



Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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STARVING?

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cover

A malnourished Ethiopian boy is measured by aid workers. While the Horn of Africa is currently suffering drought, the world produces plenty of food to help these starving people to endure their difficulties. This disaster is not "natural" but essentially manmade, brought on by a number of human factors beyond the local climatic conditions.

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The Christian Fight

Part Seven

Do we fully appreciate faith's value to our spiritual well-being? Outside of God's grace and Christ's blood, nothing—not even love—is as important as faith because, without these three, there would be no love. Faith is our response to God's love. Ephesians 2:8 reminds us that, "We are saved by grace through faith." It is of vital importance to our salvation.

Hebrews 11:6 boldly states, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him." Surely, above all beings, we want to please God. If we do, then we must believe and trust Him. By means of faith, Abel chose to make a sacrifice acceptable to God. Through faith, Enoch was enabled to walk with God and seek Him as he walked. Faith motivated Noah to build the ark, and it so pleased God that He proceeded to save him from the Flood's destruction through the very instrument his faith motivated him to build.

This article will continue to uncover many details essential to understanding more fully the foundational workings of faith in a converted person's life.

Hebrews 11:8-11 reminds us:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was

called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

Part Six of this series focused on three aspects of Christian life:

- First, that God uses Abraham's example as the overall pattern to teach us how we should respond in faith to God's calling.
- Second, that each called person actually receives two callings, but everybody rejects the first one. The first calling comes largely from the created world and the easy availability of God's Word, both of which give ample evidence of the Creator

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God's existence. Most people reject the initial calling by simply ignoring it, going on with life as if God's existence and requirements are of little importance. The second calling, though, is so personal that Jesus declares in John 10:3 that God calls us by name. This summoning has far more impact, and few called in this manner reject it outright.

- Third, that Abraham is considered to be “father of the faithful.” In John 8, Jesus explains this in terms of family resemblance—not physical resemblance, because Abraham's seed is drawn from all nations and races, but spiritual resemblance, that is, similarity in faithful conduct according to God's way of life.

Legal and Practical

Ramifications of Our Calling

In this article, we will string a number of scriptures together to show step by step what happened to Abraham when he obeyed God's call. This step-by-step outline parallels what happens to each of God's children legally and spiritually when God's calling is obeyed. It will also help us grasp the roots of some frequently occurring biblical terminology.

Genesis 12:1, 4 sets the foundation:

Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.” . . . So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

The Christian—Abraham might be termed “the first Christian”—is called and led from his old *position* in relation to God and to the world. To this we can add I John 5:19: “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.” Galatians 1:4 contributes another factor: “Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” John 15:19 confirms the transaction being described: “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” The first step resulting from God's calling, then, begins to remove the called one from being under the sway of Satan and this present evil world to being under God.

The second step is that, at the same time, our spiritual *condition* in relation to God and the world also changes. Regarding this, Paul writes in Romans 6:6: “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no

longer be slaves of sin.” The apostle John adds: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (I John 3:1).

Romans 8:8-10 describes a more complete change:

So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

The second result is that God's calling brings the Christian into a new spiritual union with new kindred, a new family, and new relationships. Thus, God's very personal calling creates two separations and two attachments: It separates us from the world and death and joins us to the Kingdom of God and life.

Practical Results

Understanding these two separations is important toward growth in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18) because the world concentrates heavily on justification while treating sanctification very superficially. Practically, this world's Christianity places great emphasis on accepting Christ and His blood for the forgiveness of sin but little on obedience to His governance of our lives. Thus, real sanctification rarely occurs among worldly Christians.

I Peter 1:1-2 addresses sanctification. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” It is the life that is obedient to God and separated from the world that provides the proof of one's conversion. If the Christian is legally cleared of guilt before God and obedient to Him, he no longer “belongs” to the world; the Bible no longer perceives such a person as being “in the flesh.”

Philippians 3:20 offers understanding of another separation from the world: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” His spiritual separation produces for the Christian a legal transfer of citizenship that he must recognize.

Colossians 1:12-13 confirms this: “Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” As a result of these separations the Christian must live his life as a stranger and pilgrim as if in

a foreign land, obeying the laws of his new nation by placing higher priority in his activities as a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

This opens the door to another line of practical thought, conduct, and attitude: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself the enemy of God” (James 4:4). We normally do whatever we can to avoid our enemies, even to the point of fleeing from them if necessary. This reality should help us to understand why God commands us:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? . . . Therefore “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.” (II Corinthians 6:14, 17)

It is by means of conduct motivated by the Holy Spirit that we are to come out from among unbelievers and be separate. We cannot—we must not—straddle the fence; we cannot serve two masters. Once we are called, we must serve God, or we will have received God’s grace in vain (II Corinthians 6:1).

Let us carry this thought further with a few more familiar scriptures that bring out our practical, spiritual responsibilities. Romans 12:1 charges us with an important responsibility: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

Romans 13:11-14 adds a sense of urgency to this task:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

In Colossians 3:1, 5, Paul provides positive direction for these activities:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. . . . Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Romans 8:1-14 summarizes what these things accomplish:

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Through our calling, legal justification before God, and sanctification—that is, our spiritual separation from the world—our standing and condition before God passes from carnal to spiritual, from death to life.

Christ’s Claims on Our Lives

The practical, day-by-day result of this transition, activated by our calling, is that Christ’s claims on our lives become of paramount importance. We, who were slaves of this world, become slaves of Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 6:19-20 reminds us:

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.

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Colossians 3:24 adds, “. . . knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.” Galatians 6:7-8 admonishes us concerning our responsibility to serve Christ:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

Our lives and time now belong to Jesus Christ. Abraham underwent this same process, becoming so encouraged by what he experienced and learned that he set an example for all who are becoming his children.

The practical, daily, experiential reality is that we now walk to the beat of a different drummer. We must do this while contending with two competing, warring dimensions within. With the help of God through Jesus Christ, we will overcome the carnal dimension in preparation for birth into God’s Kingdom.

Thus emerges the Christian fight, a spiritual war that this world’s Christianity avoids mentioning. It is this conflict that makes Christianity so difficult. Jesus Himself calls His way “narrow” and “difficult” (Matthew 7:14), and He warns all who wish to follow Him to count the cost, because to look back could greatly impede their progress or even end it entirely (Luke 14:26-32).

Into the Unknown

In Hebrews 11:8, the author reminds us of another factor that makes Christian living difficult: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” I John 3:2 provides another example of this difficulty: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

We are involved in an awesome adventure, but we are blind to many particulars that will affect us. What is emphasized from Abraham’s life is his trust in God. Trust is the most powerful fruit, the strongest, clearest evidence, of belief. Trust is faith in action, setting a truly converted person apart from one who believes only intellectually. The Christian *must* live his life by faith.

