Is Coronavirus an End-Time Plague?

Ambassadors of Christ

A House Divided Against Itself
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One of the few good things coming out of the coronavirus outbreak is that God can't be blamed for it! Don't you think He gets weary when, every time something bad happens, humans irrationally proclaim it “an act of God”?

This coronavirus outbreak, however, is clearly an “act of man”—exotic meat marketing is apparently what allowed this animal-borne virus to jump to humans. Thus far God seems to have escaped His usual position as the scapegoat!

A few years ago, following Typhoon Haiyan's devastation of the Philippines, someone commented, “Another ‘act of God’—as usual mankind will have to clean up and suffer for God's doings.”

Wow! How would you feel getting blamed whenever natural disasters occur? Yet every time a tornado, hurricane, cyclone, famine or earthquake hits, we hear about “acts of God.”

“Act of God” is used in court too. The term describes an event caused by an unanticipated grave natural disaster, one impossible to expect or prevent under normal conditions. It is a common legal defense against liability for death and injury. Many disaster victims, already in shock, are further devastated when they discover their insurance does not cover “act of God” losses.

Acts of the devil
But why do we call such tragedies “acts of God”? Especially when nothing indicates God was involved at all?

When something wonderful happens, do we ever call that an act of God? If a cancer cure was announced tomorrow, would newscasters be talking about it being an “act of God”? Not likely! No, when great things happen, we tend to attribute it to luck or our own ingenuity, but seldom give God the credit.

The phrase act of God is not bad of itself—God does act!—but it should be framed in the context of truth. The truth, Jesus said, is that there are also acts of the devil and acts of man. The Bible is, in fact, a running commentary on the acts of the devil, of man (often influenced by the devil) and of God.

In a tense public debate with the Pharisees recorded in John 8:44, Jesus identified Satan's nature and actions as the real source of humanity's suffering. “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do,” He said. “He was a murderer from the beginning. ... He is a liar and the father of it.”

Satan acts, and humanity mirrors his lustful, lying and murderous actions. And one of his greatest deceptions has been to get us to shift the blame to God.

Act like God!
In Discern we want to lift your eyes to see the truth of God’s amazing acts, past, present and future. The good news is that someday the phrase acts of God will be seen in its true light. When people consider the acts of God, they’ll remember God giving His only begotten Son for the life of the world. They’ll think about how Christ returned, as promised, and saved humanity from the worst acts of man and from Satan's wrath.

One article in this issue, about the Day of Pentecost, explains a past day when God miraculously opened the spiritual understanding of a group of people, showed them how to turn from their acts of sin, gave them His Holy Spirit and established His Church.

Another article, “Ambassadors of Christ,” makes us consider the present day, and how we are to represent God in a world that is quickly losing its way socially, morally, spiritually.

In a world blinded by Satan's deceit, may we not only learn about the true acts of God, but learn to act like God!
Is Coronavirus an End-Time Plague?

Within months, a tiny pathogen has brought our world to its knees. We’ve experienced overwhelmed health-care systems, grounded airlines, volatile and unpredictable financial markets, a global system on the brink.

Schools and businesses closed their doors, with students, parents, employees and employers struggling with schooling and working from home or, worse, the loss of instruction and hourly pay.

Not to mention a constantly rising death toll of the vulnerable and the elderly.

Previous epidemics and pandemics didn’t prepare us for this, though in many ways they should have. This crisis is unprecedented, leading many to wonder if this plague is mentioned in end-time Bible prophecy.

Plagues of Revelation

The Bible does describe terrible plagues in the end times leading up to Jesus Christ’s return. Where does the novel coronavirus fit into the plagues of Revelation?

Early in the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ opens the first four seals of a prophetic scroll that reveals events and trends leading to the end times. In the rich symbolism of Revelation, these four seals unveil four horses and riders, often called the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The rider of the fourth horse “was Death, and Hades [the grave] followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth” (Revelation 6:8).

The horse was pale, translated from the Greek chloros, which can mean green or yellowish and pale. This seems to imply a sickly color.

As our article “What Are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?” shows, the prophecies of Revelation parallel and expand on Jesus Christ’s Olivet Discourse. He gave that prophecy to answer the disciples’ question, “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

At the end of verse 7 Jesus gave “pestilences” as a sign, and this parallels the pale horse of Revelation. Pestilences include epidemics and pandemics such as the coronavirus. This terrible disease continues a long history of pestilences represented by the pale horse.

Pestilences and the other troubles represented by the four horsemen of the Apocalypse will intensify as the return of the Messiah to the earth nears.

But does this tell us exactly how close we are to the...
Quarantine is a biblical principle based on love of neighbor (Leviticus 13:19:18). Those under quarantine in ancient Israel would not spread infectious diseases to others. This concept is also behind modern efforts to halt the spread of disease.

The coronavirus experts’ advice and government regulations on limiting and slowing the spread of the disease have been very disruptive to lives and economies. But those younger people who were less at risk of the disease, but still at high risk of being a carrier, deserve high praise for their efforts to protect the vulnerable.

As U.S. coronavirus response coordinator Deborah Birx said, “The millennials are incredibly good about getting information out in a clear way, but more importantly, they are incredibly good about understanding how to protect one another, how to protect their parents, and how to protect their grandparents.”

Dr. Birx added, “Right now we need the army of millennials out there doing everything that they can to protect themselves from getting infected, because we know a lot of their cases will be mild or asymptomatic, and making sure that they’re [taking] every single precaution to protect their parents and grandparents.”

Such actions are examples of love in action.

What’s next in prophecy?
As bad as the coronavirus crisis has been, experts like Frank M. Snowden, author of Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present, are already predicting worse pandemics for the future.

And disease epidemics will only be part of the scenario that Jesus soberly warned about: “For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be” (Mark 13:19).

What must happen before this Great Tribulation begins? The following are some specific Bible prophecies that have not happened yet:

- Animal sacrifices will begin in Jerusalem.
- Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies.
- A final revival of the Roman Empire, made up of 10 nations or groups of nations, will be set up.

See our online article “Where Are We Now in Bible Prophecy?” for more details and biblical references.

Hope in the return of Christ
But in the end, there is good news! Jesus went on to say, “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22). Christ will return and bring real peace, health and meaning to this troubled world.

Jesus will save humanity from self-destruction and set up a peaceful Kingdom where healing and health will become the norm. The plagues and pestilences of this age will become a thing of the past!

When will disease and disability be eradicated?
The world under the rule of the Kingdom of God will fulfill some of our deepest longings.

God promises, “Behold, I will bring it health and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth” (Jeremiah 33:6).

Isaiah also prophesied a time of God’s intervention and miraculous healings:

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, ‘Be strong, do not fear!...’

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstoppered. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (Isaiah 35:3-6).

The first 1,000 years of God’s Kingdom ruling over...
the earth (the Millennium) will be amazing. But ultimately, God’s plan is for a wonderful time that is beyond what our human minds can comprehend!

As the apostle Paul recorded, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Revelation 21:4 gives us a hint of that future: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, and the plagues and crises still to come, we can focus on that future, the sure and wonderful promises of God. And we can fervently pray, “Your kingdom come.”

Study more about the hope for the future that God offers in our free booklet Finding Hope in a Hopeless World.

—Mike Bennett

If you’d like to learn more about this topic, or any topic within this Discern magazine, you can ask our authors a question here: LifeHopeandTruth.com /ask-a-question

DEALING WITH QUARANTINE

Quarantine can bring out the worst, and best, in people. A number of resources are available with tips for coping with this massive disruption of our lives.

