

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Introducing
Revelation

The Isle of Patmos

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About Our Cover



The apostle John was exiled on the Mediterranean Isle of Patmos when God gave him the visions of the Day of the Lord recorded in the book of Revelation. Its first chapter provides vital information to assist us in understanding Christ's revelation of events and attitudes beginning to happen in our day!

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An Unpayable Debt and Obligation

Radio personality Charles Osgood related a news item out of Miami in which a young man working as a valet parking attendant at a hotel was routinely handed a tip for fetching a man's car. Later, after the man drove off, the attendant looked at the tip and was startled to discover the man had given him a thousand dollars!

The tip-giver was unaware of his mistake until well on his way back to his home in West Virginia. He immediately turned around and drove back to the hotel. He found that the young man had turned the money in to his supervisor after correctly deciding a mistake had been made.

The story centered on the young man's honesty—and rightly so—but as Osgood was telling the story, I began wondering whether the West Virginia man would feel obligated to give the attendant a nice tip. He did.

He gave the young man a much larger tip than he would have normally, but it was nevertheless a small percentage of what he had almost lost. This made me wonder because we live at a time when so many have, at best, a very weak sense of obligation. The dominant concept seems to be "I have this coming to me" or "It is owed to me."

Entertainers and professional athletes are clear examples of people who often do not feel obligated

to conclude their existing contracts. If they have a "good year" or a "big hit," they want to renegotiate to a better contract before the old one expires.

Have the United States and Canada ever seen a time in their histories when people's sense of obligation to nation, community, or family was at a lower ebb? Though these three institutions give us a great deal—more than we could ever give back—it seems easy for many not to feel a sense of obligation to them.

Many appear even to lack recognition of their indebtedness. It is fairly obvious that human nature is so self-centered that it does not come naturally equipped with a sense of obligation, which is a virtuous quality or character trait that one must learn and build primarily within the family and secondarily within the community.

We come under obligation when we are rendered a service, producing indebtedness to the one who performed it. We feel required to respond by repaying the indebtedness, and in many cases, a heartfelt "thank you" is in order, at the very least. True obligation, closely related to accountability and responsibility, is a deep conviction that we owe someone something. This sense is very important to the proper understanding of Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Under Obligation

The word *obligation* does not appear in the King James Version and only three times in the New King James Version. However, its sense appears scores of times through other words and phrases, such as “because,” “therefore,” “wherefore,” “thus,” and “for.” These words frequently precede a Christian requirement of conduct or attitude, an exhortation to obedience, or instruction concerning cause-and-effect.

Notice this in I Peter 1:15-16: “. . . but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’” Because God, our spiritual Father whom we represent, is holy, we are under obligation to be holy ourselves. Peter draws on our sense of obligation to the Father to exhort us to obedient conduct. He then intensifies our sense of obligation by reminding us that we owe our lives to Christ because He redeemed us:

And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear, knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed

was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (verses 17-21)

Though one might understand that the “you” in verse 18 might apply generally to many, it has far greater impact if we take it as aimed directly at us personally. Christ would still have died if only *you* had sinned and needed redeeming!

These verses help us to understand something vital to our well-being. One’s sense of obligation to God is in direct proportion to his ability to contrast the peerless quality and pricelessness of the gift with the worthlessness of the purchased possession. A billionaire might consider \$1,000 to be pocket change, but to a person bankrupt and destitute, it is a fortune. Thus, evaluations vary due to differing perspectives.

The apostle Paul wails in Romans 7:24-25, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Our sense of obligation rests on a thoughtful and true assessment of ourselves and our self-centered, aimless, corrupt, sinful lives compared to the purity our Redeemer possessed and displayed in His sacrifice for us.

An Incredibly High Standard

Luke 7:36-40 introduces a parable that helps us to understand, not only how the sense of obligation is produced, but how deep it should be:

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, “This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.” And Jesus answered and said to Him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” So he said, “Teacher, say it.”

Within this setting, which contrasts the widely different perspectives of Jesus held by the outwardly respectable Pharisee and the obviously sinful woman, Jesus

gives clear instruction that a sense of obligation will produce a quality of conduct that God will highly esteem and that will be of inestimable value to those who recognize their indebtedness:

“There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?” Simon answered and said, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.” And He said to him, “You have rightly judged.” Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.” Then He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” And

those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Then He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” (verses 41-50)

The woman perceived a greatness in Jesus that motivated her to so abase herself. A proper sense of obligation works to produce a valuable Christian virtue—humility.

Notice her emotion, devotion, and seeming unconcern for public opinion in going far beyond the normal task of a slave. We can safely guess that Jesus had played a huge part in turning this woman from her bondage to sin. She may have first simply been among the crowds who were convicted by His messages. However, she thought deeply and personally on the difference between her life and His words. When she heard He was nearby, she rushed to Simon’s home, ignoring the scorn of others to express her gratitude to the One who had set her aright.

Her deed expresses her love and gratitude springing from recognition of His greatness as compared to her unworthiness. She felt obligated to respond in a way so memorable that God recorded it for all humanity for all time to witness. Note that the Bible shows human lips touching Jesus only twice: Here and Judas’ kiss of betrayal.

Now notice the contrast with Simon the Pharisee, who was evidently a man of some substance and a measure of aggression that resulted in him inviting the celebrated Jesus to his home. He was a man so self-

concerned and inhospitable that he failed to offer Jesus even the customary services a host provided visitors to his home. Simon probably felt himself at least Jesus’ equal, and his conclusion that He was no prophet perhaps indicates that he styled himself as Jesus’ superior. He likely considered Jesus nothing but an interesting celebrity who could gain him recognition in the community for having Him as his guest.

His evaluation of himself in relation to Jesus produced in him no sense of obligation, and thus no gratitude, humility, or act of love, let alone common courtesy. Had he a heart at all? He was scandalized by this dramatic and arresting scene taking place at his respectable table.

While God considered her act of love to be so awesome that He had it memorialized as an eternal witness, Simon’s perception of it only concluded, “She is a sinner.” No, Simon, she *was* a sinner, and therein is a major clue to the reason for their differing reactions to Jesus. In Jesus’ parable, Simon and the woman held something in common—something Simon did not grasp, but the woman did. *Both* were debtors to the same Creditor, and neither could meet their obligations, but Simon did not even see his indebtedness.

Interestingly, in the model prayer (Matthew 6:12), sin is expressed as debt. It is a true metaphor because duty neglected in relation to God is a debt owed to Him, one that *must* be discharged by paying a penalty. All have sinned (Romans 3:23), and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). We are all under a peculiar form of indebtedness that we cannot pay and still have hope!

Two Classes of Sinners, One Obligation

Simon and the woman each portray a class of sinners. Though all are sinners, some have incurred more debt through the way of life each lived. Some are outwardly respectable, decent, and clean living, while others have fallen into gross, sensual, and open transgression. In this regard, Simon was a great deal “better” than the woman, who was coarse and unclean. She had been wallowing in filth while he attained civic respectability through rigid morality and punctilious observance of civility. He had far less to answer for than she, but he had also received a great deal more from his morality and righteousness than she had. God is not so unfair as to withhold blessings from people for the right they have done. Yet, *regardless of the relative size of each one’s debt, neither was able to pay it!*

We all are sinful and stand in the same relation to God as these two debtors. One’s sins may be blacker and more numerous than another’s, but upon considering degrees of guilt and the complex motivations behind each one’s sins, we may not be so quick to judge the woman’s sins worse than Simon’s. From this perspective, they were equal. His sins were clothed with re-

spectability, but he still could not meet his debt. Jesus says, “They had nothing to pay.” That also precisely describes our position in relation to each other.

What does this mean practically in regard to Jesus Christ and our sins? No depth of guilt, no amount of tears, self-flagellation, or discipline, no amount of repentance can work this into a payable debt. Some of these are certainly required of God and are good to do, but forgiveness, the payment of our debt incurred through our personal sins, is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). It comes by God’s mercy through the blood of Jesus Christ (I John 1:7). We absolutely cannot pay it ourselves and still have hope of eternal life. If it could, God would owe us something—He would be indebted to us! That will never, never be.

Agnostic George Bernard Shaw makes Cusins, a character in his play, *Major Barbara*, say, “Forgiveness is a beggar’s refuge. . . . [W]e must pay our debts.” This may normally be a correct, responsible position. However, in the case of our debt to God, Shaw does not tell us how to pay it.

If a man is honorable today, he has not changed the

fact that he was dishonorable yesterday. Historians try to write accounts that will make their nations' actions and motives appear pure. But is it realistic to believe that history can be cleansed, virginity restored, murder undone, slander recalled, or deceit purified?

Can we just wipe acts from our memories? We cannot return to the past to undo things, let alone redeem them. We may mend our ways and rightfully should, but so doing leaves the past untouched. We may hate the evil, which will keep us from repeating it in the future, but it does not affect our responsibility for what has been done!

We must be realistic regarding our sins because we stand with a death sentence written all over us. As is written in Hebrews 2:2-3:

For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him . . . ?

We have nothing with which to pay this debt. We stand before Him in penniless insolvency with empty pockets and hands. No justification on our part will clear us. However, this is good because we must recognize the depth of our insolvency if we expect to be forgiven and desire to be like Him. If we are going to pay, we must pay it all. If He will forgive, we must let Him forgive it

all—on His terms. It must be one or the other, and we must choose which of the two it will be. If we choose the one, the payment is death without hope. If we choose the other, it puts us under obligation to the One who pays our otherwise unpayable debt.

