

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 7, Number 3

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About Our Cover:

Many people think of love as nothing more than a warm, sentimental feeling. The love of God, however, transcends emotion. It is the supreme virtue of God's own character and should be the motivation for everything a Christian does. (Corel photo)

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A Personal Message from John W. Ritenbaugh:

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: LOVE

What the world needs now is love, sweet love” are the opening words to a popular ballad of a number of years ago. It expresses a desire that virtually everyone holds. But what is love? Judging by the commonly held understanding of “love,” the world does not need any more of it! If what is happening in the world is evidence, it is very clear the world has only the foggiest of notions of what love is. If it does know, it is not doing it, or the song would not be making the statement of need.

Love is a much abused term. Because of our experiences, we all have somewhat different ideas about it. The most prevalent notion in the Western world is that love is a warm, topsy-turvy feeling, a thrill one gets in the pit of the stomach or a tingle running up and down the spine. We think of it as a warm sense of regard, a strong desire to be with or be satisfied by someone or something.

Some have equated it with caring, benevolent giving or nothing more than sheer emotionalism. On occasion, we use the term very casually and loosely. People express their “love” for the liturgy of a certain church. Some will say they just “love” ice cream, a certain beer, pizza, style of house, color, automobile, fashion, performer or team. People say they love an endless number of things. What some call “love” a theologian might call unbridled lust.

But these statements become ridiculous once we begin to understand what biblical love is. People’s “love” of

something is merely an opinion, a preference. A preference is not love, and to use “love” in this way devalues it.

To care about something is not love either. One can care to the point of obsession or lust. A measure of caring must be a part of true love, but by itself, that caring feeling or preference is not love.

Love’s Supreme Importance

In I Corinthians 13, the Bible reveals love’s supreme importance to life. Paul directly compares love’s value to faith, hope, prophecy, sacrifice, knowledge and the gift of tongues and indirectly with all other gifts of God mentioned in chapter 12. He in no way denigrates the others’ usefulness to life and God’s purpose, but none can compare in importance to love.

The Corinthians took great pleasure in their gifts, just as we would, but a gift’s relative importance is shown in its temporal quality. That is, there are times when a gift is of no use. But love will never end; it will always be of use.

Indeed, the receiving of gifts from God—unless accompanied by and used with love—have the potential to corrupt the one receiving them. God’s gifts are powers given to enhance a person’s ability to serve God in the church. However, we have all heard the cliché, “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” If gifts are not received and used with love, they will play a part in corrupting the recipient, just as they were corrupting the Corinthians. Love is the attribute of God

that enables us to receive and use His gifts without corruption.

The Bible says in I Corinthians 8:1, “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies [builds up].” “Puffs up,” when opposed to “edifies,” implies tearing down, destruction. Paul is saying that pride has the power to corrupt the bearer of knowledge. This statement is part of the prologue to the great chapter on love, written because the Corinthians had allowed their emphasis to drift into the wrong areas. Even as a gift from God, knowledge has the potential to corrupt its recipient, if it is unaccompanied by love.

Paul thus begins chapter 13 by contrasting love with other gifts of God. He does this to emphasize love’s importance, completeness, permanence and supremacy over all other qualities we consider important to life and/or God’s purpose.

Prophecies end because they are fulfilled. The gift of tongues is less necessary today as then because of the widespread use of English in commerce, politics and academia. Its value depends on specific needs. Knowledge is increasing so rapidly that old knowledge, especially in technical areas, becomes obsolete as new developments arise. Yet the need for love is never exhausted; it never becomes obsolete. God wants us to use it on every occasion.

Paul also admonishes us—by instructing us “to put away childish things” (verse 11), as well as his reference to a mirror (verse 12)—that love is something we grow in. It must be perfected. What we have now is partial. Therefore, God does not give it to us in one huge portion to be used until we run out of it. In that sense, we must always see ourselves as immature. But a time is coming when love will be perfected, and we will have it in abundance like God. In the meantime, while we are in the flesh, we are to pursue love (I Corinthians 14:1).

This indicates that the biblical love is not something we have innately. True, some forms of this quality we call love come unbidden; that is, they arise by nature. But this is not so with the love of God. It comes through the action of God through His Spirit, something supernatural (Romans 5:5).

Love, Debt and Motivation

In Romans 13:8-10 Paul injects love into the context of law, showing that it is the sum of all duties:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, are all

summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

He does not say love *ends* the need for law but that it *fulfills*—performs or accomplishes—the law.

Notice love’s relationship to law in context with what immediately precedes it. The context is a Christian’s response to government. He should submit to and honor human government as God’s agents in managing human affairs. A Christian is indebted to the government to pay tribute and taxes. When we pay them, a Christian is no longer financially indebted to the state until it imposes taxes the following year.

Regarding men, we are not to be in debt. He is not saying a Christian should never owe anybody money, but that there is a debt we owe to every person that we should strive to pay every day. This debt is one of love, paid by keeping God’s law, and this Paul illustrates by quoting several of the Ten Commandments! Inherent in this debt is that no matter how much we pay on it each day, when we wake up the next day, the debt is restored, and we owe just as much as we did the day before!

This sets up an interesting paradox because we owe everyone more than we can ever hope to pay. The paradox, however, is more apparent than real because this is not what Paul is teaching. He is teaching that love must be the driving force, the motivation, of everything we do. This points out a weakness of law regarding righteousness. Law, of and by itself, provides neither enough nor the right motivation for one to keep it.

Notice verse 3. “For rulers are not a terror to good

works, but to evil. Do you want

to be unafraid of the authority?

Do what is good, and you will

have praise from the same.” Laws

are stated and have penalties. Rul-

ers enforce them, but that does not

stop people from breaking them—

in many cases with impunity—

especially if they feel no

government representative is

watching them. The government’s

power lies largely in coercion,

meaning forcible constraint or re-

straint, whether moral or physical.

In other words, it is government by

force.

For instance, most people fla-

grantly disobey the speed limit on free-

ways and interstates, especially when

they are not crowded, until they spot a

patrol car with a trooper or two in it. Sud-

denly the speed limit becomes the norm until

the trooper is again out of sight. That the law is on the

books, prominently displayed and common knowledge

are insufficient motivation for many people to obey.

But love toward God, the love of God, can motivate us



to do what the law says to do but cannot motivate us to do. We can conclude that Paul claims that if one exercises God's love in paying his debt to man, he will keep the commandments.

We could also conclude that Paul says that if one does not break the commandments, he is acting out of love. This is the weaker of the two. Within this context, then, every phase, every facet of our responsibility to God and man, is covered if we make sure love has its place as the motivation for all we do.

If we really love another person, we cannot possibly injure him. Love would immediately stifle any thought that leads to adultery, murder, theft or any form of covetousness because love cannot harm. Since love cannot break the laws designed to protect another, it is supreme in providing the right kind of persuasion.

Love as a Bond

In Colossians 3:12-14 Paul shows another aspect of love's supreme importance to community life:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

Paul puts love "above all," showing that love is the epitome of virtues. Here, its importance is as "the bond," something that binds or holds things, like a congregation, together.

Eventually, all groups tend to fly apart. They do not remain united by magic. Generally, a group maintains its unity through a common cause. As each person contributes to attaining that cause, unity is generally served. However, even though individuals expend effort to achieve the cause, frictions arise from a multitude of reasons. Love is the supreme quality that enables the members of the group to maintain unity and keep it from flying apart. This is achieved by each person constraining or restraining himself to act in love.

Interestingly, qualities that we normally think of as being manly—like drive, courage, determination and aggressiveness—are missing from this list in Colossians 3. Though they are not inherently evil, they play directly into the human ego, frequently resulting in crass individualism.

Because it tends to produce division, individualism is not what Paul is aiming for here. Without strong spiritual control, those traits tend to descend into

competitiveness, anger, wrath, malice, dissembling, accusation, slander, and foul talk. These in turn are nothing more than unashamed self-seeking, traits that split and divide.

Each virtue Paul lists is actually an expression of love, traits that make it possible to live in a community. There is nothing weak and effeminate about them: It

takes a strong person to resist what comes naturally and do what God commands rather than go along with urges of our carnal feelings. Paul lists love as a separate attribute here to show that it is not limited to the qualities he names.

