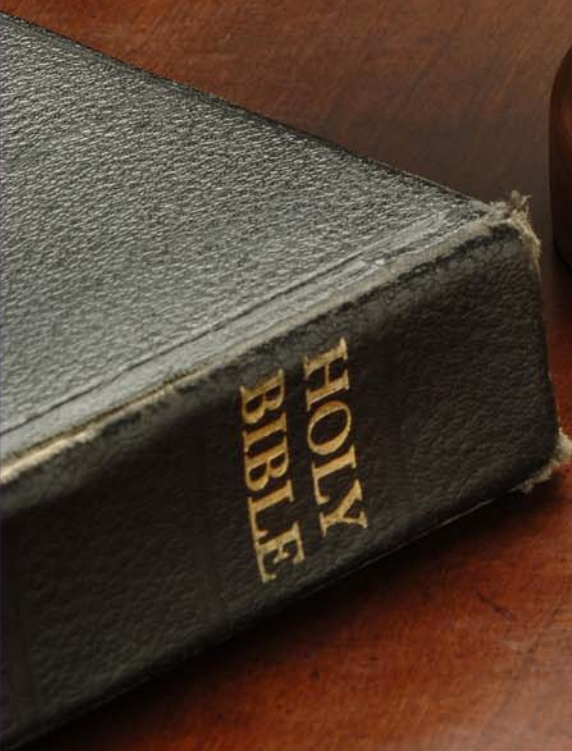


Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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THE JUSTICE
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3

PERSONAL from *John W. Ritenbaugh*
Living by Faith and God's Justice

8

PROPHECY WATCH
Meet the Minor Prophets (Part One)
BY RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

11

READY ANSWER
The Gift of Discerning Spirits
BY DAVID F. MAAS

15

WORLDWATCH
The Dream of a United States of Europe
BY DAVID C. GRABBE

16

BIBLE STUDY
The Miracles of Jesus Christ:
Healing a Deaf-Mute (Part Two)
BY MARTIN G. COLLINS

cover

The world's frequent cry for justice ignores the perfect justice of God, an element that Christians must constantly and consciously consider if they will live by faith. When He judges, God is always perfectly fair and right, despite our human misunderstandings of His sense of justice. Mercy, however, often tempers His decisions, extending help and grace instead of punishment.

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Living by Faith and God's Justice

II Corinthians 5:7 states with crystalline clarity our Christian responsibility: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." In this series of articles on living by faith, we have covered three of five spiritual elements *continuously* necessary to our thinking to accomplish this responsibility. As we are seeing, doing so involves interesting complexities. Living by faith is not easy because, just as gravity pulls us toward the earth, human nature pulls us toward living by sight. Living by sight is natural, but living by faith is unnatural—so unnatural that God must jump-start it graciously and miraculously by calling us. By comparison, simply believing that a Creator God exists is easy. Living by faith day by day is no easy matter.

In relation to God, those of unbelief live by sight. Hebrews 3:12, 17-19 provides us with evidence of this fact:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. . . . Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

The Israelites in the wilderness could not live by faith, despite having strong visual evidence of God's nearness to them daily. For example, He killed the firstborn of Egypt; He divided the sea; He provided water from a rock when necessary. *Every day* for forty years, He witnessed to His presence by providing manna and the cloud over the Tabernacle! On occasion, because of their unbelief, He triggered an earthquake or caused poisonous snakes to invade the camp, sending many to their deaths. He did much more, but these examples make the point: Those who lived by sight fell by the wayside.

We have now covered three interlocking spiritual realities necessary for living life by faith: God's sovereignty, man's pride, and man's humility. Two more are necessary ingredients: God's justice and His grace. If this package of spiritual realities is rightly discerned and is in good order in the foundation of our beliefs, they serve as constant prods to move our hearts toward making conscious and careful judgments to trust Him. This article expounds God's sense of justice to complement this mix of vital spiritual realities.

A Reality of God's Character

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 11:19-22:

personal *Living by Faith and God's Justice*

You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

Paul directs this passage toward Gentiles as part of an admonition he wanted them to consider regarding their calling into the church. We, too, must seriously consider God's goodness and severity. God is not only what we commonly think of as love. His character is perfectly balanced by a sense of justice for all concerned and for His purpose too. To be just is to be fair, evenhanded, and impartial. God will always be fair because even His justice is executed in love and is an act of love.

God is not only supreme in power and authority, but He is also supreme in judgment. His mind pierces through all of the justifications we make to excuse our bad attitudes and conduct as measured against His righteous standard. So, if we desire to live by faith, we must seriously consider His sense of justice because what we may think is a small matter, an event of no great magnitude, may trigger God to react with terrible swiftness and severe consequences that leave us wondering why. Scripture records a number of these sudden, violent reactions.

We must begin by understanding that we do not see the entire picture as God does. The reality of God's justice helps us to perceive three important factors to living by faith: 1) The wages of sin is indeed death (Romans 6:23); 2) we are headed toward death and do not know its time; and 3) God means exactly what He says.

Judgment Is Now on the House of God

Jesus declares an important principle in Luke 12:48: “But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.” We need to think about the seriousness of our calling, knowing that human nature contains a strong strain of self-deception. This verse should remind us that because we have been given so much, our judgment will be sterner.

God states in Romans 1:18-20 that mankind is without excuse regarding His existence, but it is easily seen in the immoral conduct committed throughout the world that people are paying little or no attention to their responsi-

bilities to God. As people go about their daily activities, they ignore Him; a relationship with Him is not perceived as a vital, everyday necessity to life.

Some may talk of Him on occasion and even pray, but they are not seriously committed to true devotion to Him. They are neither learning more of His truth nor further broadening and deepening obedience to Him. Besides those folks, some are openly and aggressively antagonistic toward Him and His laws.

However, in the face of these attitudes, we cannot allow ourselves to disregard the fact that God is very serious about His intentions to fulfill His purposes for His creation and most especially in the lives of His children. His purpose has been revealed to us, and we are more responsible than others.

Though by our reckoning of time God's justice often seems long delayed, the prophecies will be fulfilled and His Kingdom established under Jesus Christ. God commands that we must live by faith, so we cannot let down. We must push on in faith.

