

# *Forerunner*

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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**ALCOHOL?**

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Many Christian churches teach that the Bible condemns the use of alcohol, but is that so? Certainly, drinking alcoholic beverages to excess is sinful, but what about the occasional beer or glass of wine? What about the wine we are to drink at Passover? Can Christians drink in moderation?  
**Corbis**

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# The Beast and Babylon

Daniel 3:19-20 illustrates an important pattern of God:

Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. Therefore he spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, and cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

The Bible shows that our God follows a pattern of throwing His people right into the heart of the fire, so to speak, at important junctures in history. For His glorification, for a witness, and for our preparation, He positions them in the midst of the issues that pertain to His purpose. God placed Noah as the central figure in the Flood. He told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. He caused Joseph to be sold into Egypt. He called Moses to face Pharaoh, and made Israelites endure the pilgrimage through the wilderness. To witness to Darius, God deemed it necessary for Daniel to spend the night in a den of lions.

We sons of God now find ourselves living in the end-time Babylon, which is growing to the greatest extent of its evil, anti-God influence. We are commanded to come out of her (Revelation 18:4), but that is no longer literally possible due to Babylon being a

worldwide system. Our only viable choice is to come out *spiritually* by resisting its destructive influences to depart from God's way of life. What trials might we face, then, that parallel the above examples?

We receive comfort in the fact that God's people of old came through their trials because He delivered them. We have read of God's encouraging victories on behalf of His people, yet we have also seen plenty of evidence of Israel's weaknesses and failures. In our similar situation, it helps us greatly to understand Israel's weaknesses since we are cut from the same cloth.

Hebrews 3:12, 17-19 records the basis of Israel's failures:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. . . . Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

The apostle Paul points out the fountain that disgorged all the fickle-minded disloyalties of the people of Israel: an evil heart of unbelief. Like an inexperienced and immature teenager, Israel usually believed she knew better than the Creator.

Her sinful, unbelieving heart stands in marked contrast to the faithfulness of Jesus and Moses as noted in verse 2, “. . . who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house.” Additionally, “departing from” in verse 12 is a rather weak translation; “rebellious against” is more appropriate. Israel did not merely depart from an obscure set of doctrines, but she rebelled against a living, dynamic Being whom she in her blindness did not really “see” as

part of the Exodus and pilgrimage.

Paul’s entire exhortation is tied directly to verse 6, “. . . but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.” *Whose house we are* is a solemn reminder of our responsibilities to Christ in this deceptively perilous time. We are the people of God, and it is our responsibility to glorify Him by being tenaciously faithful in every circumstance.

## Curiosity Killed the Cat

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.”

Israel’s unbelief was the breeding ground for her capriciousness, and her insatiable curiosity and desire for variety continuously led her astray. In turn, this produced the mistrust and unreliability that characterized her relationship with God. We must not follow her example in this—our stakes are so much higher!

## Where Do the Clues Point?

In the last article, we digressed to cover a specific area of Israel’s identity as the harlot Woman of Revelation 17-18. This article continues that digression. Israel’s behavior, as revealed in the Bible, is part of how we can identify her. Though the world may not recognize her, we should be able to because we know how she should have conducted herself. Her behavior is the major fruit of her faithless, rebellious departure from her responsibilities within the Old Covenant.

In Psalm 78:57, God illustrates her as a deceitful bow. To every outward appearance, she was full of promise of success, but when put to the tests of life, she performed badly and failed to carry out her responsibilities. Thus, her conduct continually missed the mark. God calls her “weak of heart,” insatiable, unsatisfied, and contrary in a variety of contexts. Notice how strongly God describes this drive in Ezekiel 6:9:

Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations where they are carried captive, because I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot after their idols; they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations.

“Idols” represent what she greatly desired and expended her efforts to possess. As the context shows, what she greatly desired God, her Husband, prohibited. These fickle lusts led Israel into relationships with ways of life other than God’s. Her drive for the “excitement” of experiencing some new thing led her to make those other ways her ways. God labels this as adultery because she abandoned Him for them.

Usually what Israel chased after was outside the

guidelines God gave in His commands. However, to her His commands always appeared to be denying her pleasure. Hosea, though the earliest of the prophets to connect spiritual idolatry to the sexual sin of adultery, was far from the last.

Jeremiah 2:9-26 presents us with a scathing survey of Judah's behavior in the period just before she went into captivity:

“Therefore I will yet bring charges against you,” says the LORD, “and against your children's children I will bring charges. For pass beyond the coasts of Cyprus and see, send to Kedar and consider diligently, and see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory for what does not profit. Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid; be very desolate,” says the LORD. “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.

“Is Israel a servant? Is he a homeborn slave? Why is he plundered? The young lions roared at him, and growled; they made his land waste; his cities are burned, without inhabitant. Also the people of Noph and Tahpanhes [Egyptian cities] have broken the crown of your head. Have you not brought this on yourself, in that you have forsaken the LORD your God when He led you in the way? And now why take the road to Egypt, to drink the waters of Sihor? Or why take the road to Assyria, to drink the waters of the River? Your own wickedness will correct you, and your backslidings will reprove you. Know therefore and see that it is an evil and bitter thing that you have forsaken the LORD your God, and the fear of Me is not in you,” says the Lord GOD of hosts.

“For of old I have broken your yoke and burst your bonds; and you said, ‘I will not transgress,’ when on every high hill and under every green tree you lay down, playing the harlot. Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before Me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine? For though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap, yet your iniquity is marked before Me,” says the Lord GOD.

“How can you say, ‘I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Baals’? See your way in the valley; know what you have done: You are a swift dromedary breaking loose in her ways. A wild donkey used to the wilderness, that sniffs at the wind in

her desire; in her time of mating, who can turn her away? All those who seek her will not weary themselves; in her month they will find her. Withhold your foot from being unshod, and your throat from thirst. But you said, ‘There is no hope. No! For I have loved aliens, and after them I will go.’

As the thief is ashamed when he is found out, so is the house of Israel ashamed; they and their kings and their princes, and their priests and their prophets.”

This is an exceedingly intense drive! God compares Israel's urge to show disrespect for Him to a camel or a wild ass in heat! In the next chapter, God divorces Israel (Jeremiah 3:8)!

We need to heed these things because most of us have been called from a nation cut, as it were, from the same bolt of cloth. In us is the same proclivity for unbelieving, stubborn fickleness whose fruit is immature, irresponsible faithlessness to obligations. This wayward drive is actually in all of mankind, but Israel is more responsible because God has revealed Himself to her to such a great extent (Amos 3:1-2).

Satan has succeeded in deceiving the whole world (Revelation 12:9). Among these deceptions is that modern Israel is Christian, but it really practices pseudo-Christianity. She has nonetheless spread her “wine” over the entire world, drugging it with its false religious teachings and poor example and inducing much of the world to follow her.

This deception is particularly dangerous to true church members since the vast majority of God's people live in Israelitish nations. This close proximity has the power to make us feel an affinity with Israel's brand of false Christianity, luring us into producing the same tolerant, nonjudgmental, politically correct, multicultural Laodiceanism commonly displayed in Israelitish countries. It can hinder the required separation from the world by making us feel a lingering oneness with them.

I John 2:15-16 is a basic guideline for avoiding entrapment by this alluring heart of the Babylonish system:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.

Since this system has its basis in human nature, it feeds right into the desires for frequent change and variety of experience as the answers to fulfillment in life. The Bible, however, clearly reveals God drawing His children into His oneness, which is diametrically opposed

to the world's system. It promotes fulfillment in material things, excitement, gratification of the flesh, and variety of religious experience. Its major fruits are easily seen in the world around us as confusion of purpose, competition, disharmony, disunity, separation from each other and God, and death.

The result is that this world is not a happy place to live in. None of these factors can give a lasting sense of

peace, fulfillment, and abundant living because none of them harmonizes with the purpose of God. They can only produce a temporary burst of emotional well-being.

God instructed Israel often and in many ways against this proclivity. They were to seek only Him in His only habitation in Jerusalem. Israel, though, is disastrously curious and incautious and filled with discontented, unsettled, impatient, "grass is always greener" yearnings.

## Are We Gamblers Too?

Psalm 11:4-5 reminds us: "The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The LORD tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates." It is good to remember that, just because He makes something available to us—even things that might ordinarily be considered "good"—it does not mean it is good for us! God is continually testing us to see whether we understand how intimately He is working with us.

We are to be self-controlled people, our conduct motivated by faith, because we are a distinct people summoned by the great God for His purposes and His purposes only. God is drawing us into oneness with Him, which is why His Word so frequently stresses His *one* way.

