

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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A photograph of a young white lamb with its mouth slightly open, looking towards the camera. The lamb is standing in a lush green field with a blurred background.

DEATH
of a LAMB

EATING: *How Good It Is!*

Part Two

The Bible mentions eating around 700 times, highlighting the broad practicality of the Bible's instruction. Its lessons for us are drawn from life itself, and eating is a major part of everyone's experience. Regardless of race, wealth, education, gender, or age, everybody eats. We may do it carefully or carelessly. Some prefer that every meal include order and tranquility and perhaps even a measure of formality. Others catch every meal on the fly. Nevertheless, everybody eats. By studying eating in the experiences of others, we plumb a deep well of instruction from which we can draw vital lessons to help us through life.

Banquets get more ink in the Bible than one might expect. Everything from lavish state banquets held by kings to the less formal but happy occasions when families came together after a sheep shearing or harvest appear there. In each of these, something significant occurs that adds to our understanding. God also records several occasions when both the number of people involved and the amount of food eaten was small. A huge banquet is not necessary for great instructive events to happen.

Genesis provides many foundational principles and patterns that God continues to follow throughout the Bible. On at least four occasions, eating and sin or eating and righteousness crop up, showing the foundational principle. This signals that, even apart from eating being physically necessary, it in some way reveals a person's character, attitude and personality. In these four occasions, the Bible makes a clear statement about the character of the participants and gives helpful instruction for us to evaluate ourselves against.

Adam and Eve's original sin is one of these events, but we will skip it, as it has been explained so often. A second involves Jacob and Rebekah's deception of the blind Isaac, which we will peruse for its useful background

information. However, we should carefully examine Esau's rejection of his birthright. Esau's actions paint such a clear picture of an unconverted person. By choosing to eat a stew at the wrong time, he reveals a significant flaw in his character all of us share to some degree. We will also analyze a good example, Abraham's servant's conduct during his negotiations with Laban, which, for all who understand, stands in sharp contrast to the others.

Two Opposite Approaches

Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, two [*manner of*, KJV] peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25:21-23)

God's revelation to Rebekah regarding the struggling twins is that two kinds or types of people were in her womb. They were definitely not identical twins. The word "manner," as used in the King James Version, indicates the reason for their rivalry; they were so different despite having the same parents. Their struggling in Rebekah's womb was a precursor of what continued after their birth, which significantly influenced the history of Isaac's descendants.

Each son's approach toward and manner of life irritated the other. Each rubbed the other the wrong way. Rebekah seems naturally drawn to Jacob and Isaac to Esau, exacerbating an already volatile situation. Thus, each boy became a victim of the parent's favoritism and was encouraged to take advantage of it.

Genesis 25:27 describes Esau as “a skillful hunter, a man of the field.” As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that he has a powerful black mark against him, yet despite this stain on his reputation, probably almost everyone, upon first impression, would choose Esau as a friend and companion over Jacob. “Man of the field” depicts him as a person of physical vigor, virile, an outdoorsman and frontiersman, a kind of Daniel Boone of ancient times. We would likely find him to be frank, impulsive, generous, even chivalrous—but also careless and sensuous.

It appears that Isaac gravitated toward him almost instinctively. If he wanted anything done, Esau was a man who could do it. As Isaac aged, he leaned increasingly on Esau’s strengths. Esau seems to have been a warm-hearted man who sincerely loved his aged father, with whom he was gentle and quick to respond to when he needed anything.

We need to understand that Esau was not a vile person. Today, we would label him as a common, ordinary, good citizen and neighbor. He was simply worldly. Because his interests were not the same as God’s, he paid little or no attention to the things of God. He is one of the Bible’s major portraits of a worldly person.

Genesis 33:4, 9 reveals an entirely different aspect to his personality than we normally think: “But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. . . . But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’” This scene pictures a man who is generous and magnanimous even to one who had defrauded him of an extremely valuable possession.

God undoubtedly paved the way for Jacob in this instance, but still Esau’s temperament seems to have been forgiving and without resentment even though normally more mercurial than Jacob’s. It would quickly flare into anger and then subside just as quickly, so that it was difficult for him to hold a grudge. He seems lovable, impulsive, physically strong and easygoing, but unfortunately, he was also somewhat of a spiritual airhead, careless and lacking in strong principle.

Esau’s Major Flaw

Genesis 25:29-34 sets the stage for a valuable lesson:

Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, “Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.” Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright as of this day.” And Esau said, “Look, I am about to die, so what profit shall this birthright be to me?” Then Jacob said, “Swear to me as of this day.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Perhaps never in all man’s history has something so valuable been purchased for so little! The major flaw in Esau’s character reveals itself in his careless disregard of the high value of his birthright in favor of an immediate sensual satisfaction. Unfortunately, far too many of us are like him. Esau was a man, so to speak, who could not see two blocks down a straight road on a crystal-clear day. Because immediate concerns dominated his life, living by faith was extremely difficult for him.

Either he had no vision, or his personality demanded instant gratification. The things that he valued were those he could have right away. Notice verses 32 and 34. To paraphrase he says, “What good is the birthright if I have to wait for it?” Apparently, he either did not consider making a sacrifice to retain it at all or quickly passed over the thought. Therefore, he hungrily gratified his appetite and went his way, much like the harlot who, after plying her trade, unconcernedly says, “I have done no harm.”

However, Moses writes, “Esau despised his birthright”! *Despise* is a strong word, meaning “to be scornful” or “to treat with contempt.” Notice Paul’s remarks about this in Hebrews 12:16: “. . . lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.” Paul judges him as “profane,” which marks a person as irreverent toward what is sacred. The Greek word literally describes one standing in front of the temple (where God dwells) rather than within it, suggesting one not admitted into the body of true knowledge. Esau displays his profanity by treating something hallowed—his birthright—as if it were common.

Esau further demonstrates this perversity in his thinking in his choice of wives (Genesis 26:34-35). He is unconcerned about God, the things of God and the future. His mind is elsewhere; he is worldly. The Christian must live in the present dealing with life’s problems as they come to him, but always with the future, the Kingdom of God, in mind.

God’s Word depicts Esau’s worldliness through the medium of eating. Eating something he desired at the moment meant more to him than a tremendously valuable gift of God. Though he became very wealthy, the Bible ignores his death, which oftentimes indicates something ominous. It is worth meditating upon how much satisfying immediate cravings and yearnings, perhaps even for food, presents a stumblingblock to our pleasing God.

Jacob, the Plain Man

Of Jacob, Moses writes, “So the boys grew. . . . Jacob was a mild [*plain*, KJV] man, dwelling in tents” (Genesis 25:27). Some modern translations render “mild” or “plain” as “quiet.” Unlike the more volatile Esau, Jacob’s temperament was virtually devoid of peaks and valleys. Despite this quietness, other scriptures show Jacob had distinct character

contrasts, including a strong streak of craftiness. The biblical narrative portrays him as a man keenly alive to his own interests.

These characteristics probably made him less appealing to others, perhaps even a puzzle others avoided penetrating. Like Esau, he is shown to be a physically strong, robust person, yet quiet, reflective, pastoral, timid, steady, orderly and contemplative.

It is interesting that each parent favored the son whose characteristics were most unlike him or her. The quiet peacemaking Isaac rejoices in the woodsy wildness of the adventurous Esau. The vigorous, take-charge Rebekah finds an outlet for her tenderness in the quiet, reflective, hesitant Jacob.