God, Man and Love

Some have called I John 4:7-12 the most sublime statement in all the Bible regarding God's nature:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

If we are going to be like Him, these verses are important to us because they tell us much about Him and our responsibilities. First, love is of God—He is its Source. This love the apostles write about comes from God and is not normally a part of man's nature. It is *agape* love. Human love apart from God is at its best a mere pale and vague reflection of what God is eternally.

Next, John says "God is love." Sublime as this is, some have misunderstood it because it can be misleading. God is not just an abstraction like love. He is a living, dynamic and powerful Being whose personality has multiple facets. He cannot be boxed, wrapped and presented as merely being one attribute.

John's statement literally reads, "The God is love." The Greeks used an emphatic form of writing, and here the emphasis is on the word "God." The syntax means the two words "God" and "love" are not interchangeable. "Love" describes God's nature. A good paraphrase would read, "God, as to His nature, is love." God is a loving God!



This does not mean that loving is one of God's activities, but that EVERY activity of God is loving. If He creates, He creates in love. If He rules, He rules in love. If He judges, He judges in love. Everything He does expresses His nature. God and His nature are manifested by what He does. By love God is revealed and known.

The very existence of life in others besides Himself is an act of love. His love is revealed in His providence and care of His creation. Since we are not robots, free-moral agency is an act of His love. God, by a deliberate act of self-limitation, endowed us to respond with mind and emotion. We are not animals. God's love is the explanation for redemption and our hope of eternal life. Out of love, God has given us something to *live* for. Life is not just a matter of going through the paces. We do not live our lives in vain.

God made humanity in His image and likeness. But the Bible says, "God is Spirit," and "God is love." Man, though, is flesh, and the Bible describes us as carnal, self-centered and deceitful. In practical fact, this means that man cannot be what he is meant to be until he loves as God loves. Only then will he truly be in the image of God because he will have the same nature as God. So, to achieve his potential, a person must love, but he must love with the love of God.

John 13:35 adds, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Even as God is revealed by what He does, so will His children. Our love for God has not made this possible, but His love for us, as I John 4:19 say, "We love Him because He first loved us." Thus, our love for Him is a response to His love for us. Since God shows His love for us by drawing us to Him, it behooves us to do acts of love toward others to draw them.

God's act of love in giving His Son defines the ultimate requirement of true love, the giving of our most beloved possession in sacrifice for another's gain. We can understand, then, that godly love will almost always have sacrifice involved in its giving. Sacrifice is the essence, the essential or vital part, of love.

God's love originates in Himself, was manifested in His Son and is perfected in His people. God's love is perfected in us when we reproduce it in or among ourselves, primarily in our fellowship. We either use love and perfect it or lose it. This partly explains the apostle John's intense concern about fellowship. What concerned him is not just an optional blessing to believers, but a fundamental outlet for the manifestation and perfection of God's love among and in the saints.

How May We Have This Love?

It should be obvious that we neither have God's love by nature, nor is it self-generated. Romans 5:5

verifies this understanding: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us." We receive godly love from its Source, God, by means of His Spirit.

Only by knowing God can we have this love, and only by loving can we know Him! This may sound like a vicious cycle, but the two go together. Only by learning to love God can we learn His nature, that is, what He is like. We cannot have that love until we first come to know Him. By fellowshiping with Him, we come to know Him and receive His love, and in using His love, we become like Him and really know Him. We can only really come to know God by experiencing the use of His love ourselves.

All this is possible because God, in His love, initiates a relationship with us, grants us repentance, gives us His Spirit, and then, because of His love, takes the lead in sustaining the relationship. This is why Paul says in Romans 5:10 that "we shall be saved by His life." He primarily shouldered the burden of our salvation. How comforting!

What Is this Love?

I John 5:1-3 is helpful in defining God's love in a practical way:

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

God intends the love of Him and the love of man to be inseparable parts of the same experience. John explains this by saying that if we love the Father, we also love the child. If we love the Father who begot the children, we must love the children, otherwise we do not have God's love. In I John 4:20, he amplifies this: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"

I John 5:3 is the Bible's basic definition of love. The commandments define, make clear, what the basic elements of love are and what direction our actions



should take if we would show love. This means that obedience to God is the proof of love. Obedience is an action that submits to a command of God, a principle revealed in His Word and/or an example of God or the godly.

In a sense, this is where godly love begins in a human being. Obeying God's commands is love because God is love. Because His very nature is love, it is impossible for Him to sin. Thus He gives us commands in love, and they will produce right and good results. Any command of God reflects what He Himself would do were He in the same situation.

Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Keeping the commandments is how one expresses love. He adds in John 15:10, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."

A person may have a thought to do good or to refrain from evil. He may have a feeling of compassion, pity or mercy. One may feel revulsion about doing an evil action. But none of these become love until the thought or feeling motivates one to act. In the biblical sense, love is an action.

Love has yet another aspect, however. We can show love coldly, reluctantly, in "dutiful obedience." We can also show it in joyous, wholehearted enthusiasm or warmhearted, thankful devotion. Which is more attractive to God or man as a witness?

Regardless of the attitude, it is far better to obey than not at all (Matthew 21:28-31). If we cannot get beyond *doing* what is right, the proper feelings will never be formed. Experience is largely responsible for training attitude and emotion. We will never form proper emotions without first performing the right actions with the right spirit, God's Holy Spirit.

Coming to Know God

In John 2:3-6 helps us understand how we can have the right attitude and emotion in our obedience:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

We come to know God through the same general process we get to know fellow human beings—by fellowship or experiencing life with them.

Around 500 years before Christ, Greek philosophers

believed they could come to know God through intellectual reasoning and argument. This idea had a simple premise: that man is curious! They reasoned that it is man's nature to ask questions. Since God made man so, if men asked the right questions and thought them through, they would force God to reveal Himself. The flaw in this is seen in the fruit it produced. Though it supplied a number of right answers, it did not—could not—make men moral beings. Such a process could not change man's nature.

To them, religion became something akin to higher mathematics. It was intense mental activity, yielding intellectual satisfaction but no moral action. Plato and Socrates, for example, saw nothing wrong with homosexuality. The gods of Greek mythology also reflect this immorality, as they had the same weaknesses as human beings.

A few hundred years later, the Greeks pursued becoming one with God through mystery religions. One of their distinctive features was the passion play, which always had the same general theme. A god lived, suffered terribly, died a cruel, unjust death and then rose to life again. Before being allowed to see the play, an initiate endured a long course of instruction and ascetic discipline. As he progressed in the religion, he was gradually worked into a state of intense expectation.

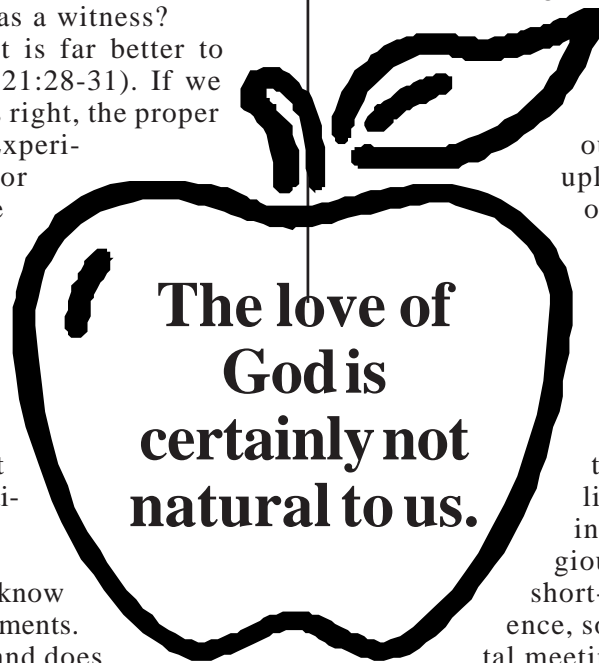
Then, at the right time, his instructors took him to the passion play, where they orchestrated the environment to heighten the emotional experience: cunning lighting, sensuous music, fragrant incense and uplifting liturgy. As the story developed, the initiate became so emotionally involved that he identified himself with and believed he shared the god's suffering, victory and immortality.

