



Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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**Should We Pray
for the World?**

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Volume 11, Number 8

- 3 PERSONAL FROM JOHN W. RITENBAUGH
The Elements of Motivation (Part Four)
- 7 A READY ANSWER:
Should We Pray for the World?
—Staff
- 10 PROPHECY WATCH:
Sky Like Iron, Earth Like Bronze
—Richard T. Ritenbaugh
- 13 *Strange Women (Part Three)*
—David C. Grabbe
- 19 WORLD WATCH
—David C. Grabbe
- 20 BIBLE STUDY
The Parables of the Millstone and the Lost Sheep
—Martin G. Collins

About Our Cover



A great deal of human suffering exists in the world, and some of those who suffer are our neighbors. We feel their anguish and despair—but it is right for Christians to pray for them? (Reuters)

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The Elements of Motivation

Part Four: Obligation

The beginning of each article in this series has shown that accepting Christ's blood and entering into the New Covenant is just the beginning of the creative process initiated at God's calling. His calling, not an end in itself, places us under obligation to live up to the terms of the covenant. If we respond, we will be motivated to produce works, which must be done if God's will for us is to be accomplished. This in no way earns us salvation, but it enables God's creative efforts to be completed.

Romans 2:1-13 shows our responsibility for keeping His commandments, a work. It is good to remember that Paul writes this to a Christian congregation.

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified). . . .

In verse 1, Paul says that anybody participating even in some of the more easily mastered practices of human nature is putting himself on dangerous spiritual quicksand. Today, in the wake of the breakup of the Worldwide Church of God, a common judgment is to call Herbert Armstrong into account yet say at the end, "But I loved him." Those who do this have overlooked how vulnerable and subject to God's judgment this makes them.

Verse 2 carries Paul's warning a step further by reminding us that God judges according to truth. Those who judge and act as Paul describes in verse 1 have precious little truth. However, this major element gives God the right to judge. He alone knows all the facts and can arrange them all in the light of perfect righteousness.

He reveals in verse 3 the weak position of those judging: They are guilty of committing the same sins, or ones just as bad, as those they are judging! Paul is saying that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones! In fact, their judgment of others may be one of those sins! In verse 4, he counsels them to lay aside their pride and concentrate on making the best use of God's patience by repenting of their sins.

In verse 5, the apostle plays on the word "riches" in the previous verse. Physical wealth is something one normally sets aside and treasures, but those who persist in evil works are "treasuring up" judgment for themselves! Verses 6 through 11 are a classic argument for the doing of good works after justification from the mind and pen of the very man most often accused of saying no works are necessary.

Within the context of the entire book, Paul is saying here that, while a person is justified by grace through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, establishing a relationship with God that because of sin never before existed, good works should result from justification. Good works are the concrete, open, and public expression of the reality of our relationship with God. They are its witness.

Just as surely as day follows night, if our faith truly is in God, the works that follow will be according to God's will. Living by God's will should be the natural consequence of faith in God. Though we are justified by faith, II Corinthians 5:10 spells out that we are judged according to our works. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Is it not logical, then, for a person, knowing he will be judged according to his works, to want at least some clearly stated absolutes to show him what is expected of him rather than a fuzzy and vague statement about loving one another? Would not such a person want to know more specifically what constitutes love?

In Romans 2:7, Paul is not saying using one's faith will be easy, but that those who have that faith will use it to work. "Patient continuance" presupposes a measure of hardship, and "seek" implies pursuing something not yet attained. Together, they indicate a persistent quest of God's righteousness. In verse 10, the apostle uses the phrase "to everyone who works what is good." He does not define what "good" is at this point, but whatever it is, work is necessary to accomplish it. In verses 11-12, he reiterates that we will be judged, introducing a word that many seem to find so repulsive: *law*!

Repulsed by Law

Why is this term so repulsive? Law implies authority, and human nature likes no authority over it, even if the law expresses the authority of God and defines love. It is especially interesting that Paul says we will be judged according to what we actually know. Know of what? The law of God. The good works he mentions earlier include the works of keeping the law. Obviously, it is God's will that we live moral lives. Morality must have standards, or there is no such thing as morality. Laws define morality. We will be judged against what we know of the laws of God. Thus, he says in verse 13 that the doers of the law will be justified.

Despite what these verses say, theologians attempt to justify their "no-law" theology by claiming that Paul writes here of the natural man, not converted people. While partially true, it avoids the fact that this epistle was written to a church of God congregation (Romans 1:1-7) and that Paul repeatedly uses the person pronoun "you"—as in "you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who

judge" (Romans 2:1). This usage, combined with the fact that it is written to a church of God congregation, easily catches the converted in its purview.

In addition, it also avoids the fact that one reason God gives His Holy Spirit is to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). This includes the truth regarding morality, lawkeeping, and good works. As God leads us to greater depths of knowledge and understanding of His truth, it builds in us a more responsible knowledge of God's will. This raises the stakes in judgment because "to whom much is given, from him much more will be required" (Luke 12:48). Growth results in closer scrutiny against a higher standard of morality.

In the broader context of Romans, it becomes clear that each person—Jew or Gentile, converted or unconverted—is judged against what he knows, and God holds him responsible for working to produce obedience at that level. This is similar to what teachers expect of school children. They hold children in the higher grades more responsible for knowing and doing than those in lower grades. Courts use the same general system, holding adults more responsible for their crimes than children. Thus, for the same crime, an adult will receive a sterner punishment.

The called must realize that, because of their calling, the requirements—and thus the judgments—are much stiffer since we know so much more. This is why Paul says in Romans 3:31, "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law." Faith upholds law or makes it firm because the law points out what righteousness, love, and sin are, and guides us in how faith is to be used.

Obligation, Self-satisfaction, and Faithfulness

All this leads to the fourth motivational factor. We have seen that the fear of God, vision, and hope all contribute to being motivated. We need to add to these a deep sense of obligation to Christ, an important factor because it leads to a deeply held, personal loyalty to Him for a number of very good reasons.

Obligation's closest synonym is "duty." It is produced by a strong and compelling sense of indebtedness for a benefit or service received, or by being bound by contract, promise, or law. Obligation is what one owes in return for a favor or because a law or promise demands one must give it. Adherence to duty or obligation produces loyalty or faithfulness.

II Timothy 3:1-5 gives us a concise but graphic overview of powerful and evil attitudes driving this world toward the brink of annihilation:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers,

disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

We have all been victims to some degree of these ungodly attitudes. We cannot escape being affected by them, and even after conversion, it is difficult to fend them off. This overriding way of life has an invasive way of forcing one to concentrate attention on self-satisfaction. It leads one to believe that life, government, employer, or society owes one a living. A strong sense of obligation to serve others, especially freely given service, and loyalty are major victims of its onslaught because it produces the attitude that one is owed rather than that one owes.

Notice how many of the descriptors given in these verses directly relate to focusing on the self. Self-satisfaction is the foundation, the launching pad, and driving force that motivates sin. It is sin's very essence. We should not be deceived into thinking that God does not want us to have any satisfaction in life, but we should rather understand that human nature, aided by Satan, easily allows conduct to get out of control and finds satisfaction beyond the bounds of righteous standards. God wants satisfaction to be produced differently in us.

Sex is an area in which we can see this principle quite easily. God created and pronounced it very good as He stopped His work during Creation week. The Bible shows it is to be used for reproduction and binding a marriage ever more closely in an intimate, loving, pleasurable, and satisfying way as each partner gives and serves the other. God intends it for use within marriage only.

