

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 11, Number 10

December 2002



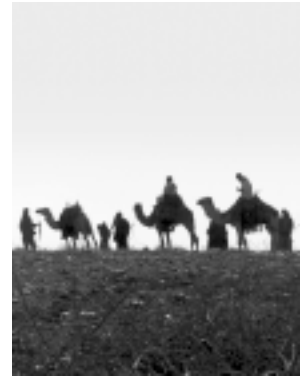
Who Were the Magi?

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About Our Cover



A fascinating element of the story of Christ's birth is the sudden appearance and disappearance of the wise men from the East. This historical mystery is more intriguing than it first appears—possibly even linking the lost ten tribes to the Messiah. (Reuters)

Forerunner Magazine

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This free publication is made possible through the voluntary tithes and offerings of its subscribers and members of the Church of the Great God. All American and Canadian donations are tax-deductible.

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Part Six:
Eternal LifeThe
Elements
of Motivation

The last element of motivation encompasses all of the previous five, which will become obvious once we understand what it is. This final element contains a term with which we are quite familiar because we hear it so often in conversations regarding religious issues. However, do we really know what it means when we read it in the Bible or hear it in a sermon? The Bible frequently uses some of its most prominent terms in unfamiliar ways. For example, it uses “spirit” in eight different ways, “soul” in four. Thus, it is important to consider the contexts in which these terms appear so we understand more thoroughly.

To us, the word *know* simply means “to be acquainted with” or “to have knowledge of.” However, in biblical usage it can also have intimate sexual connotations. Likewise, the term *eternal life* has a more definitive usage. An English-speaker’s first impulse is to think of it in terms of living without ever dying, having an endless existence. This is certainly correct—but incomplete because its biblical usage encompasses far more! By not understanding this, we deny ourselves a great deal of motivation that arises from having a better working knowledge of God’s wonderful purpose as we prepare for His Kingdom.

This term contains significant understanding of why we go through trials. Its more complete usage is not difficult to understand. However, since it is rarely explained, we need to bolster our understanding of it to sharpen our focus in using the other six motivators.

A Shade of Difference

Romans 2:5-7 introduces an interesting thought:

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself

wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality. . . .

Notice that Paul separates “immortality” from “eternal life” as though they are different. The words assuredly share a common idea, that is, both indicate a long, enduring period. *Immortality* simply means “unending existence” because the being does not corrupt, decay, and die.

However, “eternal life,” as used by the Bible’s writers, includes something “immortality” does not, introducing a shade of difference between the two words. Unfortunately, in many minds, “immortality” corresponds exactly with “eternal life.” They are not the same.

Perhaps a good way to illustrate this is to refer to the Greek myths with their pantheon of gods. In these myths, the gods had immortality but—by biblical definition—not eternal life. This is because immortality speaks only of endless life, not its quality. The Greek gods acted, reacted, and had passions and attitudes just like human beings, mere mortals, whereas eternal life in the biblical sense is *life lived the way the true God lives it*. It indicates the totality of life, which, as we will see, we already possess in principle. To put it into a more human setting, eternal life is to live life endlessly according to the will of God.

John 5:24 helps us to begin to understand when Jesus says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” Notice that he who believes has already passed from death to everlasting life. We can connect this to Ephesians 2:1: “And you He made

alive who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Before repentance and conversion, God views us as dead even though we are physically alive.

Though we possess animal life, before God’s calling we are totally unaware of the spiritual life of God, even as those who are physically dead are unaware of the pleasures, cares, and amusements of the living. They hear no music, enjoy no food, can see neither beauty nor ugliness—they are unaware even of people trampling on their graves! Before conversion, we are likewise un-

*“And this is eternal life,
that they may know You,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom
You have sent.”
—John 17:3*

aware of the spiritual life of God, the beauty of holiness, and the joy, power, abundance, peace, honor, and glory of that life. Conversion is a life slowly expanding into a new dimension that we never knew existed before—everlasting or eternal life.

We catch a sense of this in Jesus’ brief biblical definition of eternal life found in John 17:3. “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” He does not use the term “immortal” or “endless,” but He describes a kind and quality of life in terms of knowledge and a relationship with the Father and Son, a very intimate relationship, as we shall see.

Do not be misled by the limited *Strong’s* definition of the word translated “eternal” in this verse. A more complete lexicon like Spiros Zodhiates’ *Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament* gives a more precise usage—how the word is used in the Bible rather than merely in classical Greek. Zodhiates says that the word refers to the “life which is God’s” (p. 107). The life of God is more than endless, and that is what is important here. He adds, “It is to be understood as referring not only to duration, but more so to quality. That is, it is not merely life that is eternal in duration, but is primarily something different from the natural life of man, i.e., the life of God.”

The Daily Bible Study Commentary: John (Volume 2) by William Barclay contains this comment:

There is another important thought in this passage, for it contains the great New Testament definition of eternal life. It is eternal life to know God and to know Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Let us remind ourselves of what eternal means. In Greek, it is *aionis*. This word has to do, not so much with duration of life, for life which went on forever would not necessarily be a boon. Its main meaning is *quality* of life. There is only one person to whom the *aionis* can properly be applied, and that is God. Eternal life is, therefore, nothing other than the life of God. To possess it, to enter into it, is to experience here and now something of the splendor and the majesty, and the joy, and the peace, and the holiness, which are characteristic of the life of God. (p. 207)

Knowing God and Christ

John 17:3 also contains the word “know.” To understand eternal life, we must also understand how this word is used here. It undoubtedly contains elements of intellectual knowledge, understanding, discernment, information, and familiarity. However, this word suggests more than this because the Old Testament regularly uses “know” to describe sexual knowledge. Sexual knowledge between a husband and wife is the most intimate of knowledge. Husband and wife are no longer two but one flesh. In this regard, in John 17:3, the important thing is not the sexual act but the intimacy of heart and mind that in true love precede the act. To know God, therefore, is not merely to have intellectual knowledge of Him, but it is having an intimate, personal relationship with Him like the nearest and dearest relationship between two people.

Hosea 4:6 provides an interesting example of the practical effect of “knowing”: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” God’s implication is clear. If they had possessed knowledge of God, they would have had the power to avoid being destroyed. Nobody in his right mind wants to be destroyed. Ignorance might be bliss, but this verse shows it can be dangerously life-threatening.

Consider the implications of a lack of knowledge in the area of physical law. A person who does not know the power of electricity, nitroglycerin, carbon monoxide, drugs, or certain medications could pay for his ignorance with his life. Or, even if a person’s ignorance of these things does not kill him, he might have the quality of his life severely impaired through a maiming, debilitating injury. However, when they are used with knowledge, they can do worthwhile things. Similarly, knowing God opens to men the freest and most rewarding expressions of an abundant life.

Proverbs 3:13-22 reveals that knowledge yields a rich harvest of reward that adds immeasurable enjoyment to the quality of one's life:

Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand, in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her. The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens; by His knowledge the depths were broken up, and clouds drop down the dew. My son, let them not depart from your eyes—keep sound wisdom and discretion; so they will be life to your soul and grace to your neck.