But to what then are we obligated? Jesus Himself provides the beginning of the answer by asking a question in Luke 7:42: "And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" Jesus draws a direct correlation between acts of love directed toward Him and the recognition of the enormity of the forgiven sins, as contrasted to the payment made to remove our indebtedness.

We are obligated to love Him, and if the recognition is strong, we are virtually *driven* to do so due to grasping the enormity of what we have been saved from in contrast to the tremendous value of what we are now free to pursue. Could we, like the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1-7, have left our first love because we no longer make an effort to remember these things?

Jesus adds, "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Luke 7:47). The person who knows he has been forgiven much feels more strongly obliged to the one who paid his debt than one who thinks his indebtedness and forgiveness are of little consequence. The one forgiven much feels obligated to live the way his Redeemer tells him he should.

A Consciousness of Forgiveness

Jesus is telling us that those most conscious of forgiveness will be the most fruitful of love. The depth, fervor, and growth of our Christianity depends perhaps more largely on the clarity of our consciousness of this contrast than upon anything else.

One can be very gifted yet not grow as much as one less gifted but more aware of his obligation to Christ. The latter will simply be more motivated. On the other hand, some come along like the apostle Paul, who was both greatly gifted and constantly conscious of his obligation to Christ.

In I Corinthians 15:9-10, the apostle gives us insight into his awareness of his indebtedness and sense of obligation:

For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

Perhaps there is no finer example than Paul. He never forgot what he had done, or its contrast between the

immensity of what he had been freely forgiven and offered. He responded to God with great energy and enthusiasm, apparently with little concern for what others thought of him for doing so.

Another part of this picture requires examination because I Corinthians is among the earliest of Paul's writings. Was there a change in him later in life? Did his sense of indebtedness wane? I Timothy 1:12-15, among the last of Paul's epistles, provides us with the answer:

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

This proves that late in his life as an apostle, he was
(continued on page 20)

*“These are the animals
which you may eat
among all the animals that are on the earth. . .”*

Leviticus 11:2

Did God Change the Law of Clean and Unclean Meats?

As far as modern religion in America is concerned, God’s laws have been done away. Indeed, most who call themselves Christians seem to realize that sinning, however they define sin, is wrong, but somehow Jesus Christ kept the law for us, so everything will be all right. Why become worked up over something that no longer matters?

One area that the world has surely done away with God’s law is that of clean and unclean meats. Those who believe this quote passages from the Bible that seem to say that all food, even the unclean ones, have somehow been made fit for us to eat today. A common argument is that the clean and unclean laws were part of the Old Covenant, and that is “obsolete and . . . ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13).

When one states that he does not eat pork, shellfish, or any of the other foods listed as unclean in Leviticus 11:1-23 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21, he is immediately labeled as “Jewish.” However, God’s law is applicable to all of mankind (notice the principle of universal applicability in Psalm 94:12; Ezekiel 18:5-9; Mark 2:27; Romans 2:12-16), and it is absolutely vital for Christians to keep it to grow in righteousness (Deuteronomy 6:25; Psalm 119:172).

Before we proceed, it helps to remember who the God of the Old Testament is—the God who commanded the laws, not just for Judah, not just for all Israel, but for the benefit of all mankind. That same God, Jesus Christ, says unmistakably:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or

the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17-18)

Since God gives only good things (James 1:17), and the apostle Paul certifies that “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12), we know that His law is for our benefit.

If the Bible is not the basis for one’s discussion of religious matters, then one may as well not argue. This study will not convince anyone whose mind is set through the unbelieving arguments of this world, but it will build a foundation of biblical logic for us to stand on regarding this subject.

A Pre-Sinai Law

The clean and unclean laws are specifically mentioned early in God’s Word, in the account of the Noachian Flood, when Noah was commanded to take “seven each of every clean animal” (Genesis 7:2). When he and his family were back on dry land, Noah “took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Genesis 8:20). This suggests that these laws were known and practiced before the Flood—even from the earliest days of mankind (compare Genesis 4:4, Abel’s acceptable offering). Since there were no Jews or Israelites then—not even any Hebrews—

LEVITICUS 11:2

"These are the animals which you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. . ."

these laws are obviously for all humankind.

Genesis 9:3 contains a command that has proven difficult for some to understand: God says to Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs." Some take this to mean that God gives man *carte blanche* authority to eat any kind of animal. But is this what God said?

The key to this verse is "even as the green herbs." In other words, God gives mankind the authority to eat flesh within the same parameters as He allows us to eat vegetation. Does God allow us to eat poisonous plants like poison ivy, hemlock, deadly nightshade, etc.? Of course not! Just as certain plants are harmful to us, so are certain meats. As Herbert Armstrong explained in "Is All Animal Flesh Good Food?":

God did not give poisonous herbs as food. He gave man the healthful herbs. Man can determine which herbs are healthful, but man cannot by himself determine which flesh foods are harmful. That is why God had to determine for us in His Word which meats are clean. Since the Flood every moving *clean*, healthful, nonpoisonous type of animal life is good for food—just as God gave us the healthful, nonpoisonous herbs.

This does not give us permission to do as we please!

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 contain God's commandment to Israel concerning clean and unclean meats. In these passages, either He lists specific animals that are clean or unclean or He provides us with instructions about how to determine if an animal is clean or unclean. For instance, He tells us specifically that the camel, the hyrax (rock badger), the hare, and the swine are unclean (Leviticus 11:4-8), but regarding fish He instructs us to determine if a

species possesses both fins and scales (verse 9).

People have varying reactions to these scriptures. Some will take the position that unclean animals are harmful to the body. Many of us have had experience, either personally or by an acquaintance, with poisoning by trichinosis (a disease caused by parasitic worm larvae) in pork or becoming deadly sick from shellfish. Then others will bring up "Aunt Sarah," who ate pork and crawdads, drank a bottle of whiskey, smoked cigars every day, and lived to be 102 years old. Indeed, God makes some with amazingly strong constitutions.

God designed many of the unclean animals for the specific purpose of disposing of the earth's garbage. For instance, without feeling any ill effect, vultures can consume 59 times the amount of botulin, the neurotoxin that causes botulism, that it would take to kill a man. Pigs are scavengers that will eat anything, and if pork is not fully cooked to kill the *Trichinella spiralis* in it, it can destroy a person's health or even kill him.

Even though people throughout the world eat unclean food and live, and even though we could probably do the same—and many of us once did—for Christians, it is more than a health matter. In the Bible, God never directly connects keeping the laws of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 with health. In reality, it is a test commandment to see if we will obey God.

Peter's Vision

What scriptures does this world marshal to prove that eating unclean meat is approved by the Bible? There are several such "proof texts" in the New Testament, but we will see that they are all misunderstood passages. In fact, in the final analysis, none of them is even about clean and unclean meats!

Perhaps the best known passage is Acts 10:9-16, in which a huge sheet full of unclean animals is lowered from heaven, and a voice says,

"Rise, Peter; kill and eat." However, without hesitation Peter replies, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (verse 14). The Voice then responds, "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (verse 15).

First, what is the subject of Acts 10? It is evident from a thorough reading of the chapter that it is entirely devoted to the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion (verse 1), the first Gentile baptized into God's church. Peter's vision must be understood against this background to be understood correctly.

Second, it is apparent that Peter himself does not at first understand what his vision meant (verse 17); he certainly does not jump to the conclusion that all meats are now clean. While he is pondering it, a delegation from Cornelius arrives and requests that he travel with them to Caesarea to speak to the centurion. God tells the apostle directly to go with the men, "for I have sent them" (verse 20). Obviously, God was orchestrating the whole affair.

Third, if unclean meats had been approved, would Peter have not understood this from what he had learned from Jesus? He lived with his Savior for over three years. If anyone knew that the law of clean and unclean meats had been abolished by Christ's sacrificial death, it would have been Peter, but at this point, a decade later, he is operating under no such notion.

Fourth, his reply to the Voice, which Peter identifies as the Lord's, is quite confident, even vehement: "Not so, Lord!" In our colloquial English, this is equivalent to "No way!" This was a command that the apostle knew went against everything he knew about God's law. Even though the Voice repeats the command twice more (verse 16), Peter never changes his mind!

Fifth, within the context, Peter himself reveals what the vision meant. To those assembled in Cornelius' house, he says, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man

to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But *God has shown me* that I should not call any *man* common or unclean” (verse 28). The vision of unclean animals was merely an illustration God used to help Peter understand that salvation was open to those previously held at arm’s length (see Acts 11:18). This is further evidenced by the Holy Spirit being poured out visibly on these Gentiles (Acts 10:44-47). Neither Peter nor Luke, the author of Acts, makes any further commentary regarding clean or unclean foods, as the vision had served a greater purpose.

Lastly, nowhere in the context is it ever said that God had cleansed unclean meats—this is something assumed by readers with a predisposition against this statute regulating what we should eat. As Paul says, “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Romans 8:7). Acts 10:1–11:18 confirms that “what God has cleansed” is the Gentiles, not unclean foods.

“Every Creature . . . Is Good”

Another passage that *seems* to state that all flesh can now be eaten is found in I Timothy 4:1-5, especially verse 4: “For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving.” The flaw with most people’s understanding of this verse is that they fail to read what it and the surrounding verses really say. They lift verse 4 out of its context, not bothering to include relevant details from adjacent verses.

The chapter begins with a prophetic warning from Paul against false teachers and their teachings “in latter times.” Their doctrines would be those of demons, and one of them commands their followers “to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving . . .” (verse 3). Many stop right there, but the rest of the verse is vital

to understanding: “. . . by those who believe and know the truth.” These pesky details change the tenor of what the apostle is saying.

