

For Summer

Preparing ourselves for the Kingdom of God

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King David of Israel lived a life that is the stuff of legends. Among other things, he fought wars, ruled kingdoms, slew giants, spent years as a fugitive, sinned deeply, and composed dozens of songs in praise of God. One aspect of his life that we often disregard is that he was a great prophet, as can be seen in many of his psalms. In fact, some of the best known Old Testament prophecies come from his pen.
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Is There a True Church?

There was a time when the church of God appeared to be focused in one corporate body, the Worldwide Church of God. However, during these times of disintegration and disappointment, the church is widely scattered following that body's collapse. It is so widely scattered that it persuades us to wonder how many who attended the Worldwide Church of God were truly converted!

Does a single, corporate, true church of God exist? Those who left the Worldwide Church of God find themselves in different organizations, each with basically the same doctrines but different corporate names identifying them. Each group may have a somewhat different focus as to its message and purpose, and some may even exhibit a standoffish attitude toward other corporate churches of God. Because of these things, unity, purpose, and solidarity have suffered greatly.

For those who spent a long time in the Worldwide Church of God, constant references to its being the "true church" drilled the concept of a true church deeply into their consciousnesses. A many-decades-long record of unified purpose and growth supported this, as that one body carried out a large-scale, worldwide work. Its preaching of the gospel was done with such strength that it was evident that they were members of the true church.

Do the following words of Jesus in John 10:7-16 still hold true, even though we are now scattered?

Then Jesus said to them again. "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father, and lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock, and one shepherd."

This passage—with terms like "thieves," "robbers," "kill," and "destroy"—certainly indicates that attacks against Christ's Body will cause turmoil within it. Scattering results so that there is not

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merely one corporate body of believers.

For those who spent many of their religious years in the world, such a one-flock concept as we have experienced is not so clear. They are accustomed to many similar organizations, especially in the Protestant world, where doctrinal tolerance is held in such high esteem. The church they fellowshiped with was just one of many.

Is there a true church even among the church of God groups? A person's first reaction might be, "What a dumb question! Of course, there is!" and he would be right because Jesus said this in John 10:16.

I receive an occasional letter claiming that such a group never existed, not even in the first century following Christ's resurrection. Most certainly, the letter will declare, one does not exist today. Why would someone say such a thing? It is because they have not been able to find one in their own private searches or because they have come to this conclusion after someone cleverly twisted scriptures, passing such thoughts on to them.

Here are some brief excerpts taken from a recent letter:

What I learned is that in the days of Christ there were no churches; Christians gathered in homes to study and not once a week but often. . . . The church as an institution/building came along much later and is a creation of man. I learned too that the Greek word "ekklesia" was mistranslated in the bible [sic] when in fact "ekklesia" means assembly or congregation. . . . When read in its proper context it is obvious that there isn't one [church] that is righter [sic] than another. . . . We do not need to attend a designated service on a certain day at a certain time, sing certain approved songs, say so many prayers and listen to someone read off a piece of paper "their" opinions. . . . So for me it makes perfect sense that I do not need a church at all. I am intelligent, discerning, and I think pretty brave in that I have never "gone along to get along." Quite the opposite I must say. . . . I have been mislead [sic] to believe I needed a [church] with people to be a true Christian. Now I know that is not true at all.

This woman wants to be a Christian on her own terms. She is creating her own religion and is proud of it. She does not believe Christ, so she cannot follow Him. Believing and following are the major requirements for becoming and remaining a Christian. For Jesus clearly says, "I will build *My* church" (Matthew 16:18)—singular. He does not say, "I will build *My* churches."

Finding the True Church Begins

Such people are truly confused, blinded, and deceived. They focus more steadfastly on what has happened in the world than on what the Bible actually says. They may

have been sincerely searching, but unless God is with them in the search to convert them, they will never find the church that Jesus built any more than they can find God without His first revealing Himself.

This existence of a true church belongs within the same category of fact that people can be very religious and of generally good character and yet be unconverted. Many sincere people in the world fit this description. In fact, the Bible shows some like that within its pages.

Jesus says in John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." One does not find the true church on his own any more than one can find Christ and the Father on His own. A person is led to God and to the church, and he is added to it upon repentance, baptism, giving himself wholly to God, and receiving the Holy Spirit. We see not only that God's true church cannot be found without revelation, but also that it cannot be joined. What this reality begins to reveal to us is God's sovereignty over His creation and His purpose. Therefore, as Jesus clearly states, He built and continues to build His church.

Seekers badly misunderstand, thinking salvation is open to anybody at any time. However, Paul puts a damper on this notion, writing in Romans 9:16, "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."

Is it possible that people cannot find it partly because they do not know what to look for? Yes! This is true partly because of what God's church is. The Bible variously describes it as part of a Kingdom that issues citizenships (Colossians 1:13; Philippians 3:20); a building of which its members are materials (Ephesians 2:20-22); as the body of Jesus Christ of which its members are vital, living parts (Ephesians 1:22-23); and as a Family into which God's children are summoned (Ephesians 3:15). There is no more important and exclusive institution on earth. No volunteers are accepted. Each person becomes a part of it by God's design and His design only. He is sovereign!

Jesus says in Luke 12:32, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Despite this, the number of people calling themselves "Christian" tops one billion worldwide. Yet, just because people profess faith does not mean they are truly converted, and by the Bible's standard, the overwhelming majority are not.

Compared to the two billion professing Christians, the true church is minuscule and virtually invisible. However, it does exist, for Jesus promises in Matthew 16:18, "I will build *My* church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." It will never die out because eternal life resides within it, and the most powerful army in all creation protects and provides for it.

Those who say it does not exist are ignorant of its identity and purpose and are therefore misguided about what they are seeking. Does a true church not exist

because it is not easily seen? Does a true church not exist because it might be small? Does a true church not exist because its visible membership is a mixture of wheat and tares, and the tares tarnish its image?

