

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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PHILISTINES?

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Philistine warriors captured by the forces of Rameses III march along the walls of the temple at Medinet Habu. Until recently, little was known about these Sea Peoples beyond what is written in the Bible and on a few ancient monuments and tablets. As archeologists find more artifacts, our knowledge of Philistine culture expands, adding detail to the biblical record.

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Power Belongs to God

Part One

For many years, the message I have given on the Feast of Tabernacles' opening service has been titled "The Handwriting Is on the Wall," which comes from Daniel 5:5-6:

In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.

The phrase, "the handwriting is on the wall," has become a cliché in Israelite cultures, instructing us in retrospect that, an event having concluded with bad results, we should have known better. Being forewarned, we should have foreseen the result. We should have recognized that warning signs were everywhere and taken different steps to provide a more positive solution.

However, my intention in the 2006 message, and now in this article, is somewhat different. Previous "Handwriting" sermons utilized significant news events that signal that we are indeed in the end time and need to be alert and motivated. Significant news events are continuing to take place. We are further along the road to Christ's return than we were at this time last year. In this record, a sense of urgency still exists, and we must heed it so that we are not caught unprepared for what comes as we near Christ's return.

Only in a minor way does this article deal with news

events. It is more directly aimed toward a spiritual end—in fact, it is aimed directly at us. It is tied to the larger issues of God's sovereignty and providence and especially to the quality of our relationship with Him within these ever-intensifying times. He is, after all, our Father, the unseen power who is directing events to the conclusions He desires.

These conclusions *will* come to pass; His goals are a certainty. Because we in His church are directly related to Him by means of His Spirit, we are directly involved in this message. We are not merely interested bystanders, looking at a curiosity we read in the news. The quality of our lives is intimately involved in this subject.

Consider this: Are we taking seriously the warnings that the news events—the "handwriting on the wall"—are giving to us who know the truth? How thoroughly are we applying these biblically prophesied "news alerts" to our lives? This article is designed to lay a foundation for reinforcing a single, major, spiritual factor we *must* take into account and rightly apply to make the very best use of the perilous times leading up to Christ's return.

The factor we must consider is that *power belongs to God*. We must know and comprehend and believe this fact in a practical way, using it constantly to make the best possible use of God's merciful warnings. A firm conviction in God's ever-present power will give us the right perspective on the approaches we can take, not merely to endure these times, but to grow, overcome, and witness for God in the best way.

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We must believe and practice what Paul writes in Philippians 4:12-13 without justifying ourselves for failing to grow as we should: "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Be aware, be warned, and be exhorted that, if we have any desire to overcome faults, if we sincerely desire to be in God's Kingdom, if we desire to be like God and glorify Him, we need to protect our relationship with Him. He is *the* Source of the power to do all things, even to grow while also enduring these intense times. Paul is saying that he knows how to discipline himself and thus keep on track in every circumstance of life. By this time in Paul's life, he had the skills required for making the best of every situation. This article will examine the foundation of these qualities that Paul developed.

He is not suggesting that he did this alone through mere human discipline and skill that anybody can achieve, but that he was enabled because of his faithful relationship with Christ. The real dynamic is that Christ has the power, and it was He who faithfully enabled Paul. The apostle's skills, which enabled him to accomplish things that pleased God, were spiritual.

How One Is Enabled

By what practical means was he spiritually enabled? In John 15:4-5, Jesus states:

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

Jesus Christ is our Mediator (I Timothy 2:5), the connection, the bridge, between God and us. Spiritual enablement flows from God through Him to us. God's power and God's faithfulness are the "handwriting" issues that are of supreme importance to us in these critical times. Are we constantly cognizant of the fact that our salvation lies in His hands? He has the power to save.

Notice how David expressed this in a psalm written during a time of serious trouble for him: "For look, they lie in wait for my life; the mighty gather against me, not for my transgression nor for my sin, O LORD" (Psalm 59:3). David feared the threat of murder in a situation in which he was innocent. Verses 9-10 carry his thoughts further: "I will wait for You, O You his Strength; for God is my defense. My God of mercy shall come to meet me; God shall let me see my desire on my enemies." Here, David's confidence rises because he believes in God's awareness

and strength—which is strong enough to put down nations, let alone a small band of enemies. He also recalls God's mercy toward those who serve Him.

Verses 16-17 show that his thoughts extend one step further: "But I will sing of Your power; yes, I will sing aloud of Your mercy in the morning; for You have been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble. To You, O my Strength, I will sing praises; for God is my defense, the God of my mercy." These final two verses summarize why he trusts God, and conclude in a strong affirmation of David's faith. He trusts God because of the combination of God's strengths, His power, combined with His mercy and His will to use them in behalf of those who trust Him.

This concept develops further in Psalm 62, which is almost wholly dedicated to this theme:

Truly my soul silently waits for God; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be greatly moved. How long will you attack a man? You shall be slain, all of you, like a leaning wall and a tottering fence. They only consult to cast him down from his high position; they delight in lies; they bless with their mouth, but they curse inwardly. Selah.

My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God. Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us. Selah.

Surely men of low degree are a vapor, men of high degree are a lie; if they are weighed in the balances, they are altogether lighter than vapor. Do not trust in oppression, nor vainly hope in robbery; if riches increase, do not set your heart on them. God has spoken once, twice I have heard this; that power belongs to God. Also to You, O LORD, belongs mercy; for You render to each one according to his work.

David's overall theme concerns the things he has learned from his experiences with God as to *why* we can give God our fullest trust.

Pay attention to these concepts because trouble is building on a scale never before experienced by mankind. Jeremiah 30:7 says we are moving into "the time of Jacob's trouble," trouble of such magnitude that "none is like it." Jesus concurs, saying of the same period, "Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22)! As bad as Noah's time was, when every intent of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil

continually, and the earth was filled with violence, this will even be worse (Genesis 6:5, 11)!

Terrifyingly painful trouble is building from every direction, and there is no place one can literally run to escape it. When the recent Israel/Hezbollah war broke out, the Lebanese living in the south fled mostly northward because the Israelis were counterattacking from the south. They had a reasonably safe direction to flee. However, people in the terrible time just over the horizon will not have anywhere to run for safety, unless God supplies one.

Through a rather frightening word-picture, Amos 5:16-20 adds to what we know is coming upon the modern nations of Israel:

Therefore the LORD God of hosts, the Lord, says this: “There shall be wailing in all streets, and they shall say in all the highways, ‘Alas! Alas!’ They shall call the farmer to mourning, and skillful lamenters to wailing. In all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through you,” says the LORD. “Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! For what good is the day of the LORD to you? It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him! Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?”

Where will a person turn in a time like this? At that point, it will be too late. Now is the time for those of us in the church to read “the handwriting,” as it pertains especially to us. Now is when we should be admonished and turn in heartfelt devotion and submission. We will have to confront the trouble we will soon be facing—the trouble of which Jeremiah, Amos, and many other prophets speak—using spiritual resources.

Seeking God’s Available Help

When a person is in ordinary trouble and needs help, does he not seek out someone who has more of whatever it takes to help him overcome his situation? The need may be as simple as an additional hand or a bit more physical strength, or it could be something more complex like wisdom, a specialized skill, practical expertise, or community influence. The helper’s power may simply be that he or she has more experience in the area of need. The need may be legal, so contacting a lawyer is a wise move. If the need is medical, seeing a doctor makes sense. One would consult an auto mechanic if the car needs to be repaired, etc. We frequently seek the powers of others.