Notice that the subject is foods or meats in general, not necessarily unclean meats. This must be read into the passage. If we consider only the word “foods,” it is just as likely that Paul means that these false teachers would preach against eating beef as against eating pork or shellfish. However, the rest of the verse modifies the term. What “foods” did God create to be received—eaten—with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth? The list appears in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14! God has never given mankind any other list of creatures that are divinely certified as “food.”

Verses 4-5 must be taken together, as they are one thought. Paul is telling Timothy not to worry about such prohibitions because God created every creature as “good” (Genesis 1:21, 24-25, 31), and a Christian should accept what he is offered to eat with thanksgiving. Does this mean that we should not refuse skunk, badger, bear, tiger, snakes, slugs, snails, vultures, rats, horses, eel, and oysters, as long as we give thanks for it? Of course not! Again, this is not the end of the story.

I Timothy 4:5 adds important, modifying elements to what this means: “. . . for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.” *Sanctify* means “to set apart for a specific use or purpose.” The apostle is saying, then, that certain “creatures” are sanctified or set apart as human food—by what means?—by God’s Word, the Bible! God reveals these “sanctified” meats to us in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

Paul adds prayer to the setting apart of these foods because we have Christ’s example of asking God to bless the food before eating (see, for instance, Luke 9:16; 24:30). This further sets apart the food we are about to eat as approved and even enhanced by God, but in no way does

it make unclean meat clean. Besides, Scripture gives us no authority to make such a request of God.

In summary, Paul is reiterating that 1) God has set certain foods apart for His people to eat; and 2) we should not be fooled by false teachers who claim either that anything and everything is good to eat or that certain biblically approved foods should not be eaten.

“Purifying All Foods?”

Mark 7:14-23 (and its parallel account in Matthew 15:1-20) is another set of scriptures that some believe state that nothing entering into a man can defile him, therefore eating whatever one wishes is perfectly all right. Can this be correct?

Yet again, those who believe this fail to understand the subject of the chapter, which is Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisees for their rejection of God’s commandments in favor of their own traditions (verse 8). Verse 2 introduces the context: “Now when [the Pharisees] saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault.” The dispute was over ceremonial cleanliness—eating without first washing one’s hands—which is not even an Old Testament law but a “tradition of the elders” (verse 5), which the Pharisees had themselves proclaimed authoritative.

In addition, beyond this fact, note that the kind of food the apostles were eating is “bread,” not meat. Jesus’ later comments speak generally of “foods” and “whatever enters the mouth,” not specifically meat. Mark 7 is not about clean and unclean meats at all!

Verse 19 contains the phrase “thus purifying all foods,” and many have jumped to the conclusion that Jesus declared all foods clean (as many marginal references state). The context, again—the very sentence in which it appears—proves this false: “Do you [disciples] not perceive that

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The All-Important Introduction

How many times have we opened a book and read every single word from cover to cover? Introductions, prefaces, forwards, acknowledgements, notes from the author, dedications, and copyright pages are sadly neglected, opening sections of most books. Most readers consider them to be extraneous, pointless, time- and paper-wasting additions to otherwise interesting volumes. This seems to be especially true of nonfiction books and certainly of more technical works.

However, bibliophiles will scream that ignoring these vital early sections is tantamount to sacrilege! Think, they would say, about all the necessary information that is being passed over! Sure, the innards of the book are where all the really fascinating material is, but the introductory material sets the tone for the “good stuff.”

For instance, say a young person was interested in a career working in the area of human genetics, a relatively new and rapidly expanding science, and one afternoon, he found a book on the subject at the local bookstore. He would be well-advised to scan the copyright page for the date of publication, since any work more than just a few years old would likely contain out-of-date information. It would also behoove him to check the credentials of the author, as well as those who worked with him in researching, composing, and checking the text. The introduction, perhaps by a different author, might give him a needed perspective on the author and his aims, the scope of the work, and the relevance of the material to the young person’s area of interest. What he finds in these opening sections of the book could spell the difference between a satisfied customer and a career boost or a disappointed youngster and poorer to boot!

The introductory material of some of the books of the Bible is just as important—and this is doubly true of the book of Revelation. As students of God’s Word, especially when we are delving into prophecy, we are often impatient to get to the “good stuff” a few chapters into the book. However, if we skip the material that lays the vital groundwork for what comes later, our understanding, accuracy, and application will probably suffer for it. We would do well to remember that not one of God’s words is irrelevant!

Many of us skip the first chapter of Revelation to get to the tantalizing and meaty Letters to the Seven

Churches in chapters 2 and 3, but this is a mistake. Revelation 1 contains all the setup information a reader needs to begin to understand those letters and everything beyond—the description of God’s throne, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the 144,000, etc. A little time sacrificed to mine the riches of chapter one will pay nice dividends.

The Introduction

A good place to start is at the beginning. Verse 1 opens the book with the words, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” This is the book’s real title, not what the Greeks titled it, *Apokalypsis Ioannou*—“The Revelation of John.” In a sense, the apostle John is merely a witness or observer of the visions and sayings that we find within these twenty-two chapters, one who faithfully wrote them down for the instruction, preparation, and edification of the church (verse 2).

Apokalypsis means “unveiling,” “disclosure,” or “revelation,” which is just the opposite of what most people suppose it means. The book is not intended to be a collection of arcane prophecies, mysteries, symbols, and warnings, but an uncovering of knowledge about “things which must shortly take place.” As verse 1 maintains, the Father gave the contents of Revelation to Jesus Christ, who as Head of the church passed them on to His disciples through John, so that they would have all the facts that God allowed about the immanent future. God does not desire the book of Revelation to be a frustrating, impenetrable enigma, but as a gift of His grace, a sharing of privileged information.

Adding to this, verse 3 pronounces a blessing on those “who [read] and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it.” This verse is similar in form to the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-11, and in fact, it is the first of seven beatitudes in the book (see also Revelation 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). This blessing falls not on those who only read or hear what is written in the book, but on those who also “keep” or heed it. Revelation is full of exhortations to belief and action—God wants His unveiling to spur us to obedience and to a closer relationship with Him. The thrust of Revelation is not necessarily on knowing what is coming but on being prepared for it when it comes, which is accomplished by conforming to God’s instructions.

Introduction to Revelation

The final words of the benediction convey the motivation for responding to Revelation's warning: ". . . for the time is near." In just the first three verses, then, the idea of imminence has already appeared twice (see also "shortly take place" in verse 1). Our Savior wants the reader to catch a sense of urgency immediately. Elsewhere, biblical authors use similar wording—"soon," "quickly," "at hand," "the time is short"—to give the suggestion of proximity without being precise. Evidently, God feels that the best Christians are fashioned in an atmosphere of expectancy. This is reminiscent of Jesus' almost paradoxical remark in Matthew 24:44: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect Him."

The five subsequent verses comprise an extended greeting to the seven churches in Asia (later specifically named in verse 11, as well as in chapters 2 and 3). As the human author of the book, John includes himself as a sender of the greeting, but the bulk of it reemphasizes the *real* authors: God the Father, shown as eternal and sovereign, and Jesus Christ, extolled as "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth" (verse 5).

John ensures that we understand that Jesus is the same One who exhibited His love for us by sacrificing Himself for the forgiveness of our sins and made possible our future glorification (verses 5-6). In verse 8, he carries the identification even farther by quoting Jesus' own words: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,' says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'" Lest we misunderstand, John makes certain that there is no doubt that Jesus is the LORD¹ of the Old Testament, the first and the last (Isaiah 44:6; 41:4), the Almighty² God, who "declar[es] the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'" (Isaiah 46:10). This extensive greeting certifies, not only that the prophecy has its source in God, but also that it *will* come to pass.

The greeting also includes "from the seven Spirits who [or *which*] are before [the Father's] throne" (verse 4), a quite controversial phrase. Commentators are divided among four interpretations, which can be summarized as angelic, symbolic, mystical, and Trinitarian. Understandably, the Trinitarian

view—that "the seven Spirits" identifies a so-called Third Person of the Trinity—has the support of most Catholics and Protestants. Their primary reason centers on the fact that this phrase appears between greetings from God the Father and God the Son. They contend that this phrase refers to the sevenfold³ description of the Spirit of the Lord in Isaiah 11:2.

The book of Revelation itself identifies the seven Spirits as equivalent to the Lamb's "seven eyes, which are . . . sent out into all the earth" (Revelation 5:6). These "seven eyes" probably allude to Zechariah 3:9 and 4:10, where they are shown to be "upon the stone," a symbol of the Branch or Messiah, and directly described as "the eyes⁴ of the LORD which scan [or *rove*⁵] to and fro throughout the whole earth." In addition, Revelation 3:1 states Christ "has [or *possesses*] the seven Spirits of God," and Revelation 4:5 calls them "seven lamps of fire . . . burning before the throne."

This may indeed be a description of the Holy Spirit, not as a "Person" somehow divided into seven parts, but as a seven-branched conduit of God's communication to the seven churches mentioned earlier in the verse. Thus, John includes "the seven Spirits" as a source of the prophecy to specify how it was imparted to the seven churches. The apostle Paul pens a similar greeting in II Corinthians 13:14, in which he writes of "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit," meaning that God's Spirit is the means by which Christians can have a relationship with God.

The Setting

The apostle John identifies himself as the human author and witness of the Revelation three times in the first nine verses (verses 1-2, 4, 9). He humbly calls himself God's "servant" (*doulos*, "bond-slave"), not even titling himself an apostle. In verse 9, he adds that he is "both your brother and companion in tribulation and the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ." He claims no special prominence or distinction; in his own mind, he is just a "regular guy" enduring the same trials in his walk to God's Kingdom as any other Christian. These few details are surprisingly more information than John normally includes about himself in either his gospel or his three epistles.

