

Forerunner

Preparing Children for the Kingdom of God

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FAITH...
What Is It?

September-October 2004 Contents

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To many, faith is a difficult concept, made more so by centuries of misunderstanding and error. The Bible, however, explains faith in a simple and straightforward way, cutting through the theological obscurity and mysticism that many ascribe to it.

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The Beast and Babylon

Part Six: The Woman's Character

Moses writes in Deuteronomy 7:6-11:

For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

God succinctly expresses that the basis of His and Israel's relationship is found in His faithfulness to His promises. At the same time, He openly declares

His love for her, adding that she could add nothing to Him. In other words, He did not seek her out to "get" something from her as humans do. This passage also stipulates that Israel's responsibility in the relationship was to be faithful to Him by keeping His commandments, statutes, and judgments. These terms contain nothing hidden or mysterious.

Moses wrote Deuteronomy early in the relationship, but later writings vividly portray what happened. This article will explain why this tremendously beneficial relationship degenerated and how Israel earned the names Sodom, Egypt, Babylon, harlot, and mother of harlots in the book of Revelation. Like an inset chapter in Revelation, this article will provide background information to help make understanding fuller, deeper, and clearer. It may be somewhat of a digression, but one intended to highlight practical applications that might otherwise be missed.

Most of us live in the midst of the end-time manifestation of Babylon the Great. We, like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, are surrounded by it and subject to its influence minute-by-minute. Regardless of where we live, we are captive to it and cannot physically flee from it because it is a worldwide system. However, we can resist it and escape its spiritual influence if we understand what draws us to it and what we must do to counteract its seductive attraction. Recognizing it is essential to coming out of it.

A Deceitful Bow

God informs us in Psalm 78:56-57 of a devious characteristic He found in Israel: “Yet they tested and provoked the Most High God and did not keep His testimonies, but turned back and acted unfaithfully like their fathers; they were turned aside like a deceitful bow.” A deceitful bow is one that gives every appearance of being good and true to its purpose until put to the test. In the pressure of battle, it fails to shoot arrows where the archer aims them.

This illustration is one of the many ways God describes His marriage relationship with Israel. He describes her in Ezekiel 16 as being like a beautiful woman, full of promise, who eagerly entered into marriage with Him, vowing to Him as she agreed to the covenant, “All that the LORD has said we will do and be obedient” (Exodus 24:7). However, under the tests of life, she did not behave like a faithful wife. She quickly broke her

vows to be submissive to Him and Him only, unfaithfully behaving worse than a common street harlot! Notice this description of their relationship in Ezekiel 16:27-30:

“Behold, therefore, I stretched out My hand against you, diminished your allotment, and gave you up to the will of those who hate you, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd behavior. You also played the harlot with the Assyrians, because you were insatiable; indeed you played the harlot with them and still were not satisfied. Moreover you multiplied your acts of harlotry as far as the land of the trader, Chaldea; and even then you were not satisfied. How degenerate is your heart!” says the Lord God, “seeing you do all these things, the deeds of a brazen harlot.”

Where Do the Clues Point?

At this point, it is helpful to remember that the book of Ezekiel indicates that its message applies to the end time. Clearly addressed to Israel, it was written more than a hundred years after the nation of Israel fell in warfare to Assyria and was transported into captivity. Ancient Judah heard its message, but Judah comprised only a small part of Israel. The majority of Israel never received this message, even though God addressed it to them.

Through Ezekiel, God uses what happened before the prophet’s time as the basis for end-time prophecies—histories written in advance to guide the end-time church of God. Ancient Israel has regrouped in what the media frequently refer to as “the West,” and most of the end-time church is located within its boundaries. Because modern Israel’s conduct has closely paralleled ancient Israel’s, we can learn how God evaluates us and what will happen in the years ahead.

How can God make such a harsh judgment as to call Israel Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon? Luke 12:47-48 contains a principle of judgment that explains why:

And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

No other nation in the history of mankind has been given so much, especially concerning the knowledge of

God and how people must conduct their lives. Israel should know better than to act as it does, therefore its judgment is sterner. God holds Israel to standards higher than He holds other nations to.

Does the Bible truly define its own symbols? If it does, then the “woman” figure is surely its symbol for a city or nation. There is no doubt the Woman riding the Beast in Revelation 17 symbolizes an entity of considerable power, as she is portrayed as controlling the fearsome Beast. She is not a church.

Ancient Babylon is the model for the Woman of Revelation 17 and 18. Was ancient Babylon only a church? No! Ancient Babylon was both a city and nation that manufactured, conducted business, and made war. Did it have its brands of religion? Of course it did. However, Babylon was far more—it was a highly developed, complete, anti-God culture founded by Nimrod and developed to its ancient peak of power by Nebuchadnezzar.

The end-time Mystery, Babylon the Great, will be the same complete package, only far greater in terms of its influence and power because these are now worldwide. It is Babylon *the Great*. Most of us reading this article live in the end-time epitome of Babylon.

The name “Mystery” has an interesting aspect. Conservative, Protestant commentaries all make a point to say the Woman is the Catholic Church. If that is true, then everybody—even commentators who lived hundreds of years ago—already seems to know who she is. Where is the mystery?

The Beast’s power is symbolically portrayed in Revelation 13 as consisting of the strongest parts of a bear, leopard, and lion, each of which is a fearsome beast in its

own right. Does not the question in Revelation 13:4, “Who can make war with him?” proclaim the Beast’s power is such that nobody would even attempt it? The question implies fear to make war against it, yet the Woman in Revelation 17 is *riding* the Beast. She is shown in the position of control, as the rider of a horse directs the much stronger horse to go where he wants it to go.

Previously, we searched the Bible for evidence of the

Woman’s characteristics to determine her identity among today’s peoples. There is no other viable candidate than Israel, the end-time progeny of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Only with Israel did God make a marriage covenant, reveal Himself, and give His Word. Israel is a nation of unparalleled blessings and grave responsibilities that nonetheless turned its back on its great blessings, even forgetting who it is.

Exporting Idolatry

Israel is a deceitful bow; unfaithfulness in its relationship with God is a key to its identity. God has identified where Israel is now located, and it remains to be seen whether we will take advantage of this revelation and humbly submit in gratitude to the great God, allowing Him to carry out His works of creation in us. His revelation of the mysterious but tremendously influential Woman of Revelation 17 is given, as Paul says in Romans 16:26, “for obedience to the faith.”

We saw the Woman described as proud to the point of arrogance, wealthy, and committed to a lifestyle featuring a compromising, self-absorbed avoidance of suffering. In light of biblical clues, to whom can this apply except Israel?

In the Woman’s impatient desire not to suffer, she will compromise with righteousness by telling all manner of lies to herself and others. To please herself, she pushes aside her covenant responsibility of submitting to His commandments, statutes, and judgments. God does not demand that one should seek to suffer, for in itself suffering is not inherently righteous. Indeed, suffering in the wrong attitude is destructive, not edifying. He hates the Woman’s deceitful, compromising attitude.

Through modern Israel’s example, we see hypocrisy on an international scale as she deceitfully palms herself off as a Christian nation—a nation of people who have made the New Covenant with God to be faithful to Him. Is Israel Christian? How does Israel manifest its massive, worldwide harlotry? Mystery, Babylon the Great is not a church, but does she have a religious component to her? Absolutely!

The religious component is not just what this world considers as Christianity, but it also consists of a wide variety of “New Age” religions, which are nothing more than pantheistic worship of the occult—witchcraft and demon worship in a nice dress. It also practices a number of the doctrines of ancient Gnosticism woven into its modern “Christian” religion. Occult worship has also given birth to Buddhism and its spin-off, Hinduism. In addition, Israel has made Islam its own. Israel exports a tremendously wide variety of idolatries, including the worship of celebrities from the film and athletic industries. We, more than any other nation, have accepted these false religions and spread them worldwide.

Most, if not all, of these are nothing more than direct descendants and modern representations of the religious forms established in ancient Babylon under Nimrod and Semiramis. Israel had a great deal of contact with the Babylon of Daniel and Jeremiah’s day, Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Israel adopted parts of each of these cultures and adapted them to her faithless relationship with God. Each of these added to the list of what God in His Word calls fornications or adulteries. The spiritual reality is that these adopted practices were idolatry.

Revelation 12:9 states, “So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.” One of the greatest end-time deceptions Satan has perpetrated has been to convince people that the Israelitish countries are Christian. A direct result of this has been the impulse in Israelites to colonize, partly in order to spread and share its “gospel” with those considered heathen. In so doing, she has spread the wine of her religious influence worldwide. All it has succeeded in doing is to give Christianity a bad name and to spread lies about the true God and the purpose He is working out.

The Dutch were the first of the modern Israelitish nations to carry their Babylonish/Roman brand of Christianity to other nations as they sought raw materials, cheap labor, and markets for their manufactured goods. The French, the British, and the Americans in turn followed their example.

Genesis 49:22 predicts regarding Joseph, Jacob’s son through Rachel, “Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall.” Joseph, modern Britain and America, is prophesied to be an unusually prosperous people whose influence spreads far and wide beyond their home locations. At the end time, they have been at the forefront of spreading the “wine of the wrath of her fornication” by means of their cultural influences.