The Origin of the “Church”

By beginning with a definition of the word “church,” some start off on the wrong foot and therefore fail to reach a true conclusion on this issue. As the author of the letter quoted earlier correctly stated, the term “church” literally does not appear in the original text of the Bible.

In Matthew 16:18, the word Jesus used for “church” is *ekklesia* (*Strong’s* #1577), and it is so translated in the King James Version 115 times. This Greek word means “an assembly” or “a group of people called together for a purpose.” It contains no implication at all of sacredness or holiness.

In practical usage, it commonly identified people called by a magistrate for a public service of some sort. This is how it is used in Acts 19:32, 39, and 41:

Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the *assembly* was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together. . . . But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful *assembly*. . . . And when he had said these things, he dismissed the *assembly*. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Each time, *ekklesia* is translated as “assembly” and names what could easily be described as a mob of excited and confused people. However, the writers of the New Testament clearly agreed this was the word that best fit the groups of Christians called of God for service to Him. How did it come to be translated as “church” when the word “assembly” fits more accurately?

This change apparently has its beginning in another, far different Greek word, *kuriakos* (*Strong’s* #2960). *Kurios*, the Greek word for “Lord,” is easily recognizable as the root of *kuriakos*, which means “belonging to the Lord.” Curiously, according to Joseph T. Shipley, author of *The Origins of English Words*, pp. 183-184, the root of *kurios* and *kuriakos* literally means “to bend or curve.”

In the course of time, *kuriakos* was picked up by the Scots as *kirk*. Shipley shows that *kirk* and *kuriakos* share the same root. In the Scottish language, *kirk* indicates a place or a location, as in a building belonging to the Lord. The *kirk* became the place where the assembly bent before God in reverence, as in prayer, appealing to Him; or bent looking upward in praise of God; or where God bent in extending mercy.

As more time passed, the English pronunciation of *kirk* changed to “church.” Thus “church,” which indicates a building, a place where God is worshipped, gradually evolved to include, not just the place, but also the people who worshipped there and the worship services too. The modern English *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic*

Dictionary reflects this in its definitions for *church*: “1. A building for Christian worship. 2. Regular religious services. 3. A local congregation of Christians.” We regularly use all three in our everyday speech and writing, allowing the context to indicate which is intended.

However, *in the Bible* the word “church” *never* refers to a building or to worship services held within the building. It *always* refers to the assembly, group, or congregation of called-out ones who belong to the Lord, worship Him, and fellowship with others of the same mind.

The True Church Is Exclusive

We should consider another factor in identifying the true church: that the Bible itself assigns exclusivity to it, and this is good. For example, Amos 3:1-2 reveals that in Old Testament times God worked in and through only one family, the family of Abraham. He made a covenant with just one nation, Israel.

In the New Testament, Ephesians 4:3-6 supports this exclusivity in reference to the church:

. . . endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Obviously, the apostle Paul did not want members of the church to be “all over the place” in terms of doctrine and fellowship. For this to be best accomplished, people must also be in one body and unified in purpose. As we saw, Jesus did not say, “I will build my churches.”

The doctrine of sanctification actively promotes exclusivity. II Corinthians 6:17 declares, “Come out from among them and be separate,” as does Revelation 18:4, “Come out of her My people.” I Peter 1:13-16 charges the sanctified with this responsibility:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

God separates His holy people in conduct and fellowship.

However, the church’s exclusivity has a potential downside that we must be careful of. Notice Isaiah 65:1-5:

I was sought by those who did not ask for Me; I was found by those who did not seek Me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that was not called by My name. I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts; a people who provoke Me to anger continually to My face; who sacrifice in

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gardens, and burn incense on altars of brick; who sit among the graves, and spend the night in the tombs; who eat swine's flesh, and the broth of abominable things is in their vessels; who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!" These are smoke in My nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.

Our concern is His holier-than-you accusation. In this case, God is saying that Israel was rejecting Him, as if they were somehow better than He was and did not need the correction He had for them. Within a Christian assembly, a negative exclusivity can form in an individual and create hazards in our attitudes about ourselves and others, laying a spiritual minefield.

This attitude requires understanding. We must be careful. It causes some among us to be aloof within the group to their own hurt or to withdraw themselves and become independent. It infected the Jews of Jesus day—in fact, the origin of the word "Pharisee" is vague, but most commentators believe it means "separatists." It affected the church, too, in the days of the apostles.

Matthew 9:10-11 records an incident in which a form of it confronted Jesus:

And so it was, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus' response pointedly reveals the error in their thinking and conduct.

Galatians 2:11-13 exposes its existence in the early church:

But when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

This is a possible downside of the true church's exclusivity. It can produce a self-righteous, I'm-better-than-you hypocrisy if we forget or overlook the fact that it was God's work and not ours that provides our calling and spirituality. Even today, there are groups claiming to be the exclusive true church.

Was the church, the assembly of called-out ones, ever all in one corporate group? Yes, but it did not last very long. It was during the period generally covered by Acts 1-12. After that, as the apostles scattered from Jerusalem to preach the gospel, congregations began to form beyond Jerusalem and Antioch, and a gradual dissolving of the

unique, one-true-church unity occurred because it no longer consisted of only a handful of congregations.

I Corinthians 1:10-14 provides an early indication of this phenomenon:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius.

The cracks in that one congregation's unity had clearly surfaced, and they were no longer completely one with the Jerusalem assembly of called-out ones or even among themselves. But because differences had arisen, were they no longer part of the one true assembly?

Matthew 28:18-20 suggests God knew full well this would occur:

Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Clearly, it was God's will for the assembly of called-out ones to increase, not only in number, but to worldwide locations. In so doing, the apostles and evangelists were spreading the gospel to people with backgrounds of experience and education entirely different from the Israelitish people centered in Jerusalem. These were Gentile people who had little or no background of Israel's relationship with God through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, other prophets, and Old Covenant theology.