What if a person does not know of God's righteousness? Proverbs 11:6 says, "The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the unfaithful will be caught by their own lust." What a person does not have cannot deliver them, thus they are injured or destroyed. Isaiah 11:9 shows that during the Millennium, the knowledge of God will cover the earth like a vast ocean. This is what will make the Millennium so wonderful!

Eternal life is more than just endless life. The biblical eternal life includes power to produce quality living superabundantly far beyond merely existing forever.

We should touch briefly on its sexual aspect. Genesis 4:1, 17, 25 each contain the Hebrew word *yada'*. It has a wide variety of possible applications, one of which is "to lie by man." In each case in Genesis 4, it is translated as "knew," since that is its basic meaning. The Hebrews used it to describe the sexual part of the relationship between husband and wife; thus, it suggests intimacy. When applied to God, it highlights not merely being acquainted with Him but, as we would say today, being "inside His head." The corresponding Greek word, *ginosko*, translated "know" in John 17:3, can be and is used in the same way as *yada'* in Hebrew (see Luke 1:34).

To know God thus includes a wide range of mental, emotional, and experiential knowledge. The fruit of this intimacy includes love, reverence, obedience, honor, gratitude, and deep affection. We come to know Him as sovereign Ruler, Master, parent, brother, friend, Savior, and Lawgiver. We would never know this mixture of admirable qualities and authority without getting close to Him. They compel us to yield to Him with all of our heart while we strive to obey and glorify Him.

Living Like God

In sum, this points to Jesus indicating that eternal life is not merely endless, though that is its dominant sense, but that those who have it live intimately with God and conduct their lives as God does—otherwise, there would be no close intimacy with Him.

Is there a scripture that is broad enough to give us an overall idea of the kind of life God wants us to live in order to be in His Kingdom, yet narrow enough to help us see a direct tie among the resurrection, the Kingdom of God, and eternal life? John 12:20-26 may fill the bill:

Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."

*"The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the unfaithful will be caught by their own lust."
—Proverbs 11:6*

This catches the essence of what Christian life and overcoming are all about. We have often heard that, if God repeats something twice, we need to pay the strictest of attention. How important is it if He repeats it six times? Though the same wording is not used in all six passages, the same sense appears in each.

Notice the setting here. A small group of Gentiles ask Philip for an audience with Jesus. John does not record one word of what they said, and the context distinctly suggests that Jesus speaks before they ever

say a word. He responds to the fact that they want to see Him.

Two thoughts must have exploded into His mind simultaneously. He first recognized that the people who wanted to see Him were Gentiles. He must have envisioned across the expanse of time the huge multitudes of their populations being converted, growing, overcoming, and entering the Kingdom of God.

At the same time, He anticipated their questions. “What must I do to be saved? What must I do to have eternal life? What must I do to be in Your Kingdom?” How does He answer them? He tells them, “You must quit living your life the way you do.” He was not, on this occasion, concerned about specific behaviors but rather the overall principle—the force that drives carnal human life: self-centeredness. So important is what Jesus says that God’s voice thunders in agreement out of the heavens:

Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have glorified [My name] and will glorify it again.” Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to Him.” Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake.” (verses 28-30)

Notice, beginning in verse 24, how Jesus’ response unfolds. He uses a simple, understandable illustration: Unless a seed is planted in the ground and dies, it bears no fruit. Only when its life is sacrificed does it bear any fruit. This applies both to Jesus and to any of His followers. He sacrificed His life, and its fruit until now is the church, but multitudes more will be added as God’s plan unfolds.

The same principle holds true in our lives. The fruit that leads to eternal life is produced when the individual sacrifices himself in service to others, God and man. In verse 25, Jesus teaches that the person who attempts to preserve rather than sacrifice will end up losing what he spent his lifetime attempting to preserve. Meanwhile, those who readily sacrifice their lives keep living right on into the Kingdom of God.

Following Christ

It is interesting to note that John uses two different words, both of which are translated as “life.” The first is *psuche*, usually translated “soul,” which simply means physical life. The second is *zoe*, and John usually attaches it to the adjective “eternal,” causing it to mean the spiritual vitality of God.

In verse 26, He reinforces His instruction regarding sacrifice by commanding us to do as He does. In this case, this is what “follow Me” means. It is not merely walking behind on the same general course but com-

pletely “aping” or imitating Him—doing exactly what He is doing. In this particular teaching, it points to the sacrifice of our lives. He was already living this way, and He would complete His life of selfless service by sacrificing it in death. “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13). However, we must understand that laying down one’s life is a continuous process. He expects us to follow in His steps, do what He does, bear what He bears, love what He loves.

To most of those who call themselves “Christian,” Christianity is a theory to be accepted rather than a life to be actively and daily lived out. Many apparently have the vague idea that what Christ does for us and offers to us enables us, while remaining what we are, to evade the consequences of being what we are and to reap a destiny that is not naturally ours. If we believe this, we must seriously consider II Corinthians 5:10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” At the end of our lives, we will receive from God what we are living! God wants to see us living like Him, and He will honor those who do.

However, making the sacrifices to live His way is costly to human nature, which resists strongly. Jesus says in Mark 8:34-38:

Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.

Why does Christ have to say things like this? Because human nature is driven by the impulse that the only way to the things a person deeply desires is through self-centered, assertive, competitive concentration on getting what it wants. We all have this drive; however, individuals differ in the strength of human nature in them and the methods they employ to achieve their goals. Jesus says the self must be denied because human nature is driven by pride and covetousness.

Of course, the Bible is not urging us to court martyrdom. It is speaking of a general approach to life, of crucifying the self-centered impulses of human nature. This means subordinating a clamoring ego with its preoccupation with “I,” “me,” and “mine”; its

(continued on page 14)

Living By the Sword



And [Jesus] said to them, "When I sent you with out money bag, knapsack, and sandals, did you lack anything?" So they said, "Nothing." Then He said to them, "But now, he who has a money bag, let him take it, and likewise a knapsack; and *he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one*. For I say to you that this which is written must still be accomplished in Me: 'And He was numbered with the transgressors.' For the things concerning Me have an end. "So they said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough." (Luke 22:35-38)

At first glance, Jesus Christ seems to be commanding His followers to sell even their clothing, if necessary, to buy weapons. But if we examine this scripture more closely, as well as the preceding and following events, we can better understand His instruction.

Christ first asks the disciples if they were provided for when He sent them out. His reference to an earlier event provides the background for the commands in Luke 22. Jesus' *earlier* instructions—when

the disciples were sent out as ambassadors to announce the presence of a King and a Kingdom—are distinctly different from these *later* instructions just before His death and resurrection, when He would no longer be with them in person.

Early Instructions

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had told them not to be concerned with procuring extra provisions for their journeys as they went to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons. He specifically instructed them, "Take nothing for the journey, neither staffs nor bag nor bread nor money; and do not have two tunics apiece" (Luke 9:3). A short time later, He gave similar instructions: "Carry neither money bag, knapsack, nor sandals; and greet no one along the road" (Luke 10:4). The parallel account in Matthew 10:7-10 mirrors these directives:

And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics,

nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food.

Jesus Christ was not issuing a blanket prohibition against sandals, or against money, or against owning more than one shirt. However, for a limited interval of time, He directed them to travel lightly, for a number of reasons.