For example, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a four-page resource of “Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak.” Here are a few of its suggestions:

“Reaching out to people you trust is one of the best ways to reduce anxiety, depression, loneliness, and boredom during social distancing, quarantine, and isolation. You can:
• “Use the telephone, email, text messaging, and social media to connect with friends, family, and others.
• “Talk ‘face to face’ with friends and loved ones using Skype or FaceTime.”

It also recommends these practical ways to cope and relax:
• “Relax your body often by doing things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate or pray, or engage in activities you enjoy. ...
• “Talk about your experiences and feelings to loved ones and friends, if you find it helpful.
• “Maintain a sense of hope and positive thinking; keep a journal where you write down things you are grateful for or that are going well.”

The Victoria, Australia, state government also has “Quarantine at Home—Coping Tips.” Some of them include:
• “Your doctor can tell you when your quarantine can safely end. ...
• “Reassure young children using age-appropriate language.
• “Keep up a normal daily routine as much as possible. ...
• “Don’t rely too heavily on the television and technology. Treat quarantine as an opportunity to do some of those things you never usually have time for, such as board games, craft, drawing and reading.
• “Accept that conflict and arguments may occur. Try to resolve issues quickly. Distraction may work with young children.”

The U.K. government also has guidance for those needing to stay at home because of possible coronavirus infection.

In addition to these and other online resources, also remember to maintain your relationship with God while dealing with the stress and challenges of isolation. “How Should a Christian Deal With the Coronavirus Pandemic?” on the Life, Hope & Truth website gives resources that can help.
What Does Pentecost Mean?

Pentecost has special meaning for people of all nationalities and backgrounds. It marks the beginning of the Church, the gift of the Holy Spirit and more.

Pentecost is a festival observed by Catholics, Protestants, Jews and the Church of God. Many people don’t know the background of this holy day or why these groups often celebrate it on different days.

Within mainstream Christianity (Catholics and Protestants alike), many congregations recognize the biblical teaching that Pentecost was the day the Holy Spirit was first given to Christians. They consider it, in effect, to be the birthday of the New Testament Church.

Some congregations, however, give no special attention to this festival. The reasons some within mainstream Christianity choose not to observe Pentecost vary.

Some suggest that there are so many events in church history and on church calendars that it is hard to know which ones to observe. Others don’t celebrate Pentecost because of an uneasy feeling about anything connected with charismatics, who mistakenly believe it is necessary to recreate the supernatural events of the first Pentecost today.

In this article, let’s consider what the Bible teaches us about this day and some of the questions surrounding it.

What was Pentecost in the Old Testament?

Pentecost is one of the annual holy days God revealed to the ancient Israelites.

The seven feasts of the LORD are found in Leviticus 23. They are Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (called Pentecost in the New Testament),
the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles and the Eighth Day.

Some people refer to these observances as the feasts of the Jews. But, while God did indeed give these to Israel, including the Jewish people, it is important to note that God says, “These are My feasts” (Leviticus 23:2), and that Moses referred to them as “the feasts of the Lord” (verse 44).

What we note from these passages is that Pentecost is a feast of God. These festivals do not belong solely to the Jews. They are God’s feasts and are to be observed by His people, no matter what their nationality or ethnic background might be.

What does Pentecost mean in Greek?

Pentecost holds an interesting distinction among God’s commanded holy days. Of all the annual observances given by God to the ancient Israelites, this is the only one that has been commonly known to Christians since the first century by its Greek name—Pentecost, meaning “the fiftieth day” (Thayer’s Greek Definitions).

“The fiftieth day” is related to the name of the festival in the Old Testament—the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:10)—and the way the date of its observance was determined. God’s instructions were to “count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath” and that day was to be proclaimed “a holy convocation” (Leviticus 23:16, 21).

The Feast of Weeks was also called “the Feast of Harvest” in Exodus 23:16, because it was associated with firstfruits—the early part of a harvest and the first harvest of the year in Canaan.

As Numbers 28:26 says, “Also on the day of the firstfruits, when you bring a new grain offering to the Lord at your Feast of Weeks, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work.”

Pentecost: what happened?

Consider the events that led up to the momentous Pentecost of Acts 2.

Three days and three nights after His crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead, and during the next 40 days He appeared multiple times to His disciples (Acts 1:3).

In addition to talking to them about the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ told them to wait in Jerusalem because “you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:4-5).

Just a few days later, as His disciples assembled in Jerusalem to observe Pentecost, Christ’s promise that they would receive “power from on high” came true (Luke 24:49). As the Holy Spirit descended upon His faithful followers, it appeared as tongues of fire, and His disciples began to miraculously speak in foreign languages (Acts 2:3-4).

These awesome events on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 31 launched the New Testament Church. That same day an additional 3,000 people responded to a moving message by the apostle Peter. They repented of their sins, were baptized and then received the Holy Spirit.

From this amazing beginning, the Church of God began to rapidly expand throughout the Roman Empire.

What Pentecost means today

Pentecost is an annual festival commemorating the beginning of the New Testament Church of God. Even more important, it is a reminder for each of us that God’s Holy Spirit is now available to all who repent of their sins, are baptized, and continue to follow and obey Him (Acts 5:32).

As Peter explained almost 2,000 years ago, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

There is still another meaning to Pentecost that is overlooked by many because they don’t understand that God’s plan of salvation for mankind has several stages.

The concept of firstfruits—the first part of a harvest—was an integral part of the Old Testament observance of this festival, and it continues to have meaning for us today. God must first call people before they can repent of their sins and receive the Holy Spirit, which identifies them as Christians who will receive eternal life.

Jesus emphasized this point, saying, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

Those who are called by God during this present age and who respond to God’s call are the “firstfruits” of His plan of salvation for mankind. They have a part in preparing for an even greater harvest of people to follow.
Our merciful God, who wants all to be saved, has planned more than one time or age for humans to be called and have their opportunity for salvation. God determines when each person will be given the opportunity for salvation.

To learn more about this amazing truth, download our free booklet *From Holidays to Holy Days: God’s Plan for You*.

**How is Pentecost calculated?**

Although many religions observe Pentecost, albeit with different names and meanings, they celebrate it on different dates.

- Judaism observes Shavuot on Sivan 6, according to the Hebrew calendar.
- Mainstream Christianity observes Pentecost on the 50th day after Easter, inclusive of both days.
- The Church of God observes this holy day on the 50th day starting with the Sunday during the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Why are there so many variations in calculating this festival?

**How most churches calculate Pentecost**

The reason for mainstream Christianity’s date for Pentecost is pretty obvious to students of history. It’s connected with the change from the biblical Passover to Easter.

The misguided, breakaway version of Christianity, which separated itself from the original Christianity founded by Jesus and His disciples, changed Passover to Easter (the name of a pagan goddess of spring and fertility). At the same time, they also changed its date and meaning.

Although there is no biblical directive to observe Easter, the leaders of this church decided that they would observe it to honor the resurrection of Jesus—rather than observe the biblical Passover to commemorate the death of Christ.

This version of Christianity set the method for calculating Easter so it could not fall on Passover.

Although this may not have been the direct intent of the calculation, other decrees by the Catholic Church clearly show that anti-Semitism was a driving force behind their reasons for abandoning worship on Saturday and the traditional, annual observance of Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (Leviticus 23:5). Their founders despised the Jews and didn’t want their religion to look similar to that of the Jews.

**How most Jews calculate Pentecost (Shavuot)**

In the first century, when Jesus’ followers observed Pentecost and received the Holy Spirit, there is no mention in the Bible of any concern or disagreement over the date. Yet there were multiple Jewish sects—including the Sadducees and Pharisees—who had differing beliefs and practices.

