

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

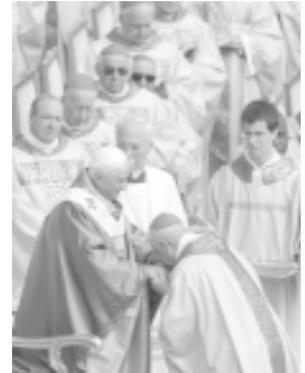
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Vatican Secretary of State Angelo Cardinal Sodano kisses the ring of Pope Benedict XVI as he leads his inaugural Mass in St. Peter's Square. The new Catholic pontiff, deeply concerned about the state of Christianity in Europe, has already outlined ambitious goals to combat the scourge of relativism and to re-evangelize the Continent. How much can he accomplish?
Reuters

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A Priceless Gift

Last month's *Personal*, "An Unpayable Debt and Obligation," had as its theme a subject that helps us to recognize that, even now, we stand indebted. We are obligated to the Father and Son for Their payment of a debt we could not possibly pay.

That debt was the penalty for our sins. Whether the debt accrued was small—because before our calling we had tried, perhaps very diligently, to keep from sinning by living a life of self-disciplined respectability and religiosity—or whether it was huge—because we had given ourselves over to outright, filthy hedonism as a drug-taking, street-walking harlot, or raped people of their incomes as a cheating, lying, power-hungry businessman—our debt was nonetheless too large to pay if we wanted life to continue with any hope of a far better quality of life.

The previous article centered on Jesus' parable in Luke 7:36-50, given as instruction to the respectable Pharisee, Simon. In it, a sinful woman, while weeping, anoints Jesus' feet, kisses them with her lips, and dries them with her hair in Simon's disapproving presence. Since most of us are not blatant sinners, we would identify more with the respectable Simon.

However, that article's overall purpose was for us to avoid falling under the judgment of I Corinthians 11:29: "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to him-

self, not discerning the Lord's body." None of us needs to fall short because we misunderstand and thus neglect the importance of what Jesus did in our behalf.

The Contemporary English Version (CEV) renders this verse, "If you fail to understand that you are the body of the Lord, you will condemn yourselves by the way you eat and drink." *The Amplified Bible* translates it, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discriminating and recognizing with due appreciation that [it is Christ's] body, eats and drinks a sentence (a verdict of judgment) upon himself."

These translations show two possible understandings of what Paul meant. The CEV contemplates our overall response in how we, knowing we are Christ's body, conduct our daily lives, whereas *The Amplified Bible* focuses on appreciation of Christ's literal sacrifice while actually taking the bread and wine. Both approaches are correct. In either case, Passover must affect our life in a positive way, or it brings judgment against us.

Along with appreciation and respect, God desires an understanding so deep, strong, and consistent that it motivates us to glorify Him by conforming to His will in daily life. This sense of obligation is not a maudlin sentimentality, but is of such sincere and intense gratitude that it gives us insight into the standard of selflessness Christ exemplified. We must strive to put it into practice

in our lives if we are to be like Them and be in our Father's Kingdom.

Put another way, our obligation is to love Them as They loved us—not a resigned attitude of “Okay, I’ll do it because I have to” that issues in low-level, letter-of-the-law obedience, but a love that expresses itself in fervent, sacrificial affection, as the woman in Luke 7 exemplified. This level of love is reasonable to pursue because it drives us far beyond mere superficial conformity. Notice how Romans 12:1-2 draws our attention to this:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Paul proclaims that this sacrificial love will serve to transform us and provide the proof we need to bolster us in following God's will.

A Second Powerful Motivator

The sense of obligation does not stand alone as a motivation for transformation. So that this way of life to which we have been called will make better sense, we must understand and appreciate another reality, one that will provide helpful motivation toward overcoming. There is nothing complicated about it. It is not only quite simple but also true—however, it is not always easily believed. Yet, if we believe it, it can provide significant purpose, impetus, and direction to the activities of our lives.

As children, every one of us had an intense desire to do something that mom or dad would not give us permission to do, despite all our emotional pleadings. Perhaps some of the women in their younger days sought permission to buy and wear a certain item of clothing that was suggestive but considered “in”—if one had it, she would be more acceptable to the group she wanted to impress. But Mama said, “No, good girls don’t do that.” Maybe for the men it was to be involved in an activity with a group of guys who were considered dangerous to a boy’s character because concerned parents did not approve of what they did or of their attitudes. In either case, when we asked why we could not do this, our parents would say, “Because.”

That would make us even more emotional because we really wanted to do whatever it was, and we could see nothing but good coming from it! Then, they might say, “Because I am your father [or mother].” They might even go so far as to say, “Because we are the such-and-such family, and we don’t do things like that.” Such responses left us quite frustrated because we could not get our way, nor could we see that our parents’ explanation was adequate. After all, we could not see any harm in it!

Believe it or not, a great deal of this appears in the Bible. It really should not surprise us because God is, after all, a Father with vast experience, and we are children who lack experience, wisdom, and foresight. God often gives commands with little explanation beyond the equivalent of “Because.”

By doing so, He is requiring that we live by faith. Do we trust Him? Sometimes He gives a broad and brief

explanation, but whether brief or none at all, do we still trust Him in a good attitude until a more complete explanation and understanding are provided? We need to see what is behind God’s method, because if we grasp it, we will see the motivational tool that is the subject of this article.

Malachi 3:16-17 says:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. “They shall be Mine,” says the LORD of hosts, “on the day that I make them My jewels, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.”

This familiar scripture contains a word that has important implications to this subject. The English word translated as “jewels” in verse 17 is not entirely wrong, but it is not a precise translation of what the Hebrew word, *segullâh* (*Strong’s* #5459, transliterated in various ways), really means. The simplest usage of *segullâh* is to indicate personal possession. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* expounds its meaning (remember that *we* are being described):

Cegullah signifies property in the special sense of a private possession one personally acquired and carefully preserves. Six times this word is used of Israel as God’s personally acquired (elected, delivered from Egyptian bondage, and formed into what He wanted them to be), carefully preserved, and privately possessed people. . . .

This is not the first time this word appears in the Bible, which distinction belongs to Exodus 19:5, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.” *Segullâh* is translated as “special treasure.”

The *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* explains:

This manifestation of the love of God to Israel formed only the prelude, however, to that gracious union which Jehovah was now about to establish between the Israelites and Himself. If they would hear His voice, and keep the covenant which was about to be established with them, they should be a costly possession to Him out of all nations. . . . *Cagulaah* does not signify property in general, but valuable property, that which is laid by, or put aside, hence a treasure of silver and gold. . . .

It is helpful to note how God emphasizes *segullâh* to impress its importance on Israel—and now us—by saying, “For all the earth is Mine.” This establishes a reference point, indicating that He could have considered any people on earth as His own personal and private treasure, but He did not. Just as a person carefully and discriminately chooses his personal jewelry according to his own criteria, so He chose Israel then and chooses us now.

In I Chronicles 29:3, *segullâh* is again translated as “special treasure,” but the context provides a clear use of the term. It involves the preparations David made for the building of the Temple so Solomon could construct it.