First, for these initial activities, Christ did not want His disciples to be concerned about physical preparations. He wanted them to focus on the job that He had given them to do—preach the gospel and report back to Him—rather than on worrying about obtaining extra clothing or footwear. *His* emphasis was on the mission He was sending them on, but He knew human nature's tendency to worry about the details of its own comfort and existence. He did not want the disciples caught up in any preparations that would delay or distract them from His work through them.

Second, Christ was helping them to build faith in God as their Provider. He was teaching them to live and do His work without concern for their physical lives. He states clearly that if we are seeking His Kingdom first, and all that it entails, God will provide for all of our real needs (Matthew 6:33). The Father provides for even the birds and

"He who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one." –Luke 22:36

flowers, and we are of much greater worth than these (verses 25-32). God even has a name that reflects this: *YHWH-Jireh*, the Lord will provide as He thinks fit.

There is an alleged contradiction between the accounts given by Matthew and Mark. In Mark 6:8-9, Jesus says, “Take nothing for the journey *except a staff*—no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts—but to *wear sandals*, and not to put on two tunics.” In Matthew 10:9-10, He instructs, “Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, *nor sandals, nor staffs.*” This problem is easily resolved when we realize that He is really talking about two different things. In Matthew’s account, Jesus does not forbid *wearing sandals* or *carrying a staff*, but only forbids their *providing themselves with more*—getting extra ones. Instead of being concerned when their current trappings wore out, they should trust God to supply their need and go just as they were. On this verse Albert Barnes comments, “The meaning of the two evangelists may be thus expressed: ‘Do not procure anything more for your journey than you have on. Go as you are, shod with sandals, without making any more preparation.’”

Third, Christ did not want His disciples caught up in the spirit of materialism. Certain elements within the culture of the day would “preach” for money, either religiously or philosophically. Charlatans would sell “snake oil” cures. Mediums and spiritists could do seemingly miraculous things—for a price. People in this society would do anything to turn a quick penny just like today.

Christ’s words in Matthew 10:8 are meant to counteract this mindset. He had given the disciples miraculous power to heal and cleanse, as well as authority over demons. Yet, because He had given these spiritual gifts to them freely, Christ told them to carry out His instructions without seeking monetary or material compensation. God’s workers are worthy of their

hire but should not build personal fortunes through the services they render for Him. God is certainly generous, and provides for His servants as He sees fit, but He prohibits them from using His gifts for their own gain. He will bless them as it pleases Him!

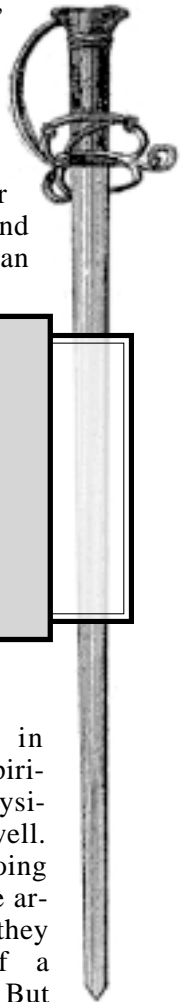
A Change in Approach

With this background in mind, we can see the contrast in Christ’s instructions, and how His death would require a change in approach for the disciples as they conducted His work.

In Luke 22, Jesus first calls to their attention that they were divinely provided for during His earthly ministry. They did not lack anything. He is reiterating that they will still be provided for, but their circumstances would not be as comfortable as before. They would have to trust even

lost their faith? Was He limiting their supply of His Holy Spirit? On the contrary, the apostles were maturing spiritually, and God did not need to bolster their faith in the same way through astounding manifestations of His Spirit. “Elementary school” was over. Now they were growing up spiritually and had more serious work to do.

In the same way, Christ warned the disciples in Luke 22:36 that their responsibilities would be increased, their journeys lengthened, the dangers greater, and the physical costs higher. God would still be with them, but they would begin to be more acutely aware of their physical circumstances and have to trust in Him to an



“Therefore since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.”
—1 Peter 4:1

more and perhaps be satisfied with less. God *would* still provide for them, simply because it is a fundamental part of His nature, but things would not be as easy.

We can see this principle at work in the account of the first Pentecost after Christ’s ascension. There were many signs and miracles, and undoubtedly every person present remembered that day for the rest of his life! As the church started out, there were miraculous healings and other gifts of the Spirit being manifested seemingly on a regular basis. However, when we read the accounts of the apostles later in their lives, there are no records of the same public miracles or healings.

Had God left them? Was He displeased with their work? Had they

even greater degree.

Christ’s instructions in verse 36 are primarily spiritual, but there are true physical principles in them as well. The disciples would be going on much longer and more arduous missions now, and they would have need of a moneybag and knapsack. But shortly after His original instructions to the disciples in Luke 9:3 and Luke 10:4, He showed them that material wealth is of little importance:

Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:33-34)

Yes, they would have need of bags to carry their provisions, but again, Christ teaches them not to be limited to the physical and temporal in their contemplations. It was exceedingly more important that the “bags” the disciples carried with them be *spiritual* moneybags, symbolizing good works that would never decay or be stolen. While there was a physical application of His instruction, the real lesson was a spiritual one.

Why Buy a Sword?

In the same way, Christ’s instruction to buy a sword had an immediate application in that it would fulfill in part the prophecy of Isaiah 53:12: By carrying weapons, the disciples would be classified by others as transgressors or criminals. In this instance also, the spiritual application far outweighs the physical.

The disciples’ reaction shows that they did not really grasp His intent. Their response is, “Lord, look, here are two swords,” to which He replies, “It is enough.” He is not saying that two swords would be enough to defend twelve men. If that were His intent, He would have said, “*They* are enough.” Instead, He is showing that the discussion was over. It was a mild rebuke showing that the matter was closed, as in “Enough of this!”

Through His capture and trial, Jesus Christ demonstrates that neither He, nor the disciples, nor anyone following Him, needs to take up a weapon:

But Jesus said to [Judas], “Friend, why have you come?” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him. And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus [Peter (John 18:10)] stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword in its place, *for all who take the sword will perish*

by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:50-53)

The parallel account in Luke 22:49-51 shows that Christ was so opposed to this sort of reaction by Peter that He miraculously undid what Peter had done!

Peter was walking by sight. He did not yet grasp that God was completely in control; nothing would happen to him or to Jesus that was not according to God’s ultimate plan. God’s plan entails so much more than just length of days or freedom from injury! This physical life is the training ground, not the end. One who stays faithful to his commitment to God will not die until God’s purpose for him is complete!

It is given that all men die (Hebrews 9:27), and our death may even be a violent one—of all of the apostles, only John died a natural death. As servants of God, we can expect to be persecuted in the same way our Master was (II Timothy 3:12). But that does *not* give us cause to take up arms if it means harming someone else! Christ shows that those who trust in physical protection will be let down, while those who trust in God to defend them will never suffer anything that does not ultimately fulfill His purpose.

Armed Spiritually

Later in life, the formerly impetuous, sword-wielding Peter revisited this scenario. After having many years to reflect on Jesus’ instructions and personal example, Peter is still inclined to reach for a weapon. He says, “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, *arm yourselves*”!

What are we to be armed with?

“. . . arm yourselves also *with the same mind*, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for

the will of God” (I Peter 4:1-2).