However, as we can see by observing the world, if a person lacks a strong sense of obligation to his mate or to God due to taking wedding vows, to God's laws, or to his personal relationship with Christ, its use can get out of control when one seeks only to please himself. Self-satisfaction then becomes a destroyer of marriage and family life. The stability of the community is disturbed, and above all, one's relationship with God can be shattered by means of something He intended for our good. A deep sense of obligation motivates us toward the vital virtue of faithfulness.

The Bible uses several metaphors to teach the result of human nature's perverse longing for self-satisfaction. Paul notes in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Sin indebts us to death to an amount that, if we paid it, cuts off all hope of eternal life. Proverbs 22:7 adds important understanding to the spiritual principle involved here: "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." Sin put us in debt to the one we obeyed in sinning. Once we sin, we are living

on borrowed time, and we, the borrowers, the debtors, lose our independence. In terms of sin, we owe our lives to someone else. A sinner is no longer his own man!

The idea of "servant" becomes clearer when we understand it as "slave." Slavery is another metaphor for what self-satisfaction produces. Sin puts us in bondage to the cruelest taskmaster in the universe, Satan, the one who generates this host of self-centered attitudes. We are completely unable to break free from this bondage without supernatural help, as Hebrews 2:14-15 says:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Enter Christ, Redemption, and Gratitude

At this point, a major reason that demands our obligation and thus our deep commitment and loyalty to Christ comes to the fore. It is the reality of our redemption by means of Christ's sacrifice:

And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (I Peter 1:17-19)

Redeem means "to buy back." The essential purpose of biblical redemption is to deliver a person or thing from captivity or loss, and as such, it becomes an almost-perfect image for God's saving actions in behalf of sinning mankind. How much would we be willing to pay for the life of someone we love dearly? Kidnappers take perfidious advantage of this desire for the safety of a loved one. They steal a person precious to another—usually a child but sometimes a mate—and hold them for ransom to extort a grand sum of money they think will put them on easy street.

God the Father was willing to pay the ransom price for us by giving up the life of the One He loved most, His own Son, the only other being in all of creation that lived life on the same level as He did. He freely made this sacrifice in exchange for our liberty from our bondage to Satan and our debt to death at the same time. Likewise, the Son willingly volunteered to be the payment in full.

Now, let us turn this reality around and examine it from the perspective of the one released. As one re-

leased, how great a sense of loyalty and obligation born out of gratitude do we feel toward the One who came to our rescue by paying such a huge price for our freedom? Plainly and simply stated, this is the issue in regard to our spiritual obligation. This aspect of our salvation is one of the major themes of the book of Ruth. At one point in the narrative, Ruth prostrates herself at her redeemer's feet (Ruth 3:7-14), illustrating her recognition of her obligation.

The book of Philemon relates an interesting event in Paul's life in which he calls upon Philemon's sense of gratitude and obligation to him. In verse 8, Paul says he could use his authority to order Philemon to accept the slave Onesimus back, charging any debt he owed Philemon to Paul. However, he appeals to him through other means. In verse 19, he delivers a double-barreled proposition. First, Paul himself writes in his own hand that he will repay any of Onesimus' indebtedness, putting Philemon in greater-than-normal obligation. Then, Paul reminds him that he owes Paul his very life spiritually. He implies that Philemon's spiritual indebtedness to him should more than cover any material debt Onesimus owed to Philemon.

Therefore, Paul suggests that Philemon charge it to his account. What Paul did for Onesimus reflects in a small way what Christ did for us. As Paul laid himself out for Onesimus, Christ did for us in a much greater way to pay our spiritual indebtedness and set us free. As Paul claims Philemon's indebtedness to him, so Christ claims our indebtedness to Him.

I Corinthians 6:9-11, 19-20 is helpful toward showing our parallel to Paul's experience with Philemon:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. . . . Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

The basis for our obligation to Christ could not be stated any clearer. He gives three reasons:

1. Verses 9-11 show what put us into indebtedness to make redemption necessary.
2. Verse 19 says that our body is now the temple of the Holy Spirit.

3. Verse 20 states that, because of redemption, we now belong to the One who redeemed us, and we must glorify Him in body and spirit.

Concerning our bodies being "the temple of the Holy Spirit," it is good to reflect on the Old Testament symbolism that God abode in the Holy of Holies within the Temple. Paul reminds us that God now lives in us (John 14:17, 23), and we are obligated to live with the utmost circumspection so that He in no way is defiled by our conduct. So it is with Christ: We are obligated to consider His demands in every area of life all the time and under every circumstance. What an honor!

I Corinthians 7:22-24 reflects back to chapter 6 and the subject of redemption:

For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become the slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called.

A way of illustrating what Paul is teaching is that, if an employer is paying us to work for him, we should work for him, not for ourselves or someone else. Our time on the job belongs to the one paying our wages. So it is with Christ: We are obligated to consider His demands in every area of life all the time.

Paul expands upon and defines this concept more specifically in Romans 6:11-23:

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instrument of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.

(continued on page 14)

During the now infamous 9-11 terrorist attacks against America, how did *you feel* about your countrymen and America? Did you wish this country, modern day Israel, would wake up to its rebellion against God? Did you yearn for God to be merciful to your neighbors and restore His protective shield? Perhaps you spent a few sleepless nights agonizing for the many new widows and fatherless and motherless. Those attacks were indeed tragic.

Did you want to pray for them but did not because the Bible seems to say not to? This may very well be a misconception to some. Over the years, various people in God's church have used verses in Jeremiah and elsewhere to teach we are not to pray for the world or the people of this world. Several correct foundational beliefs have served to foster this conclusion.

Briefly, we are not of this world, and God's Kingdom—our Kingdom—is not of this world (John 18:36). In fact, we are to come out of the world

(Revelation 18:4). We cannot and must not love this world, or else the love of the Father cannot be in us (I John 2:15-18). We are ambassadors for the Kingdom of God (II Corinthians 5:20). Our primary citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), not with any of the sinful nations of this world. Besides, God does not hear the prayers of sinners (Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 59:2). We are to remain unspotted, untainted, from the world (James 1:27). In addition, there seem to be clear scriptures that warn us to never pray for the world. These verses are just for starters!

It seems plain enough. But for those who use the scriptures to conclude we should never pray for our neighbors or for strangers in the world, please read on. That line of thinking is about to be challenged.

Proof Texts?

The Bible passages most often quoted to support the notion of not praying for people in the world are these:

Jeremiah 11:14: Therefore *do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them; for I will not hear them in the time that they cry out to Me because of their trouble.*

Jeremiah 14:11-12: Then the LORD said to me, "*Do not pray for this people, for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence.*"

Jeremiah 15:1: Then the LORD said to me, "*Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be favorable toward this people. Cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth.*"

Some feel John 17:9, a prayer of

Should We Pray for the World?

*"O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act!
Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people
are called by Your name." —Daniel 9:19*

Jesus Himself, indicates it would be wrong to pray for people of the world: "I pray for them. *I do not pray for the world* but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours."

On the surface, these four passages seem clear: Do not pray for the world or the people in the world. However, this raises a questions: If God intended the instructions He gave to Jeremiah to be binding on His people for all time, should we not find the prophets after Jeremiah never praying for the people of the land? What we find instead, though, are many examples of God's people, including Jesus Christ, doing quite the opposite!

A few details in the passages from Jeremiah may be surprising. For instance, God tells Jeremiah the same thing three times—do not pray for them. If Jeremiah had quit praying for them after His first admonition, God would not need to repeat the command. Obviously, then, Jeremiah continued to pray for his countrymen!