A man was once asked why he risked life and limb to climb a mountain. He replied, "Because it was there." This illustration is supposed to indicate that he rose to the challenges of life and overcame them. What is not often explored is that he did not need to risk life and limb to climb the mountain. He took this risk, this gamble, on himself; God did not require it. His vanity drove him to do it so he could be personally satisfied and tell others he did it.

Exercising faith in God and His Word is not a gamble. Babylon's system is a way of life that promotes gambling, betting that one will be able to beat the odds. It began with Adam and Eve in the Garden and today contaminates virtually every area of life.

Despite our wealth of knowledge concerning nutrition, we gamble with our health in what and how much we choose to eat. How can smokers not know they are gambling with their health when statistics show that each cigarette takes about seven minutes from one's life? Consider the AIDS epidemic. In spite of all the information regarding the dangerous potential of this disease, people willfully continue in their hedonistic lifestyles, gambling that a cure will be found before it strikes them down.

We often gamble in the way we drive our automobiles. People sky dive from airplanes or bungee jump from high bridges spanning deep canyons. Men and women involve themselves in a whole host of life-threatening experiences, risking their survival for the sake of a thrill.

Many have gone heavily into debt wagering that the nation's economy, their employment, and their health will continue to be positive and that they can somehow manage to keep their noses above the financial waters. Yet, the nation's economy, which affects jobs, never stays the same for long. Various factors are in constant flux, making financial speculation risky business.

The solution to each of these gambles is to control ourselves through faith in God and His purpose. We must stop indulging ourselves and begin making whatever sacrifices are necessary to keep to the strait-and-narrow course God has placed before us. It is our responsibility to glorify Him, and we most certainly will not glorify Him by gambling on some other way of life!

But Israel does not want to sacrifice. She wants satisfaction—her way—which so frequently comes at the expense of godly conduct. We cannot allow ourselves to be dragged along in her self-centered depravity, as seen in her boast, "I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow" (Revelation 18:7).

Albert Einstein was once asked for his definition of insanity. He replied, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." This entire creation works according to laws, and those laws cannot work any other way than they do. They always bring the same results.

The solution is to quit disbelieving God and obey the laws He counsels us will produce the abundance, satisfaction, and peace we so desire. Israel would not and will not do this. It remains to be seen whether we, after being given the opportunity, will follow Israel's fickle example or that of the heroes of faith.

Israel's sin is driven by an overweening self-concern, which forgets that God is working out a purpose and plan that oversees 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. God's track record is clear, and what He is providing is more than fair. He promises to supply our every need, but in Israel's fearful and fickle discontent, she did not seek Him to understand what He was doing. Instead, she sought for something different from the experiences He was providing to prepare her for His Kingdom.

## Individuality, Uniformity, and Spreading the Wine

Noted conservative radio commentator Rush Limbaugh made an insightful comment when he declared that people are saying, “Multiculturalism made America as rich and powerful as it is today because people came here from all over the world.” That is not so, he continued. “It is the ‘melting pot’ principle that did it. Yes, indeed, people came here from all over the world, but when they arrived, they strove with all their being to become Americans.”

This is what helped to produce this economic miracle. Immigrants made the American way their way. They did not remain separate, isolating themselves in their own little ethnic ghetto, never to come out. They strove for oneness with the American system, and this is what we must do spiritually.

God demands uniformity with His way and shows this principle in many ways: He commanded the priests to wear one and only one kind of uniform when serving. The coals for the incense altar were to come only from the brazen altar, and there was only one brazen altar located at only one Tabernacle or Temple. There was only one place for worship and for feasts. The high priest had only one uniform. Only certain animals were acceptable for offerings, and no variations in the rituals were permitted.

Deuteronomy 12:31-32 clarifies that He permitted no deviations whatever from His laws:

You shall not worship the LORD your God [as the pagans worship their gods]; 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.

This is obviously a directive aimed at Israel’s proclivity to look into foreign religions. Curiosity killed the cat! There is a lesson in that cliché.

Deuteronomy 23:6 reinforces how firm God was in impressing this upon them: “You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever.” Israel was to keep herself so separate from neighboring nations and their cultures that she was not even to make any peace treaties with them.

Nehemiah 9:13-17 is a vivid reflection on what literally happened in real life and real time to Israel:

You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land which You had sworn to give them. But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them.

The record is clear. Israel rejected God and His way right from the beginning of their relationship. They not only rejected Him and His way but also became a major vehicle for facilitating the spread of the false ways of the heathen all over the world. Modern Israel has followed the same path as her ancestors. As Israel migrated and settled into the lands God had set aside for them, becoming wealthy, she has given the world a poisonous cultural brew to drink, influencing them through the power of her example. She has the wealth to enable her people to export it to other nations for their consumption and inevitable emulation.

God calls Israel’s sins “fornication” because sexual sins are the most common way unfaithfulness in marriage is revealed to the public. Everybody can relate to it. However, the real spiritual sin behind all these sexual terms is gross idolatry. Israel simply did whatever she wanted to do, whenever and however she wanted to do it. The harlotry implied is clearly the breaking of the terms of the marriage covenant. Her harlotry is unfaithfulness and disloyalty, which are spiritual in nature. Her sin is primarily idolatry, but all other sins are included.

Israelites were unfaithful in conducting business both domestically and internationally, unfaithful in managing God’s great, green earth, unfaithful in forgetting who their great blessings came from, and unfaithful in the way they treated one another in their personal marriages.

## Rejection and a Change of Government

I Samuel 8 records one of the most telling and significant events in all the history of Israel. It exposes Israel’s powerful and seemingly irresistible bent to be just like

everybody else, and contrarily, to throw off the things that make her different, peculiar, and indeed holy.

*(continued on page 18)*

**W**e live in a society concerned about rights, privileges, and ownership. We live in houses, which we consider to be “ours,” when in most cases we simply own a mortgage—our *bank* owns the house. Or, we may be the proud owner of a new car that, upon closer examination of the paperwork, turns out to be owned by some financial institution to which we make monthly payments. Or, we might consider an apartment to be “ours,” yet we pay rent.

There is a human proclivity to assume ownership and dominance over most things we find within our grasp—money, for example. We speak of our salary, our wage, our earnings, our money. After all, we did the work, and we earned our pay, right? That certainly seems fair to the average individual. However, because of our citizenship within this country, suddenly not all of that money is ours. The federal government helps itself to 15, 20, and maybe as much as 40 percent of our income, and other governmental extractions significantly increase that amount. We recognize this is the price of citizenship, and we make our way with what remains of our money.

However, this picture is not accurate in the least! If we stop to consider it, we quickly realize that the percentage of our income that is actually ours is *zero*. “The earth is the LORD’S, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). The next verse establishes His claim on everything due to His creation of the universe, the earth, its resources, all living things, and human beings. In addition, due to His providence, God not only owns all the material wealth on this earth, but He also supplies man with the means—the skills, the knowledge, the methods, the tools—to earn a living.

I Corinthians 4:7 confirms this: “For who makes you to differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?” Why do we boast or assume ownership, if it has been *given* to us? All that we

# It’s Not Our Time

have—whether material wealth, skill, or talent—has been given to us by the Creator.

Thus, the money we have in our grasp does not belong to us but to God. However, as a training tool, God allows us to be stewards over it, with certain stipulations—namely, the tithes. It is as if God is saying, “Here, I give you this money. However, I ask that you give back ten percent, not only to support the ministry and the work I am doing, but also to teach you a valuable lesson in giving. I also ask you to set aside another ten percent for use at the annual festivals. And every third year, I ask that you set aside another ten percent, not only to help those who are needy, but also so you learn to have compassion for others, to trust in Me, and to give as I do.”

This certainly changes our concept of ownership!

We can see that one of the underlying premises in tithing is that we really do not *own* anything—we are simply given the use of certain things, as stewards. Observing this law is primarily for our benefit because, as Owner of everything, God does not need money!

This principle of ownership extends into a much larger issue at the core of our relationship with God. It will continue to be an issue as long as humans live on this earth. This larger issue is the Sabbath—not whether or not the Sabbath is valid, or on what day it must be kept—but

the Sabbath from the perspective of ownership.

## Our Day or God’s Day?

**M**oses writes in Genesis 2:1-3:

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

The Hebrew word translated here as “rested” is the verb *shabath*, from which comes the noun form that is rendered in English as “Sabbath.” Interestingly, the primary meaning of this word is not “rest,” in terms of relaxing or rejuvenating, but “to desist from exertion” or “to cease.” This makes perfect sense considering that God does not get tired (Isaiah 40:28)!