Psalms 62 instructs us that the supreme power in all creation is God. In verse 1, David begins to express this fact by saying that from God comes salvation, that He is our Deliverer from trouble, implying that it should be to Him that we run. In verse 2, God is our rock, meaning our foundation and source of stability, who keeps us grounded

and free from unreasonable anxieties. He is also our defense; He can deflect attacks in ways humans cannot provide.

Verses 3-4 are said to David’s attackers, who were attempting to undermine his reputation before the public while also seeking a way to assassinate him. He warns them that their lies will prove to be their undoing.

In verses 5-7, David turns his attention back to himself, trying to encourage himself by resolving to wait patiently upon God as his only trustworthy hope. In verse 7, he reminds us that God is our glory: We take pride in Him for all that He is. He can give us favor even before those who may be against us. He is our refuge, an unqualified place of safety in any circumstance. In verse 8, he exhorts others—friends, companions, and supporters—urging them to pray because God is a solid place of refuge in our times of trouble.

Five times in this brief, twelve-verse psalm, he exhorts himself or instructs us that God is the only sure place of refuge and of help in times of trouble. How can God be and do all these things? David names Him as our Rock, Salvation, Defender, Refuge, and Glory. He can hold all these titles because, as David says simply in verse 11, “Power [or strength] belongs to God.”

This confronts us with a major reason why God is the only One we can rely on *fully* in our time of need. Power is not only something God possesses, but when we come to understand it, *all* power belongs to Him. All power flows from Him, and He gives it to whomever He will. God not only has power as a possession, but He can use it in any situation or distribute it as He sees fit! Who can fight God or gainsay His choice of whom He chooses to give it to? Who has sufficient power to nullify God’s doing of anything He desires to accomplish?

Notice that in Psalm 62:11 the word “belongs” is in italics, meaning it was added by the translator. It is not a wrong addition but appropriate. It is as though He owns it; it is His to use and/or distribute as He alone sees fit. It begins to open an awesome thought to consideration: Nobody has power unless God provides it for his use.

Understanding this truth makes David’s exhortation in verses 9 and 10 more understandable. Compared to God, men are so puny as to be nothing. They may appear strong on the surface, but with our powerful, trustworthy Resource, we do not have to retaliate stupidly or be overwrought by anxiety.

This powerful Being is on our side by His choice! We have not earned it.

Notice the implications of Exodus 15:1-2, 6:

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and spoke, saying: “I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will exalt Him. . . . Your right

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hand, O LORD, has become glorious in power; Your right hand, O LORD, has dashed the enemy in pieces.”

Note especially the mention of God being Israel’s strength. This implies that the relationship between God and Israel is so close that, even though we know God did the powerful acts, it may appear to the observer as if humans did it. It is as Jesus explained in John 14:10, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.”

Thus a puny man, if God dwells in him and if he trusts in God, is capable of awesome things. The unseen reality is that God is his strength. An excellent and obvious portrayal of this appears in the life of Samson. Jesus also taught that, “if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move” (Matthew 17:20)!

This begins to explain some interesting things involved in Christian living. Paul writes in Romans 12:17-21:

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

These remarkably high standards are possible because God is our strength. He works unseen to human eyes and makes living according to these standards possible.

Deuteronomy 32:35-37 is the source for Paul’s instruction. God demands this apparently passive requirement of us as an act of faith in our intensely close relationship with Him. It may seem as if a Christian who submits to God’s instruction is spineless and easily intimidated, but in God’s judgment, he is strong where it really matters: in faith. The Christian, like Christ, has committed himself to the One who judges righteously, who will act in due time, using His powers in love toward all concerned (I Peter 2:23). When a person in a situation like this uses his natural powers to retaliate, he invariably does more damage than good.

Because our God is all-powerful, we must grow to trust Him, understanding that His judgment will be exactly right because He is not only there, He is also powerful in wisdom and mercy. This measure of faith enabled Abraham to trust God to raise Isaac should he actually be sacrificially slain.

When David says in Psalm 62:11, “God has spoken once, twice . . .” He is using a Hebrew idiom that means, “I have

heard this repeatedly.” Practically, it means God’s will always decides the outcome of whatever is in dispute, whatever hangs in the balance. Who can resist Him?

Much More Than Brute Strength

We need to look more closely at the word, “power,” or as some translations read, “strength.” *Power* is defined in *The Reader’s Digest Oxford Complete Word Finder* as “having the ability to act, influence” and “a particular faculty of body or mind, capability.” This usage opens another exciting avenue, taking the meaning of *power* from mere brute, overwhelming force into such qualities as the powers of love, intellect, wisdom, understanding, vision, logic, energy, eloquence, wealth, authority, privilege, prerogative, control, mastery, persuasion, forgiveness, and so on into every area of activity.

Is there any kind of need in which God is not superior to any alternate source we could seek out to provide help? In Psalm 62, David suggests that, when we need help in time of trouble, why not just go right to the top? Is not our Father willing to provide these things for us?

Then in verse 12, David adds yet another quality of our powerful God that we need to consider. God not only renders to every one according to his deeds, implying punishment, but He is also merciful—in fact, the very pinnacle of love! Even His sometimes-painful correction is an act of love.

The entire psalm briefly and generally explains *why* we should trust God: *To those who believe, no one is more qualified and trustworthy.* Broadly, David is saying that God’s power and willingness to act according to His purpose is the very foundation of a believer’s practical application of his faith in Him.

There is far more to God being the Source of the powers that we need to serve Him and become prepared for His Kingdom. He has made available many powers, ones that we may take for granted yet have nevertheless been provided for our benefit.

Recall that the Israelites sang in Exodus 15:2, “The LORD is my strength.” In a poetic way, they meant that we do not have strength, but God does, and He uses it for our benefit. God has not called the wise of this world (I Corinthians 1:26), but on the other hand, Jesus Christ lives in us, and He is the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1:24). He is our High Priest, who has the responsibility before God to lead us prepared into the Kingdom.

The concept of strength or power has many facets that we have not yet explored. Deuteronomy 8:11, 14, 16-18 says:

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and

(continued on page 16)

WHO WERE THE PHILISTINES?

To anyone other than a Bible student, the Philistines are merely a long-forgotten people, the subject of old, dusty volumes of equally dry and irrelevant history.

Surprisingly, even the dictionary contains little useful information on them. *Webster's Dictionary* provides a typical definition: “a native or inhabitant of ancient Philistia,” an explanation—if one can call it that—that violates a primary rule of thumb of lexicography, “Avoid defining a word by referencing itself.” It is like defining a dog as “an animal with dog-like qualities”—essentially useless, especially if one has never seen a dog.

Subsequent definitions of *Philistine* prove equally futile: “a person who is guided by materialism and is usually disdainful of intellectual or artistic values” and “one uninformed in a special area of knowledge.” Evidently, *Philistine* has acquired these meanings from association with its occasional biblical adjective “uncircumcised” (see I Samuel 17:26, 36). While David meant to suggest a man who had no relationship with God, a foreigner, generations of Bible readers have understood it to mean a brutish, unrefined person, as they imagine Goliath to have been.

So much for the helpfulness of dictionaries. They leave us still hungering for answers to the question, “Who were the Philistines?” This question, while not vital to our salvation, begs an answer, as the people called Philistines in Scripture had a great impact on biblical history. From the days of Abraham to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Philistines were at times friends, allies, deadly enemies, vassals, and rivals of God’s people, but never a people their leaders could ignore.

For Bible students in the twenty-first century, knowing who the Philistines were is important in grasping the lessons in the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Samson, Samuel, Saul, and David, in which they sometimes played major roles. Though they were bit players in later history, their name arises in the writings of the prophets, some of them having end-time implications. With Jesus’ admonition in mind to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4), finding out about the Philistines becomes more crucial.