We are commanded to arm ourselves with the same mindset and attitude of Christ. He had the entire host of heaven at His disposal yet never lifted a finger in His own defense! He threw the moneychangers out of the Temple, not because they were threatening Him, but because they were desecrating His Father’s house. When it came to His own security, He always chose to remove Himself from the situation—until His earthly ministry was over, when He humbly submitted to the most unfair treatment that has ever been imposed on a human being.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:10 to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” In the next several verses, He shows that we *are* involved in a war, one in which no sword, gun, or any other human weapon can help us. Our battles are spiritual battles, and even when those battles involve human instruments, our articles of defense are still spiritual: truth, righteousness, the gospel of *peace*, faith, salvation, and of course the “sword” of the Spirit—the Word of God (verses 14-17). This is the sword that we should carry with us constantly and look to for defense.

Jesus Christ’s words in Luke 22:35-37 are not instructions for us to be physically armed or to trust in our own might for our physical defense. There will always be a weapon or a foe that is stronger than any physical defense we could muster. God tells us to stay above the fray and to trust in Him for our defense.

If He sees fit to let us befall persecution or injury as a consequence of our own foolishness or sin, we should learn from our mistake and continue on. However, if we are reviled, slandered, or even physically persecuted for righteousness’ sake, and we take it patiently—that is, if we endure it *without* reaching for a sword—this is commendable before God (I Peter 2:19).

—David C. Grabbe

Once the trick-or-treaters all go home to eat their confections, the public is made increasingly aware of the year's most awaited holiday, Christmas. Unlike most who call themselves Christians, those who adhere to biblical Christianity feel a kind of dread for this year-end marathon of Yuletide "cheer." Beyond the easily proved fact that Jesus was *not* born on December 25 or even January 6, non-Christmas-keepers bristle at the blatant obscuration of the astounding and meaningful biblical truth found in the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Over the past century, Christmas—with its roots in ancient pagan winter solstice festivals—has become so commercial and secular that some church members have avoided all consideration and study of the few chapters of Matthew and Luke that describe the momentous events surrounding the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Like the rest of Christianity, we have been steeped in the traditional Christmas stories, music, and customs to the point that we prefer not to dwell on them at all. This is unfortunate.

That Matthew and Luke record the facts of the coming of God in the flesh means that God wants us to be aware of the truth of Jesus' birth. True, God has not commanded us to celebrate the day of His Son's birth, and it is equally true that it is not as important as the day of His death (I Corinthians 11:23-26; Ecclesiastes 7:1). However, that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) is awesome and significant of itself as a vital prerequisite to the great sacrifice Jesus Christ made by His death.

So important is it that God caused at least twelve separate prophecies of His birth to be written in the Old Testament. These prophecies are not just general predictions that a Messiah would come in some future time to save Israel. To the contrary, God made sure that we would have a detailed witness to His revelation of this part of His plan from the very beginning of humanity. By considering them, we will see that no other person but Jesus of Nazareth qualifies as Messiah and Son of God.

Born of a Woman

The Twelve Prophecies

Genesis 3:15

Immediately after the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God pronounces curses on the serpent and the two sinful humans. Concluding His curse on Satan, God says, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed" (Genesis 3:15). Important to us is the prediction that Messiah would be the child of a woman, and arguing from silence, that His father would not be a man.

The apostle Paul writes of this prophecy's fulfillment in Galatians 4:4: "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (see Matthew 1:24-25; Luke 2:7). All humanity has been "born of a woman," and because of this fact, we all share this trait with our Savior. Like us, He was a human being.

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the

devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Genesis 12:3

A turning point in the saga of God's people occurred when God called Abram to leave Mesopotamia for a land he knew little or nothing about, Canaan. He promised him great blessings of wealth and rulership, as well as spiritual blessing: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3; also 22:18). This could only be a reference to the work of the Messiah.

Paul mentions this prophecy in Galatians 3:16: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ." It is evident from the genealogies in both Matthew 1 (Joseph's) and Luke 3 (Mary's) that both legally and naturally Jesus is a descendant of Abraham.

"And if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). We Christians are also children of God through our faith in Jesus (verse 26), and this makes us spiritual

of a Woman

descendants of Abraham and co-heirs of the promised blessings.

Genesis 21:12

From what we have seen so far, one could argue that the Messiah could descend from either Ishmael or Isaac. However, as biblical generation follows generation, God narrows the lineage of His Son further. As He reassures Abraham in Genesis 21:12: “For in Isaac your seed shall be called.”

Again, the genealogies of Jesus confirm He is a descendant of Isaac (Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:34). Spiritually, this fact becomes significant, as Paul explains in Romans 9:6-8:

For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. (See also Galatians 4:21-31.)

The apostle makes clear that physical descent from Abraham is not

enough to qualify a person as an Israelite. As Paul intimates in Galatians 4:29, God considers Israelites those who have become His through begetting by His Spirit, for the Spirit is “the Promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). Just as Isaac was conceived through a promised miracle, so His promised Spirit given to us miraculously begets us as spiritual Israelites and children of God.

Genesis 28:14

Another generation appears on the scene, and again God chooses the line of descent for His Son. As God had promised his father and grandfather, He tells Jacob at Bethel, “In your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 28:14; 35:11). Centuries later, He inspires Balaam to prophesy: “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel. . . . Out of Jacob One shall have dominion” (Numbers 24:17, 19).

Paul considers this “election” of Jacob to be significant:

And not only this, but when Rebecca 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 older shall serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” (Romans 9:11)

The lesson in Jesus descending from Jacob focuses on God’s sovereign prerogative to call whomever He wills to be His children and servants (John 6:44). We have a heavenly calling into the Family of God if we continue to endure and grow in this way (see Hebrews 3:1, 6).

Genesis 49:10

The patriarch Jacob had twelve sons, and God had to choose from which tribe His Son would descend. He proclaims His choice through Jacob’s prophecy in Genesis 49:10: “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people.” Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, as many scriptures record (Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:33; Hebrews 7:14; etc.).

This fact also has spiritual implications for us. Jesus says to the woman at the well, “For salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22). Paul explains what this means:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God. (Romans 2:28-29)

Isaiah 11:1

Several generations pass before God decrees the direction of Jesus’ lineage: “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isaiah 11:1). Jesse lived at least eight generations after Judah during the days of the prophet Samuel. He and

his family had lived in the town of Bethlehem in the territory of Judah for several generations—at least since the time of Boaz (Ruth 2:4). Matthew 1 and Luke 3 both mention Jesse in their genealogies.

In Romans 15:12, Paul connects Jesus descending from Jesse to the hope of the Gentiles: “And again, Isaiah [11:10] says: ‘There shall be a root of Jesse; and He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope.’” Jesse’s female ancestors include three Gentiles—Tamar (Genesis 38), Rahab (Joshua 2; Matthew 1:5), and Ruth (Ruth 4:13-22)—who are also Jesus the Messiah’s ancestors. As Paul says, Jesus Christ became a servant “that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy” (Romans 15:9).

Jeremiah 23:5

Jesse had at least eight sons (II Samuel 16:10-11), the youngest of which was David. God chose the line of this young shepherd boy to reign over Israel and ultimately to produce the King of kings: “‘Behold, the days are coming, says 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’” (Jeremiah 23:5; see Isaiah 9:6-7).