Lack of trust is a major reason why young people “go bad” in their teen years. They do not really trust their parents. Rather, they trust other teens; they trust what they see in movies extolling the popular culture; they trust what they hear songs saying to their emotions.

They trust their own thoughts and their own experiences, but Mom and Dad are low on the influence scale.

Notice, however, what Jesus says of Abraham regarding this principle: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). Abraham saw Christ as the Savior and Author of eternal salvation in his mind’s eye and demonstrated his trust in this fact through his conduct. Abraham’s proceeding on despite not knowing where he was going demonstrates that he put himself unreservedly in God’s hands. He actually performed what he said he believed despite its potential cost. His feet, as it were, gave proof of what was in his heart by where and how he walked.

Jesus teaches this principle in Matthew 16:24-26:

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Abraham did this to a degree few have even come close to matching. To deny ourselves is to set aside our claims on the day-to-day use of our time and energy in favor of another. Often God’s commands seem demanding, even severe, but accepting God’s calling has placed the burden of this responsibility squarely on our shoulders.

There can be no doubt that Abraham’s neighbors thought he was loopy, even as Noah’s neighbors undoubtedly thought he was crazy for building an ark. People of the world cannot truly understand the actions of one who walks by faith because their perspectives on the value of things are usually quite different. If confronted with similar knowledge and circumstances without God’s gracious calling and gift of faith, the unconverted will adjust through compromise and self-justification. They will rationalize that under their “special” circumstances, God would surely not expect such things of them. The world of the unconverted is governed by its limited, carnal senses and feelings, not by faith in God’s character. They walk by sight.

What If He Had Not Stepped Out?

Hebrews 11:8 also tells us that Abraham was drawn by faith to a land that he would afterward receive as an inheritance, the Promised Land, a type of the Kingdom of God. What if he had refused to step out?

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SCARCITY AMID PLENTY

The U.S. Census Bureau's World Population Clock recently estimated that the earth's 6,666,666,666th child has been born somewhere on the planet.

Despite the fact that the number of the Beast is 666, this population figure is relevant only because of its sheer enormity. The world's population seems to be exploding, causing many to wonder if the earth can sustain such a vast number of people. In a 2004 report, the United Nations projected earth's population to reach seven billion by 2013 and eight billion by 2028.

Paul R. Ehrlich—in reality, an entomologist specializing in butterflies and now the Bing Professor of Population Studies in the department of Biological Sciences at Stanford University—has been crying wolf on “the population bomb” since his 1968 book by that name. When world population stood at 3.5 billion people, he predicted horrible global famines to occur sometime between 1970 and 1985, all attributable to overpopulation. In his 1990 book, *The Population Explosion*, co-authored with his wife, Anne—when the global population had indeed exploded to 5.27 billion—he was more circumspect in his prognostications, but his point was the same: Humanity is breeding itself toward global famine and collapse.

Most of his specific, catastrophic predictions have come nowhere near fulfillment. His population estimates were wildly overblown (his growth calculations were essentially exponential, having used a compound-interest-type formula, whereas

real-world population increases somewhat more linearly). On the other side of his thesis, his forecasts of the earth's and farmers' abilities to produce food were terribly pessimistic.

Contrarily, in 1965, the University of California's Walter Schmitt had estimated that the earth could produce food for 30 billion people,¹ and this was before the bumper yields of the “Green Revolution” were fully apparent. Present estimates suggest that the earth, fully utilized, has the potential to feed as many as 30-60 billion²—although environmental catastrophists like Ehrlich would argue that we have already far surpassed earth's sustainability.³

These figures are illogically divergent, springing from both ends of the ideological spectrum. One extreme foresees only doom, while the other forecasts only sunny days and blue skies. Neither is looking at reality, and both have left out major factors in their calculations. That said, their estimates are essentially worthless. Against the one, the earth is already sustaining more than twice the estimated population with relatively little hunger; and against the other, the earth will never get the opportunity in this age to test its limits, as world population growth is already slowing.⁴

Obviously, planet earth is a marvelous creation. Its ability to sustain such a vast amount and diver-

prophecy watch *Scarcity Amid Plenty*

sity of life has amazed human beings through the millennia. Despite being abused by mankind—through depleting the soil, expanding urbanization, depredations from war, industrial pollution, even nuclear fallout—it has continued to produce increasing yields, repairing itself remarkably fast. Even the area around the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster site has reforested, providing a haven for many species of native animals and birds.

Yet, if the earth is so productive and resilient, why are we now hearing cries of imminent, worldwide famine in the air?

THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND

On April 26, 2008, Channel News Asia reported that the chief of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Jacques Diouf, warned of potential civil wars in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin American countries due to global food shortages. World leaders, he said, had failed to heed FAO warnings about this “predictable catastrophe.” He made these comments as riots over escalating food costs engulfed Haiti’s capital, Port au Prince.

The food shortages around the globe are real. However, for the most part, these deficits are not driven by the agricultural industry’s inability to produce enough food. The problem is essentially *economic*. Joesetta Sheeran, director of the World Food Program, in appealing for an extra \$500 million in aid, put it plainly: “People are simply being priced out of food markets.”

This is not to say that demand is not catching up to supply. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently reported that global grain reserves have not been so low since 1960. Weather problems in various parts of the world have affected production. Droughts in the U.S., Australia, the Balkans, and parts of the former Soviet Union have hit grain-producing regions especially hard over the past few years. Other, more unusual incidents—like the spreading of African Rust, a wheat fungus that has crossed the Persian Gulf into Iran and threatens Pakistan and India—have also done their part to reduce yields.

However, the main problem is spiking costs, and there are a handful of reasons for them:

The first reason is the present inflation of the price of fuel, a pinch in the pocketbook that everyone feels. While there may be some increase in the price of a barrel of oil due to tensions in the Middle East, a prime engine of fuel-cost escalation is the expansion of the Chinese and Indian economies. These two huge, developing nations have a hearty thirst for fossil fuels both in their industries and in their burgeoning middle classes. More Chinese and Indians with money to burn are buying cars

than ever before, and those cars do not run on sunshine. As a result, fuel prices have risen worldwide, and food producers simply pass on their increased fuel costs to customers.

The second factor is the international push for biofuels, gasoline or diesel substitutes—ethanol and biodiesel—made from fermented plant materials, or biomass. Some nations, including the U.S., have mandated that a certain and increasing percentage of acreage be allocated for growing biomass crops, and they have also proffered subsidies to farmers who switch from food to fuel farming. This political move has driven the cost of grains to record highs, doubling or more than doubling prices. Again, producers shift their increased costs to purchasers in the grocery stores.