But this exercise failed them in coming to know God. Not only did it not change man's nature, but the passion play was also full of lies! The result was not true knowing but feeling. It acted like a religious drug, the effects of which were short-lived. It was an abnormal experience, somewhat like a modern Pentecostal meeting where worshippers pray down the "spirit" and speak in tongues. Such activities are escapes from the realities of ordinary life.

God Reveals Himself!

Contrast these Greek methods with the Bible's way of knowing God. Knowledge of God comes, not by speculation or emotionalism, but by God's direct self-revelation. In other words, God Himself initiates our knowing of Him, beginning our relationship by drawing us by His Spirit (John 6:44).

What God reveals is equally important. He reveals



Himself as a holy, loving and giving God with a purpose so awesome that our minds cannot grasp its full implications, though we can appreciate it. He shows that if we truly desire to be part of His awesome creative purpose, our covenant with Him obligates us to be as holy, loving and giving as He is!

God guides and empowers us in this great pilgrimage by the Holy Spirit, but obedience, following God's commands, is the way we begin to experience and grow in God-life, called "eternal life" in the Scriptures. By obedience we come to know God. It is like walking in His shoes, as it were.

In its biblical usage, the word "know" implies intimacy. From biblical examples, this implication can even mean sexual intimacy. That is really knowing someone closely, especially considering how long a relationship with God exists. When we apply this to our relationship with God, the sexual dimension disappears, and the intimacy becomes a deep and abiding reverence, devotion and loyalty.

People may think of God as nothing more than an intellectual exercise. They might say "I know God," or believe in a "first cause" or Creator without having any moral compunction. They go to church on Sunday and live the rest of the week just like all their neighbors and coworkers.

People may be emotional, saying God is in them and that they are filled with the "spirit," yet fail to see God in terms of commandments. They see God as something warm and snugly, a grandfatherly figure who rushes to their aid to blow away their problems, but they do not see Him as still purposefully creating.

Unmistakably and without compromise, Jesus, Paul and John show that the only way that we can show we know God, that He is in us and we love Him is if we have been regenerated by His Spirit and are obeying Him.

How High Is the Standard?

We can approach this question in a number of ways, but in comparing some scriptures, the answer becomes clear as we see a pattern develop. Jesus states the second great commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). All by itself, this establishes a very high standard because we love ourselves so much. We will sacrifice a great deal to please ourselves.

He raises this a notch or two when He says in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and

persecute you." This is a great challenge, confirming that the love of God is certainly not natural to us.

Our Savior also says in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." Paul draws this standard out even further by reiterating Jesus' own example in Romans 5:7-8:

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

He adds in Ephesians 5:25 that we are to love "just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it."

We are dealing with a love of such towering strength and determination that one with it will sacrifice himself over a long time even for his enemies. And if that is not enough, he will finally give himself totally in death for their well-being before it is reciprocated!

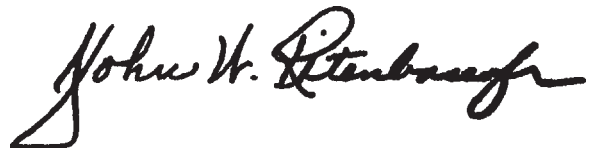
Will we ever live up to that? It is possible but only because God has made us partakers of the divine nature.

We now have the same Spirit in us that enabled and empowered Jesus. Peter writes:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. (II Peter 1:2-4)

Love, godly love, is the fruit, the product of that Spirit which now courses through our lives. That Spirit guides us and leads us into truth. It remains our responsibility, however, to choose to follow its guidance, to obey the truths of the great God who is creating His image in us. Obedience to His commands is godly love, the fruit of His Spirit that empowers us, the supreme virtue of the Almighty Creator.

In this same Christian love,



ARE YOU BEARING YOUR CROSS?

Jesus had to be crucified for our sins. Crucifixion, not uncommon in New Testament times, was a horrible execution reserved for slaves and hardened criminals. Roman conquerors kept their subjects in line by openly exhibiting this most gruesome and most feared execution. Nobody in his right mind would ever volunteer for such an end!

Or would he?

When you counseled for baptism, you probably said you were! Did you understand what you were committing to? Are you prepared to be crucified? Are you bearing your cross?

Jesus voluntarily gave His life for us on the stake. He never shied away from challenging—indeed, *demanding*—His followers do the same! Matthew 16:21-24 is one of these occasions. When Christ announces that He Himself would have to be sacrificed and resurrected, Peter rebukes Him for such a thought. Jesus chastises Peter for his comments, saying

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”
(Matthew 16:24)

with this is Paul’s statement in Philippians 3:10 that part of knowing God is “being conformed to [Christ’s]

that Satan had inspired his words! Then Jesus adds in verse 24, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and *take up his cross*, and follow Me.”

Luke 9:23 reads that we must take up our cross DAILY. It is an ongoing act! During pre-baptism counseling, ministers often read Luke 14:25-33, commonly called the “counting the cost passage.” Christ teaches us here that when we decide to be His disciples, we are making a covenant with God to carry our own cross. If we are *not* bearing our cross daily, we are *not* a disciple of Christ (verse 27). Tied

death.”

We need to understand what it means to “bear your cross”!

The practice of crucifixion ended centuries ago. How then can we bear our cross? Let’s look at *four* ways we are crucified with Christ.

Sacrificing the Self

The most common Greek word for “sacrifice” is *thusia*, meaning the act or the victim of sacrifice, literally or figuratively. It refers to the act of offering—to destruction or surrender—something precious for the sake of something else. The same

word can refer to the offering itself.

Jesus set the standard in explaining what “bear your cross” means. His crucifixion was fore-ordained *before* the foundation of the world (I Peter 1:20). The Father and the Word planned and agreed to every

step of the process in careful detail. No one forced Jesus to lay down His life; it was totally His own choice

A Ready Answer

“Be Ready Always To Give An Answer” – I Peter 3:15 (KJV)

(John 10:17-18). He knew long before it happened that He had a date set with the executioner! What pressure and stress He endured as the last few hours neared! No wonder He sweated drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44)!

After Adam and Eve's sin, God hints broadly at His coming sacrifice for man (Genesis 3:15). Adam and his sons are instructed in performing sacrifices, types of Christ's sacrifice, which explains God's displeasure with Cain's wrong approach and attitude while sacrificing (Genesis 4:3-5). From this time, sacrifice becomes a common theme among God's people, as they sacrificed valuable, clean animals from their herds or flocks (II Samuel 24:24). A sacrifice has to cost the offerer something, or it would not be a sacrifice!

In Jesus' case, His sacrifice cost Him dearly! He sacrificed everything for us (Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 9:26)—His life, title, rank, privileges, comforts, security, and power. In some translations of Philippians 2:7, the margin reads that He "emptied Himself." He obeyed to the point of death, "even the death of the cross" (verse 8). His offering set the pace and raised the standard.

In any discipline, good students imitate their teacher and walk in his steps (I John 2:6). Thus, Paul says we are to be *living* sacrifices (Romans 12:1), another way of saying "bear your cross" moment by moment, day by day. This is why Jesus, in Luke 9:23, precedes his comment about a disciple taking up his cross with "let him deny himself." Paul himself said he was being poured out as a drink offering in God's service (Philippians 2:17). Up to its last minute, his whole life after his calling was a living sacrifice.

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Ways to Sacrifice Ourselves

These days, "rights" are on everyone's lips. Society urges us to demand our rights in any given situation. Certainly, there is a time and place to claim a right, but more often we should be willing to

A sacrifice has to cost the offerer something, or it would not be a sacrifice!

"deny ourselves" and let someone else indulge in his "rights." This takes a willingness to "carry our cross," to sacrifice, to relinquish, to forgo our rights.

If we want to become a more effective sacrifice, we would greatly benefit by studying and meditating on this topic. It is so extensive that a whole series of articles could be written on "sacrificing the self." We can give up our lives inch by inch perhaps even more effectively than all at once. For example, some claim to be willing to die for Christ, but are not prepared to sacrifice a parking spot so the more elderly can park closer to the door. Are we willing to be a cheerful giver in all kinds of situations, even when no one notices? Nobody but God, that is!

