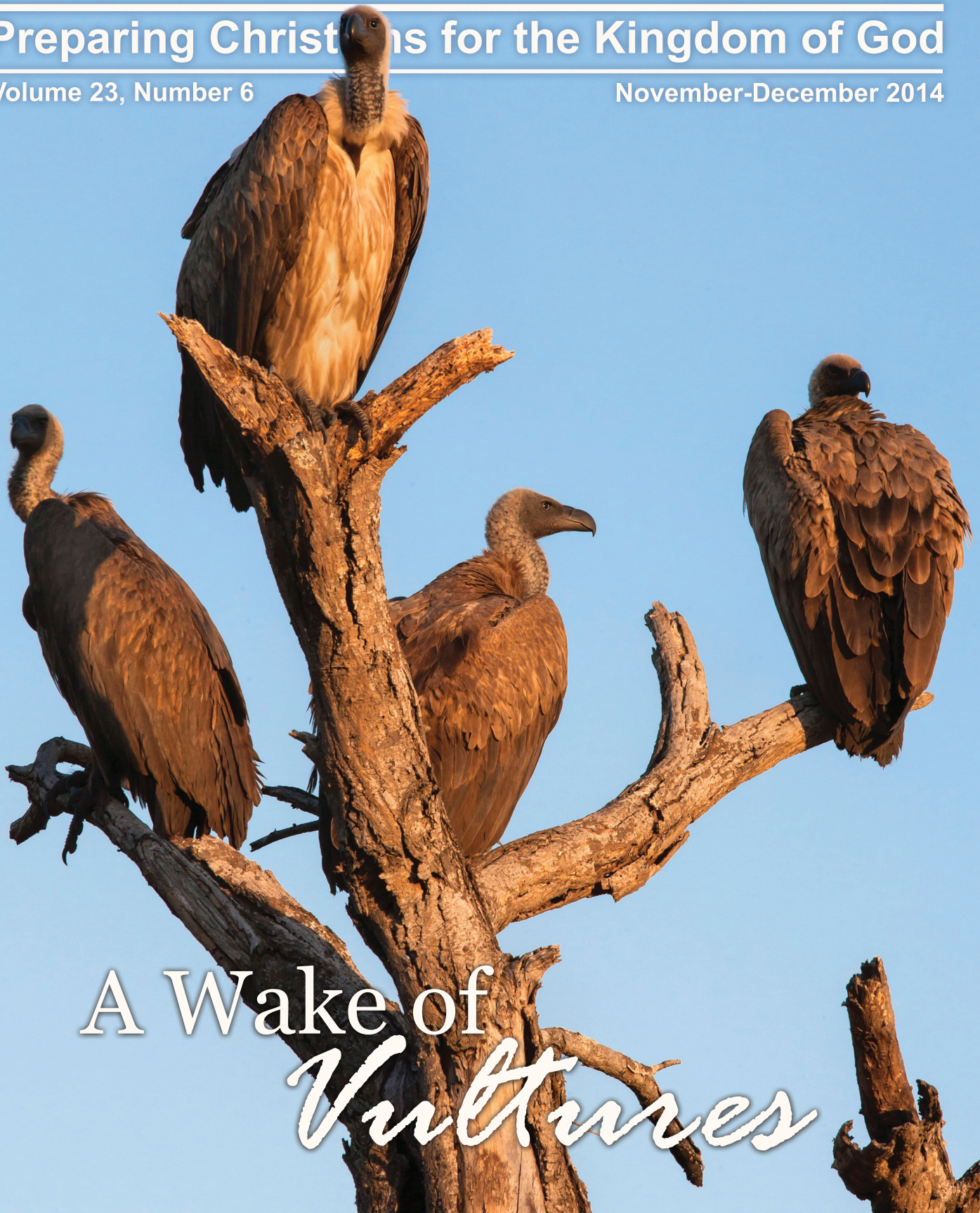


Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Vultures

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In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus provides clues to forecast His return in power and glory to this earth. One of those clues is His enigmatic statement about eagles gathering together where the carcass is. Carrion fowl like eagles and vultures indeed gather where corpses are plentiful, and that is where we must start in understanding what our Savior meant.

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Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

Part Ten: Paradox

A major lesson we have learned from this study into Ecclesiastes is that the wisdom Solomon is promoting, especially in the last few chapters, is indeed sagacity, but a narrow, intensely practical, spiritual sagacity. We have a tendency to think of wisdom as a quality possessed by those of higher educational levels, that is, it belongs to people who have achieved multiple university degrees, written some books, and sport a string of distinguishing letters after their names.

That distinction may suggest itself, but Solomon has something else in mind. Though such people may have rightly earned respect from their fellows, Solomon is concerned about day-to-day living regardless of who one is or what his station in life is. This implies that a measure of biblical wisdom is achievable by anybody whom God calls. Why? The source of this wisdom is God, who gives it as a gift to those who have a relationship with Him. Here we find the most useful applications of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Though helpful to anyone, it is primarily intended for those already in a relationship with God.

The term *sagacity*, which entered English from Latin through French, suggests “quickness of perception,” “soundness in judgment,” and “far-

sightedness.” It pictures a mind that can cut through a situation’s unimportant fluff or misdirecting false flags to grasp the essentials of a problem’s solution. This is important for a Christian because Satan has filled the world with his clever deceptions.

A Christian must understand that the wise solution in life is always to submit humbly to God in faith. We are to do this despite the twisted reasoning the Devil can inject into our minds from a multitude of experiences in this Satan-devised, worldly system.

As we have seen in the last few chapters, Solomon gives us real-life examples of circumstances that arise in the world that present us with sometimes-difficult choices. To our carnality, the foolish choice may often appear more attractive on the surface, but Solomon has been showing us in bold strokes what godly wisdom is and is not. He always makes clear what is and is not wise, and he does this most clearly in those chapters in which he makes direct comparisons: “This is better than that.” However, what may not appear at first glance is *why* this is better than that. Godly wisdom does not always initially appear to be the wiser, practical way, but it is always wiser despite common human opinion.

Ecclesiastes 7 may be the book’s most contro-

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versial chapter because Solomon makes several declarations that run counter to common opinion. For example, he says that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth (verse 1). He also claims it is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting (verse 2), and the end of a thing is better than its beginning (verse 8). He raises an issue that seems opposite of what should be, reporting that he has seen the righteous die young and the evil prosper and live to old age (verse 15).

He also warns us of being overly righteous (verse 16), and conversely, not being overly wicked (verse 17)! Is he saying God is all right with us being a "little" wicked?

There are logical, true, and godly answers to all these seeming mysteries, but we may have to think deeply, do some research, and be willing to put aside a previously held opinion. In a previous article, we looked into the first three of these five comparisons. In this one, we will begin to study into one that contains an interesting paradox.