The Sadducees, who were members of the priestly sect, were in charge of the temple and the worship behind their reasons for abandoning worship on Saturday and the traditional, annual observance of Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (Leviticus 23:5). Their founders despised the Jews and didn’t want their religion to look similar to that of the Jews.

**WHAT IS PENTECOST TO THE JEWS?**

In Judaism the festival is called by its Hebrew name, Shavuot. This means weeks or sevens, which alludes to the instruction to count 50 days. This feast occurred during the first harvest of the land, and Jewish tradition says that this day commemorates God giving the ancient Israelites the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai.

Jews often read the book of Ruth at this time of year. Their reasons for doing so “are that the book takes place at the time of the barley harvest, that Ruth’s assumption of Naomi’s religion reflects the Israelites’ acceptance of the Torah at Sinai, and that King David, who is alleged to have died at this time of year according to rabbinic tradition, is mentioned at the end of Ruth” (“Shavuot 101,” myjewishlearning.com).
that occurred there. But, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explains, “The Sadducees and Pharisees were in constant conflict with each other, not only over numerous details of ritual and the Law but most importantly over the content and extent of God’s revelation to the Jewish people” (“Sadducae”).

In addition to their disagreements over whether there could be a resurrection, angels and spirit (Acts 23:8), these competing sects differed in how they understood the instructions for calculating Pentecost found in Leviticus 23.


But after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Pharisaic beliefs became the predominant teaching of Judaism. The way most Jews now calculate Shavuot is to count 50 days from the annual Sabbath of Passover (as the Jews call the first day of Unleavened Bread). This leads to a fixed calendrical date of Sivan 6 each year.

### How the Church of God calculates Pentecost

The Church of God carefully follows the biblical instruction in Leviticus 23:16 to “count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath.”

Since the word *Sabbath* in this verse clearly refers to the weekly Sabbath rather than an annual Sabbath, we understand that the Sabbath that comes before the count to 50 must also be a weekly Sabbath—not an annual Sabbath.

The Church also notes that if God intended the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, as it is known today, to be observed on a fixed date (Sivan 6), He could have inspired that date to be recorded in Scripture. All the other holy days have fixed dates, and Pentecost could have been designated on a fixed date as well—if that were God’s intent.

Instead, the scriptural account emphasizes that Pentecost has to be counted each year. The reason is that the day of the week when the Days of Unleavened Bread begin varies from year to year. By counting 50 days beginning with the Sunday during the Days of Unleavened Bread (as designated by Scripture), we always come to Sunday.

### What does Pentecost mean for you?

Those who celebrate all seven feasts of the Lord and rehearse their meanings each year continually find deeper meaning in them. According to the biblical calculation, this year Pentecost will be May 31, 2020.

What will Pentecost mean for you this year? Study more in our article “The Miracle and Meaning of Pentecost.”

—David Treybig
God calls Christians to follow Christ and be lights to the world. We are to become ambassadors of Christ and His Kingdom. How should we represent God’s Kingdom?

Being “ambassadors of Christ” is a powerful concept. Christ Himself was an ambassador, the perfect example and representative of God’s government (“the true Light,” John 1:9).

In turn, Jesus called on His followers to become lights to the world. How?

Doing good things for others clearly benefits them. But what Jesus said went deeper than that. “Let your light so shine before men,” He said. Why? He continued, “That they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, emphasis added throughout).

God wants people to see His way of life in action, to capture the hope it represents for the Kingdom Jesus will inaugurate. Scripture calls this “the good news,” a phrase often translated as “the gospel.”

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, “He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:1). He tells His followers to continue to proclaim that good news until His second coming (Mark 16:15; Matthew 24:14).

The gospel proclaims a time when all evil will be eradicated. God wants people to see that His way of
Though these Corinthians were baptized members of the Church, at the time of Paul’s writing, they weren’t fully reconciled with God. And they wouldn’t be going forward if they continued to be at variance with Paul.

“Ambassadors for Christ” in this passage implied that it took a mature hand, the dexterity of a spiritual elder, to help the Christians through the relationship minefield into which they had been misdirected by impostor ambassadors.

So, not every believer is an ambassador for Christ in the way that Paul wrote of it in this verse. Not every believer has the gifts, the abilities or the calling to guide others into the kind of reconciling that needed to happen in Corinth.

But aren’t all believers called to represent Christ? Isn’t that essentially what being a “Christian” means—being a follower of Christ? And, in that sense, aren’t all Christians to be envoys of His government? Yes!

Representing the Kingdom of God
The Kingdom of God is a literal kingdom! It will have a King (Jesus Christ), territory (this earth), citizens (human subjects) and laws (based upon the 10 Commandments).

This message is unappreciated by many who think that they understand the Bible, but do not realize that this is the heart of Jesus Christ’s gospel, as we explain in “The Kingdom of God Is Within You: What Did Jesus Mean?”

Here is a brief excerpt:
“Even though the Bible speaks of our ‘citizenship’ as being in heaven after we are baptized (Philippians 3:20), in order to enter the Kingdom, humans must be changed from flesh and blood into spirit, from mortal into immortal, at Jesus’ second coming (1 Corinthians 15:50-53; Hebrews 9:28). When the Kingdom of God comes to earth, it will rule over all the ‘kingdoms of this world’ (Revelation 11:15).”

Christians are to become ambassadors of Christ in the sense of being representatives of that coming Kingdom.

Ambassadors and examples
Paul demonstrated what Jesus counseled about being a “light to the world.”

• He wrote to the Corinthians: “Follow my
example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1, New International Version).

- Paul wrote to believers in Philippi: “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern” (Philippians 3:17).
- He urged the evangelist Timothy to “be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). Logically, this would have been expressed to believers as, “Follow the example Timothy sets in his words, his actions. Grow to love like he does, to serve like he does, to have the conviction that he has.”

Paul gave the evangelist Titus advice similar to that given to Timothy: “Likewise, exhort the young men to be sober-minded, in all things showing yourself to be a pattern of good works [for young men to follow]; in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you” (Titus 2:6-8).

And, if you step back in the context, you will read similar direction for believers who were “older” to set an example for those who were younger (verses 2-3).

**Every believer should become spiritually mature to represent Christ**

Reaching full maturity should be the goal of every believer. The author of Hebrews chided Christians for failing to mature as they should have.

“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” (Hebrews 5:12-14).

What does this tell us? Every believer should come to the point of being able to teach others. But it also acknowledges that these believers had not reached that level of maturity.

The Bible doesn’t support the notion that every believer is automatically an ambassador for Christ in the way that one needs to be. No one is instantly mature, trusted or proven, just by virtue of his initial acceptance of Christ as Savior.

*If* Christians exercise their senses to practice the truths of God in day-to-day life, they will, over time, become spiritually mature. To mature, they have to evaluate life’s choices from the perspective of what God called “good” or “evil” and to conduct themselves accordingly.

They have to choose the good and reject the evil, putting forth the necessary effort to act on the good.

**Christians are to be salt, lights and cities on a hill**

Jesus used three analogies—of salt, light and the prominent visibility of a city on a hill—to illustrate how His followers should strive to represent Him.

Matthew’s Gospel records Jesus’ words: “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13-16).

They may not glorify God immediately—fact, they probably won’t. But they will when their minds are also opened to God’s truth (1 Peter 2:12).

True Christians should become living, breathing representations of the character of God. All Christians should come to represent Jesus Christ’s teachings, His faith, His love, His character, His coming Kingdom.

In this way, they are indeed ambassadors of Christ, the ruler of that Kingdom. This is the calling of all believers.

