

The background of the cover is a photograph of a man in a brown jacket standing on a white lighthouse tower, looking through binoculars. The tower has a glass-enclosed lantern room at the top. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

# *Forerunner*

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Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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*WATCH!*

- 3 PERSONAL FROM JOHN W. RITENBAUGH  
*The Offerings of Leviticus (Part Nine):  
Conclusion (Part Two)*
- 9 PROPHECY WATCH:  
*"Where Is the Promise of His Coming?"*  
—Richard T. Ritenbaugh
- 10 A READY ANSWER:  
*The Tongue: Our Tool of Power*  
—Mark Baker  
*Sticks and Stones*  
—Ted E. Bowling
- 19 WORLD WATCH  
—David C. Grabbe
- 20 BIBLE STUDY  
*The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree*  
—Martin G. Collins

## About Our Cover



In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus tells us that, as the end of the age approaches, one of our primary duties is to watch. No matter how things appear in the world, we are to stand prepared for Christ's return.

### PictureQuest

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# The Offerings of *Leviticus*

## Part Nine: Conclusion (Part Two)

**W**e saw in the previous article how our standing before God is established. God has given us incredible gifts in this regard because no single person in all the history of mankind apart from Jesus Christ has ever earned himself into right standing and thus access to God. Yet, I John 4:17 clearly says, “Love has been perfected among us in this: That we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He [Christ] is, so are we in this world.”

Peter adds, “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of Christ?” (I Peter 4:17). For those of us who are now part of the Body of Jesus Christ and therefore “in the church,” our time of judgment is right now. Each day, then, means there remains less time for us to please God. As we come to greater knowledge of God and His way, we become ever more aware of how often we fall short of reaching His glory. Despite this, God amazingly shows us that, “as He is, so are we in this world.” God accepts us—we stand before Him—and He looks upon us just as He would accept and look upon Christ! The word *as* means “equal to;” “to the same extent, quantity, way or degree.”

Adding to our acceptance and standing is the additional fact that Jesus, in His prayer before the disciples the night before He was crucified, asks God to show the world that He had “loved them [meaning us too] as You have loved Me” (John 17:23). The Father loves us to the same degree He loves Jesus!

What we have seen in the sacrifices of Leviticus is that Jesus personified their intent. He lived each day as a living sacrifice, conforming Himself to their spiritual purpose. His life exemplified a perfect burnt, meal, and peace offering. As such, He qualified to be the sin and trespass offering. He loved God with all His heart, all His soul, all His mind, and His neighbor as Himself. Consequently, Jesus brought man and God together in fellowship as the peace offering depicts, and God accepted and implemented His offering for man’s sins.

These factors have far-reaching benefits for us in that they provide us with union, identification, commonality, and standing before God with Christ. With Him before God as our High Priest, it is as though we are there (Ephesians 1:3). His labors have opened the door for an intimate relationship with both Father and Son. What remains to be seen is whether we will conform to Christ’s life.

## A Purpose for Our Standing

Our standing with God is for the purpose of living life as He did as closely as possible. I John 2:3-5 says:

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.

There must be something to prove we are one with Christ, engrafted as part of Him and in union with the Father and the Son. That something is the manner in which we conduct our life. It must be growing in the ever more-perfect keeping of the spirit of the Levitical sacrifices.

Paul writes in Galatians 3:26-29:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's then you are

Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

After His final Passover with His disciples, Jesus adds in John 14:15, "If you love Me keep My commandments." Earlier, He had said, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Putting on Christ is the process through which we become like Him, and we do this within the relationship established by His sacrifice. Keeping God's commandments is a vital part of this process.

Peoples' names are probably the most common of all identifiers. Language identifies people, as do their physical features and the clothes they wear. Yet, the sons of God, those in union with the Father and His Son, are chosen from all nations and languages. Regardless of the culture from which God calls them, commandment-keeping identifies them, verifying that they are united with Christ. Commandment-keeping is love. Biblical love is an action, not merely a feeling. It may contain a positive feeling, even outright affection and passion for those who receive the act of love, but its foundation lies in the act rather than the emotion.

By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

— I John 13:35

## Empty Words, Verification, and Conformation

Many claim they love Christ, but their manner of life contradicts what they say because they do not keep His commandments. Paul writes in Titus 1:15-16:

To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Do these people have the faith of Jesus Christ, that is, do they believe in and practice the same things He did? Are they truly walking in His steps? Even to casual observance, it is obvious they are unwilling to make sacrifices to practice many of the things He did. Jesus kept the weekly Sabbath and annual holy days of Leviticus; they do not. Jesus kept Passover; they keep Easter, which Jesus never did. He never observed a single Halloween or Christ-

mas, which are never commanded in the Bible and, in fact, are clearly pagan to the core.

This barely scratches the surface, involving only the more obvious pattern of works. However, it points to the fact that the verification that one loves God is moral. God determines the standards of morality, not men who say they love God yet often ignorantly go their own way in many areas of life. Without the keeping of the commandments, there is no other means acceptable to God to identify that we are in union with Him.

This does not mean that love ends with these works—in fact, just the opposite. Keeping His commands, which express godly love, only begins the process. It is by this means that we make our witness to the world. The apostle John writes, "But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him" (I John 2:5). Thus, this process also produces the boldness and confidence that enable us to overcome our anxious fears and conform our life to His.

But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.

— I John 2:5

We were created, called, and granted forgiveness upon confession of faith for this very purpose. In Romans 8:28-30, the apostle Paul confidently declares:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, and that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Romans 5:2 reminds us that we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Our goal is set, but now we learn it is conformity to Christ that leads to glorification. Justification by itself is wonderful, but it only begins the process.

Can we honestly say that our walk is every bit as pure as His walk? If we are honest, we freely admit that, in comparison, our walk is irregular, inconsistent, and sometimes thoroughly misguided. Our actions, reactions, words, and attitudes are all too often not in accordance with Christ. We take Him into situations He never would have gotten into Himself. It should be evident why we need Passover each year. It is comforting and encouraging to remember God's mercy—that because He sees us as Christ, He gives us time to recognize what we are, repent of it, yield, and progressively conform to His Son's image.

The days of sacrificing are most assuredly not over—only what is sacrificed has changed. No longer are blood or grain offerings given but things of immeasurably greater value. Our life given in total devotion to walking as our Creator and Elder Brother Jesus walked is the sacrifice that brings conformity to Him. Before our calling, our lives may have been filled to the brim with status, activities, and things we felt were important to our well being. However, in many cases, such things must be jettisoned to accomplish this.

The apostle Paul experienced this very test, recorded for us in Philippians 3:7: "But what things

were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ." If we desire to walk as Christ walked, we have to strive with all our being to meet the requirements of the sacrifices that will arise in our lives. Christ personified the intent of the biblical sacrifices; they were an integral part of His life.