Unlike the Jews, they were not focused on Israel's Old Testament history; in fact, their lifetime of experiences had been focused on rank paganism and its standards. This made the probability of division much higher. Yet, these divisions and their lack of Old Testament background are largely responsible for the writing of the New Testament, the apostles' endeavor to achieve uniformity of Christ's teachings and God's purpose in the whole church and unity within individual congregations.

Nonetheless, divisions most assuredly occurred. As a result, the concept of a single congregation or single

corporate entity being the one true church or assembly became vague and substantially disregarded.

The End of the First Century

A closer look at Revelation 2 and 3, which was written at the end of the first century, reveals some of the consequences of this. Note that each of these congregations—those in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea—was located in a Gentile city, and in all probability, each congregation's membership was primarily Gentile. It is quite likely that in each congregation the Jews were a minority.

Recall that the Romans ravaged Jerusalem in AD 70, and its Christians had to flee to Pella to save their lives. It is highly probable that none of these congregations had any communication with any survivor of the first congregation in Jerusalem. All of the apostles except John were dead, and he had been banished to Patmos. This circumstance was far different from the one in which the church was founded.

Were these Gentile congregations still part of the true church? Were they free of flaws and perfect in their character, attitudes, and doctrines? Would such a negative judgment eliminate them from being a true assembly?

Consider these further factors: Revelation 2:4 commends the congregation in Ephesus for doctrinal vigilance but castigates it for leaving its first love. Revelation 2:9-11 shows Christ commending Smyrna for being spiritually rich, but He also admonishes them to overcome. Despite His commendation, they are not a finished product.

Revelation 2:13-15 praises those in Pergamos for not denying their faith, but its members are doctrinally divided, and they permit heresy to continue. Revelation 2:19-20 presents Thyatira as growing in good works, but its members tolerate heresy and are guilty of sexual immorality.

Revelation 3:1, 4 exposes Sardis as spiritually dead, though it contains a few who remain undefiled, indicating that its members have virtually lost their faith and are capable only of dead works. Revelation 3:8, 11-12 reports that those in Philadelphia are faithfully enduring, but Christ admonishes them to hold fast and overcome. Finally, Revelation 3:15, 19 judges Laodicea as spiritually bankrupt and gives it no commendation at all. The congregation is strongly advised to be zealous and repent.

What does a composite picture of these congregations reveal?

1. All seven of them are admonished to repent, hold fast, or remain faithful.
2. Only two of them, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive strong commendations and no listing of their sins and other shortcomings.
3. Two of them, Pergamos and Thyatira, receive a lesser commendation and fairly strong rebukes for sexual immorality and allowing deceivers into the

congregation.

4. Two of them, Sardis and Laodicea, receive strong rebukes and no commendations.

In terms of a true church in a single corporate body, what do we see? Only sixty years or so following Christ's resurrection, we have a mixed bag as regards overall stability and righteousness.

Even so, is any one of them not a true congregation, an assembly of truly called-out ones? Does Christ in any way say that even one of them was no longer part of His church, His body of people? Not in the least. There are, however, warnings that, if they did not repent, some within their fellowship might not be within the Body of Christ in the future. Two things are sure:

1. Some of these congregations are clearly spiritually better than the others.
2. Some of them are decidedly awful, even though, using carnal judgment, they may outwardly appear good.

Since Revelation is an end-time book, the overview given in Revelation 2 and 3 is especially significant at this time. It is forecasting what things will be like just before Christ returns, and He uses these first-century congregations to illustrate His forecast for our time.

In our time, the headquarters' congregations of the Worldwide Church of God, first in Eugene, Oregon, and then in Pasadena, California, were the mother congregations for our time, just as Jerusalem was in the first century. The Jerusalem congregation's leadership effectively ended in AD 70 when Jerusalem was sacked and destroyed by the Romans. Because of the apostle John's presence, the Ephesian congregation became the church's headquarters as the century ended.

The corporate entity called the Worldwide Church of God crashed spiritually in the late 80s and early 90s, and with it, its headquarters in Pasadena ceased being the lead congregation. For various reasons, the remnants of that true congregation of God have scattered into the various corporate groups bearing the name "Church of God." They exhibit the spiritual characteristics of the first-century congregations shown in Revelation 2 and 3. No one corporate group of called-out ones now represents anything remotely similar to what Jerusalem and Pasadena did.

Misuse of This Circumstance

Revelation is clearly an end-time book. Christ addresses each group in a manner that shows that He still views them as His, and therefore each of them is still part of His true assembly of called-out ones. There is no true church in the way that the Worldwide Church of God dominated our spiritual activities.

(continued on page 14)

David the Prophet

Hebrews 11, popularly called “the Faith Chapter,” contains the recitation of the names and deeds of several men and women of faith from creation to the time of Israel’s entering of the Promised Land.

In it, the author—most likely the apostle Paul—presents illustrations from the Old Testament to bear out his opening statement: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony” (Hebrews 11:1-2).

In the lives of individual after individual, he shows that their expressions of faith in God, despite the lack of material evidence, proved they were righteous (verse 4), pleased God (verse 5), and were heirs of righteousness (verse 7). The remarkable acts that they accomplished—from Abel’s offering of an excellent sacrifice to Rahab’s hiding of the Israelite spies—were done because, believing the Word of God, they envisioned a heavenly future that others could not see.

We see, then, that the heroes of faith not only lived righteous lives in the present, but also moved and acted with a steady eye on the future. Their faith had its foundation in the invisible God whose Word they obeyed, yet their foreknowledge of God’s plan for mankind contained in the promises that God gave to them and to Israel also played a major role, one not nearly recognized enough among professing Christians. It was not just the promise of salvation or even of eternal life dangled before them that made them so unflinchingly faithful. It was also their steadfast hope of a better tomorrow in God’s Kingdom.

