that it was impossible to continue peace talks with the group . . .

"As lawmakers gathered in Ankara to discuss the deepening crisis, a blast hit the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline near Turkey's border with Iraq, the Energy Ministry said" (Dion Nissenbaum and Yeliz Candemir, "Turkey Hits Kurdish Militants in Iraq in Largest Airstrike Yet," July 29, 2015).

Violence and confusion are the hallmarks of human efforts to engineer peace in the world. God knows the human heart, and He knows what the way of man produces in the world. That's why He inspired the prophet Isaiah to speak out about the confused ways of the nations: "The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace" (Isaiah 59:8). To find true peace, we must look to God's ultimate solutions, not man's vain striving. (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*).

"Though notorious as a militant group, it is better known among Palestinians for its food banks and quality schools and clinics . . . The work Hamas does at home is an often-overlooked key to the domestic popularity of an organization most known elsewhere for killing" (Kim Murphy, "Hamas Victory Is Built on Social Work," March 2, 2006).

And the same goes for the Shiite group Hezbollah. It's been estimated "that about half of Hezbollah's budget is dedicated to social services sectors such as health, veterans' services, reconstruction and compensation, education, women's groups, and even

the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts (like the Boy Scouts). Such efforts are employed to capture the willing support of the people in order to further Hezbollah's political aims" (Kenneth Poole, forward to Maj. James Love, *Hezbollah: Social Services as a Source of Power*, Joint Special Operations University Report, June 2010).

These methods are used because they work powerfully. And they are helped not a little by the evil that keeps the whole world under deception (Revelation 12:9). One day the truth will set the world free (John 8:32; Isaiah 11:9). (Sources: Joint Special Operations University, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*.)

Planned Parenthood caught in horrific scandal

Abortion is a powerfully emotional topic. Pro-abortion supporters passionately rally around the cause of “reproductive rights” while pro-life activists seek to sway opinion by pointing out the barbaric facts underpinning the abortion industry.

The most recent—and perhaps most emotionally charged—debate yet is burning over the accusation that Planned Parenthood, the largest abortion provider in the United States, is engaging in the sale of tissue from aborted babies. Videos went public exposing graphic and disturbing conversations among Planned Parenthood representatives, in which they discuss the commercial value of parts of aborted infants and methods for keeping the valuable parts intact for sale.

The videos are sickening to people who recognize that abortion is the murder of the most vulnerable and innocent among us. While witnessing firsthand the callousness of abortion providers

is disturbing, the revelation may be important in reframing the abortion debate.

The Economist reports: “Surveys find that most Americans support keeping abortion legal within the first weeks of conception,” but “sympathy [for abortion being legal] plummets once the woman enters her second trimester, and nearly disappears when she reaches her third” (“The Tissue Trade,” Aug. 1, 2015).

A procedural vote in the U.S. Senate that would have barred all federal funds for Planned Parenthood failed on Aug. 3. It actually passed 53-46 but didn’t get the 60 votes needed to overcome a Democratic filibuster on bringing the bill up for debate (“Senate Vote to Defund Planned Parenthood Fails,” CNN, Aug. 4, 2015).

The American public needs to wake up to its great sin in condoning and supporting murder through abortion. Perhaps more will come to see that with these awful videos and will turn in repentance to God. Some, though, will strive to justify what’s happening and become more hardened to the ongoing atrocity. (Sources: CNN, *The Economist*.)

Greek crime rises as financial crisis continues

The Greek financial crisis is still lingering. The southern Balkan nation has been struggling economically and has been dead weight for the European Union for some time now. Greek leaders have gone back and forth on solutions and bailouts with the EU yet continue to struggle to get their fiscal feet back on stable ground.

Citizens are preparing for an exit from the euro currency (dubbed as “Grexit”). Some wealthier Greeks are stashing cash in banks outside of the country. Many in the middle class are keeping cash and other valuables of worth like gold jewelry.



The New York Times reported that “Greek crime statistics released last week hinted at a dark side to the secreting of all those valuables. Across Greece the most serious crime is down or stable over all, but reports of burglaries and robberies were on the rise for the first six months of the year, suggesting that the hidden valuables had become enticing targets for thieves.”

Desperation doesn’t always bring about the soundest judgment. The world is not in a state that God wanted for us—with its suffering and lack of resources. When God was working closely with the people of Israel in ancient times, He gave them the personal responsibility of making sure others were taken care of. We remember the story of Ruth glean-ing (picking up dropped crops after farmers) in Boaz’s field. That was a command to let those in need pick up the leftovers. God wanted people to ensure that the lowest among us were taken care of.

It’s painful to see desperation, even from afar. Some are taking advantage of the current situation of more individuals storing valuables in their homes. A time is coming when Jesus will return and establish a perfect society wherein all will learn the right way to live.

Time will tell how things will pan out for the relationship between Greece and the EU, but it certainly bears watching. (Source: *The New York Times*.)

Russia continues aggressive actions

Russia has spent the better part the last few years displaying varying levels of aggressive behavior toward other nations. Obvious examples are the March 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and Russia-sponsored military action in Eastern Ukraine. Less publicized has been Russia’s

Sam Jones, defense and security editor for *Financial Times*, reported that “in total, Nato aircraft have had to conduct emergency deployments on more than 250 occasions this year over Europe . . . the highest number for an equivalent period since the end of the cold war” (“Nato Fighter Jets Intercept Russian Aircraft,” July 30, 2015).

He said that this includes “two of the largest interceptions over Eastern Europe since tensions with Moscow began to rise” in early 2014 (ibid.)

The geopolitical landscape in Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and increasingly in North America is steadily growing in instability. Instability leads to conflict, and conflict leads to peril.

The schemes and plots of the nations of this world will ultimately

come to nothing, however. God’s will and purpose will stand to the exclusion of all others: “The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations” (Psalm 33:10-11).

Put your trust in God and pray fervently for His will and purpose in the world. (Source: *Financial Times*.)



A British RAF Typhoon intercepts a Russian bomber near UK airspace.

burgeoning relationships with other West-suspicious states such as Iran and China and Vladimir Putin’s support for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

The overall picture is one of Russian antagonism at best and outright hostility against NATO states at worst. The trend continues unabated, prompting some to suggest that we’re in the earliest stages of a new cold war.

How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. *So are we.* That’s one reason we produce the *Beyond Today* daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at ucg.org/beyond-today/daily!





THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR DEAL & Bible Prophecy



The appeasement of evil has sunk to new levels with the stunning nuclear agreement with Iran. Be warned: Terrible times lie ahead.

by Tom Robinson

The defence editor for *The Telegraph* opened his report on the Iran nuclear deal with this observation: “You only had to look at the beaming smiles on the faces of the Iranian negotiating team to see who had emerged as the undisputed winners of the drawn-out negotiations over Iran’s nuclear programme” (Con Coghlin, “Iran Nuclear Deal: Peace in Our Time? Not With This Shoddy Agreement,” July 14, 2015).

“Yes,” comments former U.S. Army officer and congressman Allen West, “there’s a reason why Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is on his balcony in Vienna laughing. I’m quite sure Adolf Hitler was doing the same thing while Neville Chamberlain ranted about a signed document from Herr Hitler guaranteeing there would be ‘peace in our times’” (“Everything That’s Wrong With the Iran Deal That the Mainstream Media Won’t Tell You,” July 14).

As of this writing, the U.S. Congress still has the opportunity to stop this agreement. But that may prove difficult.

Shocking provisions to Iran’s advantage

What are some of the problems with the agreement? And what do these developments mean for the world’s future?

Some of the more shocking provisions of the deal are that the United States will actually protect Iran’s nuclear program, no U.S. inspectors at all will be allowed into Iran to verify the agreement is being followed, and the Iranians will have up to 24 days’ delay before inspectors will be able to visit suspect sites (giving them plenty of time to literally bulldoze and erase the sites, which has happened with suspect locations before—including one just days after the agreement was signed).

Frankly, this agreement is guaranteed to do two things—assure that Iran will get the bomb regardless of whether it keeps or doesn’t keep the agreement, and to spur other Middle Eastern nations to acquire their own nukes. Nations like Saudi Arabia and Egypt understand that Iran is determined to rule the Middle East, and they will not sit idly by while Iran gets nuclear weapons. They know the stakes are too high.

The agreement puts America’s ally Israel, which the Iranian regime has repeatedly vowed to destroy, in an extremely difficult predicament. And it further puts America and the Western world in a grave predicament, despite the triumphal assurances of U.S. President Barack Obama.

Iran does not have to free the four Amer-

ican hostages it is holding. It gets to keep its thousands of centrifuges. The UN arms embargo and sanctions on Iran, which were working to curb its nuclear program and sponsorship of international terrorism, will be lifted, and \$120 billion to \$150 billion in foreign assets will be unfrozen (Joel Polak, “Iran Deal Worth More Than All U.S. Aid to Israel Since 1948,” Breitbart, July 27, 2015).

What will Iran do with all this money? Realize that it has considered itself at war with America since Islamic radicals took over the country in 1979.

An unconstitutional process

The Obama administration pushed this deal through as a mere international “agreement” or “plan of action” to avoid Constitutional requirements for international treaties—yet it is clearly a treaty.

Both political parties bear responsibility in approving the Corker-Cardin bill, designed specifically to bypass the U.S. Constitution’s treaty-approval process. Conservative radio host, author and attorney Mark Levin explains: “Normally, here’s how treaties work: The President negotiates a treaty with another country . . . Once the treaty is negotiated, it’s submitted to the Senate. Two thirds of the Senate has to vote to approve, or ratify, the treaty. If two thirds do not support it, it is not binding.

“But the bill the Congress sent to the President turns things on its head. It will allow the President to lift sanctions on

Iran, and unless Congress objects with a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote . . . the President's actions are allowed to stand. See the reversal? Formerly, the President needed a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote to act, and now the Congress needs a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote to stop him from acting" (quoted in "Forget Obama . . . Republicans Made the Iran Nukes Deal Possible," *American Thinker*, July 15, 2015).

If that weren't enough, secret side deals have been made part of the agreement that have been hidden from Congress and the public. John Kerry, when questioned before Congress about these, said that he had been briefed on them but had not seen them. And immediately after the agreement was announced, the White House and State Department rushed to get it approved at the UN Security Council long before the U.S. Congress had opportunity to review the deal, much less vote on it.

As Mark Levin observed on his program: "They ran this . . . thing to the UN Security Council, it's already in place, and the secretary of state hasn't seen the side deals. Which means the president of the United States is going all over the world saying, 'If somebody has a better deal let's see it'—they don't even know what deal they have! . . . The president of the United States and his secretary of state . . . committed our country, our future, our allies, to a deal

for decades" ("The Nuclear Deal With Iran," *PragerUniversity.com*, Aug. 3, 2015).

Even assuming the president is correct, his argument can be turned around to say that the alternative to a war to prevent Iran from developing nukes is this deal—an agreement that paves the way to further



Two weeks after the Iranian nuclear agreement was signed, Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei published a book denying the Holocaust and calling for Israel's destruction.

Iran has considered itself at war with America—which they routinely call “the Great Satan”—since Islamic radicals took over the country in 1979.

where there are secret side deals that they didn't even read . . . They have left the United States of America and our security open to nuclear war" (July 28, 2015).

No alternative?

The president has repeatedly argued that the alternative to this deal is war. Conservative radio host and author Dennis Prager answers: "The war argument is a falsehood. For three reasons.

"First, the alternative to this agreement was continuing and tightening the sanctions that were weakening the Iranian regime and greatly diminishing its ability to fund terror groups around the world. Second, because the agreement so strengthens Iran, it makes war far more likely. When evil, expansionist regimes get richer, they don't spend their wealth on building new hospitals. They expand. Third, Iran has been at war with America

Iranian aggression and likely nuclear war!

God warned of national curses

These developments touch on Bible prophecy in a number of ways.

It would surprise many to learn that the tiny state of Israel and the Jewish people around the world do not constitute all the physical nation of Israel. As explained in our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*, the ancient nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The Jews are descendants of those of the southern kingdom. The tribes of the northern kingdom were taken captive by the Assyrians and later migrated into northwestern Europe. Among these, the descendants of the patriarch Joseph eventually formed the nation of Britain and the other nations that sprang from it, including the

United States of America.

God had foretold blessings and national greatness for these nations. But He also warned of curses that would come on them for disobedience (see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28).

For instance, God stated: "I will break the pride of your power" (Leviticus 26:19). America remains the strongest and most powerful nation in the world. But its resolve on the world scene has severely waned.

Many in American leadership appear ashamed of the idea of the country acting unilaterally if need be and believe American power should be constrained by and subordinate to the international community. Thus, a major part of national power being broken is America choosing unwise leaders—and, worse, in some cases leaders who seem opposed to the country's long-held culture and values.