David explains that from his own *personally obtained and set-aside treasure*, he gave so much gold and silver.

Thus far, we have seen references from the Old Testament. Obviously, because *segullâh* is a Hebrew word, it does not appear in the New Testament. However, the same sense appears in the New Testament concept of being God’s special treasure, and through it, His personal ownership of us becomes much more important and personal.

I Peter 2:9 reads, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” The King James Version (KJV) translators use the word “peculiar” rather than “special.” Is this correct? At first glance, it may not seem so, but this is only because the word’s usage has changed through the centuries. However, according to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, *peculiar* means:

The Latin *peculium* means “private property,” so that “peculiar” properly = “pertaining to the individual.” In modern English the word has usually degenerated into a half-colloquial form for “extraordinary,” but in Biblical English it is a thoroughly dignified term for “esp. one’s own” . . .

Why Is the Special Treasure Different?

The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1:13-14:

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

This chapter extols the uniqueness of the church, which Paul refers to as “the purchased possession.” Earlier, we did not search out how Israel became God’s personal possession, but it was through the destruction of Egypt, and more importantly, with the killing of Egypt’s firstborn as the price for Israel’s liberty. God “purchased” Israel and its liberties by this means.

What we see taking form is a separate and unique people. Even though all mankind owes its existence to God as their Creator, Israel and the church are both separate and unique because they belong to God in a way other people and nations do not. Amos 3:2 declares, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” God purchased these people at awesome cost and thus came into possession of them.

When Israel became His property, it gave them

certain liberties. So it is with us, but we receive more besides. Among other things regarding the uniqueness of the church, Paul explains that its members have been set apart (redeemed and freed from the rest of mankind and its ways) and sealed through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The term *sealed* is important because it embraces, not only the sense of ownership, but also security and guarantee. Individual seals were unique, used on documents to identify the sender and to render the content secure from prying eyes and theft, and so they were a guarantee that the contents would reach the intended destination.

God’s children may look no different on the outside, but they have been given something inside; something spiritual, that makes them different from others and special to God. They are different only because of something God has done, which also makes them His personal, treasured possession.

John 1:12-13 declares, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” That “something” is the right or *power* (KJV) to believe the Word of God, which begets us and imparts to us the knowledge of God and His

purpose, faith, the fear of God, the love of God, and so much more.

Billions of people have access to the Bible. They read it and may even attend church and call themselves Christian, but they then ignore and disobey huge amounts of it, thus not living by every Word of God. This is actual evidence that those who are part of God's special treasure do indeed possess something that sets them apart and motivates them to obey more completely.

Deuteronomy 7:6 begins a section that reveals one of the major reasons why God has done this. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth." *Segullâh* appears again as "special treasure," but along with *segullâh* is another, more familiar term that iden-

tifies being a special treasure as an aspect of a larger subject: the blessings and responsibilities of *holiness*.

Holy literally means "set apart." Being a special treasure has set us apart from other people. Others, without this advantage, are not set apart. When this principle from the Old Testament is combined with Ephesians 1:13-14, we can understand that the blessing of having the Spirit of God makes us special, different, and holy (Romans 8:9).

This occurs because, in God's self-revelation, His Spirit imparts faith and the love of God beyond what the natural mind is capable. It is becoming clear that being blessed as a special, holy people imposes responsibilities on us that we are required—indeed commanded—to meet. The standards within this relationship are high, requiring gifts and growth to meet them.

Specialness and Faithfulness

Suppose a man is unmarried but attracted to someone of the opposite sex. They become acquainted and begin spending time together. The more they see of each other, the greater the bond grows. What is happening through this process is that they are becoming special treasures to each other.

During the course of their courting, they become so special to each other that they feel blessed and decide to marry. At this point, the specialness has reached such an intense state that they are completely set apart for each other. However, this intense specialness and setting apart also bring with them responsibilities to each other that did not exist before.

Now the married couple is special to each other above all other people on earth, so much so that God says that for this cause "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife" (Genesis 2:24). Their specialness to each other overrides responsibilities to all other people. The only one to whom the responsibilities of being "special" and "set apart" are greater is God.

Deuteronomy 7:7-11 continues the theme introduced in verse 6, leading to an overview of why we were chosen and of our responsibilities:

The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays

those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

Being chosen to be God's special treasure and become holy had nothing to do with any of our accomplishments, race, nationality, sex, IQ, or academic training. We are special and thus blessed because God loves us and because He is faithful to His promises to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reinforces these points by emphasizing that He is faithful, as well as by warning us that He is a God of justice.

Therefore, He is clearly stating that the foundation of this relationship is based completely in what He is within Himself, otherwise the relationship would have never gotten past the casual stage of mere acquaintance. The vast majority in the world who call themselves Christian are merely acquainted with God. By God's personal calling (John 6:44), we have been made special—to have an intense and intimate relationship with Him. The very character of God, not any excellence in those He has chosen, is the basis for our being special.

This gives us no room for pride. He was not somehow attracted to us because we had been seeking Him all our lives, were so attractive, or had done so many good things. On the other hand, this blessing gives cause for a great deal of gratitude, and just as in a marriage, this specialness brings responsibilities.

God proclaims Himself to be the faithful God, and in Deuteronomy 7:11, He broadly states the means by which we are expected to prove our faithfulness in return: We are responsible to keep His commandments, statutes, and judgments. As in a marriage, because the

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“Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Genesis 25:34

What Is *Your* Lentil Soup?

Not long ago, a section of Scripture became the subject of a great deal of meditation and study. It was stimulated by a conversation with a friend whom I had known when attending a former church fellowship. When the church began to split among the various splinter groups, he became frustrated and left. He is not attending anywhere now.

As I listened to him talk, it became apparent where his concerns and interests were—all in material things. He is more concerned about worldly pursuits than the will of God. He now works on the Sabbath and makes enough to have a new pickup, new jet skis, and a fairly new house, bought just a few years ago. It made me think that he was despising his calling in much the same way Esau despised his birthright.

So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, “Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.” Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright as of this day.” And Esau said, “Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?” Then Jacob said, “Swear to

me as of this day.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:27-34)

Because of that conversation, I became intrigued about this section of Scripture. How did Esau come to be of a mind that he could sell his birthright so easily? Can we, like my old friend, follow the same path but in a spiritual sense? What must we do to cherish rather than despise our far more glorious inheritance?

Esau’s Squandered Inheritance

What Esau despised was no small thing. Even if we disregard the earlier promises given to Abraham and Isaac of descendants as numerous as the sand of the seashore, the Promised Land of Canaan, royal dynasties, and the gates of their enemies, Esau stood to inherit a literal fortune. As we have learned over the years, the birthright contained a two-fold promise. Herbert Armstrong called them the promises of race and grace, that is, physical promises and spiritual promises. We can see this in summary in Genesis 12:1-3:

Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.

“Thus Esau despised his inheritance.”

I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

What a wonderful inheritance for Abraham’s descendants! God promises a national homeland, national greatness (power and prosperity), and national prestige. Abraham’s descendants would ultimately be a force for good on the planet, especially because from Israel would come the Messiah.