The passage in Jeremiah 15:1 is interesting. To paraphrase, God is saying, "Jeremiah, I know Moses prayed for the nation when I was about to blot them out. I know Samuel promised to continue to pray for the nation. But this time it will be different. My will is set this time. No amount of praying for them will change My will this time. So don't bother!" (See Exodus 32; Numbers 16:41-50; I Samuel 12:19-23.) Jeremiah prays for the nation because of the examples of other prophets before him. Yet, God is gently telling Jeremiah that He hears his prayers for the nation, but this time the answer is a firm "no."

God hears our prayers, but when He changes what He says He will do, it is because *He* wills to change. We have no power to *make* God change His direction, but we should feel free to ask according to His will. Perhaps our fervent prayers will cause God to reconsider what He is about to do. God decides whether and when He will change, after He hears us. He can choose to change His own mind—and He *has* changed His mind—after fervent prayers on many occasions.

Moses' prayers, the prayers of the Ninevites, and many other examples in the Bible testify that He will change. In this case, though, God is simply explaining to Jeremiah that this time, in this circumstance, He will not alter His course of action.

Commands for All Time?

Some feel God's words to Jeremiah are commands for His people from that time forward never to pray for the people of the world. Is that the correct interpretation?

The prophet Daniel is taken captive early in Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Judah, and soon after arriving in Babylon, he is handpicked to advise the emperor. As the years pass, Daniel is well aware of Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jews would return to Jerusalem at the end of seventy years in exile (Jeremiah 29:10-14). Near the end of that seventy-year period, what do we find Daniel doing? He implores God so fervently on behalf of his nation that God sends Gabriel, one of the highest-ranking angels, to deliver a message directly from Him (Daniel 9:1-24).

What stands out in Daniel's prayer for his nation is his use of "we," not "they." He puts himself in the same boat with the sinning Jews. Daniel cries out, ". . . we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments" (verse 5). Notice his prayer's conclusion:

O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all who are around us. Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord's sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline Your

ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name. (verses 16-19)

Clearly, Daniel is praying for forgiveness for his sinful countrymen and for himself. He prays for good things to start happening to his unconverted neighbors. And God hears: "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision" (verses 22-23).

As we study the inspired Scripture, we find holy men moved with deep feeling for their people, their city, their country—all the while realizing that they simultaneously look for another city with eternal "foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

Ezekiel, another captive of the Babylonians, reminds us that God puts some kind of identifying mark on those who "sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done" around us (Ezekiel 9:4). Those who are moved by events spiraling out of control pray about the situation, entreating God to act, to come soon. Ezekiel records that God spares such concerned people.

By contrast, he records the horrific scene of thousands being slaughtered who do not grieve over the condition of the nation (verses 5-6). As the slaughter commences, Ezekiel prays and begs God to reconsider what He is doing: "Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?" (verse 8). God answers that, this time, He must pun-

ish and punish hard (verses 9-10). The point is that Ezekiel felt so deeply for his countrymen and nation that he implored God to extend mercy.

How did we do on September 11, 12, 13, and in the days since? Are we sighing and crying when we see “acts of God”—natural catastrophes like floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes—ripping through the countryside? God is moved when He sees us moved by the pain and suffering occurring around us, and not just that affecting our immediate circle of family and friends.

We know God will punish modern-day Israel increasingly in the years ahead. We will witness a great deal of sorrow and woe, but God is pleased when He sees us wholeheartedly interceding even for those who deserve the discipline.

Jesus' Example

Most dramatic of all are the examples and admonitions of our Master and Teacher, Jesus Christ. For instance, as He walks up to Jerusalem, instead of thinking of His own impending suffering and death, He thinks of His countrymen: “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 brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).

How then can we explain John 17:9? Jesus gives the prayer in John 17 specifically for His disciples and for a specific reason. It was not the time to pray for any other than His disciples. However, this does not mean that Jesus never prayed for anyone but a disciple!

If we are supposed to pray only for converted brethren but not for our unconverted countrymen, how can we follow Jesus' many other examples and commands about this topic? For example, Matthew 5:44-45, 48:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and *pray for those who*

spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. . . . Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

What a statement! He says praying for people outside the church is part of what defines us as children of our Father in heaven! Those who hate us and spitefully use us are certainly not fellow church members or converted believers, yet our Savior commands us to pray for them! There is perhaps no clearer passage on this topic!

In fact, how many of those whom Jesus prayed for and healed were “in the church” or had God's Spirit? Probably none of them! How many were worldly sinners? Certainly most of them, maybe even all of them!

Later, while hanging on a stake, Jesus practices perfectly what He preaches, once more praying for people of the world: “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). What clearer example could we have?

In fact, though Jesus did not participate at all in any of the world's evils, He lived His life among the people. As the son of a carpenter, He interacted with the public constantly. He never shied away from the people of the world. He enjoyed people, weddings, and parties enough to be accused—falsely, of course—of being “a glutton and a winebibber.” He felt comfortable accepting an invitation to dinner at the house of a Pharisee—He was even bold enough to invite Himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, an ill-reputed tax collector.

How do we fare among the world? Are we comfortable with our “unconverted” neighbors? Would we accept dinner invitations and attend social occasions? Jesus, our Elder Brother, did. Jesus was not like the Pharisees—the very name means “the sepa-

rated ones”—who acted “holier than thou.” Yes, we should separate ourselves from the *ways* of the world. Yes, we should live a holy life (I Peter 1:15-16). After all, we have the Holy Spirit. But we should not be like those “who say, ‘Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!’” (Isaiah 65:5). God says of them, “These are smoke in My nostrils.”

Pray “for All Men”

Stephen, the first martyr after Christ, follows his Master's example. As rocks crush his skull, his last words beseech God not to charge his murderers with sin (Acts 7:59-60). He prays for those who are killing him!

Paul feels so deeply for his unconverted countrymen that he declares:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites. . . . (Romans 9:1-3)

Would we be willing to give up our salvation and reward for the salvation of all our fellow citizens? Paul made it a point to pray often for his people: “Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1). He obviously does not feel God's statements to Jeremiah extend to his time and situation.

He leaves no doubt about how he feels about praying for people in the world:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made *for all men*, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good

(continued on page 16)

Sky Like Iron, Earth Like Bron

Two months have passed since devastating fires in Colorado and Arizona destroyed over a half-million acres of forestland. In mid-July, a blaze raged precariously close to 1,500-year-old sequoias in northern California, and in nearby southern Oregon, a wildfire torched well over 460,000 acres as August began.

Many areas of the country are under wildfire watches because of hot, dry weather and extended drought. A cigarette butt flipped from a passing car or a campfire not completely extinguished could flare into a costly, even deadly, inferno. Matters have become so precarious that, over the Independence Day holiday, fire officials warned citizens to refrain from celebrating with fireworks because of the danger of catching the woods on fire.

Because of these drought conditions, the corn in many fields never reached “as high as an elephant’s eye by the Fourth of July,” and now stands brown and withering. Ponds and streams have dried up or have dropped several feet. Some municipal reservoirs are dangerously low, and governments have begun either voluntary or mandatory restrictions on water usage. Car, driveway, and sidewalk washing are no-nos, and watering the lawn and flowerbeds is permissible only overnight after 9 PM.

What has become of this well-watered land flowing with billions of gallons of clean, fresh water? Where are the rain clouds? Where are the summer afternoon thunderstorms? Where are the tropical depressions and hurricanes that often dump several inches of needed rain on their way through?