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SEARCHING

Part Twelve

*"I also gave them My Sabbaths,
to be a sign between them and Me,
that they might know
that I am the LORD who sanctified them."
(Ezekiel 20:12)*

Although God has made it crystal clear who make up the peoples of Israel today, most Israelites have not even a clue to their true identity. In spite of all the recent hubbub about knowing one's roots, few Europeans, Canadians, Australians, and Americans could tell you much about Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. Indoctrinated by secularist (read, atheist) schoolmasters, they accept the notion that their distant ancestors evolved into *homo sapiens* long ago and developed, through trial and error, the civilization we now call "the West." How handily—almost carelessly—they practice their faith in blind determinism, all the while scoffing at the idea of a sovereign God who rules history, and to whom they are responsible!

They dwell in the darkness of this ignorance because their forefathers long ago rejected the sign that pointed them to the God who, quite literally, promised Abraham the world. That sign is the Sabbath.

God commanded His people Israel to "remember the Sabbath day" (Exodus 20:8). A while after He issued this, the fourth commandment, He told the Israelites why the Sabbath was such an important institution. Exodus 31:13 and 17: "It is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. . . . It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever."

The Hebrew word translated *sign* means "mark" or "evidence." The Sabbath day is the mark God gave His people to identify them as His own. By it, the folk of Israel would know the Source of their sanctification.

To *sanctify* is "to set apart for holy service," or more basically, "to make holy." God's purpose for Israel from the start was to set it apart from *other* peoples by giving it His laws and His statutes. God has a special relationship with Israel. Speaking through the prophet Amos to "the whole family [i.e., all the tribes] which I brought up from the land of Egypt" (Amos 3:1), God reminds the people that, "you only have I known of all the families of the earth" (verse 2). God revealed His law *only* to Israel. When He did so, He made it clear that Israel would "be a special treasure to Me above all people, . . . a holy [sanctified, set apart] nation" (Exodus 19:5-6), *if* the people "obey My voice and keep My covenant" (verse 5). The theme is repeated in Deuteronomy 7:6: "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, . . . [who] has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."¹

God prefaces the "Holiness Code" of Leviticus 18 and 19 by commanding Israel to be *separate* from other nations. This meant acting in a way different from that of the Gentiles, not walking "in their ordinances." Leviticus 18:3-4:

According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances. . . .

F O R I S R A E L

e: The Sign

In Leviticus 19:2, He makes His purpose clear: “You shall be holy [set apart], for I the LORD your God am holy.” God’s purpose, the intent behind all His laws, is to create a people *like* Himself (Genesis 1:26), a people sharing and reflecting His most salient attribute: holiness.²

Disobedience and Separation

Obedience to God’s law plays a crucial role in bringing about this sanctification. It is not that a people become sanctified (somehow, by God’s grace) and, as a result, start obeying God’s law. God’s Word does not support the Protestant concept that sanctification imputed by God’s grace mysteriously empowers one to obey His commandments. They have it backwards.

Rather, *obedience to the law causes sanctification*. Law-keeping and sanctification become intrinsically connected: To obey God’s law is to be sanctified. *By its nature, law-keeping brings about sanctification*.

In a national context, God states that obeying His laws creates a people unlike others on the earth, a people set apart from others, a holy nation. National sanctification produces what Balaam saw in Israel: “A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations” (Numbers 23:9).

If commandment-*keeping* separates people from the nations while connecting them to God, disobedience of God’s law has exactly the opposite effect. Commandment-*breaking* separates a people from God, and connects them to the ways of the nations. Individuals who disobey God’s law become like the “world,” the *kosmos* of the New Testament (I John 2:15).

Ezekiel 20 connects disobedience with *separation*

from God. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God reiterates that He

gave [Israel] My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments . . . and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. (verses 12-13)

Verses 23-24 go on to indicate the consequence of Israel’s refusal to become sanctified by obeying God’s laws: God says He “lifted [His] hand in an oath, . . . that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths. . . .” If Israel insisted on acting like the nations of the world, God says He would physically place them among those nations; Israel would become separated from God and the land He promised them. They would become “sifted” (see Amos 9:9) among the Gentile nations.

Leviticus 18:24-30 outlines the inevitable separation that a nation (or an individual) will undergo as a result of commandment-breaking: “The land vomits out its inhabitants” (verse 25). This is the national consequence of breaking the commandments. God states the result to individuals in verse 29: “Whoever commits any of these abominations, the persons who commit them shall be cut off from among their people.” Vomiting and cutting-off are both metaphors for separation.

Nationally and individually, commandment-breaking always yields the same ultimate punishment: *separation* from God. That separation may come slowly, as Ecclesi-

astes 8:11 points out, but always surely.

The history of the children of Israel proves the point. God wanted Israel to be a special, sanctified nation; a holy one. He promised to bestow incredible blessings on it *if it acted to separate itself from the social and religious practices of other nations. Israel failed as a nation because it failed to be holy!*

The Kingdom of Israel and the Sign

I Kings 12:25-33 records the beginning of the Kingdom of Israel's apostasy. Fearing that he might eventually lose political control over the ten tribes because of their long-standing religious ties to Jerusalem, capital of the Kingdom of Judah (verse 27), Jeroboam I instituted a state religion designed to meet his peoples' needs for convenience—and his own need for power. He built two shrines, one in Bethel, at the southern extremity of his kingdom, the other in Dan, near its northern boundary (verse 29). If not *de jure*, at least *de facto*, he exiled the Levites, the priestly tribe established by God, and installed in their place a priesthood of his own devising (verse 31). Finally, he moved the fall holy day season from the seventh month to the eighth, thereby effectively setting aside the Sabbath commandment, since the holy days are God's Sabbaths (see Leviticus 23:1-3, 23-44). All this "became a sin" for Israel (I Kings 12:30).

Jeroboam's apostasy, his movement to false religious practices, took deep root. In fact, the house of Israel *never* departed from the practices he established. II Kings 17:21-23 records this fact:

Jeroboam drove Israel from following the LORD, and made them commit a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them, until the LORD removed Israel out of His sight. . . .

Having abandoned the Sabbath, the God-given sign marking them as His people, the folk of the northern tribes eventually lost their identification. That is why most Israelites do not know who they are to this day. *The forefathers forsook the sign that denoted their connection to God.*

Take this line of thought to its logical conclusion: The Sabbath is a memorial to creation and, by extension, to the Creator God (see Exodus 20:11). Modern-day Israelites do not know who they are today because their forefathers, generations ago, abandoned this memorial to the Creator God. Therefore, modern-day Israelites have come to abandon *more* than the sign: *they have abandoned the God to whom the sign points.* They no longer know God.

This is not an overstatement. Make no mistake: Failure to recognize who Israel is *is* failure to recognize the God who made Israel! The distressing secularism running rampant in Israel today has its roots in Sabbath-breaking. The antidote for secularism in America is not an inane Constitutional amendment requiring the teaching of cre-

ationism (whatever that is) in the state schools. The panacea some offer, prayer in the public schools, will not do the trick. Increased Sunday church attendance will not stanch the flood of secularism; after all, most Sunday worshippers accept the doctrines of biologic and economic determinism (i.e., evolution and socialism, respectively) just as avowed atheists do. Attempting to unite a people with its God through these measures is surely akin to building a wall with "untempered mortar" (see Ezekiel 13:9-23). In the coming storm, such a wall will fall.

However, one will never find a Sabbath-keeper who is a secularist. For the Sabbath-keeper has maintained his link with the Creator God. Sabbath-keeping and secularism mix about as well as oil and water.

The Kingdom of Judah and the Sign

For years, the folk of the Kingdom of Judah walked in the footsteps of their brethren in the Kingdom of Israel. However, a number of them then took a different path. The result of that change, of course, is in itself proof that God's Sabbath is a sign pointing to Him and His creation.

Jeremiah 17:19-27 records God's promise to a Sabbath-keeping people. Here, He warns Jerusalem's inhabitants to "bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; . . . nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers" (verses 21-22). If they heeded, God continues, "then shall enter the gates of this city kings and princes sitting on the throne of David, . . . accompanied by the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall remain forever" (verse 25). Conversely, Sabbath-breaking will have dire consequences: "But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, . . . then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched"³ (verse 27).

The people of Judah did not heed God's warning and, as a result, "kings and princes" no longer sit "on the throne of David" in Jerusalem. God moved the Davidic monarchy northwest to the British Isles, and the people He moved to Babylon. Jerusalem burned.

Those who returned from Babylon after seventy years did not learn their lesson. Nehemiah must have stood aghast at the Sabbath-breaking he witnessed among post-exilic Jews. Nehemiah 13:15, 17-18 bears the record. Nehemiah

. . . saw in Judah some people treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. . . . "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster [i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem] on us and on this city? Yet

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whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, thus purifying all foods?”

First, “thus” is not in the Greek text but has been supplied by the translators. Without it, the sentence plainly states that the stomach “purifies” any kind of food put in it, not that Jesus had somehow declared all foods to be purified. Second, *purified* is the Greek word *katharízoōn*, which means “to cleanse,” “to purify,” “to free from filth.” In relation to the stomach’s or the digestive tract’s ability to “purify” food, the sense of *katharízoōn* in this verse is “to purge of waste.” This is brought out clearly in the parallel statement in Matthew 15:17: “Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated?”

