

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 14, Number 8

September-October 2005



Our Spiritual
MARATHON OF HOPE

September-October 2005 Contents

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About Our Cover



Between April and August 1980, amputee Terry Fox ran his amazing Marathon of Hope. As Christians we are engaged in our own spiritual marathon, a lifelong process of overcoming and growth that builds character and ends as victors in the Kingdom of God. How is our pace?
Boris Spremo/Toronto Star

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Amos 5 and the Feast of Tabernacles

Deuteronomy 14:23 states regarding the Feast of Tabernacles, “And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.” Deuteronomy 16:15 adds, “Seven days you shall keep a sacred feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice.”

The feasts of God are events that we look forward to with a great deal of positive anticipation. And well we should because they are enjoyable physically and can be tremendously spiritually rewarding. However, experience has shown that, due to spiritual immaturity, there can be a kind of enjoyable dark side to Tabernacles, since it can easily be perceived as a vacation or a “godly” substitute for Christmas.

On the other side of the emotional ledger, there is also a share of trouble preparing for and traveling to them. Tabernacles, especially, can be wearying, and people have sometimes even become quite sick from the stress and consequently had a miserable time. On occasion, the Feast can even be a matrix for motivating family problems.

Overall, though, most of the time we enjoy God’s feasts immensely, cherishing the memories we have of the activities, the fine meals, the nice locations, and the time we spent with our spiritual and physical families—things we do not always have either the time or money to do at home.

Yet, we have to be somewhat cautious of this because we can enjoy doing similar kinds of things apart from the Feast—in fact, such experiences apart from the Feast happen frequently. The inherent danger is that, though God wants us to rejoice in keeping His Feast, it is easy to think that, because the Feast is indeed enjoyable, we had a “good” Feast.

Judgment of things like this is highly variable from one person to the next. People can attend the same site, hear the same messages, take part in the same activities, and all have a quite different evaluation of the quality of the Feast. We have all experienced this.

I can look back on one particularly bad Feast—it was not disastrous because no particular “bad” thing occurred—but in my evaluation, the 1974 festival I attended in St. Petersburg, Florida, was an all-time low. The site was not the problem, nor did anybody I attended with give any trouble. It was bad because I did little or nothing positive to make it a great Feast. I was just there soaking up the good times.

These two verses in Deuteronomy seem to be the ones we turn to most frequently when we refer to the Feast of Tabernacles. However, they primarily emphasize the potential for the enjoyable physical aspects. True, it does say we are to go to learn to fear God, but other scriptures focus more strongly on the spiritual aspects of the Feast, and they are considerable. Though little specific detail is given, there is enough to know that God expects the Feast of Tabernacles to be the year’s *spiritual* high-water-mark.

A Spiritual Bonanza

Leviticus 23:35-37 instructs regarding the Feast of Tabernacles:

On the first day there shall be a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it. For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it. These are the feasts of the LORD which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire to the LORD, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, everything on its day. . . .

The holy days and their offerings are shadows of good things to come (Hebrews 10:1). The offerings especially are indicative of many aspects of Christ's conduct and attitudes while serving God. We are to imitate Him (I John 2:6). Understood correctly, they represent the spiritual manner in which we are to observe these days.

Numbers 28:16-29:40 lists all the offerings to be made at the feasts. One can quickly see that more offerings were required for the Feast of Tabernacles than all other festivals combined. This ought to indicate what God expects regarding our conduct during the Feast of Tabernacles. He requires that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices so that it be most fruitful spiritually. It should be both a spiritual and physical feast whose fruit is rejoicing and learning to fear God as a result of the sacrifices done with understanding and a good attitude. This cannot be forced. It is the fruit of a right approach and use.

Nehemiah 8 records a significant festival period in Judah's history. This occasion begins on the Feast of Trumpets during the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall following the reestablishment of those Jews who chose to return from their Babylonian captivity. They had good cause for their emotional response to keeping this Feast of Trumpets in this particular location and time under the stresses they had already endured, all the while knowing that those stresses were not yet over. This was in all likelihood the first Feast of Trumpets observed in seventy years, and who knows how long the Jews had not observed it before they went into captivity?

Their joy continued, as verses 13-18 relate the first keeping of the Feast of Tabernacles in the land in a long time:

Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law. And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written." Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards, or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole congregation of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.

"Not since the days of Joshua the son of Nun had the children of Israel done so" probably means the Feast of Tabernacles had not been kept with the combination of all the elements in their right proportion to constitute a great Feast. They were obedient, in the right place, in the right attitude, with the right emphasis. The books of Kings and Chronicles provide records of the feasts being kept by Israelites during the period between Joshua and Ezra, but they did not always keep them consistently or correctly, especially in attitude and purpose.

However, we can see that Ezra understood the Feast of Tabernacles to be a spiritual bonanza whose fruit was rejoicing.

"Your Feast Days"

Isaiah 1:10-17 chronicles the time before Ezra and Nehemiah when Judah observed the feasts, yet in a wrong spirit and with reprehensible conduct. Isaiah preached this to the Jews about one hundred years before they went into captivity to Babylon:

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not

delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

This is a clear indictment of their spirit and attitude, advancing strong proof of why God later said through Ezekiel that Israel and Judah went into captivity because of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking (Ezekiel 20:12-21).

There is no reason to believe that, just because God says “your” new moons and “your” feasts, they were not the ones He appointed, at least in name. He could rightly call them “your feasts” because their keeping of them was so abominable that they bore no resemblance to His intent in commanding them to be observed. They were completely discordant with His character, as the listing of their sins shows.

He calls their giving of offerings, which were part of the spiritual aspects of keeping the feasts, vain and trampling His courts. He designates their prayers as an abomination, and their keeping of the feasts wearying to Him. Clearly, He had “had it up to here” with their Sabbath and festival observances. Have we examined our conduct recently in relation to our attitudes, approaches, and expectations for the Feast?

Until his calling by God, Amos lived and worked in Judah. However, God elected him—apparently a Jew and thus from the rival Southern Kingdom—to bear His challenging indictment against the Northern Kingdom’s sins, as well as His call for Israel’s repentance. Amos prophesied several decades before Isaiah against a nation that was much farther “down the tubes” than was Judah. Israel was very prosperous but already in the moral gutter, wallowing in the filth of her sins. It could easily have been an intimidating assignment, but Amos resolutely fulfilled his responsibilities in denouncing, among other things, Israelite attitudes and the ways they observed God’s festivals.

God says in Amos 5:21-23:

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offer-

ings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.

This sounds similar to Isaiah 1, but it is addressed to Israel. It is not certain if this involved God’s feast days since Jeroboam, Israel’s first king, changed a number of things in Israel’s worship after Solomon died. However, the context indicates that God may have accepted the days they kept and their offerings if everything else in their conduct had been righteous. They may well have been God’s feasts because, as in Isaiah, God is not against the days per se, but the attitude, character, and conduct of those keeping them. Whether they were actually God’s festivals is less important than the principles contained in the context. The entire chapter revolves around keeping the festivals in a way acceptable to God so that He might bless.

This is an interesting and instructive chapter regarding what God expects the keeping of feast days to do to and for His people. We will search it out in great detail in the hope that it will help us keep the feasts better.

Hear this word which I take up against you, this lamentation, O house of Israel: The virgin of Israel has fallen; she will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; there is no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord God: “The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.” (Amos 5:1-3)

The chapter begins as a funeral dirge, a lament, for Israel that is in reality a prophecy of what would soon happen to her. It is sung as though it had already happened even though its fulfillment—Israel’s fall and captivity to Assyria—was still about forty years off. Clearly, Israel’s conduct falls far short of God’s requirements.