If we consider just what Esau would inherit when Isaac died, it still was quite a huge amount of wealth. In Genesis 24:35, Abraham’s servant says to Rebekah’s family, “The LORD has blessed my master greatly, and he has become great; and He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys.” Just a chapter later, Moses records, “And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac,” except for “gifts” that he bestowed on his other sons by his concubines (Genesis 25:5-6).

The birthright was customarily passed down from father to eldest son. Being Isaac’s eldest son (verse 25), Esau would have stood to gain quite a lot, at least in the way of wealth. A bowl of lentils hardly compares to “flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys”! How could he have despised his awesome inheritance so easily?

Esau’s Real Treasure

What was Esau’s problem? He did not treasure his inheritance! Jesus tells us in His Sermon on the Mount, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). People usually only sell something when they value something else more. Esau did not place a high

enough value on the birthright, so he sold it for a pittance.

Genesis 25:27-29 helps us to zero in on what Esau treasured: “And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field. . . . And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game. . . . [A]nd Esau came in from the field, and he was weary.” Each of these short sentences tells us how much Esau treasured hunting. When a person is known to be skillful in some area, it can be assumed that he spent large amounts of time and energy honing his craft. That Isaac loved to eat the results of Esau’s hunts validated the younger man in his love of hunting. Finally, when a man wears himself by doing a task with all of his might, it points to where his interests lie—what he loves doing.

The Interlinear Bible renders Genesis 25:27 as, “And Esau became a man knowing hunting, a man of the field.” *Field* is *sadeh* is translated as “country,” “field,” “ground,” “land,” or “soil.” *Vine’s* comments, “This word often represents the ‘open field’ where the animals roam wild.” This verse could be read, “Esau was . . . a man of the wild,” indicating where he felt most comfortable. He treasured his time out in the wild, and he had dedicated his life to pursuing the chase. By treasuring this “wild” existence over his birthright, Esau displayed how irresponsible he was toward it.

Would we want to bequeath our wealth to a child who was not preparing himself to govern it? It would be similar to the prodigal son taking his inheritance and squandering it (Luke 15:11-13). He, like Esau, was not disciplined and trained to govern it. If most of Esau’s time was spent out in the wild, how would he have been able to tackle the responsibilities of governing flocks and herds, gold and silver, male and female servants, donkeys and camels, as well as being his family’s head and leader?

Perhaps he should have stayed in the camp like Jacob so he would not

have lost the vision of a wonderful time to come contained in his inheritance. Jacob obviously valued it, although he obtained it by trickery and deceit. He also showed himself capable of governing it, as he seemed to know plenty about managing flocks and herds, as Genesis 29-30 bear out. Laban prospered greatly from Jacob’s expertise, and Jacob then prospered himself.

In Genesis 25:29, Esau came in from the field “weary.” Some versions render it “faint.” I can relate to this situation, having grown up hunting and fishing. In younger days, I would rather hunt than eat, and I often did. I remember coming home from a hunting trip on shaky legs, ready to eat anything, even if I did not like it. Esau came home in this condition and did his thinking and reasoning in this weakened state. Instead of reasoning with his head, he let his stomach decide.

His flesh was doing all the “thinking,” as we see in his response to Jacob’s opening offer: “And Esau said, ‘Behold I am going to die; and what good is this birthright to me?’” (verse 32). Was he really so famished that he was going to die? Would he have said this had he been more involved with his inheritance and working with it?

If he had taken just a moment to think about his inheritance and what was involved, he would never have made such a rash decision. This could not have been the only food in the camp of a very wealthy man like Isaac; it was merely the first food he came to. Esau, the favorite of his father, could easily have gone to his father and told him what Jacob had tried to do *and* received food to satisfy his hunger. But he did not want to wait—he wanted immediate gratification of his fleshly desires. He thought he had to have it right away.

It is worthwhile to note that Esau sold his birthright when he came in from hunting, *and* had his blessing stolen from him when he went out to

hunt (Genesis 27:5). He lost his entire inheritance while doing what he liked to do the most—being out in the wilderness hunting. While there is nothing wrong with hunting, there is a lesson in Esau’s single-minded pursuit of his physical desires.

Our Inheritance

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 15:4, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning.” The Bible records not just the good examples, but also the bad, so that we will avoid their pitfalls. Many people find it easy to become caught up in their work, the cares of the world, and their trials, rather than being focused on what is truly important. It can become very easy to neglect our present calling and the wonderful inheritance we have before us (Hebrews 2:3).

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus exhorts us to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” and whatever our Father knows we need He will give us. We have to make the Kingdom of God—our inheritance (Matthew 25:34)—the primary goal of our “hunt.” Like Esau, we need to find pleasure in seeking it and hone our skills to become better at it. We need to be so fixated on the pursuit of our goal that we are willing to go without food and rest to attain it.

Notice a few scriptures that describe the inheritance awaiting us:

- **Matthew 5:5:** Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- **Matthew 19:29:** And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.
- **II Corinthians 6:18:** I will be a Father to you, and you

shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.

- **James 2:5:** Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

- **Revelation 2:7, 26; 3:21:** To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. . . . I will give power over the nations. . . . I will grant to sit with Me on My throne.

- **Revelation 5:9-10:** . . . You . . . have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.

- **Revelation 21:7:** He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.

These are just a few of the scriptures dealing with our inheritance. This is what God wants us to treasure. He wants us to put such a high value on it that nothing ever becomes more important.

Are we pursuing or practicing anything in our lives right now that will leave us in such a weakened condition, physically and spiritually, that to get immediate relief we would be willing to sell our priceless inheritance for something no more valuable than a bowl of lentils? Are we reasoning through our flesh as Esau did?

Are we—in any way—saying, “What profit shall this inheritance be to me?” by living for the here-and-now; by telling ourselves that we have to have this thing now; by giving in to the pulls of the flesh; by selling out tomorrow for a little satis-

faction, good times, or boost to our ego today? Do we frequently find ourselves thinking, “I’ll just do it this time but never again”?

If we are, we are in serious danger of sharing Esau’s bitter disappointment (Genesis 27:30-40; Hebrews 12:14-17).

Where Is Our Treasure?

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.” (Matthew 16:24-27)

Our Savior is trying to explain the relative values of our physical lives and what we can humanly accomplish to what awaits us in what is commonly called the afterlife. In short, there is no comparison!

Notice the Bible’s consistency on the value of human life apart from God:

- **Ecclesiastes 1:2-4:** “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.
- **Job 14:1-2:** Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and fades away; he flees like a shadow and does not continue.

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Global Warming: Scie

Everyone talks about the weather, but no one ever does anything about it. So goes an old-as-the-hills adage that in fact lies at the crux of the current global warming debate. The issue boils down to this: *Can anyone do anything about the weather?*

The answer is a categorical “yes and no.” Yes, planting a number of trees around your house can lower the temperature in your patio. And yes, the Romans’ millennium-long, tree-cutting binge in North Africa did result in the desiccation of the region. An area that once enjoyed a temperate Mediterranean climate has come to experience searing heat and debilitating winds. Tree cutting with abandon in Palestine over many centuries probably explains today’s desert-like conditions there. David, who as a boy kept sheep and shared the environment with lions and bears, would not recognize Palestine’s arid waste today.