Focus on Yielding to Him

Proverbs 21:16 contains a solemn warning: “A man who wanders away from the way of understanding will rest in the congregation of the dead.” Notice the use of the word “wanders.” God's children do not ordinarily deliberately plan to go astray, but whether they do or do not, regardless of the intention, the result is the same.

Hebrews 2:1-3 provides an illustration in which there is no deliberate intention to sin:

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.

The metaphor in “lest we drift away” is of a boat slipping its moorings and drifting away, caught in the currents it was tied against. Paul makes clear that the spiritual drifting is the result of neglecting the priorities set by our calling into the Kingdom of God, just as a boat will drift away if it is not tied securely. Other parts of the book of Hebrews show that neglect becomes a factor when one is not consciously living a *purposefully* directed life. The epistle's recipients were neglectfully drifting through life.

Hebrews 5:11-14 shows us the result:

. . . of whom we have much to say, and hard to

explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

These people had become “dull of hearing” and apparently were rapidly regressing toward unconversion. Neglect is particularly spiritually dangerous. Through neglect, they were seriously drifting into a lack of faith deep enough to have to relearn the fundamentals of this way of life. When dullness of hearing is tied to Romans 10:17—“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”—we can understand that, if one does not hear correctly, motivation to live by faith greatly diminishes.

Hebrews was written to encourage a congregation of neglectful and drifting people to repent, to get back on track toward the Kingdom. Considering their dullness of hearing, the book of Proverbs provides what might be a shocking reality, one we hope we will not have to face if we will repent.

Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the LORD; but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death. (Proverbs 8:32-36)

Bluntly stated, Wisdom’s sage and exhortative counsel is, “Listen carefully and apply what I tell you diligently. If you do not, but instead live a life of sin, then the conclusion of the matter is that, in reality, you love death rather than life.” Since our calling, have we ever pictured ourselves as loving death? Those who do not consciously and purposefully direct their lives by faith toward obedience to God in reality love death!

A Serious Lapse of Judgment

Jesus says in Revelation 3:16-18:

So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white

garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

The drifting of the Laodicean happens so subtly that he is unaware of the decline of his spiritual perception and vigor. What happens when a person begins drifting is that human nature deceives him to judge two things wrongly: 1) the quality of his own spirituality and therefore, 2) the use of his time.

Consider the process of the Laodicean’s decline: Does he stop to consider himself as loving death? On the contrary, his nature is selling him on what it calls “enjoying life.” However, the reality is that because he enjoys it so much, he thinks that he is fine the way he is. He, though, is guilty of a very serious sin: presumption. This is a sin in which ignorance frequently plays only a small part. When someone is presumptuous, knowledge of what is right is usually available, but he does not think his intent and conduct through to a right conclusion.

On the other hand, carelessness plays a large role in presumption. The Laodiceans should have known better than what their actions reveal. Their lackadaisical approach to spiritual matters, to their Savior who died for them, has earned His stinging rebuke.

Leviticus 4:2 zeroes in on this sin, revealing that it may be more serious than one might suppose. The word “unintentionally” includes more than simply lack of intention, as when a person sins and says, “I really didn’t mean it.” That is not wrong, but it misses some of the point because that conclusion is shallow and broad. In spite of the sinner’s feelings about his intent as he actually committed the act, the term “sin” still appears in God’s charge, and he continues to turn aside, wander, err, make a mistake, miss the mark, and go off the path. Though unintentional, the act is still a sin.

Consider the possible effects of such a sin. How many deaths have occurred where a person did something seriously wrong yet claims, “I didn’t mean for that to happen”? What could happen if someone is cruising along, not concentrating on his driving, and drifts into oncoming traffic, smashing into another car and killing its occupants? How many people have been killed because a driver’s attention was diverted by a cell phone? Just because a sin is unintentional does not mean it is not serious. Such a sin is often one of careless, impatient, lackadaisical neglect. It is the ignoring of a higher priority.

It is in reality often a sin of presumption, an ignoring of God and His law. It includes sins done with a degree of consciousness, a level of awareness of what one’s responsibilities are. Even though not arrogantly and deliberately done, they are in reality done willingly.

These can be quite serious. Exodus 20:7, the third commandment, reads, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” Because we have

personal *Living by Faith and God's Justice*

been baptized and have received God's Spirit, we have taken on the name "Christian." We are children of God, followers of Christ, and as such, we bear the Family name, an honor not lightly bestowed. Recall again that to whom much is given, the more shall be required.

God warns that we must not bear that holy name carelessly, that is, to no good purpose. He will not hold us guiltless. That name must be borne responsibly in dignified honor to Him, to His Family, and to its operations and purposes. Can we afford to be presumptuously negligent in this privileged responsibility? It is right here that knowledge of God's justice should come to a Christian's mind. It does this because the Christian "sees" God—not literally, of course, but spiritually, in his mind's eye, because he knows Him.

God Means What He Says

To grasp the concept of justice more fully, we need to understand three related Hebrew words that appear in the biblical text 363 times. Their common root is *tsadaq*, which originally meant "to be stiff or straight." However, in a moral context, it means "to be or to make right." These three words are translated into English as "just," "righteous," "righteousness," "justify," "justice," and "cleansed," depending on the context. In regard to conduct, *tsadaq* indicates "conforming to a standard." A just or righteous person does not deviate from a moral standard. In a legal circumstance, a judgment is an opinion or decision made on the basis of a standard, usually existing laws. In a Bible context, the standard is God Himself or His law as revealed.

Psalm 11:4-7 provides us with an essential truth about God's governance and judging of His creation:

The LORD is in His holy temple, the LORD's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The LORD tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain coals, fire and brimstone and a burning wind; this shall be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright.

A major point of instruction in this brief psalm is that, though it may seem to men as if God has gone off somewhere and is not paying attention, He is indeed very aware and patiently timing His interventions. Many evil people believe that God exists and created all things, but their belief is shallow. He is not part of their choices of conduct, so they live assuming that He is not personally managing His creation. Life goes on, they believe, without His involvement.

This psalm refutes that, as do many other passages. It is a foolish, careless, and presumptuous basis for life's choices. We will examine a few examples of people who carelessly thought this way, and we will see evidence of how God can justly act if He so chooses. Our first example is in Leviticus 10:1-7:

Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which *He had not commanded them*. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace.