Meanwhile in their homelands, Satan has convinced most Britons and Americans that everybody, regardless of personal beliefs and conduct, is worshipping the same God, the God of true Christianity! What mass confusion

and a horrific influence this has been. In doing this, they make God to be a sovereign over mass confusion, unconcerned about what people believe about Him or how

they worship Him. They make Him into a God with no purpose for His human creation except a vague concept of somehow “saving” them, whatever that means!

Is Israel Christian?

Most Americans believe the Founding Fathers of this republic were Christian men. They, for the most part, were men of considerable education, ample wealth, and high moral character, who had a wonderful but carnal vision of a nation. Their morality was indeed largely in agreement with biblical morality, but true Christians they were not, even though they and others would identify themselves as Christians. On the other hand, they were not secularists, who believe in no God or that He has no influence on their lives.

Some of them were Deists, who believe God exists and created all things but do not truly believe God as a true Christian does. Deists do not believe God is actively involved, participating in and governing His creation. They do not believe the great God is moving history and time toward a predetermined end. They essentially believe God created, stepped aside, and now merely “watches” what is going on. To them, the Creator is not actively working out any real purpose other than that He is “saving” men.

Thus, they did not believe themselves subject to Him in understanding and loving cooperation. As good as it is—and it is better than any other nation that has ever existed with the exception of ancient Israel at Mount Sinai—America’s constitutional foundation, which places the greatest burden of governance on individual responsibility, is still nonetheless flawed by the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation burst from Catholicism. All the reformers thought of the Catholic Church as the true church gone corrupt, but the truth is that the Catholic Church was never the true church, and the Protestant Reformation did not reestablish the true religion. The Catholic Church is exactly what it has always publicly called itself: It is the Roman Universal Church. It is a syncretic religion, that is, it possesses some biblical truths but its roots are in pagan Babylon. Despite the fact that it calls itself the church of God, it is not the church of God.

The Protestant Reformation simply splintered away from that syncretic religion, altering some onerous doctrines and practices but rejecting many clear biblical teachings. It established denominations of false religions masquerading as the true religion. It simply reformed the Roman Universal Church into many varieties without a pope, altered ceremonial requirements, and greatly reduced many of the more obvious corruptions. The Israelitish people then pro-

ceeded to spread these hybrid religions all over the world by colonizing other areas. These new faiths were better than the Roman Universal variety but still not the truth.

Was God involved in it? Absolutely! He governs His entire creation, and something of this magnitude could not have happened without His oversight. It did produce the release of many people from a great deal of religious and political slavery. It provided some of the impetus for colonization of other areas of the earth that God set aside for Israelitish people.

However, modern Protestantism has lost the cutting edge it once had, resulting in the loss of a great deal of influence. A number of years ago, a Protestant pastor commented that the church has become good at turning wine into water. In many cases, its services and teachings are nothing more than entertaining paganism and in other cases, a Sunday morning fraternal organization. Morality has fallen in the streets. As one recent writer proclaimed, America, largely a Protestant nation, is being swept away in a homosexual and pornographic tsunami.

Satan’s deception has created a problem for the true church because its members gradually tend to accept as true Satan’s lie that Israel is “Christian,” thus feeling a spiritual affinity with their countrymen that has no basis in fact. Israel’s modern “Christianity” makes doctrine of little or no importance, leaving everyone free to do what is right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25). If gradually accepted, it will produce the same tolerant, nonjudgmental, just-do-your-own-thing, politically correct, multicultural Laodiceanism we see so commonly in Israelitish countries.

When this happens, faith in the sovereign God to govern His creation vanishes, and people generally find justifications for idolatry, for Sabbath breaking, for murder, for lying, and for adultery. The so-called “Christian” nation finds justification for murder on a massive scale by calling its young men and women to fight its “just” wars. Did Jesus ever use any of these methods to solve His problems?

Modern Israel’s religious beliefs and practices are reminiscent of Paul’s comment in Titus 1:16 about some people of his day: “They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.” Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” Thus, widespread spiritual adultery is

committed by a nation that symbolically entered into a marriage covenant with God but whose works of faithlessness have become a way of life.

Idolatry on an unrecognized but huge scale, Sabbath breaking, dishonoring parents, murder in a wide variety of ways, breaking of marriage vows through adultery and multiple marriages, lying, and coveting have become a lifestyle, committed and justified for

moments of self-absorbed gratification and ease. Today, it is packaged for export two ways: on the movie screen as “entertainment” for the masses, and through the combination of advertising and business practices. By these, we have drugged others with our wine into a way of life to be imitated if one desires to have personal fulfillment, wealth, and national political and military power.

Uniformity or Variety?

Israel’s great sin is unfaithfulness. In terms of her character, she is fickle, a term that needs defining. The *Reader’s Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder* defines *fickle* as “inconstant, changeable, especially in regard to loyalty.” Bible histories show Israelites have a clear record of being grossly fickle in their thinking: Change and variety are the keys to fulfillment!

This proclivity reveals itself in many areas of life: Socially, Israelites have multiple sexual partners before marriage and change spouses through divorce at a prolific rate. Merchandisers are aware of this driving “need” for change and know how to promote it through frequent fashion changes, design alterations, and “new and improved” claims featuring “hot” celebrity hawkers (usually entertainers and athletes). The new promotions come and go so rapidly that they seem to be seasonal.

There must always be something new to satisfy this craving for variety of experience—but it is costly. It tends to render the whole culture unstable ethically and morally, driving individuals into debt as they pursue satisfaction and fulfillment from things that cannot give it.

Israel can no longer be trusted to do what is right. Instead, she will do what she feels like doing at the moment rather than disciplining herself. This is especially the case if doing right requires a measure of personal sacrifice or will entail some pain or discomfort. Doing right means not just keeping the commandments, statutes, and judgments per se, but also doing what is right in terms of common-sense wisdom. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death,” describing Israel’s lifestyle to a T.

None of what is written in this article will help us unless we become sharply aware that we live in the lands where this is actively taking place and that it is strongly and constantly influencing us to accept and conform to it. This attitude and way of life does not merely involve what we might term “church matters,” but every aspect of living.

Some dictionaries define “religion” as the system through which one responds to deity. This definition applies to everyone because everyone, whether it is admitted or not, has a god. Some people’s religion is more formal and systematized than others’ are. How-

ever, one’s religion, his system of responding to deity, is what governs how he conducts his life. In the Bible, God gives us an entire way of life within the commandments, statutes, judgments, testimonies, laws, precepts, and words. The New Testament calls it “the way” or “this way.”

God wants us to be fulfilled in life by following His way (“choose life,” He says in Deuteronomy 30:19). He tells us what not to eat and warns us against gluttony and overdrinking. He tells us when and where to worship and who to fellowship with. His law even covers clothing, strongly urging modesty. Its principles reach into every aspect of life. Israel has been unfaithful to things similar to this and many more.

God’s way is alluringly confronted and challenged on every side by what the New Testament calls the “world” (Greek *cosmos*). *Cosmos* means an organized system, but one opposed to the way of God’s commandment. Babylon, meaning “confusion”—confusion regarding a way of life—is the Bible’s code name for that system. God charges us in Revelation 18:4 to come out of that confused system, and the only way we can do that is to quit practicing Babylon’s ways of doing things in the worship of its gods.

Israel, however, lives for the moment and for as much immediate gratification as possible. As a whole, she does not believe God and is afraid to pay the costs to break away and be peculiar or distinctive in a right way. She finds it easier to be like everyone else and be willingly accepted on the world’s terms rather than her Husband’s.

God warns Israel many times against this because this rebellious proclivity in her is easily seen. Notice Deuteronomy 12:1-5:

These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break

(continued on page 19)

Countering the Culture

In II Timothy 3:1-4, the apostle Paul gives a disturbing prophetic glimpse of the culture of human civilization in the last days, days that he calls “perilous times.” He describes it as a time when

men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. . . .

Could Paul have been writing of our culture in the Western world in the twenty-first century? He certainly seems to describe a culture bent on pleasure, entertainment, vanity, greed, and utter selfishness at the expense of stable marriages, families, and other relationships.

Culture is a word thrown around a lot these days, but what does it mean? One of Webster’s definitions defines culture as “the ways of living built up by a human group and transmitted to succeeding generations.” In his 1991 book entitled *Winning the New Civil War*, author Robert Dugan offers a broader definition:

[Culture is] the ways of thinking, living, and behaving that define a people and underlie its achievements. It is a nation’s collective mind, its sense of

right and wrong, the way it perceives reality, and its definition of self. Culture is the morals and habits a mother strives to instill in her children. It is the obligations we acknowledge toward our neighbors, our community, and our government. . . . It is the standards we set and enforce for ourselves and for others: our definitions of duty, honor, and character. It is our collective conscience. (p. 169)

In 1947, Carle Zimmerman recorded in *Family and Civilization* his observations as he compared the disintegration of various cultures with its parallel decline of family life. Eight specific patterns of domestic behavior typified the downward spiral of each culture Zimmerman studied:

1. Marriage loses its sacredness and is frequently broken by divorce.
2. The marriage ceremony loses its traditional meaning.
3. Feminist movements abound.
4. Public disrespect for parents and authority in general increases.
5. Juvenile delinquency, promiscuity, and rebellion accelerate.

6. People within traditional marriages refuse to accept family responsibilities.

7. Desire for and acceptance of adultery grows.

8. Interest in and spread of sexual perversions and sex-related crimes increases. (Quoted in *Confident Living*, November 1987, p. 34).