A Difficult Paradox Appears

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 7:13-22:

Consider the work of God: for who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider; surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find nothing that will happen after him.

I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness. Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise: Why should you destroy yourself? Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other; for he who fears God will escape from them all. Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city. For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.

The situation stated in verse 15 is a paradox, an irregularity from the way one would expect: "There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness." A paradox is an inconsistency in circumstance, statement, activity, or conduct contrary to what a person would consider normal. Here, the paradox is found within a relationship with God. The sinner prospers, but the righteous suffers all kinds of difficulty in life. Is it not more natural to think that the sinner would have difficulty and the righteous, a prosperous, smooth-running life?

A paradox, in turn, creates a conundrum, that is, a

riddle or puzzle. A righteous individual may ask, "Why should such a situation exist?" "Where are the blessings God has promised?" "Where is God in this picture?" "Has God not promised prosperity and long life if we obey Him?" Yes, He has.

Solomon's paradox could set up a situation that makes the carnal person assume that doing evil, because it can be profitable, is the better way. This especially seems so when the evil person lives to old age in relative peace, is honored in the world, and has more-than-enough wealth. In contrast, it is not rare for a righteous person to die early, perhaps following a time of difficult persecution.

This passage causes preachers and other researchers to pace in their studies, wringing their hands. What does it mean? How does one preach it? To the preacher, the temptation becomes great either to skip over it or just barely touch on it to avoid confusion or controversy.

Perhaps a few alternate translations of verse 18 will help explain some of the difficulty confronting those looking for deeper understanding:

- The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): "It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God *shall succeed with both*." (Emphasis ours throughout.)
- Today's New International Version: "Whoever fears God *will avoid all extremes*." But it adds a footnote: "*or will follow them both*."
- The New American Standard Bible: "For the one who fears God *comes forth with both of them*."

It is unclear to what "the one" and "the other" in any translation refer. Is it the "righteous" of verse 16 and the "wicked" of verse 17? Does this mean a person is to follow both righteousness and wickedness? What is he to do when such substantial disagreement exists? Clearly, whether the reader is carnal or converted, this section raises questions. Can there be profit in being righteous if a paradox of this nature dominates the relationship with God?

Does God Promise Prosperity?

Regarding prosperity, a few commentators of prominence claim that God has not given promises of prosperity under the New Covenant, a claim that cannot be correct. Why? Because God's promises about prosperity abide forever no matter where they appear in the Bible. God Himself lives forever, and it is impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2). Both Old and New Testaments are part of God's Word. Thus, if a promise is made in the Old Testament, unless God directly cancels it elsewhere in His Word, it remains valid for us.

The term "prosperity" is not only relative, but it also comes in several varieties. God's promises in this case are merely a matter of emphasis. Economic prosperity is

simply not stressed under the New Covenant as it is under the Old, but that does not nullify God's faithfulness. God may prosper a person with good health despite not prospering him economically. To be given good health is a priceless blessing, qualifying as prosperity.

Commentators expound these verses in two different but related ways. Though the first is a possibility—and most certainly not false—it is nonetheless the weaker explanation, missing a rich trove of understanding that lies beyond the mere surface of the words.

This first way involves misjudging both God and the circumstance, and it generally results in expounding on what we might consider “normal” self-righteousness. As we are learning from Ecclesiastes, God is sovereign and rules His creation all the time. So thorough is His care of His creation that His eye is even on sparrows (Matthew 10:29). Therefore, God is fully aware of any circumstance like that described in verse 15. In fact, He may have directly created it and is using it for His purposes.

The challenge for us is, then, is whether we find fault with Him in allowing or arranging this sort of circumstance. Do we even think that God overlooks what any of His children might be going through? It is likely that He is directly involved, having caused the circumstance.

Could we be calling God into account, deciding—without knowing all the facts—that what He is overseeing is unfair? Understand, however, that even though He may or may not be directly involved in causing such a circumstance, He is *not* indifferent to human conduct and attitudes whenever or wherever they are. Our judgment must begin with knowing that His governance contains no complacency at any time. Though the righteous may die young, who knows God's entire judgment that lies beyond the grave for either the righteous or the wicked?

In addition, we ought to be wise enough to understand that in this world prosperity is frequently associated with some level of evil. God Himself says that He sometimes sets the basest of men on thrones of great power, but He does not mean He favors them in terms of economic prosperity. We should understand those persons are in that position for some good reason, and God is fully aware. The wise person grasps and accepts that God is never out of the picture. He rules!

There is therefore a primary lesson about judgment here: Things are not always as they might appear to our narrow perspective. This verse teaches us to be cautious when making judgments about a person's spiritual standing before God and his morality as we might perceive them in his day-to-day surroundings. This supplies clear insight into why Jesus cautions us about judging.

The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man contains a clear biblical example of the pitfalls contained in making these kinds of judgments. The rich man was well off and could easily have been judged as favored by God. But which man was the one truly favored by Him? It was Lazarus, the beggar, who was the better spiritually.

A major lesson to draw from this is that we should not allow ourselves to jump to self-righteous conclusions

about people and to misjudgments about God's involvement. In either case, we are fully capable of raising ourselves spiritually above them. Thus, learning to be cautious about accusations that may arise within us is an overall lesson contained in these verses.

Dealing with Spiritual Irregularities

There is considerably more that, if we are not careful, could prove to be spiritually damaging to a converted person. However, to realize the danger and consider this fully, we must add more of the context. We need to realize that, if we do not understand a paradoxical situation in which we are involved and then handle it improperly, the quality of our relationship with God—and therefore the quality of our lives—may suffer. Such a circumstance is much more difficult to discern if one is personally involved.

The danger does not always have to be one involving a paradox. It can be any exceptionally difficult, personal trial, one that never seems to end. When involved in such a trial, we are not merely observing it but are deeply enmeshed in it.

Despite any seeming irregularities in the situation, we can be certain that the great purposes of God are being accomplished. But more direct involvement makes our choices and judgment more difficult and damaging because of our emotional ties to both God and the paradox. Therefore, because his faith is in God, the righteous will wisely and humbly accept that the irregularities will pass, and all the vanities of this world will also pass with them. The wise will patiently endure the irregularities of this world as a momentary glitch in comparison to eternity. He can do this if he fully understands some important factors a person might fear.

Thus, wisdom says, “This is a situation I cannot truly change. I will not let this seeming injustice dominate my life because there is more going on here than meets my eye.” He will ask himself, “Is there anything I can do to help my judgment so this doesn't destroy my attitude and with it my faith and fear of God?”

There is, so we will look further! But doing this is sometimes not all that easy.