Genesis 27 shows Jacob, with Rebekah's urging, using food, clothing and craftiness to take advantage of Isaac's blindness and deceive him. Other scriptures also show Jacob cunningly deceiving Laban, his father-in-law. The Bible shows a clear contrast in personality between Esau

overcame, and in the end, he became one of the great men in the history of Israel. He is not labeled as worldly like his twin but a true man of faith like his father and grandfather before him.

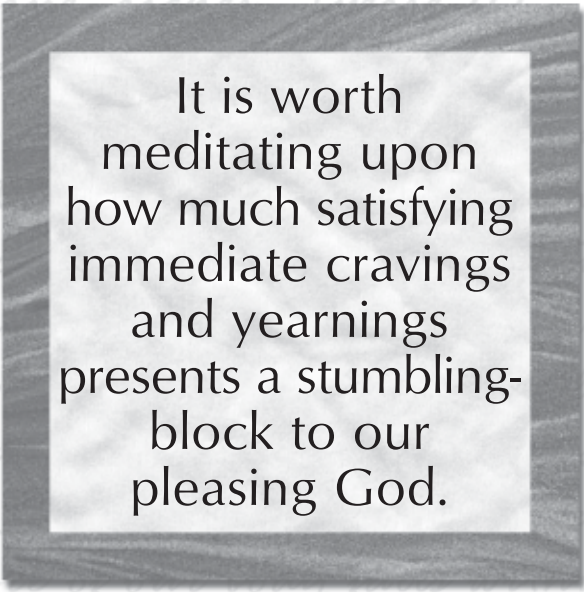
A Man Refuses to Eat

Then [Abraham's servant] came to the house. And he unloaded the camels, and provided straw and feed for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. And food was set before him to eat, but he said, "I will not eat until I have told about my errand." And [Laban] said, "Speak on." . . . Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you either bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as the LORD has spoken." And it came to pass, when Abraham's servant heard their words, that he worshiped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth. Then the servant brought out jewelry of silver, jewelry of gold, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother. And he and the men who were with him ate and drank and stayed all night. Then they arose in the morning, and he said, "Send me away to my master." (Genesis 24:32-33, 50-54)

This episode occurs when Abraham sends his most trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac. This story of eating stands in sharp contrast to Esau's satiation of his hunger, as Abraham's servant will allow nothing—not even good food, convivial hospitality and the persistent appeal of Rebekah's relatives—to deter him from completing his mission. The servant's priorities are firm: His master's delegated responsibility came first!

Of course, so are Jesus' priorities when Satan tempted Him through food, as recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. Somewhat later in His ministry, after His conversation with the woman at the well (John 4), the disciples want Him to eat. He replies that His food is to finish the work His Father gave Him to do (verse 34). He asserts, like Abraham's faithful servant, that sacrifice is in order because His immediate need to gratify His hunger was comparatively unimportant.

A major principle we can learn from these four episodes is that we will quite likely experience our most severe temptations and trials in common everyday events. We might fancifully picture ourselves giving our life for Christ before a firing squad; by being sawn asunder, as Isaiah is reputed to have been; or perhaps holding fast to our faith while imprisoned in a concentration camp. But these extreme cases do not happen to many. Most people's temptations and tests occur in the midst of everyday, commonplace events like eating or conducting business affairs or relating to others within a family or community.



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and Jacob. Jacob, rather than using his physical strength like Esau, employed perseverance and dogged tenacity, preferring to use clever deceits and inventive strategies to achieve his ambitions.


Undoubtedly, he was creative, a man who looked and planned ahead. He did not merely live for the moment. He was always planning how to get the upper hand and the best of a deal to come out on top. Clearly, he was not above lying to get what he wanted. However, he was persistent and persevering, and over a lifetime, he became by far a better man than his brother did.

The story of these two sons also parallels the fable of the race between the tortoise and the hare. Jacob, like the tortoise, through much plodding persistence succeeded, while the more colorful Esau, like the hare, failed because he beat himself. Though Jacob was also his own worst enemy, he never despised or turned his back on the hallowed things of God. With the help of God's calling, he

The Advantage of Election

Jacob undoubtedly had vision and looked ahead. If Esau looked ahead, the immediate loomed large and more important for him, and the spiritual aspects of life appear to have been completely unimportant to him. He could not control himself to wait patiently on the Lord because he did not highly value the things of God. He thus lacked proper vision.

Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Treasure is



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what we value highly, what we take great pains to serve, honor, preserve and embellish. Peter also touches on the importance of our valuation of responsibilities and things in his first epistle. Notice I Peter 3:7: "Likewise you husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life."

"Honor" is the Greek word *time*. It indicates a value, money paid, esteem, honor, precious thing and price. Peter uses forms of this word in I Peter 1:19 and 2:7, where it is rendered *precious* in reference to Jesus' blood and Jesus Himself because of the extreme value His life and death are to us. Because of the value we place on Him and our calling, we diligently strive to make sure we are serving, honoring, preserving and embellishing our relationship with Him and the Father. This relationship is our highest priority because of the value we place on it.

Jacob and Esau reveal the areas of life they gave the highest priority to. One succeeds with God, and one fails. Eating is the showcase for the one who failed. The notion that one personality type is better than another in the eyes of God is not the issue here. The issue of greatest value to us lies in the answer to these questions: Why did Jacob succeed and Esau fail? Why did Jacob value certain things more than Esau did? Did Jacob have a distinct advantage, an "edge," over his brother?

Perhaps Paul most vividly and aggressively proounds the lesson of greatest value to us. Romans 9:10-16 is a startling and sobering revelation of what God gives us to enable us to succeed before Him as Jacob did:

And not only this, but when Rebekah also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The elder shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

Jacob had God's election, selection or calling, thus giving him a very decided advantage withheld from Esau by God, who did not chose to call him. God's election of Jacob and rejection of Esau had nothing to do with anything genetically inherent within them. It had nothing to do with what either of them had done. It had everything to do with what God chose to do and did: He gave Jacob the edge. Jacob eventually responded correctly, but the sovereign God exercised His right to make moves and use people as He designs. This is Paul's main point.

God's decisions—what He elects to do—are not matters of emotion but of will. Whether we think they are right or wrong, fair or unfair, means nothing. Isaiah 55 makes plain we do not think as He does. Our thinking on these issues does not matter because, first, God is Creator and can do as He pleases. Second, what He does is always right anyway. That we are not completely masters of our own destinies and that free moral agency has its limits are sometimes humbling and difficult to accept. God, of His own volition, can and does treat some with what we might deem as favoritism, as though some are better than others.

Notice John the Baptist's reaction to a situation in which something like this is involved:

And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. . . . He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:26-27, 30)

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A Ready Answer

"It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt.

—Exodus 13:9

An Extraordinary Feast

How many of us remember where we were and what we were doing the day that John Kennedy was assassinated? Or what was happening the day we married or the day our children were born? How many of us remember the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag or the Ten Commandments? Or how to spell the name of one's fourth-grade teacher (mine was S-M-I-G-I-E-L-S-K-I!).

If we remember these things, it is because they were burned into our brains by shock, awesome unique-

ness, or repetition. Sometimes the actual incident did not even happen to us but was just repeated to us with such powerful clarity that it affected us the rest of our lives.