It sounds as if he is describing our nation today!

Values-Neutral

Sociologists call today’s Western culture *values-neutral*. Advocates of this values-neutral philosophical approach argue that we should not adopt *any* system that defines right and wrong and expects all to adhere to it because *no one* has a right to impose his values on others.

A good illustration of this philosophy occurred in a high school values-clarification class conducted by a teacher in Teaneck, New Jersey, and reported in *Imprimis* in September 1991. A “hypothetical” girl in the class had found a purse containing \$1,000 and had returned it to its owner. The teacher asked for the class’s reaction. Every single one of her fellow students concluded she had been “foolish.” When asked why they felt that way, the students contended that “if someone is careless, they should be punished.” The teacher, when asked what he had

said to the students, responded, “Well, of course, I didn’t say anything. If I come from the position of what is right and wrong, then I’m not their counselor. I can’t impose *my* views.”

Where will the children of today learn the standards of a proper culture if a teacher, a counselor, or a person in authority will not—or cannot—teach these standards? In most cases, from the popular culture around them.

A George Barna poll conducted in late 2001 found that only 22% of American adults—and only 6% of teenagers—believed that “there are moral absolutes that are unchanging.” Sadly, only 32% of those who described themselves as Christians believed in absolute moral standards, and only 26% cited the Bible as the source of their moral principles. It is tragic, but today most Americans no longer believe in the concept of absolute moral truths.

How then, can we establish an ethical and moral cultural base for our societies and families? Many articles in the church’s publications, and many other, secular magazines and writings, have highlighted the biblical foundation of true values and the fact that, when the United States was founded, its leaders accepted, without shame, many of the principles of the Bible as the basis for its laws and culture.

In an engraving by T.H. Matteson, which depicts the first prayer in Congress given on September 24, 1774, in Philadelphia’s Carpenters Hall, Jacob Duche kneels at a podium, his eyes raised toward heaven as he prays. Members of Congress, many of them on their knees, humbly participate in the beseeching of God to grant His blessings on the young nation. While the etching is an embellished account of the event, Mr. Duche’s earnest prayer reveals the godly fervor that inhabited that august body that day, only 230 years ago:

O Lord, our Heavenly Father,
high and mighty King of kings,

and Lord of lords, who dost from Thy throne behold all the dwellers of the earth, and reignest with power supreme and uncontrolled over all the kingdoms, empires, and governments, look down in mercy, we beseech Thee, on the American States, who have fled to Thee from the rod of the oppressor, and thrown themselves on Thy gracious protection, desiring to be henceforth dependent only on Thee. To Thee they have appealed for the righteousness of their cause; to Thee do they now look up for that countenance and support which Thou alone canst give. Take them, therefore, Heavenly Father, unto Thy nurturing care. Give them wisdom in council and valor in the field. Defeat the malice of our adversaries; convince them of the unrighteousness of their course, and, if they still persist in sanguinary purposes, oh! let the voice of Thine own unerring justice, sounding in their hearts, constrain them to drop the weapons of war from their unnerved hands in the day of battle. Be Thou present, O God of wisdom, and direct the councils of this honorable assembly. Enable them to settle things on the best and surest foundations, that the scenes of blood may be speedily closed, and order, harmony, and peace may be effectually restored, and truth and justice, religion and piety prevail and flourish among Thy people. Preserve the health of their bodies and the vigor of their minds; shower down upon them and the millions they here represent, such temporal blessings as Thou seest expedient for them in this world, and crown them with everlasting glory in the world to come. All this we ask in the name and through the merits of Jesus

Christ, Thy Son, our Savior.
Amen.

What would happen today, in this age of “Separation of Church and State,” this age of growing and ever-present atheism and secularism, if the leaders in Congress beseeched God openly? Stock prices in tar and chicken feathers would go through the roof!

Moral Society

It is impossible to have a moral community or nation without faith in God. Without that faith, everything comes down to “me,” and “me” alone is meaningless. Many Americans today have stopped acting on what they know is right—and “me” has become the standard of measure for everything. Men see the strength of a nation in its wealth, population, armaments, technology, and knowledge. But where does God look?

Notice Proverbs 14:34. “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” The Bible reveals that *the cause of the rise and fall of nations is moral and spiritual*. No nation can rely on its strength, power, and wealth to save it from the devastating effects of moral decay. Moral, ethical, and spiritual problems cannot be resolved by money, strength of arms, “Star Wars” projects, social programs, intelligence, or humanitarian goodwill.

Moral societies are the only ones that work. If one were to take a good look at history, it would become obvious that there is a direct and invaluable relationship between personal integrity and the society’s prosperity. It is faith in God that provides the anchor for a culture. Without it, we are cast adrift, lost in a sea of values-neutrality or hedonism and robbed of any means of determining right from wrong. The result is a culture that staggers like a drunkard unable to find a wall to hold him up.

The effects of cultural shift in the

West can be best illustrated by contrasting changing social trends, in particular, the changes over a 50-year period in New York City:

In 1943, 3 percent of all births were illegitimate. There were 44 homicides by gunshot. In 1993, 1,499 people died of gunshots. 45 percent of births were illegitimate. Nationwide, nearly 30% of all babies today come home fatherless. 68 percent in Washington, D.C., the capitol of our country!! (Gary Bauer, Family Research Council letter, November 4, 1993).

Former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett published a book in 1999 titled *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*. Here are a few of the statistics he presented, comparing life in 1997 with 1960:

- Violent crime increased by 467%.
- Illegitimate births were up 461%.
- Divorces rose by 100%.
- Children living in single-parent homes increased more than 200%.
- Teenage suicides jumped more than 100%.
- SAT scores dropped by almost 60 points.

In New Testament times, the effect of a permissive culture was illustrated by the story of the church of God congregation in the Greek city of Corinth. Corinth, located on a natural harbor and at the intersection of several major trade routes, was quite prosperous. Like the city of Sodom centuries before (Genesis 13:13; Ezekiel 16:49-50), Corinth had allowed its prosperity to lure many of its inhabitants into immorality. Its culture had become so legendary for its decadence that it gave its

name to the term *corinthianize*, meaning to act in an immoral way. Christians then—and now—are not immune to their cultural surroundings. The Corinthian Christians reflected the loose, values-neutral backdrop of their city in their own moral carelessness. Notice I Corinthians 5:1-2:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, impurity of a sort that is condemned and does not occur even among the heathen; for a man has [his own] father's wife. And you are proud and arrogant! And you ought rather to mourn (bow in sorrow and in shame) until the person who has done this [shameful] thing is removed from your fellowship and your midst! (Amplified Bible)

Verse 2 suggests that this sin was tolerated—perhaps even condoned—by many in the church. It seems that the values of Corinthian society had affected them to the point that they would tolerate this kind of degeneracy.

Steps to Take

What can we do to counter the culture that surrounds us?

First, *we must recognize the popular culture and its influence on all aspects of our life*. If we had been born in another place and another time, what kind of persons would we have been? How are we different now because of the culture around us?

We must study the history of our cultures. We must first recognize and then become familiar with the changing value systems of the modern world around us. This will then allow us to appreciate the impact of the time and place of our birth.

Second, *we must develop and build appropriate moral and ethical convictions*. What do we allow ourselves to do? What has shaped our standards and morals, our val-

ues? Where do we get our moral foundation?

There are proper definitions for the terms *right* and *wrong*, *sin* and *righteousness*, and they are found in the Word of God, the Holy Bible. Studying the Bible was once a common practice in America. In 1947, nearly 100% of American homes had a Bible or a portion of the Bible (the New Testament), and 68% of American adults read from the Bible daily. Of those, 66% believed it was the actual Word of God. Today, nearly 93% of Americans have a Bible or a portion of one, but only 36% read from it daily, and only 33% of those believe it is the actual Word of God. Our studying, meditating, and drinking in of the Word of God will provide us with a right moral and cultural foundation on which to build our spiritual lives.

Third, *we need not worry about what others will think*. Moral and ethical convictions will never bring universal approval. Those who accept a moral code derived from the Holy Bible will find themselves opposed by many, but we should not worry ourselves with what *people* think, but rather what God, our Creator, thinks.

Finally, *we must stand up for what we believe*. We live in a politically correct world. Not wanting to seem “unwise,” the vast majority of people go along with it; few ever actually think for themselves and question the prevailing “wisdom” of the age. As the apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:22, “Professing to be wise, they became fools.” This is certainly the culture that we live in, where the “wise” are proving themselves to be very foolish.

In I Timothy 6:20-21, Paul admonishes the young evangelist Timothy to stand firm to the doctrine that he had given him. He writes this in about AD 65, when the church is sliding away from the truth that Christ had entrusted to the apostles.

O Timothy, guard and keep the deposit entrusted [to you]! Turn

(continued on page 22)

“For we walk by faith,
not by sight.”

II Corinthians 5:7

Faith—What Is It?

How important is faith?

- “For whatever is not from faith is sin.” (Romans 14:23)
- “But without faith it is impossible to please Him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

As these scriptures show, for a Christian, faith is an absolute requirement.

What is this faith we are required to have? We usually turn to Hebrews 11:1 for a definition of faith, but another verse, Romans 4:3, may provide an even sharper focus: “What does scripture say? ‘Abraham took God at his word, and that act of faith was accepted as putting him into a right relationship with God’” (*The New Testament: A Translation* by William Barclay).