A Helpful Subtheme

We can make clearer sense of this passage if we fit it into a sub-theme present in much of the book. Solomon states at its beginning, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Reflect that at the opening of chapter 7, he presents several unusual and mystifying statements about some of life's experiences. He writes that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth and that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.

These statements are true within Solomon's theme, but they remain unusual ones, and answers are not immediately available. What he says in verse 15 and in his ensuing explanation are a parallel situation for which no easy answer exists. It, too, may be simply so much vanity. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon is explaining matters that we vaguely grasp but need support to understand more completely.

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We must come to grips with the fact that ultimately, God is the Author of Ecclesiastes, and He intends it should be understood this way. Supported by our faith in God, we must deal with our lack of complete knowledge and accept it. Some truths God intends us to grasp we must dig out, requiring hard intellectual labor of us. He allows this sub-theme of not fully knowing what is going on in our lives to exist because it helps to create tests to fulfill His purpose, that we live by faith, trusting Him (Hebrews 10:38).

Ecclesiastes 3:10-11 confirms this sub-theme:

I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

Solomon repeats a form of it in Ecclesiastes 7:23-25, 29:

All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise." But it was far from me. As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep, who can find it out? I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things, to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness. Truly, this only I have found; that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

He is still searching for reasons for these confounding circumstances, but he admits a dissatisfying failure. In Ecclesiastes 8:16-18, we can clearly see that he still has no personally satisfying answer to his search:

When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.

In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, he concludes the book:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.

Solomon admits to finding no fully satisfying answer to every paradox, conundrum, or irregularity in life of even the faithful person in his relationship with God. The conclusion? By faith and without disrupting our obedience to God, we must accept and live with some events of life. The wise know that God will work things out.

Some Understanding Is Available

The more meaningful answers are contained in other parts of the Bible. Some answers, though, are nearby and can provide understanding. Ecclesiastes 7:16-22 can help to solve the riddle of verse 15. To begin with, "Do not be overly righteousness" does not warn against aiming for excellence in obedience to God. Rather, it is a further caution not to find fault with God for allowing situations like those in verse 15 to exist, for such circumstances hold vital teaching for those directly involved.

Thus, this passage is first an appeal for humility, a caution against arrogant self-righteousness that guides a person to assert that he "knows it all," that he fully grasps what is going on, and that his judgment is correct. Thus, the wisdom Solomon teaches here is that the goodness of the righteous must be accompanied by humility. Without the presence of humility, a person's goodness and righteousness run the risk of producing intellectual and moral pride. This can be learned from the bad experiences of others whose examples are given in Scripture.

The Pharisees became involved in such moral pride hundreds of years later. Jesus charged them with hypocrisy. In their self-righteousness, they were calling God into account because they believed His law was not enough. The Pharisees added their self-righteousness to God's written law by means of the spoken or oral law, a set of rules framed by the minds of men through the centuries. What a lack of humility! Their trashing of the written law was not wisdom, as Mark 7:6-9 shows.

Blinded by their proud self-righteousness, they could not see that, in their blind attempts to make up for what they perceived as God's deficiencies and the people's failures, they were adding despair to people's lives. Their judgment severely lacked a proper sense of proportion about what God requires. An interesting sidelight is that the Bible shows that most Pharisees appear to have been well off. According to Jesus' judgment, they were far from righteous, so they actually fit the description of prosperous evil people given in Ecclesiastes 7:15.

But what the Pharisees were involved in is not the real lesson for a converted person, as the Pharisees were unconverted.

An Example of One Deeply Involved

Psalms 73:1-17 vividly describes the emotional and spiritual involvement of a person caught in the web of a situation like the one Solomon cautions us about. This psalm depicts a righteous man for a time severely misjudging the reality of his situation until God reveals the truth. Any of us could be guilty of the same. The wicked appear to prosper only if we, in our judgment, consider only what appears on the surface:

(continued on page 10)

The Lunar Sabbath or the Seventh-Day Sabbath: Which?

“Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. . . .”

—Genesis 2:3

For millennia, most of the world has been using a week of seven days. These seven days continuously repeat in their accustomed order week after week after week. The first day of the week invariably follows the seventh day of the previous week with enduring regularity. That is how it has always been.

Some people who keep the Sabbath are attempting to change that, believing that we have been wrong all along on how to determine the weekly Sabbath. They call this Sabbath the “lunar Sabbath,” so designated based on its relationship to the new moon, which is the marker for the start of Hebrew months. In their conception, our lunar Sabbaths occur during each Hebrew month, incrementally at intervals of seven days from the new moon. Hence, lunar Sabbaths fall on the 8th, 15th, 22nd and 29th days of each Hebrew month. (Instead, some lunar Sabbatarians observe the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th days of each Hebrew month.)

The lunar month, designated in the Hebrew calendar from new moon to new moon, is 29.5 days long. Since a calendar cannot divide days in half, in practice, some Hebrew months last 29 days, others last 30 days. (Lunar Sabbatarians express divided convictions concerning the way the “extra” days are handled. Not all of them treat them in the same way.)

These extra day(s) in the lunar month mean that the lunar Sabbath falls on a *different* day of the week from lunar month to lunar month. The lunar Sabbath will fall on the same day of the week only four consecutive times before the end of the lunar month arrives and the lunar Sabbath is “reset” based on the next new moon.

For example, it may fall on a Thursday in one Hebrew month, but on a Sunday in another lunar month, since the lunar Sabbath is reset after the passage of 29 or 30 days, that is, reset with the coming of another new moon. (The “mathematical” way of looking at this is that seven, the number of days in a week, does not divide evenly into either 29 or 30.)

ready answer *The Lunar Sabbath or the Seventh-Day Sabbath: Which?*

How Does the Lunar Sabbath Differ from the Seventh-Day Sabbath?

The weekly Sabbath observed by the Jews and by the churches of God is called the “seventh-day Sabbath.” It is so named because it is the seventh day of a recurring seven-day cycle that came into existence at the end of Creation Week, when God pronounced the seventh day as holy (Genesis 2:3). He taught the seventh-day Sabbath to the children of Israel just after they left Egypt by controlling the way manna fell during the week, as related in Exodus 16. It fell every day except on the seventh-day Sabbath. The Sabbath became enshrined in the Hebrew calendar. The Jews have been observing that recurring seventh day ever since that time.

The primary difference between the seventh-day Sabbath and the lunar Sabbath is this: *The seventh-day Sabbath does not “reset” with the coming of each lunar month.* The lunar month is irrelevant to determining the arrival of the seventh-day Sabbath, which is based simply on a recurring seven-day cycle. Hence, the seventh-day Sabbath always falls on the same day of the seven-day week. It falls on a day the Jews call Sabbath, which the Romans named Saturday.