But, no, mankind is unable to effect *global* changes in climate. Fluctuations in average global temperatures appear to correlate with solar activity and indeed with supernova activity within the Milky Way. These are variables clearly beyond man’s control. Yet, in their pride, many scientists offer the “anthropogenic hypothesis” as an explanation for today’s global warming trends. That is, they assert the warming is taking place *because* of human activity. Specifically, they blame man’s burning of fossil fuels (that is, coal and oil) to generate power. This combustion, they aver, pours hydrocarbons, “greenhouse gases,” into the atmosphere. More airborne hydrocarbons increase the levels of carbon dioxide in the air—*increase* the earth’s “greenhouse” effect, which in turn results in warming temperatures worldwide. These scientists assert that mankind is indeed doing a whole lot to change the weather.

Is their position defensible? In his article, “Strange Science” (*First Things*, November 2004, pp. 5-7), Thomas S. Derr, Professor of Religion and Ethics at Smith College and the author of *Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism*, argues that it is not. In fact, he holds that a growing number of “skeptical” scientists take issue with the global

warming thesis. Their writing, he submits, has been largely and effectively suppressed by a closed-minded confraternity of scientists and political leaders, with the media doing the dirty work. He cites, for example, the vitriol generated by advocates of global warming over Bjørn Lomborg’s *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Unable to refute the statistics presented and conclusions reached by this former leader of Greenpeace, they resorted to *ad hominem* rhetoric—like name calling—in their “fiercely hateful reaction.”

Just the Facts, Ma’am

Scientists are not without tools to determine the facts. Tree rings, whose distance from each other correlates with temperature, as well as precipitation, is one way to determine mean global temperature in the past. Taking core samples from ice fields is another tool. Other tools include coral growth, isotope data from seafloor sediment, as well as insect populations. Even “historical reconstruction” can be of use.

For example, the Norsemen discovered a “green” Greenland. When they first settled there over a thousand years ago, they were able to crop the land. Today, Greenland is “quite inhospitable to settlement, let alone to agriculture.” Greenland has actually become *colder* in the last millennium. Indeed, historical data, as well as all the tools mentioned above, “point to a very warm climate in medieval times” (AD 800-1300). This abnormally warm period is called the Medieval Climate Optimum. After about AD 1300, the world experienced a “little ice age” until about 1800, when mean temperatures again began to rise. After World War II, things began to cool down again, prompting the National Science Board, in 1974, to predict “the dawning of the next glacial age.” *Newsweek* actually reported that “meteorologists were almost unanimous in the view that the trend will reduce agricultural productivity for the rest of the century.” Surprise: in 1975, temperatures began to rise again. A “unanimous” view is not necessarily a right view, is it?

nce Falsely So Called

It is clear that these fluctuations in temperature relate to something besides human influence. For example, note that the Medieval Climate Optimum (AD 800-1300) took place when world population was much lower than today and *before* the industrial revolution. That is, it occurred before the world witnessed anything like the widespread burning of fossil fuels we see today. Obviously, there are other causative factors at play.

A general warming of the globe is taking place. This is incontrovertible. However, human activity is not the cause. *Moreover, human activity will not reverse the trend.* The Kyoto Treaty, even if assiduously followed, would lower the planet's mean temperature "maybe two-hundredths of a degree Celsius, or at most six-hundredths of a degree." Yet, it would impose immense economic costs on the United States, requiring that she pare back her energy consumption by 25% by 2012. No wonder the U.S. Senate rejected the treaty by a 95-0 vote!

Europe, which is signatory to Kyoto, is falling far behind in its commitments to cut back energy consumption. The European Union has reduced consumption 4.7% from 1990 levels, far from the 2012 target of 8%. Japan is likewise running behind. What is interesting is that Kyoto exempts the developing nations, such as Brazil and India, which so heavily contribute to current levels of greenhouse gases. Indeed, "China will become the world's biggest source of carbon dioxide emissions in just a few years." Yet, she is doing virtually nothing to curtail her consumption of fossil fuels. Clearly, Kyoto will not turn the situation around.

Nor should it! Professor Derr argues that, overall, higher mean global temperatures are good, not bad. Pointing out what so many have forgotten—that "carbon dioxide is not a pollutant," he argues that its increased presence helps plants grow. "Mapping by satellite shows that the earth has become about six percent greener overall in the past two decades, with forests expanding into arid regions (though the effect is uneven). The Amazon rain forest was the biggest gainer. . . ." Not all parts of the planet will benefit, of course, but overall, there will be "fewer storms (not more), more rain, better

crop yields over larger areas, and longer growing seasons, milder winters, and decreasing heating costs in colder latitudes." God commanded people to multiply. They have done so, and He has provided for them. Simply put, greenhouse gases are a good thing!

Satan, however, has another aim in mind: The impoverishment of the earth's people and, finally, the destruction of the planet's ecosystem itself. Toward these ends, atheist scientists and covetous leaders of developing nations are lending their hand.

The Liars, the Covetous, and the Marketers

The scientists stoop at nothing to impress the gullible public with their lies. Stanford University's Steven Schneider, a firm advocate of global warming theory, actually went on record as saying he advocated lying to the public. His comment, published in *Discover* in 1999, deserves quotation here:

To capture the public imagination, we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we may have. Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest.

The profit-driven media is always more-than-ready to print a sensational story today and answer questions about its truth tomorrow. With that all-too-compliant institution waiting in the wings, what is wrong with broadcasting a "little white lie" to 5 billion people, if it will mean the salvation of their planet? What is wrong with suppressing dialogue concerning scientific "doubts" in the interest of global salvation? Scientists' "the end justifies the means" approach indicates the moral bankruptcy of the godless intelligentsia.

Thankfully, some scientists are above this sort of rank prevarication. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Richard Lindzen, testifying before the U.S. Senate's Environmental and Public Works

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*"A good name is to be chosen
rather than great riches"*
—Proverbs 22:1

What's

What connotations or associations come to mind in thinking about the following names?

- George Washington
- Mahatma Gandhi
- Judas Iscariot
- Thomas Jefferson
- Lou Gehrig
- Britney Spears
- Yassir Arafat
- Janet Reno
- Cal Worthington
- Richard Nixon
- Jay Leno
- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg
- Frank Sinatra
- Sirhan Sirhan
- Eleanor Roosevelt
- Adolf Hitler
- Bono
- Florence Nightingale
- Gene Autry
- Hillary Clinton
- Fidel Castro
- Martin Luther

Do most of these names ring a bell? Do we associate them with certain things? Do some of them evoke pleasant responses? Do some of them provoke unpleasant reactions?

Would any of us want to be the son or daughter, father or mother, uncle or aunt, nephew or niece or cousin of Al Capone, Charles Manson, or Jeffrey Dahmer? How would we feel if we were associates of Ken Lay, Osama bin Laden, or Michael Jackson? How about Billy Graham or Mother Theresa?