Abraham’s “act of faith” was to believe the words of God. Simply, *faith is believing what God says*. That belief, that faith, is what pleases God, putting us in a position to have a right relationship with Him. A right relationship, even on a human level, must have trust as its foundation.

Abraham’s example also shows us that this belief, this faith, is not just intellectual agreement but rather a deep conviction that motivates our core and changes how we think. The evidence of this change is an action. True belief and faith *must have* action to complete it, or else it is dead and useless faith (James 2:20).

From the Beginning

Living faith as a requirement began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Notice Genesis 3:6: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for

food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

The first humans failed their test of faith. They trusted what they “saw” rather than believing what God said—His words—and became the first example of man choosing to walk by sight rather than by faith. Humanity has followed this example ever since, proving that Adam and Eve’s faithlessness was not an aberration but a trait of every human heart, including ours.

What were the consequences of this sin, this act of faithlessness? The answer is in Genesis 3:24: “So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”

Adam and Eve’s sin of faithlessness destroyed the close relationship they had with God. Because they did not trust Him, their lack of faith put a barrier between themselves and God. The broken trust, faithlessness, ruined that relationship just as it does in our human relationships.

Adam and Eve chose to follow the faithless Satan rather than the faithful God. Satan persuaded them to focus on what they could see rather than what God said. The strategy was so successful that Satan has consistently used it on humanity.

Satan is the prime example of faithlessness. Satan believes God exists, but his is a dead faith because it does not lead to right action. James 2:19-20, from the New Living Translation (NLT), forcefully points out the futility and foolishness of Satan’s faith: “Do you still think it’s enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons

(continued on page 20)

THE FIF

PART

*“When He opened the fifth
the souls of those who had been slain for the word
And they cried with a loud voice,
‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and
And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was
until both the number of their fellow servants and their bre
(Revelation*

As a child, the scariest movie I saw was *Quo Vadis?* To most people, this movie falls in the “Christian Epic” genre rather than “Horror,” but for me, it evoked dread and nightmares. Unlike today’s movies, it did not splash blood or gore on the screen, but it tastefully depicted the horrors of Rome’s persecution and martyrdom of Christians in an arresting, heartrending manner. Its scenes of Christians being attacked and devoured by lions in the Circus or being immolated as torches for Nero’s garden party were no less disturbing for being without the *Gladiator*-type realism.

Most Christian libraries are not complete without *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, which contains accounts of dozens of persecutions of Christians down the centuries. In school we read histories of religious wars—from the bloody spread of Islam across the Middle East and North Africa and into Europe, through the Crusades to repulse the infidels from the Holy Land, to the Catholic-Protestant wars ignited by the Reformation—in which hundreds of thousands of professing Christians lost their lives. More recently, while millions of Jews suffered horrible deaths at the hands of Hitler and Stalin, large numbers of Christians died with them in the concentration camps.

Currently, professing Christians are suffering and dying for their beliefs in predominantly Muslim and Communist nations. Though most secular pundits do not care to admit it, the War on Terror is really a clash of two civilizations founded on mutually exclusive religions. The Islamic side is presently engaged in holy war to convert or exterminate its enemies, while the Judeo-Christian side, morally weak and increasingly secular, seeks a political and/or military solution to contain or roll back the jihadists.

Some see this war as the latest chapter in a sporadic yet titanic conflict between the two predominant religions on earth, which had lain mostly dormant since the Spanish ousted the Moors from Europe in 1492.

On May 27, 2004, AgapePress reported in “Communist Asia, Mid-East Countries Top Church Persecution Charts” by Allie Martin and Jenni Parker on the primary international culprits:

On a list of the 50 countries around the world where persecution of Christians is greatest, North Korea is the leader of the pack.

Each year Open Doors, a ministry to the persecuted Church, compiles a world watch list of countries where Christian believers face the most severe persecution. North Korea topped the most recent list, followed by Saudi Arabia, Laos, the central highlands of Vietnam, and Iran.

Also included in the top ten worst countries is Burma, which has no constitution or laws to protect freedom of religion. Open Doors’ Jerry Dykstra says the government of Burma favors Buddhists but treats Christians harshly.

“Christian homes and churches have been burned down,” Dykstra notes, “especially among the ethnic tribes—persecution is really high. The government there is very restrictive, very wary of Christians. Christians suffer. They are not awarded jobs, and sometimes they don’t get benefits.” . . .

China also made the ministry’s top ten list,

THE SEAL

ONE

*seal, I saw under the altar
of God and for the testimony which they held.
loud voice, saying,
“avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”
said to them that they should rest a little while longer,
thenceforth, who would be killed as they were, was completed.”*
(Revelation 6:9-11)

Dykstra says. Persecution has not lessened under the new president, Hu Jintao, despite public commitments to human rights and religious freedom. In that communist nation, where Christians are required to register with the official state church, those believers who resist government control over their religious life must often face harassment by the police, detention, beatings, and torture, and other forms of government intimidation.

Nevertheless, we tend to think of Christian persecution and martyrdom in the past tense, believing that modern ideas of religious freedom and tolerance make such murderous events impossible today. However, to reach such a conclusion would be a mistake. Not only are professing Christians currently undergoing discrimination and maltreatment even in America—as extensively documented in David Limbaugh’s recent book, *Persecution*—but the Bible promises us that large-scale persecutions and martyrdoms of the saints will also take place before Christ’s return. We find this plainly prophesied in the fifth seal of Revelation 6:9-11.

S OULS OF THE SLAIN

After Christ opens the fifth seal, the apostle John sees “under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” (verse 9). No galloping horses or deadly riders appear in this seal, and their absence immediately sets this one apart from the previous four. There is no inviting, “Come and see,” or expectant, “And I looked, and behold,” but just a plain narrative describing his vision. In

fact, the tone is so matter-of-fact as to be somber, befitting its subject.

The first striking detail is “the altar” with the definite article. That it is not further defined suggests that it has already been mentioned or that the reader is expected to know what it is. However, this verse contains the first mention of an altar in the book of Revelation. An altar is mentioned an additional seven times in the book, and in six of them, it refers to the golden incense altar that stands before the throne of God in heaven (see Revelation 8:3-5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). The only exception to this appears in Revelation 11:1, in which John is told to “measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there,” seeming to refer to evaluating the church, its ministers, and its worship in preparation for the work of the Two Witnesses. The “altar” of Revelation 6:9, with the prayerful souls of martyrs under it, conforms to the rule, not the exception.

The word “souls” (*psuchás*, plural of *psuché*) also requires explanation, as the Greek word is far too complex in meaning to define facetly as a person’s immortal essence, as most Catholics and Protestants are wont to do. Its basic meaning is “breath,” and is thus equivalent to the Hebrew *nephesh* and Latin *anima* (as in English “animal” and “animate”). One of its uses is as the New Testament version of what Genesis 2:7 calls “the breath of life,” that is, the vital force that makes a body live: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [*nephesh*].” Luke 12:20 and Acts 20:10 use *psuché* in this manner.

From this basic meaning derives its extensions: as “life” (see Matthew 6:25; John 10:11; Philippians
(continued on page 17)

SEARCHING

Part Six: Israel Is

*“Woe to you who put far off
the day of doom,
who can cause the seat of violence
to come near; . . .*

*Therefore they shall now go captive
as the first of the captives.”
(Amos 6:3, 7)*

The Ephraimite Jeroboam, as Part Five explained, led a successful tax-revolt against Solomon’s son, Rehoboam. The result was a division of Solomon’s kingdom into two nations. Judah, Benjamin, and Levi remained under the control of the Davidic monarchy, under the aegis of Rehoboam. The remaining ten tribes, situated north of Judah, formed a second kingdom under Jeroboam, the Kingdom of Israel.

Jeroboam, in an effort to bolster his power over the northern tribes, instituted religious changes which “became a sin” (I Kings 12:30) for Israel.

- Fearing that he could eventually lose control over the people as they journeyed to Jerusalem for religious festivals, he built two shrines, one in the southern region of his kingdom, Bethel, and the other in Dan, near its northern boundary. He put golden calves in both sites, asserting, “Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” (I Kings 12:28).
- He changed the fall festival season from the seventh month, Tishri (see Leviticus 23:33-43), to the eighth (I Kings 12:33).

- He “made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi” (I Kings 12:31). Since the Levites had no land as a part of their inheritance (see Joshua 13:33), they migrated south to the kingdom of Judah, where they served in the Temple. The dearth of priests in the north was filled by people who were not Levites.

Jeroboam intended to build his own “designer religion” from the ground up, complete with its own traditions and shrines. He was astute enough to grasp the importance of establishing a priesthood loyal to the government.

“And this thing was the sin of the house of Jeroboam, so as to exterminate and destroy it from the face of the earth” (I Kings 13:34). Because of his refusal to obey God, Jeroboam never realized the conditional promise God made him in I Kings 11:38: “I will be with you and build for you an enduring house, as I built for David.” Jeroboam’s son and heir, Nadab, died by assassination after only two years of rule, and Baasha from the tribe of Issachar took the throne of Israel and slaughtered all of Jeroboam’s progeny (I Kings 15:25-30).