Is There Scriptural Basis for the Lunar Sabbath?

Lunar Sabbatarians defend their notion of pegging the weekly Sabbath on the lunar month by citing primarily two scriptures. One is Genesis 1:14 (*Holman Christian Standard Bible* [HCSB]): “Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will serve as signs for festivals and for days and years.’”

The Hebrew word translated as “festivals” is *moedim*, a word that is key to lunar Sabbatarians’ arguments. *Moedim*, a plural noun (#4150 in *Strong’s Hebrew Concordance*) occurs for the first time in this passage. Translators often render it as “seasons” or “times.” Properly, it denotes “appointed seasons” or “appointed times,” referring to the festivals of God, His feast days. Today, we generally call these festivals by the term “holy days.” Lunar Sabbatarians, looking at Genesis 1:14, correctly conclude that the sun—and particularly the moon—play a key role in establishing the seasons, and most specifically, the appointed feast days, the holy days of God.

The biblical chapter that summarizes these festival days, these *moedim*, is Leviticus 23. This is the second passage on which lunar Sabbatarians focus. Most specifically, they cite Leviticus 23:1-4. (Note: *Moedim* is translated as “appointed times” in verses 2 and 4.)

The LORD spoke to Moses: “Speak to the Israelites and tell them: These are My *appointed times*, the

times of the LORD that you will proclaim as sacred assemblies. Work may be done for six days, but on the seventh day there must be a Sabbath of complete rest, a sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; it is a Sabbath to the LORD wherever you live. These are the LORD’s *appointed times*, the sacred assemblies you are to proclaim at their *appointed times*.” (HCSB) (emphasis ours)

The remainder of Leviticus 23 discusses the *moedim*, the holy days, in their sequence through the year.

Here is the thrust of the lunar Sabbatarians’ arguments. They note that the weekly Sabbath, discussed in Leviticus 23:3, appears in the midst of the discussion of the *moedim*, the appointed times, mentioned in verses 2 and 4. They submit that the inclusion of the weekly Sabbath in verse 3, in the context of the *moedim*, the focus of the chapter, proves that the weekly Sabbath is connected to the *moedim*. Hence, they conclude that the moon, as mentioned in Genesis 1:14, is the basis for determining the weekly Sabbath, just as it is basic in determining the arrival of the holy days.

In other words, lunar Sabbatarians argue that the moon, which determines when a new month begins, also determines when the count toward the weekly Sabbaths begins.

The Holy Days: One Cycle

Lunar Sabbatarians’ *a priori* dismissal of an important fact has led them to a wrong conclusion. That fact is this: God recognizes two *distinct* cycles in determining Sabbaths: He created an *annual* cycle. He also created a *weekly* one. They are not the same.

The annual cycle, which defines the appointed feasts (*moedim*), is intrinsically connected with the moon, as Genesis 1:14 says. Specifically, the annual cycle is connected with the new moon, which in Hebrew is *khodesh* (*Strong’s* #2320). The annual cycle actually begins on a new moon, the one starting the Hebrew month of Abib. The fall of most *moedim*, that is, most appointed festivals, is determined by the occurrence of a new moon.

For example, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread falls on the fifteenth day of Abib. It falls fifteen days into the month of Abib—fifteen days after the new moon that ushered in Abib. Likewise, the Feast of Trumpets is the first day (that is, the new moon itself) of the seventh month, Tishri. The Day of Atonement falls on the tenth day of Tishri.

As an illustration of the importance of the new moon in determining the “appointed feasts,” notice Leviticus 23:4-6 (HCSB), which renders *khodesh* as “month”: “The Passover to the LORD comes in the first month, at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month. The Festival of Unleavened Bread to the LORD is on the fifteenth day of the same month.”

Khodesh appears ten times in Leviticus 23, always in reference to determining the day on which the *moedim*

arrive. This stress on the new moon is consistent with God's comments in Genesis 1:14 that the moon would "serve as signs for festivals."

So, the fall of the *annual* "appointed feasts" is based on the arrival of new moons, which define the start of the Hebrew lunar months. The annual holy days define one cycle, a cycle of seven holy days throughout the year.

The Weekly Sabbath: Another Cycle

The fall of the seventh-day Sabbath is defined according to a second cycle. It is a separate cycle, a different one. Importantly, in the description of the seventh-day Sabbath, the concepts of *moedim* and *khodesh* are not at all present. For example, neither word appears in Leviticus 23:3: "Work may be done for six days, but on the seventh day there must be a Sabbath of complete rest, a sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; it is a Sabbath to the LORD wherever you live" (HCSB).

Genesis 2 records God's creation of the seventh-day Sabbath and hence, the institution of the weekly occasion. In this passage as well, neither the word *moedim* (appointed feasts) nor *khodesh* (new moon) appear even once:

By the seventh day God completed His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, for on it He rested from His work of creation. (Genesis 2:2-3 [HCSB])

What is strikingly stressed in this passage is the cycle of the *seventh day*, not the arrival of a new moon. Other verses that stress the concept of "the seventh day" as a definitive element in the seventh-day Sabbath's timing include Exodus 23:12; 31:15, 17; 34:21; 35:2; and Deuteronomy 5:13-14.

Finally, *khodesh* and *moedim* are conspicuous by their absence in the Sabbath commandment itself—not even a hint:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy: You are to labor six days and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. You must not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the foreigner who is within your gates. For the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything in them in six days; then He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and declared it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11 [HCSB])

In each of these pivotal passages concerning the weekly Sabbath, the word *moedim* is absent. Its absence shows that the weekly occasion is not an "appointed feast" and therefore not part and parcel with the annual occasions, which are defined by a separate cycle. In addition, in each of these same passages, the word *khodesh* is also absent, indicating that the new moon is not a factor in determining the coming of the seventh-day Sabbath.

In summary then, lunar Sabbatarians ignore the clear fact that God has instituted *two* discrete cycles and with them, two different methods of determining the fall of Sabbaths. Lunar Sabbatarians apply the method of counting the holy days—which at its core does involve the new moons—to determining the occurrences of the weekly Sabbaths. However, the Scriptures do not support using the same method for both cycles.

To reiterate: The new moon and the lunar month are irrelevant in determining which day the seventh-day Sabbath falls on.

Did Christ Keep the Lunar Sabbath?

Christ, our example, did not observe the lunar Sabbath. As recorded in Luke 4:16-17 (HCSB), Christ "came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. As usual, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. . . ."

The Jews, as Paul wrote in Romans 3:2, had received the "oracles" (that is, the revelation or the words) of God. The Torah contains many of those "oracles," including the oracle of the seventh-day Sabbath. God deeply engrained the correct Sabbath day into the consciousness of the children of Israel during their wanderings in the wilderness of Zin, and, as a result of this weekly reminder by the absence of manna on the Sabbath, they came to enshrine that day into what has come to be called the Hebrew calendar.