What will happen if this drought continues? What can we expect if this

lasts a few more months—or years? What does it mean?

Not Encouraging

The National Climatic Data Center estimates that nearly 40 percent of America suffers from *severe* drought conditions,¹ affecting 26 states.² Some of these places—particularly the South—have been unusually dry since the summer of 1998. Brad Rippey of the U.S. Department of Agriculture writes in his “Drought Overview”:

Current impacts across the country rival some of the most formidable droughts of the last century. According to the National Climatic Data Center, more than one-third (about 36 percent) of the contiguous U.S. was in severe to extreme drought, based on the Palmer Drought Index, at the end of June 2002. This is comparable to the size and duration of the drought that peaked across the U.S. during the summer of 1988, but only the Dust Bowl 1930’s and the Drought of the 1950’s stand out as more significant, national-scale droughts since the beginning of the 20th century.³

The “U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook through October 2002” is not very encouraging either.⁴ According to this report by the National Weather Service’s Climate Prediction Center, the South will see the best chance for returning to normal conditions, while the Western Plains will experience short-term improvement. However, the Mid-Atlantic and Rocky Mountain regions will remain static or

worsen, and the Northeast will enter drought conditions. Certain areas of North and South Carolina, among the states hardest hit by drought, need 12-15 inches of rain to bring precipitation levels back to near normal. These predictions bode ill for the nation’s agriculture and forestlands.

For instance, Arizona lies near the drought’s heart in the West. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman declared the whole state a drought disaster area in May because of some of the worst drought conditions in a century. Arizona farmers may lose 60 to 90 percent of their crops in 2002, depending on what they grow and where they grow it. Ranchers have been forced to reduce their herds 20 percent because of the drought, driving beef prices to new lows.⁵

Nationally, the USDA forecasts:

Corn production in 2002 will total 8.89 billion bushels, 7% below last year and the lowest since 1995. . . . Soybean production is expected to drop 9% from last year to 2.63 billion bushels, while wheat will be down 14% at 1.69 billion bushels and cotton 9% lower at 18.4 million 480-pound bales.⁶

In addition, Secretary Veneman has made \$150 million available to farmers raising cattle in areas most severely affected by the drought, particularly Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Nebraska, where “at least 75 percent of the pasture and range crops in these states is currently rated as poor or very poor.”⁷

As for forestlands, June through early July saw massive fires mainly in the West. The Hayman fire in Colorado’s Pike National Forest de-

ize

stroyed 137,760 acres and 600 structures, making it the worst wildfire in that state's history. In central Arizona, the 85,000-acre Rodeo fire, already the worst in Arizona's history, merged with the Chediski fire to destroy 468,638 acres and more than 400 structures. Large wildfires also burned in Alaska, southern California, New Mexico, Utah, and Georgia.

The end of July into August saw the fire situation worsen considerably:

According to the National Inter-agency Coordination Center, nearly 600,000 acres of vegetation were scorched by wildfires nationally in the last week, bringing year-to-date totals through August 6 to more than 4.6 million acres. This is more than twice the average of the previous 10 years to date (despite below-average areal wildfire consumption east of the Mississippi River), and nearly 625,000 acres more than the total for the same period in the year 2000, which ended as the year with the most area consumed by wildfires since modern records began in 1960.⁸

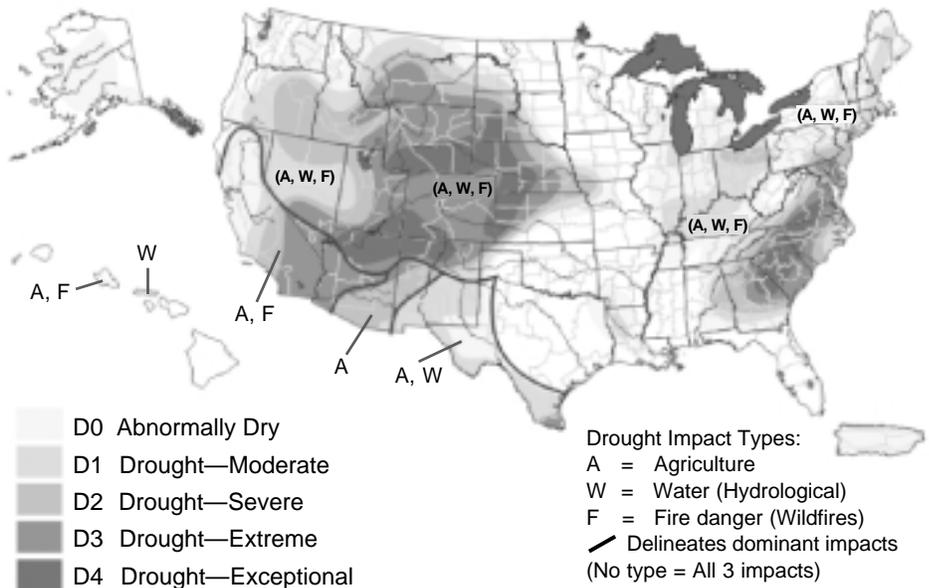
Along with the drought, foolish forest-management practices—leaving rather than logging old growth, known to firefighters as “fuel”—are receiving blame for this colossal devastation.

Resultant Effects

Drought brings more problems than just lack of rain. Such conditions cause other “natural” consequences. As noted, we are witnessing one of the

U.S. Drought Monitor

August 13, 2002
Valid 8 a.m. EDT



The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary.

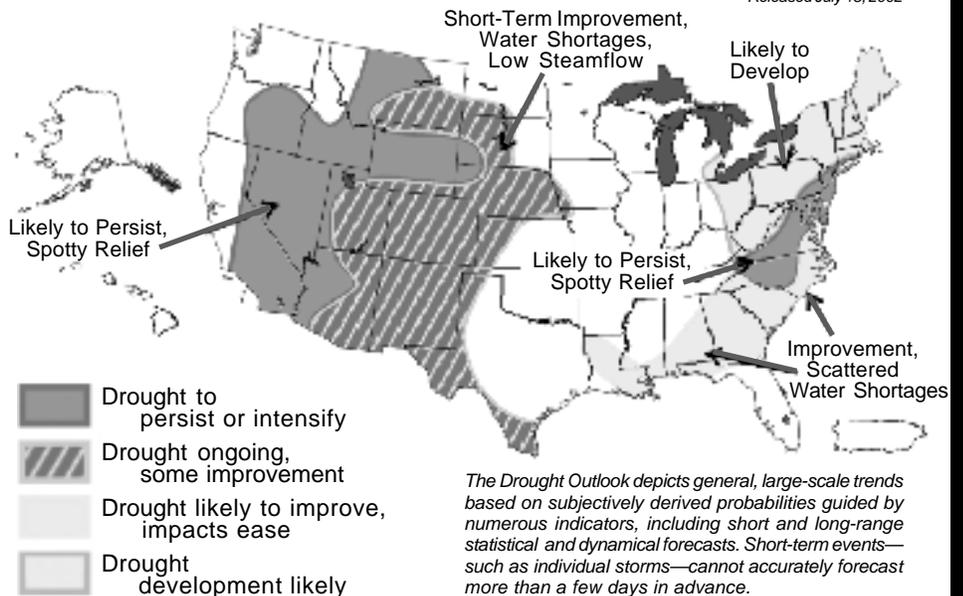
Released Thursday, August 15, 2002

<http://drought.unl.edu/dm>

Author: Mark Svoboda, ND MC

U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook

Through October 2002
Released July 18, 2002



The Drought Outlook depicts general, large-scale trends based on subjectively derived probabilities guided by numerous indicators, including short and long-range statistical and dynamical forecasts. Short-term events—such as individual storms—cannot accurately forecast more than a few days in advance.