Some parents have been crass or unfeeling enough to give their children names that will make them the butt of jokes for the rest of their lives, like the farmer named Hogg who named his daughter Ima. I graduated in the same class with a person named Jesse James. A man in Minneapolis by the name of Legg named his two sons Harry and Seymour.

If such a name annoys a person enough, he has the legal privilege to change it—like the fellow with the name Joe Stinks who insisted on changing his name to Charlie Stinks. Then there is the addled boxer down in Georgia who changed his perfectly acceptable name to God's Own Fool!

Name = Reputation

Perhaps the most important scriptural significance of names is not so much in the label as it is in the reputation (whether of fame or infamy) of the holder of the label. God has often changed the label to fit more correctly the characteristics of the person, i.e. Jacob (Contender) to Israel (Prevailer), Abram (Father) to Abraham (Father of Nations), and Hillel (Light-Bringer) to Satan (Adversary). Even a name change by God cannot automatically alter the reputation of an individual.

On the subject of names, two verses in the Bible's wisdom literature immediately come to mind:

- A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold. (Proverbs 22:1)
- A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

s in a Name Anyway?

Why is the day of death better? At birth, a person is largely a blank slate—his reputation is nothing (apart from his connection with Mom and Dad), so his name is little more than a mere label. However, at his death he has built either a good reputation or a bad one.

Reputations are built action-by-action over a lifetime, and they can be given as a legacy to a person's offspring. To be known as a son of Abraham or Job would carry some inherent honor. To be known as the son of Joseph Stalin or Julius and Ethel Rosenberg might be attended with some grief. So a name can help or harm even later generations.

Which do you think Richard Milhous Nixon craved more at the final years of his life—more money, more political clout, or a good name and a good night's sleep? Not long ago, in the final few months of the Clinton presidency, William Jefferson Clinton was feverishly trying to fashion his so-called legacy, trying to make up for a lengthy record of lying and other immoral behavior. What does he desire more now that his health has begun to deteriorate—to be known for bringing a peace to the Middle East, for saving Social Security and Medicare, for advocating welfare reform (none of which he actually accomplished), or to have a sterling reputation?

About thirty years ago, a minister whose wife's health had temporarily prevented her from traveling, asked me to go along with him to visit some prospective members in northern Wisconsin. He drove and I served as navigator, attempting to follow the map and the directions provided by the prospective member. As we crossed over a hill, we noticed on the immediate right a spacious dairy farm with a large barn and several huge, blue Harvestore silos. On the left side of the road was a run-down, ramshackle trailer with two abandoned

cars in the driveway. The minister chuckled in his inimitable way and said, "Mr. Maas, how much do you want to bet that our prospective member is located on the left?" His prognostication proved correct. God has the proclivity of choosing the "weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty" (I Corinthians 1:27).

When our names are mentioned, what image of us comes up in the mind of the hearer?

- neighborly,
- generous,
- honest,
- faithful,
- highly moral?

On the other hand, perhaps our names conjure up associations like:

- odd,
- stingy,
- secretive,
- sloppy,
- unruly.

Obviously, God's people should be known for the former and not the latter (Galatians 5:16-26; I Peter 4:1-3).

A Good Word from a Good Name

The full impact of Proverbs 22:1 became forcefully impressed upon me as I assumed a new academic job a few years ago. That spring, largely at the insistence of my old mentor and former doctoral advisor, Fred Tarpley, I applied for a job at Jarvis Christian College, a small, historically black college in East Texas. At the time, Dr. Tarpley was serving as Interim Dean of that institution until his retirement that summer.

Fred Tarpley was my doctoral advisor and mentor when I was a graduate student at East Texas State University (ETSU, now Texas A&M at Commerce) twenty-five years ago. He was one of my favorite teachers over the years, teaching me the principles of linguistics and the International Phonetic Alphabet, and providing a sterling model of diligence and rigorous scholarship. He has authored six books and numerous articles on dialectology, place names, and historical lore of East Texas. He made rigorous demands on his students, for which I have been grateful.

After serving for many years as Department Chairman of Language and Literature at ETSU, he then assumed a faculty position at Jarvis Christian College, where he worked hard to build the English curriculum, establish the Sigma Tau Delta English Society, write grants, and tirelessly serve the students. When the Dean unexpectedly resigned, he stepped into that role. His last official act before he retired was to accompany me to my interview with the President of the college.

No one at the new institution knew me from Adam; I was the new kid on the block. As I interviewed for the position, the division chair of Arts and Sciences asked me a few perfunctory questions, went over my résumé, and then forcefully said, “You’ve been recommended by Fred Tarpley. That’s good enough for me.”

Fred Tarpley had “put in a good word” for me with many of my new colleagues. Being recommended by Fred Tarpley seemed to remove the tension of ice-breaking or becoming acquainted. Knowing him provided a common ground, turning us from strangers into instantaneous friends. The good name—the reputation—of my old mentor made my assumption of new academic duties much easier. It also sobered me with the knowledge that there would be expectations to perform as Fred Tarpley had. His finely honed reputation made his shoes difficult to fill.

Bearing God’s Name

All members of God’s church have inherited a Family name far more valuable than any surname. We have an awesome responsibility to uphold and honor the nobility and dignity of the name of God. The reputation we create for our church, our businesses, or our institutions is the legacy we pass on to our brothers and sisters and our children.

Occasionally, we are saddened that people who have

accepted our Family name have brought disgrace on all of us. A number of years ago, the Dean of Students at Ambassador College Pasadena had to cancel the long anticipated Snow-Line Party because the resort where it was previously held had barred all Ambassador students. Apparently, the year before the resort management had seen a number of students (proudly displaying Ambassador College sweatshirts) gleefully wrecking their furniture and equipment. Similarly, in 1975, the city of Longview, Texas, no longer welcomed Ambassador students after they had a pizza-throwing fight in a local establishment. Unfortunately, these students were also wearing Ambassador College shirts.

Ecclesiastes 10:1 says, “Dead flies putrefy the perfumers’ ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor.” It takes years for a reputation to be built up, but seemingly only a few minutes to destroy it. There are ample warnings in Scripture that if we appropriate God’s Family name, and then by our behavior show our contempt for it, our names will be blotted out of the Book of Life (Exodus 32:33). Proverbs 10:7 teaches, “The memory of the righteous is blessed, but the name of the wicked will rot.” Conversely, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Revelation 3:5).

God feels His name to be so important that He made one of His ten great laws to cover this subject: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” The full intent of the third commandment goes far beyond cursing and using foul language. We have been invited by God to share His Family name (Matthew 28:19). If we appropriate His name and then live in a way to bring dishonor to it, we are worse than the infidels we sometimes ridicule.

One television preacher from a large Protestant denomination once asked, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” In this vein, we need to ponder the full intent of Paul’s admonition to the Romans: “You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,’ as it is written” (Romans 2:23-24; see Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22).

If we were someone’s only contact with God’s way, if our behavior were in fact their Bible (not just our words but also our deeds), could he or she make it into God’s Kingdom? If someone were to follow our example of righteousness, would he or she be acceptable to God? How are we doing in upholding God’s Family name? His name, which is now our name, is worth far more than all the riches of the world.