Did Paul follow Christ's example when sacrifice was required to confirm his devotion to Him? He says of himself that he was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5), a man of proper pedigree. He was instructed at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), so he was likely a rabbi, an honorable and exalted position he had to jettison. He may have been a member of the Sanhedrin, and thus a man of eminent authority and respect. If so, he would have had to be married, yet Scripture makes no mention of a wife. Did she leave him or die? Perhaps he had to give her up too. Apparently, he left no children. II Corinthians 11:22-33 gives an overview of the many sacrifices he made to serve the church as an apostle.

Our Savior gave more of this kind of sacrifice than anybody did. He gave up many of His prerogatives as God to experience life as a human. Abraham had to leave his home country and wander as a nomad for the rest of his life. Moses had to give up any dreams he may have had to sit on the throne of Egypt. What have we had to sacrifice—anything comparable to what these men gave up? Have we sacrificed houses, lands, families, or jobs? Paul says he lost everything! Philippians 3:8 records, "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Many of us are similar to the rich young ruler of Matthew 19, who asks Jesus what he needs to do to be saved. When Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give to the poor, he cannot do it. We see that wealth was a major idol in his life, his high tower that he looked to for security. In like manner, we also consider wealth to provide security, and we try hard to keep it from slipping away. If this were not so, idolatry would not be such a major problem, but it is the most common and serious of all spiritual sins. It comes between God and us, greatly hindering us in conforming to His image.

... through whom  
also we have  
access by faith  
into this grace in  
which we stand,  
and rejoice in hope  
of the glory of God

Romans 5:2

But what things  
were gain to me,  
these I have counted  
loss for Christ.

Philippians 3:7

## Where the Real Battle to Conform Rages

When counseling a person for baptism, a minister almost invariably takes the candidate through Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:26-30:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life

also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish.”

This discourse lists many possibilities that may require sacrifice, but none is so common or costly as “yes, and his own life also.” Though it may be a heavy condition and require deep soul-searching, we may give up an inheritance, job, title, or status with little regret. One can regroup from these losses and life goes on, but a person can never get away from himself. A person takes human nature and its enmity against God with him everywhere he goes. At all times, he faces the challenges and demands of bad attitudes, tempers, weak resolve, and weak character engrained in the past.

This is where the real battles take place to offer one’s life in loving obedience to God as a burnt, meal, and peace offering. Hebrews 5:7-8 says of Jesus:

... who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Why was the apostle Paul willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary, and what did he do about it?

... that I might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-10)

At times, the Bible uses “to know” as a euphemism for sexual intimacy. Paul is not saying here that he desires sexual intimacy with Christ, but that he greatly desires *spiritual*

intimacy with Him. He wants to be so close to Him that he experiences the same level of life as Jesus did—even to the point of suffering or dying as He died, if that is necessary to be made like Him in every possible way. He desires to glorify God in every aspect of his life just as Jesus did (John 17:4).

To achieve this requires a clear vision of where one wants his life to go; dogged, disciplined determination to work toward that end; rigid concentration to avoid becoming distracted; and an unflagging willingness to pay whatever price might be required. Paul says in Philippians 3:12-14:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Clearly, Paul was not perfected at the time he wrote this, and neither have we been perfected as we read it. But God in His merciful grace has judged and now “sees” us as He would see Jesus Christ in order to give us time to become perfected through being created in His image.

Paul expresses His determination to do whatever it takes to attain this glorious goal. It is interesting that “laid hold” (verse 12) more literally means “grabbed.” It is almost as if Christ grabbed him by the scruff of the neck out of the herd of humanity, jerking him out to be perfected and become an apostle. At the very least, this suggests God will take determined, even stern measures to give us this wonderful opportunity. In no way is He passively just letting things happen as He observes His creation, and Paul reflects the same sense of strenuous action to fulfill his part.

The apostle goes on to exhort the Philippians to have this same approach, “Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you” (verse 15). This is further encouragement to those who have not yet reached the stage of maturity Paul describes, as he is explaining that God will faithfully bring our thinking into harmony with His as we continue to strive to be like Him.

I have glorified  
You on the earth  
I have finished the  
work which You have  
given Me to do.  
—John 17:4

Therefore let us, as  
many as are mature,  
have this mind,  
and if in anything  
you think otherwise,  
God will reveal  
even this to you  
—Philippians 3:15

Verse 16 adds an exhortation not to slip from what has already been attained: “Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.” Our aim in life is to so know Christ—to be so united with Him—that day by day we share the life He lived, walk as He walked, even suffer as He did. We grow in His faith and come to share His hopes, joys, sorrows, and disappointments. We bear the stake and perhaps, as some have, die the death He died. In this way, we are sharing life with Christ, and through this process, we are perfected.

We are not complete yet, so we must press on. God has grasped us as well, not in the same abrupt manner He demonstrated with Paul, but He undoubtedly has laid hold on us. It is comforting to know that in Philippians 1:6 He

tells us He is able to finish what He has begun. He *will* finish His creative work if we give Him the chance.

Because of Jesus Christ, God accepts us, and we have access to Him. As we are being perfected, we should see ever more clearly the standard of conduct God requires of us. It is indeed a high standard, but at the same time, our acceptance should give us peace to live confidently. The death penalty is no longer hanging over us; we do not have to feel guilty. Since the standard is to come “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13), we are given goals that will always be higher than we can reach. We will always have something to strive for, so we cannot honestly say we are “rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” as the Laodicean so proudly proclaims (Revelation 3:17).

Nevertheless,  
to the degree that  
we have already  
attained, let us walk  
by the same rule,  
let us be of the  
same mind.

Philippians 3:16

## Consequences, Identification, and Sacrifices

Hebrews 10:11-14 states,

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He had perfected forever those who are being sanctified.

We are those who are “perfected forever.” However, “perfected forever” does not mean we are morally perfected. Rather, His one sacrifice is perfectly adequate to assure our standing before God. As we have seen, the sacrifices show Him proclaiming how He lived His life, but here we are seeing its impact, the consequences of what He did so well. We see man, sinning and imperfect, becoming at one with God through Christ.

By means of the burnt, meal, peace, sin, and trespass offerings, we see all of God’s holy requirements met in Christ so that we might be quickened by His Holy Spirit, be in continual fellowship with Them, and grow to become fully at one with Them. Ephesians 1:3-6 adds Paul’s thoughts on this:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly

places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

The consequences of Christ’s sacrifices do not end with our acceptance before God. Acceptance creates the requirement of being conformed to the image of the Son; we are expected to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Peter frames his instruction on our responsibility once we accept Christ’s sacrifice in our stead in this way: “Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (I Peter 2:4-5).

This is in language any of God’s begotten can understand. We are to offer up sacrifices in the way He did. There is not one record of Him ever making a sacrifice at the Temple. Rather, He lived their intent as a living sacrifice. This is why our identification with Him is so important. We are now part of His body; we represent Him. He lives in us, and we experience life with Him as part of us. Our

Therefore we were  
buried with Him  
through baptism  
into death, that just  
as Christ was raised  
from the dead by the  
glory of the Father,  
even so we also  
should walk in the  
newness of life.