<http://cpc.ncep.noaa.gov>

USDA, National Drought Mitigation Center, NOAA

Dry All Over

The National Drought Mitigation Center monitors drought conditions across the United States. As August wore on, the picture changed little from the previous month, showing just under half the country suffering from lack of rainfall. The forecast through October gives some hope for relief here and there—but few signs that the drought will lift anytime soon.

most spectacular effects of extended dry weather: forest fires. As the drought continues, however, new problems beyond tinder-dry vegetation have begun to crop up.

USA Today reported on two of these resultant conditions in early August. One story declares: “Across the parched western half of the USA, creepy-crawlies are boring through forests, invading rangelands and chomping on crops, making an already bad season worse.”⁹ The article goes on to chronicle the attacks of bark beetles, grasshoppers, Mormon crickets, and West-Nile-Virus-carrying mosquitoes. On the grasshopper front alone, “some infestations are the worst since the Great Depression, costing millions of dollars in lost crops and insecticide bills.”¹⁰

A second article contends that “drought is driving wild critters into the suburbs.”¹¹ Occasionally, bears wander down from the mountains into populated areas, but this “invasion” is far more diverse, including snakes, bighorn sheep, ducks, and rats as well. Experts believe scarce water and the resulting food shortage is forcing these animals to extend their range. Nationally, out-of-bounds wild animals cause an average \$22 billion in damage each year, drought or not.¹²

Drought is partially responsible for the deaths of millions of bees in Italy.¹³ Though this has not become a specific problem in America, something like it could very well devastate the U.S. bee population, already reeling from a mite infestation. Beyond producing honey, bees are necessary to pollinate food crops.

One little known byproduct of drought is a substantial rise in rabies cases, both in wild animals and humans. Craig Levy, manager of Arizona’s rabies program, explains: “The most significant cases of outbreaks in animals almost always occur during drought periods. And with prolonged drought, animals tend to get more concentrated around bodies of water, so you get more animal-to-animal contact.”¹⁴ Subsequently, their contact with humans increases as they move into populated areas in search of food.

We have still not encountered what may be the worse result of drought: famine. However, it is prophesied for

the end time. It is the third seal of Revelation 6:5-6, interpreted by Jesus in Matthew 24:7. Even a wealthy and productive nation like the United States can be brought to its knees by famine—and our vaunted pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality could do little to stop it.

“Acts of God”

Behaviors have consequences. Actions have reactions. Causes have effects. This is a law of nature that many moderns have sadly forgotten, or in their hubris believe that they can mitigate.

Because of man’s proclivity to rationalize and justify his actions—as well as his tendency toward shortsightedness—God works on a huge canvas in order to teach humanity spiritual lessons. Yet, even the fall of great nations and the deaths of millions of people fail to impress the truth on some. The Bible shows this in the stories of God’s dealings with Israel and Judah over 2,500 years ago. He called Assyria to invade Israel several times, carting off hundreds of thousands of slaves before ultimately conquering the nation, and they still did not make the connection between their sinfulness, particularly their idolatry, and their destruction (II Kings 17:5-23). A similar series of painful events befell Judah just over a hundred years later. The books of Jeremiah and Lamentations describe how few understood how their sins had brought on the calamities that reduced and eventually destroyed their nation.

Through Amos, God shows us that He often uses natural disasters to show His displeasure with human—and particularly, Israelite—behavior (Amos 4:6-13; 3:2). These “acts of God” occur on a scale so immense that man’s activities have little or no effect on their outcomes. Who can stop the earth from shaking? Who can hold back the howling wind and driving rains? Who can plug the magma vents of the earth? Who can “prime the pump” to make the rain fall and break a drought? Man is essentially powerless against the awesome forces of nature, and if we believe that God is nature’s Creator, we should

ask ourselves why such things occur.

The Bible is not silent on drought—in fact, it clearly attributes drought to God’s judgment for disobedience. For instance, God says in Leviticus 26:18-20:

And after all this, if you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins . . . I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit. (See Deuteronomy 28:23-24)

God also speaks through Amos about His reactions to Israel’s backsliding, a type of what will happen in the end time:

I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me. (Amos 4:7-8; see Jeremiah 14:1-6 for a similar denunciation of Judah.)

Though we cannot say that every dry spell is a curse from God, we would be foolish to think that none of them is. When natural disasters strike, it is prudent policy to take the time to evaluate our personal relationships with God, and if necessary, return to Him. Frequently, the prophets humbly interceded before God in behalf of their ignorant and sinful countrymen (see Amos 7:1-6; Daniel 9), and we can do the same (see “Should We Pray for the World?” in this issue). Perhaps then “the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15).

However, Amos 7:7-9 shows that a time comes when God will have had enough of sin and will not relent any longer:

Thus He showed me: Behold, the Lord stood on a wall made with a

(continued on page 16)

Part Three

The last two articles have focused on strange women and the warning given to us in Proverbs 7 about how they seduce foolish men. The Bible provides two examples of such women—Miss Heresy and Miss Babylon—who are strangers to God because He does not identify with their character, attitude, or conduct.

We also saw that these two women share an attribute that helps us to apply the warning in Proverbs 7 to them: They were both sexually immoral. This time, we will examine a second common symbol that highlights another aspect of their lives—and ours.

Look again at the descriptions of Miss Heresy and Miss Babylon, and note the references to *drinking* and to *cups*:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made *drunk with the wine* of her fornication.” So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a *golden cup* full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman, *drunk* with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement. (Revelation 17:1-6)

The description of the system of Miss Babylon also contains references to drinking and to drinking vessels:

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a habitation of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every

unclean and hated bird! For all the nations have *drunk of the wine* of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury.” And I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Render to her just as she rendered to you, and repay her double according to her works; in the *cup* which she has mixed, mix for her double.” (Revelation 18:1-6)

Both women are holding cups, within which are fornications, abominations, martyrdoms, and general filthiness. The *cup* symbolizes various experiences, and the people who partake of the cups of these strange women share these experiences, as well as their consequences.

Drinking of Christ's Cup

In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night when Jesus Christ was betrayed and captured, He prayed, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this *cup* pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). He was asking not to have to *experience* what He knew was in that figurative cup.

In “Are You Drinking of the Master's Cup?” (*Forerunner*, March 1999), Philip Shields tells of an ancient Hebrew tradition: When a young man and woman were to be betrothed (engaged) for marriage, the groom poured wine into his cup and invited the woman to drink of it. The choice was hers: If she drank from it, she was considered betrothed to the young man. She was agreeing to experience all the things that his life entailed, the good as well as the bad. When the woman drank of the cup, she drank of the marriage covenant and accepted it. Paul refers to this when he tells the church in II Corinthians 11:2: “For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.”

As Jesus sat at His last Passover with His disciples, He poured wine into His cup and blessed it, telling the disciples, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the

(continued on page 17)

Strange Women

(continued from page 6)

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Even as Christ has paid our indebtedness to sin and death to set us free, we are now under obligation to give our lives to Him in obedience to righteousness. Even as we were the slaves of sin while incurring the debt, we are now to give ourselves as His slaves for obedience to righteousness.

Exodus 6:6 contains the first biblical mention of redemption: "Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.'" At this time, He does not mention the redemption price, only that it will be at the cost of great judgments.