Both of Jesus’ human parents were of the line of David (Matthew 1:1, 6; Luke 3:31), and it was well known during His ministry that Jesus was a “son of David” (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 21:9; etc.). Before His conception,

Gabriel tells Mary, “The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David” (Luke 1:32). Paul reminds Timothy of what this means to Christians: “Jesus, the seed of David, was raised from the dead. . . . 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’” (II Timothy 2:8,11-12).

Psalm 2:7

Jesus’ most important descent, of course, is from God the Father: “The LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You’” (Psalm 2:7; see I Chronicles 17:11-14). The angel Gabriel tells Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Later, after Jesus’ baptism, “a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:17).

This fact has so many meanings to us, but maybe the most wonderful is found in I John 5:20: “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” Because Jesus is the Son of God, we can have a relationship with the Father and thus understand and receive eternal life.

Isaiah 7:14

The prophecy of Jesus’ birth much

of the world recognizes is that of Isaiah 7:14: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” This, of course, came to pass precisely: “After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). Mary herself confirms she was a virgin: “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” (Luke 1:34).

His “immaculate conception” (not in the Roman Catholic sense) decreed His worthiness to be our High Priest and Mediator before the Father. Though not of Levi, Jesus qualifies as a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:14-15):

Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them. For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens. (verses 25-26)

Micah 5:2

Not only did God foretell His lineage and manner of conception but also the exact place He would be born, Bethlehem: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose going forth have

(continued on page 16)



Galatians 5:22-23 contains one of the most important lists in the Bible: the Fruit of the Spirit. It is vital that we grasp their significance and put them into practice in our lives.

Order your copy of “The Fruit of the Spirit” Bible Study Series booklet today!

For address information, see page 2.

Who Were the Wise Men?



The Christmas season is almost over for another year!

Almost—but not quite! Traditionally, there are twelve days of Christmas, as the popular Christmas carol says, and as always, January 6 will again be the twelfth and last day of the season. Some churches keep January 6 as Christmas Day, but it is more commonly observed as the Feast of Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the wise men—known by many as magi—to the infant Jesus at Bethlehem.

This event, described in Matthew 2, gives rise to many questions, a few

of which true Christians should know the answers to. For instance, who were these wise men? Were they pagan, Mesopotamian astrologers? What was the “star” that they followed? Where did they come from?

A little bit of research and letting the Bible interpret itself will give us the answers.

A Difficult Scripture

Notice the account in Matthew 2:1-3, 7-12:

Now after Jesus was born in

Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. . . .

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Of the gospel writers, Matthew alone mentions this episode. Mark and John make no comment whatsoever about Jesus’ birth, while Luke, who writes the most about the events surrounding His birth, leaves this scene out. Matthew’s single, brief passage has sparked a great deal of imaginative speculation over the centuries, and we will deal with some of it as we answer some of our questions.

Were They Astrologers?

The first “magi myth” that we should question is the tradition of “we three”
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concern for self-assertion; and its insistence on comfort and prestige. It is denying the self for the sake of embracing Christ's cause. To be ashamed to live this way of life is equivalent to being ashamed of Christ Himself.

The Bible frequently emphasizes the way God lives as exemplified by Christ's life. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). "As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep" (John 10:15). "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

In addition, God gives His Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sin, mercy, kindness, correction, rain in due season, prosperity, spiritual gifts, healing, protection and much more. He gave us this earth on which to live, and He daily supplies life to billions of people. The list of things His Word says He gives is long indeed. God lives to give. As Herbert Armstrong often said, there are only two ways of living: We can live the way of human nature, the way of get, or we can change to live God's way of give.

We can never be in God's image until we live as He does. If we understand and believe in the purpose He is working out, we will use our faith to yield to His way in developing His character image. This is what overcoming and growing in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ are all about.

The Ultimate Way of Life

Many who have left the Worldwide Church of God want to make a religion out of technicalities. Paul called it "strivings about the law" (Titus 3:9). Is this where life is? Being technically correct has its place, but it is not as important as being in the image of God in terms of character, morality, and ethics. These are what prepare us for living with God.

In this light, I John 1:1-4 deserves some thought:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

Notice the wording carefully. What is it that John says

was manifested, that they experienced with their own senses? Eternal life! Eternal life is something that in the biblical sense can be seen and heard. Indeed, the apostles fellowshipped with it in the flesh! In turn, they reported it to us so we can also fellowship with it—though not to the same extent and in the same manner as they did.

Of course, John is speaking of witnessing and fellowshipping with that kind of life as exemplified in Jesus Christ. Verse 3 is the specific purpose statement of this epistle of I John: to proclaim the reality of God's eternal life as revealed in Jesus Christ.

When John wrote this epistle, the Gnostic heresy was rising in the church. We should note that John's method of countering it is highly subjective, that is, the epistle has many references to the first-person pronouns "I" and "we." The apostle uses the weight of his personal experience witnessing this life to combat the heresies of the Gnostics.

He says the life we witnessed "was from the beginning"; it is the original manner of living. It is the ultimate reality of how to live. This kind of life is not subject to change, whether over time or from culture to culture. The ultimate reality is God—in this case Jesus Christ in the flesh, who is God—and He changes not.

Fellowship With God

What the gospel of the Kingdom of God does is to command, invite, educate, encourage, persuade, inspire, exhort, and motivate people to live the eternal life of the Kingdom of God right now! The gospel is not only what a person hears at his calling but also what he should hear in greatly expanded detail the entirety of his Christian life.

In John's epistles, the term "eternal life" is equivalent to the phrases "entering the Kingdom of heaven," "sitting in heavenly places," "inheriting eternal life," or being "in Christ" used by other biblical writers. In this sense, "eternal" describes, not what is future in terms of time, but what is unending in both directions, as well as the character of the life Christ lived.

Consider what the gospel offers in verse 3. "Our fellowship is with the Father." That means right now. The gospel is offering us life with God—now! I John 5:11-13 adds a reminder that reinforces what John said at the beginning of this epistle:

And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

Eternal life is more than endless living. It includes fellowship with God and at least beginning to live life as God lives.

When God gave us eternal life, He gave us something unique, a life different from the one we were living before our calling. At that time, we were “dead” in trespasses and sins because we were living a life that produced death. Those still in the world continue to live this kind of life by nature. Do they have fellowship with God? Do they walk with Him as friends because they

*“And the world is passing away
and the lust of it;
but he who does the will
of God abides forever.”
—I John 2:17*

agree with Him about how to live and to remain at His side endlessly?

Understanding this fellowship aspect is important to understanding eternal life. “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). God created humanity for fellowship, and by nature, we seek it out on many levels. Many find it through hobbies, the arts, politics, intellectual pursuits, social organizations, and sports. The greatest and highest form of fellowship, though, is with God and others who share the common desire to live like God always and whom He is transforming to that very end. This fellowship is reserved for those whom God summons.

This means an independent Christian is a contradiction in terms. The Christian church is a community fellowship comparable to a body of which Christ is the Head (I Corinthians 12:12-31). Hebrews 10:25 commands us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Fellowship is not just friendly conversation and geniality. The Bible’s writers show plainly it is a tightly knit relationship marked by self-sacrificial love manifested in mutual service, concern, prayer, labor, and helpfulness.