DAVID AMONG THE PROPHETS

Later in the chapter, Paul writes: “And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets . . .” (verse 32). After briefly sketching the faith of Rahab at Jericho, he realizes that he cannot tell the tale of every faithful individual from the Old Testament, so he begins merely to name them in roughly chronological order. He quickly lists four judges, then lumps David, Samuel, and the prophets in another group before recounting their and others’ exploits for God.

We know David primarily as a warrior and king. We realize that he was also “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (II Samuel 23:1). Less often do we, as Paul does here, rank him among the prophets, as does Peter in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:29-31. However, Paul’s grouping of David with Samuel—who was a prophet and a judge—and the rest of a larger group of Old Testament prophets should be no surprise; for beyond his historical exploits and the lessons we can learn from his full and complex life, his most lasting contribution may well be the numerous prophecies that he wrote down for our learning (Romans 15:4).

It is intriguing to note that Paul chose to place David at the head of this second group of names, out

of chronological order and ahead of Samuel. Was this purposeful or just his stream of consciousness? If purposeful, it may indicate that Paul considered David the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, or at least eminent enough to head the list.

Whatever Paul's reason, the fact that David appears with Samuel and the prophets, as well as his inclusion in this Faith Chapter, argues that he conforms to the themes that Paul is expounding. He, too, lived a life of righteousness and faith in firm hope of receiving God's glorious promises in His future Kingdom. Though his conquests and reign established the Golden Age of Israelite history, he yearned for God's direct rule over, not just Israel, but the whole earth.

Because of his zeal for Him and His Kingdom, God used David mightily as a prophet to flesh out many of those promises in his writings, the Psalms. In his last words, David refers to the fact that God had inspired him: "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue" (II Samuel 23:2). We should not understand this to mean that God inspired him only in his last words but that the Holy Spirit was behind his entire contribution to the Old Testament, which was primarily the compositions we know as "psalms."

Even so, his last words have struck commentators down through the ages as unmistakably prophetic and specifically Messianic in tone. Adam Clarke writes, "The words of this song contain a glorious prediction of Messiah's kingdom and conquests, in highly poetic language." Of II Samuel 23:1-7, the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* states:

[The chapter contains] the prophetic will and testament of the great king, unfolding the importance of his rule in relation to the sacred history of the future. . . . [T]hese "last words" contain the divine seal of all that he has sung and prophesied in several psalms concerning the eternal dominion of his seed, on the strength of the divine promise which he received through the prophet Nathan, that his throne should be established for ever. . . . These words are not merely a lyrical expansion of that promise, but a prophetic declaration uttered by David at the close of his life and by divine inspiration, concerning the true King of the kingdom of God.

A substantial number of his psalms are clearly prophetic, even some of those that seem, on the surface, to describe his own feelings of despair and abandonment during the low periods of his life. With just a slight shift in perspective, they can often be seen as describing Christ's struggles to master His own human nature and trust in God for deliverance. In fact, if we bring a prophetic eye to the reading of many of David's psalms, we can perceive their predictive nature.

THE MESSIAH'S SUFFERING

Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to survey one of his most clearly prophetic psalms, Psalm 22. Anyone familiar with the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus Christ can see the obvious parallels, and the writers of the gospel accounts—especially Matthew—bring them out through direct quotations of this psalm. Henry Halley, author of *Halley's Bible Handbook*, writes of this psalm, "[T]hough written a thousand years before Jesus, it is so vivid a description of the crucifixion of Jesus that one would think of the writer as being personally present at the Cross" (p. 254).

No one knows what event of David's life, if any, provides the background to his plaintive song, but it must have been the nadir of his sufferings, the most likely guess being sometime during Saul's pursuit of him. However, even if it is based on David's experience of persecution, Psalm 22 is so specific and detailed in its descriptions of Christ's crucifixion that it can in reality only be a divinely inspired prophecy of the execution of the Son of God—a full millennium before the events took place in Roman Jerusalem.

At least nine prophetic references in Psalm 22 tie directly to the suffering of Jesus Christ. Without numbering them, the following summarizes the amazingly accurate details of Christ's last hours:

The psalm begins with perhaps the most heart-rending cry in history: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1). As Matthew and Mark attest, Jesus Himself spoke these words as He was about to die: "And about the ninth hour [mid-afternoon] Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (Matthew 27:46; see also Mark 15:34).

Our Savior's cry of abandonment marks His awareness that His Father had indeed turned from Him, being burdened and defiled by all human sin (Isaiah 53:6; II Corinthians. 5:21; Hebrews 2:9). As Isaiah 59:2 informs us, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear." Because He had never been sinful, Jesus had never known separation from the Father, and His feeling of desertion and rejection may have been the deepest cut of all.

The next significant allusion to Christ's suffering appears in Psalm 22:6-8:

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, "He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!"

prophecy watch *David the Prophet*

David describes the Messiah's abusers and revilers in the mob that shouted for His death. As the prophet Isaiah later wrote: "He is despised and rejected by men, . . . He was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isaiah 53:3). Again, Matthew confirms the prophecy, recording the reaction of the crowd, who unwittingly used its very words:

And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads. . . . Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, . . . "He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, "I am the Son of God." Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing. (Matthew 27:39, 41, 43-44)

In its most accurate sense, Psalm 22:9-10 can refer only to Jesus: "But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother's breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother's womb You have been My God." While others were known and chosen for special works from the womb (for example, Jeremiah; see Jeremiah 1:5), only Jesus had a relationship with the Father from infancy.