A third cause of high food prices is worldwide economic development—growing pains, as it were. As more nations enter the global economy, the millions of new consumers put strains on the worldwide system of trade. Before they developed, these nations had the money to buy only sparingly on the world market, but now, with more purchasing power, they can divert to themselves higher-status foods—wheat instead of barley, for instance—which had once gone only to the richer nations. In addition, these nations are consuming more meat, especially beef, which is grain-intensive to produce. In both of these cases, the increased demand boosts prices at the supermarket.

Seeing these factors, one could conclude that the real culprit is the global economy. In this case, in trying to spread economic prosperity throughout the world through globalism, wealthier nations like the United States are allowing their own citizens to absorb the financial pains of wealth-redistribution through sharp spikes in the costs of two necessities of this modern age: food and fuel. Yet, citizens of poor, undeveloped nations like the aforementioned Haiti, unable to compete on the world market, are feeling real, sharp pains of hunger. Thus, we have famine in the midst of plenty.

THE RED HORSE

Politics and its brutal brother, war, are the chief causes of famine, as the seals of Revelation 6 suggest in their inspired order: deception, war, famine, and death. In the last few decades, for example, the Horn of Africa—Ethiopia and Somalia, in particular—suffered terrible famines. Millions of Westerners saw the horrible pictures of stick-thin children with bloated bellies, and filled with compassion for their suffering, they contributed billions of dollars to send food, medicine, and other supplies to the afflicted region. More than enough aid reached those nations to turn the tide of the famine—had the warlords and factions not taken the

bulk of it for themselves, their cronies, and their causes. The Darfur region of Sudan now suffers the same inhumanity.

Haiti's ongoing problem is also governmental. It shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, which, unlike Haiti, has experienced a stable democracy for the past dozen years and sustains a growing economy. Yet, the instability of the Haitian government, plagued by incessant political violence, has reduced the nation to being the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Currently, eighty percent of the population there lives on only \$2 per day, and some of its people have been reduced to the point of eating cookies made of a mixture of dried yellow dirt, vegetable shortening, and salt. This is especially tragic because, until few decades ago, Haiti was self-sufficient in rice, its staple crop.

The current calamity in post-Cyclone Nargis Myanmar, the former Burma, is a similar consequence of repressive, corrupt government. In its paranoia, the military junta there has obstructed and at times denied the importation of necessary food, water, and other aid to the survivors of the devastating storm. Relief experts expect the death toll—already over 100,000—to double due to disease and malnutrition/starvation as a result of the intractability of the generals in the initial few days after the cyclone hit the vulnerable Mekong Delta region.

In all of these instances, once again, an abundance of food exists in the world, and in most cases, nearby. The trouble is overcoming the political and military obstacles placed in the way of the massive supplies available to relieve the suffering. While natural disasters and poor yields devastate some areas of the earth every year, human nature causes more suffering from starvation by far.

THE THIRD SEAL

The apostle John witnessed the opening of the seals of Revelation 6. He writes regarding the third seal:

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not harm the oil and the wine." (Revelation 6:5-6)

Clearly, this third seal pictures famine stalking the land (see Matthew 24:7; Luke 21:11). Biblically, the color black—unlike our modern conception of it as the color of evil, as opposed to white—signifies mourning

and ill health as a result of scarcity (see Jeremiah 14:2; Lamentations 5:10; Nahum 2:10; all of which, in Hebrew, describe people's expressions, skins, or faces as "black" due to want). This is in keeping with another use of black or darkness in Scripture: as a sign of God's judgment for sin (Zephaniah 1:15; Joel 2:2).

The pair of scales, of course, suggests similar things, adding an economic element, as grains or other foods would often be weighed for sale. Scales could also be used, as is likely intended in the third seal, to ration food during a time of scarcity. In the vision, a denarius represents a laborer's daily wage, and a quart of grain equals a person's daily nutritional requirement. The third horseman, then, portrays a scenario of hunger and suffering, when the powers that be tightly control the meting out of staple foods at highly inflated prices.

Finally, there is the curious phrase, "do not harm the oil and the wine." Commentators have been debating the meaning of this command for centuries. It is clearly spoken by God, sitting among the four living creatures, and just as He sets the famine prices of grain, He also decrees that oil and wine be spared any harm. How are we to understand this?

Olive oil and wine are not luxury items, as many take them to be; in the Mediterranean world, they are important supporting elements of the common diet (see Deuteronomy 7:13; Hosea 2:8; Haggai 1:11; etc.). However, while they provide supplementary nutrition, people cannot subsist on them alone. Thus, they are secondary food items, and in the prophecy, they remain plentiful. This leads to two possible conclusions:

1. God is limiting the severity of famines, as "the end is not yet" (Matthew 24:6) and "these are the beginning of sorrows" (verse 8); or more likely,
2. He is indicating a measure of disparity and irregularity in these famines. Some foods will be scarce, while others are abundant. Some people will be sorely affected, while others will hardly suffer. Some areas will be hit hard, while others feel little impact.

This second conclusion suggests human involvement, a wild card in every circumstance, which would fit well with the first two seals. Unlike simple natural disasters, religious deceptions and wars require the decisions and actions of people to bring them about. God hints at a human element in all these disasters, including famine, that occur down through the centuries to remind us of our culpability in them. When man governs without the guidance of God, catastrophe and destruction are not far behind.

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Of Sponges and Spe

So much wonderful symbolism infuses the accounts of Jesus' final hours, along with many details that we may read each year before and during the Passover service. We are so familiar with many of these details that we tend to read right over them without questioning their deep meanings and their rich symbolism.

For example, most of us fail to realize how many times "the cup" is mentioned in relation to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament alone, the authors make at least twenty-one references to this cup. Medieval readers noticed the recurrence of this theme, and the spurious legends of the Holy Grail grew out of their speculations. Although there are many aspects of the biblical cup of Christ that we should consider from time to time, we can touch on only a few of them in this short article.

The cup of Passover wine, as we all know so well, is symbolic of the blood and the sacrifice of our Savior:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28)

Relative to the subject of Jesus' cup and the pouring out of His blood, it is interesting to note that He told His disciples at His last Passover service: "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (verse 29).

Jesus was certainly aware that He would spend forty days with His disciples after His resurrection, time in which He would have been well able to enjoy a glass of wine with them. But the first part of His statement seems to have been a vow, or at least a strong promise, that He would abstain from wine until after the time of *their* resurrection.

Vinegar and Gall

It may be significant then that, just before His crucifixion, once He realized what He was being given, He refused the sour wine and gall mixture that was offered to Him: "They gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted, He would not drink" (Matthew 27:34; see also Mark 15:23; Luke 23:36).

From our human points of view, we may think that a mere taste of this foul-tasting cocktail would not have caused Jesus to break His vow—that it could hardly be construed as "drinking of the fruit of the vine" with His disciples. Jesus, however, looked at things from God's point of view, and He knew that all that His Father had assigned for Him to do was to be carried out perfectly, and not with an "oh, that should do" attitude.