Genesis 2 states that at the end of Creation Week, God stopped His physical labors, not because He was tired, but because He was setting an example for us. Furthermore, God blessed this specific day of the week and sanctified it—He set it apart for a specific purpose. Just as God deliberately sets apart or sanctifies

those people with whom He is working, He purposefully made the seventh day different from the other six.

Thus, not only did God create the Sabbath day—and thus it belongs to Him; Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28)—but He also made it separate and distinct from the other six days. So how can we think that this day belongs to us? There is not a single second of this sanctified time that we have authority over! This day is *not* our day—not for our work, our sports, or our entertainment. It still belongs fully to God, and only He can dictate its right and proper usage.

It is not that we have no part in this day. On the contrary, the Sabbath day is the most important day of the week for us as Christians, because it enhances our relationship with God the most.

When we tithe, we decide whether we are going to tithe by choosing whether or not we will submit to God and follow His way. Once we make the decision to follow God, we give up all claims to the money God requires of us. If we start “deciding” that money is ours to use, we also choose not to submit to God. Similarly, once we decide to follow God, we give up all prior claims to the 24-hour period of the Sabbath, to the extent that we have to monitor our speech and even our thoughts!

We recognize that God has given us a stewardship responsibility in using the money and material possessions He has provided us, and correspondingly, we have a stewardship responsibility over His holy time and its proper use. The Sabbath is *not* our time. It may belong to God, but He entrusts us with the responsibility to keep it righteously. We had better handle it with care!

Exodus 20:8-11 provides a further example of God’s ownership of our lives and time:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath

of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Verse 10 plainly states the seventh day is *God’s* Sabbath. This passage also shows that, although it is God’s time, we still have a responsibility to ensure that we observe it properly. Verse 11 reiterates Genesis 2:1-3, that *God Himself* set the seventh day apart.

### Why Observe the Sabbath?

**T**he context of the fourth commandment explains why He commands us to observe it. Notice Exodus 20:1-2: “And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’” Why do we keep the Sabbath holy? Why do we keep *any* of the commandments? Because God first acted to free us from spiritual Egypt, that is, slavery to sin. Before God began working with us, we had no power over sin; we were slaves to it, just as the Israelites were literal slaves to the Egyptians. When we choose to follow God and His way of life, we no longer serve sin but God, and God gives us everlasting life. Paul explains this in Romans 6:22-23:

But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Since Jesus Christ paid the ransom

for our lives, freeing us from the bondage of sin, we are now subject to the laws of the Kingdom of God, one of which is the seventh-day Sabbath.

Deuteronomy 5 repeats the Ten Commandments, and its wording of the fourth commandment is very insightful:

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall not do any work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an out-stretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Verse 15 emphasizes this relationship: God redeemed us from spiritual Egypt, and because of that, the seventh day is no longer ours!

### Our Relationship with God

**T**he Ten Commandments can be summarized in two overall principles: love toward God and love toward neighbor, as Jesus explains in Matthew 22:37-40:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” [Deuteronomy 6:5]. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Leviticus 19:18]. On these

two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God, and the last six commandments expound on our relationship with fellow man.

What does it mean to have a relationship with God? An analogy is frequently used to describe the relationship between Christ and the church. Notice Revelation 21:1-4:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Paul writes in II Corinthians 11:2: "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." The word "betrothed" seems somewhat archaic; today, we would say the church is "engaged" to Christ. By making the New Covenant with Him, we have agreed to spend all eternity with Him, but at present, we are within the period preceding the marriage described in Revelation 19:7-9. Following the analogy, we are to be preparing ourselves for this future relationship. During this preparation time, the parties involved are getting to know each other. God the Father has hand-picked us for this relationship, and now is the time we need to make ourselves ready.

How does this fit into the Sabbath and the concept of ownership? God has already established a regular meeting time with us—a "date," as it were. Every week, that part of our schedule is already determined. Amos 3:3 asks, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" In other words, can a person meet with another if they have not determined a meeting time?

Sabbath time has been specially designated as the Bride's time with Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we should restrict our interaction with Him to this day; on the contrary, part of *each* day should be devoted to prayer and Bible study. Nevertheless, this is a primary reason the seventh day has been set apart and made holy.

What does this mean practically? Imagine a couple planning to marry. Being devoted to one another, they have set their wedding date and have agreed to meet on a weekly basis. It is easy to see that, if the young man shows up at the designated time, but the young woman suddenly decides that there is a more convenient time, a rift is going to develop in the relationship. Obviously, *the correct day* is vitally important. God has already established that day.

Suppose the couple gets the day right, and they meet and spend time together. What if the young lady, in the midst of this quality time she is supposed to be spending with the one she loves, pulls out a cellphone and begins talking to her friends, as if her fiancé does not even exist? What if the topic of conversation, either between her and her friends or between her and her fiancé, is little more than gossip or what she is planning on doing as soon as her weekly date with her alleged beloved is over? Or, what if their date, which her betrothed had made special for them, has become a mere ceremony to her? What if she just goes through the motions, doing the things required of her, showing little or no feeling about what this relationship really means to her?

On a spiritual level, we are *commanded* to assemble, if possible, and part of our Sabbath is intended to be for fellowshiping. What are the topics of our conversation? Do sports, entertainment, shopping, or business advance our relationship with God? Is catching up on the latest gossip and social news appropriate for this time that does not belong to us? During this weekly appointment, where do our thoughts wander? Do we think about our business interests or financial concerns? Do we think about or make plans for what we are going to do as soon as the sun sets? Do we esteem Saturday night more than the time God has set apart for us to meet with Him? Are our Sabbath services mere ceremonies? Are we demonstrating to God by our actions on this day that we are eagerly looking forward to spending eternity with Him?

These are points to ponder.

## Idolatry and Sabbath-Breaking

**G**od says in Isaiah 58:1, 13-14:

Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. . . . If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath [keep from trampling it], from doing your pleasure on *My* Holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father [the promised blessings]. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.

On this passage, commentator Matthew Henry writes:

*(continued on page 22)*

“Wine is a mocker,  
intoxicating drink arouses brawling,  
and whomever is led astray by it  
is not wise.”

Proverbs 20:1

# Is It a Sin to Drink Alcoholic Beverages?

On the subject of wine, poet John Keats writes in his “Ode to a Nightingale”:

O for a draught of vintage that hath been  
Cool’d a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,  
Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
O for a beaker full of warm South,  
Full of the true, the blissful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stainèd mouth;  
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim: . . .

Many famous personalities, both ancient and modern, have waxed eloquent on the subject of the drinking of alcoholic beverages—some for and some against. A few quotes illustrate the diversity of viewpoints on this topic. First some humorous ones:

- Actor W. C. Fields: “I cook with wine. Sometimes I even add it to the food.”
- Author Robert A. Heinlein: “Be wary of strong drink. It can make you shoot at tax collectors—and miss.”

- Author Herman Melville: “Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.”

- British statesman Sir Winston Churchill: “I have taken more good from alcohol than alcohol has taken from me.”

With our apologies to any readers who might be tax collectors or cannibals, we will move on to two quotes in a more serious vein:

- Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw: “Alcohol is the anesthesia by which we endure the operation of life.”

- Confederate General Robert E. Lee: “My experience through life has convinced me that, while moderation and temperance in all things are commendable and beneficial, abstinence from spirituous liquors is the best safeguard of morals and health.”

General Lee’s viewpoint on this topic follows the same line as that of some professing Christian denominations that claim the Bible teaches that any consumption of alcoholic beverages is a sin.

*(continued on page 20)*

# THE FIF

## PART

*“When He opened the fifth seal, the souls of those who had been slain for the word of the Lamb and they cried with a loud voice, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who have slain us? And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them, ‘Do not grieve any longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who are like them, are completed.’”*  
(Revelation 6:9-11)

**P**ersecution and martyrdom are not popular topics among Christians today, but they are facts of Christian life. Whether they reach the depths of Nero’s or Domitian’s persecutions of the saints in the church’s first century or whether they are “merely” employment problems or social snubs, they still exist. They still hurt. They still take their toll.

In the New Testament, the apostles approach the subject of persecution courageously but matter-of-factly. To our eyes, looking back over the centuries to what we perceive to be a brutal, inhuman time, they come across as resigned to its eventual occurrence, and this should not be unexpected, since they had already endured a great deal of it personally and anticipated that it would strike most other Christians in due course. They certainly did not relish its appearance, but they considered it in the same vein we look at traffic-snarling accidents on our daily commute—as part of the journey to be endured with dignity and patience.