Do these scriptures do away with the law concerning clean and unclean meats? Not at all!

Common Meat

The final passage, Romans 14, may be the most difficult one because of the way it is translated in the King James Version and in most other translations. As in the other difficult scriptures, the subject is not clean and unclean foods but eating meat versus vegetarianism (verse 2). Paul admonishes Christians not to pass judgment on others for eating meat or for eating only vegetables (verse 3).

The question that confronted Paul was not that God’s people were suggesting that somehow unclean animals had now been made clean, but the belief of some that no meat—even meat that had been created to be eaten with thanksgiving—should be eaten at all. The apostle points out that it would be wrong for the vegetarians to eat meat if they had doubts about it, as it would defile their consciences (verse 23). He concludes, “For whatever is not of faith is sin.”

Verse 14 is a proof text used by the

world to conclude that all meat is now fine to eat: “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.” This is another verse that has been poorly translated to conform to preconceived notions.

The problem is with the word “unclean,” which does not appear in the Greek text. To mean “unclean,” Paul would have used *akarthatos*, but instead, the text reads *koinos*, which means “common,” “ordinary,” “defiled,” or “profane (as opposed to holy or consecrated).” Peter uses both “common” and “unclean” to describe meats in Acts 10:14, so there is obviously a difference between the terms.

We know that the Bible defines “unclean” meat in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, but when is meat considered “common”? The only circumstance in which clean meats are common or defiled is when a clean animal dies naturally or is torn by beasts (Leviticus 22:8) or when the blood has not been properly drained from the meat (Leviticus 17:13-14; 3:17). Such animal flesh was called common because it could be given to strangers or aliens in Old Testament times if they wished to eat it (Deuteronomy 14:21). Similarly, in Acts 15:20, 29, the apostles forbade the Gentiles to eat the meat of a strangled animal or meat that had not been drained of blood.

In the case of Romans 14:14, it is likely that “defiled” would be the best term, as the meat under discussion was probably that offered to idols then sold in the marketplace for public consumption. To paraphrase, then, the verse should read: “. . . there is nothing defiled of itself; but to him who considers anything to be defiled, to him it is defiled.” The meat was not defiled in fact, just in the minds of various church members, whom Paul had earlier called “weak” (verse 2). These “weak in the faith” Christians believed that, because the meat had been offered to a pagan idol, it had become spiritually defiled.

Paul explains in I Corinthians 8:4-7 that the demon behind the idol is nothing, for “there is no other God but one” (verse 4). Thus, there is no “spiritual” taint to the meat.

However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. (verses 7-8)

So we see that in these verses that Paul is not in any manner doing away with God’s laws concerning clean and unclean meat. The topic does not even come up! He is discussing meat defiled or profaned due to its association with a pagan idol.

In fact, all the scriptures we have reviewed confirm that the law concerning clean and unclean meats is still in effect today.

Two foundational verses are good to remember when questions over the doing away with God’s law arise.

- Malachi 3:6: “For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.”
- Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

God has good reasons for the laws He gives, and James reminds us, “. . . with [God] is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17). Rather than assume that an Old Testament law is done away, we should trust that our Maker knows what is good for His creatures and put it into practice in our lives, unless it has been specifically set aside in the New Testament. At least its principle is still valid, which will help us to live abundantly.

—John Reid

Essays on Bible Study

The Jewish Testament?

Some time ago, in his “A Moment of Hope” radio commentary, a local preacher spoke of the power of words and how, if we want our lives to be hopeful, we need to keep our speech positive. He then quoted Proverbs 18:21 as wisdom on the subject: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

So far, everything was fine—and then he went and spoiled it by saying (paraphrasing), “You can find that in the Jewish Testament of your Bible.”

The Jewish Testament? What is that? There is no such thing! We could call the Old Testament “the Hebrew Testament” with some legitimacy because it was written in Hebrew, but what would make it Jewish? Was he trying to say that, if we read only the Old Testament, we would become followers of Judaism? Or, that the Jews somehow own the Old Testament? Or, that because the Old Testament is revered by Jews as their holy book, it is somehow inferior to “the Christian Testament?”

Certainly, the Bible never calls the Old Testament “the Jewish Testament.” Paul calls it “the Holy Scriptures” in II Timothy 3:15. Jesus calls it “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” in Luke 24:44. In many places, the writers simply refer to it as “the word [of God or of the Lord]” or “the Scripture(s).” The only hint that the Old Testament “belongs” to the Jews is a misinterpretation of Romans 3:2, “to them were committed the oracles of God.” This means only that the Jews are responsible for their accurate transmission throughout history, not that they apply only to Jews or that Jews exclusively possess them in some way.

No, this all stems from the mistaken idea that the Old Testament is the Old Covenant, “becoming obsolete and growing old . . . ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13), while the New Testament is the New Covenant. Thus, to a “Christian” under the New Covenant, anything that appears in the Old Testament is of lesser value than what appears in the New Testament. This error has led to countless misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the message Jesus brought to mankind.

In fact, the New Testament cannot be understood without the foundation of the Old Testament—and not just in historical terms. Paul is not overstating things when he says the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles *and prophets*, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). After His resurrection, Jesus “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, . . . expounded to [the disciples] in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). Later, “He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (verse 45). Which Scriptures? The Old Testament, of course, the only ones written at the time!

Just these few verses say that we New Covenant Christians cannot understand Jesus Christ, His doctrine, His church, and God’s plan without the Old Testament. We can see this by how frequently the apostles quote from the writings of Moses, David, and the prophets to support and fill out their doctrinal teachings. There is hardly a page in the New Testament that does not have a quotation or allusion to the Old Testament on it. It is a vital part of New Covenant—New Testament—Christianity!

Lack of space does not permit an

explanation of the differences between the Old Covenant and the New. However, let it suffice to say that the major problem in the Old Covenant was the *people* with whom God made it (see Hebrews 8:7-12; Romans 8:3). The New Covenant is modeled after the Old with its basic law, the Ten Commandments, retained in all its force and wisdom. In fact, Jesus makes it plain that He added intent to the law’s scope so that it is now *stricter* under the New Covenant (Matthew 5:17-48)!

In the end, we must conclude that the Bible is a whole with two parts, which came as a result of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the languages in which the two parts were penned. The theology and the goal of the instruction in the two are the same. The same God who never changes rules, acts, and speaks in both. Those who believed and lived by faith in both eras will receive the same gift of eternal life (I Thessalonians 4:14-17; Hebrews 11:40).

Please be aware of this false notion of the Old Testament’s inferiority to the New, as it colors a great deal of “Christian” biblical commentary. The Word of God is God’s Word, whether spoken in 1400 BC or AD 60. Above all, remember our Savior’s instruction, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word* that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Prophecy’s Place

Bible students know that Scripture is about thirty percent prophecy, and preachers have cautioned that prophecy should take no more than the equivalent percentage of our study time. With some people, though, proph-

ecy is their Bible study, and that, frankly, is a shame.

The Bible divides itself neatly into thirds: one-third doctrine, one-third history, and one-third prophecy. History, of course, gets short shrift from most, who remember Mrs. Jones' tenth-grade history class as a collection of names and dates and boring lectures on various monarchs and wars. Doctrine is just not very stimulating; studying it brings up visions of long and involved passages in dusty commentaries written by long-dead theologians, intricate studies of unpronounceable words in ancient languages, and saccharine devotional passages with little application in the real world.

Prophecy, though, is cool. Its imagery and symbolism are fascinating with its strange beasts, lurid women, armies and battles, plagues and destruction, conquering kings, and even a red dragon. It is infused with a sense of mystery and expectation. There are enigmatic numbers to ponder and riddles and word plays to solve. Beyond all this, many prophecy buffs believe that the preponderance of the Bible's predictions will come about soon, heightening the excitement.

For evangelists, prophecy makes a wonderful hook to get people interested in God's Word. For years, the Worldwide Church of God's most-requested literature had prophetic themes: "The U.S. and Britain in Prophecy," "The Book of Revelation Unveiled at Last," "Who or What Is the Beast?" etc. These booklets were most often requested by those hearing the radio broadcast or seeing the television broadcast for the first time because the program itself frequently dealt with prophetic subjects. As a hook, prophecy works well, but as a staple in our spiritual diet, it produces deficiencies in spiritual health.

Yes, we should know the Bible's prophecies. Yes, we should be watching world events. Yes, we should be speculating to see how current events might fit the Bible's scenarios. But none of these things should be done at the expense of doctrine and Christian living.

What is the purpose of prophecy? Ultimately, it is to glorify God. Through

prophecy, we can see God at work in His plan over millennia (for instance, the many Old Testament prophecies of Jesus Christ's first coming). We see proof of God's existence and power in fulfilling the Bible's prophecies (Isaiah 40:12-29). Prophecy exhibits for all to see that God is sovereign in the affairs of men (Daniel 4:17), and what He desires He brings to pass (Isaiah 55:11).

Is prophecy in the Bible so we can know what is going to happen? Yes, but not to the degree most people think. "Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7), but this does not mean that we will have a complete or precise foreknowledge of events. Jesus Himself warns us, "But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matthew 24:36), and just a few verses later, He tells His own disciples, "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when *you do not expect Him*" (verse 44).

This is a massive hint that our understanding—as much as it has expanded over the last few decades—will still not be enough to remove the surprise from Christ's return! Paul also warns us in I Corinthians 13:9, 12, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly." This should convince us that we do not know for certain how things will work out as the end approaches. We understand in part, meaning we have a vague idea of the course of events, but we cannot honestly be dogmatic about any speculative scenarios we devise. Every interpretation of end-time biblical prophecy should be accompanied with a proviso such as, "This is where things seem to be headed from what we understand right now."