During Christ's time on earth, the Jews continued to keep the correct weekly occasion. If Christ had kept the lunar Sabbath, chances are He would have been reading to an empty room that day in the synagogue. There would have been no one present there to hand Him the scroll of Isaiah. The Jews would have been elsewhere.

The Jews certainly took exception to the way Jesus kept the Sabbath. For instance, they expressed their dismay when His disciples plucked corn on the Sabbath or when He healed on the Sabbath. *However, the Jewish leadership had no issue with the day He kept.* If they had such an issue, we certainly would read about it in the Gospels. Yet, that issue never arose.

The absence of any dispute over the correct day is an "argument from absence" that Christ kept the *same* weekly Sabbath that the Jews did—the same day they still keep. He kept the same weekly occasion the church of God keeps today. It is the seventh-day Sabbath, the Sabbath described in Genesis 2:2-3 and in Exodus 20:8-11.

Pentecost and the Lunar Sabbath

Probably one of the best arguments against the lunar Sabbath concerns Pentecost. God instructs that the Day of Pentecost, correctly counted, will always occur on the day *after* a Sabbath:

You are to count seven complete weeks starting from the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the presentation offering. You are to count 50 days until the day after the seventh Sabbath and then present an offering of new grain

ready answer *The Lunar Sabbath or the Seventh-Day Sabbath: Which?*

to the LORD. (Leviticus 23:15-16 [HCSB])

So, the requirement that Pentecost fall on the day *after* the seventh Sabbath becomes a “check point” to ensure that we have counted correctly.

A person keeping the lunar Sabbath will never find an occasion where the count of those fifty days brings him to the day *after* the Sabbath he is keeping. Try it for yourself with paper and pencil; it will soon become clear that absolutely no scenario exists where Pentecost falls on the day after a lunar Sabbath. It will never happen.

If the concept of the lunar Sabbath were correct, the requirement that Pentecost fall after a Sabbath would be impossible to meet. The model that lunar Sabbatarians use to determine the Sabbath does not mesh with the instruction concerning Pentecost, as stated in Leviticus 23:15-16.

More Than a Minor Miracle

If we counted the number of days from any seventh-day Sabbath back to the original (seventh-day) Sabbath, that is, all the way back to the one described in Genesis 2:2-3, we would come up with a large number. As we tirelessly counted, we could “count” on this: Whatever number of

days defines that interval of time, it would *always* be divisible by seven, the number of days in a week. The number of days from any seventh-day Sabbath to the original Sabbath will be divisible by seven.

That is an amazing fact. Throughout history, God has preserved the knowledge of the seventh-day Sabbath. Considering all the various calendars that have been developed over the years by pagan, godless individuals, some of those calendars basing their weeks on more than seven days, it is indeed a miracle that God has preserved the knowledge of the *true* Sabbath day to the present. Considering all the troubles that the Jews, who preserved that knowledge in their calendar, have encountered, it is more than a minor miracle.

It is fitting that we thank God for preserving a knowledge of the seventh-day Sabbath over the years for us. He did not command that the seventh day be kept and then hide it from us. Rather, our Provider has taught us the correct day; not a day has been lost in the count. We should not be deceived by the false notion of the lunar Sabbath, which is in fact one of the lies Satan has developed to hide the correct seventh day.

—Charles F. Whitaker

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

(continued from page 6)

Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm, they are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth. Therefore his people return, and waters of a full cup are drained by them. And they say, “How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?” Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning. If I had said, “I will speak thus,” behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.

What God reveals to the psalmist is that these people may *appear* to gain the whole world, but in reality, they are losing something of far greater value. The psalmist grasps this through prayer and meditation, and his emotional and spiritual state return to an even keel through God’s revelation.

At one point, through a bad attitude toward God fueled by his envy of the worldly, the psalmist appears to have been rapidly sliding into despair and perhaps even, as we might say today, “sliding right out of the church.” This presents a grave danger in such a paradoxical situation. How can we recognize this so we do not fall into a destructive attitude? We must dig for the answers.

Assuming the psalmist was a converted man, what would have happened to him if he had not done the right thing and appealed to God, or if he appealed, but God did not respond as quickly as he expected? What if the trial had gone on and on without relief? From the psalmist’s own testimony, as he went into the sanctuary, he was at the point that his feet had almost slipped. However, an answer on recognizing the issue appears within the psalm. Despite his envious attitude, the psalmist did not stop praying to God for understanding and relief. God has the answers.

When involved in such a scenario, we have in reality only three alternatives: One, we can continue as is, faithfully enduring with much prayer and steadfast submission to

God's will. Two, we can give up in despair and slide right out of the church. Three, we can strive all the harder to impress God by becoming super-righteous to attract His attention and receive blessings for our righteousness, relieving the stress. As we will see, Solomon is addressing the third alternative in these eight verses.

Super-Righteousness and the Paradox

A review will provide a platform to build on as we move forward. First, Ecclesiastes is written chiefly for the benefit of the converted, for those striving to live an "above the sun" life. The Pharisees were not converted, thus Pharisaical self-righteousness is but a small part of what matters here. This helps us understand why Psalm 73 is so important for our understanding on this subject, as it provides us the experience of a converted person.

Second, what God promises about long life and prosperity will help us see the paradox clearly. Exodus 20:12 says, "Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you." Deuteronomy 5:33 adds, "You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess."

"Well with you" points to prosperity. In a relationship with God, it is "normal" to expect these two promises to be fulfilled. Thus, Ecclesiastes 7:15 presents us with a paradox: The obedient neither live long nor are considered prosperous, yet the disobedient live long and are prospered. So, the question arises, why obey God?

Recall the complaint of the godly man in Psalm 73:12-14. More-modern translations bring out the intensity of his feelings:

- NRSV: "Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches, all in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning."
- *The Revised English Bible*: "Such are the wicked; unshakably secure, they pile up wealth. Indeed it was all for nothing I kept my heart pure and washed my hands free from guilt! For all day long I suffer affliction and every morning brings new punishment."
- *The Living Bible* (a free paraphrase): "Look at these men of arrogance; they never have to lift a finger—theirs is a life of ease; and all the time their riches multiply. Have I been wasting my time? Why take the trouble to be pure? All I get out of it is trouble and woe—every day and all day long."

The psalmist was indeed very upset.

The paradox does not always concern money. All that is necessary is a situation in which the Christian feels he is being mistreated while the unconverted are being blessed. When this upside-down circumstance continues for some time, the Christian becomes impatient and compares his state with the unconverted.