—Cecil Maranville
How to Help a Suicidal Friend

Years ago, a close friend was extremely depressed and contemplating suicide. An experience we shared during his darkest time taught me a lesson about friendship.
“Y
ou may have saved my life.”
The gravity of his words stunned me. While we were having one of our weekly lunches together, my friend paused, looked me square in the eyes and spoke those words. They were some of the most powerful things anyone had ever said to me.

His statement was made in the context of our discussion about his current well-being. My friend and former coworker was proud to tell me how, for the first time in many years, he felt what it must be like to be “normal.”

He attributed his current state to finally getting his medications right and years of group therapy—which helped him rise from the darkest depths of depression. He had come to a place in life where he finally felt happy.

His positive trajectory had helped him get his diet and health under control and had opened up his mind and heart to pursue the things he’d always wanted to do. However, it was a long road that led him to that state.

When I almost lost my friend
When he said, “You may have saved my life,” he was referring to something that occurred several years ago.

We worked together as partners in a business that had a tough time during the economic downturn of 2008. Most of our bread-and-butter computer service contracts were with manufacturers and retailers that had been hit hard. As a result, so were we.

By that time, I had learned that my friend suffered from depression and was at a very low place in his struggle. From time to time, he would confide in me that he contemplated ending his life to escape the debilitating pain and darkness he felt on a daily basis.

One day, after returning from a short snorkeling vacation, he confessed that he would sit on the beach in the evenings and seriously consider walking out into the waves … and not coming back.

To hear this from my friend was gut-wrenching, and I took him seriously and tried to be there to support him. I had learned long before then that even if it seems as if someone is joking or “just saying it,” when a person expresses a desire to “end it all,” it should be considered a plea for help. But I was relieved that he was still here, alive and telling me about those thoughts.

That temporary relief turned to anguish sometime later when he didn’t show up for work—for two straight days—with no contact or warning. He didn’t answer his phone.

I knew he was close to his sister, and I was able to find a number to call her. But I discovered that she and his other local family members hadn’t heard from him. Frantically, his sister tried to reach him by phone and even contacted his apartment complex to ask them to enter his home and check on him.

I was filled with dread as my worst fears seemed to be coming true.

Later that day, his sister called me to let me know that he had finally returned her call. He was okay physically. Relief, anger, joy and frustration collided within me when he finally called to apologize for what he had put me and his family through.

As I listened and caught my breath through my tears, my own raw emotions eventually spilled out, and I let him know the intense anguish and fear I had felt when I thought that I had lost him. I think he understood, through my anguish and honest emotion, how important his life was to me and all of his loved ones.

Proverbs 27:6 tells us, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” Looking back, that scripture has a deeper meaning to me now.

I don’t think this event alone was the reason my friend told me, “You may have saved my life.” I believe he was referring to our years of friendship throughout his battle with depression. He had trusted me with his struggle long before this event, and he knew I would always listen with full attention, ask direct questions to understand more, and inquire about how he was getting help.

A brother is born for adversity
One of the most essential things you can do if you have a friend who is struggling with these issues is found in Proverbs 17:17: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

In other words, be there. And part of being there is learning as much as you can about the struggle.

There are many resources that can provide valuable knowledge and assistance in dealing with a friend or loved one who may be suicidal. Many of these resources can be found online or through a health care provider.

They can provide invaluable information that can help you identify the potential signs of a suicidal person and offer ways to help them. (See the accompanying sidebars for more information.)

People who are suicidal can appear to push people away or withdraw from those they love. For them, life
Being there during their darkest times can help the most. They need a friend like the one described in Proverbs 18:24: “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Jesus Christ elaborated on what this kind of friend looks like: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13).

There are many ways we can lay down our lives for friends—including giving them our concern, attention and focus during their times of anguish.

Make the effort to be there when they need you. We may not always be able to prevent someone from harming himself or herself, and sometimes people give no indication that they are at the point of suicide.

However, often there is an opening to help. When you have a friend dealing with extreme depression and suicidal thoughts, just remember, this is the time he or she needs you the most.

You may just save your friend’s life.

—Kelly Cunningham

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS OF MAJOR DEPRESSION?

Depression is a major problem in the Western world. Millions of people suffer from depression in its various forms. According to the Harvard Medical School, the most common forms of depression are called major depression and persistent depressive disorder (or dysthymia).

With major (or severe) depression, a person becomes consumed with depressed thoughts and loses interest in all activities that he or she normally would find pleasurable. Those suffering from major depression have overwhelming feelings of worthlessness and often are those at greatest risk for suicidal thoughts.

With persistent depressive disorder, a person experiences depressive thoughts for a period of time (up to two years), but not to the level of those who suffer from major depression. People with this disorder can still function normally, but have a constant feeling of joylessness and hopelessness.

Sometimes it’s clear when someone is suffering from one of the above forms of depression. But sometimes the signs aren’t as obvious. According to the American Psychiatric Association, the following are some signs someone is struggling with depression:

1. Persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness.
2. Irritability and angry outbursts, even over seemingly small issues.
3. Loss of interest in activities and hobbies that would normally be pleasurable.
4. Abnormal sleep patterns (which can range from insomnia to sleeping more than normal).
5. Persistent lack of energy.
6. Abnormal eating habits (ranging from appetite loss to persistent overeating).
7. Troubles with concentrating, thinking, making decisions and remembering things.

If you have a friend or family member who is showing these signs, it is important to maintain regular contact with him or her and to try to better understand what he or she is feeling.

People with depression often feel guilty or ashamed of their feelings, so approaching them with a gentle, nonjudgmental approach is important.

—Erik Jones
Here are six suggestions for how to talk to friends who are potentially suicidal:

1. **Ask.**
   Asking the question, “Are you thinking about suicide?” communicates that you are open to dialogue. Try to be direct, nonjudgmental and supportive. Give them the opportunity to tell you about the pain they are experiencing. You can ask, “How do you hurt?” and “How can I help?” However, it’s essential to never promise to keep it a secret.

2. **Listen.**
   Take them and their answers seriously and do not ignore them, especially if they indicate they are experiencing suicidal thoughts. Listen to their reasons as well as for any potential reasons they want to remain alive—both are important when they are telling you what’s going on. Don’t impose your reasons for them to live, rather, help them focus on their reasons for living.

3. **Keep them safe.**
   Once you’ve opened a dialogue and determined suicide is indeed on their mind, it is important to find out a few things to try to keep them safe. Have they already done something to try to kill themselves before talking with you? Do they know how they would kill themselves? Do they have a plan, timing or access to do what they have planned? Answers to these questions can reveal a lot about the imminence and severity of the danger they are in. Keeping them safe is really about putting time and distance between them and their chosen method of suicide. Help and guidance from organizations like those below can be very helpful.

4. **Be there.**
   Being there for those who have thoughts of suicide can be lifesaving. Limiting their isolation and increasing their connection to others can be a protective factor against suicide. Being physically present, or speaking with them over the phone or keeping in contact through text messaging (if you can’t be with them), can help them not feel alone or as if they’re a burden.

5. **Help them connect.**
   Helping those with thoughts of suicide connect with ongoing support resources can help them establish a safety net for moments they find themselves in crisis. Explore some of these possible supports with them. Have they seen, are they currently seeing or is there an option for them to see a mental health professional? Organizations such as the National Suicide Prevention Hotline have shown that individuals who use these resources are significantly more likely to feel less depressed, less suicidal, less overwhelmed and more hopeful.

6. **Follow up.**
   Make sure to follow up with those experiencing thoughts of suicide after you have helped them with the steps above. Be interested in how they are doing. Give them a call, send a text or leave a message. This contact can continue to increase their feelings of connectedness by showing your ongoing support. Even the simplest form of reaching out can potentially reduce their risk of suicide.