Exodus 13:2, 14-16 supplies those details:

Sanctify to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and animal; it is Mine. . . . So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What is this?" that you shall say to him, "By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animal. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem." It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.

We can safely conclude that the price of buying the Israelites' freedom was the devastation of Egypt's land, and above all, the killing of Egypt's firstborn. God designed the redemption of Israel's firstborn to remind them of the high cost of their liberty. The Egyptians slain for Israel's release belonged to God just as surely as the Israelites, but God used them to pay for Israel's freedom. That collective sacrifice became a type of Christ. The practical inference is that Israel was obligated to the One who paid the price—God. To us, that God would use virtually an entire nation to pay for another nation's freedom can be a stunning, even shocking concept. However, God is Creator. He owns everything and is certainly free to do as He pleases.

God will even things out later, though, as Isaiah 19:18-25 shows. Then, Egypt will once again be a great nation. The redeeming of Israel's firstborn was to serve as a costly and constant reminder that freedom is not free and that they were obligated to God for their redemption from Egypt. Forgetfulness produces ingratitude, which in turn produces disobedience because such people are no longer motivated by a sense of obligation to the One who worked so powerfully in their behalf (Deuteronomy 8:10-20).

Obligation and Fellowship with Christ

To this point, we have examined the legal basis upon which our liberty and obligation rest. But something more wonderful and valuable beyond price is provided—a relationship with our Redeemer, a continuing, personal, loving friendship with our Elder Brother and loving Father. Christ encourages us in Matthew 28:20, ". . . and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This phrase is more literally "all the days until the end of days." Hebrews 13:5 adds more comfort by proclaiming, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

That we believe this is vital to building faith because it is so difficult for us to believe the great God would actually be aware of ones so puny as us out of billions He could choose from. A series of verses from Proverbs and one from John give instruction about how important this concept is in giving encouragement and hope.

Proverbs 17:17: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

Proverbs 18:24: "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

Proverbs 27:10: "Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, nor go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity; better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far away."

John 15:13-15 ties these together by bringing Jesus Christ into the picture: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you."

These proverbs are not saying a brother cannot be a true friend or that somehow a friend from outside the family will prove a better help in time of need than a

family member. They do not pit a brother against a friend, but use “brother” in the sense of the friendship of David and Jonathan. In that kind of friendship, the friends are truly as brothers should be. In adversity, a true friend functions as if he were really a brother. The spiritual reality for us is that Jesus is both Friend and Brother.

Proverbs 18:24 is a mild caution against having too many friends, of spreading oneself too thin. It is better to have truly good friends who will stick with us through thick and thin. Understood within the context of these four verses is a warning that, if one has too many interests as a result of having too many friends, the one true friendship we can develop with Christ—who really will stick with us through thick and thin—will probably be the one pushed aside. It is better to be loyal to one true friend who is faithful at all times than numerous unreliable ones.

Proverbs 27:10 directly confronts the subject of obligation and loyalty in human experience. The first clause is simply a Hebraic way of saying, “Don’t desert tried and true friends.” An available friend is better than an unavailable relative. The second and third clauses reinforce the first. Be loyal to and rely upon help that is near, tried, and true.

John 15:13-15 presents us with an interesting and exciting expansion of our place within our relationship with Christ. Redemption, at first glance, elevates us from being a slave of unrighteousness and Satan to being a slave of righteousness and Jesus Christ. Yet, here Christ elevates our calling to an almost unimaginable height—intimate friendship with Him and the Father.

In many cases, our understanding and therefore our appreciation of this falls short of what it should be. Few or none of us have known either the depths of actual, physical slavery to another individual or the heights of walking the halls of power. During the Clinton administration, there existed a small group of people known as the F.O.B.: “friends of Bill”—Bill Clinton, that is. Outsiders conferred respectability and influence upon them because of their unique relationship with the President. In ancient Rome, the friends of the Caesar had greater access to him than his governmental counselors and military advisors. History says they had access to him at all times, even into his bedchambers.

A slave would never know such a relationship. A slave never receives a reason for the work assigned him; he simply must do it because he has no other choice. However, a friend of Christ is a confidant of the One in power, who shares the knowledge of His purpose with him. Then the friend voluntarily adopts it as his own, perhaps for no other reason than the basis of their friendship.

We do not follow Christ simply because of some chance impulse. We have been specifically chosen, summoned by Him to be His friend! Here is our obligation set boldly and clearly before us: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should

go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give it you” (John 15:16). We have been specifically appointed, ordained, placed in this unique relationship that we may produce the right things in life.

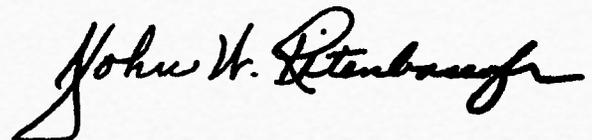
At first, our obligation rests upon the fact of Jesus giving Himself as the price of our spiritual redemption from slavery and death. If we have any sense at all—any discernment of what He has rescued us from and what He has given us the opportunity to possess—our sense of gratitude should explode in zeal and motivate us to loyalty because we owe Him so much!

Our sense of obligation is further built and strengthened by the knowledge that we have been specifically summoned and appointed to share in an intimate, loving, family relationship and friendship that He sustains through His office as High Priest. If we have any sense of gratitude for His work in intervening, leading, guiding, correcting, and perfecting our character so that we produce much fruit and love one another, our sense of obligation will be further stirred to ensure that we do not let Him down in any area of life. We will always strive to glorify Him.

This motivational factor is largely dependent upon feeling—but not the sickeningly sweet sentimentality of some of this world’s Christianity. This feeling is derived from a clear understanding of what has been done and continues to be done in our behalf. This deep, heartfelt, and comprehending feeling arises in the minds of people who have had firsthand experience with the suffering that sin and death bring. They know in their heart of hearts that they are guilty of rebellion against this wonderful Personality who created us, died for us, and continues to be our friend through thick and thin. They know He greatly desires that friendship to continue for all eternity because He is changing us to be like Him and be one with Him.

Hebrews 12:6-10 tells us that God chastens every son He loves, and He does this that we might be partakers of His holiness. We are not nameless, faceless, impersonal blobs to Him. Moreover, He and His purpose are surely something worth being obligated to! The person who keeps these thoughts near the forefront of his mind—and refreshes them from time to time lest he take them for granted—will feel such a sense of obligation that he will even attempt to pay Him back, knowing all the while it cannot be done. He will drive himself to self-control and sacrifice in obedience to Christ’s every wish. As one can see, the key to this motivational factor is not merely knowing that Christ is Savior, but also knowing and abhorring sin and its devastating effects.

In Christian love,



(continued from page 9)

and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (I Timothy 2:1-5)

Not “all men” are in the church. Few “kings and all who are in authority” are converted, if any. Nevertheless, we are to be praying for and about them. Are we? When was the last time we prayed for the President? When did we last intercede and give thanks for our governor, mayor, congressmen, senators? Abraham prayed for Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20:7). The Persian emperor Cyrus asked for prayers from God’s people (Ezra 6:3, 10).

Imagine meeting our neighbors in the resurrection. They are thrilled to see us in the Family of God. How will they feel if we divulge that we never ever uttered a word about them to our Father? Though they are now “people of the world,” they are our future brothers and sisters once they are converted. They will come to a knowledge of the truth and will be saved in God’s time. We should not be so short-sighted by failing to pray for them.

We know there is coming a time of captivity for modern-day Israel, just as Judah went as captives to Babylon. When that happened, God told them to pray for the city in which they were held captive! Notice Jeremiah 29:7: “And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.”