Christians today are not inoculated against the kind of trial the psalmist endured. We do not always live to a ripe old age; we are not immune to cancer. Sometimes Christians suffer violent accidents. Sometimes their homes are wiped away by a tornado or earthquake, and perhaps they lose a family member. In such times, it is easy to ask, "Where was God?"

A modern commentator, Sidney Greidanus, in his commentary titled *Preaching Christ Through Ecclesiastes*, uses the term "super-righteousness" based on technical reasons as well as on the flow of the chapter. It helps to clarify Solomon's teaching. To convey the sense of the context as well as the usage of the Hebrew, the King James Version translates the term in verse 16 as "righteous over much." The New King James Version translates it as "overly righteous." These translations are vague at best, wherein lies the danger. Greidanus feels that "super-righteousness" more clearly conveys Solomon's thought in our modern lingo.

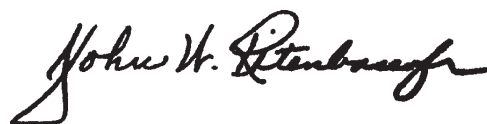
Super-righteousness is a strange and dangerous state because it is a deceptive form of evil. In the next verse, Solomon asks, "Why destroy yourself?" and "Why should you die before your time?" In addition, he states that those who fear God will escape. Each of those phrases indicates some danger exists in the paradox.

How does this super-righteousness arise within a converted person? On the surface, it seems to be a natural effect of the circumstance. Super-righteousness is indeed a form of self-righteousness but not the kind we are familiar with. A major abnormality that leads to it is a misguided response to the paradox motivating it. The danger arises in the subtle-but-risky fruit the response often produces.

In such a paradoxical situation, as it continues unabated, we would probably react by assuming that God is punishing us. We would reason that, if we were not sinning, we would not be going through this ordeal. Thus, to relieve the stress, we are likely to recall a scripture like Matthew 5:48 that tells us, "Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."

At that moment, we stand at a fork in the road, and the desire to rid ourselves of the sore trial sometimes motivates us to choose the wrong path. We will pursue this more closely next time.

In Christian love,



Where the Eagles Are GATHERED

Woven throughout Jesus' parables and prophecies are numerous descriptions of the end times, as well as the significant things His followers need to be aware of as they await His return.

He warns of increasing deception and false messiahs. He also cautions us about what we might call "false returns," where rumors fly that the Messiah has returned secretly. We may not have personally seen much of this, but the fact that Christ made these warnings means that we have foreknowledge that will help keep us from being swept away in the deceptions of the end time.

Amidst other signs in the Olivet Prophecy is this particularly obscure one:

"Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. *For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.* (Matthew 24:26-28; emphasis ours)

Here is verse 28 in *The Amplified Bible*: "Wherever there is a fallen body (a corpse), there the vultures (or eagles) will flock together." The birds described here belong to a family known as Old World Vultures, which includes eagles, buzzards, kites, and hawks. When vultures gather to eat a carcass, it is known as a "wake."

Vultures seldom attack healthy animals, but they have a keen sense for when one is wounded or sick, often killing an unhealthy animal rather than waiting for it to finally succumb. Their digestive systems are so acidic that they can ingest rabies, cholera, botulinum toxin, and even deadly anthrax without harm. They perform a grisly but necessary job in disposing of flesh that would otherwise encourage the spread of disease.

As Christ says, where a carcass is, a wake of vultures is imminent. This tells us little, aside from the fact that it is in response to the disciples' question about the sign of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). Combined with the reference to lightning, it implies that His return will be highly visible.

TAKEN AND LEFT

Matthew 24:36-44 contains more relevant information that is linked to the corpses and vultures of verse 28:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

This passage provides another concrete description of the circumstances surrounding Christ's return, emphasizing that His return will be at an unexpected hour. We can

tie this to His warnings about becoming caught up in the cares of the world, so that end-time events commence when we are spiritually unprepared (Matthew 25:13; Mark 13:35; Luke 12:39-40; 21:34).

Verses 40-41 describe two men working in a field and two women grinding at a mill. In each case, one is taken and the other is left. Subscribers to the theory of a secret rapture use these verses as support, though the only “secret” part of Christ’s return will be the timing—the event itself will be visible to all. Rapture advocates also assume that *taken* here means “snatched up to heaven.” However, in the 49 New Testament usages of this Greek word (*paralambano*), nowhere does it contain that idea.

The only verse that even approaches that sense is John 14:3, but even it does not actually support the idea of being taken off to heaven: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive [*paralambano*] you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” Notice that He says He will come again—to earth—and receive His followers to Himself there, not in heaven. Earth is where His Kingdom will be established.

Thus, Matthew 24:40-41 speaks of a divine distinction between peoples in the future: Some will be received near to Christ and associated with Him in a familiar or intimate way. The word can even imply they assume an office.

Those under judgment, however, will be left and not allowed to accompany Christ. This “being left” may be what happens to the foolish virgins who are left outside the wedding feast (Matthew 25:10-12); to the “sons of the kingdom” who will be “cast out into outer darkness” instead of entering into the Kingdom (Matthew 8:11-12); and to others who are found to be unworthy to enter the Kingdom (see Matthew 24:48-51; 25:30; 25:31-46).

In Luke’s account, the same descriptions found in Matthew 24:36-44 are linked with the eagles being gathered together, showing they are part of the same context:

Then He said to the disciples, “The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them. For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day.” (Luke 17:22-24)

Here is the same general warning against being deceived by a false return. But the prophecies are clear that, when He returns, it will be unmistakable!

Following this, in Luke 17:26-32, Jesus draws on the stories of Noah and Lot to warn that, even though life seems to be relatively normal, when God brings the judgment, it will be sudden and complete. Because God is just, there will be indicators and warnings. But when He decides that the time is ripe for Him to intervene, it will happen with breathtaking speed. If we are warned to flee, we dare not linger or look back, like Lot’s wife.

“WHERE, LORD?”

Then, Luke 17:34-37 contains the parallel account of the corpse and vultures:

“I tell you, in that night there will be two [people] in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.” And they answered and said to Him, “Where, Lord?” So He said to them, “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”

The disciples’ question, “Where, Lord?” appears to be about *where* all of this would be taking place—including His return, which would initiate the judgment—rather than about where His followers would be taken. Recall that in Matthew’s account, their original question was about the signs of Christ’s coming and the end of the age, so what appears to have been on their minds were the specifics of His return rather than the location of those “taken.”

As is His pattern, He does not answer their question directly. Instead, His answer applies on multiple levels. In the two accounts, the disciples ask about *when* and *where*, since we humans want a specific date and location so we can gauge how these things will affect us personally. God, however, gives principles.