It is good for us to remember what the apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:8: "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; . . . whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away." The point of Christianity is not to know the final score before everyone else does. God has called us to glorify Him by putting on the image of His Son (II Corin-

thians 3:18). We must be careful that we do not let ourselves be distracted from what is most important.

Putting Out Flawed Study Practices

As managing editor of *Forerunner* magazine, I occasionally receive unsolicited articles from readers who want their work published. The articles are often substandard and sometimes even doctrinally wrong, but initially, I give them the benefit of the doubt and peruse their offerings.

Recently, I received an article on disfellowshipping from a person outside the Church of the Great God. God gives the church the authority to disfellowship a member who is habitually committing sin or is a danger to the congregation (Matthew 18:17; Romans 16:17-18; I Corinthians 5:1-5, 9-13; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10-11). Every private association possesses power of this sort. For instance, the Boy Scouts of America has the right as a private group to dismiss a scoutmaster if he does not meet its stated qualifications. While this authority to dismiss members is assumed by private groups in America, the church has it by direct command from the Word of God.

The fundamental reasons for using the authority to disfellowship are to protect the church and to convey to the disfellowshipped person the seriousness of his actions. It is, in a sense, spiritual quarantine. The sinning member is separated from the rest of the congregation so he will not "infect" them, and he is given time and space to deal seriously with his problem.

Disfellowshipping does not—indeed cannot—take away a person's salvation; it does not confine him to the Lake of Fire. Jesus Christ is the Judge (John 5:22; Acts 17:31; II Timothy 4:8), not any minister or church council. All disfellowshipping does is exclude the rebellious member from fellowship with the church. However, if he does not repent and continues in his sinful practices, he is indeed in danger of the second death (Revelation 20:14-15; see Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

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Traditionally, the book of Revelation has been ascribed to the apostle John, son of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21), “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20; 13:23; 20:2), and no creditable argument has been put forward to dispute his authorship. When it was written about AD 95, he would certainly have been a very old man, but by all accounts, the apostle John lived to be nearly 100 years old, dying a peaceful death in the area of Ephesus sometime during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan (AD 98-117).

John informs us that he “was on the island that is called Patmos” (Revelation 1:9), a small, rocky Aegean island just west of due south from Ephesus, employed as a prison or place of exile by the Roman emperors. Most prisoners were required to work the quarries and mines on the island, but John’s advanced age may have allowed him to avoid such backbreaking labor.

He writes that he was exiled there “for [because of] the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ,” an indication that his preaching had come to the attention of the Roman authorities, and judgment had gone against him. It is likely that John had spoken against the emperor cult (the worship of the current Roman emperor as a god, a practice that reached its height under Domitian, AD 81-96), and his exile rather than execution can only be attributed to Jesus’ prophecy of John not facing martyrdom (John 21:22). The apostle perhaps remained on Patmos for less than two years, as such exiles were routinely released upon the death of the emperor who had exiled them.

Some protestants and Catholics contend that John saw these visions on a Sunday because John writes that he “was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). This is merely an unfortunate misunderstanding due to the prevalence of unscriptural Sunday worship throughout Christendom. In Greek, this phrase reads *en teé Kuriakeé heeméra*, literally “on the belonging-to-the-Lord day.” Although it is different in construction to other instances of “the day of the Lord” in the New Testament, the meaning is the same. John is speaking not of the first day of the week,⁶ but of the time of God’s judgment known throughout the Old Testament as “the day of the LORD.”

The apostle is giving the reader vital information about the time setting of his vision and thus the true application of the book of Revelation. Through the agency of God’s Spirit, John received a vision of end-time events and related material that reveal to the church a unique understanding of the day of the Lord. Though couched in late first-century terms and allusions, Revelation is first and predominantly about the time of the end, when God through Christ will intervene in world affairs and establish His Kingdom on the earth. Most of its

prophecies are only now beginning to be fulfilled or are still awaiting fulfillment in years just ahead. In a sense, the book of Revelation is as current as today’s newspaper—even better, because we have it in advance!

The Revelator

By far, the most important feature of Revelation 1 is its long description of the Revelator Himself, Jesus Christ. John wants to be sure that his readers—the members of God’s church—realize, not only *who* is revealing the future to the church, but also just *how special* and *important* He is to us now. In a way, the apostle is adding a final chapter to his gospel, showing us the awesome glory, power, and eternal nature of our Savior in His present role as High Priest and Head of the church.

When John turns “to see the voice” (verse 12), he beholds “One like the Son of Man” (verse 13) standing amidst seven golden lampstands, later explicitly identified as the seven churches (verse 20). John sees a glorious Being who resembles his dear friend and Master, Jesus of Nazareth, but this Person is far beyond human. He is God, in many respects just as the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel describe Him from their visions (Daniel 10:5-6; Ezekiel 1:26-27). John sees Christ

... clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. (Revelation 1:13-16)

John had seen something like this in the past, and he recognized who it was immediately: “[Jesus] was transfigured before them, His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). If anything, this vision had an even greater impact on John than the transfiguration did, causing him to fall “at His feet as dead” (Revelation 1:17), again as both Ezekiel and Daniel did (Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 10:8-9).

Laying His right hand on John (Revelation 1:17), perhaps in healing or in blessing, Jesus tells the aged apostle not to be afraid because “I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (verses 17-18). In less symbolic language, He says, “Relax, I am indeed the Eternal God, but I am also Jesus, your friend, whom you saw die and then rise from the dead. Look! This is what it is like to have eternal life!

Essays on Bible Study

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The author of the article I received on this subject, however, is definitely antagonistic to this practice, and he goes to great lengths to “prove” from Scripture that it should not be used. He begins by spiritualizing the perverse sexual relationship Paul condemns in I Corinthians 5, saying that the Bible is a “coded book,” and when we decode this section, the apostle is really writing about getting involved in politics!

The author continues through several other points, pulling various verses out of context to support his plainly emotionally motivated assault on this doctrine. Peter warns us to treat Paul’s epistles carefully, “. . . in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the rest of the Scriptures” (II Peter 3:16).

The author does this with I Corinthians 5:11: “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a

fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.” The apostle’s meaning here is clear, but within a paragraph or two, the author of the article concludes that Paul is saying that the church has no authority to disfellowship one of its own! However, in verse 13, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 17:17 to back up his decision: “Therefore ‘put away from yourselves that wicked person.’” And this is a section of Paul’s writing that is not “hard to understand”!

This should sound a warning to those of us who study the Bible. There are proper ways to determine what it teaches, and there are downright improper and dishonest ways. We see several of the latter in this example:

- First, our attitude must be that of a seeker of truth, not one of trying to prove a point.
- Second, the context of a verse is vital to its meaning, and cut-

ting it from that context and pasting it into another abuses the teaching.

- Third, spiritualizing a scripture at the expense of its plain meaning over-complicates matters and increases the possibility of error.
- Fourth, no one scripture will hold all the truth about a doctrine; one must gather all the biblical material on a subject to determine God’s teaching.
- Fifth, understanding the Greek or Hebrew meanings of words is fine, but no word’s definition is enough to formulate a doctrine.

These are just a few of the principles of Bible Study we should follow in coming to understand the way of life God has called us to. We have a lifetime of study, contemplation, and prayer to learn and grow in it. We might as well do it correctly!

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

I now have all power over life and death.” Though he remained astonished, what a comfort that must have been to John!

And he passes it on to us so that we, too, might have both comfort and faith in what Jesus commands him to write, the book of Revelation (verse 19). This final book of the canon is not the delusion of a senile old man on a sun-drenched Mediterranean isle, nor the deceptions of another, more sinister spirit whose aim is to distract and corrupt God’s people. No, the book of Revelation is a direct communication from our Lord Himself, given in love for His sheep, especially for those whom He calls to

face the turmoil and terror of that great day of God.

We have this confidence: that Jesus Christ has ascended to the Father, having fulfilled His every assignment and received all things; that He is “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth” (verse 5) and more besides; and that He will soon return to earth to set things straight (verse 7). In writing the introduction to his book this way, John has endowed us with the background information and the attitude we need to understand the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it (verse 3).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Endnotes

¹ This is a direct allusion to the YHWH of Exodus 3:14. The Majority Text reads “Lord God,” making the identification of Jesus with the God of the Old Testament even more certain. “LORD God” is used frequently in the prophetic books, especially Ezekiel.

² This title is in Greek *ho pantokratōr*. In the Septuagint, it often translates the Hebrew title “LORD of Hosts” (II Samuel 5:10; Amos 3:13, etc.). It appears nine times in Revelation (Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22), and in each case, it highlights God’s absolute control and authority.

³ However, there are only six descriptors in Isaiah 11:2, unless one counts “of the LORD” as the seventh.

⁴ The Hebrew word for “eyes” is *ayin*. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* comments on this word: “The eye is used to

express knowledge, character, attitude, inclination, opinion, passion, and response. The eye is a good barometer of the inner thoughts of man” (emphasis added). This word can also mean “spring” or “fountain,” which are outflows of water. Thus, in Hebrew, the eyes are not receptive, as in English, but communicative or expressive, which argues for “the eyes of the LORD” and “the seven Spirits of God” being means of communication rather than gatherers of information.

⁵ According to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, this Hebrew word, *šûp*, has an interesting alternative meaning: “to deliver a message throughout the land (2 Sam 24:2,8).”

⁶ Sunday, the first day of the week, was never known in the true church as “the Lord’s Day,” for Jesus Himself says He is “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28), which is the seventh day.