Romans 6:4

conduct is open to the view of all who care to look. Are we glorifying Him?

Please understand that, though our offerings will be poor and weak in comparison to His, they are not worthless by any means. They are still acceptable to God because of Christ, and they are still a witness.

Consider these illustrations: If a couple have a small child of perhaps just a few years of age, do they expect him to run one hundred yards in nine seconds? Are they disappointed because he cannot drive a car nor understand Einstein's theory of relativity? Of course not! If their child is only one year old, he may just barely be able to toddle across a room! If he falls a couple of times, do they lose their temper and put him out of the house?

Of course, they are neither disappointed at his present inabilities nor do they even think of putting him out of the house. Why? Because they know he is just a baby, and they adjust their expectations and judgments accordingly. They are confident he will get better as he matures and gains experience. They know that someday he will stride confidently across the room and

much more besides. Someday, he may run a hundred yards in under ten seconds and grasp the essentials of the theory of relativity.

In other words, growth is anticipated. God's judgment of us is much the same. When we are first in Christ, He considers us as babes (I Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:13). At this point, He very well may consider us as "perfect" for the time since our begetting, and we are acceptable because of Jesus Christ. He allows us time to grow, even though we may make mistake after mistake because of our weakness and immaturity. Because of Christ, He keeps judging us as "perfect."

This is a wonderful gift! He is not overly concerned about our individual sins as long as He sees in us a steady, upward trajectory toward maturity in our conduct to reach the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. If a child falls as he toddles across the floor, will not his parents set him upright, dust him off, comfort him, and show him, "This is the way you do it"? Can we expect any less from God, in whose image we are? Therefore, our acceptance before Him gives us time to grow.

As newborn babes,  
desire the pure  
milk of the word,  
that you may  
grow thereby  
—Hebrews 5:13

## A Detail in the Entrails

Leviticus 1 contains instructions for the whole burnt offering. Verse 9 is particularly interesting: "But he shall wash its entrails and its legs with water. And the priest shall burn all on the altar as a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD." During the preparations for the burning, the entrails and legs—representing our innermost being: the heart from which conduct springs; the viscera, our emotions; and the legs, our walk—must be cleansed with water before all is burned on the fire. The burnt offering is cleaned on the inside and then completely consumed.

Here is pictured the standard of devotion to God; this is what God is aiming His children toward due to our access to Him through Christ. We are to be a cleansed, total sacrifice. We are to withhold nothing; we are to give our all. This is the hardest of all the offerings God calls upon us to perform because, like the rich young ruler, we want to reserve things for ourselves. Whatever it is, it is like a child's security blanket, and we love it and do not want to let it go.

David understood sacrificing, which II Samuel 24:24 reveals:

Then the king said to Araunah. "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

The burnt offering is painful because it is costly. It is so costly because it costs us our life. This is what we give in exchange for the forgiveness of our sins! Jesus Himself says this in Luke 14:26: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

Hebrews 5:7-8 informs us that Jesus Christ felt His sacrifices—not just His sacrifice on the stake, but also the multitude of sacrifices He made after emptying Himself of His godly prerogatives to live as a burnt offering for 33½ years.

Like the burnt offering, the meal offering was completely consumed (Leviticus 2:2-3). The priest placed a portion atop the burnt offering and kept the remainder for his consumption. Nothing remained for the offerer. The meal

*(continued on page 18)*

If anyone comes  
to Me and does  
not hate his  
father and mother,  
wife and children,  
brothers and sisters,  
yes, and his own  
life also, he cannot  
be My disciple.  
—Luke 14:26

# "Where is the Promise of His Coming?"

As the first century began to wind down, some in the church were beginning to wonder why Jesus Christ had not yet returned to set up His Kingdom. Members in Thessalonica were concerned that the day of Christ's second coming had already come and gone (II Thessalonians 2:1-3; see II Timothy 2:18)! As much as the apostles reassured the people that Jesus would return but that certain events had to take place first, a good many listened to the talk of cynics and mockers, bringing on a crisis of faith in the church.

To those in the end time, Peter writes:

Beloved, I now write to you . . . that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." (II Peter 3:1-4)

In our day, such scoffers have indeed arisen, both inside and outside the church, spreading their ideas that the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings is many decades away. As happened in the first century, members who hear these prognostications begin to wonder if they are true, and sadly, some come to believe them, put down their guard, and begin to drift away. Agreement with any form of "the Lord delays His coming" will take a heavy, spiritual toll on those who accept it as true, as it eliminates their motivation to overcome their sinful human nature and to prepare for God's Kingdom.

## This Present, Evil World

Presently, the world scene does not *appear* to threaten the imminent return of Christ. There are certainly wars, natural disasters, diseases, famines, religious and secular deception, moral and cultural decline, and a host of perennially grievous problems—events that are "par for the course" for sinful humanity—and many of the biblical signs of the end are not *quite* in place.

Despite the war and its aftermath in Iraq, as well as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the China-Taiwan squabble, Iran's and North Korea's nuclear

posturing, and a world economy trying to climb out of the dumps, many secular pundits look around and profess that things are not all that bad. Columnist Mark Steyn, tongue firmly in cheek, wrote in Canada's *The National Post*:

Now, in 2002, with enough oil for a century and a half, the planet awash in cut-price minerals, and less global famine, starvation and malnutrition than ever before, the end of the world has had to be rescheduled. The latest estimated time of arrival for the apocalypse is 2032.

With the United States as the world's sole superpower—and the only possible rival, China, in no position to make a serious challenge to American hegemony—the world appears to be in for many years of the status quo. Analysts admit there will be upsets and downturns from time to time, but they see the world scene floating in a narrow range with no major, apocalyptic blowups in sight—at least nothing the nations cannot handle themselves.

These circumstances lead some to believe that we can firmly say Christ's return must be many years off—even sometime in the next generation. But is this the way Christians should view the next few decades?

## "I Am Coming Quickly!"

A quick survey of the New Testament reveals that imminence and urgency permeate Jesus and the apostles' approach to Christ's return in power and glory. The idea of His returning soon was so ingrained in the disciples' minds that, on the day of Jesus' final ascension to heaven just before Pentecost, they asked, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). His answer? "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (verse 7). One could paraphrase His reply as, "No, not today, but whenever the Father gives Me the nod. . . ."

Several days later, Peter begins his Pentecost sermon with the end-time prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, which mentions "in the last days" and "the great and notable day of the LORD" (Acts 2:16-21). Then, not long thereafter, while preaching in Solomon's Porch on the Temple Mount, he speaks of Jesus,

*(continued on page 16)*

*“Death and life  
are in the power of the tongue,  
and those who love it will eat its fruit.”*  
Proverbs 18:21

# The Tongue: Our Tool of Power

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a longtime friend that started me thinking. The subject of the email asked, “If you could go back in time, what would be the one thing or event that you would want to change?” After I pondered the message in the email for a while, I thought back to my late teens to a sermon given by my pastor at the time, Ken Smylie. The sermon he gave that Sabbath in late summer 1982 holds just as true today as it did then—and just as it has for the past 6,000 years. He began:

There is a muscle in the human body that can cause more heartache, more pain, more mistrust, and more anger, than all the other muscles put together. It is so powerful that it has caused betrayals, murders, wars, and riots. It is a factor in the destruction of friendships, relationships, and families, and is a *major* factor in most separations and divorces.