—Kelly Cunningham

**Resources**

**In the U.S.:** National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255), suicidepreventionlifeline.org.
Crisis Text Line, access by texting HOME or TALK to 741741, crisistextline.org.

**In the U.K.:** Samaritans, 116 123.

**In other countries:** suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html.
Differing viewpoints often lead to arguments—but they don’t have to and shouldn’t. The Bible offers advice for how to disagree without being disagreeable.

We’ve all been there: Casual chitchat at a social event morphs into a discussion about whether taxes should be raised on the wealthy. Or why gun control is or isn’t a good thing. Or other hot-button topics come up, like climate change, homeschooling or vaccines.

The person we’re talking with may emphatically state his or her views on the subject. Trouble is, what the person says is the exact opposite of what we’ve been told, understood or experienced.

Different opinions
There’s nothing wrong, by itself, with disagreeing. Everyone has different life experiences, which lead to unique perceptions, opinions and beliefs. We can’t be expected to always see eye to eye with the people we interact with. We can respectfully disagree.

Intellecually, we may know that. But if someone challenges us on something we’re passionate about, or states something as fact that we believe with all our heart to be untrue, it’s hard to not get worked up emotionally.

We might react by dogmatically declaring why we’re right, disparaging the other person’s views or attacking him or her personally—all of which escalate conflict. At this point, we’re not simply disagreeing; we’re also being disagreeable.

Once we’ve let ourselves get into this mind-set, our aim becomes winning a debate. If the other party doesn’t see things our way, we get angry, causing the other person to go on the offensive. It can turn into an ugly dispute with both parties yelling and raising their voices to try to be heard. Each person walks away feeling frustrated and upset.

Avoiding arguments that generate strife
Throughout the Bible, we’re told not to engage in these kinds of disagreements. Paul admonishes us, “Avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife” (2 Timothy 2:23). Verse 24 continues, “A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all.”

Galatians 5:20 lists contentions as one of the negative works of the flesh.
On biblical and doctrinal topics where there is only one right answer, the Bible does not say Christians are supposed to force the truth on others who have not had their eyes opened to this truth.

That being said, there are many opinions where there is room for healthy disagreement. In this situation there’s a respectful exchange of opposing ideas. Both sides of an issue feel heard and valued. Each party gains a better understanding of the issue at hand, and the relationship is preserved.

The Bible tells how to disagree without being disagreeable

The Bible spells out how to have a healthy disagreement—how to disagree without being disagreeable.

If we’re honest, most of us can think of times when we didn’t consider biblical instructions on this topic and instead got pulled into very heated disagreements. In the end, feelings were hurt, relationships were scarred, and nothing was solved.

What a different outcome we could have had, and can have in the future, by following these six biblically based principles:

1. Choose your battles

We live in a “speak your mind” culture. If we overhear others discussing the latest political controversy, we don’t think twice about jumping in and giving our opinion, even if it’s a dissenting view.

If someone says something on Facebook we think is wrong, we believe it’s our right and responsibility to correct the person online.

Surely, there are times when this is appropriate. But very often we should just let it slide.

We must discern whether or not we should “answer a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:4-5; see our online article “Proverbs 26: When Should You Answer a Fool?”).

If someone is spouting off nonsense that could cause serious damage if not addressed, that deserves a response. On the other hand, if the matter isn’t really important or is just a reflection of a different opinion, or if the other person is expressing very strong views and doesn’t seem open to other perspectives, the wisest course may be to keep silent.

Rarely are we going to be able to change others’ opinions by challenging them intellectually; doing so may only start a quarrel.

Furthermore, if we’re continually voicing contrary views, that, too, can irritate others. There’s no reason to contradict people on unimportant things. If we’re going to express dissenting opinions, it should be for things that really do matter.

2. Be gracious

We can be correct about an issue, but if we present our case in a combative manner, we’re still in the wrong. That means no insults, name-calling, ridiculing, raising your voice or shouting. Don’t be condescending, too assertive or tell the other person, “You’re wrong!” These things only bring intensity and hostility into the discussion.

I remember a conversation when the person I was talking to declared, “You’re just being vain if you think that!” When I tried to explain my perspectives, she rolled her eyes and sneered.

Admittedly, I felt offended and shot back with my own less-than-kind words. Soon we were talking over each other and not hearing what the other was saying.

Things wouldn’t have escalated if I would have remembered to respond gently and disagree politely.

We must be kind, courteous and pleasant in our interactions with others (Ephesians 4:1-2, 32), even when they vehemently disagree with us and even when we feel hurt.

Disagreements can’t intensify if the individuals involved are truly gracious. Even if just one person is being courteous, the other will often follow suit.

True, he or she still may not come to agree. But he or she may at least be willing to listen to us and learn why we think the way we do.

3. Listen more, talk less

We should listen more than we talk, and we should be willing to hear another person’s viewpoint. James 1:19 tells us, “Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” Proverbs 1:5 adds, “A wise man will hear and increase learning.”

Often we do just the opposite. Rather than listen, we’re thinking about what we’re going to say next and trying to figure out when we can jump in and make
our point. Or we might monopolize the conversation, frustrating the other person because he or she can't get a word in.

Give the other person time to voice his or her ideas, without interrupting. Really try to understand the other person's standpoint. This says we value his or her perspectives and reduces tension.

If we're unsure what the person is trying to say, we can ask questions for clarification. Sometimes we make assumptions about what others think. We need to make sure we truly disagree with them, before confronting them.

4. Think before you speak
The last part of James 1:19 warns us against being rash. If we strongly disagree with someone and blurt out whatever first comes to mind, we will often rub people the wrong way. Take some time to think through exactly what to say and how to say it.

If we see a social media thread we strongly disagree with, rather than immediately write a response, we should give ourselves enough time to let our emotions calm down. This may help us see that this isn't something worth voicing our opinions on. Or, if we do decide to say something, it may help us see how to share our information in a way that's not offensive. (For more information, see “Before You Post on Social Media.”)

Proverbs 29:11 sums up this principle well: “A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back.”

5. Look for common ground
Disagreements heat up when the opposing sides see no common ground. But if we can agree on something, even a minor point, it will help us see the other person as a friend and not a foe. Usually there's something the other side said, believes or values that we can concur with.

The point to connect on may be that we're on the same team. The apostles practiced this principle. Paul, Peter and Barnabas didn't always see eye to eye about how to do God's work (Galatians 2:11-16; Acts 15:30-41). Yet they still saw each other as working toward the same goal, referring to each other as “brother.”

Remembering our common hopes and dreams can motivate us to treat others with love and respect. Sometimes the information we disagree about comes in the form of unwanted suggestions.

When my sons were young, a neighbor often shared unsolicited advice about how to raise them. I didn’t always agree with her ideas, but I could usually find a hidden nugget of wisdom in what she said. At the very least I could see she liked my kids and meant well. Focusing on that helped keep those exchanges from turning into arguments.

6. Act in humility
The purpose for discussions should be to gain a better understanding of a particular topic, not to prove we're correct or boost our egos (Philippians 2:3).

If we shift from trying to point out something another person might not see or understand to convincing him or her we're right, friction is inevitable (Proverbs 13:10).

We might think we're better informed than the person we disagree with, but the truth is, we may still be able to learn something.

A few years back, my youngest son was taking some advertising classes in college, and we got into discussions about whether particular ads were effective. When we didn't agree, I automatically thought my views should trump his, since I had a degree in advertising and had worked in the field for many years.

But then I stepped back and realized he was right much of the time. He had exposure to some new ideas that weren't addressed back when I was in school.