Central to understanding verses 4-15 is the word “seek,” which appears four times: three times in relation to seeking God Himself and once to seeking good. The charge to seek God is not in the sense of searching to find Him—because He had already revealed Himself to them to some degree—but of seeking to be like Him.

A second important element is the listing of a number of their sins, all of which are what we would call “social sins.” Amos mentions the “poor” twice, but he does not necessarily imply a person with little money. The term includes them, but here the meaning is “weak.” The poor are those whom we would say have little or no economic, political, or judicial “clout” or “pull.” The sins Amos addresses are matters of the strong taking advantage of the weak.

He also mentions other sins that afflict the poor, such as bribery, unjust judgments in the courts, truth being ridiculed, and righteous testimony being thrown out. Amos especially indicts Israel’s corrupt court system.

Undoubtedly, the most important element in this passage, due to its impact on most of the instruction in the chapter, is the mention of Bethel, Beersheba, and Gilgal in verse 5. Amos notes these places because the Israelites were holding their festivals there. His overall

warning to the Israelites is, “Don’t go there because God is not there. Seek God instead.” The rest of the chapter tells why God is not there, why what they were doing is unacceptable to Him, and what He will do about it.

Bethel

Why does Amos specifically mention Bethel other than that it was where the Israelites were holding feasts? Why did they choose Bethel as a feast site? Bethel played an important role in Israel’s history. Twice Jacob, one of the fathers of Israel, has important events happen to him there.

Genesis 28:11-22 records the first occasion Jacob has an encounter with God at Bethel, though it was not called Bethel then. It received its name—“House of God”—from God revealing Himself to Jacob there, and Jacob believing that He lived there. On this occasion, the patriarch arrives as a homeless wanderer, a man on the run from the murderous intents of his brother Esau. He is a man with a past, having just deceived his father and brother out of the blessing. Nevertheless, God reveals Himself to him there, and the transformation of Jacob begins. He leaves Bethel as a man with a future.

The second time he encounters God at Bethel (Genesis 35:1-4, 7, 9-15), he arrives after departing from his father-in-law, Laban, and having reconciled with Esau. He is a far better man than the first time, but he is not yet complete. However, he arrives as “Jacob” and departs as “Israel.” The new name is assurance of the reality that he is a new man, that a transformation is taking place. In the Israelite mind, Bethel thus became associated as a place of renewal, of reorientation, of transformation by God.

Even as verses 1-3 of Amos 5 are a dirge, verses 8-9 are in the form of a hymn praising the true God, the transform-

ing God. When God is at work, things change for the better; He is the God who makes a difference.

With this background, we can understand why Amos 5 calls attention to Bethel. God is asking, “Why aren’t you Israelites being transformed in the conduct of your life when you keep the feasts?” He is saying, “You indeed go to Bethel for the feast, but no transformation of your conduct and attitude occurs. Are you going there to seek Me?”

One of the primary proofs that God is making a difference in a person’s life occurs when one who was formerly hostile to God and His law begins to love God and His law. He shows his new love by obeying God and His law in his life in areas like those mentioned in verses 10-12.

Yet, the Israelites attended the feasts in Bethel and returned home with their lives still ungoverned by God’s truth. When Jacob met God, his life began changing immediately, as his vow to tithe in Genesis 28:22 shows. Faith immediately became part of the conduct of his life. The lives of those in Amos’ day should also have changed according to the dictates, principles, and examples of God’s Word. They should have left Bethel singing and exemplifying, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97).

It seems that these people turned the feast in Bethel into nothing more than a vacation. Thus, Amos admonishes, “Do not seek Bethel! Seek the LORD and live!” Ultimately, the Bethel approach signifies death, not life.

Beersheba

What about Beersheba? It played a role in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Though the event for each was a little different, something was said to each that is significant to our lives, especially in light of the Holy Spirit.

Abraham’s incident at Beersheba is written in Genesis 21:22-24:

And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, “God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in

which you have sojourned.” And Abraham said, “I will swear.”

In this event, Abimelech utters the words that become central to what Beersheba came to represent to the Israelites: “God is with you in all that you do.” A pagan king observed Abraham’s life as one that reflected godliness.

In Isaac’s incident at Beersheba, recorded in Genesis 26:23-24, God Himself utters the assurance necessary for Isaac to trust Him: “Then He went up from there to Beersheba. And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for My servant Abraham’s sake.’” Like

(continued on page 17)

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly,
and he became angry.”

Jonah 4:1

The Refuser of Festivities

While thumbing through the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, I came across an intriguing subject. At first, it seemed strange and far-out, but after reading through it, I found it to be not only fascinating, but also quite appropriate for the season. The subject of the dictionary article was “Refuser of festivities.”

As defined in the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, a *refuser of festivities* “is one who, motivated by personal interests, chooses not to participate in joyful activities of the community.” In literature, such a person is often called a churl. Essentially, he refuses to be happy for others or to participate in some joyous event with others. In some cases, he declines any invitation to enjoy the good times of life.

What does the refusal of festivities have to do with Christian living? Could we possibly be guilty of this negative activity in our personal lives and in our fellowship with others in the church? With the fall feasts just around the corner, how can we relate it to them?

For starters, we can ask ourselves, do we rejoice when we see others receive a blessing, or do we gripe that it should have come to us instead? Do we fall into a bad attitude when

others are having a perfectly good time? Do we find fault with others’ wholesome activities just because we are not in the mood to be happy? On the other hand, there are certainly times that we must refuse to participate in people’s celebrations due to immorality or ungodliness.

On the surface, refusing festivities may seem like a small matter, but this attitude is part of what made Satan what he is. He could not be happy with the blessings, honor, and authority God had bestowed on him, and it eventually drove him to rebel and separate himself from the indescribable joy of being in God’s presence. In other words, he was discontented, making him incapable of true happiness. It led him to sin.

As the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* puts it, the Bible paints the churl in a “tragic hue”: “The refusal of festivities is always associated with sinfully misplaced priorities.” Those misplaced priorities distill down to one: self! “Me first.” “If I’m not happy, no one is going to be happy.” “I’m not happy, and everyone’s going to hear about it.” Perhaps we have heard others—or ourselves—say similar things from time to time. We will see that these are not godly traits.

"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry."

Old Testament Examples

There are many examples throughout the Bible of the refuser of festivities, beginning with its originator, Satan. He refused to be happy in the position in which God had placed him—in one of the highest offices in God's Kingdom (Ezekiel 28:12-16)! But this was not enough; he wanted to have it *his* way. He refused to rejoice and be content with what God was doing, so he rejected God and eternal life in His Kingdom!

Obviously, this is a very serious attitude to fall into. The apostle Paul takes great pains to explain to the church that God has placed each of us just where He wants us (I Corinthians 12:18). It is certainly fine to desire the best gifts for the good of God's purpose (verse 31), but unlike Satan, we need to be content and humble with what God has given us to this point (I Timothy 6:6). Then we can properly rejoice when honor comes, whether to others or to ourselves (I Corinthians 12:26).