Then Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp." So they went near and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons, "Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you." And they did according to the word of Moses. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Surely these men did not deliberately intend to sin. However, notice how quickly God's sense of justice reacted, striking these men dead in their tracks and burning them to cinders. Obviously, they either did or failed to do something far more serious than ever entered their minds. Is not God's reaction a vivid warning, especially to those who come near Him? Are we not among those who come near Him?

Look at the evidence more closely and observe God's sense of justice. First, these men were the sons of Aaron, and Moses was their uncle. One would think that, if anybody among those two to three million Israelites had a close relationship with God, that family did. So one might think there may have been some leeway in God's judgment, but there was not! God reacted swiftly and violently.

Second, the charge against them was not because they consorted with prostitutes. No human sacrifices were planned or made. The charge was that they used "profane" (NKJV) or "strange" (KJV) fire.

But we need to look further. Just a few days before this startling event, Exodus 40 reveals the construction of the Tabernacle had been completed and its furniture arranged. Leviticus 1 begins listing the final procedures made for God to dwell in the Tabernacle. In Leviticus 8, the priesthood was consecrated, and in Leviticus 9, they made their first official offering using the Tabernacle and its furniture. Leviticus 9:22-24 says:

Then Aaron lifted his hand toward the people, blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, and *fire came out from before the LORD* and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

This spectacular and serious event shows the offering's acceptance by God.

To this point, all was well, but we must consider a solemn command given by God to the Levites regarding their responsibilities in Leviticus 6:12-13:

And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. *A perpetual fire shall burn on the altar; it shall never go out.*

The altar fire was to be rekindled continually from its own coals, which remained from God's acceptance of the original offering. What was Nadab and Abihu's sin? They used coals from a fire not ignited by God. It was not from His hand and therefore was foreign fire.

If we read between the lines here, we can easily see that Aaron was shocked. He went right to the top of human leadership to get this straightened out, and Moses gave him God's answer: Do not mourn. Do not show any agreement with Nadab and Abihu. Do not show any disagreement with God's judgment.

Why? God's judgments are never wrong. Nadab and Abihu got what they deserved. God saw every aspect of their act as it unfolded. They had added or subtracted to what God commanded and died. They had tried to get by with what they carnally felt was acceptable.

The instruction is clear: Among those consecrated by God to serve Him and His family, His instructions must be explicitly followed. They totally disregarded what He had commanded in Leviticus 6:12-13. There is no ambiguity in the instructions. They had been completely and adequately informed. Each step and each instrument in the process had been designed to teach certain spiritual concepts. They had thought that common fire was good

enough, but in their careless, presumptuous neglect, they had blatantly twisted God's Word.

This incident vividly illustrates that the wages of sin is death. Leviticus 10:3 says Aaron held his peace; he knew the judgment was correct. It was a shocking demonstration, but we can be certain that, because God is love and is supremely sovereign in His judgment, His every decision will be as correct as His judgment of Nadab and Abihu, since He Himself is the standard.

God is not a holy terror lying in wait for us to do something wrong, but He provides us examples such as this and several others of what He can do in response to sin. When He responds like this, He is fully justified. He wants us to consider His justice so that we will be better prepared to evaluate our calling properly and then live by faith.

God's Goodness and Severity

Consider again a factor of God's judgment in Romans 11:22: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off." Paul admonishes us to consider both God's goodness and severity. Both of these characteristics are part of what He is, and therefore we must respect both.

We can make the contrast between them very sharp: Until Adam and Eve sinned, they received all goodness from God. After their sin, it appears that His severity hit them immediately; they were ushered out of the Garden.

In Genesis 4, Cain sinned by killing Abel. At first, Cain received goodness from God in that he was permitted to live, but he also received severity in that he had to live as a marked vagabond.

In these two early examples, both sides of God's judgment appear, and a pattern has become especially clear: Severity results because of sin.

Whether we are immediately aware of it is not the issue. For instance, when Adam and Eve sinned, their decline into death began immediately, regardless of whether they were physically aware of any deterioration of their health. Cain immediately became a vagabond separated from his family roots. The only real difference between the carrying out of the death penalty between Adam and Eve and Nadab and Abihu is the effect God desired to create by His immediate, shocking display of severity.

We who draw near to God must know that the God we serve is to be served as a holy God—especially because He is a holy God. He permitted no opportunity for them to repent because they should have known better. The wages of sin is always death.

In the days of Noah, the goodness of God spared only eight souls, but His severity terrifyingly destroyed the remainder of humanity. In a matter of a few days,

(continued on page 14)

Meet the Minor Prophets

PART ONE

A special group of men, most of them largely unknown except for their names—and they had some strange ones—wrote some of the most memorable lines of the Bible:

“They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind.”

“So rend your heart, and not your garments. . . .”

“Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?”

“Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down. . . .”

“When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple.”

“But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid. . . .”

“Behold, on the mountains the feet of him who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!”

“But the just shall live by his faith.”

“Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD’s wrath. . . .”

“Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Consider your ways!’”

“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the LORD of hosts.”

“For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.”

These twelve quotations were culled from the rich, prophetic teaching of the books of the Minor Prophets, one quotation from each in the order they appear in our English Bibles. Though these may be among the most memorable verses, they in no way comprise the extent of the beautiful teaching and language distilled in these twelve short works. Despite our calling this short section of the Bible the “Minor Prophets,” its instruction, preserved for our

edification (see Romans 15:4), is deep and valuable.

Over the next few issues, we will meet the twelve Minor Prophets, obtain an overview of their books, and take away a concentrated dose of their most meaningful teaching for us today. These books contain a great deal of prophecy regarding the increasingly unsettled time just ahead of Christ’s return and beyond, so it is a good idea to be familiar with their basic themes and warnings to God’s people.

MINOR PROPHET BASICS

However, before we learn more about the individual prophets and their writings, it will help to know a little bit about the subsection of the Bible that is designated the Minor Prophets. Once we have looked into this grouping, we will see that it is minor only in size!

Jesus, using a common Jewish method of organizing the Scriptures (only the Old Testament at that time), breaks it down into three sections: “. . . all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44). Even today, Jews group them in these same sections: Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and Psalms or Writings (*Ketuvim*). Thus, Hebrew Bibles are called *Tanakh*, a word made up by combining the three initial Hebrew letters of each major section of Scripture.