For instance, when I was very young, my father was trying to warn me of the dangers involved in playing near the railroad tracks. He told me a story that he himself had experienced in 1939, when he was 12 years old. While he and some friends were playing by the trains, one of his friends tried to jump on a boxcar but slipped

under its wheels. His legs were cut off! There was a pickup truck close by, and they put him in it and rushed him to the hospital where he died!

I have never forgotten that story or even the look on my father's face as he repeated it to me, even though I was just barely old enough to understand such things. Whenever any of my friends wanted to go play by the tracks, I never once even considered it. I usually convinced them to do something else.

How many of us remember what we were doing last April between the 22nd and the 27th. I caught a cold. My wife and I celebrated our thirtieth wedding anniversary. I worked for two days and was off for five. On Sunday, I spent most of the day working on my 2001 budget for the hotel. Last but not least, I ate nothing with leavening in it, as far as I knew. The only bread my family ate all week was brittle and flat.

Seven Days

We really did not do very much that week. We merely observed a very simple teaching God commanded us to do: We kept all leavening out of our houses and off our properties and ate only unleavened bread for seven days.

That week's effort could not compare to the weeks of preparation it took to deleaven our homes. It took nowhere near the physical preparations preparing for, traveling to and keeping the Feast of Tabernacles away from our homes entails. It did not even require the small, personal sacrifice it takes to keep the fast on the Day of Atonement.

Those short seven days flew by. It was seven days of easy but careful vigilance to ensure that no leavened products crept into our houses and that we ate only unleavened bread every day.

But did we get the point? Why did God give us the Days of Unleavened Bread in the first place? Are we merely performing a ritual or are we making sure the real point of delevaning our homes and keeping these days does not get lost in the physical activity? We must keep in mind God's real purpose and our part in it!

God explains why in Exodus 13:3-10:

And Moses said to the people: "Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. On this day you are going out, in the month Abib. And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall keep this service in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters. And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.' It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year.

The word for "sign" in verse 9 is *'owth*, which can be translated as signal, flag, beacon, monument, omen, prodigy, evidence, mark, miracle, sign or token. The word for "memorial" is *zikrown*, meaning memorable thing, reminder, remembrance. If we change "sign" to one of the other translations, it puts this section in a new light. For instance, *'owth* can be translated as "prodigy," which means "something extraordinary"!

Verse 9 could be paraphrased, then, "And this observance of the days of Unleavened Bread shall be something extraordinary for you to do, to make a memorable impression on your mind so that the law of God can be written in your hearts."

How do we look at the days of

Unleavened Bread? Are they merely a week of yearly ritual participation, or do we vicariously take part in events that are extraordinarily remarkable and force us to our knees before the Eternal? Are we making sure that these days fulfill the promise that they have in our lives so that His mind becomes ours?

Purely Physical

The Israelites missed the point. They saw only the physical. Adam Clarke makes these comments on verse 9:

This direction, repeated and enlarged Ex. 13:16, gave rise to phylacteries or tepillin, and this is one of the passages which the Jews write upon them to the present day. The manner in which the Jews understood and kept these commands may appear in their practice. They wrote the following four portions of the law upon slips of parchment or vellum: "Sanctify unto me the first-born," see Ex. 13:2-10. "And it shall be, when the Lord shall bring thee into the land," see Ex. 13:11-16. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" see Deut. :4-9. "And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently," see Deut. 11:13-21. These four portions, making in all 30 verses, written as mentioned above, and covered with leather, they tied to the forehead and to the hand or arm.

Those which were for the HEAD (the frontlets) they wrote on four slips of parchment, and rolled up each by itself, and placed them in four compartments, joined together in one piece of skin or leather. Those which were designed for the hand were formed of one piece of parchment, the four portions being written upon it in four columns, and rolled up from one end to the other. These were all correct transcripts from the Mosaic text, without one redundant or deficient letter, otherwise they were not lawful to be worn. Those for the head were

tied on so as to rest on the forehead. Those for the hand or arm were usually tied on the left arm, a little above the elbow, on the inside, that they might be near the heart according to the command, Deut. 6:6: "And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart." These phylacteries formed no inconsiderable part of a Jew's religion; they wore them as a sign of their obligation to God, and as representing some future blessedness. Hence, they did not wear them on feast days nor on the Sabbath, because these things were in themselves signs; but they wore them always when they read the law, or when they prayed, and hence, they called them tepillin, "prayer, ornaments, oratories, or incitements to prayer." *In process of time the spirit of this law was lost in the letter*, and when the word was not in their mouth, nor the law in their heart, they had their phylacteries on their heads and on their hands. And the Pharisees, who in our Lord's time affected extraordinary piety, made their phylacteries very broad, that they might have many sentences written upon them, or the ordinary portions in very large and observable letters. (Emphasis ours.)

Notice what Jesus says on this subject in Mathew 23:1-7:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. *They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of*

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KID KID-KILLERS

Here we go again. The nation watched and discussed another school shooting, this time at Santana High School in Santee, California, on Monday, March 6. The general course of events ran parallel to the shootings at Columbine High School and other, high-profile campus killings, only the details differed. This time, the young shooter was Charles Andrew Williams, a 15-year-old freshman who acted alone. When the bullets stopped flying, two lay dead and 13 injured.

The aftermath was also predictable: School authorities did a great deal of hand-wringing while blaming bullying, teasing, depression, guns, movies, video games, and whatever else came to mind as a possible cause of Williams' rampage. Parents expressed fear for their children's safety, demanding tighter security, metal detectors, prompt action on early-warning signs, and implementation of zero-tolerance policies. When they were not trying to get "face time" on television news, Santana High students told reporters how shocked they were that such a crime was committed at their school, and in the same breath, how closely Williams fit the school-shooter profile.

School shootings have indeed become epidemic in America. Though only a handful occur each year, the fact that they occur at all is shameful to the nation. Kids killing kids, whatever their socio-economic backgrounds, should never happen—and would not

happen if the people of the United States were still a Bible-believing society. It is not coincidental that such crimes invaded American schoolyards once God was kicked out.

THE REAL CAUSE

What, then, is the cause of this campus-crime epidemic? It is not the availability of guns, a common whipping boy of the media. True, America has the highest proportion of guns to citizens outside of nations like Switzerland and Israel. However, Americans have had the right to bear arms since 1776, and it is only in the past few decades that gun violence in school has become a problem. Young boys were routinely taught how to handle guns—both long guns and handguns—from colonial times until well into the twentieth century. The worst school shootings during those times involved spitballs and dried peas.

Are bullying and teasing nerds the cause? Nearly every adult has a memory of a particular school thug who would extort lunch money, flick protruding ears and punch shoulders or guts for fun. Some of us may have been that particular Neanderthal in our school—or his target! However, until recently, the nerds have rarely taken violent, fatal revenge. It has only happened since individual self-esteem has been promoted in our schools over family, community and nation.

Is video, television or movie violence the cause? Studies have found

the simulated violence our children see on a screen can cause them to behave more aggressively, while at the same time inuring them to it. It could contribute as an aggravating factor, causing the perpetrators to both create general mayhem and feel nothing for their victims. However, the root cause runs deeper.

Herbert W. Armstrong often spoke and wrote about the "missing dimension" in human affairs. Although unconverted people cannot experience and utilize this missing dimension to as great an extent as a converted person can, it can make a huge difference in the general tone of a society. The missing dimension, of course, is God Himself.