The Sin of Jeroboam

The results of Jeroboam’s apostasy from the true God involved more than just his immediate family, however. II Kings 17:22 states the reason: “The children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam; . . . they did not depart from them.” Subsequent kings of the northern kingdom *never* departed from his apostasy, never sought to correct his errors. “Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight” (verse 18).

II Kings 17:7-17 catalogs the sins of Israel:

- **Widespread idolatry.** Israel “feared other gods” (verse 7). “They built for themselves high

F O R I S R A E L

Fallen, Is Fallen

places in all their cities They set up for themselves sacred pillars and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree; and there they burned incense on all the high places, as the nations had done whom the LORD had carried away before them.” (verses 9-11). Further, they “followed idols, became idolaters, and . . . made for themselves a molded image and two calves, made a wooden image and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal” (verses 15-16).

- **Pagan Religious Practices.** The Israelites “caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger” (verse 17).

- **Rejection of God’s Law.** Israel “walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had cast out from before the children of Israel.” (verse 8). Verse 15 points out that the people “rejected [God’s] statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them.” The prophet Amos particularizes the epidemic of social injustice in the Kingdom of Israel. As an example, notice Amos 2:6-7, where Amos chides the Israelites: “. . . because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble.” The Israelites displayed a pandemic failure to love their fellow man

II Kings 17:5-6 relates the ultimate consequence.

Now the king of Assyria went throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria and besieged it for

three years. . . . The king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

Assyria, a kingdom known as much for its innovative weapons as for their brutal implementation, conquered the Kingdom of Israel in 718 BC. So it was that, about 250 years after it was established, the ten-tribed northern kingdom became extinct as a sovereign nation. The Assyrians deported the population *en masse* from its homeland in Canaan, transplanting it virtually *in toto* to the southern shores of the Caspian Sea.¹ The Kingdom of Israel fell below the historians’ radar.

The Fall of Judah

Jeremiah 3:7-10 states God’s view of the Kingdom of Judah by comparing it to the Kingdom of Israel. God told the peoples of the northern kingdom, Israel, “Return to Me.” God continues,

But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense.

Because the Kingdom of Judah had seen the results of Israel’s idolatry—had witnessed the catastrophe of her fall and mass deportation, but had refused to repent—God judges that “backsliding Israel has shown herself more

righteous than treacherous Judah” (verse 11).

God, through a number of prophets, warns Judah not to follow Israel’s course. For example, Hosea, using harlotry as an analogy for idolatry, pleads, “Though you, Israel, play the harlot, let not Judah offend” (Hosea 4:15).

With a few exceptions, notably Hezekiah and Josiah, the kings of Judah were more corrupt than their counterparts in the north. Israel set the pace into idolatry, and Judah enthusiastically followed. “Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity; Judah also stumbles with them” (Hosea 5:5).

II Kings 23:26-27 indicates the results of Judah’s sin:

Nevertheless the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath, with which His anger was aroused against Judah. . . . And the LORD said, “I will also remove Judah from My sight, as I have removed Israel, and will cast off this city Jerusalem which I have chosen, and the house of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’”

In the nineteen years between 604 and 585 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the same Babylonian king who later came to realize God’s place in history,² carried the population of Judah to Babylon. In the first wave of deportation, he took the military officers, craftsmen, smiths, and other skilled workers, leaving only “the

poorest people of the land” (II Kings 24:14). Later, because of continuing conspiracies against him, he totally destroyed Jerusalem, Temple and all, and “carried away captive the rest of the people” (II Kings 25:11). What Assyria had done to Israel 233 years earlier, Babylonia did to Judah in and around 585 BC: “Those [of Judah] who escaped from the sword [Nebuchadnezzar] carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia” (II Chronicles 36:20).

As national entities, Israel and Judah are extinct, their peoples, as punishment for their inveterate apostasy from God’s law, subject to Gentile rulers. However, this double fall of the children of Israel, a crisis of affairs indeed, does not mean God reneged on His promises to the patriarchs. Nor does this situation mean that the blessings the patriarchs in faith bestowed on their sons are meaningless poetry. It does mean that God carried out His promise to the children of Israel as outlined beginning in Leviticus 26:14. There, God promises that *if* the people “do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments,” He would punish them with “terror,” “wasting disease,” famine, military defeat, and scattering “among the nations.”

But how long would they be punished? God tells us exactly how long! Next month, we will discuss a remarkable search criterion that indicates the time when the

Where Did the Jews Live—Up North

II Kings 16:1-6 briefly summarizes one of the many wars between the Kingdom of Judah in the south and the Kingdom of Israel to its north. Appearing in this passage is the first occurrence of the word *Jew* in God’s Word.

In the seventeenth year of Pekah, . . . Ahaz, . . . king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaz . . . did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God. . . . Then Rezin king of Syria and Pekah, . . . king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to make war; and they besieged Ahaz but could not overcome him. At that time Rezin king of Syria captured Elath for Syria, and drove the men of Judah from Elath.

The King James Version translates “men of Judah” with the single word *Jews*. During the military campaign outlined above, the Syrians captured the port city of Elath from Judah, driving the Jews out.

The term *Jew* usually refers to a person from the tribe of Judah. In fact, *Jew* is a shortened, or what semantacists call a “clipped,” form of the word *Judah*. Strictly speaking, a Jew is genetically a member of the tribe of Judah; that is, the term *Jew* refers to a *person* who has descended from Jacob’s son, Judah. The Jews make up

one tribe of the children of Israel, the tribe of Judah, whose homeland was in the southern part of Canaan. The Jews, then, form only a subset of a much larger group of people, the children of Israel.

Of course, the Kingdom of Judah had in it individuals descended from the tribes Judah, Levi, and Benjamin. Today, Jews (for the most part) do not differentiate between these three tribes. A modern Jew, more likely than not, is descended from the tribe of Judah *or* the tribe of Benjamin *or* the tribe Levi—few, if any, know specifically from which tribe. Moreover, few even give the matter much thought, so irrelevant today have the tribes become as social and political entities.

The term *Jew* is NOT interchangeable with the term *Israel*.

There is an important distinction between them. Today, a Jew is an individual descended through one of three tribes. However, the term *Israel* has a number of broader meanings, all derived from the fact that Israel was the name God gave the patriarch Jacob.

- The word *Israel* can refer to a person. When used this way, it refers specifically to the patriarch Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel (see Genesis 32:28).

punishment will end. Combined with all the other criteria we have identified, this one will point to the precise whereabouts of Israel today.

—Charles Whitaker

Endnotes

¹ The Assyrians exhibited a deep paranoia of what in international relations is called *irredentism*. Irredentism is a resolute policy adopted by a people to regain lands taken from them by a conqueror. Irredentists seek to restore to their own control lands taken from them. The Assyrians saw irredentism as a historical cycle and feared that it would overtake them with a vengeance. In consequence, they developed a national strategy designed to protect them from the nations they vanquished and to ensure stability, if not perpetuity, to their empire.

That strategy is as well documented as it was ruthless: *Destroy the national identity of all vanquished people*. The Assyrians, therefore, played musical chairs with the populations they conquered—deporting them from their homeland *en masse*. The strategy also called for “encouraging” conquered folk to abandon their language and their religion. The long-term effect, the Assyrians reasoned, would be the protection of their empire from later reprisals. After all, a conquered people could not seek to regain past national glories if they had forgotten what those glories were!

Modern examples of irredentist policies are those of Nazi Germany, which developed a war machine in part to regain German territories claimed by the French after World War I. The current policies of the Palestinian Liberation Organization *vis-à-vis* the State of Israel are, clearly, irredentist.

² See Daniel 4:34-37.

or Down South?

- The word *Israel* often refers to *all* the descendants of Jacob. Hence, “the children of Israel,” a term much used in the Pentateuch, refers to individuals from *all* the tribes—literally, all the descendants of the man Jacob (Israel).
- After the fissure of the Davidic monarchy, the term *Israel* came to have a more specific *national* meaning. Used in this collective sense, *Israel* refers to those Israelites who were citizens of the Kingdom of Israel, the northern kingdom.
- Often, the Scriptures use the word *Israel* in a specialized, limited way, where it refers *only* to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob, remember, began his blessing on the two boys with the statement, “Let my name be named upon them” (Genesis 48:16).

These differences are more than “shades of meaning,” or nuances. Readers of God’s Word need to keep a keen eye on both the words *Jew* and *Israel*, ensuring that they understand their proper meaning in context.

(continued from page 13)

2:30; Revelation 12:11) and “living being” (see I Corinthians 15:45; Revelation 16:3). In addition, *psuché* can refer to the seat of emotion, will, and desire, whereas we would use the terms “heart,” “mind,” “personality,” or “being” today (see Luke 1:46; Acts 14:2, 22; Hebrews 6:19; II Peter 2:14). In a similar sense, it can also identify man’s moral and spiritual life (see Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 1:22; 2:11, 25; 4:19; III John 2).

Some try to read immortality into certain biblical uses of *psuché* (for instance, Acts 2:27, 31; II Corinthians 1:23; Revelation 20:4), but the Bible does not support such an interpretation. In fact, in one of these, Matthew 10:28, Jesus confirms that souls can indeed be destroyed (also supported by the Old Testament in Job 33:22; Ezekiel 18:4, 20)! One must consult extrabiblical sources (such as Plato, Xenophon, Herodotus, and other Greek writers) to find usages of *psuché* that define “the soul as an essence which differs from the body and is not dissolved by death” (*Thayer’s Lexicon*).