We often think about sacrificing in the big ways and omit our day-by-day opportunities. Who sacrifices or serves the most in the home? Who is most willing to be inconvenienced—and serves cheerfully? Great is his or her reward. Do we practice this idea moment by moment in the privacy of our homes, as an example to our children?

The best opportunities to sacrifice our time and money come when it is a burden to do so! Think about that! These opportunities are never convenient, nor do they set appointments. They just pop up, and we may have to sacrifice something important to ful-

fill them. As one writer said, too often the problem with living sacrifices is that they have a habit of crawling off the altar at the last second, just when they are needed!

Many of us have already sacrificed a close family because of our "strange" beliefs. Some have given up choice jobs over the Sabbath and Feast of Tabernacles. We have all "sacrificed" money that could have gone for vacations or retirement investments in order to obey God's tithing laws. At least that is what a financial planner would say!

Sacrificing entails giving up something we want or need for the common good. It is a sacrifice to keep our mouths shut when we feel like giving someone a piece of our mind. Are we willing to make these kinds of sacrifices—or do we indulge our human nature?

It is a sacrifice to defeat temptations of all kinds, when our nature cries out for instant gratification, be it for alcohol, illicit sex, materialism, too much food, "saving face," gossip, etc. The apostle Peter reminds us that, when we really understand what godly suffering is all about, we will lose interest in sin—and will cease from it, no longer pursuing our former lusts (I Peter 4:1-3).

Paul perhaps says it most eloquently in Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Are we willing to give up the "self" and all its rights, if need be? Can we dare say with Paul, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me"? Incredible! But that is our goal.

Later in the same book he adds: "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus

Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). Are we really willing to give up what the world has to offer us? Are we willing to give up the world’s values, entertainment, approbation and esteem? To many, it is a sacrifice, but we cannot simultaneously befriend this world’s values and God (I John 2:15; James 4:4).

Suffice it to say, that “bearing our cross” deals with willingly sacrificing ourselves, our wants, desires and needs, for others and the things of God. It is being willing to lose our lives for His sake (Luke 9:24).

Suffering Shame for Jesus

A crucifixion involves incredible shame. It was a hardened criminal’s execution, conducted in the most shameful way: with the victim naked on the stake. The Bible refers to the “shame” of the cross, and how Jesus endured it for us (Hebrews 6:6; 12:2). Though we deserved that cruel and shameful criminal’s death, Jesus stepped in for us, not ashamed to identify with His sinful brothers (Hebrews 2:11).

After that, do we dare feel shame at being identified with Him, His cause, His way, His life? We sometimes do, perhaps without even knowing it! Do we dance an embarrassed two-step around questions coworkers may ask us about the Feast, or Days of Unleavened Bread or the Sabbath? Are we ashamed to admit we are devoted Christians?

Look long and hard at this. Jesus says that after all He has done for us, if we are ashamed of Him, He will be ashamed of us before His holy angels (Luke 9:26). Paul writes that He considers it an honor to be counted worthy of suffering shame for our Savior. He certainly was not ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16). We may be hard on Peter for denying His Master, yet we may do the same in spirit, when we try to hide that we are Jesus’ followers.

In the coming years, persecutors will no doubt try to make God’s people ashamed of being out of the mainstream. They may affix literal labels and signs to our clothing and houses, much as the Jews endured in Nazi Germany. We may be reviled, spit upon, hissed at, laughed at, ridiculed and mocked for our beliefs. Who knows how soon this could happen? Jesus certainly endured sneering and ridicule for us while suffering on the stake.

How will we react when we must suffer shame for Him? Will we feel it is more than we can bear and deny our Lord? Or will we bear the shame with grateful dignity that God has counted us worthy of representing our great Savior who bore our shame for us on a lonely hill called Calvary?

God has forewarned us about these things—even given us examples of how to react. When the early New Testament church began, the apostles were frequently threatened and beaten in efforts to stop their preaching. Notice what Luke records for us after one such occurrence: “So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41).

Our turn may come soon. God give us the grace and power to uphold His holy name when it comes!

Persecution and Martyrdom

Ultimately, Jesus’ crucifixion is about His persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the Jews

about their beliefs and their God. These were the men and women of God’s spiritual hall of fame “of whom,” Paul says, “the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38).

“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (II Timothy 3:12). Have some of us been lulled into a sense of false security, thinking that we will not suffer persecution in these end times? Do we think God has promised to protect us 100% of the time from any persecution or martyrdom?

Just because God apparently promises some a place of safety for the last few years before Christ’s return does not mean we will not have to endure heavy persecution before He removes us there! In fact, Jesus forewarns that we may have miniature flights, in a sense, prior to the main one—fleeing from city to city in pursuit of peace and safety. The context is just before the return of Christ:

And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel *before* the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10:22-23)

It is likely that God will allow some of us to die because of who we are and what we believe—before those who are “worthy to escape” flee to a place of safety. Whether or not that happens, we

should be willing to die for God and mentally prepared for it. Jesus soberly teaches His disciples—including us—that “whoever loses his life for My sake will save it” (Luke 9:24).

We have had it very easy until

now. The kind of peaceful assembly most of us have enjoyed is unparalleled in most of human history. Much of the time, God’s people had to worship in secret. “They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being

Carrying our cross daily also means being willing to suffer persecution and die for Christ.

and Romans as representatives of all mankind. God has often tested and tried His people in the furnace of persecution and martyrdom. Sometimes, it was no doubt as a witness to others of His people’s conviction

destitute, afflicted, tormented” (Hebrews 11:37).

It was dangerous to claim to be a true follower of Christ for most of the last two thousand years. In the apostles’ day, our brethren were crucified alive and their bodies used as human torches for Nero’s garden parties! Historians recount how lions tore Christians apart while a perverted Roman crowd cheered. Some accounts describe our brethren as calmly singing hymns of praise as the lions charged. Even Paul says

he “fought with beasts at Ephesus” (I Corinthians 15:32). During the Crusades and the Inquisition, many of our spiritual forefathers also gave their all for their beliefs.

Our turn may be coming. Be praying for the strength and conviction not to deny our Lord if our turn comes, as well as for the ability to jump for joy and be “exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

Of course, we need to be aware of not giving our persecutors any just cause to bring charges against us. If we suffer from our own sins, crimes or stupidity, then we had it coming to us. But if men say “all kinds of evil things against you falsely for [Christ’s] sake,” then that is a different matter.

So carrying our cross daily also means being willing to suffer persecution and die for Christ.

Why Go Through All This?

Why should we carry our cross and all it means and implies? It sounds painful, risky, shameful and certainly means being willing to give up our lives. What is in it for us? Peter asks the same question of Jesus, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” (Matthew 19:27).

In Jesus’ case, because He was perfectly willing to give up every-

thing and be crucified for us, what happened? Paul answers in Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus

So never forget the instruction
of our Savior: Willingly share in
His suffering, and He will
willingly share His glory with us.

every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Before honor is humility. Before blessings, we must often be willing to sacrifice. Once God sees that we will give our lives, He gives us eternal life. When we humble ourselves, He elevates us in His time and His way. Jesus assures his disciples that those who have willingly given “houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundred-fold, and inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Of course, whether we live or die, we should do all to and for the glory of God. He, in His grace and generosity, has promised that He will share His glory, His power, His eternal life, His riches and honor forever and ever with all those who are willing to carry their cross for His name’s sake!

Imagine being an heir of God! Actually, we cannot imagine it! If a person were told he was named as an heir in a billionaire’s will, he would be ecstatic! Yet when we read of being heirs of God, some of us yawn! God have mercy on us for not valuing more highly the promises

given to the faithful! Notice just a few such scriptures given for our encouragement:

◆ The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and

joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the

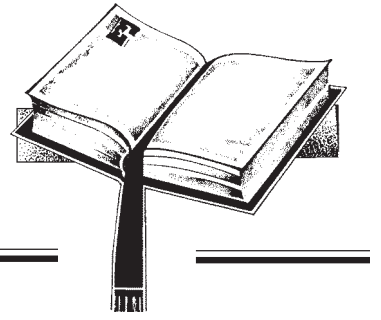
glory which shall be revealed in us. (Romans 8:16-18)

◆ . . . and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? (Romans 9:23-24)

◆ Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, he also will deny us. (II Timothy 2:10-12)

So never forget the instruction of our Savior: Willingly share in His suffering, and He will willingly share His glory with us. Willingly conform to His death, and He will grant us eternal life. Willingly take up the cross daily, and follow Him, and great will be our reward. Having been conformed to His suffering and death, we will truly be His brothers. And we will rule with Him and be co-heirs with Him in His Father’s Kingdom.