The real cause of these school shootings, then, is God's absence from nearly every sector of American society. Though many would argue that a large majority of Americans believe in God, such a fact is not an indicator of how these "believers" live! James writes, "Even the demons believe—and tremble!" (James 2:19), but their behavior remains demonic. True belief in God, as the apostle explains, is accompanied by works that demonstrate our belief. These works are behaviors, words and thoughts that conform to the revealed will of God. In other words, true believers try to live as God lives!

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DEATH Ho

Have you ever seen a lamb slaughtered? For those of you who have, I am sure that, unless you had been previously calloused by working on a farm or in a slaughterhouse, that shocking experience has stayed vividly in your mind. It is not something that is easily forgotten.

During the Passover season, in addition to the New Testament symbols of unleavened bread and wine, the members of God's church continue to ponder the Old Testament symbolism of the slaughter of lambs. What those lambs represent is still very much apropos to modern-day Christians. This article will examine the sacrifice of the Passover lamb in detail, illustrating the deep and eternal significance in what many feel is a barbaric and inhumane practice. Though we do not sacrifice lambs today, the ancient ritual contains a number of thoroughly modern spiritual principles.

SHEEP SLAUGHTER

Some years ago, Rick, a coworker of mine who was also a sheep farmer, sold me two ewes, adult, female sheep. He sold them to me at a tremendously low price, their value having been reduced because of their inability to bear lambs. Rick, with his many years of experience in raising sheep, told me that if we enjoyed eating lamb, we would probably also enjoy the milder-tasting mutton we would obtain from this pair.

However, we soon put all thoughts of the taste of their meat out of our minds. My wife gave the sheep the humorous names of *Cassa* and *Roll*, and our family really enjoyed having them around. It was so calming for us to watch these good-natured animals feeding, relaxing, chewing the cud, and wandering tranquilly around our property.

The months sped by, and soon the sad day came: the optimum time to have the ewes slaughtered and butchered. The Feast of Tabernacles was approaching, all the brethren would be away or otherwise busy, and my father-in-law was away on a long vacation. No one would be around to feed the sheep their hay and water.

Another friend, Wayne, a man who had raised many cattle and was, like Rick, skilled at this kind of activity, volunteered to do "the dirty deed" and the butchering if I would help him with the necessary heavy lifting. One Sunday afternoon, then, Wayne arrived at our home with

his rifle, and I sent my wife and our four daughters out shopping for the remainder of the day.

Because our family had become so used to having the two peaceful animals around the place, the slaughter of Cassa and Roll was very, very unpleasant to watch. Wayne, in his long experience, was understandably thick-skinned about the whole procedure. Without any "goodbye," he simply loaded his rifle, picked out one of the ewes, and shot her in the head at very close range. Her legs immediately became rubbery, her eyes glazed over, she tottered for a few seconds, then fell and tumbled down a small hill. A look of horror and fear immediately appeared in the eyes of the other ewe as she saw her old companion fall. If I had looked in a mirror at that moment, I would have probably seen a similar look on my own face.

Wayne told me that, although her brain was now dead, the sheep's heart and lungs would continue to operate for a few more minutes. To bleed her, he must cut her throat immediately, and we would then need to hang her by her hind legs. As I was attaching a rope around her hind legs, I heard some strange, wheezing and gurgling sounds from the front end of the animal. After I had finished my little job, I returned to Wayne who was just completing the cutting of the animal's throat. Remember, this was an adult sheep, not a tender, one-year-old lamb. My eyes fell on the awful spectacle of the severed windpipe still puffing in time with the irregular, strained and waning inflation and deflation of the lungs. We hung the sheep's carcass from the edge of the roof of the woodshed and then went to repeat the gruesome procedure with the other poor victim.

Every year when Passover season comes around, I think of the grisly demise of Cassa and Roll—even though they were comparatively tough, adult, mutton-producing ewes and not tender, young lambs like those that picture the sacrifice of our Savior.

PRIME TIME

When is the meat of a sheep (or goat) at its very best, and in its prime for butchering? I asked Rick this question recently, and he told me that, although it can vary slightly from breed to breed between eight and twelve months, the prime age for butchering never exceeds a year. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* article entitled "Lamb" agrees:

FALAMBS

Lamb: Live sheep before the age of one year, and the flesh of such animals. Mutton refers to the flesh of the mature ram or ewe at least one year old; the meat of sheep between 12 and 20 months old may be called yearling mutton.

We can be sure then that lamb meat will be at its best when the lamb is less than a year old because a lamb is *not* a lamb if it is over a year old. At a year, it becomes an adult sheep—a ram or a ewe—and its meat becomes mutton. This is interesting because, for the annual Passover sacrifice, God commands, “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats” (Exodus 12:5).

God commands the Israelites to choose an unblemished, male lamb of the first year. The lamb was to be of the highest quality and no older than one year. This is the time that it would be at its very best meat quality and highest saleable value.

Although I have never seen the slaughter of a lamb in its first year of life, I would expect that it is probably more unpleasant to watch than the slaughter of an older sheep. I have no wish to be morbid by suggesting this, nor am I criticizing God’s perfect timing, but the members of the New Testament church miss a great deal by not experiencing this annual, physical ritual of the Passover sacrifice. It would provide so much more rich meaning to us than it did to God’s Old Testament people. Though most church members would consider it a very unpleasant sight, it would be a very significant annual “jolt” that would remind us of the horrible suffering Jesus Christ endured for us.

On the other hand, it may be that God’s Old Testament people took the annual Passover sacrifice for granted because they witnessed so many offerings in the course of a year. Perhaps they did not understand the spiritual symbolism of those offerings as well. They may not have understood the meaning of the offerings because they took them for granted.

Many—myself included—have asked why Jesus Christ will reinstitute animal sacrifices after His return (see Ezekiel 40:41-42; 44:11; 46:24; Zechariah 14:21). One reason may be to help the resurrected members of the Old Testament congregation of Israel to learn to pay better attention to the deeper spiritual meanings of the physical sacrifices. A second reason might be to

introduce the resurrected and glorified members of the New Testament church to the rich symbolism and significance of the sacrifices.

A HUMAN DEATH

For most people in our “civilized” Western society, the slaughter of a young lamb would be shocking, unpleasant to watch and maybe even offensive. To witness the slaughter or execution of a human being would, of course, be even more disturbing.

Other than those who have served in the military, and except for the occasional news videos or photographs of executions or assassinations, most of us have not seen real, violent human death firsthand. To some, the simulated violence and death in a television program or movie is so troubling that they want it banned or extensively curtailed. It is certainly unpleasant to watch anyone die, even a relatively peaceful death.

Have you ever seen a person die, perhaps a close relative? I have not. Although I was with some of my loved ones during their last hours of life, for some reason, God did not allow me to be present at the actual moment when my baby son died, when my mother died, or when my wife’s mother and father died.

Somehow, human death does not seem *quite* as unacceptable when the person is very old and has enjoyed a good, long life, or when his death is peaceful and nonviolent. On the negative side, we normally do not question a person’s death when he has flagrantly and selfishly abused his health or is guilty of a violent crime. Human death seems so much worse when the person is young—a child, a youth, or a young man or woman in his or her prime of life; when the person is either relatively or absolutely innocent; or when the death is painful, traumatic, or violent.

The Lamb of God, whose life was of an infinitely higher value than the sum of all human life, was just thirty-three years old when He sacrificed Himself for our salvation. He was in the very prime of His physical life and, like no other adult human before or since, He was one hundred percent innocent of sin. Yet He suffered the most painful, traumatic, violent and shameful death that the human mind could invent.