The apostle Paul—who suffered more than his fair share of persecution, even to near-death a few times (see his list in II Corinthians 11:23-28)—is known for a couple of such statements. In Acts 14:22, just after being stoned by Jews in Lystra, he and Barnabas are attributed as saying encouragingly, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” At the other end of his ministry, imprisoned and awaiting trial before Nero, Paul writes Timothy, “. . . what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (II Timothy 3:11-12). It is a given, he says, that the practice of true Christianity will attract persecution.

In his epistles too, Peter advises Christians to suffer their expected persecutions with joy, faith, grace, and patience:

For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are

beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps. . . . (I Peter 2:19-21)

But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. “And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.” . . . For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good, than for doing evil. (I Peter 3: 14, 17)

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try [test] you, as though some strange thing happened to you, but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings. . . . If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. . . . Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. . . . Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator. (I Peter 4:12-14, 16, 19)

This is exactly what Jesus Himself taught during His ministry. He says in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

Later, speaking to His disciples before His arrest, He warns:

# THE SEAL

## TWO

*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,  
thren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.”  
n 6:9-11)*

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. . . . If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. (John 15:18-20).

They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. . . . These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:2-3, 33)

So it is no wonder that the fifth seal concerns persecution and martyrdom. A world deceived by false religion and racked by wars, famines, and diseases, can be expected to lash out at those who teach and live a different and better way, the way of God.

### HOW LONG, O LORD?

In his vision, the apostle John hears the souls under the altar beseech God, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10). Theirs is not a bloodthirsty cry for vengeance, as some have seen it, since this does not accord with Christian character (Romans 12:19-21), but a call for justice or judgment—a major theme of the seals—as well as a question about the proximity of Christ’s return. It is well known that at His second coming, He will both reward His saints and judge His enemies (see Matthew 24:30-31; Revelation 11:15-18; Joel 3:9-17; Zechariah 14:1-5).

This plaintive cry, “How long . . . ?” is a New Testament echo of the Old Testament prophets, many of whom were persecuted and slain for their testimony.

The psalmists use it most frequently: from David in Psalm 13:1 (“How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?”) to Asaph in Psalm 74:10 (“O God, how long will the adversary reproach?”) to Moses in Psalm 90:13 (“Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants”). Even Ethan the Ezrahite gets in on the act: “How long, LORD? Will You hide Yourself forever? Will Your wrath burn like fire?” (Psalm 89:46; see also Psalm 6:3; 35:17; 79:5; 80:4; 94:3).

This question continues in both the major and minor prophets. Isaiah writes, “Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’ And He answered: ‘Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate. . . .’” (Isaiah 6:11). Later, Habakkuk asks, “O LORD, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, ‘Violence!’ and You will not save” (Habakkuk 1:2; see also Daniel 12:6; Zechariah 1:12). “How long?” has been a constant prayer to God through the ages, especially during times of great distress, particularly when God’s servants are under intense persecution, when the surrounding culture has reached its nadir and the nation is ripe for judgment, or as it often works out, when both are happening simultaneously.

The intent of the request in Revelation 6:10 is for an indication from God of how long the saints have to endure the worst that Satan-inspired humanity can throw at them before He acts on their behalf as He has promised. As early as Deuteronomy 32:43, the conclusion of the Song of Moses, it is promised, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries.” Jesus Himself promises, “And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily” (Luke 18:7-8). Paul later expands this considerably:

. . . it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you

*(continued on page 16)*

# SEARCHING

## Part Seven: Seven

*“Rachel weeping for her children,  
refusing to be comforted for her children,  
because they are no more.”  
(Jeremiah 31:15)*

The mass expulsion of the children of Israel from Canaan, first by Assyrian kings and then by Babylonian ones, left Canaan essentially bereft of Israelites. The theocracy was gone; the monarchy was not around; the people were slaves to Gentile peoples. All this came as a consequence of the people’s habitual rejection of God’s law. Was this punishment of indefinite duration? Did God turn away from physical Israel and begin to work with spiritual Israel, the church (Galatians 6:16), instead?

That is what some teach, but they are wrong. God is still working with physical Israel. God established a specific time to terminate Israel’s punishment. That point in time becomes a vital search criterion for identifying modern-day Israel.

Leviticus 26 records a number of conditional promises God made to the children of Israel. This chapter relates what He will do *for* them “if you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them” (verse 3)—and what He will do *to* them “if you do not obey Me” (verse 14). In the context of punishment, related in verses 14-39, God uses the phrase “seven times more” four times (verses 18, 21, 24, and 28): “If you do not obey Me, then I will punish you *seven times more* for your sins.”

The phrase “seven times more” can refer to *intensity*. It is used this way in Daniel 3:19, where Nebuchadnezzar ordered a furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual.

However, in Leviticus 26, God uses the phrase to refer to *duration*, not intensity of punishment. God says He will punish Israel for a length of seven times. Understanding this, we can easily calculate when God completed His punishment of Israel, when He stopped withholding His fulfillment of the promises. A prophetic “time” is one year of 360 days. Seven “times” is obviously seven prophetic years. Using this logic, the Kingdom of Israel’s period of captivity, national humiliation, and deprivation must have

ended seven years after her fall. Since she fell to the Assyrians in 718 BC, God ended her punishment seven years later, in 711 BC.

But history will not support that facile conclusion! Indeed, the northern Kingdom of Israel was not restored in 711 BC; the people did not then inherit the land as an eternal possession, where they now live as a wealthy, powerful, populous company of nations. Emphatically, *nothing* like that happened in 711 BC.

### Scriptural Evidence

The five-fold record of the Scriptures, the Apocrypha, the Talmud, Jewish tradition, and history is clear. Notice first the scriptural evidence.

1. The author of II Kings records, “Israel was carried away from their own land to Assyria, as it is to this day” (II Kings 17:23). That is, Israel was still in Assyria at the time this passage was written. To determine the approximate point in time to which the phrase *as it is to this day* refers, we need only determine the date of the *latest* historical event recorded in the book. That date will be the *earliest* possible date the book could have been written. That is, a historical—as distinct from a prophetic—book can be written no earlier than the latest event it records.

Chronologically, the latest event recorded in II Kings is the release of one of Judah’s kings, Jehoiachin, from prison some 26 years after the fall of Jerusalem in 585 BC. This release took place about 559 BC (585 - 26 = 559).<sup>1</sup> We know, then, that the phrase *as it is to this day* can refer to a year *no earlier* than 559 BC, which is a full 159 years *after* Israel’s fall in 718 BC. Israel did not return to its homeland in 711 BC, but was still in exile *at least* 159 years after its fall. God’s punishment of Israel lasted far longer than a mere seven years!

2. About 540 BC, the prophet Daniel testified, in a prayer recorded in Daniel 9:7, that the house of Israel had

# FOR ISRAEL

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## Years' Punishment

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not returned to its homeland. As of that date, they were still “far off.”

O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day—to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed against You.

The phrase “those near” refers to the captives of the Kingdom of Judah—of whom Daniel was one—who were interned in and around Babylon. “[T]hose far off in all the countries to which You have driven them” probably refers to the exiles of the Kingdom of Israel. Daniel says Israel still had not returned, as of about 178 years *after* their deportation in 718 BC. Daniel would not agree that God’s punishment of Israel was to last only seven years.

3. The punishment had not even ended in Christ’s time, more than 700 years *after* Israel’s fall. In about AD 31, Christ says He was “not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). They were still “lost” in His day, not having returned to Canaan.
4. Still decades later, the apostle James addresses a letter to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1). In New Testament times, the house of Israel was still scattered—still in a state of punishment.

Therefore, Israel was still in exile as late as the generation of James, still punished more than 750 years after Assyria conquered it.

### Other Records

Second, there is the extra-biblical evidence of the apocryphal writings. II Esdras 13:40-41, 45, dated AD 81 to 96, indicates its author’s conviction that ten-tribed Israel was in captivity at the time he wrote:

Those are the ten tribes, which were carried away prisoners out of their own land in the time of Osea the king, whom Salmanasar the king of Assyria led away captive, and he carried them over the waters, and so came they into another land. But they took this counsel among themselves, that they would leave the multitude of the heathen, and go forth into a further country, where never mankind dwelt. . . . For through that country there was a great way to go, namely, of a year and a half: and the same region is called Arsareth.

Third, there is Talmudic evidence. The Talmud, compiled during the four centuries after AD 100, attests to its writers’ convictions that the ten tribes were still exiled from Canaan:

DD. . . . “The ten tribes are not destined to return,

EE. since it is said, *And he cast them into another land, as on this day* (Dt. 29:28). Just as the day passes and does not return, so they have gone their way and will not return,” the words of R. [Rabbi] Aqiba.