An unmistakable example of refusing festivities in the Old Testament is that of the prophet Jonah. God gives Jonah a job to do, but he refuses and runs the other way. By the time we reach the end of the book, Jonah is pouting in anger. The people of Nineveh had heeded the warning delivered to them by Jonah and repented! Jonah, however, refuses to rejoice with them; he refuses to be happy after a marvelous example of God's mercy:

Then God saw [the Ninevites'] works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was this not what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled pre-

viously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm." (Jonah 3:10-4:2)

Instead of rejoicing and enjoying the mercy of God, Jonah wanted to see the people of Nineveh pay for their sins! It is clear by what Jonah

Michal, Saul's daughter, looked through a window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart. (verses 14-16)

Three times in this chapter, Michal is referred to as "Saul's daughter." Michal may have harbored some of the same contempt for David that

"And if one member suffers,
all the members suffer with it;
or if one member is honored,
all the members rejoice with it."

I Corinthians 12:26

says that he understood what God was doing. He understood God's mercy and forgiveness. He had a good understanding of God's character and His will, but from his own words in verse 2, he did not want God's mercy and grace to be showered on the people of Nineveh! They were Israel's enemies, and he did not want to have anything to do with bringing them good things from God. These pagan Assyrians were more receptive to God's will than Jonah was.

Michal's Pride

Another Old Testament example of a refuser of festivities is that of David's wife, Michal, whose story appears in II Samuel 6. The occasion of her churlishness was her husband's joyous celebration of the return of the Ark of the Testimony to Jerusalem.

Then David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet. And as the ark of the LORD came into the City of David,

her father showed the shepherd from Bethlehem. Maybe she was more her father's daughter than her husband's wife. Or perhaps the writer wants his audience to think, "Like father, like daughter" in terms of Saul's famous pride. He may have started out a humble man (I Samuel 10:17-24; 15:17), but his office went to his head. He seems to have passed this trait on to his daughter.

Then David returned to bless his household. And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, "How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself today in the eyes of the maids of his servants, as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!" So David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me instead of your father and all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel. Therefore will I play music before the LORD. And I will be even more undignified than this, and will be humble in my own sight. But as for the maidservants of whom you have spoken, by them I will be held in honor." There-

fore Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death. (II Samuel 6:20-23)

Michal, revealing another aspect of her nature, accuses David of dancing shamefully before the maids of his servants. Jealousy had set so deeply in her heart that it led her to despise her husband. Her embarrassment—which no one else seemed to share—blinded her to the larger occasion of giving God glory. She could see the celebration going on from her window, but in her self-centered jealousy and pride, she refused to rejoice with the rest of Israel.

She could only find fault. Proud Michal felt that her husband should do things the way *she* thought they should be done—evidently, with stately grandeur rather than wild abandon. Her jealousy caused her to try to make David feel guilty for celebrating as he did. The king does not let her off easily, but lets her have a piece of his mind!

Today, we might call Michal a “party pooper,” but in reality, her transgression was far more serious. Because she could not see past her

in full view of them night and day, via the cloud and the fire (Exodus 13:21), it took them only a few days to begin griping and pointing fingers.

They accused Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to die. They complained about the food. They whined about their leader running off. They grumbled about not having enough water. The children of Israel refused to be content with the way God chose to free them, and for their refusal, they did not enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:23; Psalm 95:7-11).

The New Testament has probably the best example of “refusers of festivities” in the whole Bible: the Pharisees, a group of men schooled in the Scripture. They knew God’s Word over and under, front and back. They went to great lengths to keep the law. They even knew that the Messiah was coming, but they refused to accept the way God chose to present Him.

The Pharisees had an accusation for every move Jesus made. They charged Him with gluttony, excessive drinking, and keeping bad company. They asked; “Why would the

rejoice in His Feast (Deuteronomy 14:26), we should add “refuser of festivities” to our list of points to consider. Is God’s Feast a joy to us, or do we feel burdened by it? Do we complain about the decisions of those in charge? Do we grumble about going to the same old Feast site? Do we gripe about the meeting hall, the hotel, or the restaurants? Do we criticize the spiritual food? Do we whine about too many activities or not enough? Do we protest the way certain situations are handled? Do we work ourselves into a disgruntled attitude before we ever get there? Are we quenching the Spirit by refusing to be happy and enjoy what God has provided?

A seventeenth-century English clergyman, Jeremy Taylor, once said, “God promises to do terrible things to people who refuse to be happy.” Paul writes something similar in Romans 8:6: “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” The “refuser of festivities” is one who allows human, carnal feelings to rule his or her actions. He will never have peace while in this state of mind, and his future will hold nothing but troubles.

The prophet Jonah should have understood the way God worked, and God tested him to see how the man would react to his given task. He was commanded to preach repentance to the Ninevites, but he rejected God’s instruction. Even when God set him back on track, he maintained his bad attitude throughout his mission. The author of the book leaves us hanging about whether he ever repented of his stubborn, sullen dissatisfaction.

We are likewise commanded to go to God’s Feast and rejoice. God has given us specific instructions on where, when, and how to keep it. What will be our attitude in celebrating it this year? Will we be festive Davids—or killjoy Jonahs?

—Ronny H. Graham

“For to be carnally minded is death,
but to be spiritually minded
is life and peace.”

Romans 8:6

baseless pride and jealousy, she was punished with barrenness. Some commentators suggest that she was not to come before the king the rest of her life!

Group Attitude

Groups—and even whole nations—can have this same attitude of refusing festivities. From a national point of view, the children of Israel were freed from 400 years of bondage, and were they happy! However, their rejoicing was short-lived. Though God provided their every need and stayed

Messiah keep company with sinners and the poor?” They attacked the miracles that He did and went so far as to prefer giving credit to Satan than to believe in Him (Matthew 12:24). Rather than rejoicing that God was with them in the flesh, they did their best to attack Him, and ultimately joined those who condemned Him to crucifixion!

Making It Personal

Feast time approaches, making it a good time to evaluate ourselves. Since God commands us to

“Ask five economists and you’ll get five different answers—six if one went to Harvard.” —Edgar

Part Two of this series focused on the causes and consequences of the new demographics, paying special attention to the “graying” exhibited by virtually all industrialized and industrializing nations. Societal aging and the economic difficulties it engenders appear to be waxing in both depth and breadth—in the magnitude of sub-replacement fertility rates and in the spread of these low rates around the planet. Part Three spotlights the economic solutions to what is increasingly becoming a global problem.

Governments are toying with a number of plans to remedy, or at least mollify, the problem of increasing pension payouts in the face of decreasing industrial and agricultural production in aging societies. Viable solutions, though, are hard to come by.

Economics’ Unforgiving Math

Two of the governments’ plans are these:

Raise the retirement age. Inarguably, a retirement age of 70 or so is consonant with the health and vigor many people today enjoy throughout their sixties. This fact of life stems from modern medicine and nutrition.

Accordingly, some economists have urged nations to index retirement age to life expectancies, hiking retirement age as life expectancies increase. Doing so, they claim, will “burn the candle at both ends.” An increase in the number of years people work will increase the amount of tax money flowing into national pension programs. At the same time, these fattened funds will experience less outgo, as people retire later in life, and therefore live fewer years as retirees. Raising the retirement age will increase the funds’ income while reducing the rate of their drawdown. It sounds like a solution made in heaven.

It will not work, at least, not for more than a moment. Creditable studies indicate that people who work longer save less money because they know they will have a shorter period of time to spend those savings. Lower aggregate saving will cancel out the effects of reduced pension outlays.¹ Raising the retirement age is not a solution because it does not address the real problem: It does absolutely nothing to raise fertility rates.

Increase taxes. Increased taxation is the common-

Big or Small: Does It Matter?

“Demography is destiny.” Auguste Comte’s aphorism, although overstated, offers a grain of truth. For, indeed numbers do count!