AEGEAN ORIGINS

Unexpectedly, the Philistines first appear in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10:13-14: “Mizraim [a son of Ham] begot Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, Pathrusim, and Casluhim (from whom came the Philistines [*Philistim*, KJV] and Caphtorim).”¹ *Mizraim* is the Hebrew word that is commonly translated as “Egypt,” thus the Philistines are ethnically related to the Egyptians.

However, note that the Casluhim are divided into the Philistines and Caphtorim (in fact, the Philistines are frequently identified with Caphtor, the Hebrew name for at least the island of Crete and perhaps for the whole Aegean region; see Amos 9:7; Jeremiah 47:4). This indicates that their origins lie in the area of Crete, western Asia Minor, and the Aegean Sea, and modern archeology bears this out. For instance, Philistine pottery resembles that of the Minoan and

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Mycenaean (Homeric Greek) civilizations to the point that a material connection is beyond question. Other substantial links to the area include early Greek weapons, armor, dress, burial methods, military tactics, government, religion, etc.

How did these Aegean people end up settling in southwestern Canaan? The story is a long one, beginning in the days of Abraham. Being a restless, warlike, trading people, the Philistines frequently attempted to expand their influence, first through setting up trading colonies in distant lands and then by force of arms, if necessary. Genesis 21:34 records, “Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines many days,” referring to the area around the town of Gerar, where Abimelech² was king (see Genesis 20). This means that by the early nineteenth century BC, at least a small colony of Philistines had already gained a foothold in the land of Canaan.

After Isaac’s similar experience with them, they are next mentioned in passing in Exodus 13:17:

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.”

The “way of the land of the Philistines” describes a small portion of the route later known as the Via Maris, “the Way of the Sea.” This coastal road connected the Nile Delta region with Canaan, Syria, and beyond that to Mesopotamia. Although the naming of this portion of the road after the Philistines may be a slight anachronism (perhaps a later emendation), Philistines already lived along its southern course in Canaan.

However, more significant is the Philistines’ connection with war. Evidently, the people who lived along that road were a hostile group, easily provoked into armed conflict, and at the time of the Exodus, on a war footing. The fledgling nation of Israel, God knew, was not yet prepared to fight any people as aggressive as the Philistines, no matter what their numbers were at the time.

Nevertheless, this passing mention in Exodus 13 alludes to the fact that the Philistine presence in southern Canaan had not remained static. From a trading outpost in Gerar, they had expanded in the intervening four centuries to control a large area. Perhaps they were not the most populous of the ethnic groups there, but they were certainly the dominant one. It is thought that their numbers were steadily increased by new colonists from their homeland in the Aegean. In addition, it seems to have been a conscious policy to assimilate to a large degree with the native population, which would include intermarriage³ and adoption of local deities. In this way a minority people could quickly rise to prominence.

SEA PEOPLES

Despite their early dominance, the bulk of the Philistine people did not migrate to coastal Canaan for another nearly two and a half centuries. What caused the main body of Sea Peoples⁴—as they are known to historians—to cross the Mediterranean is not entirely known. Perhaps the migration of Central European peoples into the Aegean region dislodged them, or maybe the early throes of Mycenaean decline played a part. Some have even suggested a terrible famine or a volcanic eruption as reasons for their relocation. Whatever the cause, the annals of the time record that the Sea Peoples were strong enough to overwhelm the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor, as well as other nations down the Mediterranean coast. Not content with these conquests, they set out to invade Egypt between the reigns of Pharaohs Merneptah (c. 1224-1216 BC) and Rameses III (c. 1174-1144 BC).

One massive sea battle in the Nile Delta region during the reign of Rameses III put an end to the Sea Peoples’ advance. Though normally outmatched on water, Pharaoh won a decisive victory, capturing large numbers of Sea Peoples. As new vassals of Egypt, they were placed in Egyptian fortified cities up the coast in southwestern Canaan where small Philistine colonies already existed, and many of them—particularly those of the Peleset tribe—settled permanently in the area. They formed a league of five major cities (a Pentapolis): Gaza,⁵ Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath, each of which was ruled by a “lord” (Hebrew *seren*, which is perhaps better rendered as “tyrant,” a Greek concept).

Now being the majority people in the area, it did not take the Philistines long to ignore Egyptian overrule (Egypt had been weakened and exhausted by its conflict with the Sea Peoples) and to carve out their own nation between the desert buffer of Sinai and the weak, disunited, hill-country Israelite tribes. Their rise to power began in the early- to mid-twelfth century BC (for instance, the Philistines conquered Ashkelon in about 1175 BC), contemporaneous with the end of Deborah’s judgeship and the length of Gideon’s. By the days of Jephthah, Samson, and Samuel in the early eleventh century, the Philistines dominated most of the land of Canaan from Sinai to Galilee, especially in the areas closer to the coast.

A key to their dominance lay in their more advanced material culture. While the Israelites and Canaanites of the highlands still practiced Bronze Age skills, the Philistines had advanced to an Iron Age culture, making them nearly invincible on the battlefield. I Samuel 13:19-22 informs us:

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, “Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears.” But all the Israel-

ites would go down to the Philistines to sharpen each man's plowshare, his mattock, his ax, and his sickle; and the charge for sharpening was a pim [two-thirds of a shekel, an exorbitant price] for the plowshares, the mattocks, the forks, and the axes, and to set the points of the goads. So it came about, on the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan. But they were found with Saul and Jonathan his son.

Saul could muster only two swords among six hundred men (see verse 15)! Evidently, most of his soldiers fought with axes, mattocks, ox goads, sickles, or sharpened sticks. Recall that Samson never used a normal weapon either, resorting to the jawbone of a donkey or his bare hands. The Philistine army, however, was fully outfitted with the advanced weaponry of the day:

So the LORD was with Judah. And they drove out the inhabitants of the mountains, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland [the Philistines and Canaanites there], because they had chariots of iron. (Judges 1:19)

[Goliath] had a bronze helmet on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail. . . . And he had bronze greaves on his legs and a bronze javelin was between his shoulders. Now the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his iron spearhead weighed six hundred shekels; and a shield-bearer went before him. (I Samuel 17:5-7)

Later, the account mentions that Goliath also carried a sword (verse 51). David, of course, having refused Saul's armor and sword because he was untrained in them, carried only "his staff in his hand; . . . five smooth stones from the brook, and . . . his sling" (verse 40). David's severe disadvantage in arms was typical for an Israelite before the might of the Philistines.

PHILISTINE CULTURE

While a fair amount is known about the Philistines from textual sources, only recently have archeological finds begun to flesh out Philistine culture. For instance, relatively little is known about the original Philistine language except that, upon arriving in Canaan, it seems they quickly adopted the Semitic language of the area while retaining words from their original Indo-European tongue, including personal names. In November 2005, a small pottery shard bearing an inscription containing two names linguistically resembling "Goliath" was found in the ruins of Gath. There is no evidence that it refers to the biblical Goliath, but it confirms the general historicity of the story in I Samuel 17.

The artifacts being dug up from the ruins of Philistine

cities reveal that Philistine culture was as advanced as their weaponry. Their art was refined, being heavily influenced by typically Mycenaean motifs with Egyptian and later Canaanite styles added to their repertoire. While its roof may not have been redundantly supported (see Judges 16:23-30), their Temple of Dagon in Gaza—similar in design to Cretan architecture—supported about three thousand people on its roof, making it an imposing edifice. The evidence found in the tells of the Pentapolis bears out that, for the time, the Philistines built large, planned cities complete with fortresses, palaces, temples, and markets, all of which were surrounded by thirteen-foot-thick walls.