After reading the email and thinking back to that sermon, I conducted a brief survey of some of my older employees. I asked them, “If you could go back twenty, fifteen, or even ten years in your life, is there one single event that you would want to change?” Everyone answered that there were actually *many* events that they would change, but after focusing on the question at hand, almost everyone said, yes, there was at least one event

that they could remember quite vividly. Most of those asked remembered an event that involved something that had been *said* that caused them or someone they love severe strife or heartache. Words spoken in the heat of the moment had left scars, ruined friendships, destroyed relationships, or even alienated family members.

The muscle that Ken Smylie described is the tongue, and for 6,000 years, it has been the tool men have used to inflict the most pain. However, the tongue is not solely to blame because it is only a tool of the heart (Matthew 12:34). God tells us in Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” In Matthew 15:18-19, Christ echoes this: “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies.”

Remember the old children’s saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”? In most cases, this is a lie. The hurtful words that we speak can create scars that last longer than any physical scar that sticks and stones may cause. The human body is quite resilient in healing itself from physical injury in a matter of days or weeks, but it may take years—or in some cases, a lifetime—to heal the injuries words cause.

*(continued on page 13)*

“Also do not take to heart  
everything that people say,  
Lest you hear your servant cursing you.”

Ecclesiastes 7:21

## Sticks and Stones

As children on the playground at school, we would hear the old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Anyone who has been stung by the lashing of another’s tongue will know that this saying is not always true!

Small children tend to allow words to go in one ear and out the other, but as we grow older, our attitude toward what is said to us becomes more and more personal. The wounds caused by sticks and stones heal, but many of us have likely experienced times when we thought the wounds caused by words would *never* heal. We have come to understand that words have a massive potential power over us. We have seen the harm that the tongue can inflict. It is amazing that an organ created for so much good could produce so much damage and heartache.

As members of God’s church, what are we to do when destructive words come our way, words spoken to us that hit us like a rock upside the head?

### Shrug It Off

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:20-22:

For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times,

also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.

“Others” here is referring to another person; it could even refer to a stranger. What Solomon is giving us in this section (verses 15-29) is counsel for balanced living.

Verse 20 shows that no one on earth does what is right all the time, never making a mistake. It is the character of a just man to do good, but that is not what always happens.

Then verse 21 begins with the word “also,” which means “in addition,” “likewise,” “too,” “in like manner,” and “furthermore,” suggesting that verses 21-22 continue the thought of verse 20. In just about every situation, sin is involved. Either we have sinned or others have sinned against us—or both.

Solomon advises us not to pay attention to or take to heart everything people say, even if we hear an employee or someone under our authority insulting us—because we know that we have insulted other people many times.

Understanding the word “curse” is important here. It does not mean “to invoke or bring evil or misfortune upon” or “to damn.” It is the Hebrew word *qalal*, which means “to make light, trifling, bring into contempt, abate.” Our English word *abate* means “to make less,” “to

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*“Also do not take to heart everything that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.”*

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reduce in quantity, value, degree, or intensity,” “to beat down,” and even “to deprive.”

These verses do not give specific examples of what might have been said. Perhaps it was a defaming remark, an unwarranted comment, an angry threat, a joke at another’s expense, or deliberate untruths. What was said is ultimately unimportant.

Baptist commentator John Gill (1697-1771) writes in his *Exposition of the Old Testament* on verse 21:

Seeing so it is, that imperfection attends the best of men, no man is wise at all times, foolish words and unguarded expressions will sometimes drop from him, which it is better to take no notice of; they should not be strictly attended to, and closely examined, since they will not bear it. A man should not listen to everything that is said of himself or others; he should not curiously inquire what men say of him; and what he himself hears he should take no notice of; it is often best to let it pass, and not call it over again; to feign the hearing of a thing, or make as if you did not hear it; for oftentimes, by rehearsing a matter, or taking up words spoken, a deal of trouble and mischief follows.

In the face of provocation, the true quality of self-restraint is displayed in our ability to take it patiently with forbearance and longsuffering. A person who is longsuffering is not quick to retaliate or promptly punish someone who has insulted, offended, or harmed him.

## David’s Example

As Solomon wrote these words in Ecclesiastes, he had the experience and example of his father, Israel’s

King David, to learn these principles of a proper balance in dealing with people. Notice how David handled such a situation in II Samuel 16:5-6:

Now when King David came to Bahurim, there was a man from the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei the son of Gera, coming from there. He came out, cursing continuously as he came. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left.

In Hebrew, the word for “cursing” here is the same word as in Ecclesiastes 7:21-22.

David’s warriors, especially Abishai the son of Zeruah, wanted to lift the head of Shimei right off his shoulders (verse 9), but how did David reply to his request to do so? “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David.’ Who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’ . . . Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him” (verses 11-12).

Who else in all Israel was more deserving of honor and respect than David? He could have given a simple command, and Shimei would have been dead, but he held his peace.

Later on, Shimei bowed before him, knowing he had sinned against the king by cursing him, and Abishai again wanted to put the Benjamite to death. Yet, David swore to him that he would not die by his hand (see II Samuel 19:18-23).

Solomon knew what had happened with Shimei because later on he had to deal with Shimei himself (I Kings 2:36-46). However, he learned from his father’s patience and self-restraint and passed it on to us.

The world does not teach such principles today. Satan’s world is not one of forgiveness, longsuffering, or patience but of retaliation and revenge. Today’s motto is: “Don’t get mad, get even”; “Even the score”; “Hit back”; and “Give back as good as you get.” So many of today’s movies, television shows, and popular songs are based on revenge. Showing restraint is seen as a weakness.

Sometimes we do not realize how competitive our human nature is. It is full of pride. It feels it has to win, to be vindicated, and if possible, elevated over others. Man’s pride tends to drive him to extremes. And yes, this propensity is not easy to overcome. It is difficult to withstand unlawful and unwarranted criticism, but we must be able to forgive and forget, which our human nature fights against with all its power.

## Dealing With “Enemies”

In God’s Word, we are instructed in how we are to deal with those who sin against us. To begin, we must remember, as Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 7:22, that we have been guilty of the same sins in what we have said to others. Therefore, we must be willing to wipe the slate clean everyday, not allowing feelings of hurt and revenge to eat at us like a poison.