—Staff



The Branch

In our frequent studies of the Old Testament prophecies, we have undoubtedly read the sections on the Branch. In many translations, the word “branch” is in all capital letters so it is obvious to the reader that it refers to the Messiah. Usually, a quick survey of the context shows that the translators were justified in doing so.

Often, when something is so obvious, we tend to take it for granted. We see the simple solution and fail to take the time to dig a little deeper. As Winston Churchill once remarked, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened.” This is human nature at work.

Is there something more to the Branch than we have realized? Is the Branch’s identification as Messiah all that the prophets meant to convey? Is there anything more about the Messiah that His identification as the Branch can tell us? Could it possibly tell us something about ourselves and our tremendous potential as children of God?



What Is a “Branch”?

Branch” is capitalized sixtimes in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word used in five of them, *semah*, is fairly insignificant. It simply means “sprout, growth or branch.” The remaining occurrence has the word *hoter*, meaning “branch” or “twig.” We can see, then, that the literal meaning leads to a more metaphorical one.

The Hebrews and other Semitic peoples used the term in a genealogical sense, meaning that a certain person belongs to or descends from a

particular family line. To give the same sense, we might use the term “heir,” “descendant,” “seed,” or

“scion.” Like Hebrew, English

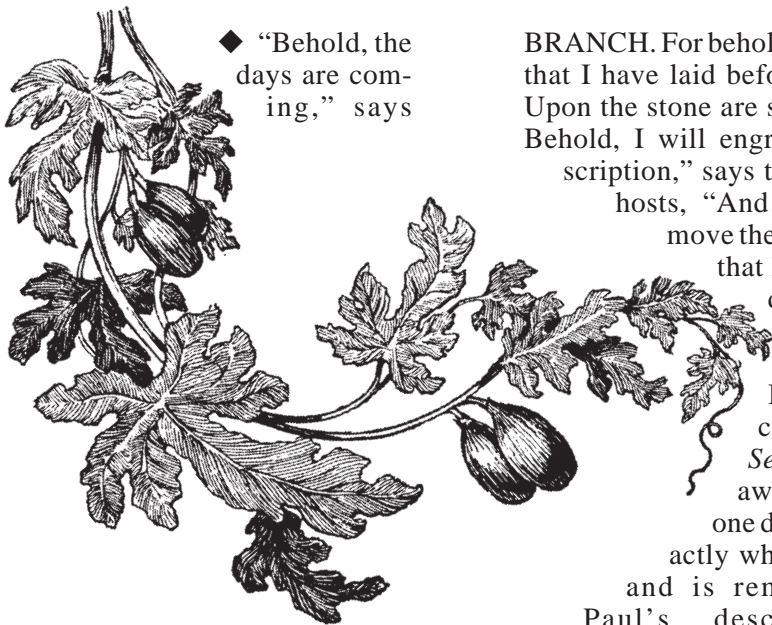
links trees and genealogy in such phrases as “family tree” and “the apple doesn’t fall very far from the tree.”

Of all the “Branch” passages, Isaiah 11:1 shows this usage the best: “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch [*hoter*] shall grow out of his roots.” As the context reveals, the Messiah will descend from the line of Jesse, the father of David. This idea of descent is present in all the “Branch” passages.

The “Branch” Passages

Let’s see what the Bible has to say about the “Branch”:

Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-17



◆ “Behold, the days are coming,” says

BRANCH. For behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua: Upon the stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave its inscription,” says the LORD of hosts, “And I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.”

Here the Branch is called God’s *Servant*, taking away iniquity in one day. This is exactly what Christ did, and is reminiscent of

Paul’s description in Philippians 2:7: “But [Christ Jesus] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant. . . .”

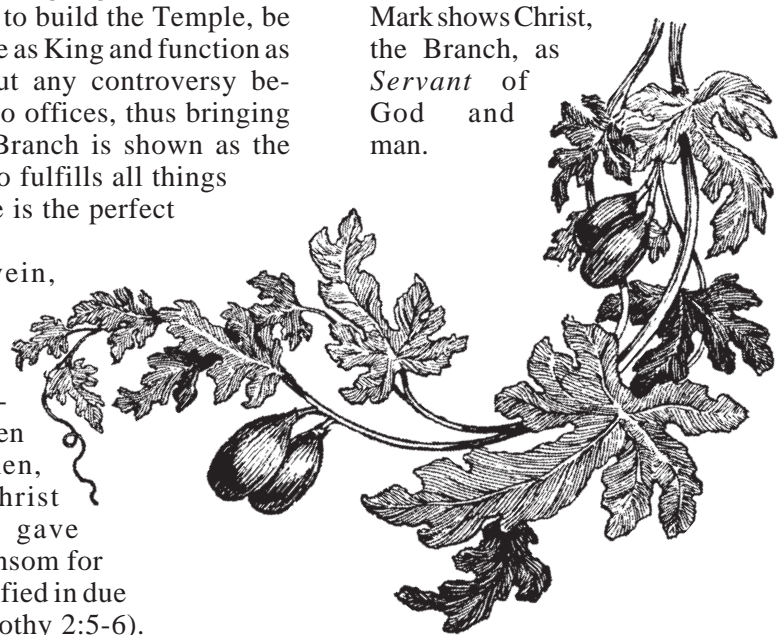
Zechariah 6:12-13

Just a few chapters later, Zechariah provides another angle on the Branch:

Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and He shall build the temple of the LORD; yes, He shall build the temple of the LORD. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne; so He shall be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

Here He is highlighted as a *Man* whose job is to build the Temple, be glorified, rule as King and function as priest without any controversy between the two offices, thus bringing peace. The Branch is shown as the one Man who fulfills all things perfectly. He is the perfect man.

In this vein, Paul writes, “For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus; who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time” (I Timothy 2:5-6).



Isaiah 4:2

Finally, we have the ultimate description of the Branch!

In that day the Branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped.

He is called “the Branch of the LORD”—He is *God’s* descendant! He is the Son of God, not just the son of the man David! Yet this verse also describes Him as “the fruit of the earth,” meaning that, though He is God, He is also from mankind. He could claim full descent from both Godkind and humankind!

A Hidden Passage

So we have seen the Branch in four different ways, as a King, Servant, Man and God! Does this ring any bells? John Ritenbaugh gave a series of sermons a few years ago titled “Four Views of Christ.” Here we have Old Testament verification of that very same idea! The four views of the Branch are the very same four views that the gospel writers give in the New Testament:

◆ Like Jeremiah 23 and 33, Matthew shows Christ, the Branch, as *King*.

◆ Like Zechariah 3, Mark shows Christ, the Branch, as *Servant* of God and man.

the LORD, “that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

◆ “In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this is the name by which she [Jerusalem] will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” For thus says the LORD, “David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.”

Both of these sets of scriptures focus on the Branch as *King*, descending from David, making righteous judgments, ruling and causing peace and security. Thus Revelation 19:16 calls Him, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Zechariah 3:8-9

“Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, you and your companions who sit before you, for they are a wondrous sign; for behold, I am bringing forth My Servant the

◆ Like Zechariah 6, Luke shows Christ, the Branch, as *Man*, whose job is to build the church and become the perfect Mediator between God and man.

◆ Like Isaiah 4, John shows Christ, the Branch, as *God* in the flesh.

At first glance, the New Testament seems not to have picked up on this Old Testament prophetic description of the Savior as the Branch. However, Luke 1:78 contains a hidden reference to the Branch, obscured by the translation:

And you, child [John the Baptist], will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)

This is the end of Zacharias' prophecy of the Messiah, and it seems to contain not even a hint of a reference to "the Branch."