What do people think—how do they react—when they see or hear our names?

—David F. Maas

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Committee, called a “doom-and-gloom” UN report “very much a child’s exercise of what might possibly happen . . . [which] conjures up some scary scenarios for which there is no evidence.” The movie *The Day After Tomorrow*—about sudden and cataclysmic climate change, particularly a new ice age—is an example of such evidence-less scenarios in pop culture.

The UN report that so “exasperated” Lindzen was a typical call-for-action paper by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “a body responsible for an increasing crescendo of dire warnings” about global warming. The IPCC, as a part of the UN, “reflects UN politics, which are consistently favorable to developing countries, the majority of its members.” Within the IPCC’s hearing rooms, scientists willing to fudge the facts for ideological reasons shake hands with the covetous leaders of developing nations.

The politics of scientists and leaders become almost conspiratorial when viewed under the light of Kyoto. That treaty exempts developing nations from emission standards imposed on developed ones. Much more, though, Kyoto calls for compensation “from the wealthier nations for any economic restraints that new climate management policies may impose on these developing countries.” This is redistributionist policy writ large. The leaders of developing nations are as savvy as they are covetous. They know they stand to get big bucks from America and Europe. Of course, they collude with deceitful scientists to produce “scare” movies like *The Day After Tomorrow*!

They know that the day after the day after tomorrow they will get a billion bucks from Uncle Sam.

Death to the Lamb!

The global warming theory and its spawn, Kyoto, are modern manifestations of what the apostle Paul termed “science falsely so called” (I Timothy 6:20). The *New King James Version* puts it more idiomatically: “falsely called knowledge.” That base of false knowledge has at least one of its roots in the ancient romantic myth: Progress is intrinsically evil. The “noble savage” of Africa or India or Oceania or America, living simply and off the land, is morally superior to modern man, who has corrupted himself by material things and organized religion. Its goals are to break the hold of superstition (read “religion”), limit hydrocarbon emissions, curtail factory production, and curb human reproduction. Let evolution take its course by returning man to nature. The weak will be weeded out, and the strong will survive—the lion will thrive, the lamb fail. That is the aim of the romantic myth.

Moreover, that—the destruction of the lamb—is

Satan’s plan. The Satan-inspired romantic myth denies man’s God-given role to keep and tend the Garden (Genesis 2:15). It also denies the God-given command to “multiply [and] fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28). The purpose behind God’s commanded fecundity was His intention that man be the dominant life-form on the planet (see verse 28). To the extent that Satan’s counter-philosophy rules the hearts and minds of men, God’s creation will decay ever faster, and people, refusing to reproduce in sufficient numbers to replace themselves, will cease to be the dominant life-form on the planet. Satan will have had his way. We see Satan’s victory over reproduction (and over reason!) in the future seat of the Beast, in Europe, which has become a demographic disaster.

In I Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy that “the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and the doctrine of demons” (I Timothy 4:1). This is a prophecy for today. Paul concludes his comments on this subject with a warning to avoid “the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (I Timothy 6:20). To profess such false knowledge is to stray “concerning the faith” (verse 21).

Never buy Satan’s teachings that the savage is more noble than the civilized, that material dearth is more desirable than wealth, and that yesterday is better than tomorrow. For, to those who do not stray from the faith, decency and prosperity remain the standard, and in the end, the day after tomorrow is the best day of all.

—Charles Whitaker

Suggested Reading:

Bailey, Ronald, *Global Warming and Other Eco Myths: How the Environmental Movement Uses False Science to Scare Us to Death*, Competitive Enterprise Institute, Prima Publishing, 2002.

Essex, Christopher, and McKittrick, Ross, *Taken by Storm: The Troubled Science, Policy and Politics of Global Warming*, Key Porter Books, 2003.

Huber, Peter, *Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists: A Conservative Manifesto*, Basic Books, 1999.

Kirkland, Robert, *Skeptical Environmentalism: The Limits of Philosophy and Science*, Indiana University Press, 2002.

Lomborg, Bjørn, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World*, Cambridge, 2001.

Michaels, Patrick J., *Meltdown: The Predictable Distortion of Global Warming by Scientists, Politicians, and the Media*, Cato Institute, 2004.

Michaels, Patrick J., and Balling, Robert C., *The Satanic Gases: Clearing the Air About Global Warming*, Cato Institute, 2000.

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parties have become special to each other, they are responsible to be faithful to each other above all others. A covenant made before God binds us to this intense, marital faithfulness.

I Peter 2:9 states this responsibility in a somewhat different manner: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him, who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Notice his sentence begins with “but,” introducing an explanation of why the chosen are to be different from the disobedient of verses 7-8, and of what they are obligated to do.

As stated here, the responsibility of God’s own special people is to proclaim—to show forth (KJV)—the praises of Him who has called us. The proclaiming is accomplished through speech and conduct. We show forth His praises in our witness through faithful obedience, just as is commanded in Deuteronomy 7:11.

I Peter 1:13-16 shows that being a special treasure and holiness are inextricably linked:

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

God emphasizes “special treasure” to impress us with the magnitude of His blessing in making us special and the critical importance of our difference from others expressed through holy conduct.

It is important to consider our calling as God’s peculiar treasure a tremendous blessing that we never allow to slip from our minds. It opens the door to the knowledge of God, faith, forgiveness, His Holy Spirit, access to Him, transformation to be like Him, and an endless supply of other things He provides, besides everlasting life. However, there are specific things we must do and cannot do because we are special.

Responsibility goes both ways. In return, He loves us

to a degree that others are not loved. Is that surprising? It is often said that God loves the sinner but hates the sin. We cannot take that broad, blanket statement to be always true. God does not love everybody equally, as Romans 9:13-16 plainly states:

As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

Psalm 5:5-6 can be a startling statement to those who do not understand this: “The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.” Notice David specifically says God hates the *workers* of iniquity, not merely their works. Such people are most definitely not special.

Notice also Hosea 9:15: “All [Israel’s] wickedness is in Gilgal, for there I hated them. Because of the evil of their deeds I will drive them from My house; I will love them no more. All their princes are rebellious.” God’s hatred of individuals is not something frequently stated, but it is part of the Bible’s record. We who are called to be special must remember that God warns in Deuteronomy 7:10-11 that He is a just God, therefore He punishes as He sees fit. However, it does not have to be this way with us if we believe His calling is a blessing, and we use it to drive us to further growth.

John 14:23 shows the positive side of this coin: “Jesus answered and said to [Judas (not Iscariot)], ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.’” The Bible clearly teaches God’s reciprocity. God loves us while we were yet sinners and makes the first step toward reconciling us to Him (Romans 5:8-10). He expects love in return for His love so freely given. What we must understand is that, whether God loves or hates, He never loses His sense of righteous judgment, as we would.

Other Specific Responsibilities

Deuteronomy was written in the final month prior to Israel’s entering into the Promised Land. Following God’s review to the Israelites of the basis of their relationship in Deuteronomy 7 comes a warning to be faithful to the covenant, along with a brief overview of their responsibilities. In chapter 8, He proceeds to remind them of how well He provided for them in the wilderness and how He tested them through a variety of means.