In His promises to the Patriarchs, God makes clear the implicit nexus between population and national power. Probably the clearest example of this connection is His covenant with Abraham, recorded in Genesis 17:4, 6: “. . . My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. . . . I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” Through this covenant, God promises both fecundity and national greatness—essentially in one breath. It may not be fair to say that one causes the other, or even that they are two sides of the same coin. However, they very often accompany one another.

The book of Exodus classically rehearses the conflict that can develop between different peoples as their relative population proportions shift. Changing demographics played a leading role in the interface between Egypt and God’s people at the time immedi-

ately before the Exodus. The children of Israel entered Egypt only 70 in number (Exodus 1:5), a decided minority. In time, they undoubtedly became major contributors to the Egyptian economy.

Recognizing this, the Egyptians came to believe that it was in their national interest to retain the labor pool afforded them by Israel at any cost. Eventually, however, the fertility of Israel became a concern to them; they reasoned that Egypt could lose the economic benefit of this ever-growing labor pool should Israel act unilaterally to build an alliance with any of Egypt’s enemies.

Their worst nightmare, in all likelihood, was the scenario that Israel could gain independence in event of war—even emigrate from Goshen. As a response to this perceived threat, the Egyptians developed a national policy of restricting Israel’s independence. This ultimately amounted to out-and-out enslavement (see Exodus 1:7-11). “But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel” (verse 12). At

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That Miss the Mark

r R. Fiedler

place panacea proffered for any problem. For instance, some writers have suggested that as much as a 68% increase in taxes will be necessary to prevent fiscal disaster in America's Social Security program. Certainly, there will be political pressure by one large voting block, the pensioners, to raise taxes. After all, with reduced incomes, they pay relatively low taxes. The many seniors in Florida, America's "oldest" state, where a frequently seen bumper sticker grins gleefully at the idea of retirees' spending their grandchildren's income, will not be threatened by higher taxes. Let the young work and pay!

This solution is even more wrong-headed and more unworkable than raising the retirement age. In an environment where sub-replacement fertility is persistent, increased taxation means simply this: An ever-decreasing number of young workers will be taxed at ever-higher rates to pay for a greater volume of pensions.

Patently, this new math will not mesh with the new demographics. In fact, higher taxes will be dysfunctional in the long run: Aside from resolving a short-term

fiscal crisis, higher taxes will only act to discourage young couples from having children.² They will not be able to afford them. In the end, higher taxes will merely deepen the problem. Again, this solution does nothing to resolve the root cause of the problem: low fertility.

While these solutions—and any number of others offered by economists—may temporarily ease the fiscal crisis faced by under-funded national pension programs, permanent answers they are not.³ They are makeshift at best because they are rooted in economic theory and practice, not in moral actions. What they represent are mankind's answers to a problem caused by his disobedience to God's command to multiply. To the extent that they attempt to circumvent this moral issue, they only worsen the problem.

Another group of individuals, biotechnologists, is proposing that mankind take another avenue to resolve the planet's aging problem. The technological solutions they propose are radical indeed. The last part of this series will examine the solution offered by biotech firms.

—Charles Whitaker

that point, the Egyptians attempted to enforce population control, going so far as to institute forced infanticide: "Every son who is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive" (verse 22). Of course, God intervened and freed His people.

In the ancient world, people represented power. The more people a king controlled, the bigger the army he could muster. This is the stuff of which empires were made. Today, even with the advent of weapons of mass destruction capable of being hurled around the world without the use of vast armies, people still represent power. The Russian, and later the Pole, came to understand where the Pope's armies were—in the parish churches, among common folk. Indeed, especially in democracies, people can form voting blocs that determine (or at least affect) domestic and even foreign policy.

The best example of this is a bloc that may become highly disruptive to the *status quo* of Europe: the Muslim population of France. Because their numbers

are growing prodigiously, the Muslims will soon become a significant bloc of voters in France. Closer to home, the Hispanic community in the American Southwest is exercising its muscle at the polls, as the newly elected Latino mayor of Los Angeles vividly proves.

Nicholas Eberstadt, writing in *Policy Review* ("Power and Population in Asia," February/March, 2004, p.3), cites some examples of balance-of-population shifts that might soon affect us all.

India/China. By 2025, China's population will grow by half, but India's will more than double. While a generation ago, China's population was half again larger than India's, in just one more generation, the two nations' populations will be within five percent of each other. Of course, population is not the only reason behind India's emergence as an economic powerhouse, there being any number of other important economic and social reasons as well, not the least of which is her

peoples' familiarity with the English language. Yet, for all that, population is certainly playing its part in India's current economic dynamism.

Pakistan/Russia. In 1975, Russia's population was about two times that of Pakistan. By 2025, that situation will be turned around a full 180-degrees: Pakistan's population will be almost twice that of Russia's. This fact, coupled with Pakistan's possession of nuclear arms, will certainly change the balance-of-power

equation in central and eastern Asia.

Will any of these shifts in relative population weights change the way nations do business with one another? Count on it! Changing demographics within regions, among religious and ethnic subgroups, as well as between nations, will result in instabilities and in new strategies to cope with them. Changes in population, such as outlined above, will surely bring new definitions of national identities and interests, as well as realignments of economic and military force.

Who is Malthus? Who is Ehrlich?

Thomas Malthus is widely credited with being the father of demographics, the study and measurement of populations. A Calvinist minister who died in 1834, Malthus believed that food supplies grow arithmetically: 1, 2, 3, 4. But, because couples in his day frequently had many children, he noted that population grows exponentially: 2, 4, 8, 16. In other words, population grows much faster than food. Since there is a physically limited amount of arable land on the planet, population growth will inevitably outstrip food production.

This unforgiving and inexorable math dooms mankind to live in a fallen world of famine and starvation. Only the Four Horsemen, riding repeatedly throughout the course of history, will be able to control runaway population by slaying people the planet cannot sustain anyway. Malthus' Calvinist background, with its dark view of mankind's total depravity, colored his thinking.

In many ways, Malthus was one of the seminal thinkers of our time. In his *Autobiography*, Charles Darwin, himself certainly a seminal thinker, wrote in 1838 that, upon reading Malthus "for amusement," he "had at last got a theory by which to work." Malthus' ideas provided the jelly that would serve as the foundation of Darwin's equally gelatinous theories of natural selection and survival of the fittest.

If Darwin had Huxley to popularize his hypotheses, if Marx had Engels to popularize his, Malthus had Paul Ehrlich. More properly, Malthus had a sensationalist. In his infamous book, *The Population Bomb*, first published in 1968 and re-released in 1971, Ehrlich histrionically prophesied that India would starve in the early 1990s, that Europe would "dissolve" by then, that New York City would

experience food riots before the year 2000. History discredited his overwrought predictions.

Ehrlich, who incidentally defends his ideas to this day, failed to plug the advances of technology into his equations. He failed to recognize the importance of the so-called "Green Revolution" of the 1970s and beyond, as well as advances in genetic engineering—whole clusters of technologies that have effectively increased food production far faster than population growth. India is quickly becoming a world-class economic power, and, by the way, an *exporter* of food. No, famine has not forced the dissolution of Europe and food riots have not rocked New York City.

Even more significantly, Ehrlich failed to consider statistical evidence that was becoming available even as *The Population Bomb* was going to press in the late 1960s. By then, some astute demographers had become aware of an important countertrend: Fertility rates were falling. If those declines were not temporary but proved long term, it would be only a matter of time before total world population would begin falling. Rather than explode, population would implode.