FF. R. Eliezer says, “Just as this day is dark and then grows light, so the ten tribes for whom it now is dark—thus in the future it is destined to grow light for them.” (Neusner, Jacob, *The Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10:3.V)

The Talmud goes on to attribute the inability of the ten tribes to rejoin Judah to the “fact” that the ten tribes were exiled beyond the mysterious river Sambatyon (*The Midrash*, Breishet Rabba 73:6).

Fourth, there is traditional evidence. The authoritative *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972 ed., “Ten Lost Tribes”) summarizes the Jewish tradition that Israel has not returned to its homeland: “The belief in the continued existence of the ten tribes was regarded as an incontrovertible fact during the whole period of the Second Temple [516 BC to AD 70] and of the Talmud [AD 100 to 500].”

Finally, there is historical evidence. The conservative Jewish historian Josephus wrote in about AD 94: “The ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an

immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XI, 5.2).

The scriptural, apocryphal, Talmudic, traditional, and historical sources do not substantively contradict one another. Israel did *not* return to Canaan in 711 BC to inherit the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nor is Israel to be found elsewhere in that year as a rich and powerful nation. Rather, ten-tribed Israel was still exiled from its homeland, under the thumb of the Assyrian.

The phrase “seven times more” as used in Leviticus 26 cannot refer to a period of seven *literal* years. We need to dig deeper to understand the meaning of this phrase.

## Seven Long Years

Numbers 14 relates an incident that occurred as the children of Israel approached the Promised Land. Moses sent twelve men to “see what the land is like” (Numbers 13:18). All but two of the spies brought back a “bad report” (verse 32). So discouraged were the people, so afraid that their “wives and children [would] become victims” (Numbers 14:3), they determined to “select a leader and return to Egypt” (verse 4). Moses, intervening on behalf of the people, dissuaded an angry God from destroying them outright.

However, God did punish Israel for its faithlessness: “According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years” (Numbers 14:34). In punishing Israel, God used the year-for-a-day principle: *Each day counts as one year.*

God reversed the year-for-a-day principle in Ezekiel 4:4-8. God told Ezekiel that Israel had sinned for 390 years—from the time it had demanded that Samuel provide it with a king to its fall to Assyria. In verses 4-5, He commands Ezekiel:

Lie . . . on your left side. . . . According to the number of the days that you lie on it, you shall bear their iniquity. For I have laid on you the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days; so you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel.

Ezekiel could not, of course, lie on his side one year for each day in the 390-year interval. That would be 360 x 390, or 140,400 prophetic years, or the equivalent of just under 2,006 seventy-year lifetimes! So, God reversed the formula to a day-for-a-year. Ezekiel was to lie on his side for 390 days, *one day for each year*. This was to be a sign to the house of Israel (Numbers 4:3) that it was to be punished.

Hosea also makes a veiled reference to the year-for-a-day principle. Offering hope that God will “heal” Israel after allowing it to be wounded (Hosea 6:1), the prophet alludes to three days. These are probably years, part of the 3½-year Tribulation period. “After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight” (verse 2). Hosea might be saying that God will

progressively show mercy to Israel in its afflictions, providing some relief after two years, more during the third.

All these scriptures have this in common: *When speaking about the time-period of Israel’s punishment, God uses the year-for-a-day principle, or its inverse.* We now have a solid formula to define the length of “seven times more” as used in Leviticus 26. Each “time” is one 360-day prophetic year. Seven “times” is 2,520 days ( $7 \times 360 = 2,520$ ).

Each day represents one *year*. So, the actual time span in “seven times” is 2,520 years. That is far longer than seven years!

Grab your calculator; take the time to confirm the math! From 718 BC to AD 1802 is 2,520 years. Remember, there is *no* year zero, but there is a 1 BC *and* an AD 1.

Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24, 28 all prophesy the same thing: If Israel refuses to obey God, He will withhold fulfilling His *conditional* promises to it for 2,520 years. Those 2,520 years began with the fall of Israel in 718 BC. They ended in the year AD 1802. Here is an amazingly specific search criterion to identify modern-day Israel. We will see later on, too, that history fully supports it.

Next month, we will look in another area for our search criteria: geography. God tells us quite specifically “where in the world” we can find Israel.

—Charles Whitaker

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> II Kings 25:27 tells us Jehoiachin was imprisoned in Babylon 37 years, after which he was freed and became a courtier to the Babylon king, Evil-Merodach. Verse 2 of the same chapter tells us that the eleventh year of that imprisonment was the year of Jerusalem’s fall, 585 BC. So Jehoiachin was imprisoned eleven years before the city’s fall and 26 years afterward ( $11 + 26 = 37$ ). Jehoiachin was released, then, in 559 BC ( $585 - 26 = 559$ ).

## THE FIFTH SEAL

(continued from page 13)

who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. (II Thessalonians 1:6-10)

There is never a doubt about God’s eventual intervention to avenge the deaths of His saints. God’s promises are sure (Isaiah 46:11; 55:11; Matthew 24:35; John 10:35). Obviously, “How long, O Lord . . .?” is a query about the duration of events until God intervenes, and the souls under the altar ask it, not in impatience or exasperation, but in anticipation of the end of the saints’ tribulations and of the receipt of their reward.

In reading this, however, we must not forget that these martyred saints are dead, resting in their graves, as Revelation 6:11 confirms. Thus, the answer to their question is not for them—they know nothing (Ecclesiastes 9:5), their testimony having finished in death (Acts 20:24; II Timothy 4:7; Revelation 11:7)—but for living saints, who will undergo persecution and eventual martyrdom.

## GOD'S ANSWER

Before God answers them, they are each given a white robe in Revelation 6:11. Much has been made of the fact that this robe is a *stolé*, a long, stately, often status-indicating garment, while the overcomer in Sardis receives a white *himation*, an ordinary outer garment like a cape or cloak (Revelation 3:5). This distinction should not be taken too far, as Christ Himself returns in a *himation* dipped in blood (Revelation 19:13), not a *stolé*. The important element is that the robe is white, the color of purity and righteousness, as well as joy, victory, and perfection (see “The Four Horsemen (Part Two): The White Horse,” *Forerunner*, May 2004, p. 12). The giving of a white robe, formal or common, is a symbol of salvation for these martyred Christians.

Finally, God responds to their question: “. . . it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.” The immediate answer, “a little while longer” (literally, “yet a little time”), is ambiguously short-range. At this point in the prophetic timeline as we have learned it—the Great Tribulation has just commenced—this uncertain period is probably at most three and a half years long.

Yet, because Revelation was written to the church late in the first century—more than nineteen hundred years ago—this comforting and expectant phrase implies a longer duration for Christians through the ages since then. II Peter 3:8 reminds us “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” There is even biblical backing to regard the day of the Lord as the whole period since Christ’s *first* advent nearly two millennia ago! Written around the same time as Revelation, I John 2:18 goes even further: “[W]e know it is the last *hour*”! Certainly, God marks time differently than we do. Nevertheless, the phraseology assures us that, though it is still future, God’s vengeance will fall justly on the guilty, and His saints will be free of suffering and receive their promised reward.

The explanatory material that fills out the remainder of the verse provokes varied interpretation. The reason for this is that two similar but variant readings of “was completed” have come down to us in the manuscripts: *plerothosin* and *plerososin*. The former is aorist passive, meaning, as in the New King James Version, that “the number of their fellow servants . . . was completed,” while the latter is plain aorist, changing the sense to

either “their fellow servants . . . should be complete” (less likely, according to the experts) or they “should complete [their course]” or “should fulfill [their calling].”

Yet, this may all be just a semantic argument. By using italics, most Bibles make it clear that *the number of* is not in the Greek text but has been supplied by the translators. This was done to conform to their misunderstanding of the passive form, *plerothosin*. Since mainstream Christians, including translators, do not believe in the biblical doctrine of sanctification as a lifelong process—in cooperation with God—of spiritual growth toward perfection, translations of this verse contain a built-in bias toward a certain number being saved by grace alone through faith rather than those whom God calls being transformed into the image of Christ through grace *and* works. Thus, they insert the italicized phrase unnecessarily to preclude the idea of Christian works—despite the fact that the entire passage exalts the particular works of witnessing and martyrdom!

Nevertheless, the verb—whichever is chosen as the better of the two—appears in the *plural* form, as it refers to its plural subjects, “servants and . . . brethren.” “Number” is singular. This provides additional proof that Revelation 6:11 is not referring to a specific number of martyrs but simply that others either will be completed or will complete their calling through martyrdom. The latter half of the verse, then, is better rendered, “. . . until their fellow servants and their brethren, who are to be killed as they were, should also be complete [or, *should also complete (their course)*].” In other words, whether passively or actively, more sons and daughters will come to perfection through suffering and death, just as God’s Firstborn Son did as our Forerunner (Hebrews 2:9-11).