Others may have some helpful insights, thanks to their unique experiences and backgrounds. We should always approach disagreements with humility, willing to be shown another aspect of the topic we hadn't thought of.

When we encounter differences of opinion, we must make peace a priority. Romans 12:18 says, “As much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”

Granted, there's no guarantee that by following these principles, all of our disagreements will end agreeably. We can't dictate how others act.

However, we can and must strive to learn how to disagree politely and avoid being disagreeable ourselves.

—Becky Sweat
The scribes had foolishly accused Jesus Christ of casting out demons by the power of Satan. Jesus replied that if He were acting on behalf of Satan to cast out Satan’s own evil assistants, then Satan’s kingdom could not stand.

While His immediate response was to refute the accusations against Him, the meaning of His proclamation carries significance beyond that particular episode.

Jesus said that a kingdom (or nation) divided against itself cannot stand, and also that a “house” divided against itself cannot stand.

What is the significance of what Jesus said? What does it mean for our lives in our increasingly polarized nations today?

A “house divided against itself will not stand.” What does this mean for us?

Jesus’ response to a dramatic accusation

All three of the synoptic Gospels describe this event using very similar wording (Matthew 12:22-37; Mark 3:20-30; Luke 11:14-23).

Mark 3:22-26 tells us: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebub,’ and, ‘By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons.’

“So He called them to Himself and said to them in parables: ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end.’
Matthew 12:24-26 has similar language: “Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, ‘This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.’

“But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?’”

Modern examples of a kingdom divided against itself

Jesus completely refuted the accusation against Him.

But how does His statement apply to other situations? Many can bring to mind examples of kingdoms and families divided against themselves. We can think of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Babylon and Egypt. We can think of many modern examples of a nation or a kingdom divided against itself.

Certainly the United States today is a prime example of that division. In the United States there are two primary political parties. They are characterized by such terms as left versus right, conservative versus liberal, Democrat versus Republican. They have had disagreements over Supreme Court nominees, abortion rights, immigration and many other things.

A more recent example is the bitter split over the impeachment of the president. And, of course, the parties are currently engaged in a contentious 2020 presidential election campaign.

Modern news reports on political issues are less likely to use words like division or divided, but everywhere we see the term polarization.

Political polarization

There has always been division and polarization within nations and groups. But it seems that today polarization has become more pronounced and widespread.

Polarization is a word that has many uses. But let’s focus on what is often referred to as political polarization. This usually refers to the divergence of attitudes to the extreme sides of a particular issue, instead of having the majority of people in agreement.

Perhaps a graphical representation might illustrate the concept. The two graphs represent a theoretical poll or a vote on a particular issue; think of the legalization of late-term abortion or of same-sex marriage, for example.

The first graph portrays a completely divided or polarized population; the second graph illustrates a perfectly unified or united population.

Of course, while this graphical portrayal may serve to illustrate the concept, it is completely unrealistic and unachievable in the real world. Actual statistics on any issue will always be fuzzier.

Most of the political polarization issues seem to arise in democratic systems of government where there is a two-party system or where most of the power is collected in two main parties.

History shows one end result of extreme polarization is state collapse, a complete failure of a governmental system or a sovereign state, as in the fall of the Roman Empire.

Polarization is the opposite of unity

One recent example of what comes from lack of unity is what has taken place between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

On Jan. 31, 2020, the United Kingdom officially left the European Union (even though the U.K. will still operate according to EU regulations until the end of the calendar year 2020).
Brexit came after the U.K. spent 47 years as a member of the European Union and after almost four years of acrimonious negotiations between the U.K. and the EU, and among members of the various political parties in the U.K.

Political polarization: a widely publicized phenomenon
A Google search for the phrase political polarization reveals millions of sources of information on the topic. There is, of course, a Wikipedia article on the subject. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has an article titled “How to Understand the Global Spread of Political Polarization.”

The Pew Research Center has published many polls revealing attitudes related to the subject. For example, its poll on “U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided” shows that “deep partisan divisions exist in the news sources Americans trust, distrust and rely on.”

There are even full-length books written on the subject. One notable example is Why We’re Polarized, by Ezra Klein. This book was published in January, and its author has been interviewed extensively on such television networks as MSNBC. Excerpts from the book reveal an interesting perspective:

“The digital revolution offered access to unimaginably vast vistas of information, but, just as important, it offered access to unimaginably more choice. And that explosion of choice widened the interested/uninterested divide. Greater choices let the devotees learn more and the uninterested know less” and has resulted in a “political media system” that “deepens political identity, hardens polarization, and raises the political stakes.”

What does it mean to us today?
But how should we as individual Christians think about all this evidence of division and polarization? Jesus’ statement that a nation divided against itself cannot stand can be viewed along with many prophecies in the Bible that show nations that break God’s laws will bring punishments on themselves.

Even though the United States shows many symptoms of division and sin, many Americans find it hard to believe that a nation so militarily and economically powerful—a nation so greatly blessed—could fall. (Learn more about the source of these national blessings and the responsibilities they bring in our book The United States, Britain and the Commonwealth in Prophecy.)

Though it seems hard to believe, God’s Word must be true even if every man is a liar (Romans 3:4). Didn’t ancient Babylon view itself as impregnable just before it fell to the Medes and Persians virtually overnight? Can a similar fate befall the United States?

God’s Word cautions us to be careful when we think we are strong, lest we fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Did God really mean it when He said our sins would be punished by national captivity as happened to ancient Israel? Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 list blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, warning that God will “break the pride of your power” (Leviticus 26:19), “bring a nation against you” (Deuteronomy 28:49), “scatter you among the nations” (Leviticus 26:33), and “you shall serve your enemies” (Deuteronomy 28:48).

What an emphasis this adds to Christ’s imperative to “watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36)!

(For more details on the downfall of the nations that have enjoyed the blessings of Abraham, as well as the comforting promises of restoration, see our article “What Is Jacob’s Trouble in End-Time Prophecy?”)

The most important division to repair: our separation from God
Perhaps there is little we can do now to change the world’s nations that have largely abandoned any vestige of righteousness. But we can recognize and strive to correct what may be the most important instance of division and polarization: our sins that separate us from God (Isaiah 59:2).

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should strive to ensure that our goals and behavior reflect the truth of God’s Word. We should examine ourselves and seek to draw closer to that truth, knowing that we can rely on God’s plan for righteousness to reign in all the world when Jesus Christ returns and the Kingdom of God is established. (Study more about this in our booklet The Mystery of the Kingdom.)

God speed that day!

—Kenneth D. Herring
When God designed owls, He used some creative solutions to make sure they didn’t all die just by turning their heads.

We humans can turn our heads left or right about 85 degrees. Owls can turn their heads 270 degrees—three-quarters of a full circle. They need twice as many neck bones as we have to do that. But how do they swivel so far without stopping blood flow and giving themselves a stroke?

God prevented that by giving owls special blood vessels that pool blood for their brains and eyes, making air-cushioned channels for those blood vessels and providing other routes for blood to travel.

Speaking of eyes, owl eyes can’t move like ours. They’re large and ideal for night vision, but they are tubular and fixed in place. This gives owls fantastic binocular-like vision to track distant prey.

And their head shape, feather design and asymmetric ear positioning combine to funnel sound into their ears—kind of like cupping your hands behind your ears. This helps owls pinpoint the exact origin of noises around them even in the dark.

All these things combine to make owls skilled nocturnal hunters—and incredible wonders of God’s creation.

Pictured: great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

Photo by James Capo

Text by James Capo and Jeremy Lallier
Is Your Name in the Book of Life?