However, there are two ways to translate the word "Dayspring" in verse 78. It is *anatole* in Greek, meaning "rising up," and Greek speakers usually use it of the sun and stars rising. It often has the sense of "from the east," since the sun rises in the east.

Its second meaning, though, is "shoot" or "branch"! It is the same word that the Septuagint, the Old

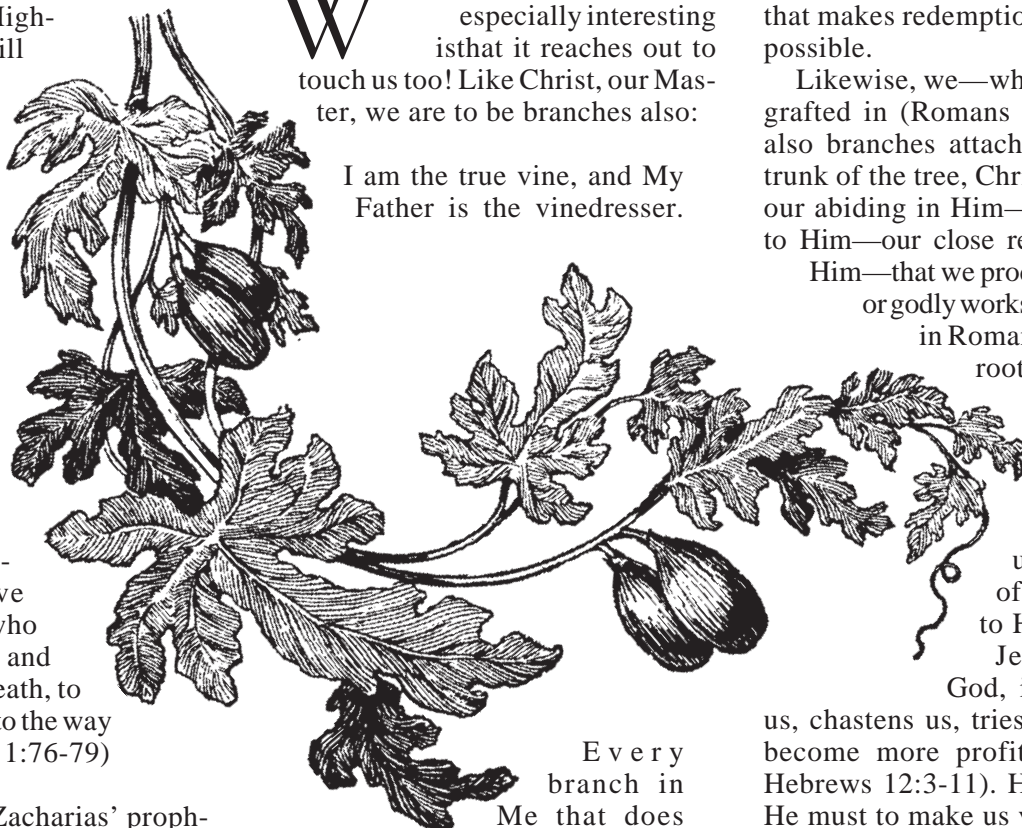
Testament in Greek, uses in Jeremiah 23:5 and Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12 for "Branch"! At the very least, this is a double entendre, a play on both meanings of the word, to describe the Messiah. This could be translated "the Branch from on High," which is very similar to Isaiah 4:2, "the Branch of the LORD [YHWH]."

The translators chose to use "Dayspring" because verse 79 contains the imagery of giving light in darkness, just as the dawn chases away the darkness of night. They are undoubtedly correct in their choice, but the idea of "the Branch" is lurking just behind.

"You Are the Branches. . ."

What makes this topic especially interesting is that it reaches out to touch us too! Like Christ, our Master, we are to be branches also:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.



Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, *you are the branches*. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do

nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:1-8)

Christ came to this earth as THE BRANCH and fulfilled all righteousness, qualifying to replace Satan and rule as King over all the earth. He proved His worthiness by remaining in full accord with His heavenly Father, and bearing the spiritual fruit that makes redemption and salvation possible.

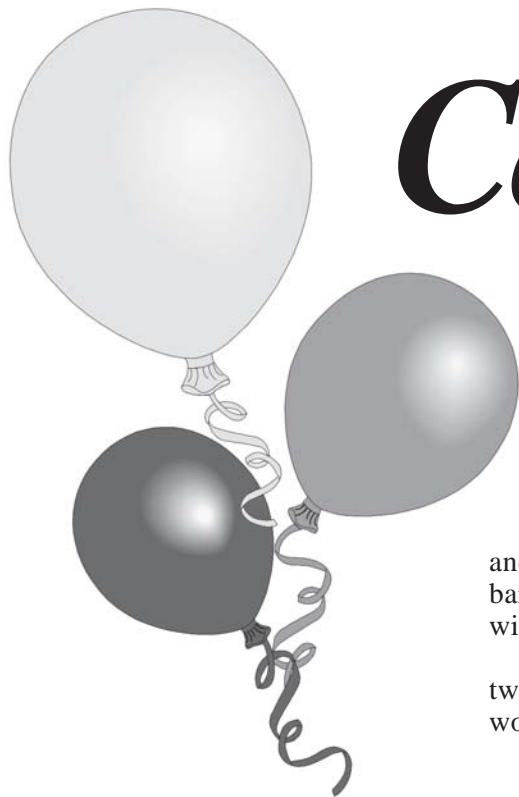
Likewise, we—whether natural or grafted in (Romans 11:17-24)—are also branches attached to the solid trunk of the tree, Christ. It is only by our abiding in Him—our attachment to Him—our close relationship with Him—that we produce any growth or godly works. As Paul writes in Romans 11:16, "If the root is holy, so are the branches."

Our righteousness, works and holiness come to us only because of our connection to Him.

Jesus says that God, in love, prunes us, chastens us, tries us, so that we become more profitable (see also Hebrews 12:3-11). He will do what He must to make us yield. But if we resist and eventually sever our connection with Him, we are fit only to be burned. God has no use for dead wood.

God wants us to use this connection to His Son to "bear much fruit," just as Jesus Christ did. Doing so proves to Him, to ourselves and to everyone else that we are true Christians, disciples of His Son, the Branch. By this, we will glorify God and secure our place in His Kingdom.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh



Celebrating Birthdays

An air of excited expectation hovers in the room. A dozen or more guests, replete with party hats and favors, sit around a long dining-room table laden with gift-wrapped presents and a decorated cake. Six shining candles—five and one to grow on—await the extinguishing breath of the young child seated at the place of honor. The now-five-year-old Mary takes a huge breath, silently makes her wish and blows for all she's worth until only little streams of smoke arise from the candle wicks.

Everyone claps and sounds their noisemakers. In seconds, the children are screaming for cake and ice cream, while their parents smile and say how cute the birthday girl is in her new outfit. After wolfing down their dessert, the guests exclaim, "Cool!" and "Awesome!" as Mary opens her many gifts.

Soon, they are all distracted by the arrival of Bertram the Clown and his trick dog, Winfred. The children sit mesmerized by their performance. Bertram is not only funny, but he also sings silly songs and makes balloon animals. Winfred can jump through a hoop and stand on both his front legs

and his back legs. He even does math, barking the answers! The pair is a hit with the kids.

The party is all over in an hour or two, except for the clean up. What a wonderful day it has been for Mary! Really?

Are birthday celebrations as harmless as they seem? Certainly, they are fun, but what are we teaching our children by throwing birthday parties for them? Are the long-term effects good or evil? Do they help or hinder the growth of a child's character? What implications do birthday celebrations have on their relationship with God?

Biblical Examples

The Bible notes only two birthday celebrations, one in the Old Testament, one in the New. It should be instructive to review them because the way the Bible colors events indicates God's thoughts on a matter. Though the subject of birthday celebrations is never broached directly, it is mentioned as a detail in two negative vignettes.

We find the first occurrence in Genesis 40, in the account of the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and baker. After hearing these men's dreams, Joseph tells them that within three days the king will restore the butler to his office but hang the baker (verses 9-13, 16-19). "On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday" (verse 20), the king did just as Joseph had predicted. The day ended badly, not only with the death of the baker, but also

with Joseph having to languish in prison for another "two full years" (verses 40:22-41:1).