Anciently, the Philistines were also renowned for both their production and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Numerous finds have exposed a well-managed spirits industry, from breweries and wineries to retail outlets that advertised beer, wine, and strong drink. Among the most numerous artifacts unearthed from Philistine ruins are beer mugs and wine craters (large drinking bowls). The story of Samson's wedding feast alludes to the Philistine practice of engaging in weeklong drinking parties, as the Hebrew word *misteh*, translated as "feast" in Judges 14:10, indicates a "drinking feast."

From the Old Testament, we find that the principal deity of the Philistines was Dagon (Judges 16:23; I Samuel 5:2-7). This deity, either a god of fish or of grain (the root *dg* can represent either idea, depending on the vowel used), was worshipped at least in the temples of Gaza, Ashdod, and Beth-shan. II Kings 1:1-6 records that at Ekron the god Baal-Zebub was venerated. There is thought to be some connection between these gods and similar ones worshipped by the Hittites, also a Hamitic people, who lived in Anatolia (Asia Minor). Over time, however, the Philistine deities began to resemble their Canaanite counterparts, though the Philistines retained a distinctive worship ritual.

Judges 16:23-24 contains snatches of a song sung in the Temple of Dagon at Gaza celebrating the successful capture of Samson. Cultic artifacts found at Ashdod suggest music played a prominent role in Philistine worship, both singing and instrumental music, particularly the use of the lyre. This same passage also shows a Philistine penchant for performance art and entertainment (verse 25), another interest attributed to the Greeks.

Unlike the common belief, the Philistines were not unsophisticated, uncultured brutes, but advanced, refined people. In fact, for several generations their culture was years ahead of Israel's, a disparity they maintained through their martial superiority. Nevertheless, their cosmopolitan sophistication could not hide their underlying uncircumcision in God's eyes; they were a foreign people in the land God had promised to Abraham's descendants. Eventually, through His intervention, the Israelites under David overcame the Philistine's might and advanced culture, making Israel the dominant force in the region.

(continued on page 16)

WHATEVER HAPPENED GNOSTICISM? *PART ONE* *FALSE KNOWLEDGE*

During the last few years, an increasing number of movies and books have emphasized a major heresy that the true church had to contend with during the first years following Christ's death, yet there nevertheless seems to be a resurgence in the growing popularity of the various philosophies generally known as *Gnosticism*.

We do not hear much about Gnosticism in the news, and we typically give it little thought. In terms of theology and doctrine, we concentrate on many other controversial points, relegating Gnosticism to an ancient, long-dead heresy. However, we would be remiss to assume that Gnosticism has no relevance to us today.

After all, Gnosticism was the predominant source of heresy when the New Testament was written. The books of John, I Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, I and II Timothy, Jude, and I John all combat various elements of Gnosticism. Even the book of Revelation cites a couple of Gnostic beliefs and practices, referring to “know[ing] the depths of Satan” and “the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:6, 15, 24).

Gnosticism is clearly not some minor biblical issue. Given that the Bible is timeless and has never been more applicable than here at the end time—

when knowledge is increased, and faith is lacking (Daniel 12:4; Luke 18:8)—perhaps Gnosticism is a greater threat now than we might think!

Gnosticism in Vogue

Gnosticism is not mentioned by name in the Bible, with one possible exception, I Timothy 6:20-21:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is *falsely called knowledge*—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen. (Emphasis ours throughout)

The *Amplified Bible* makes these verses clearer:

O Timothy, guard and keep the deposit entrusted [to you]! Turn away from the irreverent babble and godless chatter, with the vain and empty and worldly phrases, and the subtleties and the contradictions in what is falsely called knowledge and spiritual illumination. [For] by making such profession some have erred (missed the mark) as regards the faith. . . .

Paul warns Timothy about “the *subtleties* and *contradictions* of what is falsely called *knowledge* and *spiritual illumination*.” The word translated “knowledge” in most translations (“science” in the King James Version) is the Greek *gnosis*. Literally meaning “to know,” it forms the root of the word *Gnosticism*. It is possible, even probable, that Paul refers to Gnosticism here, since both of his

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uncovered by interpreting esoteric symbols and riddles. The story also blasphemes the true nature of Jesus Christ—a common element of Gnostic teachings—by proposing that He fathered a child by Mary Magdalene, and that a “divine” bloodline exists today.

The Da Vinci Code is not alone in its promotion of spiritual illumination by means of secret knowledge. *The Matrix*, released a number of years ago, is heavily laced with Gnosticism. (This is not a recommendation to see it, as it is a very violent movie containing a clever mix of truth and error.) Among its prevalent themes is that what happens in the mind can be entirely different from what happens in the body, and that the mind has to be “freed” to be able to accept truth. The main character has his mind opened to the knowledge of what human life “really” consists of and how it can be transformed for the better by gaining more power of the mind.

More recently, Walt Disney produced *National Treasure*, a film that introduces Freemasonry to the younger generation. Freemasonry is a prime example of Gnosticism; in fact, the *g* in the Masonic symbol does not stand for *God*, but for *gnosis*—that is, knowledge. Freemasons are initiated into secret knowledge and various mysteries through the teaching of more advanced Masons. Its symbolism and esoteric knowledge draws its adherents in, modifying their worldview. The Freemasonry in *National Treasure* is presented as exciting but harmless, with the “secret knowledge” dealing with various clues that would lead to an old and immense treasure. (Dan Brown is said to be working on another book, *The Solomon Key*, believed to be about Freemasonry.)

Many college fraternities and sororities—known as “Greek societies”—make use of symbols, rites, and ceremonies that originate in the same ancient “mystery religions” from which Freemasonry and the notorious “Babylonian Mystery religion” arose. The Greek societies, as well as the

ancient mystery religions, have “outer mysteries,” which the public may be privy to, as well as “inner mysteries,” which are gradually imparted to initiated members. They even have a “high priest” or “high priestess” who conducts the ceremonies and rituals. Truly, Gnosticism is alive and well right now in various forms.

Gnostic “Gospels”

Recently, the newly-discovered *Gospel of Judas*, an example of what is called a “Gnostic gospel,” has made headlines worldwide. It was not written at the same time as the four canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but rather appeared a couple of centuries later. The *Gospel of Judas* contradicts the true gospel accounts by asserting that Judas Iscariot was actually the hero, who had been given *secret knowledge* that the other disciples did not possess.

The opening line of the *Gospel of Judas* demonstrates this secret knowledge: “The *secret account* of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week, three days before he celebrated Passover.” This so-called gospel gives a quite different view of the relationship between Jesus Christ and Judas, and its defenders say that it offers “new insights” into Jesus’ betrayal, and the nature and character of Judas. “New insights” is another common theme of Gnosticism.

Several years ago, another Gnostic gospel, the *Gospel of Thomas*, was all the rage in the scholarly community. Its opening lines also emphasize this secret knowledge: “These are the *secret sayings* that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. And [Jesus] said, ‘Whoever discovers the *interpretation* of these sayings will not taste death.’” Notice that the emphasis is immediately on discovering an *interpretation* and on increasing *knowledge* as a way to eternal life. It contains nothing about salvation coming through one’s relationship with God or even about living a godly life. In this Gnos-

letters to Timothy contain warnings against false teachers bringing in foreign concepts that were undermining the faith of church members.

Remember, however, that his warning is against a particular type of *knowledge* that induced some members to stray from the faith, knowledge that was subtle and yet contradictory. That it was contradictory is interesting because Gnosticism not only contradicts the truth, but within Gnostic beliefs there are also many contradictions.