How then is this word used in Revelation 6:9? We must remember that John is viewing a vision (Revelation 1:10), a symbolic representation for mortal eyes and minds of future events, not reality. One cannot see a person’s actual soul, that is, his being, his life, so what John saw were *representations* of those who had been martyred. He probably literally saw bodies (Greek *soma*) under the altar but chose to identify them as *psuchás*, “lives” or “persons,” because, as the next verses show, the vision depicts them speaking and receiving clothing, things a person can do only while alive.

The important point to remember is that John specifically identifies them as having been “slain”—they are dead—and the Bible elsewhere shows that “the dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5) and cannot work, plan, learn, or pursue any activity in the grave (verse 10). Thus, John, a Hebrew, is using *psuché* in the same sense as Old Testament writers sometimes use *nepshesh*, as “dead body,” a being that once had life (see Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:6; 9:6-7, 10; 19:11, 13; Haggai 2:13).

WORD AND TESTIMONY

The apostle John tells why these saints suffered martyrdom: “for the word of God and for the testimony which they held.” For John, these two are important elements, and they occur several times in Revelation. In opening the book, the apostle contends that he himself “bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ” in Revelation 1:2, and in verse 9 he says

he “was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Later, when observing a vision of God’s people contending with Satan, he writes, “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Revelation 12:11). A statement similar to Revelation 6:9 appears in Revelation 20:4: “And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God.”

The first element, *the word of God*, is straightforward: It is the truth, the inspired revelation of God, that we find today in the Bible. For John and many in the first century, it was the Old Testament combined with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Only later was this supplemented by the epistles of the apostles, Acts, and Revelation. (No one can be certain when the authoritative canon was compiled, but all the components were likely in place by the time John died. Using Isaiah 8:16, some believe that he authorized the present canon before his death, c. AD 100.) Unlike many today, these martyrs of the fifth seal do not take God’s Word for granted, believing that its message is personally vital, current, and authoritative, and they are willing to die rather than compromise with its instruction.

The second element, *the testimony which they held*, can seem to some to be more complex. The key word, *testimony*, is the Greek word *marturían*, which means either “the act or office of testifying” or “what one testifies.” In modern terms, it is either the giving of evidence, as before a judge in a courtroom, or the evidence itself. The word *witness* is similarly used, as, for instance, the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11 are called *mártusín* (“witnesses” or “martyrs”), a related word. Their “testimony,” then, is evidence they give or a witness they provide.

We should not forget the final phrase, “which they held,” as it adds definition and emphasis to their testimony. The evidence they give means something special to them! It is not as if they witnessed an auto accident and, as unbiased bystanders, simply testified about how it happened. Their testimony is something so precious that they hold it fast, bear it, maintain it, keep it in trust, possess it, consider it, believe it, and adhere to it.

How do they give their testimony? It could be different for each one, but notice Jesus’ interpretation of this seal in Luke 21:12-19:

But before all these things [the heavenly signs of the sixth seal], they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in

your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will send some of you to your death. And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. In your patience possess your souls.

He specifically mentions testifying before religious authorities, in prisons, and before secular leaders. These are the “classic” occasions for witnessing of the truth, all of which are reported as happening to the apostles in the book of Acts. He also hints at other ways of testifying, more personal ones that involve relatives and “friends” seeing a Christian practicing his beliefs or hearing him propounding the truth, and betraying him to the authorities.

Hebrews 11 gives multiple examples of the heroes of faith making a witness of the true God and His way. Abel, for example, bore witness by making an acceptable sacrifice (verse 4). Enoch’s translation was witness that He pleased God (verse 5). Noah’s obedience in constructing the ark bore witness of his faith (verse 7). Abraham testified of his allegiance in many ways: leaving Ur (verse 8), dwelling in tents in Canaan (verse 9), and sacrificing Isaac (verse 17). Sarah, too, testified by conceiving and bearing the promised son, Isaac (verse 11). Later, Moses showed his faith by refusing royal rank (verse 24), forsaking Egypt (verse 27), and keeping the Passover (verse 28).

Likewise, we give testimony of our devotion to God and our beliefs in simple, everyday acts, many of which we probably never consider to be witnessing. We make a witness to other members of our families with our every word, act, and decision. We witness of our adherence to law in our public activities, from driving our cars to paying our taxes. Our diligence and thoroughness on the job testify of our godly character or lack thereof. One could go so far as to say that everything we say and do that is witnessed by others shouts out the testimony that we hold.

Are we, like these martyred saints, willing to lay down our lives for God’s Word and our beliefs? It may never come to that for any of us personally, but do we have the sacrificial attitude applauded by Revelation 6:11 and many other New Testament verses? Do we value God’s revelation of His way of life highly enough to defend it despite the cost? Do we, as Jesus warns in Luke 14:26, “hate” our lives enough to be His disciples?

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things. But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His habitation; and there you shall go.

Fickle Discontentment

In its carnality, Israel reveals itself to be disastrously curious and incautious in temperament, thinking that variety of experience rather than the truth of God's Word is the answer to her dissatisfied, rebellious, unsettled, impatient nature. This fickle discontentment is not limited to just the worship of God. It reared its head early in the history of her relationship with God. Numbers 11:4-6 reports:

Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!"

A number of quite serious sins are exposed in this particular issue, perhaps the most serious being their lack of faith in God's providence. This sin is driven by an arrogant self-concern that forgets that God is working out a purpose and plan in us and overseeing everything in our lives. He bought and paid for us with Christ's sacrifice, and we vowed to submit to His authority when we gave Him our lives. What He provides to those of faith within that purpose is more than fair. In fact, it is usually quite generous.

He promises to supply the faithful with their every need, but in Israel's fearful and fickle discontentment, they did not seek Him to understand what He was doing. Instead, they sought something different from what He was providing in terms of experiences within the relationship. This drive for fulfillment in variety remains within the Israelitish people.

Though the emphasis under the New Covenant has shifted to the spiritual, God shows us in numerous ways that His desire is for His children to be unified in one system—His. The manna provided under the Old Covenant represents God's desire that we are to be strengthened in His way *only* through His Word.

Uniformity with His way is illustrated in several ways

The existence of this exhortation to seek Him only and destroy the worship of Canaan's inhabitants is strong evidence that God foresaw that Israel was thoroughly smitten with "the grass is always greener" disease. They failed both to dispossess the land's inhabitants and to destroy their places of worship. History records that God was right, and Israel is left without excuse for its spiritual adultery.

in the Old Testament. For example, the priests could use coals only from one particular fire for the incense offering. They had to be uniform in the clothing they wore when officiating at the one altar God permitted in only one place in Israel. In addition, Israel was allowed only one festival site, Jerusalem.

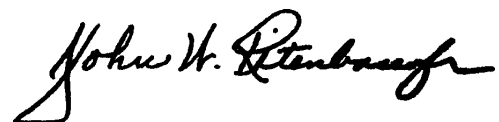
Consider how God concludes His instructions in Deuteronomy 12, which limited Israel's sacrifices to Him to one location:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise." You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it. (verses 29-32)

This instruction is specifically aimed to stifle Israel's proclivity to look into foreign religions. The lesson is "curiosity killed the cat"! Deuteronomy 23:6 adds concerning the heathen, "You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever." In Ezra 9:12, where this also appears, God tells them to keep themselves so separated that they were never to make any kind of alliance with neighboring peoples!

As the Bible shows, Israel did not heed God's counsel. In stubbornness, she sought fulfillment in variety and became a great whore.

In Christian love,



“For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

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believe this, and they tremble in terror! Fool! When will you ever learn that faith that does not result in good deeds is useless?”

The Evidence

When confronted with the choice to eat or not eat the fruit, what evidence did Adam and Eve have? All they had were the words of God.

Notice the classic definition of faith found in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” What is the “evidence of things not seen?” God’s words. The rest of the chapter with its examples of faith illustrates that the faithful had only His words as evidence.

Verses 36-38 list various trials God has required of some of the faithful. Especially notice verse 39: “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise.” Even though all *looked* lost from a human standpoint, they still believed God, knowing that the sovereign God could and would keep His promises even beyond the grave.

With all of God’s promises, He does not promise *when* He will answer. The timing of those answers is in His hands. Based on what is best, God, who is love (I John 4:8, 16), decides when (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The right time may be, not in this life, but in the next. In fact, believing God’s promises, even to the end—death—could be the last piece of proof God requires to “know” He can entrust us with eternal life, an everlasting relationship with Him.

Again, notice our example of faith, Abraham, the “Father of the Faithful.” As Abraham had the knife raised to sacrifice his son, the only evidence he had was the words of God. Abraham could believe God—take Him at His word—or believe all the evidence he could see that the son of promise would die before God fulfilled His prom-

ises. Abraham could not “see” what God was going to do. As far as Abraham was concerned, Isaac was dead. The only “evidence” he had that it all would work out was God’s words—the promises God made to him.

God also needed evidence. God did not know for sure what was in Abraham’s heart (Genesis 22:12) until Abraham made the decision to trust God rather than all the physical evidence around him. The patriarch’s actions proved he would walk by faith and not by sight.

To walk is an action. So even the phrase “walk by faith” demonstrates that living faith requires action. Our evidence is God’s words. God’s evidence is our actions.