Helping to bring down America

Another curse God pronounces is "I will even appoint *terror* over you" (Leviticus 26:16, emphasis added throughout). This comes in various forms but surely one form is what is now actually called terrorism. This has already affected the nations descended from ancient Israel, but is certain to increase.

Iran has long been a supporter of Hezbollah and other Islamic terrorist groups. A huge problem is that if Iran is suffused with \$150 billion as called for in the Iranian agreement, and economic sanctions imposed against Iran for its nuclear program are lifted, we can expect terrorism to increase greatly—particularly against Israel and "the Great Satan," America.

Republican U.S. senator and presidential candidate Ted Cruz noted that in unfreezing Iran's assets, the Obama administration will effectively become "the world's leading financier of radical Islamic terrorism" (July 29, 2015). And he further affirmed, "When you send billions of dollars to Jihadists trying to kill Americans, you bear responsibility for the murder that they carry out with the money you have given them" (July 31).

God warned further of increasing natural calamities to befall the Israelites along with military attacks and invasion, with the people and their leaders in utter confusion. He says, "You shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you" (Leviticus 26:17).

How can it come to this? It won't all happen at once. There will be increasing prob-



lems, just as there were for ancient Israel before it was finally crushed and enslaved.

Then, horrifyingly, God foretells something like nuclear war or worse—with cities in America and other British-descended nations ravaged and destroyed. As Ezekiel 6:6 states, “In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste.”

This is speaking ultimately of the all-out devastation of the period before Christ’s return that the Bible calls the Great Tribulation and “the time of Jacob’s [or Israel’s] trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7). While other nations will be behind this widespread devastation of the United States and its fellow English-speaking nations, Iran could well play a part in more localized nuclear destruction in the lead-up to this period—whether through direct attack or through terrorist proxies.

Iran might alternatively succeed in detonating a nuclear electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapon high above the United States that could knock out the electrical infrastructure over a huge part of the country. (Iran is thought to have conducted test runs for such an attack using cargo ships in the Caspian Sea.)

Such events, along with an increase in major natural disasters, could greatly weaken America, leading to its prophesied downfall in the time leading up to Jesus Christ’s return.

Iranian role in the march of end-time events?

Iran could also play a part in the rise of the end-time “king of the South” in the prophecy of Daniel 11. This chapter principally concerns an age-old conflict between powers to the north and south of the Holy Land (see our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*).

Historically, the kings of North and South were the rulers of ancient Syria and Egypt. The power to the north was eventually the Roman Empire and its revivals. Before Christ’s return, the end-time king of the South will attack an end-time king of the North (verse 40).

Some think this southern power will be Iran. But it seems more likely that this power will be seated again to the south of the Holy Land, perhaps in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. That would seem to tie in to a prophecy in Psalm 83 of an end-time Arab-Muslim confederation against Israel. Persia or Iran is not listed in this confederation.

Again, though, Iran could be a big factor in the rise of the final kingdom of the South.

The Sunni Muslim nations of the region do not want to be under the control of a new Iranian Shiite Persian Empire. So Iran’s push toward nukes is driving other Middle Eastern states to pursue them as well. Saudi Arabia recently signed an agreement with France for two nuclear reactors, and Egypt and Turkey likely aren’t far behind.

In the book of Revelation, chapters 9 and 16 both mention powers east of the Euphrates River mobilizing for war in the end time, in the latter case coming to Megiddo in northern Israel before moving on to Jerusalem to fight the returning Jesus Christ. Given the empowerment Iran is currently receiving, it seems quite likely that it will be part of the forces mentioned here.

Something else to note about these chapters is that they show the various forces to be directed by demonic spirits. This reveals who’s really running the show behind the scenes—demonic powers led by Satan the devil.

It should also be pointed out that Persia (Iran) is mentioned as part of the Gog-Magog alliance in Ezekiel 38-39, of which Russia, India and China are apparently also a part. Many think that this is a prophecy of an invasion of the Holy Land by these nations prior to the return of Christ. But as it occurs when Israel is dwelling in peace with no defensive walls, a time soon after Christ’s coming better fits this prophecy (see bible.ucg.org/bible-commentary/Ezekiel/Future-invasion-of-Israel-by-Gog-of-Magog/).

Still, we might expect to see this alliance developing in some respects even prior to Christ’s return—and perhaps be the same as the eastern powers in Revelation. Indeed, Russia is allied with Iran even today. The present Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) includes the nations listed in Ezekiel’s prophecy. And Russia is promoting its new Eurasian Economic Union as a counterweight to the European Union.

The current deal can facilitate closer integration between these powers. In pointing out that lifting sanctions and the embargo on Iran, a terrorist state, makes no sense, Allen West states: “Of the P5+1 nations [involved in the agreement], it’s China and Russia who are supporting these conditions—wonder why? Imagine a collusion between Russia, China and Iran when it comes to energy security.

“There’ll be an incredible run on oil and natural gas. And if Russia were to supply the S-300 anti-aircraft weapon system to Iran in exchange for oil shipments—then we have a new world axis developing. And China will

be more than happy to accommodate and use those energy resources as well.”

What now?

For now we appear to be left with this highly dangerous deal with Iran that seems likely to go into effect. Even if it doesn’t, Iran will be moving toward developing nuclear weapons nonetheless. The desire of the mullahs ruling Iran is to instigate a global apocalypse to usher in the coming of one they call “the 12th Imam,” whom they believe will establish Islam in its rightful place of dominance over in the world.

There is really no way to successfully negotiate with such people. Whatever they agree to is merely to buy time to prepare for the needed world conflagration.

You as an individual will not be able to affect the deal or how it is implemented directly. But there is something you can and must do—seek the God of heaven! Only He, through His Son Jesus Christ, will ultimately bring lasting peace to earth. We must be praying for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2). And we must pray for His help to continue to personally grow in His way, keeping the vision of His coming Kingdom before us (Matthew 6:33).

In the meantime, there is much to grieve over—even if the agreement is stopped. In the words of John Podhoretz at *Commentary* magazine: “This is an infamous day, and while those of us who see Iran’s nuclearization as the threshold threat for the rest of the 21st century will not be silent and will not give up the fight against it, it is appropriate to take a moment to despair that we—the United States and the West—have come to this” (“Iran Deal: The Right to Despair,” July 14, 2015).

Thankfully we know the end of the story. But the world will see great darkness before it’s over. **GN**

Learn More

What’s behind the rapidly diminishing geopolitical stature of the United States on the world scene? Why is it increasingly unwilling to uncompromisingly confront evil—in this case a dictatorial enemy regime poised to acquire the world’s most deadly weapons? You need to know the answers! Download or request our free study aid *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.



Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download it from our website.

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The Gay Agenda Blueprint: A Plan to Transform America

The startling shift in American attitudes toward gays and same-sex marriage is not the result of chance or random events. More than a quarter century ago, gay strategists laid out a plan to transform the nation—with astounding success. *by Charles Melear*

Do you consider yourself an independent thinker? What is the source of your conclusions regarding right or wrong? How do you determine your opinions regarding the news and political events?

Professional marketers develop strategies to influence and persuade potential customers to purchase their products. Some are very successful, as you can probably hum or sing dozens of pithy jingles or recognize the logos of many companies.

But you should also realize that people are affecting our culture who you've probably never heard of. How about Dan Wieden, co-founder of the advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy? Have you ever repeated the Nike slogan "Just do it"? Wieden developed that phrase in 1988.

Have you ever used the expression, "Where's the beef?" Wendy's hamburger chain profited from that slogan's creator, Cliff Freeman, around 1984. You've probably never heard of him either.

You've also likely never heard of Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen. Nevertheless, these men have directly affected your life and American culture—strategically, gradually, subtly and definitely intentionally.

In the November 1987 edition of *Guide*, a magazine for homosexuals, the two men authored an article titled "The Overhauling of Straight America." There Kirk, a researcher in neuropsychiatry, and Madsen, a public relations consultant, laid out a blueprint to fundamentally change Americans' attitudes toward homosexuals and homosexuality. In 1989 they expanded that blueprint into a 398-page book titled *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90s*.

The "bible" of the homosexual agenda

Their goal was to make homosexuality

acceptable and to forge negative opinions of any who disagree. The article began by stating: "The first order of business is desensitization of the American public concerning gays and gay rights. To desensitize the public is to help it view homosexuality with indifference . . . She likes strawberry and I like vanilla; he follows baseball and I follow football. No big deal." (We quote from the *Guide* article rather than the book, which at times is quite vulgar and graphic. Interested readers can find the article in whole or in part online.)

One person described "The Overhauling of Straight America" as the "bible" of the homosexual agenda. It is quite a contrast to the Bible of Christianity.

The authors, relating to the culture of the late 1980s, were realistic. They continued: "At least in the beginning we are seeking public desensitization and nothing more. We do not need and cannot expect a full 'appreciation' or 'understanding' of homosexuality from the average American. You can forget about trying to persuade the masses that homosexuality is a good thing. But if you can only get them to think that is just another thing . . . , then your battle for legal and social rights is virtually won."

To understand how startlingly successful their blueprint proved to be, consider this: In 1987, the year that article was published, Gallup polls showed that only 33 percent of those polled thought that same-sex relations between consenting adults should be legal, while 55 percent thought such action should be outlawed (numbers don't total 100 percent because some offered no opinion). By 2015, the numbers were more than reversed—68 percent believed such sexual relations should be legal and only 28 percent were opposed.

Same-sex marriage was so off the radar that it wasn't even asked about in Gallup

polls until 1996, when only 27 percent approved and 68 percent were opposed. Today, Gallup polls show that 58 percent approve and 40 percent disapprove—another startling turnaround in attitudes.

Gallup polls in 1989 showed that only 19 percent of Americans believed people were born homosexual, with 48 percent believing it was due to environmental factors such as upbringing. By 2015 those numbers had dramatically shifted to 51 percent believing homosexuals were born that way and only 30 percent attributing it to other factors. (This is in spite of the fact that extensive genetic research and many studies of identical twins where only one was homosexual have disproven genetic determinism.)

Well-researched surveys (as opposed to some with markedly skewed samples and/or methodology) have consistently placed the homosexual population of America at around 2 to 3 percent—yet the influence of homosexuals on American culture is vastly out of proportion with their actual numbers. How did this come to be?

For those who remember what American culture was like in 1987 when the blueprint was first published, you can easily evaluate whether the six strategies they outlined have been successful. For those too young to remember the late 80s, consider how pervasive these things are in the culture you experience today.

What was their blueprint for overhauling American attitudes? Following are the six steps they advocated a quarter-century ago.

Step 1: "Talk about gays and gayness as loudly and as often as possible."

Authors Kirk and Madsen say that "almost any behavior begins to look normal if you are exposed to enough of it . . . The way to benumb raw sensitivities about homosexuality is to have a lot of people talk a great deal about the subject in a neutral or supportive way . . . Constant talk builds the impression that public opinion is at least divided on the subject, and that a sizable segment accepts or even practices homosexuality.

Consider this quote: "And when we say



talk about homosexuality, we mean just that. In the early stages of any campaign to reach straight America, the masses should not be shocked and repelled by premature exposure to homosexual behavior itself. Instead, the imagery of sex should be downplayed . . . First let the camel get his nose inside the tent—only later his unsightly derriere!”

When we are exposed to anything repeatedly, it becomes routine and normal. What initially might shock someone eventually can become acceptable. And acceptability is the ultimate goal. What at one time was highly offensive to the vast majority of Americans is now no big deal. They’ve been lulled into complacency.

“Where we talk is important,” wrote Kirk and Madsen. “. . . The average American household watches over seven hours of TV daily. Those hours open up a gateway into the private world of straights, through which a Trojan horse might be passed . . .

“So far, gay Hollywood has provided our best covert weapon in the battle to desensitize the mainstream. Bit by bit over the past ten years, gay characters and gay themes have been introduced into TV programs and films . . . On the whole the impact has been encouraging.”

Have you noticed the number of homosexual characters appearing in TV programs and how they are overwhelmingly depicted positively? From a rarity on TV in the 1980s, such characters are now almost inescapable. A *USA Today* article last year reported 32 regularly appearing bisexual or homosexual characters in primetime network scripted series for the 2014-15 television season, with another 64 appearing in cable TV shows (Bill Keveney, “Yes, You Really Are Seeing More LGBT Characters on TV,” Oct. 1, 2014).

If a child grows up hearing about the gay lifestyle and seeing it portrayed positively his entire life, won’t that make it seem normal?

Kirk and Madsen also described a strategy by which the homosexual movement could counter and largely nullify opposition from America’s churches. They wrote: “When conservative churches condemn gays, there are only two things we can do to confound the homophobia of true believers. First, we can use talk to muddy the moral waters. This means publicizing support for gays by more moderate churches, raising theological objections of our own about conservative interpretations of biblical teachings, and exposing hatred and inconsistency.”

This they have certainly accomplished—enlisting liberal scholars to explain away biblical teachings about homosexual prac-

tices, reinterpreting their plain meaning.