Luke's account, particularly chapter 2, goes to great lengths to show Jesus' early relationship with God: "And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40; see also verses 49, 51). His memory of God's help and presence from His earliest childhood only made His final suffering harder to bear: "Be not far from Me," He cries in Psalm 22:11, "for trouble is near; for there is none to help."

HIS BRUISED AND BEATEN BODY

In the next few verses appear descriptions of the state of His dying body. Verse 14 reads, "I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within Me." Descriptions of Roman crucifixion bear this out, and Christ's execution was no exception, apart from its brevity. Jesus was utterly exhausted, not just from lack of sleep, but also from the scourgings and beatings He had received (see Matthew 26:67; 27:26, 30; Luke 23:11). Having no strength to carry His cross, as was customary, another man, Simon of Cyrene, was compelled to do it for Him (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26).

In addition, crucifixion often pulled its victims' bones out of joint, either from the jarring jolt of the stake plunging into its rocky posthole or from the full weight of the sagging body hanging from the cruelly

driven nails in the hands and feet (or often in the wrists and ankles). That His heart was like melted wax, explains the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, "recalls His burning anguish, the inflammation of the wounds, and the pressure of blood on the head and heart, the characteristic cause of death by crucifixion." Jesus, however, died, not of a broken or failed heart, but by exsanguination, that is, He bled to death, "as a lamb led to the slaughter . . . He poured out His soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:7, 12).

Psalm 22:15-16 predicts that the Messiah's tongue clings to His jaws in terrible thirst and that His hands and feet are pierced. Both of these details are dutifully documented in the gospels. John relates, "After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, 'I thirst!'" (John 19:28). Likewise, Luke 24:40 appears in a scene after His resurrection, when Jesus is trying to prove to His disciples that it is really He and no ghost: "When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet," which had obviously been pierced by nails. Thomas later asked to see and feel that same proof (John 20:25).

Even the minor detail from Psalm 22:17, "They look and stare at Me," finds a parallel in Matthew 27:36, where the apostle writes, "Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there." A last important feature regarding His crucifixion comes out in Psalm 22:18: "They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." Matthew quotes this verse in Matthew 27:35, saying, "Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet."

The remainder of Psalm 22 looks even further into the future, foretelling the effects of Christ's magnificent sacrifice. Notice verses 27-29:

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD's and He rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth shall eat and worship; all those who go down to the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive.

In just three succinct verses, David encompasses the apostles spreading the good news around the world and its people eventually turning to worship the Messiah; the establishment of God's Kingdom at His return as King of kings; and the dead being resurrected to life to learn God's way and submit to Him.

The psalm's final verses seem to speak of the work of the church of God down through the ages in

(continued on page 14)

ready answer

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

Little Compromises

“. . . that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.”

—*Deuteronomy 17:20*

Contrary to popular belief, we live in one of the most difficult and dangerous ages in all of human history. Some would be willing to argue this, saying that civilization has come a long way and that mankind is not as cruel as the record of history shows that he once was. Certainly living in the first century in the Roman Empire must have been difficult, they might say as an example, since we have the Bible’s account of the apostles living in constant danger—and most of them died horrible deaths!

That is true. From what the Bible shows, that constant danger promoted closeness to God; the apostles relied on God to keep them safe and provide deliverance for them at every turn. While we are not being hunted down for our religious beliefs, the danger we face today is far greater—spiritually—in that it does just the opposite: It promotes a slow separation from God. We know this kind of danger by the illustration of the frog in the water. The increase in temperature happens so slowly that the frog fails to realize that it is in trouble until it is too late to jump to safety.

What produces this danger for us, the called-out children of God? What is the signature attitude of the era that we live in? What failing among the majority of people will cause the loss of our freedoms and the downfall of our nation? It is compromising with the laws and principles of God.

We live in a nation that has largely compromised the character it once possessed. Just a minority uphold the Christian principles that underlay documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which provided the foundation for America to become the envy of the world. Now, so many are willing to trade their hard-won freedoms for a little temporary security, essentially selling their birthright.

We face an analogous situation among the greater churches of God. We live in a time when the majority of those with whom we once fellowshiped have compromised the beliefs they used to hold dear. Many of these people have joined worldly churches, or worse, losing faith altogether, have slipped back into the world. Some have contrived strange new doctrines to live by, and despite attending services among the scattered churches, too many have nearly lost their faith and zeal for this way of life.

In our church history, we can see how deadly even a little compromising with God’s ways is. It almost always leads to greater compromises until a person is so far from what has been revealed in Scripture that he has apostatized, cutting himself off from God. What a sad end after such a promising start!

Royal Compromise

God's Word provides an example of compromise for us to learn from, if we are wise enough to heed it (Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11). This example comes from the life of the wisest king ever to live, one whom God blessed with wisdom that no one could gainsay, who had wealth and ability no one had ever possessed before. God loved this man greatly—He even spoke directly to him more than once, and because of the man's humble response, blessed him far beyond what he requested. This king, a man of peace and learning, was commissioned to build the most beautiful Temple to God in Jerusalem. The man, of course, was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba.

To understand why Solomon's compromises seemed so small and insignificant to him when he succumbed to them, we have to understand the situation of Solomon's reign. We could compare it to America today. As Psalm 18:43-44 suggests, David and his armies had essentially subjugated all of the world that mattered at the time. King David of Israel was "the head of the nations," and faraway kings he did not even know trembled at the mention of his name. As the sole superpower in the region, wealth poured into Israel. When Solomon was made king upon David's death, not a nation on the face of the earth would have considered attacking Israel. It was just too strong.

So, Solomon ruled the known world, and as time progressed and in that strength, he did not see the need to obey God fully in all that He had commanded the kings of Israel to do. In his power and wealth, he saw no problem with compromising just a little with God's instruction. As we will see, Solomon failed completely in his old age, but the seeds of that failure were sown early in his reign.