The Bible has a lot to say about those who won’t be in the Book of Life or the Kingdom of God. Does that include you? And if it does, what can you do about it?

It’s difficult to overemphasize the mercy of God. From the first page of the Bible to the last, the reality of our Creator’s mercy is a thread that weaves itself in and out of parables, historical accounts, psalms of praise, epistles and divine proclamations alike.

God of mercy

That mercy is the only reason you and I can be Christians in progress. We didn’t earn our knowledge of the truth. We weren’t freed from sin’s eternal death penalty by some cosmic fluke or lucky happenstance. We don’t have the opportunity to enter into the Kingdom of God because we are somehow vital and indispensable to the bigger picture.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. … For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9).

In the book of Psalms, the word mercy shows up in about 100 different verses sprinkled throughout 49 different psalms.

• “The mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:17).
• “For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You” (Psalm 86:5).
• “Your mercy reaches unto the heavens, and Your truth unto the clouds” (Psalm 57:10).

Jesus’ teaching on God’s mercy

In His earthly ministry Jesus emphasized this aspect of God’s character in the parable of the prodigal son, who returned to his father after years of poor decisions and found forgiveness instead of rejection (Luke 15:11-32); in the parable of the lost sheep, where the shepherd goes to the mountains to rescue one lone, straying sheep and rejoices in the rescue (Matthew 18:11-14); in His own lament as He looked at the nation of Israel and cried out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

There’s no arguing that we serve a merciful, patient God, who is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

What happens to those whose names are not in the Book of Life?

And yet ...

And yet the Bible is clear that some people will perish. The apostle John, who watched the final stages of God’s plan play out in a vision, wrote, “And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).
There’s a limit to the patience. God’s Word tells us two important truths about this harsh-sounding verse in Revelation.

1. The vast majority of all who have ever lived have never truly understood God, His way of life, or their own potential to become sons or daughters of God. Most people have been (and continue to be) blinded by a spiritual veil that God has not yet removed from their eyes (Isaiah 25:7; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18).

2. That veil will be removed. One day, all people, even those who died millennia before us, will have the opportunity to learn and to live God’s way of life—to repent of their sins and experience the mercy of God in their own lives.

(For more insight into this phase of God’s plan, read “The Last Great Day: The Final Harvest.”)

The lake of fire comes after all this.

In the Kingdom: no more pain requires no more sin

God wants everyone to come to repentance, but He also knows that not everyone will come to repentance. At the end of it all, with the veil removed and eyes wide open to the truth, there will still be those who refuse to leave sin behind—who see God’s perfect way of life and say, “No, I want to do things my way.”

Sin is sin because it produces pain and suffering. In some form or fashion, sin always hurts.

God refuses to allow that into His Kingdom. In the Kingdom, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

That’s not possible until sin is removed from the picture. While sin is present, sorrow, crying and pain are unavoidable. And so, in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, God leaves us with a promise and a warning:

“Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie” (Revelation 22:14-15).

Inside the Kingdom are those who have repented and dedicated themselves to living within the boundaries of God’s law. On the outskirts of the Kingdom are those who cling to sin. They—and their sinful lifestyles—will be permanently destroyed in the lake of fire, blotted out of existence for eternity.

Whose names are in the Book of Life?

It’s hard, as a Christian, to not entertain a fear about the Book of Life:

What if my name isn’t in it?

What if I’ve messed up too much—what if I haven’t conquered enough of my sins—and when the day comes, I find myself standing on the outskirts of the Kingdom instead of inside it?

If you find yourself wondering that, you’re not the first, and you won’t be the last. It’s something most of us have worried about at some point in our lives.

Jesus told a lot of parables that ended with “weeping and gnashing of teeth” for characters who shirked their responsibilities (see Matthew 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). It’s easy to wonder if we’ve
somehow slipped into those roles without realizing it—to wonder if we’re straying toward the outskirts of the Kingdom ourselves.

But take a closer look at those parables. What characters get punished? The “sons of the wicked one” (Matthew 13:38), a disrespectful wedding guest, an evil servant and a lazy servant. These aren’t roles we just “slip into”—they’re decisions. These parables aren’t about people who tried and failed; they’re about people who stopped trying altogether—and who, in many cases, are actively opposing God.

Is that you? I doubt it. I suspect you care very much about being aligned with God, or else you wouldn’t be reading this column. You are a Christian in progress, which means you probably fail more often than you like (in which case, welcome to the club), but that failure doesn’t mean you aren’t trying.

And the trying is what matters. Are you repenting? Are you putting in the effort? Are you pushing yourself to be better? Do you have spiritual goals you’re working toward?

Here’s the thing about the Book of Life: The people whose names aren’t in it are those who don’t want to be in it. They’re people who aren’t willing to repent and change, even when brought face-to-face with the truth of God. They’ll refuse to make the effort. Through their actions, they will tell God, “I don’t want what You’re offering. Holding onto my sin is more important than living Your way, and I refuse to let go.”

If that is and remains our attitude, we can be certain there will be no place for us in the Book of Life or the Kingdom of God. But if that’s not our attitude—if we’re just flawed people who make mistakes and struggle with our own human nature while trying to seek and obey God—well, then, we don’t need to be afraid.

**God wants to write your name in the Book of Life**

Our place in the Book of Life and the Kingdom of God is reserved for us through the mercy of God: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

None of us are strong enough to pry open the doors to the Kingdom—but the undeserved grace God gives us flings those doors wide open. It is by God’s grace that we can be made clean again when we stumble. It is by God’s grace that we are justified in His eyes. It is by God’s grace that we come from the outskirts of the Kingdom and into the family of God.

Jesus told His disciples, “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

It’s difficult to overemphasize the mercy of God. From the first page of the Bible to the last, it’s there, reminding us that, if we’re willing to follow Him, nothing in the world can stop us from stepping through the gates of the Kingdom of God.

—Jeremy Lallier

Have a topic you want to see tackled in this column? Send your suggestions anonymously through lifehopeandtruth.com/ideas.
Surprising Truths From the Olivet Prophecy: 
This Gospel Will Be Preached

Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24:14 that His Church will be preaching the gospel to the whole world in the end times. Is this prophecy being fulfilled today?

In the previous article in this series we explored Jesus’ prophecy that God’s people will be hated by all nations in the end time and will face violent persecution.

But after Jesus talked about these dangers, He made a much more optimistic prophecy about His people. Despite the fact that they will be an unpopular minority, He said they will be doing something:

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

Like many other prophecies in the Olivet Discourse, this isn’t about a specific future event. This is about an ongoing effort that has been happening for a long time.

In a sense, it is just as much a mission statement as it is a prophecy. Jesus was telling His people what they are commissioned to do by stating it as a prophecy in absolute terms.

He said it will happen.

Jesus Christ wanted this prophecy to drive and motivate a relatively small and weak group of people to do something big.

Let’s explore this prophecy section by section to see what truths we can learn from it.

“And this gospel of the kingdom”

The first five words of Matthew 24:14 identify the gospel Jesus said His Church will be proclaiming—the gospel of the Kingdom.

Mark records that this was the same message Jesus was preaching from the very beginning of His public ministry: “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15, emphasis added throughout).

Matthew’s account tells us the same thing—Jesus preached the gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35).

This is significant, because it reveals an important marker to identify the true Church of God in modern times. There are many religious organizations that talk about Jesus and claim to represent Him—but very few of them say anything about “the gospel of the Kingdom” in their mission statements or...
make the “Kingdom of God” a central theme in their preaching. Many preach a lot about Jesus today, but say little (or nothing) about His actual message.