The Greek verb for "taste" in Matthew 27:34 is *geuomai*, which can mean "to perceive the flavor of," suggesting that perhaps Jesus did not actually taste the mixture at all. In the haze of His agony, He may not have been aware of what the Roman soldier was holding up to Him until it reached His lips, and in that split-second, He recognized it for sour wine. In any case, a taste cannot be considered a drink.

Later, as His human life moved into its final moments, He was offered sour wine a second time: "Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink" (Matthew 27:48; see also Mark 15:36; John 19:29-30).

These "drink offerings" of sour wine and gall perfectly fulfilled David's prophecy of Psalm 69:21: "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."

But what was this "sour wine"? *Easton's Bible Dictionary* describes this drink in its article, "Gall":

The drink offered to our Lord was vinegar (made of light wine rendered acid, the common drink of

Roman soldiers) “mingled with gall,” or, according to Mark 15:23, “mingled with myrrh”; both expressions meaning the same thing, namely, that the vinegar was made bitter by the infusion of wormwood or some other bitter substance, usually given, according to a merciful custom, as an anodyne [pain reliever] to those who were crucified, to render them insensible to pain. Our Lord, knowing this, refuses to drink it. He would take nothing to cloud his faculties or blunt the pain of dying. He chooses to suffer every element of woe in the bitter cup of agony given him by the Father (John 18:11).

Other commentators opine that the gall—being a poison as well as a desensitizing drug—was meant to speed the death of the victim before the grisly effects of the crucifixion did. But surely it was not offered as, Easton suggests, for the comfort of the condemned! Rather, it was given for the soldiers’ own ease and perhaps for the benefit of the pitiless Jewish leaders who wanted the three victims dead and disposed of before the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31-33).

Luke’s account implies that the soldiers’ offers of sour wine to Jesus were part of their mockery of Him: “The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine” (Luke 23:36). It is not logical that these soldiers would mock Jesus, beat Him, spit on Him, jam a crown of thorns on His head, flog Him terribly, and then give a pain-relieving drink to Him as a “merciful custom”! Later, to speed their deaths, the soldiers would break the legs of the two men who were crucified on either side of Jesus and would cruelly stab Him with a spear. They would have broken Jesus’ legs too, but they were prevented from doing so for the prophecies to be accurately fulfilled. Not much evidence of mercy here!

Sour Wine, Act Two

John’s version of the second offering of sour wine reads:

Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. (John 19:29-30)

Like this rendition from the New King James version, most Bible translations read that Jesus “received” the sour wine, but this is not to say that He actually drank it. *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* states that *lambano*, the Greek verb translated “received,” can imply “to have offered to one.” In the overall context, this is a more logical meaning. Also, if Jesus refused to drink the first offering, why would He accept the second? Knowing that only moments—perhaps even seconds—remained before He would die, why would He seek any temporary comfort from the effects of this drink?

Understanding these things, three probable reasons why Jesus turned down the mixture of sour wine and gall immediately come to mind:

- First, because its taste was so disgusting;
- Second, because He knew that the offerings were part of the soldiers’ mockery of Him; and
- Third, because, as Easton wrote, He could not allow anything to desensitize His mind and body to the pain He was enduring.

These were all parts of the terrifying “cup” that God the Father had given Jesus to drink from (see Matthew 26:39-42; Mark 10:38-39; 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11).

However, Jesus' vow regarding wine in Matthew 26:29 adds a fourth interesting reason. If He would have accepted and drunk either of these offerings of sour wine, would He not then have broken His promise?

At the time He made it, during His last Passover service, the wine and His blood, which it symbolized, were both physically pure—the wine relatively so and Jesus' blood perfectly so. The symbolism of the offerings in Numbers 15:7-10 suggests that the wine may have been of a sweet variety, perhaps similar to today's Jewish Concord grape wines (see also Amos 9:13 and Micah 6:15). As we have seen, Jesus promised to drink *new* wine with His disciples in His Father's Kingdom.

But later that Passover evening, His Father laid the sins of the world on Jesus' head in Gethsemane. Those sins permeated His mind and body, thoroughly polluting Him—all of Him, including His blood, which became tainted and besmirched—like the sour wine mixed with gall that was offered to Him before His crucifixion and again some hours later as He hung on the stake. Jeremiah writes prophetically of this: "He has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drink wormwood. . . . Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall" (Lamentations 3:15, 19).

Putting all the relevant scriptures together, it appears that yet a fifth reason for Jesus' refusal of the sour wine is because His blood—the antitype of the formally pure wine—had already been "soured" by His Father's injection of the sins of the world into it.

When a soldier brutally speared Jesus in His side (John 19:34), the spear severed a major artery and probably punctured His heart or the pericardium (the membrane enveloping His heart) (Job 16:13; Psalm 69:20). John is clear that His blood and some "water" poured out. As some commentators have written, this "water" may have been lymph or serous liquid from Jesus' ruptured pericardium; and it flowed from the fatal gash, down His legs and feet, and onto and into the soil of Golgotha. If the sour wine pictured Jesus' tainted blood, then perhaps the gall symbolized the "water."

The Thrust of a Spear

We should examine the subject of this awful wound—this piercing—in some more detail. To further comprehend the suffering that our Savior went through for us, we will briefly study John 19:34 and 37: "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. . . . And again another Scripture says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced.'"

The other scripture mentioned by John is Zechariah 12:10:

And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.

The modern understanding of the English word "pierced" used in these verses (also in Job 16:13; Psalm 22:16; Lamentations 3:13; and Revelation 1:7) does not adequately describe the magnitude of Jesus' terrible wound. When we think of "pierced," we probably think of:

- The minor puncture of the tiny needle used for the medical blood-tests we might have from time to time;
- The minute holes required for earrings; or
- The erroneous view of classical artists who painted depictions of the crucified Christ with small, inoffensive wounds from which drip insignificant trickles of blood.

Webster's Dictionary definitions, however, show that the Bible's translators did an accurate job in translating this word:

- To run into or through as a pointed weapon does;
- To stab;
- To enter or thrust into sharply or painfully;
- To force or make a way into or through.

Here is an excerpt from Albert Barnes' commentary on John 19:34:

[With a spear] The common spear which soldiers used in war. There can be no doubt that such a stroke from the strong arm of a Roman soldier would have caused death, if He had not been already dead. . . . Let the following circumstances be remembered, showing that death must have ensued from such a wound:

- (1) The Saviour was elevated but a little from the ground, so as to be easily reached by the spear of a soldier.
- (2) The wound must have been transversely upward, so as to have penetrated into the body, as he could not have stood directly under Him.