II Chronicles 9:22-28 gives us a summary of his reign:

So King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom. And all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart. Each man brought his present: articles of silver and gold, garments, armor, spices, horses, and mules, at a set rate year by year. Solomon had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king at Jerusalem. So he reigned over all the kings from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedar trees as abundant as the sycamores which are in the lowland. And they brought horses to Solomon from Egypt and from all lands.

This sounds like the perfect, storybook career until we notice God's instruction to kings in Deuteronomy 17:14-20:

When you come to the land which the LORD your God

is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, "I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me," you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the LORD has said to you, "You shall not return that way again." Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself.

Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.

Was Solomon unaware of these instructions? Of course not. David, a man who knew God's law intimately, would have been sure to instruct his son in them and have him write a copy of the law as commanded. Surely, Solomon could not have been ignorant of them. He, then, must have known it was wrong to import horses and chariots from Egypt, but because of his wealth and might, he must have considered this infraction too minor to take seriously.

Why did God not want Israel's kings to import warhorses? Armored warhorses and the chariots they pulled can be compared to today's tanks, which are devastating when fighting foot soldiers. A nation with this level of war materiel put their reliance on it as it made the army such a powerful fighting machine. Why should a nation trust an invisible God to fight its battles when it could see rank upon rank of seemingly invincible horses and chariots?

God wanted His people to rely on Him. Solomon knew this, since he wrote in Proverbs 21:31: "The horse is prepared for the day of battle: but deliverance is of the LORD." The issue of importing horses may have seemed a small thing to Solomon, but it was important to God. From all indications, his compromise in this matter began his slow separation from God.

Many Wives Too

Compounding his compromise concerning warhorses, by the end of his reign, Solomon had a substantial harem:

But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as

well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. (I Kings 11:1-3)

As he began his reign, would Solomon have considered “multiply[ing] wives for himself,” especially to this extent? Probably not. When he was tender of heart, needing God to help him rule this great people and kingdom (see II Chronicles 1:7-12), he doubtless walked carefully, making sure he did what was commanded in everything. But once secure in knowledge, wealth, and power, he began to forget the God who had spoken to him, placed him in power, and given him all that he had.

Perhaps Solomon’s reasoning went something like this: “When I imported horses from Egypt, there were no adverse consequences, so what would be wrong with taking additional wives for political reasons?” We do not normally see the results of sin immediately, yet they inevitably come. At some point, he learned this principle, writing in Ecclesiastes 8:11: “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.” In any case, knowing this did not help him, as I Kings 11:4-8 records:

For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not fully follow the LORD, as did his father David. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, on the hill that is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the abomination of the people of Ammon. And he did likewise for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

Wise Solomon fell victim to the same temptations that the rest of us so often face. He compromised on what he thought were small concerns—matters he probably considered well into the gray areas—to do things his way rather than God’s. The danger of such reasoning is that small compromises weaken character, and over time, they lead to major sins. For Solomon, the results were devastating. His experience is a warning of what will befall us if we follow his example of compromise.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 111:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and a good understanding have all they that do His commandments: His praise endures forever.” Solomon’s compromises gradually but inexorably distorted his understanding of God’s laws and ways. He slowly drifted away from God, so that when he

was old, unbelievable as it seems, he allowed his wives to turn his heart from the God that had given him everything.

From the “minor” infraction of importing horses, Solomon eventually condoned and was at least an accessory to the sins of idolatry and outright murder, sins that he would never have considered committing at the beginning of his reign. For, at the end of his life, Solomon worshipped Ashtoreth, Milcom, Chemosh, and Molech, the last having rituals that called for children to be given to the fire of his altar. By giving his royal sanction to worshipping these pagan deities, he set a precedent that was followed by many of the kings of Israel and Judah after him.

A Righteous Example

We can see what a little bit of compromise cost this supposedly wise man, as well as how it affected future generations of Israelites. But what about those of us who live in a world that feels free to compromise at will? Has this society and the spiritual confusion among some of the churches of God caused us to ignore the laws, principles, and statutes that we see in God’s Word?

Josiah, who reigned not long before Judah’s Babylonian captivity, was one of the most righteous kings. II Kings 23:10-11 records how he dealt with the “insignificant” issue of horses and the more important matter of child sacrifice:

And he defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Molech. Then he removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun, at the entrance to the house of the LORD, by the chamber of Nathan-Melech, the officer who was in the court; and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire.

All it took was to stand up for what God had revealed, and he used the power given to him to respond in obedience.

In these perilous times, it is of the utmost importance that we resist the urge to use our human reasoning to compromise with God’s law. We must be particularly careful in what we perceive as the “smaller areas” of God’s Word. Why? Because Satan often makes his greatest inroads by getting us to relax in little things and gradually convincing us to do the same in more vital matters. If he can just get his foot in the door, he feels he has won a great victory and can make us slip away from God. Paul, however, exhorts us, “. . . nor give place to the devil” (Ephesians 4:27).

Once we compromise, the process of sin has commenced, and godly character, which is so precious to God, begins to erode, opening the way for sin on a larger scale. If a wise man like Solomon went from ignoring a seemingly obscure admonition to the flagrant breaking of many of God’s commandments, we, too, can certainly yield to the peril of compromise. We must learn to spot and avoid the little compromises that lead to big sins.

—John Reid

prophecy watch *David the Prophet*

(continued from page 10)

preaching the redeeming, atoning, and sanctifying work of Christ: "A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the next generation, they will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He had done this" (Psalm 22:30-31). Under the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, David the prophet could see God's plan of salvation move forward from Christ's seemingly ignominious death to the efforts of His followers to preach His Word to as many as would hear it and

beyond, all the way to its wonderful conclusion in eternity.