As part of the model prayer in Matthew 6:12, Jesus tells us, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Our sins are debts to God, which we, the debtors, cannot pay. God is willing to wipe our slates clean if we humble ourselves before Him. We ask for forgiveness for our sins, and by so doing, we acknowledge that there is no other way to get rid of sin but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we forgive others, God can see His own

*(continued on page 15)*

*"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."*

*(continued from page 10)*

## Using God's Gift

God created in man the ability to communicate with the spoken word. He gave us the tongue as a tool to use to speak with each other. It enables us to tell each other how we feel and what we think, as well as to convey words of wisdom, hope, encouragement, and love. He gave us the ability to worship Him in speech, to communicate His laws and His ways.

Unfortunately, however, this gift from God is all too often used by Satan for his own plans. The Devil hates God and His laws and ways, and he does everything possible to destroy relationships. He starts rumors and encourages prejudices. He will do anything and everything that he can to create differences between people and to get people upset with one another. At every opportunity, he tries to create stumbling blocks for God's people by fracturing their relationships with family, friends, and brethren. This way, their minds become focused on their differences, rather than on the ways of God.

There are so many ways that we can inflict pain on each other with our words. We need to remember that God has given us a few principles to help us to be mindful of each other and to refrain from hurting one another.

***Treat others the way you want to be treated.***

We start teaching our children from a young age to treat others as they would want to be treated, to speak as they would want to be spoken to, and to share as they would want to be shared with. However, as adults, we sometimes forget this basic instruction. If we ask ourselves, "Do I follow the teachings of my childhood?" most people in the world would probably answer, "No, I don't." As children of God, what is our answer?

We know what it should be. In Matthew 7:12, Christ exhorts us to follow this principle of respect: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

We all want to be treated with respect. Everyone desires to be treated as someone of value or worth. To be respected is a great human need. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves, "Do we always extend to others the same level of respect that we desire for ourselves?"

***Treat people as unique individuals.***

God, as we know, has created tremendous diversity on this earth. The many trees, animals, plants, and foods He has created testify to His delight in variety.

He has created that same diversity in people. We have many races, sizes, shapes, and attitudes. No two people on the face of the earth are alike. God looks upon His children, each of us, as unique, special beings and treats each of us separately and distinctively. Even though we are to become like Him, one in Spirit and character, we are all very different (see Romans 12:3-8; I Corinthians 12). Each of His children has unique trials, personalities, background, experiences, and needs. Nowhere in His Word does He require us to become proverbial yellow pencils in order to enter His Kingdom.

Because of this, we must remember that a piece of advice, encouragement, or criticism that works for one may not always work for another. We need to tailor our speech to the individual's need, attitude, understanding, and circumstance (Colossians 4:6).

***Do not be judgmental toward others.***

Now, we are to make discernments, evaluations, decisions, and judgments, but being judgmental is

## The Tongue: Our Tool of Power

an attitude, one that tends to condemn others. When we first notice an individual, we have a propensity to judge him immediately based on his physical appearance or behavior.

To illustrate this point, the following story is worth reiterating:

A minister is observed going into a bar in the late afternoon. After an hour or so, he exits the bar, trips, stumbles, falls, and is seen lying on the sidewalk. Our immediate conclusion might be that he is stone-cold, falling-down drunk. Our immediate action might be to run and tell others what we *think* we know.

In reality, the truth could be this: At the late hour at which he exited the bar from a counseling session with an old friend who works there, the setting sun was reflected straight into his eyes by a window from across the street. The glare temporarily blinded him, causing him to miss seeing an uneven section of concrete on the sidewalk. His toe caught on the raised lip, and he tripped, stumbled, and fell onto the sidewalk, hitting his head and knocking himself unconscious.

In many instances, we judge situations where we have no concept whatsoever of the struggles, the battles, or the experiences the person may have been through—and may still be going through. There are two sides to every coin and at least two sides to every contention. We must learn to take a deep breath, step back, and evaluate these occasions objectively and realistically, gathering as much pertinent information as possible before we reach a conclusion.

In Matthew 7:1-5, Christ exhorts us:

Judge not, that you be not

# The Tongue: Our Tool of Power

## PROVERBS 18:21

*“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”*

judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how do you say to your brother, “Let me remove the speck out of your eye”; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

It is inevitable that, at some point in our lives, someone will say something that will cause us pain, whether it comes from family, friends, or even our brethren in the church. It is at that point that we must choose how to deal with it. Either we will let it consume our thoughts and emotions, or we will follow what Christ commands us to do.

### *Pray for, love, and forgive your enemies.*

Jesus instructs us in Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, love your enemies.” We might think for a moment, “Who are our enemies?” Many of us believe we have no enemies. However, an enemy might be someone we thought was a friend, a family member with a long-held grudge, or even a brother or sister in Christ. An enemy can be someone we feel does not like us and has hurt or mistreated us. Whether we consider them enemies or not, there is no denying their hostility. In the same verse, Jesus goes on to expand His list of hostiles: “Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”

If we have been in the church any length of time, we have all been through this particular trial and test

as we grow to love one another as brethren. The church is just like a big family, where people can be hurt or feel mistreated in one way or another. Conflicts, misunderstandings, and slights—real or imagined—occur in every group of human beings, Christian or not.

It is very difficult to “love,” “bless,” “do good,” and “pray” for a person who has hurt us deeply. It goes against our human nature to behave positively toward someone we feel deserves shame, censure, and punishment! Putting this principle into practice is a high hurdle for any Christian to clear.

Yet, as Christians, we know that forgiveness is one of the keys that Jesus taught for healing. Not only is it a teaching—it is also a command. Christ admonishes us to keep this charge in His model prayer in Matthew 6:12: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Alternatively, it could be said, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us” (see Luke 11:4).

Jesus comments further on this in Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

In Matthew 18:21-22, we find another example: “Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’” In other words, we must always be willing to forgive a brother.

## The Power of Words

The following story illustrates just how powerful our words can be:

A group of frogs were traveling through the woods one

day, and two of them fell into a deep pit. All of the other frogs gathered around the pit to see what had become of their friends.

When they saw how deep the pit was, they told the unfortunate frogs that they could never get out. It is just too deep. But the two frogs ignored the comments and tried to jump up out of the pit.

The other frogs kept jumping and yelling and telling them to stop, that they were just as good as dead.

Finally, after dozens of attempts to jump out of the pit, one of the frogs took heed to what the other frogs were saying and simply gave up. He fell down and died.

The other frog, though, continued to jump just as hard as he could.

Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and suffering and just die. But seeing his friends jumping and yelling, the last frog jumped even harder and finally made it out.

The other frogs asked him, “Why did you continue jumping? Didn’t you hear us?”

The frog explained to them that he was nearly deaf. He thought they were encouraging him the entire time!

This story teaches us that the tongue, the spoken word, has the power of life and death (Proverbs 18:21). An encouraging word to someone who is down can lift him up and help him make it through the day

## PROVERBS 18:21

*"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."*

(Proverbs 10:11; 15:23; 16:24; 24:26; 25:11). On the other hand, a destructive word can cause him to give up and quit (Job 19:2).