They continued: “Second, we can undermine the moral authority of homophobic churches by portraying them as antiquated backwaters, badly out of step with the times and with the latest findings of psychology.”

Again, their strategy has succeeded remarkably well. Those who hold to biblical teachings about homosexuality and marriage are condemned as bigots, homophobes and

with the Gay Victim image,” they wrote.

“. . . This means that jaunty mustachioed musclemen would keep very low profile in gay commercials and other public presentations, while sympathetic figures of nice young people, old people, and attractive women would be featured.”

They then add this caution for those who would want to push the gay agenda too far: “It almost goes without saying that groups



Today’s issues regarding the gay lifestyle have been orchestrated by activists for more than 25 years. This was no accident or chance course of events.

backward thinkers who are a threat to progress. Some who have stood up have been fined, ordered to attend pro-homosexual “sensitivity training,” lost jobs or had their businesses sued out of existence by government agents and agencies that support the homosexual agenda.

The next step in their stated strategy similarly turns truth on its head.

Step 2: “Portray gays as victims, not as aggressive challengers.”

“In any campaign to win over the public, gays must be cast as victims in need of protection,” Kirk and Madsen wrote. Of course this does not address the issue of whether the gay lifestyle is right or wrong. It is an attempt to emotionally manipulate others with the motive of getting them to accept values they otherwise wouldn’t agree with.

“If gays are presented, instead, as a strong and prideful tribe promoting a rigidly non-conformist and deviant lifestyle, they are more likely to be seen as a public menace that justifies resistance and oppression. For that reason, we must forego the temptation to strut our ‘gay pride’ publicly when it conflicts

on the farthest margin of acceptability such as NAMBLA [the North American Man-Boy Love Association, which as its name suggests promotes adult-child homosexual sex] must play no part at all in such a campaign: suspected child-molesters will never look like victims . . .

“Straight viewers must be able to identify with gays as victims . . . To this end, the persons featured in the public campaign should be decent and upright, appealing and admirable by straight standards . . . they should be indistinguishable from the straights we would like to reach.”

It should be obvious that we are beyond this strategy today. The gay community should no longer be considered victims in the United States—and in reality those in the gay movement have become aggressive challengers of traditional values and biblical beliefs on many fronts.

This brings us to the next step in their strategic blueprint.

Step 3: “Give protectors a just cause.”

“A media campaign that casts gays as society’s victims and encourages straights

to be their protectors must make it easier for those to respond to assert and explain their new protectiveness. Few straight women, and even fewer straight men, will want to defend homosexuality boldly as such . . . Our campaign should not demand direct support for homosexual practices, [but] should instead take anti-discrimination as its theme.

“The right to free speech, freedom of beliefs, freedom of association, due process and equal protection of laws—these should be the concerns brought to mind by our campaign.”

Again, this tactic is antiquated now. Law and due process should’ve always protected all citizens equally. The real issue is whether there is a true Creator God who authored the Bible and if that God has the right to determine right and wrong and what is best for those He’s created.

Step 4: “Make gays look good.”

“In order to make a Gay Victim sympathetic to straights you have to portray him as Everyman. But an additional theme of the campaign should be more aggressive and upbeat: to offset the increasingly bad press that these times have brought to homosexual men and women, the campaign should paint gays as superior pillars of society.”

This approach can be considered mission accomplished. Kirk and Madsen also pointed out the benefits of “the celebrity endorsement.” It doesn’t matter whether the celebrity is straight or gay, the important thing is the endorsement of homosexuality as normal.

Of course, most celebrities are part of the entertainment world, where values are overwhelmingly liberal and opposed to biblical standards. Is it any wonder that so many celebrities have “come out of the closet” in recent years or proclaimed their support for gays?

Step 5: “Make the victimizers look bad.”

Kirk and Madsen continued: “At a later stage of the media campaign for gay rights . . . *it will be time to get tough with remaining opponents.* To be blunt, *they must be vilified.* . . . Our goal here is twofold. First, we seek to replace the mainstream’s self-righteous pride about its homophobia with shame and guilt. Second, *we intend to make the anti-gays look so nasty that average Americans will want to dissociate themselves from such types*” (emphasis added throughout).

“The public should be shown images of ranting homophobes whose secondary traits and beliefs disgust middle America,” Kirk and Madsen wrote. To this end, they then suggested that those who oppose the homo-

sexual agenda be linked with images such as the Ku Klux Klan, “bigoted southern ministers drooling with hysterical hatred,” thugs and convicts, and Nazi concentration camps.

This strategy—aided and abetted by sympathetic news media and government agencies—has led to us entering a stage of aggressive attacks by some in the gay community against those who sincerely believe that homosexual behavior violates the laws, instructions and principles of God. Bible-believing Christians are indeed “vilified” and branded as bigots and homophobes.

Do rights of freedom of speech, freedom of religious beliefs and freedom of association work both ways? We’re seeing a time in which constitutionally guaranteed citizens’ rights are being stripped away to accommodate new supposed rights invented by various court rulings and government policy.

Step 6: “Solicit funds: The buck stops here.”

“Any massive campaign of this kind would require unprecedented expenditures for months or even years—an unprecedented fundraising drive,” they acknowledged.

Yet at the same time, they made a statement showing that gays really aren’t the oppressed, victimized group Kirk and Madsen advocate they be portrayed as: “Because those gays not supporting families usually have more discretionary income than average, they could afford to contribute much more.”

If you’ve ever wondered why so many American businesses cater to a gay clientele, donate money to support homosexual causes and celebrated the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, it’s because they recognize this simple fact: Homosexual couples, who typically don’t have children, have substantially more discretionary income than families who do.

The impact of this is also being felt in the political arena, where wealthy gays help bankroll campaigns for sympathetic candidates who will advance their interests and fund ads attacking those who stand for traditional and biblical values.

Kirk and Madsen go on to praise the fact that homosexuals have been able to infiltrate American news media to advance the cause of issues important to them. “Because most straightforward appeals are impossible, the National Gay Task Force has had to cultivate quiet backroom liaisons with broadcast companies and newsrooms in order to make sure that issues important to the gay community receive some coverage.”

In the 26 years since they wrote that, most U.S. media has tilted even more to the left,

so proponents of the homosexual agenda are usually assured of favorable coverage and free publicity for their cause.

What is the right Christian response?

Those who believe the Bible and care about the future of America should be aware that today’s issues regarding the gay lifestyle have been orchestrated by activists for more than 25 years. This was no accident or chance course of events.