The New Testament occurrence appears in Matthew 14:1-12 and Mark 6:14-29. Herod holds a feast on his birthday and is so pleased by the dancing of his step-daughter that he promises to give her anything she desires. Her mother, Herodias, instructs her to demand the head of John the Baptist, as revenge for his condemnation of her marriage to Herod. Though regretful, Herod orders the execution, feeling bound by his oaths and pressured by his guests (Mark 6:26-27).

One birthday celebration ends with a hanging and a servant of God locked in prison, and the other with the corruption of a young girl and the death of one of God's greatest prophets, the Elijah to come (see Matthew 11:11, 14). The major lesson in each of these events is certainly not about birthdays per se, but we cannot escape the fact that God puts birthday celebrations in an evil light through the details of these stories.

A spiritual lesson that can be drawn here is that, when seen in a larger context, birthday celebrations in no way enhance the purpose God is working out and may even play a role in hindering the salvation He is bringing to mankind (Psalm 74:12; see John 6:29).

Some might argue that birthday celebrations are only cultural affairs. But knowing that Satan is the god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4), and

the whole world lies under his sway (I John 5:19), should we not at least examine their appropriateness to a Christian's life? At the very least, these biblical examples show that birthday celebrations seem to bring out and reinforce the darker side of human nature.

Obviously, the people of the Bible at least marked their birthdays because Scripture often records their ages. However, there is a wide gulf between marking a day and celebrating it. One acknowledges its passing while the other honors it. The biblical record shows no man or woman of God celebrating a birthday. Thus, birthday celebrations do not have a God-ordained origin.

One could even say a birthday celebration goes against God's instruction in Ecclesiastes 7:1, where Solomon writes, "The day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth." God's perspective on this matter, as in all things, is far higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). He has more joy when we leave this world, having overcome it, than when we enter it (see Isaiah 57:1-2; Philippians 1:21-23). God's perspective seems to be, "Why celebrate the day all your troubles began? Far better to celebrate the day they ended in victory!"

A Spiritual Principle

Let's look at this subject from another angle. A basic spiritual principle answers any questions regarding the celebration of birthdays. Paul states it very simply in I Corinthians 10:31:

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, DO ALL TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

In all our activities, our emphasis should be on honoring God, rather than ourselves.

Since birthday celebrations encour-

age the glorification of the self and promote "self-centeredness" rather than "God-centeredness," birthday celebrations transgress this principle. If we are truly striving to instill godly character into our children, birthday parties are not a good option.



In a radio interview with a former Satan worshipper, the interviewer asked, "What is the most important day after Halloween to a Satan worshipper?" The answer is eye-opening! He said, "Your own birthday!" We know that everything Satan does is contrary to God's way. Satan opposes God in every thought and despises all godly things. If he initiates something, the result is wickedness. By promoting birthday celebrations, Satan, the Great Deceiver (Revelation 12:9), deceives people into exalting themselves so he can

de-emphasize the great God.

Birthdays promote the idea that we have achieved something worthwhile, when in fact life is a gift from God. King Solomon, speaking of man in general, writes of "the days of his life which God gives him under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 8:15). A birthday celebration takes credit away from God, redirecting it to a physical human being. Birthday celebrations rob God of the honor and glory He is due as Creator and Sustainer of life.

Moses records:

The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Man made no effort in his creation; he *is* the creation. Nevertheless, human beings redirect the credit and glory to themselves, which is simply a form of idolatry. We have been called and set apart to worship the Creator, but those who are still carnal worship the creation (Romans 1:25).

Gift-Giving

At birthday parties, gift-giving is usually a central part of the celebration. Guests give gifts to the creation instead of the Cre-

ator, showing honor to an undeserving recipient. What have humans ever done to merit such rewards, honor and praise? Surely, attaining one more year of age is not such an achievement! Spiritual gifts such as praise and thankfulness should go to God for all of His wonderful creations, as well as for the many gifts He gives.

Satan uses this common practice to de-emphasize God's greatness and worthiness. Jesus gives us the proper perspective:

How can you believe, who re-

ceive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God? (John 5:44).

In the end, only the honor and praise that God gives us are of any eternal importance.

Generally, though, giving gifts is not wrong. James describes God the Father as the Giver of “every good gift and every perfect gift” (James 1:17), and He gives His children many gifts and talents throughout their lives. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends parents for giving good gifts to their children (Matthew 7:11). In many places the Bible instructs us to imitate and grow in the character traits of God.

The context of Jesus’ remarks in Matthew 7, however, hints at providing for their needs, not fulfilling their lusts or lavishing them with undeserved “loot.” As Herbert Armstrong would say, doing so only teaches and reinforces the “get” way that Satan promotes. Knowing when and why to give a gift to another is the key. A gift should always serve to edify the recipient and should never perpetuate an existing problem like greed, covetousness, envy or self-pity. Giving a gift simply because time has passed is not among the best of reasons.

Celebrating birthdays with parties and gifts emphasizes the “selfish” way of life. However, acknowledging a

loved one’s birthday and letting him know that he was remembered can be a “thinking of you” type of warm gesture that can be encouraging if done properly. Sending an uplifting card, calling on the telephone or a personal visit would not be inappropriate, especially to those who are elderly, live alone or reside far away.

But God’s spiritual principles should not be compromised. If we feel that a wrong spirit pervades any kind of celebration, we should not be part of it or condone it by our presence and participation.

Wrong Attitudes

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6:3, “For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he *deceives* himself.” The word “deceives” in this verse is the Greek word *phrenapateo*, meaning “to mislead after having been misled by a seducer.” Satan, the seducer, misleads man in any way he can, and one of his subtle methods is the pride and selfishness that birthday celebrations promote. Once a man is misled by Satan, he becomes a misleader himself, leading others down the road to destruction.

Celebrating birthdays at first glance may look like a harmless, innocent celebration, but it still promotes wrong attitudes. Along with self-centeredness, it also encourages self-exaltation or pride.

Jesus Christ said, “And whoever exalts himself will be abased [humiliated], and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12). Satan uses pride to combat humility because he knows that pride and humility cannot co-exist. Pride replaces humility unless we actively fight against it.

The apostle Paul says:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Romans 12:3).

Here, he admonishes us not to esteem ourselves too much, an attitude that leads to vanity and arrogance.

Yet, is that not what is being pushed in our society today? A central premise in education and childrearing is instilling self-esteem in our youth, supposedly to give them confidence and motivation to succeed in life. There is no surer method to produce competition and strife! The Word of God, on the other hand, teaches us:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Philippians 2:3).

This latter attitude produces peace, cooperation and unity.

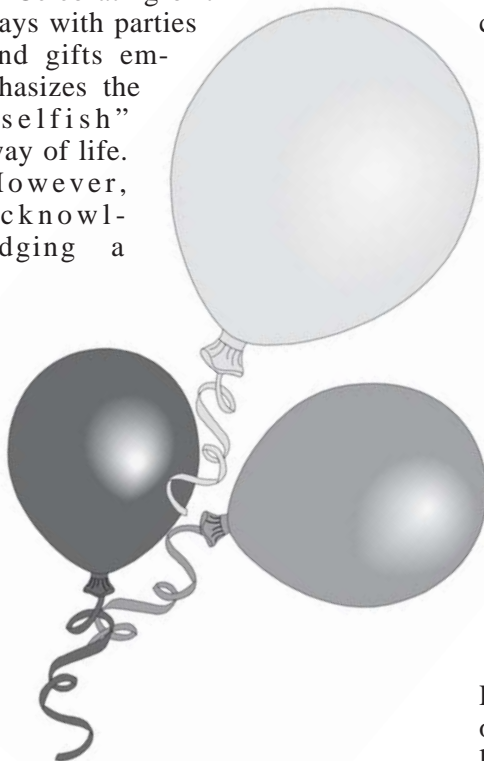
A birthday party places all the attention on one individual, upon whom is bestowed attention, praise, honor and gifts. What a boost to the self-esteem! A young child, without wisdom and maturity, might come to expect—even demand—such attention, which could evolve into self-centeredness. Obviously, this could lead to grave, eternal consequences.