Anyone can speak words that rob another of the will to continue in difficult times, but special is the individual who will take the time to encourage another.

How we choose to deal with one another is up to us. As we grow in brotherly love, we need to remember the tongue and its awesome power, as James 3:2-10 (*The Amplified Bible*) attests:

For we all often stumble and fall and offend in many things. And if anyone does not offend in speech [that is, never says the wrong things], he is a fully

developed character and a perfect man, able to control his whole body and to curb his entire nature. If we set bits in the horses' mouths to make them obey us, we can turn their whole bodies about. Likewise, look at the ships: though they are so great and are driven by rough winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the helmsman determines. Even so the tongue is a little member, and it can boast of great things. See how much wood or how great a forest a tiny spark can set ablaze! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is a world of wickedness set among our

members, contaminating and depraving the whole body and setting on fire the wheel of birth, being itself ignited by hell (that is Gehenna). For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea animal, can be tamed and has been tamed by human genius. But the human tongue can be tamed by no man. It is a restless, undisciplined, and irreconcilable evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who were made in God's likeness! Out of the same mouth come forth blessing and cursing. These things, my brethren, ought not to be so.

—Mark Baker

## Sticks and Stones

## ECCLESIASTES 7:21

*"Also do not take to heart everything that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you."*

*(continued from page 12)*

image reflected in us. As His children, we must be willing to forgive no matter the affront. Jesus gives us the example to follow, as He was able to ask the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him (Luke 23:34)!

Solomon gives us more advice in these verses in Ecclesiastes 7. We need to be balanced in our response, not over-reacting or taking what is said too seriously. We must be thick-skinned and not wear our feelings on our sleeves. We should not believe everything people say about us, and we should be careful when inquiring of others what people are saying about us.

Yes, we may sometimes hear others say bad things about us, maybe words spoken in anger and intended to deliberately hurt us. But we have also said things that were unkind

about others. Perhaps there was a time when a friend said something to us he did not mean and had no idea was insulting. Maybe what he said was true but his tone was offensive. These things happen in human relations. We need to learn to take them in stride.

We must also consider the words spoken to us in spiritual correction, when we receive godly rebuke and instruction. In these situations, no specific sin is necessarily involved. Solomon teaches in Ecclesiastes 7:5, "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools." Some "hurtful" words are for our ultimate good.

We must learn to take everything in our lives with much patience and longsuffering. What do we achieve by being patient with each other? What is the result of forgiving and showing proper re-

straint toward those who curse us? Peace.

Paul writes in Hebrews 12:14-15: "Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled."

God has called us to peace (I Corinthians 7:15). God's peace is a deep, spiritual calm that is unaffected by the world. It comes through our relationship with Jesus Christ and by taking on the character He displayed when He walked the earth. He did not react to the curses and false accusations of others (I Peter 2:23). We can have this kind of peace by striving to reproduce His character and by being obedient to His Word.

—Ted E. Bowling

(continued from page 9)

whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. . . . Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. (Acts 3:21, 24)

He later writes in his second epistle:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . ? (II Peter 3:10-12)

His point is clear: Repent now, or these days will come upon you in a flash!

In one of his early epistles, I Thessalonians, written about AD 50, Paul ends every chapter with an admonition concerning Christ's return:

- . . . to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1:10)
- For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? (2:19)
- . . . so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. (3:13)
- For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. (4:16)
- Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (5:23)

This repeated emphasis on His second coming suggests urgency and an ever-narrowing window of time before that great day arrives. This is the typical Pauline approach, found in some form in nearly every epistle.

Even James preaches Jesus' imminent return:

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not

grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:7-9)

John, too, mentions Christ returning soon in his first epistle:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. . . . And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. (I John 2:18, 28)

Finally, the book of Revelation is full of warnings that Jesus Christ will return before long. Its first verse informs us that the book will reveal "things which must shortly take place." Verse 3 says, "The time is near," and verse 7 proclaims, "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him." In six of the letters to the seven churches, there is a mention of His coming to them (Revelation 2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11, 20), four of which are specific references to His second coming. Chapter 19, of course, prophesies of His return to marry His bride and put down His enemies. The final chapter contains three instances of Jesus Himself warning us, "Behold, I am coming quickly!" (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20).

These are just a few of the New Testament references to Christ's return—and this list does not contain any material from the four gospels.

## Jesus' Instruction

Our Savior says in John 14:2-3, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." Jesus had clearly intimated throughout His ministry that His physical appearance in Judea did not signal the establishment of His Kingdom on earth. In fact, many times He told His disciples that He had come to die (see, for instance, Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19)!

By the last few months of His ministry, His disciples had at least intellectually accepted this, enough to ask Him, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus' response is the Olivet Prophecy, which speaks of the signs that will precede His return and the awesome display of divine power that will accompany Him when He comes.

But He does not stop there. He goes on to give His disciples three fundamental principles vital to having the proper approach to His return. First, He teaches that we must learn to read the signs so we can recognize how close His return is—at least we will know in which generation He will return (Matthew 24:32-35).

Second, He warns that we will not know precisely when He will come back, for that information is known only by the Father (verses 26-44). Therefore, we are advised to watch—that is, be aware of events, trends, and attitudes both inside and outside the church, as well as in ourselves—and to prepare for His return at any time.

Third, in the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants, He says to continue doing the job He has given us to do no matter what conditions *appear* to be (verses 45-51). If we say, “My master is delaying his coming,” we are likely to veer off the path of righteousness and abuse the brethren. Thinking we have many more years before His return puts off the day of judgment, causing us to relax our determination to be transformed into Christ’s image, reduce our excitement about and anticipation of His Kingdom, and ignore our sins.

The prophet Amos cries, “Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near” (Amos 6:3). The very act of believing judgment is delayed causes violence and destruction to descend nearer and swifter! As Solomon puts it, “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). When humans think they have gotten away with sin, their hearts become calloused to it, and they commit more and worse sin, bringing on its penalties: distress, destruction, and death.

In Luke’s account, Jesus gives the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants just after instructing His disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Luke 12:31). Notice how He prefaces His comments:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (verses 35-40)

From this, we can see that expectant watchfulness is the normal posture of a Christian. Jesus wants us to be ready for His return at any time, and as servants, we are in no position to determine when to expect Him. He will come when He will

come, and we must be prepared to welcome Him whenever that happens to be.

## A Thief in the Night

The apostle Paul picks up Jesus’ language in his own admonition to the Thessalonians:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. . . . Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. (I Thessalonians 5:1-4, 6)

Thieves send no warning messages ahead of them that they are coming, so break-ins are usually sudden and shocking events. We are assured that Christ’s return will be equally surprising to most on the earth. The Bible’s indications are that He will come when a majority of people least expect Him: when newscasts assure us of “Peace at last!” and the whole world is busy with the affairs of this life (Matthew 24:37-39). Then, everything will fall to pieces with a bang!