The section of the Prophets is itself divided into two major parts, the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets are the historical books of Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel, and I & II Kings. The Latter Prophets are the named prophets from Isaiah to Malachi (excluding Daniel, whose book is included in the Writings). The twelve works

that comprise the Minor Prophets are a subset of these, which the Jews consider to be, not twelve little books, but one large book, the fourth of the Latter Prophets, balancing the four books of the Former Prophets (I & II Samuel are considered one book, as are I & II Kings). As such, the Minor Prophets were often written on one scroll.

As a group, they are often called simply “The Twelve” or “the Twelve Prophets.” Sometimes, the section is more formally named “The Book of the Twelve.” The title “Minor Prophets” derives from the length of the individual books, which range from one to fourteen chapters, and even the longest, Hosea, is well short of the lengthy Isaiah (66 chapters), Jeremiah (52 chapters), and Ezekiel (48 chapters).

Despite their short lengths, they pack a concentrated punch of teachings, warnings, calls to repentance, and promises of vengeance and blessing. Included are several prophecies that relate to the coming of the Messiah, both as Redeemer and conquering King. There are tantalizing dates, scenes concerning Christ’s return, horrifying descriptions of war and devastation because of sin, and visions of the peace and prosperity of the Millennium. These prophets write mostly in poetry, using metaphor and parallelism to increase our understanding and give their words a greater emotional impact by allowing us to see in our mind’s eye what God revealed to them.

In the order in which they appear in our English Bibles, the Twelve are roughly arranged in chronological order, stretching from the eighth to the fifth centuries before Christ. Among the first half-dozen, all except Joel and Jonah contain internal dates in referring various eighth-century Judean and Israelite kings, and even Jonah can be dated fairly accurately to the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 786-746 BC). The last half-dozen books appear to be later, having been written no earlier than King Hezekiah’s reign (c. 715-686 BC), with Malachi, the last of the Old Testament writings, having been penned perhaps as late as around 425 BC.

Finally, a tantalizing progression of themes runs through the twelve books, indicating that those who compiled them into one scroll were inspired to arrange them to present a unified teaching. For instance, Hosea shows how far the Israelites have transgressed—to the point that they are “not My people” (Hosea 1:9). Joel begins where Hosea leaves off, making extended calls to repentance. Amos repeats Joel 3:16 in Amos 1:2, as if taking up Joel’s cry of warning about the coming wrath of God. Obadiah expands on the mention of the downfall of Edom in Amos 9:12. Jonah then narrates the story of God’s judgment on another of Israel’s enemies, Assyria, but the Assyrians, unlike the Edomites, repent!

The next book, Micah, cautions the Israelites that God is also judging them. Nahum’s opening poetry

continues Micah’s warning about God’s indignation, turning it once again toward Assyria, and confirming that, despite its earlier repentance, Nineveh will soon fall to Babylon. Habakkuk then prophesies that once Babylon conquers Assyria, it will turn its sights on Judah. Zephaniah takes us to the time when Babylon is about to strike, showing just how sinful Judah has become, but the book ends in hope, promising that her captives will return. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi deal with those exiles who have returned, illustrating their shortcomings and emphasizing that One whom God has chosen will come to save His people.

Looking at the Minor Prophets in this way reveals the hand of God in its composition and vital part in the canon of the Old Testament.

HOSEA

The prophet Hosea has the honor of opening the Minor Prophets with the longest of the twelve books. He begins his work with one of the more informative introductions, letting us know among other things that his father’s name was Beerli, which means “man of the well,” and perhaps metaphorically, “expounder” or “enlightener.” We later find out that his wife’s name was Gomer and that they were the parents of two sons—Jezreel and Lo-Ammi—and a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah. God Himself names the children, giving them prophetic names to foretell the fate of the unfaithful nation of Israel.

The prophet also tells us that he served God during the reigns of four Judean kings—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—and one Israelite king, Jeroboam II. This would seem to put his ministry within the bounds of Jeroboam II’s prosperous 41-year reign (c. 793 to 753 BC). However, since Hezekiah did not come to the throne as co-regent of Judah until 719 BC, it appears that the mention of Jeroboam II is included only to give the reader the starting point and context of Hosea’s message. Most Bible historians date Hosea’s ministry from about 755 to 710 BC, a period that essentially covers the entire downfall of Israel from the last days of her wealth and power to her destruction by Assyria and a few years beyond.

Hosea means “help” or “salvation,” and despite the recurring theme of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, the eventual salvation of Israel is the main subject of the prophecy. God uses the prophet’s marriage to Gomer, “a wife of harlotry,” to illustrate the relationship between God and His people. Gomer is not faithful to Hosea, yet God commands the prophet to take her back, just as He would restore Israel to Himself:

For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and

prophecy watch *Meet the Minor Prophets*

seek the LORD their God and David their king. They shall fear the LORD and His goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3:4-5)

The remainder of the book expounds and expands on this pronouncement, making intermittent calls for repentance. Several sections include Judah within the prophecy (see Hosea 5:5, 10-15; 6:4, 11; 8:14, etc.), showing that Hosea's prophecy, though preached primarily to the northern ten tribes, is in reality aimed at all twelve tribes of Israel. God accuses both Ephraim (Israel, also called Samaria) and Judah of running to other nations, particularly Egypt and Assyria (Hosea 5:13; 7:11), when threatened rather than to God. In the same way, all Israel loves to pursue idols—Baal seems to have been a favorite—rather than their Maker (see Hosea 4:12-14; 8:14; 12:11; etc.).

Hosea also contains a well-known Messianic prophecy, found in Hosea 11:1: "And out of Egypt I called My son." This foretells of Joseph and Mary being warned by an angel to take the newly born Jesus to Egypt to avoid the cruelty of King Herod, and once Herod died, the family returned to live in Nazareth (see Matthew 2:12-23). The Minor Prophets contain several of these "obscure" prophecies, many of which are highlighted in Matthew's gospel.