We will consider two ways to understand Christ’s answer. The first explanation is that a wake of vultures is an indicator of *God’s judgment for rebellion*. In the blessings and curses given to Israel, God warns them, “Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away” (Deuteronomy 28:26). It is a judgment of great shame, one that has been fulfilled in type in the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (Psalm 79:1-3).

Under this curse, the Israelites would have no dignity in their deaths; they would have no one to bury them. It symbolizes the height of defeat, disgrace, and personal insignificance, when no defenders are left to keep the scavengers from tearing a human body apart just as they would a dead animal. When God cleans His creation in this way, a person becomes nothing more than a meal for one of the most despised creatures.

But Israelites are not the only ones to receive this shameful judgment. The same fate is prophesied for those fighting against Christ at His return:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, “Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all *people*, free and slave, both small and great.” And I saw the

prophecy watch *Where the Eagles Are Gathered*

beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. . . . And the rest were killed with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse. And all the birds were filled with their flesh. (Revelation 19:17-19, 21; see also the prophecy against Gog in Ezekiel 39:17-20)

The followers of the Beast and False Prophet will be killed, and God will specifically call the carrion birds for this gruesome feast. Any alleged return of the Messiah that does not involve this judgment on God's enemies is a lie. These are grisly descriptions but necessary reminders of His view of sin, disobedience, and rebellion against Him. Christ will return at a time when the opposition to Him will have reached a peak and to a place where human governments will have assembled against Him. Moreover, there will be a gathering of scavengers as a sign of God's judgment of shame.

UNCLEAN AND HATED BIRDS

There is still another way to understand Christ's answer about the wake of vultures, something we can see happening right now: A gathering of vultures indicates *a diseased spiritual condition*. In Revelation 18:2, Babylon the Great is described as being "a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird."

Vultures are undoubtedly at the top of the list of unclean and hated birds! End-time Babylon is the focal point of demonic spirits, which are likened to unclean birds. Both of them prey on the sick and the injured, and they gather where death is.

This is where it becomes relevant to us. Our greatest threat is not the Tribulation at the end! As bad as it will be, far worse is being spiritually unprepared when Christ returns and being judged as unworthy to enter the Kingdom. This is what the Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Wedding Feast describe. This is the substance of the warnings about Christ's return being like a thief in the night—coming when He is completely unexpected. This is why He warns us against neglecting so great a salvation and against being led astray by the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the pleasures of life. Jesus warns us to keep us on the path of life, so that we do not fall to the birds of prey that stalk the spiritually dying.

We are given the charge to come out of Babylon, so we do not share in her sins or in her judgment (Revelation 18:4). If we have a discerning heart, we should have a good idea of what will attract the vultures, as it will be giving off the smell of spiritual death. God gives us that discerning heart, so we can make good choices.

We have read the scriptures about the swiftness of Christ's return, but do we really believe them? It is easy

to look at world events and compare them to our understanding of prophecy; we know that things are bad and getting worse—but the end still seems to be just over the horizon. Because it is not here yet, it is easy to conclude, even subconsciously, that there is no need to become serious just yet.

However, this conclusion is filled with assumptions. One is that our understanding of end-time events is correct! A second assumption is that, even if we do have correct understanding, we will never lose it through deception. A third is that our faith will remain constant until the end. A fourth is that, when we do decide to get serious, that we will have ample time to build character, take on the image of God, and complete our sanctification. A fifth is that our Creator will go along with our agenda of pushing Him off until the last minute.

These are a lot of assumptions! If we are misjudging these things, we may hear those terrible words, "I never knew you; depart from Me" (Matthew 7:23)!

If we are delaying the time to start seeking God, the vultures may be eyeing us as ones who may not spiritually survive what lies ahead. Perhaps all of us have seen this happen to people we care about. If we are spiritually sick or injured, there is no time like the present to seek our Healer and Protector to beat off the hated birds!

FOOLISH VIRGINS

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the foolish ones thought they had more time. They were probably aware that their reserves of oil were not as full as they could be, but they may have assumed that they could always attend to that later. They did not count on falling asleep. They did not count on life happening, that something would prohibit them from taking care of preparations they had put off.

A lesson we can draw is that, if we are not putting everything we have into our calling *right now*, how much time is left does not matter. If that is the case, we may find ourselves, like the foolish virgins, suddenly awake and realizing we cannot get ready in time. What we claimed we wanted will have slipped through our grasp, one day at a time.

Judgment is coming on the world, but it is on the house of God right now (I Peter 4:17). A gathering of eagles—a wake of vultures—is a symbol of God's judgment on those who stubbornly resist coming into alignment with Him. Vultures will literally gather for those who rebel against God in the final battle, and they are metaphorically already circling those who cannot tear themselves away from Babylon—those who are on such good terms with the world that they are giving off the scent of spiritual death.

The multitude of warnings and prophecies means that it is a possibility for us, because it is a certainty for some. Yet, with all that God makes available, there is no good reason for that judgment to fall on us.

—David C. Grabbe

Age of Empires

Scientific discovery coined a phrase that has become axiomatic: “Nature abhors a vacuum.” In short, when a vacuum is created by whatever means, unless the seal is diligently maintained, gaseous or liquid matter will expand to fill the space. We can see this principle at work when we break the seal of a vacuum-packed container: Air rushes into and fills the space, equalizing the interior pressure with that outside the container.

The political world also hates a vacuum. However, in the political world the missing medium is power, influence, control. When political players realize that another has relinquished control over an area or a people, they move with sometimes-frightening speed to assert their own control over what has been abandoned. For instance, on a small scale, when a metropolitan government no longer has the means to police certain areas of its city, gangs will soon move in to claim the territory for themselves.

This vacuum-filling happens on a grand scale too. When empires begin to decline, whether for lack of funds, military weakness, or plain weariness, local chieftains on the periphery begin carving fiefdoms out for themselves. Sometimes these fiefdoms grow to become kingdoms and nations in their own right, and they may even garner enough power to challenge the old empire or even preside over its death throes.

The dominant empire of our day is the United States of America. It has never been imperial in the traditional sense of the term, that is, it has never deliberately set out to conquer all the nations around it and rule over their peoples. In fact, compared to those of Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, Japan, and even Great Britain, America’s imperialism has been soft. Its dominance has been mostly economic and cultural, backed by a large, powerful, and innovative military that has protected its vital interests yet without resorting to direct rule in most cases.

American power, though, is not what it once was. Over the course of the Obama administration, its economic, political, and military hegemony has eroded significantly. It has dropped behind China as the world’s chief economic power. It has ceded vast amounts of political influence around the globe, and it has effectively surrendered to terrorists and jihadists in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Under Obama, who believes that his legacy depends on undoing as many of his predecessors’ “militaristic misadventures” as he can, the U.S. has abandoned much of its former leadership and thus power.