A gay person should not be afraid of a Christian as some hate-monger. True followers of Jesus Christ are to always show love toward others (Matthew 5:44), recognizing that all have sinned and need God’s mercy and forgiveness (Romans 3:23). But this does not mean excusing and accepting sin.

Recall that Jesus didn’t condemn a woman who was caught in adultery and brought before Him (John 8:2-11). But He didn’t say that what she was doing was acceptable either. He told her to “go and sin no more” (verse 11). Moreover, He had to die to pay the penalty of her sin—and ours.

We should call sin what it is. And the Bible clearly labels homosexual activity a sin (Leviticus 18:22; 22:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Of course, we must have compassion for those who don’t understand—and for those who do who struggle with this sin.

In communicating with others, Christians should be wise enough not to be trapped by phrases mislabeling the Christian approach. “Are you anti-gay?” can be a very misleading question. Understanding the definitions of someone you are having a discussion with is important. Acceptance, tolerance and inclusivity can be controversial and emotionally charged words.

Speaking on the issue of tolerance, mega-church pastor and bestselling author Rick Warren observed that our culture has accepted two huge lies. The first is that if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle, you must fear them or hate them. The second is that to love someone means you agree with everything they believe or do.

Both notions are nonsense. You don’t have to compromise convictions to be compassionate. Disapproval is not hate. Disapproval of what is wrong and harmful is a part of godly love.

Don’t let your life be controlled by the clever marketing of evil as good and good as evil. Look to God’s Word as the blueprint for your life. One day this wayward world and its vile influences will end, but the way of God will prevail. Stand firm with Him and you will stand forever! **GN**



Follow Me

Glorifying God With a Loud Voice

Jesus' healing of 10 lepers—with just one giving thanks—is a story for how we are to live today beyond our initial encounter with God.

by Robin Webber

The apostle Peter witnessed boldly to an audience on the Day of Pentecost that “Jesus of Nazareth, a Man, was attested by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did through Him in your midst as you yourselves also know” (Acts 2:22).

You may not realize how one such miracle incredibly impacts our lives today as we respond to Jesus' invitation of “Follow Me.” It's the story of the 10 lepers healed by Christ recorded in Luke 17:11-19. Its focus centers on the offense of ingratitude, but the greater story for us today is how to truly express thankfulness for God's intervention in our lives beyond our initial encounter with Him.

No accidental meeting

The story begins in verse 11 with the words “Now as it happened,” giving urgency to the moment in Jesus' travels north of Jerusalem between the regions of Samaria and Galilee. The Samaritans, a people of mixed heritage, worshipped in a manner different from the Jews. And the Jews, considering themselves exclusively God's people, looked down on and ostracized the Samaritans.

The next key words are “Then as He entered” in verse 12, again framing the moment of Jesus' encounter with “ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off.” Luke's account goes on to say, “And they lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’”

I don't believe this was an accidental bumping into someone. The time was imminent for Christ to not only touch people with a miracle, but to also reach down and offer a fuller transformation of their being beyond the moment. Jesus was making it loud and clear that He would enter the lives and work with those whom society

had marginalized or ostracized—those without hope.

These 10 men, beyond their backgrounds, personalities, and hopes and dreams, were now lumped into one broad-brush term—*lepers*. Leprosy was an infectious disease causing bodily deterioration, with progressive damage to skin and underlying nerves, leaving limbs in an atrophied, useless state.

The ever-present, notable skin lesions were symptomatic of something going on inside. Biblical instruction long before had told the people of Israel to “put out of the camp every leper . . . both male and female” (Numbers 5:2-3).

William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible*

Jesus was making it loud and clear that He would enter the lives and work with those whom society had marginalized or ostracized—those without hope.

commentary on the Gospel of Luke mentions that “there was no specified distance at which they should stand, but we know that at least one authority laid it down that, when he was windward of a healthy person, the leper should stand at least fifty yards away. Nothing could better show the isolation in which lepers lived” (comments on Luke 17:11-19).

Is it any wonder that the lepers in Luke 17 cried out to Jesus for mercy? The culturally prescribed distance of 150 feet and the immensity of their debilitating ailment demanded such a pronounced cry.

Something to do—and a mind-set to keep

Christ would not brush them off. He wouldn't condemn them as did so many in the religious culture of that day, who believed physical ailments or infirmities were a direct result of sinful people's

actions (see John 9:1-2 as an example).

Rather He said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests” (Luke 17:14), which followed the prescribed detailed and systematic manner of inspecting lepers who might reenter society from “outside the camp.”

Did you notice something here that Jesus specifically gives those who would follow Him? He gives them a job to do! Following Christ is not simply staring upward and believing precepts, but doing something down here below that He has asked you to do in His Word that might even seem humanly frustrating. Jesus told the lepers to take a walk and go to the priests.

And notice what followed in the same verse: “And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.”

What happened next after this life-changing miracle? “And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and

fell down at His feet, giving Him thanks, and he was a Samaritan” (emphasis added throughout).

Jesus then responded in typical rabbinical manner by conveying instruction through a question: “‘Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?’ And He said to him, ‘Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well!’” (verses 17-19).

Only one in 10 of that forsaken band returned to express gratitude. How soon they forgot! But this one man returned to Jesus and, it is forever imprinted, “with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down at His feet, giving Him thanks.”

And He was a Samaritan, of all people—one ridiculed and marginalized by those professing to follow biblical religion in that day. Yet he would be one of Luke's many

heroes. He would be the New Testament Naaman who would resemble Christ's words spoken earlier in Nazareth (see Luke 4:24-27; 2 Kings 5).

Moreover, he's us and we're him. We have all been spoken to and touched by the same Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. This story is more than a moment or event frozen in time. It lays out a manner of existence for us to live out today before God and man.

As they were, so were we

The life of the lepers actually portrays our life before God began to work with us and brought us into contact with His Son. We were separated from God—and by far more than 150 feet. We were in a different world and a different walk away from God.

We were cut off from the land of true

the camp? Consider the words of Hebrews 13:12-13 with that in mind: "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered *outside the gate*. Therefore let us go forth to Him, *outside the camp*, bearing His reproach."

Jesus Christ died in relative isolation from the community of men. Paul tells us why in 2 Corinthians 5:21, explaining that God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

The spiritual leprosy that has consumed humanity since Eden and consumed our lives until we accepted God's gift of redemption was placed on Christ—"outside the camp." Truly, "He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows . . . And we hid, as it we, our faces from Him" (Isaiah 53:3). He not merely reached out to the

lepers, but in a greater spiritual sense identified with their lot and suffered in their place—and ours.