LOVE and DEATH

As we consider the supreme and selfless love for humankind of Jesus Christ and God the Father (John 15:13), let us consider three questions:

- ◆ Is death really an enemy?
- ◆ Should we look forward to death?
- ◆ Did Jesus look forward to death?

In the arts, love and death are frequently linked. A few familiar examples that come to mind are Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and the beautiful "Liebstod" ("Love-death") sequence in Wagner's opera, *Tristan und Isolde*. In former times, it was considered fashionable and suave for the rich and famous to appear melancholy and mournful in the presence of their friends, to favor poetry, literature and music dealing with death, and even to feign a yearning for death.

Some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists, poets and composers took this doleful subject matter another step farther. Their works describe the praise of death and, in some circles, even to the extent of the love of death, the yearning for death. A scene from *War and Peace* tells of Pierre Bezukhov, who, upon joining the Russian Freemasons, discovers that the highest virtue a member of that secret society could strive for is "the love of death"!

With various objectives for the teaching, motivation, and encouragement of His children, God also inspired the concepts of love and death to be linked in Scripture. For example: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death; jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame" (Song of Songs 8:6).

Uncontrolled or immature love, lust, passion and jealousy can be forces as strong as death and can lead to death. How many "crimes of passion" are committed around the world each year? How many teenagers in recent years have committed suicide or murder because a girlfriend or boyfriend rejected them for another, or because their parents disapproved of their relationship?

I John 3:14 is a second example of love linked with death: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death." Contrary to man's Satan-inspired ideas, love should be linked to life, not death. We should consider life, under normal circumstances, as a good thing and death a comparatively bad thing. Love of our physical and spiritual brothers and sisters is consistent with life, and the lack of love for them is consistent with death.

Solomon gives us a third example: "But he who sins against me [wisdom] wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:36). In this section, wisdom stands for God and His way of life. This proverb tells us that those who hate God and sin against Him—likely without realizing it—are lovers of death. If the

hatred of God is proportional to the love of death, then the love of God must likewise be proportional to the love of life.

THE LAMB of GOD

Did not Solomon also write, "[T]he day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth," and "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting" (Ecclesiastes 7:1-2)? Was Solomon just having a bad day when he wrote this? Or can there really be positive aspects to death? We will return to this question later, but for now, let us ask another:

Did Jesus "love death"? Did He look forward to it? Did He look upon death generally—and His own death specifically—as positive events? Some scriptures almost give the impression that He did. Notice Matthew 16:21-23:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Poor Peter was looking through a glass very darkly and suffering from the common human malady of selective hearing and understanding. All he seemed to hear and understand were those horrifying words about the suffering, the rejection, and the killing. Did he not hear Jesus telling them that His resurrection from the dead—one of the greatest turning points in all eternity—was soon to occur?

Peter had the powerful Satan whispering words of fear into his mind: fear for Jesus, fear of persecution, fear of his own death. Would any of us have fared any better than Peter? Satan, up to his old tricks, knew that one of history's most pivotal days was approaching and what the glorious outcome of Jesus' suffering and death would be. He wanted to make a concerted, eleventh-hour effort to prevent it from happening. How? By using human fear and reason—by frightening and tempting Peter into trying to talk his beloved friend Jesus out of even mentioning these two events: the greatest sacrifice and the greatest miracle in human history.

Jesus was no coward, of course, but He certainly did not look forward to the impending physical torture that He knew He must endure. He had the ability—if just through Scripture alone—to foresee it all in detail. Paul suggests that, even before His incarnation, Christ frequently pondered what He would have to experience: "He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once in the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26).

In Gethsemane, just outside the eastern gates of Jerusa-

lem, on our Savior's last night on earth as a human being, He, in deep and fervent prayer, asked His Father:

"O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." . . . He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." . . . So He left [Peter, James and John], went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44)

Perhaps it was not just the approaching physical torture that Jesus dreaded as He made this plea to His Father. For every microsecond of eternity (with the possible two exceptions of His time in Mary's womb and His human babyhood), He had enjoyed a level of consciousness, involvement, control and communication with God the Father that no other human could even begin to comprehend. It must have been almost intolerable for the Son of God, the great YHWH of the Old Testament, to contemplate being totally unconscious and "out of the picture," even for a mere 72 hours.

Jesus' agony no doubt included the foreknowledge of the spiritual torture of billions of sins committed throughout human history being laid on His innocent head. Jesus knew that His mind would soon become besmirched, infected and injected with every filthy sin that man had ever committed in the past and would commit from that time on.

God tells us in I Corinthians 15:56, "The sting of death is sin." Most of us have been stung by a spider, bee, wasp, or hornet. The pain of an insect sting increases rapidly as its poison spreads through the blood vessels, deep into the body part that has been stung, and it can sometimes be almost unbearable. Nevertheless, it is impossible for us to imagine a fraction of the spiritual agony that those billions of "stings of death" caused our Savior as all the sins of the world were laid upon Him.

With all His might, He strove to dwell on better things (Philippians 4:8). He struggled to look beyond those hours of torture, despite His foreknowledge of their severity. Jesus knew what would happen after this day of agony and shame that was just beginning. More than any other human being who ever lived, He understood what lay beyond the split second of death and His short stay in the tomb. Just hours before this prayer in Gethsemane, He had spoken joyfully to His Father about their approaching reunion and regaining His former glory (John 17:5, 11, 13).

How did King Nebuchadnezzar feel when God gave him back his status as a real human being and a great king after living the existence of the lowest, slinking animal in the wild (Daniel 4:29-36)? How much more did Jesus look forward to waking after three days in the tomb as the Eternal God!

Did Jesus look forward to His death? No. He looked beyond His hours of suffering and beyond the instant of His death. He looked forward to life!

GOOD and BAD?

However, if we believe Ecclesiastes 7:1-4, we must accept that death must have its "better" points. We are all well aware of the reasons why we think of death as a negative thing, but how can we think of such an event and condition as positive?

We must always remember that our Creator, the Master Craftsman who made everything of the highest quality (Genesis 1:4-31), built death into man's design. He did this for good reasons. Surprisingly, there really are good and positive purposes behind both the "first death" and the "second death" (Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 14; 21:8). The first death is the one with which every person is familiar—the one everyone must face. This death terminates the physical life of every human being who lives during the 6,000 years allotted to man.

Before the Flood, even though many people lived for multiple hundreds of years, they all still died. Afterward, God gradually shortened man's average lifespan to 70 years (Psalm 90:10). Perhaps He did this to show us the results of long lives of disobedience to God's law, such as we see in the record of the pre-Flood world, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah. What would the world be like if it were filled with immortal, law-breaking humans?

As Herbert W. Armstrong taught, God is reproducing Himself. He wants children who will not turn to lives of sin, as Satan and his demons did, and continue to live forever in misery. Unlike the destiny of that miserable band of fallen angels, death is the wages of sin for human beings; death is our penalty for failing to live God's way (Romans 6:23).

Is death, the just penalty for sin created by God, really the "bad thing" in this equation? Is it not rather sin, which causes the death penalty to be incurred, that is really bad?