(continued on page 18)

ready answer

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

Unity and Personal Responsibility

“ . . . that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.”
—*I Corinthians 12:25*

Has there ever been a time in man’s history when such a prevalence of disunity existed? Everywhere one looks on God’s great green earth, turmoil between competing factions has either already erupted into open hostility and people—many of them entirely innocent of the conflict—are being killed; or people are living in anxiety because strong differences of opinion, sometimes among multiple sides of a disagreement, are smoldering and about ready to explode into conflict.

But what if the disagreement is between God and His nation or His church? What if the citizens or members of the church have drifted so far from a vital, thriving relationship with Him that they are not even aware that God has a disagreement with them? When God acts to make them aware of His disagreement with their conduct, how will people react? His intervention into human affairs might be to send a prophet or minister, as often happened in the Old Testament. On the other hand, He might create a calamity (Isaiah 45:7) designed to make people analyze and evaluate the state of their standing before Him. What would we do in such a situation?

Such circumstances took place any number of times in God’s relationship with Israel under the Old Covenant, giving rise to prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a host of others, named and unnamed, whom God sent to make the nation aware of His concerns. The reactions of the people were varied, but typically, they continued on their self-destructive course. When a significant change for the good did occur, the unity and peace it generated historically lasted but a generation, or two at the best.

ready answer *Unity and Personal Responsibility*

Final Warning

An intriguing confrontation is detailed in the book of Amos. It is especially significant because this confrontation turned out to be a final warning from God to His nation, Israel. As such, it contains vital lessons for us today. A particular lesson for us begins in Amos 3:1-7 and carries through chapter 5. The prophet writes in Amos 3:1-7:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he has caught nothing? Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth, where there is no trap for it? Will a snare spring up from the earth, if it has caught nothing at all? If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it? Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.

Amos' prophecy contains some dreadful descriptions of disasters God planned to send unless the Israelites changed their attitudes and conduct. Amos is the prophet who coined the phrase, "the day of the Lord." At least no one else used it in his writings prior to Amos. He introduced it in his preaching to the Israelites around their capital city, Samaria. Regarding the disasters of the day of the Lord, Amos 5:18-20 declares:

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?

Amos was a Jew, a citizen of the southern kingdom, not an Israelite of the northern kingdom. However, God sent him, a Jew, to preach to the northerners. Almost needless to say, he was not a popular man there! First, because he was a Jew, and ethnic antipathy against Jews was high there. Second, because the message he brought is quite accusative of the northerners' attitudes and conduct.

Amos 3:1-2 establishes the foundation for God's accusations by showing the privileged and intimate relationship between God and the Israelites. It follows, then, that because of the privilege He had freely given them as a gift to establish the relationship, God has every right to make such accusations. Moreover, due to the intimacy of their relationship, He is justified in making them.

Verse 3 begins a string of seven questions that any Israelite could have answered, as they address familiar things. The purpose of these questions was to help them understand that a fact invariably leads to a reasonable conclusion, that is, a given cause produces a given effect. God designed them to get the Israelites' attention and to point their thinking in a desired direction: that their immoral conduct was leading them and the nation to the day of the Lord. God's aim was to help every Israelite admit a measure of responsibility for Israel's immoral condition and thus repent.

What It Means to Repent

There is nothing difficult to understand about what *repent* means. It simply means "to change one's mind." In biblical usage, it implies changing one's mind in relation to God and His way of life. Repentance, though, is invariably preceded by something else, usually a deeply felt sense of concern, arising from guilt that one has done wrong. It can also be fear for one's life or reputation, or it may be sorrow over the horrible mess one has created.

We must understand that concern, unease, guilt, fear, or sorrow is not repentance. However, these feelings can *lead* to repentance, the change of mind that contains the resolve never to repeat whatever made us feel uncomfortable about our relationship with God. Notice the apostle Paul's explanation of this in II Corinthians 7:9-11:

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all these things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

Paul had, in effect, chewed them out in a previous

letter, and it set off a chain of reactions: It produced the sorrow that leads to repentance, the change of mind in relation to God. That, in turn, produced a change of conduct because they set their wills never to allow their unrighteousness to be the cause of breaking their relationship with Him again. If a person changes his mind in relation to God rather than merely because of the pain that his conduct caused himself and others, it opens the door to making real change in attitude and conduct.

A number of factors always work to keep us from admitting responsibility for the destructive conditions surrounding us. First, sometimes we simply do not “get” it! It sometimes takes a while to understand that, by our own conduct, we are shooting ourselves in the foot and hurting our loved ones besides. In human nature, the tendency always exists to blame others before ourselves.

Second, sometimes we are so unfeeling, so unconcerned, and so self-centered that we just do not care! This attitude is dangerously destructive—in fact, biblically suicidal. This attitude is similar to what occurs to people in the grip of a drug, whether it is alcohol, a chemical like heroin, cocaine, or the nicotine in a cigarette.

The third reason is more subtle and difficult to grasp, and it resides at the foundation of a great deal of our failure to repent and change. Because of our tendency to think we are nothing, we cannot seem to get it through our minds that what we do matters! Are we not only one of billions of people on earth? Are we not only one of 300 million Americans? Or, are we not only an insignificant member of community, family, club, or church?

It is a careless but nonetheless strong inclination to believe that nothing we do has any effect whatever on the improvement of life for anybody else. Do we realize that almost everybody else also carelessly feels the same way? Thus, the whole family or nation continues its violent, heartbreaking, pell-mell rush into the pit and on to oblivion!

It Does Matter!

The same beliefs confronted Amos as he preached to the people of Israel more than seven hundred years before Christ was born. They also confronted Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and all the other prophets, as well as Jesus and the apostles! Isaiah lamented with all his heart, “Lord, who has believed our report?” (Isaiah 53:1). They are the ministry’s challenge to this very day.

It is also where our relationship with God becomes so vital to the quality of our lives. We cannot afford to

let ourselves be lulled into thinking that our attitudes and our conduct do not matter—that they do not contribute to the disaster that is this world.

The drought that the Charlotte area is enduring provides an interesting illustration in this regard. In 2001, Charlotte experienced a drought similar to the present one. Voluntary water-use restrictions were imposed, producing a 23 percent water savings. This past year, in the second-worst drought in Charlotte history, mandatory restrictions produced 30 percent savings, a modest seven-point increase. Why was a higher percentage of water not saved during a far more serious drought?

Measurements reveal that 50 percent of the water drawn from Charlotte’s reservoirs goes to home consumption. The reason for the modest increase, then, largely comes down to the attitude in each individual’s human nature that says, “What I do doesn’t matter.”