## VENGEANCE IS COMING

Like the first four seals, the fifth is a judgment “on those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 6:10). We are distracted from this because the action focuses on Christian martyrs who have endured the hostility of men and women who, as spiritual children of Satan (John 8:38, 41, 44), have accepted this world’s anti-God attitudes and beliefs. Yet, judgment is present, appearing in God’s promise that, because He is the “[Sovereign] Lord, holy and true,” He will judge and avenge His faithful servants. Time may pass before this is accomplished, but it is assured.

As this world continues its downward spiral toward the end, Christians can take comfort in this otherwise horrific prophecy. Some of us may be called upon to pay the ultimate price to witness before the world of God’s truth and way of life, but it is made “easier” knowing that God will not let it go unpunished and unrewarded. With God’s faithful assurance backing us, we can “rest”—be at peace or at ease—knowing our sacrifice will not be in vain.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

(continued from page 7)

And the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also.” (verses 7-8)

Israel had already deviated from faithfulness, but here, she formally rejects God as her ruler, taking a major step toward being exactly like all the nations around her. This occurred between 1100 and 1000 BC or roughly 350 years after the original making of the covenant. Except for brief periods when Israel had a judge or king who did right in the eyes of God, the spiritual harlotry continued unabated until God formally divorced her, sending Israel and Judah into captivity.

We frequently gloss over the truly important part of this as we read through it. It is clear from Genesis 17:6 and Deuteronomy 17:14-20 that God anticipated Israel having a king or judge. The title is of little importance. Having a king was not the real issue because God had already planned for Israel to have a king. Every organization must have a leader, so God lays down instructions as to how the leader should conduct himself in office. They are designed to ensure that the king does not elevate himself above the people and rule as a despot. Instead, he is to be thoroughly familiar with and guided by the attitudes and laws of God. He must comprehensively know that his own nature is just like those he serves and be humbled.

However, the key to understanding the significance of Israel’s demand in I Samuel 8 is that she desires a king *just like the other nations*. Spiritually, this demand confirms Israel’s whorish behavior, and thus God tells Samuel to describe the national effects of her demand. On Israel’s part, it is a complete rejection of her marriage vows; she wants her Benefactor and Husband—God—to have no say in her life, declaring herself free of Him and to be completely and totally a nation of this world, no longer the type of God’s Kingdom on earth.

Herbert Armstrong had a wonderful gift: He was able to cut through a jungle of confusing information and penetrate to the heart of a matter. He wrote and spoke in simple, plain terminology, and thus the learned tended to minimize or outright reject what he said as not “academic” enough for them. He said the issue between God and man is simply a matter of government—of sovereignty and providence. This appears as early as Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve reject God’s rule over them.

Once God reveals Himself through His calling, the issue of government comes to the fore. This is what we confront in decision-making. As the Bible has recorded

in great detail, mankind has shown that it wants to retain this authority to itself. Yet, the naked truth is we cannot retain sovereignty to ourselves and still have what God is offering, entrance into the spiritual Kingdom of God. We cannot have it both ways. We will be submissive either to God’s will or to our own fickle drives. Many of us do not get it!

Earlier, we read from Psalm 11. In the hymnal, Dwight Armstrong renders one line of this psalm, “His eyes behold the children of men; testing and proving the upright in heart.” Israel failed when He tested her. What is He testing in us? As He tested Israel, God is testing our loyalty, our faithfulness to Him, to see if we will keep the covenant across a wide spectrum of situations. These tests never come at a convenient time, do they? Do they not always seem to hit when we are in a bind of some kind, making the choices all the more difficult? They make us decide who comes first in our life—God and faithfulness or our own nature and flesh?

What are we to do when the issue is whether to break the Sabbath by working or keep it by refusing? What should we do when we are in a financial bind and in debt—submit to men or pay God His tithes first? Can God, will God, provide our needs in such a tight financial situation? What will we do when we desire to cover a failure—brag and lie or tell the truth? What should we do when we are sexually enticed—flee or commit sexual immorality?

What will we do in any case when submitting and the glorification of God are at issue? Should we expect God to bless us when we choose to take sovereignty to ourselves? When we take sovereignty to ourselves, we introduce idolatry into the relationship.

Once we are no longer ignorant of the choices before us and choose to take sovereignty to ourselves, sin becomes exceedingly more serious in its consequences—we become our own idol because that is whom we are serving. Paul tells us what to do in Romans 12:1-2:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Ancient Israel would not do this, and neither will the modern version.

This is in no way easy. If it were, there would be no test. It must be this way because, if there were no test, there would be no evaluation. Without an evaluation, neither God nor we know where we stand.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 reminds us how God worked with Israel:

And you shall remember that the LORD your God led

you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

God deliberately made difficulties for the Israelites to face. The stakes are so high, He cannot just guess about the nature of our character. The more difficult choices come in times of hardship, when our loyalty is really in question, for it is much easier to serve ourselves then.

Psalm 53:2 declares, "God looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God." This verse provides an overall solution to this unbelieving, stubborn, and debilitating proclivity toward fickleness that draws one right into the maelstrom of Babylon to seek its brand of fulfillment. Do we truly believe God is working with us and judging our responses? Do we respond by truly seeking Him?

Isaiah 55:6-7 emphasizes the importance of seeking God, showing a way to prove that we indeed are:

Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

The very wording in this exhortation implies that Israel did exactly what He did not want them to do. They sought satisfaction and fulfillment in the world—things that do not satisfy. They believed the world's word and practiced as it did, thus rejecting God and His Word.

But we must not follow their example. What does it mean to seek the Lord? Amos 5:4, 14-15 trumpets to us:

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: "Seek Me and live. . . ." Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Note that this is written to Israel, to whom God had already revealed Himself. Therefore, *Seek Me* most certainly does not mean, "Look for Him in order to find Him," but "Seek Him in order to be like Him in the conduct of His life, to know His will so one can submit." Instead of being like a normal wife, Israel eagerly pursued ways to be unfaithful to her Husband, God, which is why He calls her "contrary" in Ezekiel 16:34.

Ezekiel 33:10-11 clarifies and adds emphasis to this:

Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: "Thus you say, 'If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?'" Say to them, "As I live," says the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?"

The phrase "as I live" in verse 11 appears many times in Ezekiel. In all other cases, it is an oath, but in this one case, there is an alternative meaning: It is simply the answer to the question asked in verse 10, "How should we then live?" The answer: "'As I live,' says the Lord."

It does not mean to live on the same level but to live as God would live if He were a man. This way is spelled out in great detail in the commandments, statutes, and judgments. In addition, God gives many examples from the lives of others to clarify exactly what He wants, especially the life of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh (John 1:14).

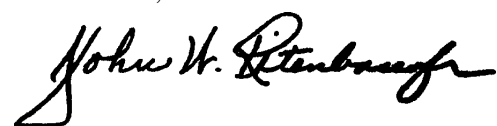
What God proposed to Israel and to us is an entire way of life that covers every possible choice that might confront us. This way is the only way, the one way that will produce abundant life and at the same time prepare us for God's Kingdom.

God says in Amos 3:2-3, "'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" God entered into no other like relationship with any other nation or people in all the history of mankind.

A person may have many friends, many family members, many business, fraternal, and professional relationships, but the biblical standard for marriage is one spouse until death. The relationship God entered into with Israel—and now with us—involved an intimacy normally associated only within marriage. Yes, God had relationships with other nations and people, but none even close to what He entered into with Israel and us. We are favored with gifts greater than any other nation or people because of that intimacy. Our judgment is therefore sterner.

Perhaps the greatest gift of all is the revelation of God Himself and the knowledge of His purpose and how to live life at its fullest. But because of these gifts, Israel's responsibility and deviancy were also the greatest on earth. This is the basis for understanding Israel to be the Great Whore of the Bible.

In Christian love,



"Wine is a mocker, intoxicating drink arouses brawling, and whomever is led astray by it is not wise."

(continued from page 11)

## Winebibbers and Drunkards

**I**t is true that there are some scriptures that might, at first reading, seem to teach total abstinence from wine and other strong drink. Here is one example:

Hear, my son, and be wise; and guide your heart in the way. Do not mix with winebibbers, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags. . . . Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things. Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying: "They have struck me, but I was not hurt; they have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?" (Proverbs 23:19-21, 29-35)

These verses are among those often quoted by those who believe that it is wrong to drink alcoholic beverages. They claim that this passage proves it is sin to drink wine, and by extension, any drink containing alcohol. However, this scripture does *not* say these things. What then does it say?