Belonging to Eternity

John writes, “And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides

forever” (I John 2:17). The will of God is the driving principle of life—indeed, of all of creation because our Creator is gradually imposing His will on the whole creation as He works His purpose to His ends. Those not in harmony with that will are doomed; they will simply cease to exist! Permanent value, reality, abides only in God’s purpose and His will. Everything else is vanity. We belong to eternity only as far as we attach ourselves to His will and conform to it.

If we live according to the lusts of the flesh, we are not living according to God’s will. We will pass away and be destroyed. Life beyond the grave is bound up in the life we live here and now (Romans 2:5-10). This is because the blood of Jesus Christ and the way we live prepares us for walking with Him eternally.

I John 2:1-6 says:

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. 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.

Eternal life is to know God. Do we want to know God and do His will at the same time? Keep His commandments. Do not sin. Overcome and grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18). To do this, we have to desire to live the eternal life given us by the Father through Jesus Christ. This does not come easily. Our Savior describes this way as difficult and narrow, for human nature stands ever ready to throw stumbling blocks in our path.

Sin destroys ideals. As we sin, the high standards of eternal life are gradually eroded away, and we become willing to accept just about anything. Sin destroys innocence, and in the process creates fear, cynicism, guilt, and restlessness. Sin destroys the will, gradually removing the barriers to sin more and the incentive to do well.

Sin produces more sin, sickness, pain, slavery, and finally, death. This cycle will never change unless each person, as God summons him, takes it upon himself to allow himself to be motivated to use the gifts God gives. It takes a great deal of effort to do this. Jesus warns it will be difficult.

The fear of God, vision, hope, a deep sense of obligation to Christ, knowing who we are, and a strong desire to live eternal life are all motivators that are

needed as we progress on our pilgrimage. Different trials may require one, several, or all of them at once. Always working in conjunction with them are faith and love. Living faith undergirds the entire process and manifests its reality in our lives through love.

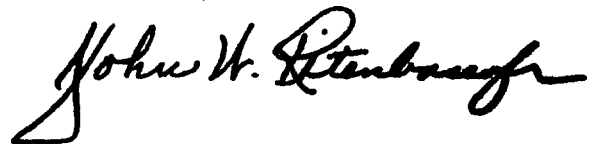
John 6:60-68 says:

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one

can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" Then Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

From time to time, we need to consider these weighty things, making frequent comparisons between the realities of the way life is under Satan and the realities of God, His will, His way of living, and faith. The choice is ours. Which reality will we choose? The one that is passing away or the one that is permanent and therefore eternal?

In Christian love,



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been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2). Both the learned and the common people knew that the Messiah would come from this little Judean town (Matthew 2:4-8; John 7:42). And, indeed, so it happened (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4-7).

His birth in Bethlehem ties Jesus directly to the house of David, cementing His claim to his everlasting throne. However, the meaning of the name, "house of bread," points to another title of Christ, "the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48). As Jesus says in verse 51: "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." This sign guarantees that Jesus Christ is the true Messiah through whom we can receive eternal life.

Hosea 11:1

A short while after Jesus is born, God warns Joseph in a dream to leave immediately for Egypt to escape persecution from Herod the Great (Matthew 2:13). Once Herod dies, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus return to Judea (verses 15, 19-21), fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

This recalls God's redemption of Israel from bondage, suggesting the later work of Jesus as Redeemer of

all mankind. Paul encourages Titus by saying that Christ "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people" (Titus 2:14).

Jeremiah 31:15

Finally, Jeremiah 31:15 foretells Herod's slaughter of innocent boys in the Bethlehem area: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." Only Matthew mentions the fulfillment of this prophecy in Matthew 2:16-18.

This atrocity is a precursor of the reactions of both Jewish and Gentile leaders who, instead of submitting to Him, put Him to death. It thus indicates the normal experience of Jesus' followers in this world: "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (II Timothy 3:12). Peter writes:

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's suf-

ferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. (I Peter 4:12-14)

He is Coming Again!

God left nothing to chance, predicting the course of His plan for His Son down to the smallest detail. This should give us great confidence and faith in our God and Savior Jesus Christ as the true Messiah. And if all of these things have come to pass so very exactly, why should not the dozens of other prophecies of Jesus Christ also happen just as He has said?

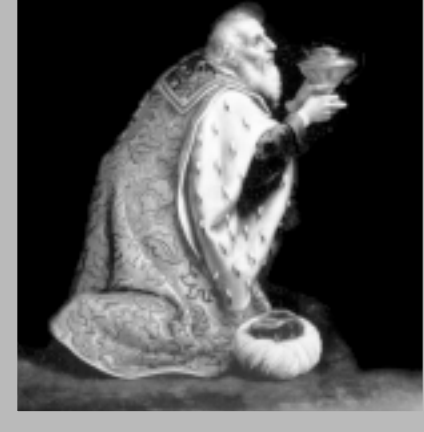
Most of the remaining prophecies concern His second coming, when He returns as King of kings and Lord of lords to judge the earth and set up His Kingdom on the earth (Revelation 19:11-16; 5:10; 20:4; etc.). He tells us in Revelation 22:7: "Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

Do we believe it? Are we keeping it? As we have seen in these prophecies of His first advent, we have no reason to disbelieve and ignore that He is coming again!

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Prophecy Watch

Who Were the Wise Men?



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kings.” The Bible nowhere states how many magi visited the infant Jesus. Although Matthew mentions three types of gifts they presented to the Son of God, there may have been two, three, or more of them. Some have even thought there might be as many as twelve!

Regardless of how many there were, the question remains, “Who were they?” Because the wise men saw and followed a “star,” many believe that they were pagan astrologers. However, throughout Scripture, God soundly condemns astrology. Notice a few quite pointed examples:

- And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, and you feel driven to worship them and serve them. (Deuteronomy 4:19)
- If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, a man or woman who has . . . gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven which I have not commanded, . . . then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has

committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. (Deuteronomy 17:2-3, 5)

- Let now the astrologers, the star-gazers, and the monthly prognosticators stand up and save you from these things that shall come upon you. Behold, they shall be as stubble, the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame. (Isaiah 47:13-14)

In addition, the wise men who visited Jesus knew in advance who they were going to visit and that the purpose of their visit was to worship Him (Matthew 2:2, 11). It is highly unlikely that heathen, idolatrous astrologers would go to the great effort to travel many, many miles to give honor to the son of a deity they did not worship. With this evidence, we can be quite certain that these magi were not pagan astrologers.

What Was the Star?

Many historians have attempted to determine the date of Jesus’ birth by looking for records concerning comets, meteors, supernovae, conjunctions of planets, and the like.

What was the “star” that led the wise men to Jesus Christ in Bethlehem? Was it a physical star at all? Whatever it was, the “star” (Greek *aster*) was definitely of miraculous origin; it was no ordinary, physical star. For instance, it had the ability to move. Matthew writes that the star “went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was” (Matthew 2:9). No star we have ever seen can do that! Even shooting stars—really meteors burning up in the atmosphere—cannot change directions and stop over a specific place!