A true Christian is God-centered rather than self-centered and gives honor to Him rather than himself. We look forward to a new birth as spirit members of the Kingdom of God rather than back at an imperfect physical life. Why would we want to celebrate an inferior physical birth?

We will not even celebrate our “birth” as spirit beings at the resurrection. We (as the bride) will attend the *marriage* supper with Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom. We will not be celebrating our birth as spirit beings but our union with our God, Elder Brother and King. God does not even ask us to celebrate the birth of His own Son but rather His death! We do this each year at Passover (I Corinthians 11:26).

As quoted earlier, Paul’s words sum up our approach to our every action: “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, *do all to the glory of God*” (I Corinthians 10:31). Everything we do should bring dignity, honor, glory, praise, and worship to the great and almighty God of the universe! If what we do fails this test, avoid it.

—Martin G. Collins and
Richard T. Ritenbaugh





by Andy Benedetto

Disease



⌚ A cholera outbreak—enhanced by heavy rains, poor sanitation and inadequate medical response—has reached epidemic proportions in East Africa with 61,534 cases and 2,687 deaths.

Earthquakes



⌚ A 7.1 magnitude quake rocked Papua New Guinea for nearly three minutes in late December. Incredibly, there was no significant damage.
⌚ On January 10 in northern China, a 6.2 earthquake killed 50 people, injured 11,440 and flattened 103,000 homes, leaving 540,000 homeless.

Environment



⌚ A U.S. Senate study shows that animal waste on American farms often pollutes water and is 130 times the amount of human waste. Agriculture officials consider 60% of American rivers and streams as “impaired” by waste runoff. In 1996 alone, more than 40 animal waste spills killed 670,000 fish in Iowa, Minnesota and Missouri. Experts think hog waste is responsible for large fish kills and a *pfisteria* outbreak in the mid-Atlantic states as well.

Religion



⌚ For the first time, a Hanukkah candle was lit in the Vatican on December 23. The candle was placed beside an olive tree planted in the gardens behind St. Peter’s Basilica to mark diplomatic ties between Israel and the Holy See. Just days earlier, an agreement placed Catholic institutions in Israel under the jurisdiction of Israeli law, making it easier for the church to acquire property there.

Technology



⌚ Two University of Massachusetts scientists have cloned two calves from cells of cow fetuses. They say the cloned calves can help lead the way toward “pharming,” creating genetically altered animals that produce valuable pharmaceutical substances in their milk. Another goal is to create pigs with a crucial gene deleted so that porcine organs could be transplanted into human patients without being rejected by the immune system.

Terrorism



⌚ Since Algeria’s insurgency began in January 1992, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan has been a time of increased violence. On January 2, assailants brutally killed 412 people in four villages near the city of Relizane. At least 600 more were slain in western Algeria during the year’s first week. On January 12 in Algiers, gangs of men hurled bombs into a mosque and a movie hall. Conflicting reports claim between 103 and 400 deaths resulted. So far, over 75,000 have died in this ongoing war between insurgents and government security forces.

Weather



⌚ A bitter Siberian cold front plunged Europe into a deep freeze in mid-December, dropping temperatures in Russia to -49°F. At least 50 people died from England to Moscow. The same front later killed 24 in India and Bangladesh.
⌚ A sharp cold snap hit Mexico around the same time, bringing snow for the first time in 120 years. The cold is blamed for at least 60 deaths and extensive crop losses.
⌚ On January 9, Canada’s worst ice storm on record wreaked havoc across five eastern provinces, forcing 3 million people to endure several weeks of frigid weather without electricity. Ice up to 3 inches thick coated exposed surfaces, downing trees and power lines. Insurance officials estimate damage at \$350 million. America’s northeastern states were also affected. The storm is blamed for 15 deaths in Canada, 5 in New York and 3 in Maine.

BIBLE STUDY: JOY

In our world of unprecedented prosperity and luxury—a world of boundless accomplishment and breathtaking advances—human reasoning tells us that there should be great joy throughout the world. On the contrary, however, depression, hopelessness, despair and suicide are commonplace. Materialism and man's obsession with the accumulation of physical things has never led to anything but increased sorrow.



1. What is characteristic of worldly joy? Job 20:5; Luke 8:13; Proverbs 15:21; Hosea 9:1. When should joy be turned to gloom? James 4:8-10.

COMMENT: Carnal joy is temporary because it is based in self-centeredness. By the lifestyles of the average, unconverted person, we can easily see that they live their lives according to the saying, "Ignorance is bliss!" But God tells His people not to rejoice like the world. It is better to have sorrow in humility than joy in pride.

2. What are natural expressions of joy? I Samuel 18:6; I Chronicles 15:16; Ezra 3:12-13; Psalm 27:6; 32:10-11.

COMMENT: The ancient Israelites expressed joy by singing, dancing, playing musical instruments and shouting at victory celebrations, festivals, sacrifices and coronations. Gladness and joy are blessings from God. Gladness is the experience of pleasure, joy, or delight, resulting from happiness and joy. Joy is a quality, not simply an emotion, grounded upon God Himself and derived from Him. It should characterize our lives as Christians. Joy springs from the prospect of possessing our desires and can be temporary or long-lasting.

3. Do angels express joy? Job 38:4, 7; Luke 2:10-14. What else causes joy in heaven? Job 33:26; Luke 15:7, 10.

COMMENT: The terms "morning stars" and "sons of God" are biblical names for angels, who express joy when events in God's plan unfold. Not only God but also angels are thrilled when a sinner repents of his worldly ways. Prayer for forgiveness brings about joyous repentance and restoration of righteousness in a person's life.

4. To whom does God grant joy? Nehemiah 8:9-12; Psalm 5:11; Ecclesiastes 2:26; Isaiah 29:19; Matthew 25:21, 23. Does God make people joyful? II Chronicles 20:27; Ezra 6:22; Nehemiah 12:43.

COMMENT: Joy strengthens us when it results from our relationship with our Creator, who gives it to us as a reward for repentance, humility, trust and faithfulness.

5. What does God promise His servants? Isaiah 65:13-14; Jeremiah 31:13; John 16:20-22. Is there joy in unity? Psalm 133:1; Acts 2:42-47; I Corinthians 12:26; Philippians 2:2.

COMMENT: Godly unity produces joy because it over-

comes the sorrow of self-seeking and fulfills the true love of outgoing concern for others. Joy through unity comes when God's people have all things in common—the same beliefs and desires working toward a common goal.

6. In what does God's ministry find joy that differs from the rest of the saints? I Thessalonians 2:19-20; Philemon 7; III John 4.

COMMENT: A minister labors long to help lead others to repentance and to direct them toward the Kingdom of God. When he sees progress, his encouragement manifests itself as joy.

7. Can persevering through a trial be joyous? II Corinthians 8:2; Colossians 1:9-11; I Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 10:34; James 1:2; I Peter 4:12-13.

COMMENT: Our joy through trials is a result of suffering for Christ's sake. Of the persecution we must endure, Jesus says, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy!" (Luke 6:23). Through the Holy Spirit, God gives us His gift of joy as part of the process of spiritual completion.

8. Is joy a characteristic of the Kingdom of God? Isaiah 35:10; 65:17-19; Matthew 13:44; 25:21; Romans 14:17.

COMMENT: Sorrow and sighing is of the world because of sin, but joy and gladness is of the Kingdom because it is holy and good. The Kingdom of God is joy in the Holy Spirit, producing eternal spiritual fruit.

9. Should the prospect of salvation and eternal life be joyous? Psalm 21:1; 51:12; 132:16; Isaiah 12:3; Habakkuk 3:18; I Peter 1:8-9; I John 1:1-4.

COMMENT: There will be everlasting joy when God's Kingdom is established on earth. Joy and gladness is not only a deep inward feeling, but it is also expressed in visible celebration when God's people gather together. Speaking of the future church, Isaiah 60:15 says, "Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, so that no one went through you, I will make you an eternal excellence, a joy of many generations." In the meantime, the apostle Paul advises us to "rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4)