JOEL

Hosea is followed by the three-chapter book of Joel, which may well be the earliest of the Minor Prophets, although it cannot be dated with any confidence. Although modern critical scholars make Joel a contemporary of Haggai and Zechariah, conservative commentators often place his ministry in the reign of Joash, who ruled Judah for much of the late ninth century BC (c. 835-796). As II Kings 11 and 12 relate, Joash was placed on the throne at age seven in a coup that rid the kingdom of his evil grandmother, Queen Athaliah. His uncle, Jehoiada the priest, functioned as regent and chief counselor of the young king, so that as long as Jehoiada remained alive, Joash did well. However, as soon as the good priest died (at age 130!), Joash apostatized. He died by assassination in his bed at the hands of his own servants (see II Chronicles 24).

If the conservative view is correct, this was the atmosphere when Joel prophesied in Judah (this conclusion is derived from the fact that he mentions "Israel" only twice, while speaking of Judah, Jerusalem, Zion, and the Valley of Jehoshaphat more frequently). This makes him a contemporary of the prophet Elisha, whose ministry centered in Israel. Some believe that Joel was also a priest due to his call for the priests to mourn and consecrate a fast in repentance (Joel 1:13-14) to beseech God to spare

His people (Joel 2:17).

Joel is the son of Pethuel ("God delivers"), but of him and his father we know little else for sure. His name, a popular one among Israelites (Scripture mentions at least thirteen men named Joel), means "the LORD is God," a name that fits in well with the themes of his book. He shows that God is in control of nature and of history, and in light of God's overwhelming power, Joel calls his countrymen to repentance.

The most striking aspect of Joel is his use of a devastating locust plague to picture the destruction of the coming Day of the Lord, a central idea in his prophecy. Judah had been laid waste as successive waves of locusts devoured every bit of greenery in the land (Joel 1:4, 7). He proclaims it to be a divine judgment on the sins of His people, and he urges them to humble themselves and seek forgiveness.

Chapter 2 uses similar language, ramping up the martial imagery, foreshadowing the specter of the real armies that will march over the earth during the Day of the Lord. Again, Joel takes the opportunity to declare the need for the people to

. . . rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him . . . ? (Joel 2:13-14)

The third chapter takes the reader to the actual Day of the Lord—far in Joel's future but on our near horizon—prophesying of the gathering of all nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat near Jerusalem for judgment. The timing shown in Joel 3:15 parallels the wonders that occur at the return of Jesus Christ, as shown in Matthew 24:29. Then and there, God will show who is really in control, defeating His enemies and setting up His Kingdom.

Joel is quoted in the New Testament by the apostle Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost in AD 31 (see Acts 2:17-21). Peter had just seen God manifest His Spirit on his fellow disciples in the sound of a mighty wind and in tongues of flame, and Joel's words in Joel 2:28 immediately sprang to mind: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." Joel actually speaks of a yet future day when God's Spirit will be available to all, but this Pentecost miracle typifies the power of God's gift to His elect.

Over the next few issues, we will meet the remaining ten prophets and examine their helpful and ultimately encouraging prophecies.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

ready answer

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

The Gift of Discerning Spirits

*“ . . . to another
[is given the gift of]
discerning spirits . . .”
—I Corinthians 12:10*

For over a year, I have been pondering whether the spiritual gifts mentioned by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 12:8-10 are something a Christian in today’s world should desire or pursue.

As many know, I am a professor at a small college in East Texas. Often, as I deal with my students on a day-to-day basis, I would like to be able to read between the lines, determining their motives—not only for *what* they ask, but in the *way* they ask, such as sincerely, sarcastically, flatteringly, etc.

When we think reflectively, Christ’s mandate to us that we become “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16) implies that we must develop discernment, the ability to detect motivation and the spirits that motivate. The gift of discerning the spirits will become increasingly important as we approach the end of this age because deception will be the hallmark of these extremely dangerous times.

In the Olivet Prophecy, the disciples ask Jesus to reveal the sign of His return. Jesus does not give one sign but several. At the top of the list, he warns the disciples of deception, and follows it up with warnings of false prophets, false miracles, and the warning not to be deceived (see Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-26).

We deduce from this last warning that false “Christian” ministers and ministries will have the capability of performing convincing lying wonders and signs. These false ministers will demonstrate power—occult power—for the specific purpose of leading all people astray, including the most sincere believer.

We have a clear warning from the apostle Paul that the battles we face on a daily basis cannot be won by conventional weapons that we can attain from the world. The weapons we must seek should be spiritual, having the power to destroy arguments and every false claim that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and God’s Word (II Corinthians 10:3-5).

ready answer *The Gift of Discerning Spirits*

The Purpose of Gifts

Spiritual gifts are valuable assets that we should desire, but we must examine the reason they are given in the first place. I Corinthians 12:7 reveals why God distributes these gifts; they are given for the profit of all: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (English Standard Version [ESV]).

Asking for the gift of discernment or any other spiritual gift should not be to give us a more special or holier status than our brother or sister in Christ, but instead, to promote the common good for the entire body of Christ. If we think of it this way, it should deter us from corrosive pride, as we realize that each gift has a specific use, and one gift is not any better or inferior to any other.

However, suppose that one gift did contain more value or status than another. Did we do anything to deserve this status or recognition? Of course not! God Almighty distributes these gifts to each member specifically and individually as He wills, as we see in I Corinthians 12:11: “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.”

We must also realize that all these gifts are meant to interact; no one individual, except for Jesus Christ, has all these gifts. Thus, we need other members of the Body of Christ, with their unique gifts, to complement our own God-given gifts. Christ’s Body is meant to work together.

I Kings 3:9-10 records the wisest mortal man who ever lived making a request to God for discernment: “Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?” The speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing.”

We learn from Ezekiel 44:23-24 that to discern spirits enables one to make distinctions between holy and profane as well as clean and unclean. The discernor can also make decisions according to biblical judgments, based on knowing the commandments, and if people should violate them, what the appropriate punishment should be. A discernor is one who habitually obeys God’s laws and statutes and who faithfully keeps God’s Sabbaths.

A Supernatural Ability

To discern spirits is a supernatural ability enabled by God’s Holy Spirit that allows a person to determine the source of a spiritual manifestation, whether it emanates from God, the Devil, the world, or man. If we have this gift, God will reveal information about the presence or absence of spiritual entities. Usually, people regard this gift as useful to detect evil spiritual forces or influences. It can also detect the presence or absence of angelic intervention or the prompts of God’s Holy Spirit working within us.