Nevertheless, *The Population Bomb*, popularizing as it did the term *population explosion*, was like a stick of dynamite detonated in a bed of snails. The blast spread slimy Malthusian ideas all over the place and resulted in a whole genre of socialist-inspired, anti-capitalistic books in the 1970s, the most notorious probably being *Famine 1975!* by William and Paul Paddock.

For a readable and concise critique of Malthus, see Bailey, Ronald, "The Law of Increasing Returns," *The National Interest*, Spring 2000, p. 113.

Endnotes

¹ Kotlikoff, Laurence J., and Burns, Scott, *The Coming Generational Storm: What You Need to Know About America's Economic Future*.

² Kurtz, Stanley, "Demographics and the Culture War," *Policy Review*, February/March 2005, p. 33.

³ Kurtz suggests indexing Social Security benefits to prices,

not wages. Others have suggested attaching a means test for Social Security benefits. Perhaps the most useful single answer is that of Laurence Kotlikoff ("Privatizing Social Security the Right Way," *The Independent Review*, Summer 2000.) This article was adapted from testimony before the U.S. House of Representative, June 3, 1998.

Our Spiritual Marathon of Hope

On March 3, 1977, the life of a young Canadian man changed course forever. The young man had been diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, a cancerous tumor that makes bone go soft. This resulted in him having to have his right leg amputated six inches above the right knee. This life-altering cancer did not cause him to go into depression or feel sorry for himself, but instead he proclaimed, “I’m not ready to leave this world.”

The night before the surgery, he picked up a magazine and read an inspiring story of amputee Dick Traum, who had run the New York City Marathon a few years earlier. He thought that he, too, would like to run a marathon with his prosthetic leg.¹ In the fall of 1979, he hatched a plan to raise money for cancer research by running across Canada. His goal: \$1 for every Canadian. This journey would be run on the Trans-Canada Highway, the world’s longest highway, spanning a distance of 4,860 miles.

The “Marathon of Hope” was born.

On April 12, 1980, he dipped his prosthetic right leg in the frigid waters of the Atlantic Ocean, off Canada’s easternmost province, Newfoundland. For the next 143 days, this twenty-one-year-old man with a prosthetic leg ran 143 marathons. Think about that! He ran 143 marathons in 143 days. How many elite athletes the world over could do that?

On August 31, just outside Thunder Bay, Ontario, with 3,339 miles behind him, he was forced to stop. The cancer had returned, and he was no longer

physically able to complete the Marathon of Hope.

What occurred in those 143 days changed a nation, leaving an indelible impression in the minds of millions of people around the world. This young man made a difference beyond anything he could have imagined. His name was Terry Fox.

The story of Terry Fox can help to inspire us as we run our own spiritual Marathons of Hope, and to encourage us to build the godly character necessary to fulfill the offices being prepared for us in the Kingdom of God.

Discovering Spiritual Cancer

In what seemed like an instant, Terry’s life changed forever when he learned that he had cancer of the right knee, which resulted in him having that leg amputated in order to save his life. Did we not also experience a life-changing event when God called us, an event that saved our lives? He opened our minds to see His truth and the truth about our spiritual health. We were filled with the leaven of this world; we had spiritual cancer—sin.

In an instant, we were faced with the piercing truth about man’s, as well as our own, track record on this earth. The Bible clearly tells us in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (with the obvious exception of Jesus Christ). Members of God’s church know Jeremiah 17:9 very well; most can quote it from memory: “The heart is deceitful

above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

God reveals to all mankind the dwelling place of our spiritual cancer: the human heart. If left untreated, this spiritual cancer carries the same penalty as physical cancer: death (see Ezekiel 18:4, 20)! The human heart—where sin festers to the point where it can become so out of control that one cannot grasp his own depravity—is incurably sick. In effect, we all need a spiritual heart transplant.

The people of God's church have been given an opportunity not afforded to the rest of mankind. God has essentially offered us this heart transplant—a cure to our spiritual cancer made possible by only two things:

- The sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ for all of the sins of mankind (John 3:16), and
- The indwelling of God's Spirit to enhance the operation (II Corinthians 1:21-22).

By His merciful calling, God has given us the greatest hope possible that any human being can be given—the hope of eternal life in His Kingdom. In reality, God is the One who begins our spiritual Marathon of Hope.

Nobodies of the World

Terry Fox was just a young kid with curly hair who decided to make a difference by running across Canada to raise money for cancer research. He set this goal for the benefit of others, not himself. He knew the risks and the probable toll his run would take on his body, but he did it anyway. Not only was this a remarkable goal, but it originated with someone who came completely out of the woodwork. Terry was essentially a nobody.

We Christians share this same trait; we are not the movers and shakers of this world. We are not heads of state, royalty, leaders in government, or the academic elite. We are *nobodies*, plain and simple. This should not burst anyone's bubble. It is simply a fact of life.

The apostle Paul captures this beautifully in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (I Corinthians 1:26-29)

Let us take stock of our situation. God has given us the

diagnosis that we are full of spiritual cancer—sin. He then offers us the only possible cure to our terminal illness: a heart transplant that can only occur through the shed blood of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit imparted to us at our baptism (Romans 6:1-8). As nobodies, but equipped with God's Spirit, we begin our spiritual Marathon of Hope.

Nobodies Making a Difference

April 2005 marked the 25th anniversary of Terry Fox's Marathon of Hope, and to commemorate this event, the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper ran a special feature entitled, "25 Days of Hope." It ran one article per day for each year of the anniversary, recounting stories of people whose lives intersected and were changed by the inspiring young man who ran the Marathon of Hope.

In one of these articles, "One of those moments that touched the soul,"² Marion Shynal reflects back to the ten-minute encounter that still burns brightly in her mind. It is because, she says, "There aren't many moments in a lifetime that touch the soul."

It was late afternoon on August 28, 1980. Ms. Shynal, her parents and her aunt drove along a remote section of the Trans-Canada Highway near the shores of Lake Superior. The family was enjoying the rugged terrain, punctuated by windswept pines and pink granite, when the sightseeing was interrupted by an oncoming police cruiser motioning to proceed with caution.

"I thought there was an accident," recalls Ms. Shynal. "But around a rocky bend, there he was: Terry Fox. He was running alone at the side of the Trans-Canada. His Winnebago was following behind, at a distance."

The Shynals pulled to the side of the road, as had a few truckers. There were probably about 12 people in all, said Ms. Shynal, on hand to cheer for the courageous young man.

"Terry ran by, and we all applauded, with big lumps in our throats."

As she watched him make his way, Ms. Shynal said, she began to understand the enormity of Terry Fox's accomplishment.

"He was so alone out there in the wilderness, doing what he believed in, even when nobody was paying attention."

There are a couple of powerful statements contained in this excerpt—and please remember, this was only a ten-

minute encounter!—that apply to us as we run our spiritual marathon.

Unfortunately, we do not have people standing on the figurative roadside, cheering us on. However, God is surely planting seeds in the minds of those with whom we interact, perhaps in preparation for a future time when they will be resurrected to physical life and begin to learn to live God's way. Then, and possibly only then, will people begin to understand the enormity of *our* accomplishment. It sometimes feels as if we are all alone, but like Terry Fox, we are doing what we believe in, even when no one is paying attention.

We Can Make a Difference

God's Word is replete with examples of people who have made a difference. We have been called to make a difference, not only in the Kingdom of God, but now as physical human beings on this earth.