We are in the same boat as Abraham. So says Galatians 3:6: “You have exactly the same experience as Abraham. Abraham took God at his word, and that act of faith was accepted as putting him into a right relationship with God” (William Barclay). Just as Abraham had to choose between believing God and believing the circumstances he could see, God also has to put us into exactly the same position. He must find out what is the true intent of our hearts—the depth of our faith. God needs to “know” that we will trust Him, no matter what, before He commits to a permanent, eternal relationship with us.

Faith’s Source

Where do we get this faith? Ephesians 2:8 answers: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” We cannot work it up—that would be our effort (Isaiah 64:6).

Consider when God first started working with us. One year we were clueless, the next year things were making sense. We read the Bible and understood it, but more importantly, we believed it.

Where did that belief come from?

It was, as Ephesians 2:8 says, a gift from God. The real miracle is not that we understood, but rather that we now *believed* those words we understood. And this happened only because God made it possible.

What was the evidence that we believed those words? We began living by them. Our new works and actions were the evidence of our faith: keeping the Sabbath, tithing, eating habits, etc.

Just like Abraham, our actions showed our desire to begin a right relationship with God motivated by His gift of faith. “Don’t you remember that our ancestor Abraham was declared right with God because of what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, he was trusting God so much that he was willing to do whatever God told him to do. His faith was made complete by what he did—by his actions” (James 2:21-22 NLT).

To complete our faith, are we willing to believe and do whatever God tells us? Consider those first experiences as we began to believe. We faced family pressure, work pressure, peer pressure, etc., to obey what we now believed. What evidence did we have to back up our actions? All we had was God’s words. Armed with only those words, we willingly faced any opposition to act on what God commands. Just like Abraham, it was our faith in those words that encouraged us to obey and begin our journey, not knowing where we were going (Hebrews 11:8).

At our baptism, could we have predicted all the twists and turns our lives have taken since? Just like Israel’s journey after baptism in the Red Sea, God has taken us in a zigzag route across this wilderness we call life. What was our evidence of things not seen? Only the words of God. That was the only evidence we had then, and it is the only sure evidence we have now.

As we deal with our trials, do we remember that first love? Do we

remember the challenges we were willing to confront with only the words of God as our evidence? It is no different today. Will we believe God or what we can see? God needs to find out just as He did with Abraham—to “know” we will obey, no matter what, until the end (Matthew 10:22).

To test our faith, God’s pattern is to bring us to a point—a brick wall or a Red Sea—that seemingly allows no escape. That is where He can find out what is truly in our hearts—hearts of belief or evil unbelief (Hebrews 3:12). Will we believe Him or our eyes?

Paul had this experience and recorded it for us in II Corinthians 1:8-10:

We should like you, our brothers, to know something of the trouble we went through in Asia. At that time we were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact we told ourselves that this was the end. Yet we believe now that we had this sense of impending disaster that we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God who can raise the dead. It was God who preserved us from such deadly perils, and it is he who still preserves us. (Phillips translation)

Even though all human hope was lost, God came to the rescue to teach Paul—and us through Paul—that God can be trusted. “I am God! I can be trusted. . . . I alone am the God who can be trusted” [Isaiah 65:16 Contemporary English Version (CEV)].

Promises

It is unwise for us to use such words as “never” and “always.” We humans just do not have the power to fulfill what these absolutes imply. The actor Sean Connery found this out when he once said he would never play James Bond again. Some years later, he did just that, and the movie was called “Never Say Never Again” as a re-

minder of his brash statement.

The sovereign God is under no such restrictions in His power. Notice some of the absolute words of God, words that are promises we can trust:

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (CEV): “God makes everything happen at the right time.” Not some things, not most things, but everything.

Psalm 84:11: “No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” No good thing means absolutely none, not even one. It is good to remember that carnal man has a very nearsighted definition of good (Isaiah 55:8).

Psalm 34:19: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.” Not some, not most—but *all!*

Philippians 4:19: “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” He promises to supply, not all our wants, but all our needs. People often confuse wants and needs.

Romans 8:28: “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.” Do we know and believe that all things work together for our good? Again, it means exactly what it says—not some things or most things, but *all* things.

Herbert W. Armstrong wrote about an incident in his early ministry that illustrates this promise in Romans. A flood in the area put all the farms under water. One of the farmers, a member of the church, while looking at his flooded farm, said he did not see how this could be good. However, because God said all things

work together for good to those called, he chose to trust and believe God. When the water subsided, most of his crops survived while the water destroyed most of his neighbors’ crops. When it came time to harvest and sell his crops, he received top dollar because the flood had created such a severe shortage.

The farmer walked by faith, not sight. Rather than give in to worry and fear, he instead *chose* to trust God and wait patiently on Him to keep His promise.

Notice another example of faith—one that Christ calls the greatest example of faith He had seen during His ministry—that of the centurion and his sick servant found in Matthew 8. What makes this such an outstanding example of faith? It starts with the centurion recognizing Christ’s authority. Once that is established, the words of Christ are sufficient; nothing more is necessary. Are the words of the sovereign God sufficient for us?

As we contend with trials that seem to have no way out, are we going to trust every word of God (Matthew 4:4)—His promises, even the absolutes—or are we going to believe what we see? Will we walk by faith or sight?

Will we have faith in God’s promises and love for us, even if there is no deliverance in this life? The faith chapter, Hebrews 11, shows that this may be required (Hebrews 11:36-39). So does Revelation 12:11: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

The only evidence we have in these circumstances is God’s words. Will we trust them? We did when first called. Will we do it to the end? Will we ask God to stir up His gift of faith? He promises to supply what we need (Philippians 4:19), especially if we ask (Matthew 21:22).

So faith is simply believing and acting on what God says without watering it down—even the abso-

II CORINTHIANS 5:7

“For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

lutes—no matter what the circumstances are, no matter what the physical evidence looks like, no matter what price we may have to pay. This applies not only to the big trials of life, but even more so to the little decisions we make each day (Luke 16:10). Human nature chooses to rely more on carnal reasoning and human tradition and examples rather than on God’s words. What governs our daily actions? We can prove to be faithless by discounting the words of God, compromising, and making them of no effect (Mark 7:13).

A Test

God, through Paul, commands us to examine our faith and to test ourselves (II Corinthians 13:5). How can we know the strength of our faith—our belief in the words of God? All we have to do is examine our fears and worries.

Nehemiah writes, “For this reason he was hired, that I should be afraid and act that way and sin, so that they might have cause for an evil report, that they might reproach me” (Nehemiah 6:13). Why did Nehemiah call being afraid a sin? Because fear and worry call God a liar, insinuating that His words about His sovereignty, love, power, and faithfulness are not to be trusted. Fear and worry mirror the attitudes of a faithless Satan who

believes God exists but does not believe what He says.

Philippians 4:6 tells us, “Be anxious for nothing.” In other words, we are commanded, “Don’t worry about anything,” another of God’s absolutes. To have fear, worry, anxiety, or forebodings question God’s goodness and care. They display a lack of faith in His promises of wise and gracious providence and cast doubts on the depth of the love God and Christ have for us. If we cannot trust God, how can He ever trust us? Why would Christ marry forever someone who doubts His love?

Rather than give in to fear and worry, we can choose—an action—to believe God and His love. If we believe in the depth of the love God (John 17:23) and Christ (John 15:13) have for us, believing those words, faith in that perfect love will cast out fear (I John 4:18) so that we can say as David did: “I will fear no evil; for You are with me” (Psalm 23:4).

In Psalm 78:22 (NLT), David succinctly cuts to the heart of Israel’s problem, and by extension, ours: “. . . for they did not believe God or trust him to care for them.” Doubting God’s love for us is at the core of the sin of faithlessness. This doubt was a major characteristic of our ancestors, ancient Israel. “. . . because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the LORD going

to take care of us or not?’” [Exodus 17:7 (NLT)] They never overcame this sin of faithlessness. We must. The stakes are so much higher.

It is sobering to consider the fate of the fearful and unbelieving and the rank they are given in the list found in Revelation 21:8: “But the cowardly [*fearful*, KJV], unbelieving [*faithless*, RSV], abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

God tested the faith of Adam and Eve and of Abraham. The former failed, the latter succeeded. Eventually, God will put every human being to the same test.

As we cope with these tests we need to stir up (II Timothy 1:6) and exercise that gift of faith God gave us at the beginning, to get back to that first love and dedication to the words and promises God has given us.

We have the same choice as Adam and Eve, ancient Israel, and Abraham had. It is our decision to make: to believe God or to believe what we see—the visible circumstances we face. Faith is life (Habakkuk 2:4), and faithlessness is sin (Romans 14:23) and therefore death (Romans 6:23). God entreats us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19).

—Pat Higgins

Countering the Culture

(continued from page 11)

away from the irreverent babble and godless chatter, with the vain and empty and worldly phrases, and the subtleties and the contradictions in what is falsely called knowledge and spiritual illumination. [For] by making such profession some have erred (missed the mark) as regards the faith. (Amplified Bible)

He says, “Guard the deposit com-

mitted to your trust,” as if he were making a deposit at the bank. Guard the deposit, the sound doctrine, the revelation of Jesus Christ! Paul writes that we should avoid “godless chatter,” or as translated in the New King James version “profane and vain babblings.” “Contradictions” is the Greek *antithesis*, a rival theory, fact, or concept. Paul means, of course, those rival arguments to the true doctrine.