The apostle John writes in I John 4:1, “Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test [try] the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” We are commanded to examine thoroughly any spiritual teaching with our critical faculties to see whether the presenter is handling the Word of God accurately. Because evil spirits have the capacity to produce paranormal phenomena, the Scriptures exhort us to prove or test the spirits, proving all things, holding fast only to what is good (I Thessalonians 5:21).

It is highly imperative that we use our God-given reasoning and understanding in doing this, but we should not rely exclusively on our intellect. Likewise, it is unwise to allow our inward feelings to sway us, but we should seek the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit. Undoubtedly, the most reliable guide concerning the testing of Spirits would be the Scriptures. We know that God’s Word—the Bible—is truth (John 17:17).

We must remember that just reading or mumbling God’s Word without understanding is next to useless. We have leaders who eloquently read teleprompters but have not the foggiest notion of what they are saying. Likewise, reading the Word of God without understanding makes us a spiritual “empty suit.” Reading God’s Word with understanding via the Holy Spirit enables us to tap into the spiritual realm, know “the things of God,” and make right judgments (I Corinthians 2:10-16).

What Jesus says about His own words parallels this truth: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

In his sermon, “The Two Witnesses (Part Four),” Richard Ritenbaugh asserts:

. . . one of the main manifestations of God’s Spirit is words. The entire revelation of God that we have before us, [the Bibles] in our laps, is made up of words. And if this is not a manifestation of God’s Spirit, I do not know what is! Many of these words are the words of God Himself. Many of the words—far fewer, but many of them—are words of God’s servants that have been written down for our admonition. But everything . . . comes down to words because the way of God is a set of ideas. These ideas we put down on paper as words, or when we speak, we speak them as words. We cannot understand them otherwise. . . .

So, the servant of God may do other works. He can do healings, which are not necessarily manifested as words—although often there are words that accompany a healing, that is, specifically, a prayer. Casting out demons is the same way: There is usually a prayer involved. There are miracles, and often miracles

involve certain words that are spoken. The works themselves—the healings, the casting out of demons, and the miracles—are not words, but they are manifestations of the Spirit.

In this vein, the Proverbs teach us that good words have the power to heal (Proverbs 16:24), and bad words have the power to destroy health (Proverbs 12:18). There is great power in words.

The best safeguard to determine the authenticity of spirit entities, then, is God's Word, the Holy Scriptures. When we examine a counterfeit bill, we have to know what a true dollar looks like. God's Word resembles a crystal glass: It rings true because all the impurities have been purged out of it.

If we are, through constant practice studying and meditating on the Scriptures, keeping in tune with the themes of the Bible, we will detect those discordant sounds that are not in harmony with the scriptural motifs.

An Exercise in Discernment

Dr. Basil Frasure, a counselor and minister with the Fellowship Church of San Angelo, Texas, has written a fascinating article, "Discerning of Spirits." Dr. Frasure has authored several psychology self-help books, including *How to Destroy the Evil Tree*, a popular and informative book on overcoming generational curses, as well as *Bringing Every Thought Captive, Vol. 1*, also a great self-help book, which he describes as an informative manual on Whole Person Counseling. He also has designed and taught competent counseling courses.

In the course of his article, Dr. Frasure explores just what kind of spirit visited Job's friend, Eliphaz. This episode appears in Job 4:12-21:

Now a word was secretly brought to me, and my ear received a whisper of it. In disquieting thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair on my body stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence; then I heard a voice saying: "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker? If He puts no trust in His servants, if He charges His angels with error, how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before a moth? They are broken in pieces from morning till evening; they perish forever, with no one regarding. Does not their own excellence go away? They die, even without wisdom."

Dr. Frasure writes, "One of the best ways to discern the nature of a spirit is to check the Word of God. Does what the spirit says match up with the Word of God?" When we

apply biblical themes and principles to Eliphaz' encounter with the spirit, it does not pass the "smell" test.

When we closely examine the nature of the being that troubled Job's friend, we learn that this spirit appealed to the carnal desire for a special revelation. If we remember the content of serpent's appeal to Eve, "Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5), we see a similarity.

We notice that the spirit came at nighttime, in the form of a nightmare, an approach that could be characterized as intimidation, not an approach that God chooses to use with believers. We remember from Paul's second letter to Timothy that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7).

Generally in Scripture, when people express fear at the appearance of angels, the angels comfort them, saying something akin to "Fear not" (see, for example, Daniel 10:12; Luke 1:13, 30; Revelation 1:17). Yet, this elusive being in Job 4 prefers to remain obscure and daunting, something atypical throughout God's Word.

We also observe that this spirit's message begins with an accusation, a technique usually ascribed to Satan (Revelation 12:10). The being insinuates that God does not trust the angels. However, we understand that God often entrusted His Word and weighty responsibilities to angels. If this spirit is so sensitive about God charging some of His angels with folly, it is perhaps that this message came from one of the rebellious angels who followed Satan. It is no wonder this evil spirit had bitterness and animosity against God.

In several places, the Bible contradicts the assertions that this demon makes. In fact, God Almighty has trusted His church—human beings!—with the mandate to carry His priceless gospel throughout the world. As for no one observing when a person perishes, we are assured by Christ Himself that no human being ever dies without God being mindful. As He keeps meticulous records of all the falling sparrows (Matthew 10:29), He also keeps track of the deaths of His saints, which He regards as precious (Psalm 116:15). Our God is not intent on destroying us, as the demon intimates, but as Paul writes in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

Dr. Frasure takes issue with several Bible commentaries, including *Barnes Notes*, which erroneously suppose that this communication is consistent with God's revelations. We can extrapolate from God's stern rebuke of Job's friends (Job 42:7-9) that He considered the communication not to have been consistent with His character.

Remember, the main principle of interpreting Scripture is that the Bible interprets itself. Contextually, then, Eliphaz probably received his counsel from a familiar spirit totally out of sync with the whole counsel of Scripture.

We see that only by repeatedly cycling through God's Word in the manner of the Bereans (Acts 17:11) can we properly exercise the gift of discerning of Spirits.

—David F. Maas

personal *Living by Faith and God's Justice*

(continued from page 7)

perhaps billions of people, even innocent unborn and newborn babies, died because of sin.