Our personal acceptance of what Christ has done for us allows us to be spiritually cleansed inside and out. Every

lesion of impurity that we brought on ourselves, be it on our hearts, thoughts or deeds, is removed.

The apostle John makes it plain that what our Heavenly Father asked Jesus to perform in our stead goes deep and thoroughly: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Our spiritual reality is that we are no longer spiritual lepers, but welcomed into the spiritual family of God with a "newness of life" (Romans 6:4) as real and incredible as the miracle that touched those lepers of old.

How loud, then, is our voice?

How, then, do we emulate the example of the thankful Samaritan leper who "with a loud voice glorified God"? How do you and I "go outside the camp," as Hebrews 13 says, encounter Jesus Christ once and

always, and do as it instructs in the verses that follow? We are admonished, "Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (verses 15-16).

We do so, and seek out Christ and be about our "Father's business" by realizing:

- God hasn't touched our lives by accident but by design. He's our physical and spiritual Creator. We don't worship an accidental Savior, for He not only created time but is also the Master of timing. Hearing His words, reading this article, is no chance encounter. The God we worship doesn't operate by chance but by determined purpose (1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:10). Experiencing Him is not by the roll of cosmic dice.

- God has not called us to despise others, but to pray and long for others to become part of His family. It's God's call to choose His family. It's our job to accept His family and to always remember that at one time we were the "others"—but now we can rejoice because by God's grace we belong to God through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:23).

- When God comes into our lives and begins to perform His work in us (Ephesians 2:10), He will give us something to do, just as with the lepers of old. He will give us a job. It may not be to visit a Levitical priest, but to look for and follow through on the assignment He presents you. God will do for us what only He can do—heal our heart and remove the sinful lesions of the past—but He will also ask us to do our part in faith, which demands eyes that see beyond the moment.

- God's reach into our lives isn't momentary, and thus our response cannot merely be a fleeting verbal thank-you. Experiencing God isn't a one-time event. It's a transformative relationship that must persist for the rest of our lives.

Our appreciation may commence with a verbal thank-you, but this gratitude needs to remain, shaping every motive in our heart, thought in our brain, reasoning of our mind, and actions that are witnessed by all.

Why? Because we have been created to worship God in all we do, to glorify His name in all that comes our way, and to be a blessing to all with whom we come in contact—just as the Samaritan leper's example of return and thankfulness remains a blessing to us.

The future awaits us, but not alone as we continue in Jesus' directive of "Follow Me." The question now is, with how loud a voice will we glorify God? **GN**



spiritual living. Isaiah 59:1-2 describes our previous isolated spiritual state before God entered our lives: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear."

Sometimes we forget where God found us and began to work with us! Even Spirit-led Christians can be prone to spiritual amnesia. Romans 3:23 offers a vivid reminder that we were in that band of those cut off: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And the penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Just like the lepers we were all "the walking dead"—we just didn't know it.

It's time to respond to this wakeup call found in the telling of the miraculous healing of the lepers.

Remember the instruction in Numbers 5:1-2 that stated lepers had to be put outside

Letters From Our Readers

Comments about the July-August issue

Thank you for the article "The Worst World War Is Yet to Come" in the July-August issue. It helps those who love God without measure to prepare for the time that is coming. Courage is required, but God has always rescued me in the nick of time, no matter what the trial. Daniel of the Bible is another good example of courage without compromise—God delivered him without fail.

We should be willing to lay down our lives to defend His holy honor at any given time because we know about the hope of eternal life! The end of this age will test our strength of character. May we pray that His Kingdom comes quickly!

From the Internet

Good reading! I am tired of all the warfare, corruption, collusion and greed in this world! Pride, envy, greed, gluttony, laziness, lust and wrath dominate all too much of humankind's endeavors. God save us from ourselves!

From the Internet

Thanks for Good News articles

It gives me a great feeling knowing that there is a Christian Church willing to not only admit the truth, but also to explain it for all to see. I am so thankful for your articles. They shine light on the history and the misrepresentation of Christianity, and how it has unfortunately caused Scripture to be misunderstood. I hope that more and more of this type of information will come to the surface. God is about love and truth. Thank you!

From the Internet

I just want to send you a note to express my appreciation for your publications. I, as a retired university professor, appreciate good biblical research. With my teachings of ancient history that covered Islam, Christianity and the heroes of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, I feel I have a basic understanding of Christ's teachings.

I have spent hours in the Garden of Gethsemane and spent hours in Old Jerusalem. I am a pioneer in the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, being associated with them from an early date. I tell you this so you will understand my appreciation for your publication. Incidentally I do read Greek, Latin and a bit of Hebrew. Sincerely, and thanks for your good publications.

Reader in Temecula, California

Feedback on previous issues

Thank you for explaining the meaning of Ephesians 2:8-9 in the article in the May-June issue titled "Is Belief All That's Required for God's Gift of Salvation?" I have always wondered how eternal life can be a gift if one has to do something to earn it. The analogy of a self-addressed envelope to receive a \$100 bill as gift made it as clear as day. Thank you again. I do believe that the Holy Spirit is guiding you!

From the Internet

I found a copy of *The Good News* being given away at our local library. It is pretty beat up, but the information is so important! May I have another copy of

the March-April 2015 issue? I would also like a subscription. Thank you!

Reader in Louisiana, United States

Thanks for your interest! You may be interested to know that all of our previous issues—20 years' worth—are archived online at www.GNmagazine.org.

Thank you for *The Good News* magazine that you've been sending me since 2010. All your articles are enlightening, informative and up-to-date, and have helped me in my spiritual growth. I am so blessed to know your organization and your magazine. I came to know the incredible truth about the pagan origins of Easter and Christmas through your magazine.

I even came to know the truth about the biblical festivals we are supposed to observe, and especially about the Sabbath. Even though I was familiar with God's Word beforehand, I never had any particular interest in which day we are supposed to observe. But by God's grace, I came to know the truth through your magazine.

Subscriber in India

I'm writing to say thank you so much for all the great issues that you have sent to me the past two years. I've enjoyed every single article and am still eager to read more.

Reader in Morocco

Although I am an atheist, I find *The Good News* magazine very informative and always enjoy reading it. Please keep me subscribed.

Subscriber in Honiton, England

I have learned so much about the Bible since subscribing to *The Good News*. You make the Bible come alive, and for that I am very grateful.

Reader from Slough, England

I am greatly impressed with *The Good News*. It is of great concern in this age we live. It's a great help to get a biblical explanation.

Subscriber in Devizes, England

Beyond Today TV program comments

I had the joy of watching your program this morning. I watch it every week and find it very rewarding. I read *The Good News* magazine cover to cover, and it makes me better understand my Bible. I thank God that He showed me your program!