This past summer, tremendous buzz surrounded the movie version of Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code*. *The Da Vinci Code* is part of the popular revival of Gnosticism—even though it may not be recognized as such. Its underlying premise is that *secret knowledge* concerning the life of Jesus Christ has been repressed through the millennia and can only be

tic gospel, eternal life comes from the *secret knowledge* that will explain the obscure sayings.

Not only were the Gnostic gospels written long after the fact, but they are also full of statements that oppose the text of the Bible. For example, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus allegedly says, “If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits.” Scholars say that Jesus is advocating “fitting in” and “being true to oneself,” phrases often repeated these days.

In another place in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus is quoted as saying, “[Blessed is] the one who came into being before coming into being.” This makes absolutely no sense to us, but it does make a kind of sense to Gnostics, who believe in a dualism of flesh and spirit. Thus, they understand that “Jesus” implies that the spirit could come into being before the flesh. Many Gnostics were followers of *docetism*, the belief that *Jesus* and *Christ* were two separate beings in one body. Docetists believed that the *man Jesus* was born, and that the pre-existing *god Christ* entered into Him when He was baptized and left again before He was crucified. This, then, is an example of coming into being before coming into being.

Also in the gospel of Thomas,

The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us, how will our end come?” Jesus said, “Have you found the beginning, then, that you are looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is. [Blessed is] the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death.

Again, *knowing* something is shown as the antidote of death. In this case, another element of dualism is that every person has a little spark of God in him or her, and that we have an eternal spirit (or soul) that is trapped or imprisoned within a body of flesh.

Modern Gnostic Doctrine

Gnostics generally believed that all spirit was inherently stable and good (overlooking the fact that Satan and his demons are spirit and yet also unstable and evil), while all matter and flesh was inherently evil (contradicting God’s statement in Genesis 1:31 that *everything* God had made was “very good”). Plato reinforced this belief, writing, “The soul is the very likeness of the divine—immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable.” He also declared, viewing the body as a temporary house in which the soul is imprisoned, “The soul goes away to the pure, the eternal, the immortal and unchangeable to which she is kin.”

The Gnostic goal was to learn the secret knowledge that would allow the inner spirit to be released from the confines of the flesh, enabling it to rejoin God in the spirit realm. Thus, the Gnostics linked the beginning and end (often depicted in the figure of a snake swallowing its tail), because if a person could figure out how the divine spark was infused into the flesh in the first place, he could then reverse it and release the spirit. We find the same basic tenet in the modern doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and the widespread belief that our “home” is in heaven, and that we go to this home when we die.

At the end of the *Gospel of Thomas* appears this bizarre statement:

Simon Peter said to them, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.” Jesus said, “Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

If we ever encounter someone who teaches that a woman must become a man to enter God’s Kingdom, the source of his doctrine should be apparent!

Ironically, despite this incendiary verse, the modern feminist movement

actually leans heavily on various Gnostic texts to substantiate their ideas. While they do not care much for this line in the *Gospel of Thomas*, they typically pass it off by saying that, as an allegory of the inner transformation every woman must go through in order to find herself, it should not be taken too literally.

However, feminists who try to find their roots in ancient “Christianity” draw heavily upon the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Eve*, and the *Pistis Sophia* (variously translated *Faith Wisdom*, *Wisdom in Faith*, *Faith in Wisdom* or *Faith of Sophia*—the Gnostic “divine counterpart of Christ”). From these texts springs the idea of the “divine feminine” (or “feminine divine”), and many liberal Christian churches rely on them as historical “proof” of female apostles, supporting the argument that women can and should hold any church position.

Philip Jenkins, in *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*, notes: “Gnostic believers practiced ‘equal access, equal participation and equal claims to knowledge,’ to the extent of *allocating clerical functions by lot* at their ceremonies.” This can be seen not only in the ordination of women, but also in the attitude of some Christians who argue that, since “we *all* have the Holy Spirit,” we do not need any authoritative teacher or leader.

Satan convinces those with Gnostic leanings to disparage the God-ordained roles and hierarchy within the church of God (see Ephesians 4:11-16). While this egalitarian idea might appear on the surface to contain utopian goodness, the result is confusion, as doctrine becomes subjected to the lowest common denominator. Not surprisingly, such individuals typically believe that *they know better*—or more—than the rest of the church and particularly the ministry. God’s pattern is to establish doctrine and leadership through those *He* chooses (see, for instance, I Corinthians 12:18 and I Timothy 2:7).

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—David C. Grabbe

“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15

Out of the Abundance of Our Prayers

**“For out of the
abundance of the heart
the mouth speaks.”
—*Matthew 12:34***

When we were first called and entered the church, we found that, rather than just attending church services on a Saturday, we were admonished to study God’s Word and pray daily. Ministers, following Herbert Armstrong’s lead, preached that we should study and pray at least half an hour a day each. For most of us, this was both a new and trying experience.

The study portion of this recommendation was not difficult due to the Correspondence Course and the interesting subjects our studies could unearth, but getting on our knees and talking to God for half an hour seemed impossible. We thought, *What does one say after the first five minutes? How can I possibly fill that much time?*

However, we have grown spiritually over the years, and prayer has probably become easier for us. We now realize that, of all people on the face of the earth, we alone have been justified by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and are able to come directly into God the Father’s presence, before His very throne. We should by now have a greater appreciation for our unique standing before God and be able to thank Him profusely for this grace.

Still, there is a danger that, because time has gone on, and perhaps because we are living in the Laodicean era, we have become a little complacent in this area of Christian living. Prayer has slid from its former place of importance.

In Matthew 12:34, Jesus tells us that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” He elucidates this by saying, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart [the storehouse of the mind where thoughts, feelings, and counsels are kept] brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil things” (verse 35).

He concludes by warning us that our day of judgment is upon us.

Even our “idle” words will be scrutinized, and we will have to give account of them to God (verse 36). Our words will either exonerate us or condemn us (verse 37).

Because we know and believe these scriptures, we work to watch what we allow to leave our mouths. We know that James admits in James 3:2, “If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.” Even though we work at being blameless in speech, we still realize that none of us has arrived at oral perfection.

Consider That!

Have we ever considered applying this principle a little differently? Most of us naturally think of this passage to refer to our conversations with others at home, at work, at play, at the store, at church services, etc. But what about applying it to ourselves when we are on our knees before God? Have we ever considered that out of the abundance of our prayers—or the lack thereof—our heart speaks?

Further, do we deeply consider what we say to God? Do we take the time to organize and improve how we present our requests to Him? Do we think about the attitude in which we come before the great God of the universe?

Though we may not always count it a blessing, God knows our every thought, every desire, every emotion. It is impossible to hide anything from Him (Hebrews 4:13). The beauty in truly understanding this is that we may as well be totally honest with Him, telling Him everything, because He already knows the deepest intents of our hearts!

He sees the tender feelings we have toward the plights of others and our desire to help. He notes the patience, forbearance, and true outgoing concern we have for the brethren in the church. He knows the deep love we have for those who request our prayers for their healing. He observes our sighing and crying over the wretched world we live in (see Ezekiel 9:4).

Conversely, He also sees when we are being self-centered, pigheadedly pursuing our own desires, and justifying what we want as opposed to what is right and good in His sight. He notices when we ignore the needs of others. He surely must shake His head in shame when we excuse ourselves for not doing what we know to be righteous.

God is acutely aware of our attitudes when approaching His throne. He discerns whether we consider time spent in conversation with Him to be of great value, or whether we are just going through the motions. Because He knows what we are going through at all times, He knows when we are harboring

grudges, doubts, malice, lust, impatience, covetousness, and any other carnal motivation against another.

Certainly, He realizes that we will not be at our best every time we enter His presence, but He can tell when we are distracted or disinterested.