God shows no partiality. If we are growing in God’s image, neither will we show partiality—not even in our prayers.

Harmonizing Beliefs

How do we harmonize praying for people of the world with the concepts of coming out of the world?

It is true that we are not of this world, but we live in it. We cannot totally avoid having regular day-to-

day interactions with uncalled people, or else we would have to leave the earth (I Corinthians 5:9-12; John 17:14-15). Besides, if we stopped interacting with sinners, where would our light shine? A light is most needed, and most effective, where there is darkness. We are the light of the world but do not participate in “the unfruitful works of darkness” (Ephesians 5:8-12).

We are *not* to love the world—the cosmos, the lifestyle—but we are to show love toward the people of the world. God does—to the point of having given His only begotten Son to die for the world so that all who believe in Him could be saved and not perish. This love for the people of the world includes praying for them in various ways.

It is right to pray for a city and its residents whose lives have been ripped apart by a catastrophe, manmade or natural. It is right to mourn, cry, and sigh, for the brokenhearted mom whose little girl has been kidnapped, for shattered families working through a messy divorce, and for the nation itself—that God be merciful to all of us.

God says to leave the world’s values and priorities. We seek higher values, the world to come and its priorities. We are not trying to save the world now, but we are allowed to have feelings for our fellow human beings. We do not find pleasure in the things the world’s people do, but we do care for them.

However, we should never forget John 15:18-19. The world hates us because we are not part of their way of life. We are not of the world. We are different—from a different world, as it were, but we still hurt when others hurt. We need to be a people who sigh and cry about the suffering and evils we see, begging God, “Your Kingdom come.”

The next time you feel a need to pray for your neighbors, for someone in distress, for the President and other leaders, or for the nation itself, please do so. God says we should.

—Staff

Sky Like Iron, Earth Like Bronze

(continued from page 12)

plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said: “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam.”

The plumb line is a symbol of judgment, a tool God uses to see if His people are upright. A time comes in the life of a people when they become so “out of plumb” that God must act swiftly and harshly to punish for sin and bring them back into line. We cannot know when this point will be reached, but the state of our society suggests it may not be far off.

Thus, God says: “Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (Amos 4:12). Are we prepared? Will it be a meeting of friends or enemies? Acts of God, like the present drought, should prod us to ask questions like these to prepare us for the Kingdom of God.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Endnotes

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Strange Women

(continued from page 13)

new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:27-28). By literally drinking from His cup, they each accepted the terms of the New Covenant. It was a symbolic betrothal or engagement of the church, the Israel of God, to Christ. This is part of what we commemorate with each Passover service—our spiritual engagement to Christ, which will culminate with the marriage feast after He returns (Revelation 19:9).

Before we were called out of this world, we all walked according to the course of the world (Ephesians 2:2-3). We were the sons and daughters of disobedience, conducting ourselves in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and mind. We drank from the cups of Miss Babylon and Miss Heresy by ingesting a false religion, or drinking of the culture around us that God says is *filthiness*.

This is why God tells us to come out of Babylon—so that we do not share the sins in her promiscuous cup and the consequences that God promises He will pour out upon her.

Formerly, we were slaves to sin and its consequences. Now, under the New Covenant, we drink from Christ’s cup and agree to His terms. This frees us from the penalty of sin as well as making us responsible to remain faithful to this spiritual engagement.

Paul warns us that God is jealous toward His people, and that they must choose to whom they will be loyal: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?” (I Corinthians 10:21-22).

It is plain that we must make a choice: We either drink of the cup of Christ and remain faithful to our commitment, or we drink of the cup of demons and the sinful system they rule. These two cups are mutually exclusive. We cannot have both!

If we have drunk from Christ’s cup, can we continue to sip from the cup of this world’s culture or its false religious system? Can we drink of His cup, accepting His proposal for marriage, and still have intimate interactions with Miss Babylon or Miss Heresy? Even in our morally debased secular world, this would be grounds for nullifying that covenant of future marriage.

Possessing Our Vessel

The Bible is full of warnings about fornication and promiscuity, and it is worthwhile to see just how far this principle reaches:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification [God’s will is that we be holy, pure, and set apart]: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor . . . (I Thessalonians 4:3-4).

The phrase “possess his own vessel” can mean a

number of different things.

First, the visual imagery corresponds to the theme of being faithful to a cup—to the marriage commitment we have made. It could be translated, “that each of you should know how to *be faithful to his covenant* in sanctification and honor.”

Second, this phrase refers to self-control, specifically of one’s own body. The New International Version translates this verse as, “that each of you should *learn to control his own body* in a way that is holy and honorable.” Paul, in instructing the entire church—both male and female, married and single—shows it is the duty of *all* to preserve purity with regard to relationships.

Third, this verse refers to the way one acts with regard to a spouse, present or future. The Revised Standard Version translates this as “that each one of you know how to *take a wife for himself* in holiness and honor.” I Peter 3:7 likewise refers to the wife as a weaker vessel to which husbands are commanded to give honor.

Continuing in I Thessalonians 4:5-8:

. . . not in passion of lust [longing after something that is forbidden], like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should *take advantage of* and *defraud* his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

Verse 6 includes the curious word “defraud.” To get the full understanding of what Paul is teaching here, we have to examine part of the God-plane ideal of the male/female relationship.

God’s ideal in this is that there is one (and only one) man for each woman, and one (and only one) woman for each man. It is very clear that God *hates* divorce (Malachi 2:16); He hates the breaking of that covenant, as well as the emotional pain that accompanies it, the scars that the children will have to bear, etc. As loathsome as divorce is to Him, however, sexual immorality is one of the reasons He gives for allowing divorce. He repeatedly warns against promiscuity, and He is very explicit that sex and everything that it involves are only allowable between two people who have made the commitment to each other for the duration of their physical lives.

Seeing I Thessalonians 4:3-8 in this light, part of our responsibility as Christians is purity within our relationships. We are responsible to control ourselves (“possess his vessel”) in an honorable way without lust or wrong desire. We also have to make sure we do not “go beyond”—cross the line—and defraud or cheat anyone in this matter.

The essence of what Paul is saying here is that even before a man is married, he can cheat his future spouse out of something! A man can be cheated out of the experience of completely sharing himself with a woman, who is in turn completely sharing herself with him, in a way neither of them has experienced before. Even if a man is not yet married, in essence he already “belongs” to the woman

that he will eventually marry, and vice versa for the woman. *Even when not married, we have to conduct ourselves as though we are!*

Sharing Oneself

It is clear, then, that a man's body belongs to his spouse—whether current or future. This is the principle behind the many warnings against physical promiscuity. But it can go even further than that:

Imagine a young man who is determined to remain physically pure, and yet shares the rest of himself—his emotions, specifically—with every girl he meets. Every girl in the county knows his hopes, fears, dreams, the innermost workings of his mind. When he marries, he will have shared everything about himself *except* his body. How would his wife feel, knowing that all the other girls had already “experienced” him in all but the sexual act?

In the same way, imagine a young lady who remains physically pure but shares her emotions with all the young men she meets. She will have shared parts of her innermost being, things that really belong to her future husband. This is one reason why God tells us, “Keep [guard] your heart with all diligence” (Proverbs 4:23)!

It is just as easy to be emotionally promiscuous as physically promiscuous, if not more so. And the dangers are significant: continually forming emotional bonds, only later to break them; make them again with someone else, then break them; make them, break them. It will not take long before emotional calluses begin to develop, and a person is unwilling to share him/herself anymore because of the inevitable pain that results. When these calluses develop, it is very difficult for any future relationship to be anywhere near as fulfilling as what God intends.