It warns that:

- The *excessive* drinking of alcohol is a sin. The winebibber drinks too much and too often.
- Improper use of alcohol is as poisonous as a snake's venom (verse 32).
- God's children should avoid company with winebibbers (verse 20; see also Matthew 24:49; I Corinthians 5:11).
- Poverty is just one potential negative result of drunkenness (verse 21).
- Other potential—even probable—negative consequences of chronic drunkenness include woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, bloodshot eyes, hallucinations, nightmares, addiction, lack of self-control in speech and other matters, and bodily injuries without apparent cause—the cause being forgotten because of drunken stupor (verses 29, 33-34).
- We should not tarry long at wine (verse 30).

On this last warning, we know that a person who lingers where alcohol is consumed can so easily become a winebibber, or in plain, modern English, a drunkard. God, through Paul, lists drunkenness as one of the works of the flesh, warning that no drunkard will inherit God's Kingdom:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, . . . envy, murders, *drunkenness*, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19, 21; emphasis ours throughout)

## Look Not Upon Red Wine?

**L**et us more closely examine Proverbs 23:31, which offers some seemingly unusual advice: "Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly." This is from the New King James version. The "old" King James version puts it this way: "Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright." What does this mean?

The terms "red" and "moveth itself" refer to wine when it is in the process of fermentation. This is the period before the wine is fully fermented. If during this time a person "looks on it," so as to finally drink it, he may become sick and possibly even die. In fact, instances are recorded of winery workers becoming asphyxiated by merely leaning over the wine vats to "look on" the fermenting wine, and being overcome by the poisonous gases, falling into the vats and drowning.

"What a great way to die!" we might joke, but not so long ago, just such an accident happened at a winery in Canada. Here is an excerpt from a recent fatal accident alert in the Workmen's Compensation Board of British Columbia's Health and Safety Centre:

The owner of a winery collapsed while taking a sample from a wine fermentation tank. A second person entered the tank in an attempt to rescue him, and he also collapsed. They could not be revived.

Both men died because they looked upon the wine when it was red! So we see, once again, that God's advice was not just for the people of previous millennia. It is, in fact, right up to date.

## Old Testament Approval

**God’s Word shows** that it is perfectly fine to drink wine in moderation. It is replete with accounts of the proper uses of wine—accounts of people considered righteous according to God’s standards. Here are some examples:

Melchizedek, whom we believe to have been Jesus Christ Himself, brought some wine to His meeting with Abram: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and *wine*; he was the priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18).

When giving his blessing to his son Jacob (who he thought was Esau), Isaac drank wine and asked for plenty of wine as a blessing from God:

He said, “Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son’s game, so that my soul may bless you.” So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him *wine*, and he drank. . . . “Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.” (Genesis 27:25, 28)

Is it likely that Isaac would have asked God to bless his son with an abundance of wine if he knew that He forbade it? Wine was included in other blessings too. Through His servant Moses, God told the Israelites that wine would be included in the many blessings He would pour out upon them if they would obey Him:

And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your *new wine* and your oil, . . . in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. (Deuteronomy 7:13)

Then Israel shall dwell in safety, the fountain of Jacob alone, in a

land of grain and *new wine*; His heavens shall also drop dew. (Deuteronomy 33:28)

Here we read of wine promised by God for the Israelites as a blessing for obedience. Conversely, if they were to disobey Him, He solemnly warned them that He would take their wine and vineyards away from them as a curse:

You shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the *wine* nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them. . . . And they [fierce foreign invaders] shall eat the increase of your livestock and the produce of your land, until you are destroyed; they shall not leave you grain or *new wine* or oil, . . . until they have destroyed you. (Deuteronomy 28:39, 51)

In many scriptures in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—too many to list here—God commands that wine be used in Israel’s drink offerings to Him. In addition, God’s people are commanded to pay to Him His tithe of all the wine they produced: “The firstfruits of your grain and your *new wine* and your oil, . . . you shall give him” (Deuteronomy 18:4).

In His instructions on the proper use of the festival tithe (or “second tithe,” as we often refer to it today) for the celebration of His feasts, God authorizes the purchase and use of wine and similar beverages (Hebrew *shekar*: “strong drink” or intensely alcoholic liquor):

And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your *new wine* and your oil, . . . that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. . . . And you shall spend that money for whatever your

heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for *wine or similar drink*, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household. (Deuteronomy 14:23, 26)

## New Testament Approval

**The instruction and example** continues throughout the Old Testament. However, in turning to the New Testament, let us begin with a question. In the transition between these two eras of time covered by the volumes we call the Old and New Testaments, did God change His mind regarding the use of alcohol?

It is certainly true that drunkenness and excess of alcohol are as clearly condemned in many New Testament scriptures as they are in the Old (see Matthew 24:49; Luke 12:45; 21:34; Romans 13:13; I Corinthians 5:11; 6:10; 11:21; Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:21; I Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; 2:3; I Peter 4:3).

Jesus and His apostles mention wine and other strong drink numerous times in the New Testament, but nowhere do any of them say that moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages is wrong. A few verses strongly indicate that Jesus Himself liked the occasional glass of wine:

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, “He has a demon.” The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:33-34)

Why would anyone call Him a winebibber if it were anything other than wine that He had been seen drinking? Jesus drank wine with His disciples at His last Passover service, promising that He would again join them in a glass of wine after their

*“Wine is a mocker, intoxicating drink arouses brawling, and whomever is led astray by it is not wise.”*

resurrection: “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29).

The very first miracle Jesus performed was to turn water into wine:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, “They have no wine.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it.” Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And

He said to them, “Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.” And they took it. When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, “Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then that which is inferior; but you have kept the good wine until now.” (John 2:1-10)

Not only did Jesus condone the proper use of wine, but He knew what the qualities of a good wine were, a fact confirmed in Luke 5:39: “And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’”

Some have argued that, at the Cana wedding, Jesus changed the water into unfermented grape juice, not wine. However, the Greek word translated “wine” throughout John

2:1-10 is *oinos*, which means “fermented wine.”

The apostle Paul follows His Master’s lead on this subject. In the same letter to Timothy in which he soundly condemned excessive alcohol consumption (I Timothy 3:3, 8), Paul advises him to drink some wine to help ease his chronic stomach problems: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities” (I Timothy 5:23).

God gave us wine and other alcoholic beverages for our enjoyment and so that we may learn to use them properly. We can develop character by properly exercising wisdom and self-control in consuming them. However, if one has a low tolerance for alcohol or one is an alcoholic, the wisest course is to abstain from them altogether (with the exception of the small amount required to be taken during the Passover service).

The proper use of alcohol is a great responsibility, but it is only the wrong use of it that is sin.

—John Plunkett

## It’s Not Our Time

*(continued from page 11)*

On sabbath days we must not walk in *our own ways* (that is, not follow our callings), not *find our own pleasure* (that is, not follow our sports and recreations); nay, we must not *speak our own words*, words that concern either our callings or our pleasures; we must not allow ourselves a liberty of speech on that day as on other days, for we must then mind God’s ways, make religion the business of the day; we must choose the things that please him; and speak his words, speak of divine things as we sit in the house and walk by the way. In all we say and do we must put a difference between this day and other days.

At the heart of Sabbath-breaking is idolatry, having other gods before the true God (Exodus 20:3). The basic, physical manifestation of idolatry is the worship of idols—graven images, statues, etc.—but its spiritual manifestation is much more subtle and dangerous. It is putting *anything* above God: money, a job, a house, or even a spouse! If anything becomes more important than God, idolatry is committed. Thus, if in the weekly observance of the Sabbath we do anything that becomes more important to us than our relationship with God, we have broken the Sabbath *and* committed idolatry. It could be said that idolatry is at the heart of all sin, as our willingness to esteem something higher than God and His way of life causes us to sin.

We must make a very real distinction between the Sabbath and the other days. The Sabbath was “made for man,” as Christ points out (Mark 2:27), but that does not mean mankind has the authority to use it for his own purposes—rather, God made it *on man’s behalf*, for his benefit. The seventh day still belongs to God, and He shares it with those whom He has called and sanctified. We have a key responsibility in esteeming the Sabbath in our conduct, in our conversations, in our attitudes, and even in our thoughts. By entering into this covenant with God, we have been entrusted with the knowledge and significance of this day, but we have also been warned, as stewards of God’s truth, to be very careful with it.

—David C. Grabbe

## Ich Bin Heide

Europe's culture has its roots in religion, namely in the teachings of Roman Catholicism and, later, in the various Protestant centers of power in northern Europe. European culture is defined and shaped by Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Cases aside, the various power structures ruling Europe ultimately were beholden to the Church.