God is shaping us for future offices in His Kingdom, and He learns a great deal about us as we come before Him in prayer. He truly does listen to what we bring before Him, but He always considers our heart and our reasoning in His response to us.

This does not mean that we have to pray perfectly every time, having every word and rationale in its proper place, although doing so should be our goal. Romans 8:26-27 assures us:

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit . . . makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He [Jesus Christ; see verse 34] makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Even though we might not put every word or thought in its proper place, still the ideas, plans, and attitudes in our prayers are amplified and aided by God’s Spirit flowing between God and ourselves, and the Father responds according to His will for us. Paul continues, providing us greater confidence and boldness before God, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (verse 28). What joy we should have in knowing that everything will work out splendidly in the end!

Praying for Our Enemies

If we pray according to God’s will for us, our prayers will help to shape our character to become more like God’s. This is only logical, for if we continually express God’s thoughts and desires, they will eventually become habitual to us and ingrained in our natures. For instance, in Matthew 5:43-45, Jesus instructs us to pray for those who have mistreated us:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

This truly goes against our human nature, and it definitely takes thought and genuine concern to pray for blessing and good to come to one's enemy. Praying for soundness and fairness in thinking, and working to make sure we do no harm to that individual are difficult, yet in preparing us for our future responsibilities, this is what God wants from us.

The apostle Paul was undoubtedly faced with difficult personalities, general church problems, trials, and personal attacks, yet even in these circumstances, he understood what Jesus Christ wanted for His people. Therefore, he kept his general prayers, his thoughts, and his goals on par with those of Jesus Christ for God's people. We read one of his positive, uplifting, and encouraging prayers in Philippians 1:9-11:

And this is my prayer, that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling you to learn by experience what things really matter. Then on the day of Christ you will be flawless and without blame, yielding the full harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Revised English Bible)

Were those in the Philippian church perfect? Certainly, they had their problems, yet Paul overlooked all the petty matters and focused on the goal that Jesus gives to each of the members of His church, praying accordingly. When we follow Paul's example, our sights are lifted above the trivialities that confront us daily, realigning us on what Christ desires for each of us.

Praying for the Ministry

In Colossians 4:2-4, Paul again reminds us not to neglect our duty to pray:

Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

Here Paul instructs us not only not to neglect prayer, but also to keep at it in earnest. He advises us to watch for opportunities to pray for others and for situations, especially in the church, that require prayer. This important work belongs to us individually.

As we see, Paul was at the time imprisoned in Rome, and he desperately longed to be released so that he could proclaim the gospel and teach God's way as he had been commissioned to do. He was certain that, through the power of prayer, God would open a door—perhaps the door to his prison—to present God's Word

to others. The apostle knew that this was God's will for him, so prayer according to that same will would be effective.

The lesson for us today is to pray for the ministers who speak to us, teaching the doctrines and principles that will help us to overcome, grow in grace and knowledge, and obtain the understanding to put on the image of Christ. We must realize that their messages go out, not just to us, but to other members of the congregation who may have different needs than we do. In addition, they are spread around the world via cassette tape and the Internet to people who may have had a long association with God's truth, as well as to those who are truly babes in the Word of God. We need to pray that God inspires the ministry to fill the needs that He sees in today's very diverse audience.

Prior to each service, we should humbly pray in deep appreciation for whoever is presenting both the sermonette and the sermon, asking that God would guide their messages and that all who hear them might receive what Jesus Christ wants them to understand. Such an attitude and prayer will please God greatly.

Praying for Others

James gives us further instruction regarding prayer beginning in James 5:16: "Confess your trespasses [faults] to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Though he seems to be speaking about praying for those who are sick, the overall command is specifically to "pray for one another."

Further, James instructs us to confess our faults. The apostle does not mean that we should reveal every sin and foible to everyone in the congregation. He implies that we should confide our problems to a close, trusted friend so that he or she can help us by praying to God for help in overcoming it.

We should pray for one another, and it need not be known by others or even asked of us. We may notice a brother struggling with a problem, and rather than pointing out his flaw to others, we should get on our knees to petition God to come to his aid. The apostle James assures us that such a prayer, given seriously and thoughtfully, will make a difference.

The Jews say regarding prayer: "He who prays surrounds his house with a wall stronger than iron." Another of their sayings runs: "Penitence can do something, but prayer can do everything." To them, prayer is nothing less than contacting and employing the power of God; it is the channel through which the strength and grace of God is brought to bear on the troubles of life.

ready answer

In the next two verses, James uses the illustration of Elijah to show just how effective righteous prayer can be. He chose Elijah because the biblical story of this prophet brings out his passionate—and sometimes still carnal—nature. Nevertheless, he prayed earnestly for drought, and God responded: No rain fell on the earth for three years and six months! When he prayed again for rain, God again heard and acted. What tremendous power can be unleashed through prayer that conforms to the will of God!

James 5:19-20 continues the theme. If we see a brother straying from the truth, and with the help of prayer, restore him to a right understanding, we may indeed be saving him from the Lake of Fire, from the second death! Such loving help is the essence of true outgoing concern.

A proper prayer life, one patterned after God's desires for us, helps us to develop His mind and character. It prepares us to serve our brethren better now, as well as to deal with those who will need our attention and instruction in the Millennium and beyond.

In the abundance of our prayers, our hearts do speak. They reveal what we are most interested in and what our goals and aspirations are. They tell us if we are trying to help ourselves alone or others also. They can be a gauge to monitor our spiritual growth and our transformation into God's image. What do your personal prayers say about you?

—John Reid

prophecy watch

(continued from page 9)

PHILISTIA IN PROPHECY

Prophetically, the Philistines are mentioned several times in both the Major and Minor Prophets. The sense of many of these passages is that, despite being put under tribute by David, the Philistines were not absorbed by Israel but remained a distinct people beyond the fall of both Israel and Judah. In fact, Assyrian records list the Philistines separately from Israel during the time of the latter's fall in the late eighth century BC. Further, these passages suggest that the Philistines are a distinct people at the time of the end.

For example, Isaiah 11:11-14 is a prophecy of the Day of the Lord and the regathering of Israel to the Promised Land, an event known as the Second Exodus. Isaiah prophesies that the reunited Israelites will overwhelm the end-time Philistines:

It shall come to pass in that day that the LORD shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, . . . and the islands of the sea. He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. . . . [T]hey shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines toward the west. . . . (see also Isaiah 14:28-31)

Jeremiah (Jeremiah 47:1-7), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 25:15-17),

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(continued from page 6)

His statutes which I command you today . . . when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; . . . who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.” And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

That wealth is power is an easily recognized concept. “Wealth” is used in this context to represent all evidences of prosperity and well-being. We tend to think of wealth in terms of material things like the size and location of our home, the cost of our automobile, or the fashionableness of

our clothing. However, there is more to prosperity than material goods.

The concept developed in this passage also includes qualities like good health, sound-mindedness, and the level and breadth of our education—elements common to prosperous cultures. It includes things such as understanding and having the opportunity to perceive what is happening in this world from a godly point of view. All of these and many more are powers available to us. In other words, “wealth” is not limited to material things. It includes our health, the disposition in which we live our lives, the liberties we enjoy, and the opportunities available to have those things whether or not we have actually taken advantage of them.

For example, Solomon said, “Of making many books there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). The tremendous volume of information available in books is beyond our comprehension. Of course, not all the power contained in this information is good, but God has made it available.