He gives the same warning to us:

We *cannot* be caught up in the culture of today. The Bible, the very Word of God, must be our culture. We must eat it, drink it, and live it!

Remember the adage, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” The courage to stand up for what is right may cause us to lose “friends” in this world, but actually doing what is right will reap valuable returns in our character over the course of this life and into eternity.

—Mark Baker

Europe: Ripe for Change

Even though the European Union is trying to shape itself to rival the United States in several arenas, certain military, economic, and demographic factors point to the EU's need to make dramatic shifts to stay in the superpower game:

- As reported by *LifesiteNews.com*, Europe's population is aging, and there are not enough new births to sustain it. The present trend indicates that, by the middle of the century, *more than half* the population will be age 65 or older. By contrast, the median age in the U.S. in 2050 is predicted to be 35.4, only slightly more than what it is now. This bodes ill especially for Europe's pension system, which, as a number of officials are realizing, is headed for imminent collapse. Although the trend is uniform across Europe, Germans may feel the pinch most because of their highly state-funded system. To maintain the current system, there must be at least four working-age people for every three retirees, and by 2035, every worker will have to support himself *and* one retired person.
- Europe's aging population and low birth rates also signal a decreased work force. The 2004 World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, revealed that, while the labor forces of Southeast Asia and India will continue to grow in the next 30 years, the EU will see a decline in its labor force population from 208.7 million in 2000 to 151.2 million in 2050—a little over 70% of its current level. During the same period, the number of people over the age of 60 in the EU will climb from 82.1 million to 125.1 million. As for economic productivity, the EU's share of total global output is predicted to

shrink by almost half. Today, the EU produces some 18% of the world's wealth; in 2050 that figure is expected to fall to 10%. Richard Samans of the World Economic Forum says, "Economic output is determined by labor force growth and productivity rates. In countries with significant projected labor shortages, the supply of goods and services may not meet demand and standards of living."

- Niall Ferguson, columnist for *The London Telegraph*, shows that on top of Europe's shrinking labor force is another disparity: what "labor" actually means. German, Italian, and French workers enjoy, on average, more than 40 vacation days each year, while the average American takes just two weeks. Additionally, over the past decade, U.S. unemployment has averaged 4.6% compared with 9.2% for the EU. Another difference is in labor participation. Between 1973 and 1998, the percentage of employed Americans rose from 41% to 49%. However, in Germany and France, the equivalent percentage fell to, respectively, 44% and 39%. Consider also the European proclivity for labor strikes. Between 1992 and 2001, the Spanish economy lost, on average, 271 days per thousand employees because of strikes. For Denmark, Italy, Finland, Ireland, and France, the figures lay between 80 and 120 days, while America lost just 50 days. Perhaps the most striking difference between American and European working patterns, however, relates to working hours. In 1999, the average employed American worked just under 2,000 hours a year (1,976). The average German worked 1,535 hours—22% less. A recent study shows the average Frenchman works a staggering 32% less.

Protestantism's Decline

According to a study by the University of Chicago, Protestants may soon account for less than half of the U.S. population for the first time since the country's founding. While still outnumbering Catholics—the next biggest group—by roughly two to one, Protestant denominations have been steadily losing members. While Protestant membership stood at 63% of the population in 1993, it fell to 52% in 2002 and is predicted to drop below half in the next year or two. Tom Smith, general director of the National Opinion Research Center, states that "many scholars have noted that the numbers of people who say they have 'no religion' is increasing, but they haven't noted what faith group these people have been leaving. It is clear that many of these people are former Protestants." It is also possible that a small

number of the people who formerly identified themselves as Protestant now identify themselves simply as "Christian," in which case they would fall into the "other" category on the survey, Smith said. Those who in 2002 said they were Catholic remained fairly steady at about 25% of the population. People who said they belonged to other religions, including Eastern faiths and Islam, Orthodox Christians, non-denominational Christians, and native-American faiths, increased from 3% to 7% between 1993 and 2002, while the number of people who identified themselves as Jewish remained stable at slightly under 2%. Those who claimed no religion totaled nearly 14% in 2002 compared to 9% in 1993. Protestants are in decline, the survey found, because younger adherents are dropping out.

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 UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS

When God calls us, we may take our newly found power of faith for granted and may be increasingly susceptible to becoming angry at offenses and persecution. Aware of this, Jesus sought to caution His apostles against such pitfalls. In Luke 17:1-6, Jesus sets up the Parable of the Unprofitable Servants with introductory instruction. He warns His disciples of the inevitable attacks on His teaching and on those who proclaim it, pointing out the guilt of those responsible (verses 1-2). Then He admonishes them to value a loving and forgiving attitude and to be ready to pardon when an offender repents. Knowing this is difficult and seeing this weakness in themselves, the apostles feel the need for an increase of faith, an additional amount of spiritual help to aid them in complying with Jesus' requirements.



1. Would it be enough for Jesus merely to increase their faith as His apostles asked? Luke 17:5.

COMMENT: The apostles wanted more faith so they could meet the challenges of God's demands, but Jesus knew that it was not quantity they needed but quality. They did not need an increase of faith that would bring some reward following its use, but a faith that, although small like a mustard seed, is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). The disciple with this type of living faith is convinced of the fact that God exists (Romans 4:16-22; Hebrews 11:1-3), conscious of his intimate relationship with God (Romans 5:1-2), and concerned about absolute submission to His will (Romans 12:2).

2. As servants, do we have to be subject to God in everything? Luke 17:7.

COMMENT: As servants or bondservants, we are not our own. We belong to Christ who bought us with His blood. We have no right of ownership of anything because God owns us and all we have—even our time. This means we are at His disposal. He demands our total effort at all times, and has every right to expect it as He has given all, owns all, and has a right to all. We are His by creation, by redemption, and by our surrender of our lives to Him.

The images of plowing fields and tending sheep in verse 7 represent spiritual labor, to which Christ called His own followers (John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3). A master is not required to refresh or compensate his servant immediately, even when he has plowed his master's fields or fed his sheep. The servant has merely done his duty. Before the servant can sit down and rest, he must prepare and serve his master's meal. Though tired, he is still under obligation to serve.

3. How much effort must be made for the Master? Luke 17:8.

COMMENT: From the master's point of view, all the servant had already accomplished was a matter of obligation, and now he demands further obedience and additional service from him. His needs must be satisfied first, and then at the proper time, the servant may eat. This represents our work on earth on our Master's behalf, giving Him the spiritual food and drink of seeing His Father's will accomplished (John 4:32-34). We are under obligation to Christ, and without delay and rest, we must present ourselves completely to Him in service (Romans 12:1).

4. Should a servant expect immediate praise or compensation for his obedience and service to the Master? Luke 17:9.

COMMENT: The only limit to the servant's duty is his master's

The lesson in verses 1-6 unites with the parable in verses 7-10, which emphasizes the obligation of each disciple to serve the Master without expectation of release or reward. His followers must give complete obedience to Him no matter what trials come upon them and like Him, they must conquer their own human nature by suffering. Jesus emphasizes the kind of faith His disciples would need to endure coming trials and to obey His commands (1 Timothy 1:5). This parable is designed to guard against the subtle danger in the servant who becomes satisfied with his work and expects that the Master will recognize his service with reward. Jesus impresses on His disciples the difficult and continuous service He requires of them and the attitude in which their service should be given.

will. There is no point at which we can claim that we have done enough and are entitled to ease. The servant is always a debtor of service; the master is never a debtor of reward. One who idolizes his duty may be satisfied when his duty is accomplished and expect the praise of others, but servants should not expect even thanks.

God promises us rewards, but we do not work for the Master simply to receive compensation. As servants, we serve Him because we are His to command as He wills and because we love Him. He has every right to our service and is under no obligation to thank us for our obedience. The servant does not serve for nothing, but receives consideration for the gift of salvation because of his dedicated obedience and humble service. Nevertheless, it is good for His servants to seek His praises and rewards with the right attitude because God does praise and reward the faithful (Colossians 3:23-24).

5. After serving the master, why is the servant still unprofitable? What is expected of us? Luke 17:10.

COMMENT: The lowly attitude of the servant is seen clearly in the word translated "servant" in verse 7. It is the Greek word *doulos* meaning "bondservant." During Christ's time, such a servant-slave was under the complete authority of his master. We must take this lowly position if we are going to serve our Master well. Our service will always fall short of the suffering and sacrifice Jesus received while in the flesh on earth. Therefore, there is no such thing as an excess of earned credit in us; even after serving our best at what the Master requires, we are still unprofitable servants in comparison to Christ. After performing our duty perfectly, we are still short of earned credit before God. We cannot build anything on our own effort. If we expect thanks and reward for fulfilling the minimum requirement of work, our thoughts are not on the duty but on what we may gain.

Christ expects every church member to do his duty in a mind and will unified with His. His emphasis on humility is a hard lesson for those who will not serve unless given recognition, honor, and position. In reality, much of the service we perform for Him is humbling and obscure by the world's standard. Christian works must be done in faith (James 2:20). The only way to obtain increased faith is for the working servant to manifest steadfast, persevering obedience, grounded in humility with the help of the Holy Spirit. Faith is produced as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). A humble, obedient, serving attitude goes a long way to increasing faith and practicing true forgiveness.