Things have changed. Robert Wilkin, writing in "The Church as Culture," (*First Things*, April 2004, p. 31), asserts that "only 20 percent of [Germany's] population today professes adherence to Christianity." He bemoans the insouciance, the nonchalance, with which Germans today say, *Ich bin Heide*, "I am a heathen." The falling away from Christianity began with the First World War, and has increased to a fever pitch after the fall of Bolshevik Communism in early 1989.

Today, many of the great cathedrals of European cities, structures centuries in the building, have become more museum than church, more tourist-trap than house of worship. The selling of baubles has replaced the practice of liturgy. Much of Western Europe has been called the "great plain of irreligion."

This change did not take place through external conquest. While Europe has not been free from war, of course, it has been largely free from the pains of external invasion for almost a millennium. Yet, the change in religious orientation has not been accidental or the result of "natural" economic forces. This "collapse of Christian civilization," claims Wilkin, was "deliberate and intentional, not only promoted by the cultural despisers of Christianity but often aided and abetted by Christians themselves."

This undeniable state of affairs—and it is undeniable—seems counterfactual to members of God's true church. After all, did we not understand that the False Prophet was to come out of European Christianity? Was he not to unify it, and, in collaboration with the Beast power, construct a European power structure that would shock the world and eventually rule it? Yet, today Europe is not militarily strong. In addition, the Catholic Church is apparently imploding under the pressure of political and doctrinal dissent.

Moreover, Europe seems to be committing suicide by "systematically depopulating itself," to borrow a term from George Weigel's article, "Europe's Problem—and Ours" (*First Things*, February 2004, p. 18). The birthrate of many European nations is below the replacement level. Weigel points out, for example, that Spain's population will decline from its current level of 40 million to 31.3 million by about 2050. That represents a *decline* of nearly 22%. Many wars are not so devastating. Solzhenitsyn appears to be right: Europe is in "a rage of self-mutilation."

From this torn fabric world-ruling kingdoms are not cut.

Weigel believes that the root of Europe's problems lies in what a Jesuit priest, Henri de Lubac, calls "atheistic humanism." This is not the isolated and usually thoughtless atheism of the oddball skeptic or cynic, embittered by some personal experience. No, this atheism is dangerous because it is buttressed by a philosophy—humanism. In short, atheistic humanism is "the deliberate rejection of the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, in the name of authentic human liberation." Its agenda lurks behind almost every headline we read today: the remaking of the world into a liberal technocracy where freedom becomes individual willfulness and the rule of law becomes subservient to science. God has no part of all this; in the world of the humanist, He has become deceased. Religion is irrational. Faith in anything except scientific progress is superstitious. Piety is silly.

As a result of her heedless (and headless) sprint into atheistic humanism, Europe has abandoned almost two millennia of her history and tradition. This leaves her rootless. A few Catholic—and fewer Protestant—church-people have called for a return to Europe's traditional Christian roots. Such cries fall on the deaf ears of Europe's elites and rank-and-file alike. In the meantime, narcoleptic Europeans do not perceive a real threat.

Europe, for the first time in a millennium, is being invaded. As Christians murder their children in a frenzy of abortion—their newfound freedom, long denied them by their Christian tradition—immigrants from North Africa, Turkey, Pakistan, and other areas of the Arab world, pour in. They have traditionally high birthrates. In the long run, Martel's victory over the Moors and Sobieshi's over the Turks may be for naught, as radicalized Islamists "colonize" Europe, finally realizing their ancestors' dreams of conquering the bastion of Catholic Christianity. Europe of the late twenty-first century may be Islamist!

Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilization" is an understatement, for what the world will shortly face is the clash of Abrahamic *religions*. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (which is in fact a heresy of Christianity) will clash in Europe. The ramifications will be worldwide. Chaos, not to mention bloodshed, will be everywhere, in every area of life. In the midst of this maelstrom of death, the leadership that will restore order will arise. The people will wonder: "Who is able to make war with him?" The world will worship: "Who is like the beast?" (Revelation 13:4).

Do not look for Europe to slide peacefully into its prophesied role of world domination. It will not happen that way. The cowardly voice of Osama bin Laden has made that clear. ■

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 PERSISTENT WIDOW

The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8) teaches the necessity of patient, persistent, and persevering prayer, much like the Parable of the Persistent Friend (Luke 11:5-13). A mention of prayer precedes both parables. Though delivered in different situations, they both show the absolute, immeasurable contrast between God and men, and provide evidence that God yields to the saints' pleading and urging. Both parables depict a person granting a request because of his selfish motives. The Persistent Friend's persevering prayer is for necessities, while the Persistent Widow's is for protection. Both parables conclude that God will not fail us as friends

and acquaintances often do.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow is especially linked with the final crisis of the last days and the painful circumstances the faithful remnant will face. Prayer will be a major resource for them. Since vengeance is God's alone, they know He will judge their oppressors, but as they wait for deliverance, persevering prayer will be their refreshment and supply of patience. The parable is preceded by Jesus' exhortation on the Christian duty to pray, dedication in prayer, and resisting the temptation to discontinue prayer. It concludes by indicating that prayer is a matter of faith.



1. What does the word "always" express about the dedication we need in praying? Luke 18:1.

**COMMENT:** Concerning our habits of prayer, "always" does not mean we should pray every single minute of the day. If this were so, the faith involved in prayer would be a dead one, as we would never have time to do the works required with it (James 2:17-18, 20, 26). "Always" means that we should be faithful to our regular times of prayer. Concerning the time of prayer, "always" includes the fact that we should pray in both good and bad times. Sadly, some pray only in a crisis, and others forget to offer a prayer of thanksgiving when God has intervened to solve a problem or provide a blessing (I Thessalonians 5:17-18). Regarding the spirit of prayer, "always" means we should be continually ready to pray, praying whenever a crisis hits or a need arises. Because they reveal our priorities, good habits of prayer show dedication to God and strengthen our relationship with Him.

2. What causes people to discontinue praying? Same verse. **COMMENT:** "Not lose heart" or "faint" (KJV) means to grow weary, to give in to evil, to turn coward. We must resist the human tendency of growing weary in prayer. We have a duty as the elect of God to pray. There are several major causes of losing heart: defilement, doubt, danger, distractions, and delay.

- The *defilement* of sin kills interest in spiritual exercises like prayer. Sin does not promote a good prayer life—in fact, it will stop it dead. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the LORD will not hear" (Psalms 66:18).
- Praying with *doubt* is faithless, making the prayer useless. Doubting the inspiration of Scripture and the power of God hinders prayer (I Timothy 2:8). As prayer and faith go hand in hand, so do unbelief and not praying.
- Prayer must sometimes be done at *dangerous* times. Danger weeds out the coward from the courageous. Daniel faced real danger in praying, but kept on praying, even though it led to the lion's den (Daniel 6). Today, our dangers are varied, but the danger of embarrassment often affects people more than danger of physical harm.

- Satan is a master of causing *distractions*, especially during prayer time. Probably every saint has experienced his mind wandering, causing him to think about everything except what he should be praying about.

- Few things cause us to lose heart in praying more than *delays* in answers to our requests. Jesus uses this parable to teach us that, though answers often appear to take a long time in coming, we should persevere and not grow weary in praying to God.

3. Why does Jesus compare the dealings of God with a corrupt judge? Luke 18:2-8.

**COMMENT:** Jesus compares God, not with a good man, but with a godless man to emphasize the vast difference between this unjust judge and the righteous God. The conduct of the unjust judge exposes the chaotic and corrupt judgments in which he had prostituted himself. No one can compel him to do anything because he feels no regard for anyone, including God. He acts purely out of self-interest. Yet, if this unjust judge could avenge a widow whom he distained, how much more will the righteous God avenge his elect (Jeremiah 11:20)?

This parable reveals God's willingness to hear and answer the supplications of His elect (Luke 18:7), responding when they are offered according to His will. The word "avenge" (verses 5, 7-8) implies the working out of His vengeance in justice, not in retaliation. If God's elect are wrongly treated, they can be sure of vindication. So, if the unjust judge because of a selfish irritation avenges a troublesome widow, how much more will the selfless God come to our aid? We can expect substantially better treatment from a God of lovingkindness than from a heartless judge.

The widow, who speaks only five words, does not prevail because of her persuasive plea but because of her persistence. Sometimes too many words reveal a scarcity of desire or a lack of purpose. Jesus tells us long prayers and useless repetitions will not make God hear us any better (Matthew 6:7). He already knows our needs (verse 8).

God has assured us that He hears and answers prayer. We must have the faith of Christ that God can provide what we need, enjoys hearing us ask according to His will, and desires to give us abundantly what we should have.