Following King Saul's paranoia-driven reign, God showed His goodness to Israel by raising up David, a man after His own heart, to rule over Israel. Yet, then David committed a disastrous double sin by entering into adultery with Bathsheba and deliberately bringing about the death of the loyal Uriah. God mercifully forgave the sins, but that does not mean there was no painful punishment laid on David and his family. God's severity against David and his family was hard and long. First, the son born of that illicit union died shortly after its birth. Later, David's firstborn son, Amnon, raped his own half-sister, Tamar. Tamar's brother, Absalom, seeking revenge, killed Amnon and fled from David, not seeing him for two years.

Then Absalom revolted against David in his desire to take over the throne. Absalom arrogantly proceeded to defile David's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Several thousand were killed in this revolt, and eventually, Absalom himself was killed by Joab. The family's pain did not stop even then, washing over into Solomon's reign when he put Adonijah to death because he sought political power by asking for Abishag's hand in marriage.

David was a man of blood, as God Himself mentions, but his children carried a moral cancer until death stopped them. Have we ever noticed how much deceit and illicit sex was involved in David's family's sins? God was not present in that family's life as He had once been. He could have stepped in at any time and stopped the holocaust ripping through David's family, but He did not. Living as they did, despite being the progeny of a man God greatly loved, they felt the severity of His judgments.

Deeply consider how long God's severity lasted! He did not simply let David off the hook. He had been chosen to draw near to God. Much was required of him.

We Must Take Note

All that it took to allow these characteristics to blossom into hateful violence right within the family was for God to withhold His spiritual blessings. Nadab, Abihu, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah all received what they deserved.

It is interesting to note that a striking display of God's justice is recorded at the outset of important steps in God's plan. The first occurred as the Tabernacle and its operations for the worship of God began, and Nadab and Abihu died. The second happened when Israel entered the Promised Land, and Achan died for his thievery. The third event resulted in Uzzah's sudden death as the ark was wrongly transported just as David's kingship blossomed in great peace and prosperity. The fourth transpired as the

Christian church began, when God struck Ananias and Sapphira dead for their deceit. These admonishments seem planned as shocking reminders for us not to forget that God's justice remains active.

Paul writes in Romans 11:33: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" This fervent outburst of praise follows soon after his admonition about the goodness and severity of God in verse 22. We have grown up in a very permissive culture, making us almost totally unfamiliar with the tough love God uses because He loves His children so much. Because the stakes are so high, He cannot permit Himself to be permissive.

Revelation 16:5-7 reminds us:

"You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because you have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due." And I heard another from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments."

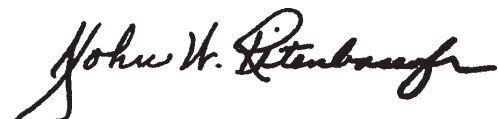
There is no injustice with God. His justice is never divorced from His righteousness. He never condemns the innocent; He never clears the guilty without repentance; He never punishes with undue severity; He always rewards righteousness. His justice is perfect justice.

He does not require absolutely perfect obedience, or nobody would make it. The blood of Jesus Christ is available to cover us (Revelation 1:5). However, He does not always act with justice because He sometimes acts with mercy. Mercy is not justice, but neither is it injustice, as injustice violates righteousness. Mercy manifests kindness and grace; it does no violence to righteousness.

Those who live by faith must seriously consider God's justice. It constantly reminds us that the wages of sin is death, that sin is disloyalty to God, and that God means what He says. It reminds us of the tremendously precious value of Christ's sacrifice. When we enter into the covenant with God, we are pledging our lives to serve Him in gladness and faithfulness so that He might create us in His image.

Next time, we will delve into the next element, God's grace, which helps to prod us to live continuously by faith. We must know and appreciate His grace without abusing it. His justice is a reality, and so is sin's penalty, but His mercifully given grace overrides both.

In Christian love,



The Dream of a United States of Europe

After a series of victories by Nazi Germany in 1940, Wilhelm II—the grandson of Britain’s Queen Victoria and the last emperor of Germany—stated that “the hand of God is creating a new world and working miracles. . . . We are becoming the United States of Europe under German leadership, a united European Continent.” Though Nazi Germany was defeated after years of devastating war, the dream of a United States of Europe lived on. In a speech at the University of Zürich on September 9, 1946, Winston Churchill reiterated this vision—though without Germany at the head: “We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living.”

The concept of a unified Europe has been around in various forms since at least the fifteenth century. It contains not only the dream of prosperity, but also the hope of ending intra-European wars by creating economic incentives to keep all the nations working together. The idea has been that closer integration of the nations will generate more peace and prosperity, based on the belief that nationalism is the greatest threat to European life and wealth.

The 1993 Maastricht Treaty created the present-day European Union (EU), suggesting that a United States of Europe was just around the corner—a superstate that could counterbalance America. For the last two decades, the idea of a unified Europe has been a motivating force in the global economy. However, the present financial crisis has rocked the nations and institutions of the EU to their core, and the fallout has yet to be fully realized.

In his article, “Europe’s ‘Proud Empire’ Is Entering a *Cul-de-Sac* of History” (*The Financial Times*, February 17, 2012), British historian Andrew Roberts suggests that the EU is well into the process of stagnation:

The whole of human history is testament to the fact that vast sections of mankind can seem to be progressing towards what looks like an established goal, only to get sidetracked into cul-de-sacs, sometimes for decades, occasionally for centuries. So why do we still assume that an eventual return to any significant economic growth in the European Union is inevitable? . . . Isn’t it more likely that we have simply entered one of history’s classic cul-de-sacs, like the Ottoman Empire . . . or the Holy Roman Empire . . . or the Spanish empire . . . or the Austro-Hungarian Empire . . . ? They all had anaemic growth rates, often lasting decades, as did that other failed empire, the USSR, for much of its existence. Even the mighty Roman Empire—and no one equates today’s confederation based in Brussels with *that*—had a period of nearly 250 years in which it stopped growing both territorially and economically, but merely trod water. As the hymnal reminds us: “Earth’s proud empires pass away,” but if there is no obvious external threat, the gap between rising and falling can be a long one.