But to the Christian, it *does* matter! Why? Because watching our response to governments and circumstances that God has established is, in an overall sense, what He is judging most closely. In each of His begotten children, He wants to see whether we really do perceive Him to be sovereign over His creation and will submit to Him by faith. He wants to see whether we will look to Him beyond the human government He ultimately installed; beyond what everybody else is doing; beyond our cynicism, distrust, and skepticism; and beyond our feelings of being of no consequence.

Oh, yes, it *does* matter. Spiritually, to God and to our ultimate destiny, it matters a great deal! It shows that we are living our lives “by faith, not by sight” (II Corinthians 5:7).

The Israelites to whom Amos preached did not repent and perhaps did not feel even a little guilt for the direction their immorality-laden nation was headed. Therefore, nothing changed. Thus, as God planned, the Israelites, defeated by the Assyrians, were taken into captivity and seemingly disappeared from the pages of history—all because each individual Israelite thought that his actions did not matter. Israel’s unity as a nation was destroyed.

As Christians, our attitudes and actions really *do* matter. Just as individual Israelites ultimately affected the decline and fall of their entire nation, so our approach and conduct affect the whole body of Christ, as I Corinthians 12:12-27 shows so clearly. We must always be aware that what we do individually affects the whole, so we must each take personal responsibility to do our share in love to “knit together” the church, building godly unity (Ephesians 4:16).

—John W. Ritenbaugh

personal *The Christian Fight*

(continued from page 6)

What God has recorded of Abraham's life reveals that how he responded illustrates a path, a way of trust that will lead us to our inheritance. It is the "narrow way," the difficult way that leads to life. That way would have existed even if God had not revealed it to him, but Abraham's following that way in faith proved that his heart was one with God's. God expects us to follow the same trustful attitude that motivated Abraham's actions.

Abraham's obedient response suggests that no proud, stiff-necked rebel will be in the Kingdom of God. No one wrapped up in himself will survive this difficult path, only those who by faith are humbly submissive to God's will. In short, God's calling begins severing us from a number of important negative worldly and carnal factors. At the same time, it also attaches our loyalties, our responsibilities, and our purposes in life to God and His Kingdom.

In biblical terminology, we are transferred from death to life; from fleshly minded to spiritually minded; from Israelite or Gentile to Abraham's seed; from uncircumcised to circumcised in heart; and from the world to the Kingdom of God. It is essential that our severing from the old way be as complete and continuous as possible because, despite what happens to our heart in our attachment to God and His way, the world and carnality remain as constant threats, almost like magnets drawing us back toward them.

From this arises our need for faith to wage the Christian fight so that we do not backslide to where and what we were before. We see this in a small way from Abraham's life; his breaking away was not as smooth as it appears on the surface. Genesis 12:1 contains God's original charge: "Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get you out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.'"

God was severing Abraham from his country, his kindred, and his father's house. Our severing rarely involves a physical separation from the nations of our birth, but it almost always involves a spiritual division from our natural families. Frequently, this severing causes strained family relations. It appears that it caused Abraham problems as well.

In Luke 14:26-27, Jesus admonishes all who desire baptism to consider well what He says:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

As our calling begins, problems do not generally arise because the uncalled family members hate us outright. Instead, they love us in their carnal fashion, but our desire to obey God upsets their sense of family unity, loyalty, and responsibility. A related factor irritates them: They under-

stand that we are rejecting many, if not virtually all, of the spiritual values they taught us.

Abraham's Background

This connects to a problem Abraham appears to have had at the beginning of his conversion, showing that he was not perfect in his obedience. It also reveals God's patience in dealing with us, as well as how little control we sometimes exercise over some circumstances. In such times, we must continue trusting God and fighting to overcome as He leads us through them and teaches us aspects of His character.

Joshua says of Abraham's family background:

Thus says the LORD God of Israel: "Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac." (Joshua 24:2-3)

Abraham's family members were outright pagans, as was Abraham before his conversion. We need to add Genesis 11:27-32 to the mix:

This is the genealogy of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran begot Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Then Abram and Nahor took wives: the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took his son Abram, and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.

Barnes Notes contains a fairly complex study of these verses, showing that Abraham actually received his initial calling when he was 70 while living in Ur of the Chaldeans. Why "initial"? Verse 31 says they left Ur and then came to Haran, adding that Abraham's family dwelt there. "Dwelt" indicates that they remained there for an extended period—it was no mere overnight stop by a group of pilgrims at a motel.

Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2-4 helps us to understand:

Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to

him, “Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.” Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.

Stephen clearly states that God called Abraham before he dwelt in Haran, but Genesis 12:1 shows God then moved him from Haran after his father died. Apparently, Abraham’s account to his father and others in the family—but most especially his father—of the things he was learning and believing in his calling persuaded them, despite being pagan to the core, that they, too, should emigrate to wherever God was leading Abraham.

Recall, however, from Isaiah 51:2 that God says that He called Abraham alone. Genesis 11:31 clearly shows Terah, the pagan patriarch of the family, leading the expedition, not Abraham. Abraham no doubt deferred to his father in this decision, but this was not God’s will.

God knew that, because of Abraham’s attitude, he would continue to defer to Terah. God did not want Terah’s direct influence in what He was establishing through Abraham. Under Terah’s pagan, patriarchal leadership, they got only as far as Haran from Ur, by itself an arduous 700-mile journey on foot!

Researchers speculate that the trip from Ur to Haran plus the sojourn there may have taken as long as five years before the party resumed the journey to Canaan. Perhaps Terah had a lengthy, lingering illness before dying. However, when the last leg of the journey was made, it was under Abraham’s leadership.

God intends us to understand that the distance to the Promised Land—1,200 miles on foot from Ur to Canaan—plus the time spent getting there, illustrate the difficulty of breaking away from what we were to what God wants us to be. Unfortunately, some people never seem to accomplish the break.

God Shakes Things Up

Genesis 12:1 is translated in the past-perfect tense in the King James Version and others, demonstrating the translators’ awareness that Abraham’s entourage spent a period of time in Haran. However, modern translations favor a present-tense translation, which indicates two separate summons from God to Abraham to get moving. Whichever it was, it must have been a frustrating period for Abraham, seeing how the Scriptures emphasize his zeal. That Terah’s death triggered Abraham’s departure from Haran suggests that Terah’s death broke the logjam that tethered Abraham to his human family.

Moses writes in Deuteronomy 32:9-12:

For the LORD’s portion is His people; Jacob is the

place of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As the eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the LORD alone led him, and there was no foreign god with him.

It appears that, through death, God had to shake Abraham’s nest in Haran to fulfill His purpose for him. Though Abraham appears to have stumbled around a bit, apparently through no fault of his own, God was faithful in getting him away from there. They may also have added a number of people to their group during their stay there. Hebrews 11:9-10 identifies what motivated him:

By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Abraham left Ur by faith, and it was also by faith that Abraham left Haran. He sojourned in the Promised Land by faith as well. Nowhere does it say how Abraham knew that Canaan was where he was to remain or even that it was indeed the Land of Promise. We will pursue how he knew in a later article.