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still keenly aware of the enormity of what he had been forgiven. He probably purposely kept this memory alive so as not to take any chance of losing his sense of responsibility. He understood human nature well, not wanting to risk losing the proper perspective that Christ had given him at the beginning. Rather than carry it about as a burdensome load of guilt, he used it as a realistic recognition of his indebtedness to Christ for what he had been forgiven and what had been accomplished since that time.

A stark contrast to this appears elsewhere in Paul's writings, which some think reveals a contradiction. In Philippians 3:6, he writes concerning himself before his conversion, "... concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Is this truly a contradiction? No, before conversion Paul was a great deal like Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7. He was clothed in respectability, but he knew he was guilty of many deeds and attitudes for which Jesus denounced the Pharisees. In Philippians 3, he is instead looking back on what he thought of himself then. However, as God called him, he came to see himself through God's eyes as a man struggling with sin but rescued from it through Jesus Christ, which he describes in Romans 7. He then became a man whose faith was in God's grace, and he responded with zealous work largely out of a deep sense of grateful obligation.

Paul was full of wonder and gratitude when he remembered what Christ had done and continued to do through and for him. G.K. Chesterton, an atheist who converted to Catholicism, commented regarding this circumstance, "It is the highest and holiest of paradoxes

that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it."

Throughout his epistles, Paul supplies us with definitive answers as to what we are obligated. However, in Romans 12:1-2, He gives us a broad overview:

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.

To grasp this properly, one must understand these two verses against the background of the book of Romans. The preceding eleven chapters contain the doctrinal foundation and prelude to the last four chapters of practical Christian living. These two verses bridge the gap between the doctrinal foundation and the practical, daily applications. In these two verses, he is essentially saying, "In light of what I have told you, this is what you are obligated to do in order to serve—that is, to love—Christ."

First, we must operate by these two principles and give up our whole being constantly to these pursuits. Second, we must yield ourselves so that we are not merely avoiding conformity to this world but being transformed into a new being, proving to ourselves the benefits of this way of life. Thus, we are to apply these two principles to the subject of the rest of chapter 12, which primarily concerns relationships with the brethren within the church, and secondarily, with those in the world.

A More Comprehensive View of Love

Chapter 13 begins by stating our obligation to submit to civil governments, pay taxes, and respect those in authority. However, verses 8-10 are a summary statement that captures the breadth of our obligation:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

However, in verse 8, Paul has presented us with an interesting paradox. On the one hand, he states that we should owe no man anything that he can rightfully claim

from us, yet on the other hand, we must owe everyone more than we can hope to pay—perfect love. By this, he extends and intensifies the concept of obligation. We must be more scrupulous within the limits of the customary concept of indebtedness, and we must infinitely widen the range within which they operate.

Was it not our failure to meet our obligations to God and man that accrued the unpayable debt in the first place? Now that the debt has been paid, we are under obligation, not only to strive to avoid falling into the same trap, but to expand and perfect the giving of love. The paradox is more apparent than real because love is not merely one's duty added to others, but is the inclusive framework within which all duties should be performed. Love is the motivating power that frees and enables us to serve and sacrifice with largeness of heart and generosity of spirit.

However, as long as we view love merely as the keeping of God's laws, we are stuck on a low-level,

letter-of-the-law approach to righteousness. That is most assuredly a vital and necessary aspect of love, but there is far more to love. That level of love can be merely one of compulsion, and be done in a “just because” attitude: “I must love this person, but I don’t have to like them.” This may suffice for a while, but Paul, by drawing upon Christ’s teaching, unveils an entirely new significance to the concept of obligation.

Of what level was the love of the fallen woman who washed Christ’s feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them with her lips, and anointed them with costly oil? Was her conduct merely to keep a commandment, or was it an exquisite expression of a heart freed to give its all?

I Corinthians 11:17-34 encapsulates the solution to a tragic story of gluttony, drunkenness, class distinction, and party spirit—all within the framework of the “love feasts” of a Christian congregation! Why were some guilty of these sins? Because, despite being converted, some of them neither loved God nor their brethren, which a reading of the entire epistle reveals.

To what does Paul refer them to correct their abominable behavior? To the Passover service and Christ’s death! Christ’s death is the supreme example of unselfish and sacrificial service in behalf of the undeserving guilty. It is the highest, most brilliant example of love.

Out of a beneficent good will, the Father and the Son freely gave of themselves for the sake of our well-being. For those of us still in the flesh, this beneficent goodwill results in our forgiveness, forging a foundation from which the same approach to life can begin to be exercised. When we can properly judge ourselves in terms of what we are in relation to Their freely given sacrifices, it frees us, not only to conduct life as They do, but eventually to receive everlasting life too.

Job confesses in Job 42:5-6, “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Though Job was among the most upright of men, all his life he had held a wrong evaluation of himself in relation to God and other men. Yet when God allowed him to “see” himself, as He did the apostle Paul in Romans 7, Job was devastated, his vanity crushed, and he repented. Now, he was truly prepared to begin to love.

Paul instructs in I Corinthians 11:24-25:

... and when He had given thanks, He broke [bread] and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

“Do this in remembrance of Me” has a couple of alternative renderings that may help us understand more clearly. It can be rendered more literally, “Do this for the remembering of Me,” or “Do this in case you forget.” God does not want us to let this sacrifice get very far from our minds. It is not that He wants maudlin sentimentality from us. Instead, He wants to remind us that it represents the measure of His love for us as well as of our worth to Him, that we always bear a right sense of obligation, not as an overbearing burden, but a wondering awe that He would pay so much for something so utterly defiled.

We are admonished to remember not merely the personality Jesus, but the whole package: His connection to the Old Testament Passover; His life of sacrificial service; His violent, bloody death for the remission of the sins of mankind; the sacrificial connection to the New Covenant; and who He was, our sinless Creator! This act becomes the foundation of all loving relationships possible to us with God and His Family because it provides us reason to hope that our lives are not spent in vain. In addition, it motivates us to do what we failed to do that put us into debt in the first place—to love.

Paul admonishes in verse 29, “For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” To eat the bread or drink the wine in an unworthy manner is to treat His sacrifice with casual, disrespectful ingratitude—a better translation might be “without due appreciation, especially as shown by one’s life.” It means that the person who does this is not showing much love in his life because he is barely aware of his sins and the enormous cost of forgiveness.

Such a person is not really free to love because he is still wrapped up in himself. When we take Passover, let us strive to remember that our fellowship at that special time is with Him. The others there to participate in the service are at that time only incidental to our relationship with Christ. The focus is on Christ and the subject of this article.

Passover

The Passover service is not an hour of instruction, though some things are undoubtedly learned. It is a *communion* within the framework of a ritual. If we are in the right spirit of devotion, we are in the closest possible relationship with our Savior.

In John 6:53-57, Jesus speaks of the value of His death using His own flesh and blood as the means to everlasting life:

Then Jesus said to them. “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in

Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.”

During the Passover service, Jesus is not only the host and giver of the feast; symbolically, He is the feast itself. Any other food or fellowship for that service is at the least a distraction from the intended communion with Christ.

What a Savior, what a sacrifice, what an example, what a purchase price we are obligated to! Nothing better could ever happen to us in our lives because of what it opens up to us. The world does not revolve around us, what we think, how we act, or what our goals might be.

Passover is intended by God to teach us these things so that we begin each year by being turned from where we have deviated in our understanding and application, and “jump started” once again in the right direction with the right attitude.

Life revolves around our Father in heaven, His Messiah and our Creator and Savior, and Their purpose. Let us cry out to God for a better understanding of what we are and what Christ did so we can be filled with an awesome sense of our indebtedness and obligation.

In Christian love,



Searching for Israel (Part Twelve): The Sign

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you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”

Both Ezra and Nehemiah worked assiduously to teach the people to keep holy God’s Sabbath. It was during this time that the people of Judah took a different path than those of Israel. For, while Israel *never* (no, not to this day!) returned to the practice of Sabbath-keeping, the descendants of the tribe of Judah (with Levi) came to keep it—albeit not perfectly.⁴ They kept it throughout the hideous Maccabean period and throughout the long Roman occupation later. They kept it after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. They kept it in the Diaspora—during the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. They kept it whether they dwelt in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, or later, America. Many keep it to this day. Because they do, *they know who they are!* They know who their patriarchs are.

Like a neon sign, the mark of the Sabbath, identifying Jews as worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, shines brightly through the ages, through the darkness of ghetto and oven, even piercing the murky gloom of today’s secularism and humanism. To a good extent, the experience of the Jews shows that God’s mark, the Sabbath, does in fact identify a people as worshipping the God of the patriarchs.

Had the northern ten tribes “remember[ed] the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8) even half as well as the folk of Judah do, they would today have a fair idea of their roots. Having forsaken the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath, the peoples of the Kingdom of Israel came, over time, to forget the God of their fathers, as well as His revelation and His prophets.

“Beware,” one of those prophets declares, “lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 6:12). Forgetting the God who separated them from the other nations, ten-tribed Israel, scattered and wandering, became separated from their God and ultimately grew to be *like* other nations. Becoming like them, Israel became *lost* among them. Beware.

—Charles Whitaker

Endnotes

¹ See also Deuteronomy 14:2.

² Sanctification is also the purpose behind God’s often-denigrated *physical* laws. Consider, for example, the reason *why* God imposed the dietary law, as stated in Leviticus 11. God does not cite the maintenance of health as a reason to obey the dietary laws; the Scriptures do not specify that obedience of these laws will cause good health or prevent disease (though this is a secondary, albeit unmentioned, benefit). Rather, God concludes His dietary laws with a statement of His holiness and a command for His people to be like Him. Leviticus 11:44-45:

For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the LORD who brings you up out of

the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

³ For the fulfillment of this prophecy, see Jeremiah 39:8; II Chronicles 36:19.