Roberts concludes,

. . . the EU is giving off the strong historical whiff of an empire plateauing out into long years of relative stagnation. . . . Birth rates, defence expenditures, bond prices, welfare spending versus wealth creation; everything that historians look to in order to gauge the health of empires suggests that Europe’s fire has gone out.

Stratfor’s CEO George Friedman, in “Europe, the International System, and a Generational Shift” (November 8, 2011), explains the implications of the EU’s condition from another angle:

In the context of the ongoing European financial crisis, the issue is not simply whether the euro survives or whether Brussels regulators oversee aspects of the Italian economy. The fundamental issue is whether the core concepts of the European Union remain intact. It is obvious that the European Union that existed in 2007 is not the one that exists today. Its formal structure appears the same, but it does not function the same. The issues confronting it are radically different. Moreover, relations among the EU nations have a completely different dynamic. The question of what the European Union might become has been replaced by the question of whether it can survive. Some think of this as a temporary aberration. We see it as a permanent change in Europe, one with global consequences.

The theory of harmonious European integration has collided with reality. A significant part of the problem is that the various regions of Europe require different economic and political environments in which to thrive. However, policies of the European Central Bank and the bureaucrats in Brussels that help one nation or region inevitably hurt another. Interest rates and subsidies that ease the cost of operation for some nations penalize others. Thus, the nascent central authority intended to move Europe away from nationalism in fact continues to reinforce it.

A driving force in the creation of the EU was to keep Germany so tied down that it would not be inclined or able to become aggressive again. But Germany has turned this on its head through high productivity and fiscal discipline, and is by far the largest and healthiest economy in Europe. Berlin has essentially accomplished through economic and political means what it failed to do through war. It may not be led by a dictator, but its position allows it to influence the shape of the EU and get its own way more often than not.

During 17 years of prosperity (1991-2008), imbalances and inequities were hidden by cheap credit and the assurance of a bright future. But the financial crisis has stripped away the veneer, and underneath is the stubborn reality that the various sovereign nations have fundamentally different interests. In short, nationalism has roared back in, the grand dream of European unity has been put on indefinite hold, and the question now is just how divided Europe will become.

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

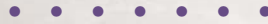
Healing a Deaf-Mute (Part Two)

The spiritual picture presented in the miracle of healing a deaf-mute man (Mark 7:31-37) is of the sinner's moral and spiritual condition. The tongue of the unconverted person is as estranged from God as his ear. Even the most polished and educated sinner betrays an impediment in speech as soon as spiritual truths are introduced.

The methods that Jesus uses for healing this deaf-mute man are unique. They are not so much His means of healing but signs intended to explain to him how healing would come. Mark reveals the variations in Christ's miracles. Some are healed in a crowd, some in solitude. Others are healed by a word, by a touch, or by clay. He heals a few at a distance and many when present. Sometimes the healing is instantaneous, while at other times, it is gradual. Because of His wisdom and omnipotence, God works through Christ as He deems best.

In this case, Jesus takes the man aside from the multitude. It appears that He wanted privacy to avoid any spectacle that might arise from unrestrained crowds (Mark 7:33). While away from the interruption of a noisy and pressing throng, quietly and privately, the man would be more attentive and receptive. It is important that Jesus awaken in the man a confident hope and an assured faith that he is to be healed.

Christ's response to those who brought the deaf-mute man for healing is simply to heal him. Although they presume to dictate the method of healing, Christ nevertheless honors their faith. He often works out His purpose in spite of us. However, this is not an excuse for our own failures but a demonstration of God's grace in granting us favor.



1. Why are worldly people deficient in helping those with serious problems?

COMMENT: In bringing the man to Christ, the deaf-mute man's friends proved their wisdom by knowing where to take the needy (James 5:13-16). Many in society recognize the problems of others. They know when a person is mentally and morally sick, but have no clue as to the true cure. Such people are often unaware of their ignorance, resulting in their championing strange remedies for people's serious needs.

Instead of leading a person to Christ for help—instead of pointing them to the Scriptures or quoting biblical passages as solutions—people are most likely to take a troubled person to a psychologist or psychiatrist for help (I Corinthians 1:20-21). Unfortunately, secular advice often perpetuates the problem rather than solving it (I John 2:15-17). Conversely, Christ is the answer to the greatest problems and needs of people, for "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

2. Why does Jesus put His fingers in the deaf-mute's ears? Mark 7:33.

COMMENT: Jesus takes the man aside from the crowd to show tender consideration for the feelings of one for whom life was very difficult. Once they are alone, the first thing Jesus does is to put His fingers in the man's ears. They must be healed if the tongue is to work normally, since the man was mute because he could not hear. This symbolic action sends a clear message to the deaf man, helping to awaken his faith and to alert him to the expectation of healing. Since he could not hear encouragement, it had to come from a compassionate touch.

For us, we learn that it is good for us to be alone in God's presence, away from the busy cacophony of a confused world, which is never conducive to spiritual reflection (Ecclesiastes 3:7). In the quiet of God's presence, we can

build and improve our personal relationship with Him (Psalm 46:10). Each person needs time alone with the Father to keep a sharp focus on Him. Jesus instructs, "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:6-7).

3. Why does Jesus spit and touch the man's tongue? Mark 7:33.

COMMENT: The popular belief at that time was that saliva had medicinal properties. This case and the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6) are the only instances where Jesus uses popular medical remedies in healing. However, He did not use His saliva for any medicinal virtue it contained but as a symbol of the spiritual power within Him and emanating from Him. By Christ's touch, the man was shown that the power to heal both his deafness and speech impediment completely came from Jesus. Even with this healing, the man would have to be willing to hear God's words; if not, he would waste his healing and the grace of God (Acts 28:26-28).

The account shows us that Jesus does not consider the deaf-mute as merely another case but as an individual. The man had a special need and a special problem, and with tender consideration, Jesus deals with him in a way that spares his feelings and helps him to understand.

When the healing becomes known, the people declare that He had done all things well (literally "beautifully"), which is also God's verdict on His creation (Genesis 1:31). In the beginning, everything was very good, but mankind's sins have spoiled it ever since. When Jesus came, bringing healing and salvation to the people, He brought the work of spiritual creation, beginning with His church. One day soon, Christ will bring back God's beauty to the whole world.

—Martin G. Collins