This vision of the glorious future reign of Christ and the conversion of mankind to His way of life constitutes a fixed vision throughout the psalms of David. When we read the Psalms, we should be aware of this prophetic perspective and allow the prophet David to inform and encourage us about the wonderful future God has in store for His chosen people.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

personal *Is There a True Church?*

(continued from page 7)

However, because the true church is in reality a *spiritual organism*, the true church still exists though in a scattered condition. Frankly, this scattered condition is the more normal circumstance for Christ's church throughout its history. The Worldwide Church of God was the *abnormal* configuration, in which the called-out ones were mostly in one body.

Why does the true church still exist? Because of God's faithfulness, we have retained enough of the true doctrinal base and of His Spirit, and we are maintaining that doctrinal base to varying degrees of faithfulness to retain that identity. Some congregations may be dominated by Laodicean characteristics and others by Smyrnan and Philadelphian characteristics. It is also highly likely that all the congregations may contain individuals with these characteristics within them.

Remember that God is judging us individually within each group. An attitude that we should not allow to grow in us is to think that we are the only ones who retain a true-church identity. The other side of that same concept is that, even if we agree that others are still part of the true church, we are still better than they are—indeed, everybody else is Laodicean by comparison.

This unmistakably holier-than-you attitude is extremely destructive to true brotherhood and proper fellowship and unity. Luke 18:9-14 records this teaching of Christ concerning self-righteousness and its effects on these matters:

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you,

this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Those who elevate themselves in their judgment of themselves as compared to their fellow members bring on themselves this condemnation. God does not justify them when they make this kind of judgment.

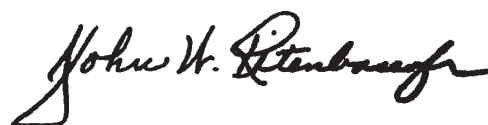
Hebrews 10:23-27 adds important counsel applicable to all of us:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

Christ's brethren are scattered but not necessarily by their own choice as "independent" entities without opportunity to fellowship. We are indeed scattered, but under present circumstances, fellowship of some sort is still available with the various congregations of God.

This situation gives God the opportunity to judge us regarding the depth of our personal conversion in ways that the church's former situation did not. This has occurred for our good. We must not merely endure it but use it as an occasion to grow and glorify God. And we certainly must not elevate ourselves as better than others, erecting walls against true unity.

In Christian love,



The Burning Middle East: Revolution or Power-Grab?

From above, the Middle East and North Africa appear to be experiencing a regional revolution. The forced resignations of the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt, along with anti-government violence in Libya and popular protests across the region, give the impression that a wave of repressive, aging regimes in the Muslim world are likely to be overthrown by Facebook-fueled rebellions. While some broad similarities exist in the nations currently experiencing unrest, the details reveal sizeable differences, both in terms of causes as well as the effect—if any—in the international order.

Throughout the Arab world, high unemployment—especially among the youth—along with rising prices of food and energy, a lack of housing, oppressive police states, and no political or judicial redress of grievances are common complaints against the existing orders. After decades of corruption and crony capitalism, the populations of poor and rich nations alike are demonstrating their displeasure, hoping for a change. These are the commonalities. However, though these protests will undoubtedly leave their mark for years to come, the region as a whole is not experiencing a true revolution, for the circumstances in each affected country are unique, and the protestors typically deeply divided among themselves.

The unrest in Tunisia and Egypt was largely focused on the leaders of the regimes rather than the regimes themselves. The presidents of Tunisia and Egypt are gone, but the regimes that they represented have survived essentially intact. King Abdullah of Jordan sacked his government and appointed a new prime minister to defray public anger, but little else has changed. At this point, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi is in the greatest danger of violent overthrow, but in the absence of outside intervention, he could overpower the opposition and remain at the helm.

While the amount of unrest has been substantial, the overall geopolitical effects have thus far been minimal. With the military-backed regime in Egypt still intact, its peace accord with Israel—a cornerstone of security for the Jewish state—is unchanged, and Israel is not facing a hostile southern neighbor. The greatest shock to the international system has been the disruption of Libya's oil output: 1.5 million barrels per day go to Europe, via Italy, and oil prices have responded accordingly.

The demonstrations in Cairo and the violence in Libya have captured the media spotlight, but more is happening in the broader region than is immediately apparent—much more than simply popular protests against oppressive regimes. Ultimately, the issue of greatest importance is not why this turmoil is taking place, but who stands to gain the most.

The United States, currently in a weak political state, is scheduled to withdraw all combat personnel from Iraq in 2011, causing a major shift in the dynamics of the Persian Gulf. The U.S. military presence in Iraq has been keeping Iran's rise in check, but its withdrawal will facilitate Tehran's stepping into the role of regional hegemon—even without nuclear weapons. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's Iraq fought a brutal war with Iran, and by keeping its neighbor weak, Iran is doing its utmost to

ensure that does not happen again. When the U.S. invaded Iraq (with the "help" of Iranian intelligence), destroyed its army, and overthrew the Ba'ath Party, it removed the largest counterweight to Iran's power and influence.

As U.S. power in Iraq withdraws, Iran's influence increases. Iran is a majority Shiite country, and as it rises, so does its influence among Shiite populations in other countries. For example, through its proxy, Hezbollah (a Shiite Islamist movement), Tehran has already collapsed the coalition government of Lebanon. While the U.S. has tried to broker a power-sharing agreement in Iraq wherein Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds would all be represented, the Shia have received substantial support from Iran, dramatically shifting the balance of power within the nascent government. Once the U.S. exits the country, Iraq—without a strong military or a government able to impose its will on the people—could become essentially a satellite of Iran.