The story of Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, provides an illustration of this:

Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. And the Syrians had gone out on raids, and had brought back captive a young girl from the land of Israel. She waited on Naaman's wife. Then she said to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy." And Naaman went in and told his master, saying "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel." Then the king of Syria said, "Go now, and I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So he departed and took with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing." (II Kings 5:1-5)

This is an account that God felt was important enough to have it recorded for all time. In this example, most readers quickly grasp the story line that involves Naaman going to Elisha the prophet to be healed of his leprosy. However, what about the person who is the catalyst in helping Naaman to be healed? Most of us pass right over this "nobody." All we are able to learn about her is that she is a young girl from the land of Israel who becomes the servant to Naaman's wife. She makes an impassioned suggestion to help Naaman become healed of the leprosy that plagues him.

Notice how Naaman recounts her words to the king of Syria: "Thus and thus said the girl who is from the land of Israel." He seems to trivialize her words to the king, maybe because of her position as servant. Yet this nobody made a life-saving difference in the life of a great and noble man (verse 1).

Do we have to be an important "somebody" to make a difference? Obviously, no! Do we get up each day determined to make a difference in some person's life? We can. It is an admirable goal.

In mid-October, the church of God will keep the Feast of Tabernacles. Here is a bold challenge: Attempt to make a difference in the life of one person in the church every day of the Feast. This may be as simple an action as inviting someone into our group of friends, taking him out to lunch or dinner, or just taking the time to get to know him better.

Further, may I also dare you to make a difference in the life of someone *not* in the church? We will be surprised how easy this is to do, and it will add to our Feast immensely. If "natural" opportunities do not seem to present themselves, then create them. We may have to put on our thinking caps!

We have added our rightful place to the spiritual marathon equation, not only in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of the world. God certainly does not want us to remain foolish, weak nobodies, but to move and grow towards "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Character

Although Terry Fox was athletic by nature, to run 143 marathons in 143 days was more than pure athleticism. What separated this incredible young man from the rest of the pack? What makes Terry's legacy live on twenty-five years later?

It can be summed up in one word: **character!**

Many exceptional athletes are not remembered simply because they did not display any character. Most elite athletes are selfish creatures; they spend their whole careers trying to better themselves, usually to attain the pinnacle of their sport. The few who reach this much-dreamed-about and coveted level enjoy all the accolades, praise, and idol-worship that come with it. Our Western culture today is dominated by idol-worship. Such athletes become "somebodies" that many admire. There is nothing wrong with looking up to someone, but do those who admire superstars want to emulate their character—or merely their skill?

Though men like to be idolized for their skills and accomplishments, character is the most impressive trait that anyone can display. It is the most underrated, under-emphasized, and under-taught trait in society today, but when true character is displayed, nobody misses it. Character is unmistakable.

It has been said that character is built fastest through adversity, and this was true for Terry. Every one of those "25 Days of Hope" articles touched on various points of his character. For instance:

Because Terry was finishing his run for the day, the Shynals had a few minutes with him. "He was so

polite and soft-spoken. And he was very humble, which drew me to him even more.”

After a couple of pictures, a handshake and an autograph signed on the back of a paper bag, the Shynals were once again on the road, awed by what they had witnessed.³

We are called to build a different type of character, the very nature and character of God. This character has a unique trait that separates it from the character of the world. It provides an example that makes those who are not in God’s church know that God’s way of life is warm and inviting, one that draws people to Him. Building this type of character is the loftiest goal for any human. Of ourselves, we could never attain it, but as Jesus Christ pointed out to His disciples, “with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).

These days, it is “easy” to stand out from the pack by demonstrating godly character. Doing so may not always bring positive results or praise, but it does plant seeds in others’ minds, which may germinate immediately, or the next day, week, month, or year—possibly even years or decades down the road. The point is that, when we correctly witness for God by being excellent examples of His holy, righteous character, we leave an indelible impression in the minds of those in whom God wants it left.

We have now moved on from the diagnosis of our terminal illness, been baptized, and are well underway on our spiritual Marathon of Hope. Our goal is to be born into the Family of God, and we have strived to have His very character developed within us. Now what do we do with it?

A Great Message for the Future

Referring to Terry Fox’s achievements, *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Carrie Kristal-Schroder writes, “He taught us that one individual can make a difference, that life isn’t just about ourselves—it’s bigger than that.”⁴

We are living in a time when many people in the church of God are enduring sore trials. A number of church members are tired because their race has been so long. Others have contemplated throwing in the towel, and sadly, some *have* thrown it in, considering their trials too difficult to endure.

We must not give up! Why? Because this is not just about us! God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ have provided us, and the rest of mankind, with the greatest hope possible: the opportunity to be born into the Family of God. John 17:3 gives us a taste of how glorious this will be: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” What an awesome thought! It should cause us to think seriously about the importance of our roles now, while we are still physical human beings.

Have we ever considered that, as resurrected “former human beings” in the Family of God, *we* will be able to give

the people who live during the Millennium something that even God the Father and Jesus Christ cannot? Astonishing but true! What is the one thing that Jesus Christ and God the Father have never done? They have never sinned. We, of course, have all sinned, but our human faults will serve a positive use. If nothing else, our lives of overcoming and growth will be used as examples, and as converted spirit beings, our very glorified existence may inspire millions to overcome. This sheds an exciting light on Isaiah 30:20-21:

And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction [which help to build character], yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, but your eyes shall see your teachers, your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.

What will it take to back up our saying, “This is the way, walk in it”? God will give us the ability to build virtually instant credibility with those who will live as human beings in the World Tomorrow. We will be able to provide them with a hope that is unique, based on *our* human experience—a hope that they, too, can overcome through God’s Spirit and be born into His Family. They will look at us and declare, “If he could do it, then, with God’s help, so can I!”

Terry Fox died on June 28, 1981, one month before his twenty-third birthday. Since his death, more than \$360 million has been raised for cancer research as a direct result of his efforts. The “Terry Fox Run” is held yearly in sixty countries around the world.

Like Terry, we have been called to be a part of something much bigger than ourselves. God has called us to make a difference, and our difference will have consequences far beyond what Terry ever achieved. We will administer God’s government as kings and priests with Jesus Christ (Revelation 5:10)!

One of Terry’s best-known phrases is, “Nobody is ever going to call me a quitter,” so as we continue to run our spiritual Marathon of Hope, we need to remember what a privilege it is to be in the race at this point in history. If we do not quit, our lives, which may be marred by many trials and afflictions, will not only benefit us, but will provide hope to countless people in the Kingdom of God.

—Warren Lee

Endnotes

¹ “Top Ten Greatest Canadians—Terry Fox,” http://www.cbc.ca/greatest/top_ten/nominee/fox-terry.html, accessed July 18, 2005.

² Kristal-Schroder, Carrie. “One of those moments that touched the soul,” *Ottawa Citizen on the Web*, April 14, 2005, <http://www.canada.com/ottawa/ottawacitizen/terryfox/story.html?id=da948ad2-99a3-4076-a0be-a33c505d5d9a>, accessed July 18, 2005.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

(continued from page 6)

Isaac, we need assurance, we need to believe, that God is with us.

In Jacob's case, he is on his way to Egypt to meet with Joseph, filled with a stressful mixture of joy and fear, when the event of Genesis 46:1-4 occurs:

So Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely

bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes."

Thus, at Beersheba, each of the three patriarchs receives assurance of the companionship of God. What might have been the reaction of the Israelites when Amos said, "Don't pass over to Beersheba"?

It is a pastor's responsibility, not only to help to build peoples' trust in God, but also from time to time to sow doubt about their condition or standing before God. This is necessary because we often assume that all is well in our relationship with God. Amos filled not only the role of prophet but also of pastor of these wayward people, who were falsely confident in their standing with God.