God does not want one of us to live a miserable, sinful existence for all eternity. He wants children who will learn to obey Him willingly, who will learn to reject sin and reap the positive results throughout eternal lives of joy. He has promised to give every human an opportunity to receive His gifts of salvation and eternal life in His Family and Kingdom. However, if any of His regenerated children insist on continuing in sin after they have been given adequate time to learn, weigh and understand the consequences of each alternative, they will incur the penalty of the second death, God's loving and merciful penalty of eternal sleep (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). Herbert Armstrong often paraphrased the apostle Paul, saying: "The wages of sin is death! Eternal death! Not eternal life in hell-fire, agony and misery!" We can see by this merciful method of final punishment that, when God tells us to love our enemies, He is not asking us to do something that He is not willing to do Himself. What a loving and merciful God we have!

We believe and hope that Jesus Christ will return very soon to straighten out the mess that man has made of His creation. However, if He does not return before our

allotted time expires, we will experience the dreamless sleep of the first death as He did. Jesus' sleep lasted only 72 hours. We should not be concerned that ours will probably last longer because, when we are in a deep, sound sleep, we are unaware of time passing (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

FRIEND or FOE?

Now for our deferred question: Is death really an enemy? It is Paul's teaching that, yes, death *is* an enemy: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death" (I Corinthians 15:26).

If death is part of God's good creation, how can it also be an enemy? God does not create enemies, does He? Yes, He does! For the ultimate good of His people, God has allowed—and even raised up—many different kinds of enemies throughout history to test us. Without making light of the seriousness of human death, we might look on it as a "disposable test tool." When God has finished with it, He will throw it in the garbage!

Yes, death is an enemy. Death and its inseparable and causative partner, sin, are enemies that, although they have led to so much unhappiness and misery over the years, God will one day destroy. But they will not go down without a fight!

In some respects, the first and most crucial battle in the war between humankind and these enemies, sin and death, has been won already by our Savior: ". . . knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him" (Romans 6:9).

Because Christ won this first battle through His death and resurrection, we—His fellow-soldiers (II Timothy 2:3-4; Ephesians 6:11-18)—have been given an opportunity to fight in these subsequent battles, to participate in the destruction of sin and death. Our reward is to receive the gift of eternal life: "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:20, 22).

Is it any wonder that Satan did not want Jesus to talk to His disciples about His future suffering, death, and resurrection? Satan was—and, for a little while longer, still is—the prince of this world (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). He had been permitted to enjoy things his own way for so long that he had no desire whatsoever for battle to commence.

Although Jesus' death and resurrection constituted the first and most crucial battle and victory in this war against sin and death, it was not the last. Encouraged, empowered, and strengthened by the Author of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10), His fellow soldiers are involved in an ongoing daily battle with Satan and his forces.

In addition, there are more major battles to come. God will win an intermediate battle at the time of the first resurrection (I Corinthians 15:54). Even then the

war over sin and death will still not be totally won. Satan will stir up the massed armies of the world to join in an unholy alliance with those of the Beast and the False Prophet. Together they will mount an insane attack upon Jesus Christ, His spirit brothers and sisters, and His vast army of angels as they descend to the earth (Revelation 19:14, 19).

The opening verses of Revelation 20 describe the first imprisonment of Satan. Even with Jesus Christ reigning on the earth and without Satan's direct influence, it will still take many years to get the spirit of sin, competition, strife, conflict and death out of man's system. The victory, however, will still not be complete. After the Millennium Christ must engage in a final battle, and Satan will then be permanently imprisoned (Revelation 20:7-10). However, God's plan takes things further:

And I saw a great white throne, and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. And Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Death will, at last, be swallowed up in victory. Sin, death, Hades (the very idea of the grave), and Satan, with the billions of sins of the world firmly transferred onto his head, will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, never again to reappear. It is beyond our human mental powers to be able to imagine the joy and glory of that day.

How complete will be the joy of humankind, now the Family of God, when this day arrives at last? "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

No more death! No more sorrow, crying or pain! What a day that will be! The purpose of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God will at last be fulfilled. Our Savior will proclaim that the terrible agony He willingly endured for His brothers and sisters was worth it. With His children gathered around Him, our Father will joyfully proclaim that even the risk of losing His Son was worth it.

What a day! Let us, then, keep the Passover—with its death of the Lamb of God—with this in mind, looking forward to that wonderful time!

—John Plunkett

KID KID-KILLERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

VIRTUAL BIBLE BANNING

When most Americans tried to live “by the Book,” our society had far fewer instances of mass murder, corruption, betrayal, thievery, and sexual crimes. God’s Word, particularly the Ten Commandments, strongly influenced decisions, creating a moral, ethical conscience in the majority of the citizenry. In fact, until the public school system secularized education, teachers used the Bible frequently for lessons in writing, spelling, grammar, literature, history and values. Because of both its content and wide distribution, it was a standard textbook in American schools for decades.

Over the past century, more or less, the Bible has gradually been virtually banned from public discourse, producing deleterious effects in private life as well. Beginning with evolutionary theory, materialistic humanism and scientific rationalism, intellectuals and elitists have eroded public confidence in the Bible itself and Christianity as a whole. The sexual revolution, feminism, atheistic socialism, Roe vs. Wade, Vietnam, cult murder/suicides, religious hucksters, and numerous other movements and events have likewise taken their toll.

A most significant factor over the past few decades has been the steady exclusion of all mention of God or religion in the classroom. God has even been banished from graduation ceremonies and football game invocations! Most of us would not want the public schools to teach religion to our children, but we would advocate allowing them to express their religious convictions on school grounds

without fear of punishment, ostracism or lawsuit. However, the public has accepted this strict separation of church and state because it lacks the will and conviction to stand for religious freedom (freedom *of* religion, not *from* religion).

In the absence of God and godly morality, base human nature fills the void. Raw emotion flares. Self-esteem metamorphoses into radical self-importance, self-interest and self-expression. Common sense and civil behavior lose ground to unrestrained individualism, what the Bible calls “every intent of the thoughts of [man’s] heart [being] only evil continually” (Genesis 6:6). It is only a matter of time before bursts of rage,



THIS HIGH SCHOOL IN SANTEE, CALIFORNIA, BECAME THE LATEST STAGE FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF AMERICA’S BRUTAL UNDERCURRENT, AS PROPHESED BY PAUL IN II TIMOTHY 3.

depression and frustration manifest themselves in violence as we have witnessed at Santana and Columbine.

BIBLICALLY PREDICTED

Unsurprisingly, the Bible prophesied of these conditions in the end time. Maybe the best-known list of last-days evils appears in II Timothy 3:1-5:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers,

without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

“Disobedient to parents” obviously applies directly to children. Its principle covers rejection of all authority, and in combination with other traits in Paul’s list, provides a recipe for the latest rash of school shootings.

Jesus compares conditions in the end time with that in Noah’s day. Although His prophecy includes two complementary meanings (see “As It Was in the Days of Noah,” *Forerunner*, January 1998), the most obvious meaning is that the world will be violent and corrupt. Moses writes in Genesis 6:11-12, “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence . . . for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.” Just like today, the pre-Flood world sank into this condition because it rejected God, following the examples of Adam and Eve, Cain and Lamech (Genesis 3:1-4:24) rather than Abel and Enoch, who walked with God (Genesis 4:4; 5:24; Hebrews 11:4-5).

Without contemplating its spiritual meaning, Malachi 4:5-6 suggests a problem with children in these days: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.” This follows Solomon’s instruction regarding the importance of godly childrearing in Proverbs 29:15: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.” Undeniably, negligent parenting has played a large role in setting up young killers like Andy Williams, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold to carry out their bloody crimes.