His message was centered on the Kingdom of God. That message encompasses many truths that all revolve around the central truth that God’s ultimate purpose is to establish His government on this earth—and that human beings can be a part of that government by entering His family.

The true gospel of the Kingdom, when fully understood, answers the major questions of human life.

“Will be preached”
The Greek word translated “will be preached” is the verb kerysso. According to Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, the word means “to be a herald; ... to proclaim after the manner of a herald; always with a suggestion of formality, gravity, and an authority which must be listened to and obeyed.”

Preaching usually entails proclaiming a message in a way that appeals to the heart and urges action (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 24:47; Acts 8:12).

When we compare this to Jesus’ parting instructions to His disciples in Mathew 28, we see that Jesus used a different word there to describe how His Church will spread His message. In Matthew 28:19, He stated, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations” (King James Version).

The verb translated “teach” is matheteuo, which is an academic term meaning “to make a disciple [student]; to teach, instruct.” This describes the systematic instruction of the truths of the Bible in a logical manner that helps people clearly comprehend the message and how it applies to them.

When the gospel is proclaimed, it usually includes a mixture of both preaching and teaching. In Acts 28:31, we read about the apostle Paul “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.” (For more examples of this in action, read Acts 5:42; 15:35; Colossians 1:28; 1 Timothy 2:7).

“In all the world”
Jesus was clear that His Church will preach (and teach) the gospel message on a global scale. This effort began shortly after the Church received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowered them to “be witnesses to Me [Christ] in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Paul also wrote that the gospel must be spread “to the ends of the world” (Romans 10:18).

Even though there will be a time when the organized effort to preach the true gospel will be forcibly halted, the gospel will still be preached.”

The apostles in the first century made an effort to spread the gospel message as far and wide as they could, but it was not possible for them to truly reach all “the ends of the world.” They preached to as much of the known world as they could travel to on foot, but it wasn’t until the modern age that this verse could be accomplished fully.

In the 20th century, the Church of God began taking advantage of new mass communication technology, such as radio and television, to spread the gospel farther and wider than ever before. Today, the Internet provides an even more powerful tool for the Church to reach all nations.

A few words later, Jesus reiterated this point by saying the gospel will go to “all nations.”

The Church isn’t commissioned to just do a local community work. It will (and must) work hard to spread the true gospel “to all nations.” Modern circumstances make it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to reach some nations due to the ideologies and restrictions of certain governments. But the Church of God continues to do all it can to make the gospel message accessible to “all nations” around the globe.

“As a witness”
Jesus said the gospel will be preached “as a witness.”

The Greek word used for witness is martyrion. From this Greek word we get the word martyr (to die for something), but the original Greek word simply means
a testimony. Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates defines it as “the declaration which confirms or makes known anything” (The Complete Word Study New Testament, 1992, p. 934).

In the New Testament, the word was used to describe the apostles giving a testimony—an accurate eyewitness account of the facts—about events surrounding the life and messiahship of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:21-22; 4:33; 5:32).

Since the death of the apostle John, the last of the original apostles, it’s not possible for anyone to give an eyewitness testimony of biblical events in the same way. But Jesus’ prophecy dogmatically states that a witness will continue to be given.

_Discern_ magazine writers and staff work very hard to provide our readers an accurate and clear witness of the true gospel—and the many truths connected to it. Even though most will reject the testimony given by God’s people, they still must proclaim it, even if it serves only as a warning for some (Ezekiel 33).

“**And then the end will come**”

Jesus finished Matthew 24:14 by revealing that the work of preaching the gospel to the world will conclude at “the end.” In this context, “the end” refers to Christ’s second coming—which marks the end of “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4).

We should note that there are other prophecies that show that how the gospel is preached will change at the very end of this age. There is a time coming when “the power of the holy people”—the Church—will be “completely shattered” (Daniel 12:7), resulting in “a famine ... of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11).

The Bible indicates persecution will be the cause of this. Some of God’s people will be martyred, and others will be hidden and protected throughout the Great Tribulation (Revelation 12:14-17).

Even though there will be a time when the organized effort to preach the true gospel will be forcibly halted, the gospel will still be preached. The book of Revelation shows God will use two special men (“my two witnesses,” Revelation 11:3) to preach the gospel during the 3½ years of the Great Tribulation.

To learn more about these men, read our article “Two Witnesses.”

**The work of God today**

The prophecy recorded in Matthew 24:14 isn’t something far off in the future or something that has already been done and finished. It is actually, in a sense, being fulfilled at this moment as you read this.

The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, which publishes _Discern_ magazine and sponsors LifeHopeandTruth.com, is driven by this prophetic commission. We are small, but we are determined to preach the true gospel of the Kingdom to all nations as a witness before the end comes.

—Erik Jones
Yamoussoukro was a dusty African village of 500 inhabitants until the president of Côte d’Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, decided to make his birthplace the nation’s capital. Massive structures were built: the House of Deputies, the Presidential Palace, a polytechnic university, a towering Hôtel du Président.

**Basilica of Our Lady of Peace**

But the most striking is the city’s Catholic basilica, built at a cost of at least $300 million, drawn from the president’s personal fortune. It was built to emulate (and rival) St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

As one approaches Yamoussoukro from any direction, the gigantic dome rises starkly from the savannah. There is space for 18,000 inside. The “basilica in the bush” was built in part to memorialize the builder; in one stained glass window, the president stands next to Jesus.

Presented to the Catholic Church as a personal gift, the church was consecrated by Pope John Paul II on Sept. 10, 1990, and dubbed the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace.

**Sinking into civil war**

Three years later, Houphouët-Boigny died after a presidency of 33 years. The country suddenly had to face contested democratic elections.

The wealth generated by the stability and economic policies of the longtime president had drawn many immigrants, predominantly Muslim, from neighboring countries into the previously Christian-dominant nation. By the early 2000s the immigrants were more numerous than the natives.

Tensions rose over who should be considered a citizen, who could run for office and who could vote.

In 2002 a civil war began. A decade after the dedication of Our Lady of Peace, the country sank into a bloody war.

During a ceasefire, I crossed several times from government-controlled territory to rebel territory to visit people interested in the Bible. Weapons were everywhere in evidence. Cities had been picked clean by looters; fear was evident on many faces.

The war raged, hot and cold, until 2011, when the “New Forces” from the north, supported by the international community, finally conquered the south. Côte d’Ivoire, which had been an example of economic success in the region, was a shell of its former self. Reconstruction efforts are ongoing, and there is now new hope for the future of this dynamic nation, but scars remain.

**The way of peace**

Each time I drive past Our Lady of Peace, I think of a passage from Isaiah: “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God. …

“The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace” (Isaiah 59:1-2, 8).

That passage sums up much of human history. We long for peace, but don’t know how to achieve it, and we aren’t willing to give what is necessary to have and maintain it. As long as man pursues whatever seems right to him, he shall not know peace.

But there is another prophecy, about Jesus Christ, that gives hope.

He would come “to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79).

There is a way of peace, though humanity can’t find it by itself. The Bible promises that Jesus Christ, soon to rule as King of Kings, will finally install it. Gone will be the contradiction between huge buildings dedicated to peace witnessing tragic bloodshed. We shall all soon be guided into the way of peace.

—Joel Meeker
@JoelMeeker
Marriage today is undergoing startling revisions.

Marriage has been a long-cherished building block of society. But changing beliefs about sexuality have led to redefinitions of marriage and to unstable relationships unmoored from the Bible. Have we humans lost sight of the ancient wisdom that leads to happiness and stability in our relationships?

Learn more about this blessing from God.

Download your free copy of God’s Design for Marriage from the Learning Center on LifeHopeandTruth.com