In the next two chapters, He reviews their rebellions,

reminds them that He had to provide a second table of laws, and appeals to them to understand that what He desires of them is their love. In chapter 11, He encourages them to obey Him, showing that their love and obedience will be greatly rewarded.

In Deuteronomy 12, He provides specific instructions regarding worshipping Him, emphasizing that He is to be worshipped only where and how He signifies. Deuteronomy 13 contains a powerful and sobering exhortation

against idolatry in the form of a command describing the responsibility of one who has witnessed it being practiced within his own family.

If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers, of the gods of the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth, you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; but you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. And you shall stone him with stones until he dies, because he sought to entice you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. So all Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you. (verses 6-11)

Is there such a zealous fervency like this in the church today? Is it burning in us individually? Is there such a hatred of evil and a love for God and His Family within us that we will not permit even one iota of idolatry within ourselves? Or, are we tolerant of its existence within ourselves and within the church, convincing ourselves that it really does not matter? These verses show that it matters very much to God!

Beginning in Deuteronomy 7, He is systematically defining their relationship to Him and the terms of faithfulness. God is to be our God—exclusively. Please understand that we cannot literally conform to some of these details today because we have no civil authority. Nevertheless, His stern commands illustrate how serious God is about idolatry—faithlessness to Him and the covenant. He charged them with this because He loved them, because faithfulness would be good for them and would bless them within the relationship, whereas faithlessness would bring curses on them, just as it does in human marriages.

The relationship is further defined in Deuteronomy 14:1-2:

You are the children of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Segullâh appears again in verse 2, as He is more

specifically defining their—and our—responsibilities. He is saying to do or not to do these things because we are a special people and because He is our God and Father.

What comprises the rest of chapter 14? We are not to eat things God has declared unclean for the same reason: because we are His special, holy people and because He is our Father. He gives no other reason. He is still defining faithfulness. He does not say we are not to eat them because they will destroy our health—a point that must be assumed because we know everything God does is in love. Thus, if He says not to eat them, we do not.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29 contains the tithing laws. We are to follow His tithing laws and keep His festivals for the same reason: because we are a special, holy people to Him personally. Faithfulness to Him and the covenant is primarily tied to our personal and intimate relationship with Him—and only secondarily to membership in the Israelite nation or the church of God. Trusting Him is the issue.

Deuteronomy 7:2-3 commands:

. . . and when the LORD your God delivers [the Canaanites] over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son.

This particular point of obedience is especially interesting because it is the first thing mentioned about our faithfulness to Him. This passage bans Israel from making covenants with the people of the land. Among covenants are marriage unions. A marriage is a covenant to be special treasures to each other and therefore faithful to each other. As we continue in the chapter, verses 4 and 6 begin with the conjunction "for," which tells us why something is to be done or is forbidden.

Here, unlike some other situations, He provides a brief reason or two why this is forbidden. In short, in verse 4, covenants—including marriages with the heathen—are banned because it is too spiritually dangerous. It is similar to playing with fire—the Lake of Fire. Interreligious marriages *will* work to destroy the special faithfulness to each other.

In verse 6, God's reason is that they—and we—are a special, set apart people for God's uses only. Entering covenants with the heathen, including marriage and honoring their gods, *will* work to destroy the special relationship. In other words, it will work to destroy our faithfulness to God and therefore our ability to proclaim God's praises.

Do we love God enough that we are willing to heed His commands, or do we love ourselves more than Him, making us willing to risk what He says not to do? Marrying outside the faith is a matter of idolatry.

Half-Full or Half-Empty

The perspective through which we look at these things in the course of daily life makes all the difference in the world. A common way of illustrating this is to ask whether we consider the glass half-full or half-empty. Do we think of God's calling as a blessing that has opened a door to a fabulous eternity? Or, do we feel it bars us from areas of fulfillment, excitement, adventure, and fun in life, excluding us from those who have access to all the pleasure and glory this world can produce?

As mentioned earlier, becoming God's special people gives us liberty. But liberty to do what? Exodus 3:18 provides us with a major clue:

Then they will heed your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him, "The LORD God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God."

This is the original request Moses made to Pharaoh for Israel to be set free. The reason was that they might be free to sacrifice to their God. The same principle

applies to us; this is why God has freed us. Recall that Romans 12:1 charges us with the responsibility, once we are free of our slavery to Satan and sin, to be living sacrifices.

The blessing of our God-given calling makes available to us the opportunity to dedicate our lives in service to Him. Its magnificent potential opens the door to positive motivation to counterbalance the somewhat negative sense that obligation to Christ seems to impose. Because He first gives us evidence of His love for us, it enables us to believe Him, to live by faith, and to live a life of self-sacrifice to glorify Him. It has provided entrance to the Kingdom of God.

The just shall live by faith because they know Him in His loving character. This causes any lingering negative sense that human nature has toward being *required* to keep God's commands to fade gradually into the background, freeing us to obey from the heart in sincere gratitude and joy.

In Christian love,



GENESIS 25:34

"Thus Esau despised his inheritance."

(continued from page 9)

- **Psalm 90:10:** The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.
- **Isaiah 40:6-8:** All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.
- **James 4:14:** For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.
- **I John 2:17:** And the world

is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

The physical life we would live now is a bowl of lentils compared with eternal life. It is nothing more than a vapor, a breath, a shadow. The passing pleasures and cares of the world will only gratify and satisfy the immediate desires. If our only interest is the immediate gratification that the world has to offer, we are indeed saying, "What profit is the Kingdom of God to me now?" Like Esau, we will despise our inheritance and go our way apart from God.

Our inheritance is the Kingdom of God. By seeking it and His righteousness first, we are telling God that we place high value on it, that we want it, that we want to be like Him and think like Him, and that we

can be trusted to take care of His estate and to live and reign with Christ.

Jesus promises in Revelation 3:11-12:

Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

If we are seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, this is what our future will be—and it all hinges on what we treasure.

—Jeff Volk

A Pope for Europe

Much of the world was saddened by the death of Pope John Paul II on April 2, 2005, at the age of 84. Around the globe, he was seen as a force for traditional values and democratic principles, and his passing seems to have marked the end of an era. He was the last of the great fighters of communism, generally being credited—along with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher—with pushing the Soviet Union to the breaking point. He was the last of the West's Cold Warriors of any stature.

Seventeen days later, the College of Cardinals elected a new pope, Benedict XVI, the former Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, as the 265th pontiff of the Catholic Church. His election was only mildly surprising—he was the odds-on favorite as the Conclave began—and that because he was thought, at 78, to be too old. Even after a month's observation, many pundits still think he will be a "transitional pope," one who does little more than mark time until a pope from the next generation can take office. This, however, seems to be a dangerous underestimation of the man who for many years wielded great power as prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the office that was once known as the Inquisition.