We are told that despite becoming quite wealthy, and with the exception of a burial place for Sarah and himself, never owning a piece of land, he lived the entire time in tents and that the Canaanites lived in the land with him (Genesis 13:2; 23:1-20). This establishes another general pattern for his faithful children. In every sense of the word, he was a pilgrim. No matter where he lived or what were his economic circumstances, he purchased no land—he never even built a house!

Beyond this, the Bible reveals little social interaction with others outside of his family. Except for a league made with his nearest neighbors, Abraham made no alliances, nor took any part in the politics or the religions of the people of the land. He lived this way for one hundred years. Isaac and Jacob shared the same pattern of life.

God shows us all of this so we might see that virtually Abraham’s entire post-calling life was engaged in living by faith, focused on maintaining his relationship with God. He truly was in the world but not of it. He did not cultivate its friendship but used it as necessity required, though in a guarded way, lest he should in some way abuse his privileges with God.

In Christian love,



prophecy watch *Scarcity Amid Plenty*

(continued from page 9)

Right now, we in the developed world are not facing starvation, just feeling a little light in the pocketbook. If nothing else, the present high prices for staple foods should warn us that the global economy is more fragile than is generally recognized. A major shock to the system—war, depression, major natural disaster—could derail the smooth flow of goods even to strong, wealthy countries

How prepared are we for such a circumstance? How well would we survive until the system resumed normal operations? Now is a good time to heed the wisdom of Solomon: “The prudent foresees evil and hides himself; the simple pass on and are punished” (Proverbs 27:12).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

ENDNOTES

¹ Cohen, Joel E., “How Many People Can Earth Hold?” *Discover*, November 1, 1992; <http://discovermagazine.com/1992/nov/howmanypeoplecan152>).

² The “Accelerating Future” blog, in its entry, “Overpopulation? Not a problem!” has an interesting discussion of the earth’s population capacity. The author argues that, using only 70% of the earth’s land mass, it could easily and comfortably sustain 100 billion people, provided that the current pace of technological progress continues. (<http://www.acceleratingfuture.com/michael/blog/?p=174>)

³ Monbiot, George, “Just Fade Away: It’s Time to Lighten Up About Falling Birthrates,” *The Spectator*, May 15, 2004. “Ecologists estimate the earth’s carrying capacity—the number of people it can sustain without ecological collapse—at between two and four billion.”

⁴ *Ibid.* Monbiot writes, referencing Phillip Longman in the May/June 2004 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, “Demographers now predict that our numbers will peak at about nine billion in 2070, and then begin to fall.”

Of Sponges and Spears

(continued from page 12)

(3) It was probably made with a strong arm and with violence.

(4) The spear of the Roman soldier was a lance which tapered very gently to a point, and would penetrate easily.

(5) The wound was comparatively a large wound. It was so large as to admit the hand (John 20:27); but for a lance thus tapering to have made a wound so wide as to admit the hand, it must have been at least four or five inches in depth, and must have been such as to have made death certain. If it be remembered that this blow was probably in the left side, the conclusion is inevitable that death would have been the consequence of such a blow. . . .

It is clear that the spear pierced to the region of the heart. . . .

Such a flowing of blood and water makes it probable that the spear reached the heart, and if Jesus had not before been dead, this would have closed His life. . . .

He [John] shows that those who were sent to hasten His death believed that He had expired; that then a soldier inflicted a wound which would have terminated life if He had not been already dead; and that the infliction of this wound was followed by the fullest proof that He had truly expired.

Further research informs us that some Roman spears had larger blades attached to their “business end” for the purpose of inflicting larger wounds. However, if Barnes is correct that the point of this spear tapered gently to a point, the soldier must have viciously twisted it in order to create a five-inch gash. In fact, such a twisting motion, virtually guaranteeing a mortal wound, would have been second-nature to a veteran soldier.

Each year, as we reflect upon the great sufferings of our Savior, let us not be depressed by them. Although we should deeply appreciate the agonies that Jesus endured for us, we should realize that His physical suffering is now over, and has been over for nearly two thousand years. In this regard, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* on John 19:34 is very interesting, positive, forward-looking, and worthy of some reflection. He notes that the Creator—the One who later became Jesus Christ—pierced and opened Adam’s side to create his wife, Eve. Likewise, Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, suffered His own side to be pierced and opened in order for His own Bride to be created.

The members of God’s true church constitute the beloved Bride of Christ. Our tiny congregations have the wonderful privilege of being part of that church. As we have seen, Jesus calls on us to remember His affliction, including the piercing, the cup, the sour wine, and the gall. No matter how many years we have rehearsed these events, let us remember once again what our Savior went through bodily for us. As He said to His disciples, “This is My body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19).

—John Plunkett

The Neighbor to the South

One of the fundamental reasons for the United States' position as sole superpower is geography. Since the end of World War II, a central pillar of U.S. defense policy is that as long as it can maintain control of the oceans on either side, North America is secure. Unless Canada and Mexico were to somehow greatly increase in strength such that they no longer needed U.S. trade, essentially the only thing that can threaten America's survival would be a nuclear missile strike.

However, this pillar may bear re-examining soon. The U.S. Navy still secures the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and no imminent threat of nuclear attack from anywhere exists. But what affects a nation's neighbors affects a nation—even a superpower—and all is not well on America's southern border.

As the post-war U.S. economy soared, so did trade with its neighbors. In 2007, U.S.-Mexican trade totaled around \$350 billion. Mexico exported about \$210 billion worth of goods to the U.S., and imported about \$140 billion from the same. America is, by far, Mexico's largest trading partner, while Mexico is America's third-largest trading partner. Trade between these two nations is so substantial that U.S. fiscal policy dictates that U.S.-Mexican border regulations be "flexible" enough not to hinder the free flow of goods. This is largely why U.S. politicians are reluctant to "secure the border." Not only would it entail constructing a wall nearly 2,000 miles long and substantially increasing military manpower (at enormous cost), but tightening border checks would impede trade. The U.S. has concluded that easy trade with Mexico is of greater benefit than a fully secured border—affecting, of course, U.S. immigration policy.

However, in 2007, an estimated \$40 billion—20%—of the \$210 billion of Mexican exports to the U.S. came from illegal drugs. To put that into perspective, \$170 billion worth of trade is being not-so-evenly "distributed" among roughly 100 million Mexicans, while a handful of drug cartels split \$40 billion. A massive amount of money—and thus power—is flowing into the hands of a few individuals who are, by definition, opposed to the interests of national and local governments.