Yet, Christians should not be taken by surprise. We are supposed to be aware of the signs of the times, evaluating the course of events, and growing in the grace and knowledge of God, so that, no matter when He comes, we are prepared to meet Christ in the air. Because we are not in darkness, our eyes should be fixed on what is truly important during these troubled times: God’s Kingdom and His righteousness.

Like his Master, Paul tells us to watch, and he adds, “Be sober.” A sober person’s mind is unadulterated by anything that would cause poor judgment, as a drunk’s ability to make proper decisions is affected by the booze in his system. One who is sober is serious, thoughtful, cautious, calm, and not given to excesses of any kind. He weighs matters carefully and chooses the wisest course of action.

This should be our stance now, despite what people claim about the timing of Christ’s return. The promise of His coming has not been delayed, and things are not as they always were. God’s plan marches on; He is maneuvering events, circumstances, and individuals into place. We have been given front-row seats to witness the most astounding series of prophetic fulfillments in human history, and to keep them, we must watch, be sober, and prepare for the return of Jesus Christ.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

(continued from page 8)

offering depicts that man has a claim on man. We are obligated to love our neighbor as ourselves; we are our brother's keeper. We owe these to fellow man, and therefore fellow man has a claim on our love, even as we have a claim on his love.

Paul writes in Philippians 2:17, "Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all." The drink offering was an adjunct to the meal offering. Clearly, Paul considered his life as an offering to the Philippians for the benefit of their faith in God and His purpose. Because of this, he was not able to live life as he might otherwise have chosen. He was always at their service; he sacrificed his life on their behalf.

Others are named for their service to the brethren. Phoebe refreshed the brethren. Philemon was hospitable, and Luke and Silas made arduous journeys with Paul in service to those in far-flung areas. They, like we, serve people who are carnal or leavened, as the Bible says, and thus their reactions are not always what we would like them to be.

A clear example of this occurred when Mary offered her perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. Judas reacted carnally, asking why this could not have been sold and given to the poor. This illustration shows that sacrifices made for another can be misunderstood, and people can become offended. When we serve, expectations are usually high, but realization sometimes falls short, causing pain even in attempting to do good. We must always remember that it is a sacrifice to be a meal offering. The possibility of pain is always present.

The peace offering reveals a sense of satisfaction, of well-being produced by sacrifice. Hebrews 13:16 declares that God is pleased with sacrifices in which we share or serve in fellowship with each other. Philippians 4:18 shows God well pleased with the Philippians' sacrifices following their offering to their brethren in Jerusalem. The peace offering even contains a sense of reward and prosperity for something well done, suggesting that the reward will be spiritual in nature. Paul says God loves a cheerful giver, so He must be pleased too (II Corinthians 9:6-7)!

The sin offering may be the ultimate in terms of sacrifice and the discomfort and pain of self-denial. Is it also applicable to us? Did Christ perform His mighty works in our behalf to spare us from suffering? We would be wrong to think

that was His purpose. Notice I Peter 4:1-2:

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, 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.

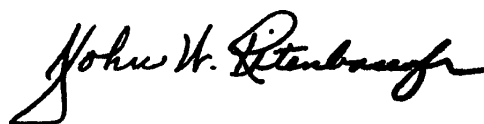
Christ has given us a reprieve from the death penalty but not from the suffering that results from the sacrifices needed to overcome sin. Resisting the flesh is painful. We are crucified with Christ; the flesh must be put to death, as it were. Paul asserts in Galatians 5:24, "And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires," and in Romans 8:13, "But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Doing so makes us a sin offering of the first order with Christ.

In the trespass offering, the offerer is required to make restitution of one-fifth above the price of what was stolen. This is to teach us the practice of going beyond what the letter of the law ordinarily requires. For example, we must not only love our friends but our enemies also. We are to forgive even though one has not asked our forgiveness. We must suffer loss even though we might be in the right and could press our demand for full payment. We must go the extra mile. We must be generous, gracious, and kind, packed down full and running over. This is a major lesson of the trespass offering.

The lesson of the offerings is clear. Jesus says in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." Jesus' life exemplifies love, and the essence of love is sacrifice. We must walk the walk He walked to glorify and magnify God. However, it is a walk that greatly burdens human nature, producing suffering, which we must bear along the narrow way.

Christianity is not a mere crutch to make us feel good. It is a way of life that prepares us for living in God's everlasting Kingdom by engraving in our hearts the very way They live. Each offering represents a significant step in the service of God and His purpose. Jesus lived them, and He and His Father expect us to make every effort to follow in His steps.

In Christian love,



And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:24

But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:13

## MORAL DECAY

Recent research conducted by Barna Research Group supports the readily apparent: Morality is declining quickly. Of the ten moral behaviors evaluated, a majority of Americans believed that gambling (61%), co-habitation (60%), and sexual fantasies (59%) were “morally acceptable.” Nearly half of the adult population considered having an abortion (45%) and having a sexual relationship with someone of the opposite sex other than their spouse (42%) to be moral. About a third of the population approved of pornography (38%), profanity (36%), drunkenness (35%), and homosexual sex (30%). An indicator of how confused our post-modern society has become is that only 17% of Americans believe it is morally acceptable to use non-prescription drugs. In comparison, abortion and adultery are twice as acceptable, and co-habitation, gambling, and sexual fantasizing are three times as acceptable. In essence, drug usage rather than these other perennial sins has become the great evil of our day!

“The data trends indicate that the moral perspectives of Americans are likely to continue to deteriorate,” predicted researcher George Barna. “Compared to surveys we conducted

just two years ago, significantly more adults are depicting such behaviors as morally acceptable. For instance, there have been increases in the percentages that condone sexual activity with someone of the opposite gender other than a spouse, abortion (up by 25%), and a 20% jump in people’s acceptance of ‘gay sex.’ . . . Most of the people we interviewed believe that they are highly moral individuals and identify other people as responsible for the nation’s moral decline. This is reflective of a nation where morality is generally defined according to one’s feelings. In a postmodern society, where people do not acknowledge any moral absolutes, if a person feels justified in engaging in a specific behavior, then they do not make a connection with the immoral nature of that action. . . . Until people recognize that there are moral absolutes and attempt to live in harmony with them, we are likely to see a continued decay of our moral foundations. . . . Things are likely to get worse before they get better—and they are not likely to get better unless strong and appealing moral leadership emerges to challenge and redirect people’s thoughts and behavior. At the moment, such leadership is absent.”

## U.S. Pregnancy, Birth, and Abortion Rates

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates dropped from 1990 to 1999. Pregnancies fell 7%, to 6.28 million in 1999. The birthrate declined 9%, to 64.4 per 1000 women ages 15 to 44. Also, the abortion rate went down 22%, to 21.4 per 1000 women. Teen pregnancy rates reached historic lows, dropping 25%. The teen birthrate dropped 19%, and the teen abortion rate was down 39%.
- The significant drop in teen abortions seems to be part of a larger cultural trend. A recent Gallup survey of teens found 72% believe abortion is morally wrong. The survey of youth, aged 13 to 17, indicated just 19% believe abortion should be legal in all circumstances, compared to 26% for adults. About 47% of teens said it should be legal under some circumstances, while 55% of adults agreed. About 32% of teens thought abortion should never be permitted, yet only 17% of adults said the same.