“His star” (verse 2) was possibly—perhaps even probably—an angel. These spirit beings have a glorious appearance like a radiating star, and they can certainly move and change directions to show someone the way. Stars in the Bible often symbolize angels, for example:

- [Where were you] when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:7)
- His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven. . . . And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought. (Revelation 12:4, 7)

What Are Magi?

The Bible mentions two types of magi:

Heathen Magi

Jeremiah 39:3, 13 is the earliest of ancient records mentioning magi:

Then all the princes of the king of Babylon came in and sat in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer, Samgar-Nebo, Sarsechim, Rab-saris, Nergal-Sarezer, Rabmag, with the rest of the princes of the king of Babylon. . . . So Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard sent Nebushasban, Rab-saris, Nergal-Sharezer, Rabmag, and all the king of Babylon’s chief officers.

The word “Rabmag” is merely transliterated because the original translators did not understand its meaning, and even subsequent translations have left it untranslated. However, it has since been correctly deciphered as “chief magus.”

The best translation authorities say that “magus” (a singular form of “magi”) comes from an old Pahlavi Persian word *mag* or *mog*, meaning “priest” or “great one.” Thus, a man by the name of Nergal-Sharezer was the “rabmag” or “chief magus” of the Babylonians at this time (about 586 BC) when they were conquering Jerusalem.

The magi of Babylon were heathen physicians, priests, and learned men, and it is said that from them descended a line of evil, perverted priests and sorcerers (said to include Haman of the book of Esther and Barjesus or Elymas of Acts 13). It is not at all likely therefore, that the

magi of Matthew 2, seeking to worship the newborn King of the Jews, could be included with the likes of these men!

God-fearing Magi

Daniel 2:48 gives us a quick glimpse of another kind of magi:

Then the king promoted [*rebah*] Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler [*shelet*] over the whole province of Babylon, and chief [*rab*] administrator [*cagan*] over all the wise men [*chakkiym*] of Babylon.

Using the *Brown, Driver & Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, we can define some of the key terms:

- “promoted” (*rebah*) – to grow long, tall, or great; to increase; to make great.
- “ruler” (*shelet*) – to have power, to rule (over), to make ruler.
- “chief” (*rab*) – (adj.) great; (n.) a captain, a chief.
- “administrator” (*cegan*) – a prefect, a governor.
- “wise men” (*chakkiym*) – (adj.) wise; (n.) a wise man

The verse tells us the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar elevated God’s servant Daniel to the ranks of the great in Babylon. He made Daniel a ruler, an official of great power over his kingdom. This promotion made Daniel the chief or lord over all the other wise men (magi) of Babylon.

This act of Nebuchadnezzar gave Daniel the power and the opportunity to make significant changes in the way the magi operated in Babylon. He may have held this post for the rest of his long life, and such a long tenure would ensure that many of his changes would endure. We could also speculate that, understanding the Seventy Weeks Prophecy (Daniel 9:20-27), he could have passed along to the magi the need to

watch for strange tidings in Judea around this time.

We should also remember that a large number of Jews, Levites, and Benjamites still lived in Babylon and the surrounding areas, for only a small percentage of Judeans returned from exile to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:64-67). Some of them, following the example of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, may have been magi or governors. It is most probable, then, that the magi who visited the young Jesus would come under this second category of God-fearing, high-ranking rulers.

Of Orient Are?

Finally, where did these wise men come from? As explained in Francis W. Upham’s book, *The Wise Men* (1869), there are two Greek expressions for “East” used in Matthew 2:1-2, 9.

Firstly, in verse 1: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” “The East” is *ton anatolon*, the common Greek expression for “eastern regions,” particularly those far distant.

Secondly, in verses 2 and 9:

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and have come to worship Him.” . . . When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

In both verses, “the East” is *te anatole*, literally, “the rising,” which could mean either that the magi saw the star when it first appeared—at its rising—or that they saw it from their vantage point east of Jerusalem, the direction in which the sun rises. The latter is more natural and to be preferred. The magi, while in a place east of Jerusalem, saw the star, and it led them west.

The more important expression, then, appears in verse 1. The magi

were from “the East,” a land or lands far away from the Judea of 4 BC. This could not mean Arabia for two reasons: 1) The New Testament explicitly identifies Arabia in Galatians 1:17, so why not here as well? 2) Though we know Arabia is east and south of Palestine, commonly expression of the time considered Arabia to be in the south, not the east. Further, any nearby country would have been named specifically and does not qualify as “distant.”

In the distant east lay the Parthian Empire, little known today, but it rivaled the Roman Empire for hegemony of the world at the time. Parthia included all the conquered lands of Babylon, Persia, Bactria, and many other countries on the east side of the Euphrates River. It was to these lands that the Assyrians had exiled some of the ancient house of Israel, and many of their descendants had remained in the region.

The Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature by John J. McClintock and James Strong, in its article “Magi,” says that some of the ancient magi claimed Abraham as their ancestor. If this were true, it would add evidence that the magi were Israelites who were desirous to honor the One who could be their rightful King, especially since the miraculous star made His birth so auspicious. (For more on the magi being Israelites from Parthia, please see *The “Lost” Ten Tribes of Israel . . . Found!* by Steven M. Collins, pp. 205-278.)

Altogether, this biblical and historical evidence indicates that the magi of Matthew 2 were not pagan astrologers whose observations of the heavenly bodies led them to the infant Jesus. Rather, they were probably God-fearing descendants of the exiled house of Israel who were led to Bethlehem miraculously, likely by an angel, just as they were “divinely warned” to flee back to their homeland after their visit (Matthew 2:12).

Once again, we see that if we are willing to break free of the bonds of the world’s traditions, the historical evidence backs up the Bible record and leads us to the truth.

—John Plunkett

DRUGS and CULTURE

✘ According to *USA Today*, an estimated half-million schoolkids take powerful anti-psychotic drugs—*ten times* more than a decade ago. Experts worry that too many children are getting these drugs inappropriately to control aggressive behavior. Doctors wrote more than 33 million pre-

scriptions for them in 2001, nearly 35% more than in 1999. Ninety percent of the world's supply of Ritalin is used in the U.S., and children use 80% of the U.S. supply. WorldNetDaily opines that this shocking increase in the use of anti-psychotic drugs has little to do with

"need" but with "chemical parenting": Modern, two-income parents find it easier to administer mind-altering drugs than parental discipline and guidance. Later, studies show, this combination of absent parents and cocaine-like Ritalin leads to further substance abuse.

Archbishop of Canterbury

Selected by Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, Dr. Rowan Williams was ordained as the new Archbishop of Canterbury in November. It is feared that his extremely liberal views will hasten the moral decline of Great Britain and of 70 million Anglicans worldwide. At 52, the youngest Archbishop in modern times, Dr. Williams is not required to retire until age 70. For the next 18 years the Church of England will be led by a man who:

- openly endorses ordaining women and homosexual bishops;
- does not condemn sex outside of marriage;
- recently wrote a book encouraging devotion to the Virgin Mary; and
- was inducted as a druid earlier this year in a ceremony that paid homage to the god and goddess of the land, a ritual nearer to Shintoism than Christianity.

Dr. Williams is also the first Archbishop since the Reformation selected from outside the Church of England; his religious roots are Anglo-Catholic.