In addition, God can prosper us by giving us favor in the eyes of others. He opens doors to bring us goodwill because power belongs to Him, and He uses it as it pleases

Joel (Joel 3:4-5), Amos (Amos 1:6-8), Obadiah (Obadiah 19), Zephaniah (Zephaniah 2:4-7) and Zechariah (Zechariah 9:5-8) also make proclamations of destruction against the Philistine people. Ezekiel's is typical:

Thus says the Lord GOD: "Because the Philistines dealt vengefully and took vengeance with a spiteful heart, to destroy because of the old hatred," therefore thus says the Lord GOD: "I will stretch out My hand against the Philistines, and I will cut off the Cherethites and destroy the remnant of the seacoast. I will execute great vengeance on them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I lay My vengeance upon them."

All of these prophecies were anciently fulfilled, but end-time fulfillments cannot be ruled out. Isaiah's prophecy hints that ultimately, God will deploy Israel to punish the Philistines. These prophecies highlight the Philistines' treachery in taking Israelites captive and selling them to Edom as slaves, as well as their long-held, smoldering, spiteful hatred that caused them to take vengeance on Israel for old defeats. From evidence like this, the speculation that the modern inhabitants of the Gaza Strip descend from the ancient Philistines takes on greater credence.

Joel also mentions a further reason: "Because you have taken My silver and My gold, and have carried into your temples My prized possessions" (Joel 3:5). Evidently, the Philistines' capture of the ark in the time of Eli (I Samuel 4:10-11; 5:1-7:1), as well as other plunderings of Israel and Judah, rankled God, and He is determined to repay them for their sacrilege.

Him. No potential help is beyond His power!

In many cases, these things come to us as byproducts of His fulfillment of promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Are we using them, and if not, why not? God's fulfilling of His promises provides us with potentially valuable experiences, which are lavished on us simply because we live in an Israelitish nation. Each nation of modern Israel has its own peculiar wealth of beauty. Most of us have noticed and compared the barrenness of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq on television with the fruitfulness of our nations. This beauty, along with its productivity and liberties, are included in the concept of "wealth."

He provides these things and uses them to benefit us at all times because it pleases Him to do so. Powers are not always given because we please Him. Deuteronomy 8 is a warning against pride. We must humble ourselves, never forgetting that we are created and that we live by the gifts He provides. Remember, Jesus says, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This awesome statement is made by the One described by Paul as upholding all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus means, in reference to God's purpose, that we could do nothing spiritually

While modern humanity has essentially forgotten the real people of Philistia, God certainly has not, and neither should His people. Far from being uncultured rabble, the Philistines were refugees of the great Minoan/Mycenaean civilization, prepared by God to be a thorn in Israel's side for many generations. In the historic conflicts between these two very different peoples, we can unearth many lessons that we can apply on our Christian walk to the Kingdom of God.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

ENDNOTES

¹ The Hebrew masculine suffix *-im*, along with its feminine counterpart, *-oth*, turn a root word into a plural. These names, then, identify peoples rather than individuals, although most of them probably contain the name of a forefather. For instance, *Ludim* probably means "the people of Lud," the nation history calls "Lydians."

² *Abimelech* is not, as is often supposed, a proper name but a title. It means "my father is king," implying the right of the bearer to rule through dynastic succession, or "father-king," suggesting that the ruler is father to his people. The Abimelech in Isaac's story (Genesis 26); the would-be king Abimelech, son of Gideon (Judges 9); and the Abimelech before whom David feigned madness (see Psalm 34:1; called Achish in I Samuel 21:10-15) are all different men from Abraham's acquaintance.

³ The native Canaanites were a related people (see Genesis 10:6-20).

⁴ Several tribes composed the Sea Peoples: the Peleset, Tjekker, Shekelesh, Denyen, and Weshesh, among others. The Egyptians called the Peleset *prst* (in Egyptian hieroglyphs, *r* is often interchanged with *l*), which is very similar to their Hebrew name, *pelistim*. The Tjekker settled in and around the northern Canaanite city of Dor, while the Denyen may have eventually settled in Cyprus. The Shekelesh and the Weshesh were probably absorbed into Egypt, although some scholars believe some of the Shekelesh found their way to Sicily.

⁵ Interestingly, Gaza's original name was Minoah, very similar to that of the ancient Aegean civilization.

without what He adds to our labors. Yet, these verses also tell us where to go to receive the help we perceive that we need.

Cooperate With the God Who Helps

Psalm 121:1-8 expresses where we should look at all times for guidance and intervention:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills—from whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.

Are we truly looking to Him? Are we taking advantage of the wealth of spiritual opportunities to become better

personal *Power Belongs to God*

prepared as the times intensify? What we are doing now may give us insight into what we will do then. Are we establishing a right pattern of accessing God's powers? Are we truly and continuously seeking God to equip us to serve Him to our greatest extent?

Romans 8:28-39 is vital to understanding the powers already used in our behalf and available to us for further growth:

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

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

To make the best use of the time remaining in our lives, we must perceive ourselves as individual parts of the costly, important, vast, and glorious purpose and plan that God is working out. That God has called us is not insignificant. We tend to assess ourselves as not being worth much, but these verses dispute that vain judgment.

In I Corinthians 12, Paul illustrates the church as a living body consisting of many functioning parts. His point is that every part of the human body is important to both its well-being and its effective functioning. So is each called-out one vital to the spiritual body. In I Peter 2, Peter uses a more mechanical metaphor, a building, with each called individual as a living stone in it. We are imperfect parts being formed into a perfect team.

In Romans 8, Paul urges us to understand that, during this stage of God's purpose and plan—the process of sanctification unto holiness—our cooperation with God is required for the creation of Christ in us. We must cooperate to bring us into conformity with Christ in a practical way, as well as for the family-team concept to be completed. God is not merely saving us, He is creating.

Many in the world have a problem understanding this concept because it means that, following God's giving us grace, we are required to do works. Doing works is a major reason God has called and converted us (Ephesians 2:10). They believe this is earning salvation, but the doing of works simply prepares us for the Kingdom while glorifying and witnessing for God.

It is as if we were given a free ticket to witness a game, but the ticket required us to sit in a certain seat in the stadium. The effort of entering into the stadium, finding the section and seat, and sitting in the assigned seat does not earn the free ticket.

God's grace provides us with access to the great Creator God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ so that we might be conformed to the image of His Son. Romans 5:1-5 declares:

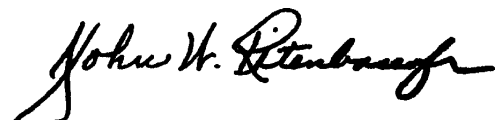
Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us.

Romans 8:29 confirms this purpose, one that will require God to give us many powers in order to complete His awesome creation: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."

The handwriting is on the wall for those of us who have been called during this difficult, end-time period. What lies before us is awesome to contemplate. On the one hand, because we know how difficult the times will be, it can be terrifying. On the other, because the result of God's creative effort is so awesome, because we can access His powers all along the way, and because we can be assured of victory, we have no need for irrational fear.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

In Christian love,



The Axis of Evil and the Western Coalition

In his January 29, 2002, State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush identified North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as countries that posed the greatest threat to the West in general, and to the United States in particular. In that speech, he put those countries on notice, labeling them an *axis of evil*:

States like these [North Korea, Iran, and Iraq], and their terrorist allies, constitute an *axis of evil*, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, *the price of indifference would be catastrophic. We will work closely with our coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction.* (Emphasis ours throughout)

In the intervening years, Iraq was invaded and conquered (this conquest currently keeping much of the U.S. armed forces tied down), Iran has made great strides in its nuclear program, and North Korea performed conspicuous missile tests, apparently detonating a small nuclear device. Part of the axis has been neutralized (though at great monetary and political cost), and the other members constitute an ever-growing threat. President Bush pledged to “work closely with [a] coalition” to thwart the violent intentions of these nations, and to a large degree he has—but the usefulness of alliances and coalitions is now being tested and stretched as globalism wanes and tribalism grows.