Persian Gulf nations are reading the handwriting on the wall, recognizing that they will have to come to terms with the post-American constellation of powers. Several Gulf States are particularly concerned due to their majority Shiite populations that—they fear—could be influenced by Iran to overthrow the minority Sunni regimes, destroy the infrastructure of competing oil companies, or otherwise wreak havoc. These States feel pressured either to reach an understanding with Iran directly or to make concessions to the (largely Shiite) protestors, which will strengthen the rebels' position—and hence Iran's. As Stratfor's George Friedman notes, "... the Iranians do not have to invade anyone to change the regional balance of power decisively."¹

Of particular interest is the tiny island-nation of Bahrain, where the Shiite majority has long struggled against the ruling Sunni monarchy. Part of Bahrain's significance is that it is home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Another element is that it links via causeway to a heavily Shiite area of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis fear that a regime change in Bahrain—or even significant political concessions to the Shia—will carry over into its own Shiite population (approximately 20%), which resides mainly in the oil-rich areas of the country. While a demand for democracy sounds beautiful to Western liberals, the local reality is that it would mean an empowering of the Shia, and by extension, an empowering of Iran. Though the specifics differ, there are similar concerns of Shiite power increasing in Kuwait and Yemen.

The current uprisings in the Arab world were sparked by an unemployed, university-educated Tunisian committing self-immolation. They have been fueled by decades of resentment against the ruling class. Though Iran did not instigate these things, it is well-positioned to use the climate of unrest to strengthen its position and expand its sphere of influence. Globally, the stakes are high, since approximately 10 million barrels of oil per day originate where Iran is becoming more assertive.

—David C. Grabbe

NEWS AND TRENDS

WORLDWATCH

¹ Friedman, George, "Obama's State of the Union and U.S. Foreign Policy," Stratfor.com, January 25, 2011.

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Feeding the Five Thousand (Part Two)

Just prior to this miracle (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14), the people anticipated where Jesus was headed. By walking along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, the crowds joined Him, and He, feeling compassion, healed their sick. When evening came, the disciples sought to send the crowds away because supplies in that remote place were inadequate to feed so many. Despite having only five loaves of bread and two fish at hand, Jesus desired to give them something to eat, and with just these, He performed an astounding miracle. The bread and fish continually multiplied so that everyone was satisfied—so much that twelve basketfuls of broken pieces were left over.

This took place at Bethsaida just before the Passover (John 6:4). Jesus primarily intended this miracle to teach the disciples, although a witness of the Son of God's power had also been impressed upon the multitude. In it, Jesus illustrated the kind of ministry His disciples would conduct after His departure: feeding people with *spiritual food*, and their source would be Christ Himself. They would have to replenish their supply of spiritual food continually by maintaining a close relationship with Him, but they would be responsible for feeding their congregations.



1. What godly characteristic does Jesus display that we must emulate?

COMMENT: Jesus is “moved with compassion” when He sees the needy multitudes exhausted and wandering like sheep that had been tattered from cruel fleecing. Twice He is “moved with compassion” when He sees the hungry multitudes without food (Matthew 14:14; 15:32). The two blind men (Matthew 20:34) and the leper (Mark 1:41) also stir His compassion, as does the sorrow of the widow at Nain (Luke 7:13).

In addition, Jesus uses the word translated “compassion” in three of His parables: The king has compassion on his bankrupt servant and forgives him his debt, showing how we should forgive one another (Matthew 18:21-35). The Samaritan has compassion on the Jewish victim and cares for him in love (Luke 10:25-37). Finally, the father has compassion on his rebellious son (Luke 15:20).

We, too, should show compassion toward others. Compassion, a fundamental and distinctive quality of God, is literally “a feeling with and for others.” It lies at the foundation of Israel's faith in God, because, in an act of compassion, He delivered them from slavery and called them to be His own people. His compassion does not fail (Lamentations 3:22). Jesus teaches that it should be extended, not only to friends and neighbors, but to all, even to our enemies.

2. What solutions to our problems does this miracle provide?

COMMENT: Jesus watched His frustrated disciples try to solve the problem of feeding the multitude, but “He Himself knew what He would do” (John 6:6). He wanted to teach them a lesson in faith and submission. In this story, we can see certain steps we must take in solving our own problems:

1. *Start with what you have.* Andrew found a boy who had a small meal and brought him to Jesus. Was the boy willing to give up his lunch? Yes, he was! God begins where we are and uses what we have.
2. *Give what you have to Christ.* Jesus took the simple meal and blessed it. He then divided the bread and fish and gave the pieces to the disciples, who, in turn, fed the multitudes.

3. *Obey what He commands.* As Jesus ordered, the disciples had the people sit down. They distributed the broken pieces and discovered that there was plenty for everybody. As His servants, we are “distributors,” not “manufacturers.” If we give what we have to Him, He will bless it and give it back to us for use in helping others.

4. *Conserve the results.* After the people had eaten their fill, twelve baskets filled with pieces of bread and fish remained. These pieces were carefully collected so that nothing was wasted (Mark 6:43; John 6:12).

3. Why is the bread so important?

COMMENT: On the next day, Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum, saying, “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:32, 35, 48). Though willing to receive the physical bread, many would not receive the living Bread—Jesus Christ who came down from heaven. Thus, the miracle of feeding the multitude was actually a sermon with visual aids.

The main lesson of the miracle is that Christ is the Bread of Life to a dying humanity, and in Him, there is enough to satisfy the entire world. Only He can satisfy the spiritual hunger in mankind. Jesus says, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. . . . Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:51, 53). The Bread that is Jesus gives life in the present (John 6:35, 47) and eternal life in the future (John 6:27, 40).

The tragedy is that people waste time and money on “that which is not bread” (Isaiah 55:1-7). Waste is an enemy of miraculous generosity, so great care was taken to collect the leftovers, though we are not told how they were used. The lesson is that overabundance does not justify waste.

We also learn that Christ asks that we give Him all that we have and allow Him to use it as He sees fit. When we do this, we never lose, always ending up with more blessings than when we started.

—Martin G. Collins