The Mexican drug cartels' increasing and expanding powers are producing severe consequences. First, competition among the cartels is sparking ruthless violence. Not only are rivals killing the local smugglers and dealers, but also top cartel leaders. No one is immune. In 2005, law and order broke down in the Mexican border town of Nuevo Laredo to such an extent that the Mexican army had to be sent in. As the cartels vie for smuggling routes into the U.S., the borderlands are rife with intra-cartel turf violence, and in the major cities brazen attacks are occurring even in broad daylight.

Second, Mexican law enforcement has been ineffective in stemming the violence—let alone the drugs—due to corruption and assassinations. Law enforcement personnel at all levels are being forced to choose between accepting cartel bribes and being killed. In July 2006, nearly the entire police force of

Apatzingan (a city of 120,000) was interrogated on suspicion of working with the cartels. Of the 220 officers interrogated, charges were brought against 27, and another 40 officers never returned to work.

Because of the cartels' enormous power and hubris—and their increasing ability to bribe or kill officials who would oppose them—a faint chance exists that Mexico could become a "failed state," one in which the government is unable to protect its citizens, regulate trade, etc., similar to the Lebanon of the 1980s. Even in present-day Lebanon, Hezbollah, a non-state entity, regularly dictates terms to the Lebanese government, reacting with violence if it is opposed. Though the relative goals of Hezbollah and the drug cartels differ, there are parallels in what happens when a powerful, minority entity puts itself above the law via paramilitary, political, and/or economic means.

A non-state actor wielding substantial influence over a state is a geopolitical event that changes the calculus of the region's nations. Just as Israel is wary of Lebanon—not of Lebanese policies or interests, but of Hezbollah's massive influence—so also will the U.S. government become increasingly distrustful of its southern neighbor as the cartels' power mounts.

For the last half-century, conventional wisdom has held that, as an essential trading partner, Mexico is an ally. The proposed Security and Prosperity Partnership (a.k.a. the North American Union) is based on this premise, that lashing the U.S., Canada, and Mexico together militarily and economically will secure and prosper all three nations. However, if Mexico ceases acting like a sovereign state and either fractures into mini-states governed by the cartels, or begins acting as an arm of a dominant cartel, the dynamics of the region will change, forcing U.S. policy to change as well.

Moreover, were Mexico to fail as a state, the cartels would likely just move north and continue their operations, introducing a level of instability even America could not ignore. Even if Mexico continues to be viable, unless the cartels are eliminated—a task Mexican President Felipe Calderon is attempting—at the very least the border areas will continue to see rising violence and corruption.

It is worth recalling that several Mexican governments have failed, particularly in the last two centuries. In addition, the U.S. invaded and occupied parts of Mexico for six months in 1916 when the Mexican revolutionary, Pancho Villa, established himself north of the border and began instigating significant instability in the borderlands. If violence and corruption along the border continues to increase, or if Mexico's government succumbs to the influence of the cartels, a threshold may be reached where the U.S. concludes that it is in its best interests to intervene. That tipping point has not yet been reached, but some analysts are beginning to explore its prospects.

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Cripple by a Pool (Part Two)

In the healing of the crippled man at Bethesda (John 5:1-16), the man clearly desires to be healed, but no one would help him down to the pool (verse 7). The Bible's mention of this detail is an intentional rebuke of the heartlessness and meanness of human nature. It was every man for himself.

Despite the man's frustration, he still maintains good manners by acknowledging Jesus as "Sir." This word, the Greek *kurios*, appears over 700 times in the New Testament. Hundreds of times it is translated as "Lord" or "lord," but as "Sir" only about a dozen times. The term shows respect and honor for Christ. In today's society, we see quite a contrast to this example. The opposite attitude is usually present when people address each other, and even when children address parents.



1. By what power is this miracle performed? John 5:8.

COMMENT: The healing occurs by the Word of God; Christ speaks, and it is done by the power of the Holy Spirit. Although the pool is known for its therapeutic qualities, Jesus does not use it in the healing so there would be no doubt that the power to heal had come through Him. He does, however, require that the man perform a work to accompany his faith: "Rise, take up your bed, and walk."

Jesus actually gives three commands here: rise, take, and walk. He demands that people take action and responsibility—to take a stand with Him. The more we follow Christ, the more we rise in spiritual character. Sin, on the other hand, causes people to decline, degenerate, and descend to the depths of despair and spiritual weakness.

His second command is that the man "take up" his bed. Since the healed man no longer has need of his bedroll, he needed to clear it from the pool area. Taking up the bed illustrates the principle that we should not maintain remnants of our former ways of life. The new man is to clear away the old man's baggage to avoid returning to his past ways. Now that he is healed, he is to live differently. Spiritually, we leave our old man in the watery grave of baptism, putting on the new man and living a changed way of life (Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:10-14).

Jesus also requires that the man "walk," a testimony of the fullness of His healing power. The man is able to rise up, providing the first visible testimony of his healing to those around the pool. However, he does not just hobble away—he has strength to carry his bed and walk. Being able to walk gives the man opportunity both to show and tell many others of Christ's miracle.

The excellence of His work is seen in all these commands. If a person reacts positively to his contact with Christ, it will manifest itself in his conduct. The most effective witnesses are from those who walk as Christ commands!

2. What part does his obedience play? John 5:9.

COMMENT: The response of the previously crippled man was immediate obedience. Blessings always come from a rapid, positive response to God's commands. How many people have missed out on blessings because they were

too slow to obey? In this case, the sooner the crippled man obeyed, the sooner he realized his healing.

As part of the healing, the helpless man was given the power to obey Christ. The same holds true for any work God gives us to do. We receive the power in mind and body to perform the duty at hand, meaning that, when God is involved, we have no room for excuses for not serving Him (Ecclesiastes 9:10; Hebrews 10:38). The man's complete obedience—following all of Christ's commands—produced the best possible witness and blessing.

3. Why is the healed man permitted to carry his bed on the Sabbath? John 5:10.

COMMENT: The Jews had perverted the keeping of the Sabbath, commanded in Exodus 20:8-11, which codifies the observance of the Sabbath day as one of God's supreme laws. Nehemiah 13:15 and Jeremiah 17:21 deal specifically with working and doing business on the Sabbath. The crippled man carrying his bed was not condemned under the fourth commandment because works of mercy were acceptable on the Sabbath day.

For example, it is acceptable to rescue animals on the Sabbath. While performing another miracle Christ said to his critics, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:11-12).

The Jewish critics targeted the man's conduct, but in reality, Christ was the ultimate object of their hate. Jesus later tells His disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Wicked people despise right conduct; they will ridicule it and even try to stop it because it is repugnant to them (Proverbs 29:27). Even relatives are often appalled when family members are called into God's church, and they see a change for the better. Human nature does not like to be outdone or shown for what it really is—self-serving.

Martin G. Collins