⁴ After the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews’ religious leaders became so zealous in their desire to observe the Sabbath properly that they made it a burden. They eventually lost perspective: Failing to grasp the spirit of the fourth commandment, they created hundreds of “do’s and don’ts” to define its letter. By Christ’s time, their fanaticism had grown to the point that the Sabbath had itself become an object of worship. Christ had to devote a fair portion of His ministry to teaching the people that “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Generations in America

The well-known book, *The Fourth Turning*, by Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, has given rise to many commentators and analysts looking at the present culture from a generational point of view to catch a glimpse of the future. The present state of the “generations,” while perhaps inconclusive with regard to future events, demonstrates that the generational forecasts have not been far off.

The Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960)

Columnist Jay Bryant, writing for Townhall.com, takes note of “the centrality of the baby boom cohort to our national life during its remarkable cycle of existence” in his column entitled *The Last Boomer Battle* (March 29, 2005). He contends, “. . . almost everything has been all about the boomers since approximately nine months following the end of World War II.” For examples, he points out that the birth control pill was invented when Boomers were teenagers, and Viagra appeared when they hit 50. Boomers protested to have the legal drinking age lowered from 21 to 18, yet when their own children approached adolescence, young Boomer parents campaigned to have it raised again.

Bryant also posits that abortion is a Baby Boomer issue: “Sexually liberated” Boomer women shaped the feminist agenda—at the heart of which is the “right” to destroy the unintended consequences of sexual liberation—and compliant Boomer men, for their own selfish reasons, saw no reason to oppose them. However, popular momentum is now moving against the pro-abortion forces. Bryant observes, “Because most of today’s boomer women are post-menopausal, and while they may still believe the ideological arguments fashioned to support their position, the urgency of the matter has faded—as has the stamina to undertake rigorous political action such as marching all day in the hot Washington sun.”

Bryant suggests that the “last boomer battle” may be the one regarding euthanasia:

The same demographic and scientific forces behind the ebbing of abortion as a hot-button political issue make it certain that euthanasia will move front and center in the public consciousness. The oldest boomers will be sixty next year, and the case of Terri Schindler Schiavo notwithstanding, euthanasia is an issue about old people.

The Thirteenth Generation (born 1961-1981)

Howe and Strauss show that members of this generation typically are not movers and shakers like Boomers. *The Fourth Turning* says of them, “In childhood, the indulged Boomers were replaced by the neglected 13th Generation . . . who were left unprotected at a time of cultural convulsion and adult self-discovery. Known in pop culture as Generation X, its name here reflects the fact that it is literally the thirteenth generation to call

itself American” (p. 17). However, the authors forecast that, as this generation ages, it will take steps to outgrow its youthful selfishness and indiscretions, and even tend toward conservatism.

An annual survey by the Barna Group seems to support this. The *State of the Church: 2005* compares people’s religious beliefs and practices to levels measured in identical national surveys conducted by Barna since 1991. While very little change has been measured in most areas for the past 15 years, the survey shows a surprising and significant increase in Bible reading. According to Barna, 45% of adults read the Bible during a typical week (not including when they are at church), up from 31% in 1995. Barna concludes that this increase is largely attributable to an increase in Bible reading by Baby Busters—the Thirteenth Generation, Gen Xers—who are now between the ages of 24 and 44. While it is still uncertain whether this upward trend will have any great effect on the culture at large, it is at least a significant footnote.

The Millennials (born 1982-2000)

According to Howe and Strauss, this generation, also known as Generation Y, is the one that will lead society following the Crisis forecast to commence in roughly 2005-2008, based on the cycles of Anglo-American history for the last 600 years. What the nation looks like on the other side of the Crisis will largely depend on how this generation responds to it. *The Fourth Turning* says this generation “grows up as increasingly protected post-Awakening children, comes of age as the heroic young teamworkers of a Crisis. . . .”

Reboot, a Jewish group that examines generational issues, released a study on April 11, 2005, entitled, “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era.” The study, reported by *The Washington Times* (April 12, 2005), indicates that this generation is technically savvy and tends toward individuality when it comes to personal choice (i.e. styles, music, even religious beliefs). However, even as it prefers a smorgasbord of choice, it is also much more likely to accept others of differing background (whether ethnic or religious). For example, according to the study, only 7% of Millennials said that “all” their friends were of the same religion. Significantly, while many in this generation are concerned about good grades and finding work after school, their biggest concern is the solidly “moral” issue of sex outside marriage.

Even this brief analysis exposes the reality of “generation gaps,” which are major factors in societal turmoil. Each age group, using its own characteristic approach to life and childrearing, raises a generation very different from itself—and these differences often prove to be significant factors in bringing on the “Crisis.” To use Howe and Strauss’ terms, the “unraveling” of society is far advanced, society has “awakened” to many of its problems, and the next Crisis is due. All that remains to be determined is what form the Crisis takes and how the generations react to it.

Exciting times appear to be just ahead. ■

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 TEN VIRGINS*

Part One

Knowing that human nature loses heart over time without the help of the Holy Spirit, Jesus understood that His church would need encouragement to be watchful while awaiting His second coming. For this reason, He gave the Parable of the Ten Virgins, found in Matthew 25:1-13, to some of the twelve disciples just days before His brutal crucifixion. The parable pictures ten virgins waiting for the Bridegroom's return. However, half of the virgins are unprepared because they lose heart in the face of their uncertainty, and as a result, they do

not prepare and persevere to the end.

Jesus gives ample warning in His teaching concerning the last days and the need for spiritual preparation for them. But He also realizes that His church would need spiritual focus while waiting for His return. Therefore, He warns that lack of adequate preparation for His coming can be eternally devastating. Jesus makes the purpose of this parable clear in its last verse. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (verse 13).



1. Who are the Ten Virgins? Matthew 25:1.

COMMENT: The characters of the parable are the "Bridegroom," also referred to as "Lord," who is Jesus Christ Himself, and, of course, "the ten virgins," representing those called of God (Matthew 22:14; Ephesians 4:1-6; I Peter 1:15; Revelation 17:14). The Bride is not mentioned because she represents the entire church, and the church is not presented here in its entirety. By implication, the Bride is represented in this parable more personally in its individual members (Psalm 45:14). But since the wedding feast could not be held without the Bride, and since five virgins miss the feast, all ten virgins cannot make up the Bride. These ten virgins, then, represent those individuals called into the church at the end time. "The daughters of Judah" are treated similarly in the Old Testament (Lamentations 2:13).

When Jesus gave this parable, the mystery of the church was not yet fully known (Ephesians 3:3-5). In it, the called are seen individually as "virgins" expecting the Bridegroom to come. In this way, the parable illustrates "many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 20:16; 22:14). Interestingly, the apostle Paul refers to the church at Corinth in its virgin character in II Corinthians 11:2, "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Virgin character refers to the whole church, but virgins (plural) describes individual members of the body. Jesus makes this parable very personal to highlight the need for each individual's spiritual preparedness.

2. What are the similarities between the two types of virgins? Matthew 25:1-5.

COMMENT: In the introduction, we see revealed important characteristics about the two groups that obviously describe two different types of attitudes. These traits make the two groups' approaches to the wedding celebration predictable, summarized by the contrasting behaviors of sincerity and superficiality. The two have some interesting similarities that cause them to appear the same outwardly.

Both groups were in the same place going to meet the bridegroom (verse 1). The spiritually unprepared Christian may sit right beside the spiritually prepared Christian in Sabbath services, similar to the state of the tares and wheat

(Matthew 13:24-30). They both seem interested in the same things and seem to have the same character. Both may diligently give tithes and offerings and serve their brethren. It may only be in a crisis that the real differences show up, and then attendance may begin to wane, and their monetary support of the church may slow or even stop.

Both groups were carrying lamps (verse 1), so these vessels are not a sign of who had prepared. Similarly, a person carrying a Bible to church does not show that that person has prepared by study and prayer during the previous week to overcome sin and produce spiritual fruit. Neither does it show that the Holy Spirit exists within a person.

Both groups slumbered and slept (verse 5). Even the most dedicated and sincere saints may temporarily become spiritually lethargic. The fact that the Bridegroom delayed His coming is one of Jesus' many hints that His return may be much later than expected. From the perspective of the first-century church, Christ has delayed for almost 2,000 years! Nevertheless, we should not allow ourselves to become lethargic about His eventual return (Habakkuk 2:3). The word "slumbered" is actually *nod*, a transient act, whereas "slept" should be *sleeping*, a continuous act. Thus, we see the progression of lethargy. First, the virgins nodded their heads as if napping, and later, they slept continuously and deeply. Initial weariness is the first step to further spiritual decay. It is vital to catch temporary apathy early to prevent permanent disillusionment.

The ten virgins' service and reverence to God is done perfunctorily. It is more of a habit than a sincere zeal, and this is seen in Christians' routine attendance at Sabbath services. They obey God almost mindlessly, developing it into a routine over time. Their lack of emotional maturity and forethought carries them through life in lightheaded bliss, and so they remain with the church, just filling a seat or attending only occasionally.

Those who follow the Lamb are called virgins (Revelation 14:4), symbolizing their spiritual purity, but it appears only half of the virgins are presented as the Bride to Christ. We have identified the ten virgins and analyzed the *similarities* of the two groups of five virgins. Next time, we will analyze their decisive *differences*.