Seek a Means of Life

An analysis of Paul's writings shows that his tactics at meeting church problems varied. At times, he energetically battered the opposition's position, and at others, he merely asked questions accompanied by some well-placed, incisive, solid, logical reasoning. In Amos 5:5, the prophet uses some strong imperatives, then turns to a recitation of matters the Israelites would have immediately recognized as accurate, even though they might not have accepted the truth of his statements.

Could these people have assumed—because of the general prosperity in Israel—that God was with them in all they did, despite all the evidence of their sinfulness Amos observed during their festival in Beersheba? Were they blind to the fact that prosperity is no guarantee that one is righteous before God?

The essence of the "God is with you" promise is that all is well and peace exists between God and a person; there is no barrier or constraint between them, and harmony reigns. Thus, the two can walk together because they have an understanding (Amos 3:3)—in fact, they may even have a covenant.

Amos had many reasons to believe that their assumption that God was with them was on shaky ground. First, in Amos 5:6, he briefly warns them of the fire of God's judgment, an allusion to the Day of the Lord, soon to fall upon them. He knows they are not seeking God to walk in His steps, so he proceeds to list a number of their sins. Finally, in verses 18-20, he shows them that they had no fear of the consequences of their way of life.

They truly assumed that everything was okay between them and God despite the sorry record of their sins that Amos laid before them! They completely ignored the fact that they, in reality, lived their lives apart from God. They really did not know the God they claimed to be walking with!

Consider the seriousness of verses 14-16:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. Therefore the LORD God of hosts, the Lord, says this. . . .

Nowhere else in the Bible do three successive verses feature the awesome name, "the LORD God of hosts," underscoring His leading the armies of heaven! Amos is making a very strong point by drawing their attention to the sovereign, omnipotent God of Armies, who is so far above us He is out of sight. These complacent people might choose to believe they were walking with Him, but it begs the question, did this great God want to walk with them as they were?

Adam would have happily remained in the Garden, provided he could hide, but God knew He could not allow such a condition to continue. What good would it do Adam? The Israelites' complacency had been telling them that, when the Day of the Lord arrived, God would side with His people, making it a day of great glory for them. Instead, Amos informs them that it would be just the opposite! It is a time of wailing and disaster (verses 16-17). They had been feeding themselves on false hopes. God says, "I will pass through you"!

In saying, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken" (verse 14), Amos admonishes them to seek holiness. He is urging them to see that it is not just a way or rule of life, but a *means* of life. Hebrews 12:14 confirms its importance, ". . . without holiness no one will see the Lord." When the people of God follow the way that accords with God's will, they come into possession of life. We must never presume God's grace or take it for granted. We must always fervently seek and submit to the will of God in order to be in His Kingdom.

Gilgal

Finally, what is Gilgal's significance in Israel's spiritual history? Israel's first experience at Gilgal occurs when the people cross into the Promised Land under Joshua: "Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho" (Joshua 4:19). In Gilgal, they set up the twelve stones taken from the Jordan as a memorial of their crossing (verse 20-24).

Joshua 5:1-12 records that it was in Gilgal that all the Israelite males who had been born during the forty years in the wilderness were circumcised, thus entering into the Old Covenant—in effect, becoming God's nation in the land. Verse 10 shows that they kept the first Passover in the Promised Land in Gilgal, and in verse 12, where they first ate the fruit of the land.

Chapters 9, 10, and 14 show that Joshua launched his military attacks from Gilgal against the people of the land to secure it for Israelite inhabitation. I Samuel 11:14-15 records that Saul was confirmed as Israel's first king in Gilgal. All this early history of Israel's occupation of Canaan made Gilgal a shrine to the Israelites' inheritance and possession of the land.

However, Amos again hits the people with a precisely aimed lightning bolt by saying, "Gilgal shall surely go into captivity [exile]" (Amos 5:5). He then fastens that thought more firmly in their minds by making it personal: "'Therefore I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus,' says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts" (verse 27). In other words, even though they observed a festival in the shrine that commemorated possession of the Promised Land, those prosperous, lukewarm people listening to him would lose the land and be taken into captivity.

From this knowledge, we can begin to understand the attitude that Amos confronted. Generally, complacency or apathy was the problem, but specifically, it was much narrower.

With the Bethel illustration, Amos points out that they were mistaken in believing that God was in this place, and therefore their hope for life was a hollow one. They were assuming that

simply because they were there, it would work in their favor.

The Beersheba illustration makes them face the fact that they were assuming God was with them. Their pride was almost boundless. They should have been asking whether God was pleased to walk with them.

The Gilgal illustration deals with their assumption that, because they were not only in the Promised Land but in full possession of it, everything was thus well with them.

Amos 5 highlights three critical assumptions, all of which are factors in a doctrine evangelical Christians term "eternal security." The context of the chapter shows a wealth of religious activity (verses 21-26). Amos mentions religious festivals, animal sacrifices, and music they believed to be glorifying to God, all indicating worship services of some kind. They went in for religion in a big way! Undoubtedly, they were wholehearted about it, so it was probably emotionally satisfying to them. But what good is worship if it does not get through to God? This is what Amos reveals to them. All of their enthusiasm was for naught because their daily lives did not match God's standards.

We are assured of making it into God's Kingdom on the strength of His ability to prepare us. So what is the problem? Verse 24 gives us some insight: "But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The first phrase can just as easily read, "Let justice [or, *judgment*] roll down." There is a clever play on a word here, as *Gilgal* means "the rolling." The people attended the festivals in Gilgal, but before their arrival and after they returned home, justice and righteousness failed to roll down—we might say "trickle down"—into their everyday life. Things went on as before. They had fun at the feast all right, but nothing changed spiritually.

Justice is the fruit of righteousness. When linked as they are in this verse, *justice* stands for correct moral practice in daily life, and *righteousness* for the cultivation of correct moral principles. Justice is external, righteousness is internal. The trouble with Gilgal was that the people allowed their human nature to keep their religion in a box with no way for it to influence daily life.

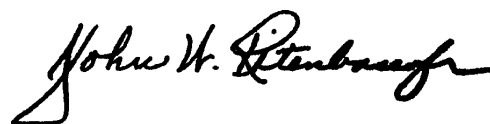
Our Priorities Are Spiritual

Together, these three illustrations show that our relationship with God is not a game. Each of His festivals has a serious purpose in keeping us oriented toward the completion of His purpose for us as individuals, for His church, for Israel, and in due time, for the whole world. Presently, attention is focused on the church and our part in its life. The church exists to serve Him in witnessing the gospel to the world by our lives, as well as by preaching. We cannot witness well without preparation, and the festivals play an important role in this.

Let us all make sure that at this year's Feast of

Tabernacles we give spiritual matters first priority in our minds, and let rejoicing be its fruit. The Feast is not a vacation, not a gospel concert, not a social tea party, not a substitute for a Christmas shopping binge. Even though it may have elements of these, we should not let them dominate. Make this Feast a springboard for significant, positive change!

In Christian love,



Stats and Sin: Measuring Peoples' Morals A Case Study of Canada and the United States

Canada and the United States share more than space on the same continent and a long boundary. Their peoples also enjoy a common language, a similar European heritage, and comparable democratic institutions. Of course, both nations descend from Abraham through Joseph.

The two countries have a long tradition of cooperation. In fact, the forces of convergence have been so great at times that some commentators in the 1950s actually predicted they would ultimately merge. Of course, that degree of consolidation never happened. Current trends lead analysts to see increasing *divergence* between them. Like many brothers, Canada and America do not see eye-to-eye on everything. For instance, since the late 1960s, the Canadian elite have Europeanized their nation much faster than their counterparts immediately to the south. For instance, Canada's government since the early 1970s has been much more left-of-center than America's.