The worth of an alliance was powerfully proved during World War II, when a coalition defeated the Axis powers of the time—Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan. As George Friedman explains,

The coalition . . . involved a range of nations that were prepared to *subordinate their particular national interests* to the broader interest of defeating the Axis powers. Military success in the war rested on the *ability of the coalition* to hold together. And reading backward, *had this coalition existed prior to the rise of Munich, World War II likely never would have happened.* Maintaining global stability required a coalition of states that shared a *mutual interest in stability* and would suppress, as soon as possible, nations that would want to upset that stability. (Stratfor Geopolitical Intelligence Report, October 17, 2006)

As Friedman explains, the Cold War was successfully prosecuted along the same lines: Nations banded together, agreed on the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Russia, and were prepared to act economically, politically, or militarily (short of direct confrontation) to keep the common enemy contained.

These two successes, however, have spawned the thinking that an alliance or coalition is *always* the solution, even when members disagree on the actual problem. Witness, for example, the frequent charge against President Bush of acting “unilaterally” (i.e., as a single entity) on Iraq, despite mustering a thirty-nation “coalition of the willing.” Clearly, the real objection is not his acting alone, but that he did not wait for *approval* from other parties who had a stake in the matter—and he acted simply because he knew that other stakeholders (France and Germany, most notably) did not consider Iraq to be as threatening as America did. However, the international community continues to call for “multilateralism” and “coalition-building” as the solutions, despite not agreeing on the scope of the problem.

Predictably, similar national self-interest played out in the “six-party talks”—North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia, China, and the United States—that completely failed to rein in North Korea. Since the Clinton presidency, the multilateral approach has been applied to North Korea, but most of the coalition, supposedly against a nuclear North Korea, does not believe Kim Jong Il is enough of a threat to do anything. South Korea wants neither war with nor destabilization of North Korea. Japan has major domestic and social issues with projecting its military power, and though open to sanctions, it is happy to keep trading with North Korea. “Russia,” Friedman notes, “is about as worried about the prospect of a North Korean nuclear strike on its territory as the United States is about a French strike. The two countries may not like each other, but it isn’t going to happen.” Yet, both Russia and China desire to keep the U.S. geopolitically off balance, valuing this more than a non-nuclear North Korea. The multilateral approach has failed because those involved could not agree with the U.S. that North Korea is a threat.

Significantly, the same multilateral approach is being employed with Iran in particular and militant Islam in general. The international community—whether the EU, the UN, Russia, China, or a combination of all—is convinced that alliances guarantee stability. But so far, each major player, aside from the U.S., has a vested interest (read: oil and weapons trade) in the status quo of a stable Iran and an off-balance U.S. To them, militant Islam is not threatening enough to be worth countering. Like in the run-up to World War II, most nations are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to contain emerging and escalating threats.

Whoever remains after the next crisis will have the clarity of hindsight to realize, “This could have been prevented—if they could have agreed on the threat.” For these reasons and others, God wisely warned ancient Israel against putting their trust in alliances and covenants with other peoples (Psalm 118:8-9; 146:3; Isaiah 30:1-3; Jeremiah 46:25). If only the modern nations of Israel would heed His counsel!

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Water Into Wine, Part One

The first miracle Jesus Christ performs during His ministry is changing water into wine at a marriage feast in Cana (John 2:1-11). When we compare what Christ and Moses each did with water, Jesus' miracle shows the contrast between law and grace. Moses changes water to blood, and Christ changes it into wine. Earlier, in John 1:17, the apostle John writes, "For the law was given through Moses, [and] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Moses' turning of water into blood suggests judgment (Exodus 7:14-17), while Jesus' turning of water into wine implies generosity and joy. In John 3:17, John comments, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world [what the law does to sinners], but that the world through Him might be saved [what grace does for those who repent]."

This miracle demonstrates at the earliest possible time that Christ's ministry would be one of grace and truth, as an extension and complement of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17-19). Jesus had come to fulfill God's law, that is, to teach it and live it as an example of how to apply it to everyday life (Luke 24:44-45).



1. Why is John's statement that this miracle was the "beginning of signs" by Christ so important? John 2:11.

COMMENT: That we are told that the miracle in Cana is the first Jesus performed discredits the false traditions that He worked miracles during the thirty years before His public ministry. It invalidates the miraculous accounts in the apocryphal gospels, which have been excluded from the Bible because of their contradictions to Scripture and their counterfeit nature. All stories about Christ's alleged miracles done prior to His public ministry are false.

2. Why does Jesus perform His first miracle at a marriage ceremony? John 2:1.

COMMENT: Jesus heaps great honor on marriage by using such an event to manifest His glory. The apostle Paul writes, "Marriage is honorable among all" (Hebrews 13:4), but society increasingly scorns marriage, a fact clearly seen in rampant premarital sex and divorce upon demand. Like Christ's coming, a wedding is a joyous celebration.

Jesus and at least six of His disciples were invited to the wedding, suggesting that the wedding couple were concerned about the character of their guests. As His blessing and presence are essential to marital happiness, Christ must be involved in our marriages. However, those who desire His involvement must invite Him in. Had Jesus not been invited to this wedding, a serious problem would have marred the marriage feast. We can learn that couples in whose marriage Christ is involved have a great advantage in solving problems that arise later.

3. Why was running out of wine a problem? John 2:3.

COMMENT: Weddings in the ancient Near East included a strong legal side, especially regarding providing the appropriate wedding gift, of which the wedding feast was a part. When the supply of wine failed at this wedding, more than social embarrassment was at stake. The bridegroom and his family could have become financially liable for inadequate wedding provisions. The seriousness of the lack of wine (symbolizing a lack of joy) helps us to appreciate the blessing contained in the miracle Jesus performed (Ecclesiastes 9:7-9).

This situation relates to the common problems couples experience in marriage, even among God's people. We cannot always stop problems from developing, but we can overcome them with the help of Christ who dwells in us and therefore within our marriages (Romans 8:10).

4. Why does Jesus rebuke His mother for her seemingly innocent request? John 2:4.

COMMENT: When Jesus reprimands Mary, calling her "woman" (*gunai*) rather than "mother" (*meter*), He implies that He is not conforming to her authority but acting under His Heavenly Father's authority. This statement establishes that Mary, even as His physical mother, has no authority over Jesus, destroying any belief that urges us to pray to Mary to intercede for us. On the two occasions in which Mary is seen intruding in His ministry—here and in Matthew 12:46-50—Jesus verbally moves her aside. His rebuke censures her assumption of authority she does not have. She also seems to lack the humility with which we must go to God with our requests.

Since the Father had already predetermined Jesus' agenda, Mary's request is inappropriate because she tries to determine what He should do. The Father would not have let Mary change His plan, so He had probably already inspired Christ to perform this miracle. Obviously, Jesus does not deny Mary a solution, but He does mildly rebuke her for her attitude toward Him and His purpose.

5. What does Mary's response demonstrate? John 2:5.

COMMENT: On behalf of the newlyweds and their families, Mary prudently goes to Jesus to solve their wine problem, emphasizing the value of friends and brethren praying for the marriages of others. The strength of Mary's faith is exhibited when she orders the servants to follow Jesus' instructions, confirming her acceptance of what He had said to her in verse 4. She demonstrates both meekness and faith by expressing a humble attitude. This is what service to Christ is all about, living in obedience to His every word.

—Martin G. Collins