Viewer in Buffalo, New York

I was not aware of *Beyond Today* television until, by pure accident, I came across one of your episodes: "God's Plan for the Middle East." Unfortunately, your TV show does not seem to air on Australian television. I would be obliged if you could send me a hard copy of the booklet *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.

From the Internet

In fact, Beyond Today does air in Australia and several other countries. Viewers can find the details at beyondtoday.tv/schedule.

Excited to find answers

It gives me a great feeling knowing that there is an actual Christian Church willing not only to admit the truth but also to post the truth for all to see. I am so glad that these articles shine light on the history and the misrepresentation of Christianity and how it has unfortunately caused Scripture to be misunderstood. I certainly hope that more and more of this type of information will come to the surface. After all, God is about love and truth. Thank you.

Internet reader

Thank you for all your wonderful studies, teachings and information. Your church is the best place for help in finding the truth in the Bible. I have been trying to make sense of certain scriptures for years, and now I truly can.

Internet reader

Please accept a donation

I recently received quite a few booklets from your organization, which I am excited to read! Based on their titles, they seem to be touching upon topics that I really want to explore further. I love that they are Bible-based, and I am able to look up each scripture you reference to meditate on. Please accept my dona-

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I really enjoy *The Good News* magazine. It gives a good understanding of the Bible and highlights information not given in mainstream Christian faiths. I highly recommend this magazine to all.

- K.T., *Good News* magazine Facebook fan



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Questions & Answers

Q: Where did Halloween come from? Is it a holiday that's okay for Christians to celebrate?

From the Internet

A: Most people know that Halloween takes place on Oct. 31. Far fewer understand the connection between Halloween and the next day on the calendar, the festival of All Hallows' or All Saints' Day, celebrated by some churches and denominations Nov. 1. Oddly enough, history shows that Halloween—this ancient, thoroughly pagan holiday with its trappings of death and demonism—is inseparably tied to All Saints' Day.

Pagan festivals have had a curious way of worming their way into Christianity over the centuries. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* explains that "the British church attempted to divert the interest in pagan customs by adding a Christian celebration to the calendar on the same date as the Samhain [the ancient Celtic name for the festival that we call Halloween]. The Christian festival, the Feast of All Saints, commemorates the known and unknown saints of the Christian religion just as the Samhain had acknowledged and paid tribute to the Celtic deities" (1987, Vol. 6, p. 177).

How did this strange turn of events come about? How did the Catholic Church transform an ancient pagan festival into one supposedly honoring dead saints?

The 1913 edition of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says this about All Saints' Day: "In the early days the Christians were accustomed to solemnize the anniversary of a martyr's death for Christ at the place of martyrdom. In the fourth century, neighboring dioceses began to interchange feasts, to transfer relics, to divide them, and to join in a common feast. Frequently groups of martyrs suffered on the same day, which naturally led to a joint commemoration.

"In the persecution of [Roman Emperor] Diocletian the number of martyrs became so great that a separate day could not be assigned to each. But the Church, feeling that every martyr should be venerated, appointed a common day for all. [Eventually] Gregory III (731-741) consecrated a chapel in the basilica of St. Peter to all the saints and fixed the anniversary for 1 November" (Vol. 1, p. 315).

Pope Gregory's choice of Nov. 1 for this celebration wasn't random. He chose that date for a specific reason. Author Lesley Bannatyne explains: "That the date coincided with Samhain was no accident: the Church was

still trying to absorb pagan celebrations taking place at this time . . .

"Villagers were also encouraged to masquerade on this day, not to frighten unwelcome spirits, but to honor Christian saints. On All Saints' Day, churches throughout Europe and the British Isles displayed relics of their patron saints. Poor churches could not afford genuine relics and instead had processions in which parishioners dressed as saints, angels and devils. This religious masquerade resembled the pagan custom of parading ghosts to the town limits. It served the new church by giving an acceptable Christian basis to the custom of dressing up on Halloween.

"In addition, the Church tried to convince the people that the great bonfires they lit in homage to the sun would instead keep the devil away" (*Halloween: An American Holiday, An American History*, 1998, pp. 9, 11).

Later a second celebration, All Souls' Day, was instituted on Nov. 2. Eventually these two holidays merged into the present observance on Nov. 1, which was also called All Hallows' Day. The name of All Hallows' Even (evening) for the night of Oct. 31 evolved into the name Hallowe'en, or Halloween as it is called today.

This is a brief history of how men rationalized taking an ancient pagan festival rooted in death and demonism and adapting it for use as a "Christian" celebration. Regrettably, it flies in the face of God's explicit instruction to not use pagan practices to worship Him.

He clearly states in Deuteronomy 12:30-32: "Do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You 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."

Some argue that they are not using Halloween to honor God now but to just have non-religious fun. But God wants His people to completely remove from their lives anything derived from pagan religion (see verses 2-3).

This is a brief explanation of the origins of the holiday and why Christians should have nothing to do with it. There's a lot more to say. You can learn more by searching our website at www.ucg.org or from our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?* available at www.GNmagazine.org/booklets, or you can request a copy from the office nearest you listed on page 2 of this magazine.

tion. I would also like to mention a gentleman from *Beyond Today* in Cincinnati answered a letter I wrote when I was feeling discouraged. I am so thankful for that letter! He provided valuable information to me. So thanks to all of you!

Reader in Illinois

Please find a check for our tithes enclosed. Before now our tithes have been faithfully paid to a local church. We do not believe many things this church believes, so we stopped attending, but we kept sending our tithes. But we would rather pay tithes to a church that believes the way we do. We called the phone number in *The Good News* and made arrangements to send tithes to the United Church of God. Thank you for your wonderful magazine, the *Bible Study Course* lessons, and your helpful staff. May God bless and keep your good works going!

Subscribers in Georgia

Looking for like-minded worshippers

I am looking for a church location near my home. I was wondering if there were any United Church of God members close to me who fellowship on the Sabbath.

Reader in Virginia

Is there a fellowship in my region in Australia? I would love to be around some people of like mind in person. Thanks for your work!

Reader in New South Wales, Australia

I would like to know more about your church. I have been going to the Church of England for many years.

Reader in England

Interested readers can find locations and contact information for local congregations of the United Church of God, publisher of The Good News, at www.ucg.org/churches. To learn more about us, we recommend the free resources This Is the United Church of God and The Church Jesus Built. Both are available at www.ucg.org/booklets or from our office nearest you listed on page 2 of this issue.

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