## AMERICAN FINANCES

- Retirement-age homeowners are more likely than ever to be carrying mortgage debt. A *USA Today* analysis of census data shows that 28.3% of homeowners age 65 or older owe on their homes, up from 20.7% in 1990 and 18.9% in 1980. Although seniors are still the group most likely to own homes outright, their growing reliance on mortgage debt is part of a broader trend. Overall, 70% of homeowners owe against their homes, up from about 65% in both 1980 and 1990. However, the trend among seniors reflects erosion in a long-held financial goal and safety cushion for Depression-era Americans—owning a home free and clear in retirement. This trend overall seems to be the result of a change of approach from being savings-centered to having more liquid cash. Many retirees would rather have a monthly mortgage payment that frees up cash for other purposes, than to completely pay off their mortgage. Future liberty is being exchanged for immediate spending power.
- In a similar trend, *USA Today* also reports that more U.S. workers are jeopardizing their retirement futures by abandoning 401(k) plans and raiding retirement savings when they switch jobs. The average participation rate in 401(k) plans dropped 3.6 points this year to 72.6%. It is the second year participation fell. But 401(k) plan defections are not the only worrisome sign: The number of Americans who save for retirement has reached record lows. Only 42% routinely set aside money for retirement, the lowest since 1980. That is much lower than the 401(k) participation rate because it includes workers who have no company-sponsored retirement plan. The biggest drop in retirement savings was among the Baby Boomers—Americans aged 45 to 59. Just 41% of them are now saving for retirement, down 17 points from 2001. Among workers who took a distribution from a 401(k) plan last year, almost half—42%—cashed out when changing jobs.

NEWS AND TRENDS  
Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:13)

# BIBLE STUDY: THE PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

The problem of human suffering and sin raises serious questions, and in His reply to such a question, Jesus' speaks of repentance and judgment (Luke 13:1-5). He continues with the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (verses 6-9), which refers to tragedy among the Galileans (verse 1). History fails to record the exact incident, but the revolutionary activities of that time made anything possible. Galileans, says Josephus,

were especially susceptible to revolt.

In His discussion, Jesus does not attribute tragedy or accident directly to any person's sin as the Jews did—instead, He affirms the sinfulness of everyone. A person who flagrantly sins can expect judgment to come eventually, though it may be long delayed (Ecclesiastes 8:11-13). Victims of calamity die physically, but anyone who does not repent faces spiritual death.



1. What is so bad about a tree that bears no fruit? Luke 13:1-6; Isaiah 5:1-7.

**COMMENT:** We need to connect this parable to what precedes it, and with Jesus' calling of the Jews to repentance. Christ gives it to illustrate God's dealings with Israel and their wickedness despite all His kindness. *The "certain man" who owned the vineyard* is God, and the *vineyard* is Israel. The *fig tree* represents the individual Israelite, especially the Jew in this case. The *coming of the owner for fruit* is God's desire for His people to produce good works. Finally, the *barrenness of the tree* portrays the wickedness of the people, who produced nothing of benefit to others (Micah 7:1; Matthew 21:19). The vineyard acts as a beneficial enclosure, symbolizing God's people isolated from other nations and especially honored with the light of supernatural revelation through the prophets and all the influences of divine grace. The Israelites, however, did not recognize this blessed condition.

2. Why does the owner cut the tree down? Luke 13:7.

**COMMENT:** The *keeper* represents Jesus as Intercessor, pleading to God to spare His people. The "certain man"—the Father—had one purpose when he planted his fig tree in the vineyard: to gather fruit at the appointed time. After all the care, time, and money he had spent on it, he anxiously looked forward to fruit, but he is disappointed. After three years, he is positive the tree is barren, so he orders it cut down, perhaps to plant something in its place.

Similarly, God sought, by example, miracle, teaching, and sacrifice, to produce fruit in Israel—in fact, He expected it. Sometimes there were signs of encouragement, but in the end, Israel totally rejected Him (John 1:11). He came anticipating fruit from Israel and met with firm resistance. Where He looked for faith, He found disbelief. Israel, content with all the benefits of the sunshine and showers of divine benevolence, refused to produce fruit for God. As spiritual Israelites, Christians are now likewise expected to produce fruit (Romans 7:4-6; John 15:1-8; Proverbs 12:12).

3. How would the tree benefit from the keeper working with it longer? Luke 13:8.

**COMMENT:** The owner's waiting signifies the delay of vengeance, to give Israel an opportunity to repent. Knowing that the vineyard's owner had every reason to be

disappointed with the barren tree, the keeper intercedes for the tree's life, asking for another year. He does not plead for its indefinite existence, but for an opportunity to stimulate it into fruitfulness by imposing more dramatic measures. If it bears fruit after further treatment, then the keeper knows that the owner will be pleased to allow the tree to remain in the vineyard. The keeper asks only for the owner to postpone judgment.

In the intercessory plea of the keeper, we have an illustration of Jesus' reluctance to let Israel go. During His life, Jesus prayed for fruitless Israel to repent (Matthew 23:27; Mark 1:15; Luke 23:34). In answer, God sent the apostles to provide Israel another opportunity to repent, as they fertilized Israel with God's truth (Matthew 10:6; Luke 24:46-47; II Timothy 2:25-26).

4. Do the owner and the keeper of the vineyard agree on how to proceed? Luke 13:9; John 15:2, 6.

**COMMENT:** That the owner wants to destroy the tree but the keeper prays for its continued life for another year is not a case of the owner being full of wrath and the keeper defying him. The owner and the keeper have the same goal: to help the tree to produce fruit, if possible. Similarly, both the Father and the Son are angered by sin. Any thoughts Christ had toward Israel were also the thoughts of the Father (John 5:19; 10:30). Even though He is longsuffering, Jesus agrees with the owner of the vineyard in cutting down the tree if it refuses the offer of help (Hebrews 6:4-6; Proverbs 29:1). The Son never denies the right of the Father to destroy, and both agree in offering grace to the sinner at the best time.

Since the vineyard and the tree planted in it belong to the owner, he has a right to expect it to bear fruit—or to destroy anything barren or useless on his land. Some people falsely believe this delay means judgment will not come against them. However, the owner clearly says to cut the tree down if it ultimately does not produce fruit—a righteous decision since it would be given every opportunity to bear fruit. If a tree does not produce fruit, it wastes valuable resources and occupies needed space where a fruit-producing tree could stand. Within this parable stands a warning for anyone to whom God has revealed His truth: Do not delay producing good fruit (I Peter 4:17-19; II Peter 3:3-10)!