Cardinal Ratzinger was John Paul II's chief theological adviser for twenty years, linking him inextricably with the Vatican's conservative doctrinal stance during the latter's reign. Some European publications even nicknamed him "God's Rottweiler" and "the Panzer Cardinal" for his ferocious defense of orthodoxy. CNN.com reports, "In the Vatican, he has been the driving force behind crackdowns on liberation theology, religious pluralism, challenges to traditional moral teachings on issues such as homosexuality, and dissent on such issues as women's ordination" ("German cardinal elected new pope," April 20, 2005).

His papal agenda became clear during his pre-Conclave homily: He warned against

relativism, which is letting oneself be "swept along by every wind of teaching." [It] looks like the only attitude [acceptable] to today's standards. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism, which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires. (*ibid.*)

It is clear that he believes in authority, particularly the authority of the Catholic Church, while the rest of the world, Europe specifically, sinks further into "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). He sees himself now in a position to turn the tide.

In the first general audience of his pontificate, Benedict XVI

referred to Europe's Christian roots in what is expected to be a major theme of his papacy.

The pope touched on the issues as he described how he chose his name, recalling Pope Benedict XV, who led the church during World War I. "In his footsteps I place my ministry in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples."

He also recalled St. Benedict of Norcia, a patron saint of Europe, "whose life evokes the Christian roots of Europe. I ask him to help us all hold firm to the centrality of Christ in our Christian life." . . .

The reference to Europe's Christian heritage is a theme Benedict is expected to take up frequently in a bid to combat religious apathy on the continent.

He said the founder of the Benedictine order is heavily venerated in Germany and "in particular Bavaria, the land of my origin." ("Pope Benedict XVI pledges to work for reconciliation and peace," *International Herald Tribune*, April 27, 2005)

In essence, he desires to re-evangelize Europe after decades of secular humanism have reigned unchecked across the Continent.

It remains to be seen, of course, how much of these substantial goals Benedict XVI will be able to accomplish. Entrenched politicians, academics, cultural icons, and even many within his own church will oppose him at just about every point. Under current conditions, he could, like his predecessor, have at best incremental success.

However, events within and without Europe could prove to be his allies should matters escalate to threaten her economic, political, and cultural survival. A severe economic downturn, a sharp increase in terrorism, or an explosion of violence and disruption by non-Europeans within her borders could spark a yearning to return to traditional European values. With their backs against a wall, Europeans may then be willing to listen to the advice of the head of the Catholic Church, one of their own.

This early in Benedict XVI's pontificate, however, the Vatican is relatively quiet. But it should not go unremarked that the last time a German theologian rose to such prominence, Europe was not long thereafter plunged into the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). ■

BIBLE STUDY: THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS

Part Two

The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) pictures the members of the church as virgins waiting for the bridegroom's return. They all carry oil-filled lamps to light their way while waiting through the darkness of night. However, half of them are unprepared; these foolish virgins have no reserve oil to refill their flickering lamps. While they are gone buying new oil, the bridegroom comes and the door to the wedding is shut. This pictures some losing heart during the bridegroom's delay and not persevering to the end.



1. How do the *descriptions* of the two groups differ? Matthew 25:2.

COMMENT: Jesus describes one of the groups as wise and the other as foolish. The wise virgins are intelligent, practical, and careful, but the foolish are dull-minded, unrealistic, and careless. "Foolish" is translated from the Greek word *moros*, from which derives the English word "moron." Their conduct warranted their uncomplimentary description—after all, are we not known by our fruit or the lack of it (Matthew 7:17-20)? The major difference between the wise and the foolish is found in their attitudes. The moronic attitude is spiritually poor, blind, and naked because it has no true vision of the future (Revelation 3:14-22), even though God and His Son have plainly set into motion Their wonderful plan of salvation. The foolish virgins do not recognize the presence of any real sin in their lives. They are spiritually lukewarm.

2. How does the *diligence* of the two groups differ? Matthew 25:3-4.

COMMENT: There is a strong contrast in the diligence of the two groups. One takes sufficient oil with it, but the other does not. Since the procession is at night, and the lamps have only a small oil reservoir, they have to replenish the oil periodically. The wise virgins prepare by carrying extra oil for when the lamps run low. This pictures readiness for future needs, which requires forethought, planning, and dedication. The foolish virgins do not prepare, content to carry only enough to appear wise. They carry out God's instructions with the least amount of effort they think they can get away with (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The foolish are not spiritually concerned about their future, but the wise are, even though they have to carry the extra weight of an oil container. However, this extra preparation gives them the hope and faith they need to meet the bridegroom successfully and enter the marriage feast.

3. Why do the wise virgins refuse to share with the foolish? Matthew 25:8-9.

COMMENT: It was midnight, and the lamps were needed for the procession and the rest of the night. The reserve oil supply was only enough to supply oil for the lamps of the five wise virgins. So the inability of the wise to provide oil for the foolish illustrates that no one can give to another what he has done to add works to his faith (James 2:14, 17-22, 24, 26). Our faith must be our own through Jesus Christ; it cannot be borrowed.

In Part One, we identified the ten virgins and analyzed the *similarities* of the two groups of five virgins. Those who follow the Lamb are called virgins (Revelation 14:4), symbolizing their spiritual purity, but it appears that only half of them are presented to Christ. Part Two will analyze some of the decided *differences*. Jesus points out two main differences between the two types of virgins: One deals with the description of the groups and the other with their diligence.

Moral character or spiritual gifts cannot be transferred from one person to another. To delay submission and obedience to Christ is to risk eternal death. Therefore, to delay preparation for His return is nothing short of spiritual negligence.

4. Was the closing of the door to the wedding feast fair? Matthew 25:10-12.

COMMENT: The door is shut with finality. The verb tense says the door is shut to stay shut. Therefore, at that point, no one's repentance, prayer, or pleading can change that fact. Noah's ark having its door sealed shut is a similar vivid illustration of its finality (Genesis 7:16)—it was shut to stay shut throughout the Flood. All the pleading in the world would not open the ark's door to others after it was shut. Once Christ has come or we have died, our opportunity to be among the firstfruits of the Kingdom will have been decided. The door's closing is fair because everyone had ample time to prepare for the bridegroom's coming. He does not come early in the evening but late. He is even delayed (verse 5), giving extra time to be ready. We have our whole lives—all the years of Christ's long suffering and patience with us—to prepare. Therefore, it is just and fair that the door is shut when our last hour comes. Isaiah recognizes man's tendency to procrastinate in his warning, "Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

The foolish Laodicean attitude dictates that one needs nothing else spiritually, but such a one will be rudely awakened to realize his terrible unpreparedness. This attitude is bankrupt of vision and foresight. It sees no need to prepare for the eventualities of life either physically or, more importantly, spiritually. Opportunities come and go through life, and no opportunity is so greatly lost than that of the foolish virgins. They fail to realize that the bridegroom would probably come later than expected. They lack faithful perseverance in thought and action.

The lesson Christ emphasizes in this parable is to be prepared for the future, namely, the coming of Christ. The prophet Amos expresses this powerfully: "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:12). Human beings have little trouble preparing for everything, except meeting God. The last verse of the parable (verse 13) makes its purpose ring in our ears: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."