God says through Isaiah, "I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. The people will be oppressed, every one by his neighbor; the child will be insolent toward the elder. . . . As for My people, children are their oppressors" (Isaiah 3:4-5, 12). Children and their needs are driving our social policies, but since they are not based on godly wisdom, they are practically useless—and may be doing more harm than good. As for oppression, the United States is certainly oppressed by the merciless slaying of its children by other children.

When it reaches this point, we are assured that the end is close:

Behold, the day! Behold, it has come! Doom has gone out; the rod has blossomed, pride has budded. Violence has risen up into a

rod of wickedness; none of them shall remain, none of their multitude, none of them; nor shall there be wailing for them. The time has come, the day draws near. . . . Make a chain, for the land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence. Therefore I will bring the worst of the Gentiles, and they will possess their houses. . . . Destruction comes; they will seek peace, but there shall be none. Disaster will come upon disaster, and rumor will be upon rumor. . . . I will do to them according to their way, and according to what they deserve I will judge them. Then they shall know that I am the LORD! (Ezekiel 7:10-12, 23-27)

The good news is that God's King-

dom will descend with Jesus Christ to resolve the mess man has made of society. In Isaiah 11:6, 8-9, God assures us that children then will live in a far different, more peaceful world; kid killers will not even be remembered:

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 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.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

A Ready Answer

An Extraordinary Feast

Continued from page 8

their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'"

Later in the chapter, Christ calls them hypocrites. They had made God's Word of no effect. They were missing the point completely—even missing the point of who Christ was! Rather than stepping out in faith, they had made physical things the objects of their worship!

We Are Involved

We may be doing the same thing! We delevener our homes and eat unleavened bread, which we must, but then we tell ourselves, "Boy, if I would have witnessed the miracles that Israel witnessed to free them from slavery in Egypt, I never would have rebelled against God! If I had been spared as the death angel passed over, I would have been absolutely careful to follow every word

God spoke!" The point is that we *are* part of every one of these events!

This works in much the same way as my involvement with that fatal train accident my father witnessed in 1939, eleven years before I was born. My dad made it so real to me, and I believed what he told me. I followed his instructions, and his fearful respect of trains became my fearful respect of trains! Though he related the incident to me many years ago, it is still with me—and affects me—just as it did then!

The days of Unleavened Bread are about remembering the events of the Exodus and becoming involved in them so that we can use the lessons to enhance our journey toward God's Kingdom. It is not time for us to rest and pat ourselves on the back because we worked so hard to get the physical leavening out of our houses. It is not time to make a show of eating flat bread and counting the minutes until we can have that next hamburger on a bun.

It is a time for getting the leavening out, eating the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (I Corinthians 5:8) while seeing and believing the awesome power of the great Creator God in delivering His people.

It is a time to count the cost of our deliverance and to see God's justice and mercy in action.

It is a time to know that He has set apart His firstborn for Himself because He spared us from the death angel, while the rest of the world's firstborn died the death that we should have died for sin.

It is a time to recognize that, because we were bought at such a great cost, we have a responsibility to make His law our law from the inside out so we may accomplish His purpose.

We can keep the days this year just as the Israelites did—and we have indeed done this in the past with great bravado, faithfully delevenering our homes and eating flat bread. These can be our phylacteries. Or we can make this year's feast the most remarkably memorable time in our personal history. We can march out of Egypt with the nation of Israel and see the mighty hand of God delivering us all along the way. We can be driven to make the Eternal's way our way because, in faith, we have already seen it work!

So now, as we prepare to delevener our homes, keep the point of these days in mind. God has given us an extraordinary feast, a spiritual banquet, to remind of many vital lessons, principles and instructions that will nourish us in our trek toward our Promised Land, the Kingdom of God!

—Mark Schindler

EATING: *How Good It Is!*

John had come to grips with this concept. He understood that his role in the vast scope of God's purpose was limited by the overruling wisdom of the Creator as He carried out *His* purpose. This is a reason why salvation is spoken of as "free"—because God is not bound to show mercy to anybody since all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All too often, we forget that the invisible God is working things out according to His purpose, not ours. God is free to do as He pleases. He owes no one anything.

I Corinthians 4:6-7 adds:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Do we have grounds for being puffed up or jealous? John the Baptist did not think so, and what he declared is truth. I Corinthians 12 makes clear that God places people in the church as it pleases Him, and He gives gifts to them so they can be responsible for a function. The gifts do not make them "better," just prepared by the Creator to serve in a specialized way.

At this juncture, we can draw a major lesson from the Parable of the Talents and fit it into this picture:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. . . . So he who had received five talents, came and brought five other talents, saying, "Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them." . . . He also who had received two talents came and said, "Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them." . . . Then he who had received the one talent came and said, "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed." (Matthew 25:14, 20, 22, 24)

Not all are expected to produce the same results, but all are expected to be equally faithful to the gifts God entrusted to them. Interestingly, the one who was unfaithful to what God gave him failed to produce based on his reasoning that God is unfair. Like so many people today, he felt victimized.

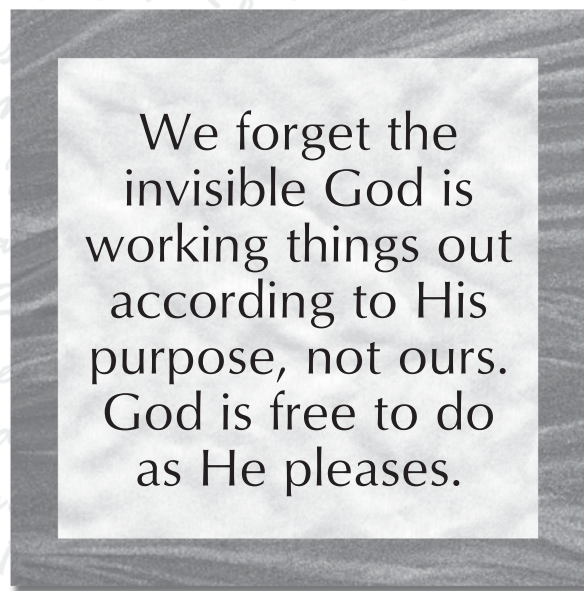
We see, then, that Jacob was not inherently a better person than Esau was. He was simply gifted in a way Esau was not. God probably chose to use twins to illustrate this vitally important lesson to draw attention to how He works and to His grace. In this way, God is never indebted to man.

What makes this so important to us? We have the same advantage over those not called as Jacob had over Esau. We also learn that those who judge themselves among themselves are not wise because not everyone is gifted in exactly the same way. Finally, we learn that each bears his own responsibility to edify the body according the measure of what God has given him.

Whom He Wills He Hardens

Paul takes this another step further in Romans 9:18, 21-24:

Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. . . . Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared before-



hand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

God not only gives gifts to those He favors, but He also hardens and/or blinds (Romans 11:7) some so that they become enemies of those He favors. Witness what He did to and with Pharaoh when He redeemed Israel from Egypt. That God would actually harden someone's heart so that he would become an enemy of Himself or His people is

sometimes even more difficult for us to comprehend than His bestowing of favor on one over another. Because God is invisible in exercising His sovereignty, people often put far too much weight on a person's works and far too little on God's grace toward us in the outworking of His plan.