I Thessalonians 4:6 begins to take on an even deeper meaning when we consider that a basic definition of the word “defraud” is “to promise something one cannot or does not intend to deliver.” Today, many practice flirting. Along the same lines as emotional promiscuity, this kind of defrauding promises—either blatantly guaranteeing or merely appearing to—one's emotions, commitment, affections, etc., without meaning to or being able to follow through. Flirting gives the appearance of interest, or it may even be genuine interest, where one cannot follow through with his “promises.”

In the modern game of flirting, for example, a young man may behave in a manner that does not match up with his true intent. If he is demonstrating in his actions that a certain girl is the one (and only one) for him, yet is unprepared or refuses to follow through with that process, the girl has been defrauded or cheated. The man has been “promising” an emotional bond without following through. No wonder the Bible says, “Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing” (Proverbs 31:30)!

If we consider that individually we belong to our present or future spouse (physically *and* emotionally), we can see that certain actions are far from the ideal. That is, if it is inappropriate for a man to interact with a woman in a certain way if he were married to another, it is most likely still inappropriate even if he is *not yet* married.

Higher Spiritual Stakes

This same principle applies on the spiritual level, and the stakes are much higher. Proverbs 19:14 tells us that a prudent (sensible, understanding) wife is a gift from God. When we apply this to the New Covenant church, it reiterates that it is God that chooses who will be a part of the Bride for His Son. God the Father will be faithful to provide a wife that is prudent, sensible, etc., for His Son.

We each have this opportunity to be part of this perfect Bride that God is preparing for His Son. We have already drunk of the wine of betrothal, and now we are in the process of preparing to *be* the perfect mate. We do not have to worry about *finding* the perfect mate—God has already seen to that!

As mentioned before, Proverbs 4:23 tells us to “guard our heart,” to keep a tight reign on our affections, because our affections—the things we are interested in—have a tremendous impact on our direction in life.

Our responsibility now is to reject the other cups that we are offered. We have to ignore Miss Babylon's advances, with her suggestive glances, appealing and revealing clothing, and promises of fulfillment in “living for the moment.” We have to ignore the seemingly warm and appealing invitations from Miss Heresy, as she offers us shortcuts to where we want to go.

We are currently engaged to be married in a spiritual sense, but we must act as if the wedding has already passed, and we are now living faithfully with our Spouse. We cannot make promises or suggestions to this world that we are interested in her ways. We cannot act as if we see eye-to-eye with the mainstream religion. We cannot flirt with the ideas, attitudes, philosophies, and values of this world's system, nor can we take clandestine sips from these other cups. We have a God who is jealous over us, and He will not tolerate unfaithfulness.

There is a happy ending:

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand [the Bride of Christ], having His Father's name written on their foreheads. . . . These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins [they were faithful to their Husband, even before they were married]. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God. (Revelation 14:1, 4-5)

The Bride of Christ does not commit to one thing and then fool around on the side. Her word is sure and dependable.

We have each shared this cup of betrothal. If we remain faithful to it, we will have a place at the Wedding Supper of the finest wedding that will ever take place.

—David C. Grabbe

BIBLE STUDY: THE PARABLES OF THE MILLSTONE AND THE LOST SHEEP

In Matthew 18, the disciples ask Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Thinking that He was about to set up a great temporal kingdom, they want to know who would hold the primary offices and posts of honor and profit. Mark informs us that they had disputed this subject while traveling (Mark 9:34). Jesus

asks them what they had been arguing about. Luke adds that Jesus perceives their thoughts (Luke 9:47). The disciples, conscious that Jesus is aware of their dispute, are at first embarrassed into silence, but they eventually ask Him to decide it for them. Jesus’ reply are the parables found in Matthew 18:1-14.



1. What does Jesus mean by “unless you are converted and become as little children”? Matthew 18:1-5; 25:35-40; Mark 9:35; Psalm 51:10-13, 17; I Corinthians 14:20.

COMMENT: The word “converted” means to change or turn. Specifically, it means to change from one way of life or set of beliefs to another. Sometimes it means “regeneration”—beginning to live a new spiritual life. Jesus tells the disciples that their attitudes of ambition are wrong, and they must change or have no part in His Kingdom. To do this, they must be like small children, who, for the most part, lack arrogance and pride. Children are characteristically humble and teachable.

According to Mark, Jesus teaches them that, “if anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” The most humble Christian will be the most distinguished, and he who is willing to be esteemed last and least will be esteemed first. To regard oneself as God regards us is humility. One who receives and loves someone with an innocent child’s humble attitude, who may be weak in the faith, displays true Christian character and loves Jesus Christ. “Receive” in Matthew 18:5 means to approve, love, or treat with kindness; to aid in time of need.

2. How serious is an offence against a weak Christian? Matthew 18:6-9; Mark 9:42-50; Romans 14:19-23; I Corinthians 8:9-13; I John 2:1, 18-19, 28.

COMMENT: Anyone who causes a Christian who manifests this childlike attitude to sin, or who places anything in his way to impede his faithfulness, would be better off being weighted down and thrown to his death into the sea. It would be better for him to die before committing such a sin. Christ regards injuring or causing a weak Christian to sin as a very serious offence. We are all human, so offences will happen, but our Savior pronounces woe on the person who offends and causes others to sin. Anyone who leads others into sin bears great guilt. Only a deep-seated wickedness attempts to confuse and destroy another’s potential.

A Christian’s potential is so fabulous that he must do whatever he can to ensure it. No matter how important they are to us, we must abandon any worldly attachments, friendships, and employments that will lead us into sin, or we will receive eternal judgment. Of course, Jesus’ illustrations of cutting off a limb or plucking out an eye are

not literal, but He wants us to understand the stakes. It is far better to attain to eternal life without enjoying the pleasures of sin, than to enjoy them here in this life and be lost. Thus, Jesus emphasizes that we must remove temptation and avoid sin at all costs.

3. Why are weak Christians valuable to God? Matthew 18:10-11; Romans 14:1-4; 15:1-3; I Corinthians 1:26-29; Hebrews 1:14.

COMMENT: The explanation of why we should not despise weak Christians relates to the care Christ gives to them. First, God’s angels watch over and aid His followers. Some of the universe’s highest and noblest beings, who enjoy the favor and fellowship of God, minister to even the most obscure Christians! They are that precious to God.

Second, Christ Himself came to save the weak. He came in search of the weak and base that were lost, found them, and redeemed them, according to God’s great purpose. They may be obscure and little in the eyes of the world, but they cannot be objects of contempt if Christ sought them and died to save them.

4. Is something lost and then found more valuable to us than those things that we have with us? Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-10; James 5:19-20.

COMMENT: To demonstrate further the reason why we should not despise weaker Christians, Jesus illustrates the joy one feels when a lost possession is found. A shepherd rejoices over the recovery of one of his flock that had wandered away more than over all that stayed with him. Similarly, God rejoices when a person who has gone astray from His truth turns back to His way of life. In like manner, we rejoice most in our health when we recover from a serious disease. We rejoice more over a child rescued from danger than over those who were never at risk. We rejoice more when property is saved from fire or flood than when all was well and we took it for granted.

Certainly, God’s desires all to have salvation according to His joyful plan. He takes the most joy, however, from those who seem to defy the odds to grow and overcome more than others who are more naturally strong. The strong must “bear with” the weak (Romans 15:1), and together they will glorify God!