America’s global retreat has already had profound consequences. Regional powers in unstable parts of the world, once held at bay by the will and might of the world’s sole superpower, are becoming more aggressive toward their neighbors and have no qualms about throwing rocks at the retreating back of Uncle Sam. He has made it clear to them that he is not likely to return anytime soon, so they

are free to pursue their own ambitions.

Five powers in particular have rushed to fill the vacuum, and all five are anti-American, militaristic, and reactionary autocracies: Iran, Turkey, the Islamic State, Russia, and China. Note that three of them—Iran, Turkey, and the Islamic State—lie in the powder keg of the Middle East, while Russia and China are perennial adversaries of the U.S. From the American point of view, these quintuplets are all bad guys. The situation makes perfect sense: Once what has been keeping the bad guys down is removed, and the bad guys will get up again and return to the fight.

Iran is a Shiite Islamist theocracy. It wants one thing: to be the dominant Islamic sect in the world. To do this, it aims to defeat its Sunni rivals and carry jihad to the rest of the planet. For these reasons, it desires to build nuclear weapons, which, due to American laxity over the past six years or more, it nearly has. The Obama administration thinks “talks” will make it see reason.

Turkey is the quasi-secular, democratic descendant of the Ottoman Empire, and its current leader, Recep Erdogan, would like nothing more than to return his nation to both its political and religious heights. In fact, he wants the nations on his periphery to repudiate the West in everything and look to Turkey for guidance—and, of course, to wipe Israel, America’s only truly democratic ally in the region, off the map. At the moment, his odds are improving.

As chronicled here in the July-August issue, the Islamic State sees itself as the seed of a new caliphate that aims to span the Arab world. Having fought Bashar Assad’s Syria to a standstill, it has reveled in the spotlight of Islamic terrorism, gruesomely slaying non-Muslims and Muslims alike on a regular basis. It will continue its bloody rampage until eradicated by a stronger force.

Additionally, all know the rundown on Russia and China: major nations with a perpetual, adversarial rivalry with the U.S., both determined to dominate and expand their spheres of influence, globally, if possible. Russia seems to be picking on and picking off its neighbors one by one, reintegrating them into its traditional buffer zone of states. With its economic growth, China is aggressively expanding its military capabilities as well as its financial stranglehold on the Asia-Pacific region. Both still want more.

As historian Victor Davis Hanson writes in a recent article, “Barack Obama, Empire Builder” (National Review Online, January 27, 2015), all five of these emerging empires believe they can continue doing these things without fear of “an intrusive American global cop sticking its post-colonial, imperialist nose where it has no business.” They are right. With the American eagle molting on its roost, by turns preening and brooding, who can stop them?

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

The Resurrection of Lazarus (Part Two)

Christ's conduct just prior to raising Lazarus from the dead is instructive and inspiring: "When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled" (John 11:33). This scene of death and despair deeply moved and upset Him, even to the point of indignation. Lazarus was dead because sin had entered the world and brought death and the sorrows that follow. Sin does not bring life; it always results in death. Our Savior's weeping shows the pain of sin.

Today, we laugh and joke about things that caused even God Himself to weep. When we are tempted to sin, we must remember verse 35, "Jesus wept." It succinctly emphasizes the curse of sin.



1. What does Jesus' weeping reveal about Him? John 11:35. **COMMENT:** The Greek verb translated "wept" is found only here in the Bible. Its root means "tears." His were not the tears of a sentimentalist, but those of a pure, righteous, sympathizing High Priest (Hebrews 4:15). The word twice translated "weeping" in verse 33 is not the same word, meaning "to lament loudly, to wail." Unlike these others, Jesus did not wail but wept quietly with tears flowing.

It is often supposed that Jesus wept only because He had lost a friend to death and because of the deep mourning of Mary and Martha. However, even before Lazarus had died, He knew that He would resurrect Lazarus to glorify His Father and as a sign of His Messiahship (John 11:4, 15). He was in complete control of the situation.

His weeping does show Him as a compassionate friend, and from this we learn that it is right and natural for us to sympathize with others in their afflictions. "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15). Sorrow at the death of friends is not improper, yet we should not belabor it but help others who grieve to find peace in the God of all consolation.

We see in this miracle an instance of the tenderness of the character of Jesus, the same Savior who wept over Jerusalem and felt deeply for others even in their sins. To the same tender and compassionate Savior we may now come, knowing that He will not cast us away. His example shows that heartfelt mourning in the face of death does not indicate lack of faith but honest sorrow at the reality of suffering and death.

2. Why did Christ have others do the physical work? Did He need help?

COMMENT: This miracle was one of His Father's works, so Jesus prayed and thanked God for the answer He knew would follow. It did not require the disciples' help, yet Jesus commanded them: "Take away the stone" and "Loose him, and let him go" (Luke 11:39, 44). Jesus always used His power wisely, never wastefully, frivolously, or unnecessarily. By involving His disciples in the event, He shows that we participate in God's way of life with Him.

3. What was the intended result of this miracle?

COMMENT: After His prayer, Jesus, in whom is life (John 1:4) and who is the Life (John 14:6), shouts to Lazarus with a strong, confident voice, and he walks from his grave alive.

It is an almost incredible thing to read. Can we imagine the effect it had on those who witnessed it?

As the conclusion of the chapter shows, this miracle had diverse results. Many Jews believed in Him, but it only angered His enemies, making them more determined to rid themselves of Him. The high priest, Caiaphas, a dupe of Rome and a Sadducee, who did not believe in resurrection, suggests to the Council that they must kill Jesus rather than lose their positions. The words and works of Jesus divided light from darkness, the believing from the unbelieving. There is still division because of Him (Luke 12:51).

The word John uses thirteen times for "miracles" in his gospel and in Revelation suggests "wonders," "foreshadows," or "signs," and not "mighty works." E.W. Bullinger explains it as

a signal and ensign, a standard, a sign by which any thing is designated, distinguished or known; hence, used of the miracles of Christ, as being the signs by which it might be known that He was the Christ of God, a sign authenticating Christ's mission; a sign with reference to what it demonstrates. (*A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, p. 503)

As John sees them, Jesus' miracles are symbols, proofs, messages, and object lessons of spiritual truth embodied in the wonders themselves. They are living parables of Christ's action, embodiments of the truth in works. They are not merely signs of supernatural power, but dramatic indications of the goal of His ministry and of His own all-loving character. His visible works of power and mercy foreshadow the spiritual restoration of all things. Because of these elements, a lesson, discussion, or sermon usually follows them.

John recorded only eight of Jesus' miracles, choosing typical ones to elucidate while recognizing their greater extent: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book" (John 20:30). In the next chapter, he provides a glimpse of the fullness of His ministry: "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen" (John 21:25).

—Martin G. Collins