FOOD IRRADIATION

The Food and Drug Administration now allows food producers to avoid using the word "irradiation" on labels. Instead, words such as "cold pasteurization" can be used. Critics say using different language is a way to hide what actually happens to the food. Studies indicate the process depletes vitamins A, E, and K and can deposit carcinogens in their place. When a piece of meat is zapped with 10 kilorays, or radiation beams, the surge of energy is equal in power to 150 million chest X-rays. Another consumer concern is that irradiation ignores the root cause of meat contamination: unsanitary practices at ranches and slaughterhouses. Feces infected with *E. coli* get into the meat because slaughterhouses are more interested in profitability than quality. Food irradiation could lull officials and consumers into accepting poor meat-processing practices.

Militant Islam


Daniel Pipes, founder of the Middle East Forum, believes the recent bombing of a Bali nightclub fits into a larger pattern. Militant Islam was once confined mostly to the Middle East, but it has recently spread elsewhere. This is especially evident in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Nigeria, which have a combined population of about 494 million inhabitants, 378 million of which are Muslims—about a third of the world's Muslims.

Indonesia:




This Southeast Asian country, 88% Muslim, hosts Islamist efforts to impose Islamic law (Shari'a) through both legal and violent means. In all, Muslim-Christian clashes in Indonesia have killed more than 19,000 since 1999, displacing over 600,000 from their homes.

Bangladesh:



Islamists in this 83% Muslim country of South Asia aspire to establish a true "Islamic Republic of Bangladesh" with a constitution based on the Shari'a Law—much like Afghanistan under the Taliban. *The Nation* reports that Buddhists and Christians have been blinded, had fingers or hands amputated, or had iron rods nailed through their legs or abdomen. Women and children have been gang-raped, often in front of their fathers or husbands. Islamists have desecrated hundreds of temples and statues and looted or burned thousands of homes and businesses.

Nigeria:



Though the Nigerian constitution calls for separation of church and state, Islamists in this West African country have adopted or plan to adopt some version of Islamic law in 12 of its 36 states. Vigilantes enforce Islamic law with stoning, flogging, and chopping off hands. Solidarity visits from Sudanese, Pakistani, Saudi, Palestinian, and Syrian Islamists tie Nigeria to the wider forces of militant Islam.

Russia's Abortion Woes

★ Russia's chief gynecologist reports that about 60% of all pregnancies in Russia end in abortion, and another 10% of pregnant women lose unborn children due to health problems. Russia ranks second in the world behind Romania in abortions per capita. Of some 38 million women of childbearing age, about 6 million

are infertile, and medical authorities consider abortions a major cause of infertility. Half of Russian mothers do not get enough nourishment or vitamins while pregnant, and nearly 60% of all newborns last year were born ill. The 1991 Soviet collapse and economic turmoil has led to the disintegration of the state health care system—a key factor behind Russia's population decline: by about 4 million to 143.4 million since 1989.

BIBLE STUDY: THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Conflict between brethren can easily turn into offense, causing the spiritual life of both parties to falter. Offenses often result when one or both individuals fail to forgive or extend mercy. Christians understand that Jesus Christ commends the forgiving attitude and condemns the unmerciful because in the gospels He is precise in explaining how we should forgive others.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus elucidates the principle of a person forgiving another by illustrating God's example of forgiveness toward His human creation. This principle develops as a response to Peter's question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" This study will explain Jesus' reply, the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.



1. How much responsibility do we have to forgive offenses against us? Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:4; Colossians 3:13; II Corinthians 2:5-11.

COMMENT: Forgiveness is a matter of mercy and conduct. The Jews taught that a man was to forgive another three times but not four. Peter more than doubles this, asking if forgiveness should be extended so far. Jesus' answer tells us we should not limit our forgiveness to any fixed number. As often as a brother injures us and asks forgiveness, we should forgive him. It is his duty to ask forgiveness. If he does this, we have a duty to declare that we forgive him and to treat him accordingly. Even if he does not ask for forgiveness, we are still not at liberty to take revenge, but we should treat him kindly and do him good. It is a Christian's duty to forgive others.

2. How much does sin put us in debt? Matthew 18:23-24; Job 22:5; Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:23; I John 5:17.

COMMENT: "The kingdom of heaven" represents God's government, including His church, so God deals with church members as this king with his servants. The debt of the king's servant was an enormous sum. A talent was a denomination of money, or weight of silver or gold, equaling three thousand shekels. By Roman calculation, if this talent were of silver, then ten thousand talents would be equivalent to several million of today's dollars. By Jewish calculation, ten thousand talents would equal three times more, probably over ten million dollars. If this talent were of gold, ten thousand talents would amount to about fifty times more than the silver talent! Nevertheless, Jesus uses this amount to show that the debt—sin—was immense and humanly unpayable. To us, and those we touch, the impact of our sins is immeasurable, but Jesus' sacrifice is greater, covering all sins.

3. Are we called to emulate God's compassion? Matthew 18:25-27; Zechariah 7:9-10; I Peter 3:8; Ephesians 4:32.

COMMENT: The indebted servant has no assets, so his master commands all that he has to be sold, including his wife and children. By ancient custom, a creditor could sell a debtor, with his family, into servitude for a time sufficient to pay a debt. Hearing this, the servant falls down before him in a seemingly humble and earnest manner, entreating him to have patience with him. The king sees his distressed condition and has compassion on his family, forgiving him of the whole debt. God's forgiveness of humble, repentant human beings is an act of mercy and

compassion that we are to emulate. Like this servant, we owe God more than we can ever repay.

4. Does receiving forgiveness always produce good fruit in a person? Matthew 18:28-30; 6:15; Romans 1:21-22, 31-32; James 2:13.

COMMENT: The heartlessness of the forgiven man—along with his utter disregard of his obligation to emulate the gracious example of his king—is sin. Compared to our offenses against God, the offenses that our brethren commit against us are small and insignificant. Since God has forgiven us so much, we ought to forgive each other of anything, large or small. Grace bestowed puts the receiver under obligation to manifest the same grace to others. Even though a person receives forgiveness, it does not guarantee that he will be a better person, as this deceived world generally believes today (as seen in how ineffective leniency on murderers, rapists, and thieves is.)

5. Can we be forgiven if we do not forgive the offenses of others? Matthew 18:31-35; Luke 7:41-43; Matthew 5:7; 6:14-15.

COMMENT: Ultimately, receiving God's mercy and compassion is contingent upon our forgiving treatment of others. The word "torturers" or "tormentors" (KJV) probably means "keepers of the prison." Torture by various cruel and painful methods was usually inflicted on criminals, not on debtors. Jesus probably does not intend to suggest torture but only that the servant would be imprisoned until he paid his debt.

We can learn several principles from this parable:

1. Our sins are great.
2. God abundantly forgives.
3. Offenses committed against us are comparatively small.
4. We should abundantly forgive as our Master does.
5. If we do not, God will be justly angry and punish us.

We have nothing to pay toward our indebtedness. Therefore, God's forgiveness of our sins is nothing less than a gift, one that rests on the foundation of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Because Christ died to pay the penalty for sin, God can wipe clean the record of our spiritual indebtedness and establish a relationship with us.