Nevertheless, Barbara Torrey and Nicholas Eberstadt, ("The Northern America Fertility Divide," *Policy Review*, August/September 2005, p. 39) speculate that the differences between Canada and America in controversies like "Iraq, missile defense, lumber, gay marriage and marijuana . . . may not be the biggest ones." Underlying all these spats are basic differences in *values*. The indicators of this more "fundamental" divergence lie in the "steadily increasing differentiation of demographic trends in North America."

The basic demographic indicator of this divergence is the significant variance in total fertility rate (TFR) over that last half century. TFR gives the average number of births a group of women will have during their lifetimes. In 1945, Canada's TFR was 3.0, a full half-child higher than American women's 2.5 children each. Today, however, the American TFR is about 2.00, while the Canadian TFR is 1.49, a significant disparity of 0.51. In other words, "Canadians have 25% fewer children than Americans today." About 20 of those 51 points can be explained by the higher fertility rate of American minorities. What explains the other 31 points?

- **Marriage Rate Differences.** In part, the 51-point disparity is attributable to Canada's lower marriage rate. Fewer people marry and produce offspring. Both nations' marriage rates were at parity until 1979: Nine Canadians per 1,000 married yearly, against ten Americans per 1,000. Today, however, Canada's marriage rate is fully 40% lower than America's. Why? It appears that extra-marital cohabitation is much more frequent in Canada, where tax and pension laws are more "friendly" to cohabitating couples.

- **Common-Law Rate Differences.** Yet another part of the disparity can be explained by Canada's higher rate of common-law relationships. In

1981, 6% of Canadian couples were common-law, a number that grew to 14% by 2001. During those same twenty years, the American cohabitation rate also registered an increase, from 3 to 6%. While not praiseworthy, America's rate is less than half that of Canada's. Obviously, such casual relationships are less apt to produce children than wedded relationships.

- **Abortion Rate Differences.** However, the abortion rate differential explains the lion's share of the disparity in TFR—no less than 35% of the Canadian-American fertility gap. Since 1975, abortions per 1,000 Canadian women have *increased* 66.7%, from 0.3 to 0.5, while abortions per 1,000 American women have *decreased* about 12%, from 0.8 to 0.7.

The 1980s tell the story. In 1980, 42% of Americans deemed that abortion "can never be justified." Just ten years later, only 33% took that view. Shamefully, the percentage of Americans willing to murder their children increased by 20% during the 1980s. Sadly, the Canadian figures are even more shocking. In 1980, 38% of Canadians saw no justification for abortion under any circumstances, yet by 1990, only 21% felt that way. The number of Canadians who had adopted more liberal views on abortion grew by 46%—almost half! These views translate into actions—into abortions, which lower the number of births a woman has in her lifetime. No wonder the Canadian total fertility rate is 25% lower than America's!

Statistics may seem cold, boring, and impersonal, but they really are not. Albeit sometimes imperfectly, they reflect peoples' actions, which in turn derive from their values, their belief systems. Behind every cold stat lies a value, a belief. *Statistics are driven by a people's values.* Values regarding the importance of marriage and the horror of abortion explain at least a part of the 51-point disparity in fertility between these two North American nations, so alike in many ways, but so different in others.

Actions count. Low fertility rates translate over time into an increase in a nation's average age because not enough children are being born to offset the ever-aging adults. In 2000, Canada's median age was 36.9, against America's 35.2. At current replacement rates, by 2025 Canada's median age will be 43.5, against America's 39.0. By then a full 22.9% of Canadian citizens will be over 65, against 12.7% over that age today. This increased number of seniors will put pressure on Canada's healthcare systems. Taxes will be raised, weakening the economy, lowering the standard of living overall, and ironically, discouraging young people from having children. So, over time, the fertility problem will just get worse.

Let no one ever tell you that morals are relative and neutral. Wrong beliefs produce bad results, and bad results hurt everyone. ■

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 PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13*

Part One: Introduction

Matthew 13 contains Christ's explanation of His use of parables as a way of teaching. In analyzing these parables, we discover the King's personal view of His Kingdom through the past, present, and future of the history of His church. They seem not to reveal as much about the church's eternal characteristics as about its day-to-day efforts resulting from Christ's work in coming into the world. They act as a prophetic summary of the historical development of God's church. The recurring phrase "kingdom of heaven" denotes Christ's work through His church to make known "the word of the kingdom" (verse 19), that is, to announce the good news of the coming Kingdom of God.

The chapter contains eight parables. Jesus gave the first four to the mixed multitude, while He told the last four to the twelve disciples in private. After the first series of four parables, Matthew writes, "All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them" (verse 34). These four parables describe the outward characteristics of the church, the working of the mystery of sin against the church, and the extent to which the Evil One is allowed to go in his opposition. The remaining four parables illustrate the inner characteristics of His church. After the eighth parable, Matthew makes another concluding statement, ". . . when Jesus had finished these parables, . . . He departed from there" (verse 53).

The parables can also be grouped into related pairs that illustrate the church's different characteristics:

First Pair: *The Sower* (verse 3) represents the relationship of the church to the different groups of people with which it comes into contact while doing its work. *The Tares* (verse 24) represents the relationship of the church to the wicked one and his agents.

Second Pair: *The Mustard Seed* (verse 31) represents the dynamic growth of the church from small beginnings even while adversaries confront it. *The Leaven* (verse 33) represents the progress of the church against and despite the contagious outspread of sin.

Third Pair: *The Treasure* (verse 44) represents the preciousness of Christians to Christ, who can see their hidden value and sacrifices all to possess them. *The Pearl* (verse 45) represents the preciousness of the Church to Christ, who sacrifices everything to acquire it.

Fourth Pair: *The Dragnet* (verse 47) teaches that the good and evil who intermingle on earth will be completely separated in the judgment. *The Householder* (verse 52) represents the work of the true minister and teacher who feeds the household of faith from a rich storehouse of essential spiritual treasures.

Taken together, the stories describe the characteristics and dynamism of the church, its formidable obstacles, and its ultimate victory. They show Christ working through His messengers to preach the gospel of the Kingdom between the time of His first and second comings.

The first parable, *The Sower*, and the eighth, *The Householder*, are key, the first introducing and anticipating all of the parables, and the last concluding and reflecting back on the whole, stating the church's purpose and duty under the authority of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus finished the first seven parables, He asked His disciples, "Have you understood all these things?" That they understood made it possible for Jesus to conclude with a final parable that reveals the responsibility of the disciples as "scribes" in the church, "instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven" (verse 52). The apostles, and the church Jesus would build, would bring forth a treasure of knowledge and understanding, "things new and old."

Jesus teaches us by the simplicity and shortness of His parables that directness and brevity are effective teaching tools. His method stands in sharp contrast to the involved and lengthy style of some Bible commentators. Jesus gave clear and precise illustrations to which His audience could relate. Farmers listened to pictures of agricultural life. Wives could grasp His word pictures from home life. Merchants could relate to illustrations from the business world that translated into spiritual principles. Jesus also spoke of common civic duties and social events. Portrayals of nature scenes provided Him with analogies with which to express spiritual truth. Jesus used pictures that fit the occasion in a way that preserved their naturalness.

Only Christ's disciples can really understand the true spiritual principles involved in the parables, "because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 11). They were inspired by His Father in heaven, "[for] all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15), therefore "blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:16).

In Part Two, we will analyze the Parable of the Sower.