At times, this leads people—who are confidently oblivious of their woefully insufficient wisdom—to judge Almighty God on either what they think He does or does not do. In principle, this is precisely what some did

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concerning the calendar issue that recently swept through the church. Those advocating calendar change were calling God into account, blind to the fact that they were doing so. When this happens, faith goes out the window to be replaced by sight. They devise a calendar of their own creation, and the result is trusting in their own works.

Another aspect of disregarding God's right to do as He pleases with His creation involves the clear biblical statement that God sets up and deposes the rulers of the nations according to His purpose. On the other hand, I Timothy 2:1-2 admonishes us to pray for them:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

We may be puzzled why we in the United States should have been subjected to such an immoral president, a congenital, serial liar with an extremely ambitious and aggressive wife. In addition, his vice-president also possessed a strong urge to tell tall tales and reinvented himself with every speech. What do church members say about these facts? They shrug their shoulders, saying it must be God's will for it to be this way. They are correct.

While members willingly accept this as a reality, they

fail to apply the same level of God's will to the church. It is somehow unthinkable that God would allow intelligent and charming false ministers to invade His church, preach false doctrines, destroy the faith once delivered and drive the church into its scattered condition! In the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, however, Jesus warns that tares would come into the church, and Paul, Peter, Jude and John all confirm that it indeed occurred. The church's recent history provides clear evidence that God has greatly favored us, yet He has also prepared enemies to test us, just as He loved Jacob but hated Esau.

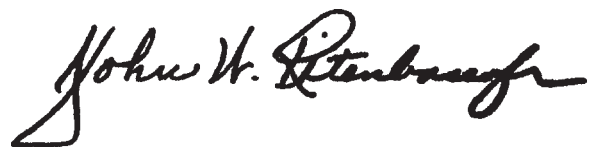
In Ephesians 1:3-14 the apostle Paul gives a much more complete rendering of our advantage:

1. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing.
2. He has chosen us.
3. He has bestowed His grace upon us.
4. He has adopted us into His Family.
5. He has given us wisdom and insight into His plans for the future.
6. He has revealed to us that we will share in the coming reconciliation of all mankind.
7. He has made us His special treasure.
8. He has granted us His Holy Spirit.

All of this began with Jacob and Esau, a bowl of stew, and a bad choice of when to eat by a man who had no vision and badly underestimated what he was forfeiting through his desire for immediate gratification. It was such a simple thing, a family matter, but it produced a choice with such long-lasting and painful consequence that its effect reverberates to this day. It continues to provide the sons of God with a profound lesson even in these end times. Will we, like Jacob use our advantages, or will we, like the likeable Esau, fritter them away in the world?

It is through these advantages that God is shaping our lives for salvation and entrance into the Kingdom of God. Our advantages do not lie in anything we have inherently or have done to earn, but they come to us entirely because of God's choice. The reason some are accepted and some are rejected is because God wills it. Therefore, we need to understand that there is no valid reason why we should fail. We need to dig in and take care of the business at hand—God's business. We are His workmanship, being created for good works. Our work in this creation of God's is to yield our lives to His persuasions as Jacob did.

In Christian love,



BIBLE STUDY: SELF-INDULGENCE

Today, we see an epidemic of obsession with everything from food and drink to personal agendas. In religion circles, some indulge themselves with new theological ideas that are nothing more than heresy. So much religious information is available on the Internet and in print that one so inclined can spiritually drown in false doctrine.

Solomon writes that too much study—especially

of the wrong thing—is wearisome to the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Of this inclination to self-indulge in titillating religious knowledge, Paul says such people are, “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (II Timothy 3:6). Self-indulgence in anything leads to worse spiritual problems. This Bible Study will investigate this common failure in Christian growth.



1. What does it mean to self-indulge? Proverbs 16:26; Ecclesiastes 6:7, 9; Matthew 23:25; Luke 11:39.

COMMENT: Jesus declares the Pharisees “hypocrites” because they looked like they led “clean” lives, but inside they were greedy and self-indulgent. A person indulges himself by taking unrestrained pleasure in his pursuit of enjoyment and showing undue favor to his desires and feelings. By excessive compliance in gratifying our own desires, we pamper, humor, and spoil ourselves. **Pamper** implies inordinate gratification of desire for luxury and comfort with a consequent enervating effect. **Humor** indicates yielding to moods or whims. **Spoil** stresses the injurious effects on a person’s character. Self-indulgence is excessive satisfaction of our sensual appetites and desires for the specific purpose of pleasing the self.

2. What is the most common form of self-Indulgence? Numbers 11:5-6, 32-34; Deuteronomy 21:20-21; Proverbs 23:1-3, 21; Philippians 3:18-19.

COMMENT: The power of appetite is a great enticement to self-indulge. In Deuteronomy 21:20, the Hebrew word for “glutton” is *zolel*, from a word meaning “to shake out” or “to squander.” One who is extravagant, who wastes his means by self-indulgence, is a glutton. In Proverbs 23:21, the word means “debauchees” or “wasters of their own body.”

3. What attitudes does self-indulgence promote? Isaiah 47:8-9; Luke 12:16-20; II Peter 2:13-14; II Timothy 3:1-6.

COMMENT: Among a few: fanaticism, false security, presumption, and fun-seeking are attitudes promoted by self-indulgence. Fanaticism is unbridled obsession, and though most do not recognize it as form of self-indulgence, it is a gratification of selfish desire. The apostle Paul says that we should avoid those who are driven by lust and greed and have no self-control.

4. What are the effects of a self-indulgent life? Proverbs 21:17; Luke 8:14; I Timothy 5:6; Titus 3:3; James 5:5.

COMMENT: Some of the results are poverty, spiritual emptiness, and death. In I Timothy 5:6 “live in plea-

sure” is translated from the Greek word *spatalao*, describing a lifestyle of abandonment to one’s desires for comfort and pleasure. It appears again only in James 5:5, as “luxury” or “wanton” (KJV).

5. To what ultimate end does self-indulgence lead? Ecclesiastes 2:1-3, 10-11; Isaiah 22:12-13; 56:11-12; Amos 6:4-7; I Corinthians 15:32-34.

COMMENT: Self-indulgence leads to excessive striving for yet more worldly pleasure. For those whose chief aim in life is sensual pleasure, there is never enough to satisfy. Self-indulgence can lead to full-blown addiction. Without God’s truth of the coming resurrections of mankind, men see no reason to refrain from a life of pleasure and dissipation, ending in death.

6. Is self-indulgence actually a spiritual sin? Deuteronomy 31:20-21; 32:15-18; II Timothy 2:16-18; 4:3-5.

COMMENT: The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 contains an indictment against Israel for her self-indulgence in the form of spiritual gluttony. The nation of Israel (Jeshurun) and individual Israelites grew fat and kicked, rejecting God. The metaphor used here is of a pampered animal, which instead of being tame and gentle, becomes mischievous and vicious as a result of good living and being spoiled. The Israelites showed their self-indulgence in craving and pursuing a pantheon of pagan gods and numerous false doctrines.

Some in the church of God today are similarly spiritually self-indulgent. The constant bombardment of enticing new ideas to “clarify” and “improve” established doctrines seems overwhelming and alluring to the itching ear. These “new ideas” are old traps circulated every few decades in the church. Satan, the great deceiver, takes the same temptations, repackages them in a new or slightly different form, and presents his refurbished tasty morsel to the spiritually weak, self-indulgent person. Despite these enticements, “the solid foundation of God stands” (II Timothy 2:19), and those who repent of sin and live the way of life Christ’s name represents understand it.