

# Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 14, Number 10

December 2005



Are You Teachable?

# december 2005

volume 14, number 10

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Although Christianity's basic principles are quickly understood by most people, a Christian spends his entire converted lifetime learning a new way of life—God's way. How much we learn and put into practice depend upon whether we allow ourselves to be taught. Are we teachable?

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This free publication is made possible through the voluntary tithes and offerings of its subscribers and members of the Church of the Great God. All American and Canadian donations are tax-deductible.

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# Communication and Leaving Babylon

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## Part One

*Revelation 18:4 records this sobering command: “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.’”*

This is sobering because the course of this world is closer than ever to reaching its anti-God fullness. There has never been a time in the out-working of God’s purpose when this advice is more urgently needed.

Among mankind, the course of the world did not begin in the original Babylon but in the Garden of Eden with the disbelieving conduct of Adam and Eve. They introduced the alien spirit and conduct among mankind—they *were* mankind at that time. Under the deceitful influence of Satan, they disbelieved God, following the Devil’s line of reasoning and conduct. They spread it to their children, who spread it to their children, and so forth.

In that manner, it became the way of life of all of mankind until God called a few, and they repented. It was in the city of Babylon, first under Nimrod and then under Nebuchadnezzar, that its concepts were perfected and forced on concentrated masses of people. These people then imposed it on others through whatever methods necessary.

God dealt with those two Babylons, destroying them. God directly confronted the first by destroying the people’s ability to communicate with each other, and they were thus scattered over the face of the

earth. He dealt with the second less directly by raising up the Medo-Persian Empire to destroy Babylon’s powerful influence.

With both of those Babylons, the influence was localized. The first was concentrated in a small area, and its ways were imposed on relatively few people. The second Babylon’s geographical influence was greatly expanded, but it was still contained within the Middle East’s Fertile Crescent. However, its armies, economic and educational policies, and religions forced anti-God ways on many more people. Most importantly, among those affected were the ancestors of the peoples who make up the modern Western world—the part of the world now known as the bastion of Christianity—and they were among those most strongly affected. The effects of that contact reverberate to this day in our cultures.

Now we have reached the time the Bible calls “the last days” or “the end time.” We stand on the cusp of the Tribulation and Day of the Lord, and God’s Word prophesies that Babylon will once again be on the scene of events—only this time its powerful influence will be felt worldwide. This time, Babylon not only has dominant armies, powerful economic and educational systems, and strongly en-

# personal *Communication and Leaving Babylon*

trenched and popular religions, it also has extremely effective mass communication networks to disseminate its ways into the minds of men, influencing men against their Creator and His people.

Thus, God's urgent warning to take action while one can. The influence of Babylon is imposed through communication. It occurs when we experience countless examples of misguided conduct by those who—unknown to them—are already enslaved by its evil influence.

## The Battle to Resist

The apostles Paul and John speak of this largely unrecognized burden mankind carries. In II Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul writes, "But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them."

Additional subtle influence occurs when a person experiences Babylon's ways and words and fails to monitor the attitudes he picks up and lives. Perhaps above all, men must deal with the inaudible but nonetheless attractive and powerful spiritual communication of Babylon's invisible god and leader, the prince of the power of the air, and his hordes of equally invisible demons. Resisting it can be a daunting task even for those aware that this communication is occurring; it calls on one to be constantly on guard. Nevertheless, resisting the communication is the key to blunting Babylon's siren call.

God admonishes us to come out of her, but there is physically no place to go! The influence of Satan through Babylon's powers of communication is everywhere. In Revelation 12:9, the apostle John confirms we have no place to run because this world's god and his assistants have been permitted to communicate with and deceive mankind over the whole earth: "So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, *who deceives the whole world*; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." We have been born into this ready-made, deceived world, taken it for granted, and absorbed it until God revealed an alternative.

Compared to previous Babylons, the major difference in what we now face in modern Babylon lies in the intensity, availability, and receptivity of its communication. As far as we know, mankind has never before been confronted by these twisted, persuasive, demonic powers as he is today. They now have the global use of the visible and audible influence of radio, music, movies, television, and the Internet, in addition to the entrenched systems of thought and standards of conduct.

There is no place to run. The battle to resist, then, is almost entirely internal—it is fought right where we live and conduct the business of life. What we must believe, and trust with steely determination and discipline, is that

God never gives a person a responsibility impossible to perform (see the principle in I Corinthians 10:13). What God commands of us we can do! Therefore, if He commands we come out, we can come out right where we are. The coming out will not be a physical leaving of a geographical area but a departure from Babylon's spiritual and physical influence.

This is not to say that changing one's physical location will not be helpful in fighting the spiritual battle—just as not frequenting a den of iniquity has definite advantages! It is logical to assume that the intensity of evil communication would be worse in the heart of Babylon than out in the hinterlands. However, we must acknowledge the reality that we can take Babylon's influence with us wherever we might go on earth. Even going to live on a deserted island will not spare us the burden of the influence Babylon has already exerted on us.

## The Power of the Air

Revelation 18:2 adds additional information regarding the ubiquitous nature of evil communication: "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.'" In God's description of Babylon's evil qualities, He links demons with birds—not just any birds but unclean and hated birds, ones that display in their natural characteristics activities humans find disgusting and revolting.

America's national symbol, the bald eagle, is beautiful to behold and majestic in flight, but it is also a carrion eater, feeding on the dead, and a vicious killer, relentlessly and ruthlessly seeking to devour. Then there is the vulture, ugly to behold, which strips the flesh of anything, including unburied human dead. Other birds, like certain types of owls, have somewhat similar characteristics, yet are nocturnal in their habits, seeking to attack and kill under the cover of the darkness of night. They also seem to seek out ruins of buildings as their habitats, places that men perceive to be cursed.

God paints Babylon as a dangerous place inhabited by predators, as if it is the very generator and purveyor of all evil on earth. Babylon has spread its influence over the whole earth, but in another sense, its heart and core are in one place. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

In this chapter's first ten verses, Paul is showing that the children of God—us—who were once objects of God's wrath, are by His grace legally and spiritually freed from the clutches of Satan's dominion. However, the influences of the world Satan has fashioned remain to be dealt with and overcome.

Satan is described as a spirit who is "prince of the power of the air." This phrase has a familiar ring to it, but alternative translations may be better suited to understanding. The *New English Bible* calls him "commander of the spiritual powers of the air now at work among God's rebel subjects." The *Concordat Literal New Testament* renders it as "chief of the jurisdiction of the air, the spirit now operating in the sons of stubbornness."

*Webster's* gives as one of the usages for *jurisdiction*, "the limits, or territory within which authority may be exercised." This particular jurisdiction is where air exists, tying in with the word "heavenly" in Ephesians 6:12: "[We wrestle] against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." Here, "heavenly" refers, not to the place of God's throne, but to the first heaven, the air surrounding the earth in which birds fly. This also links with Revelation 18:2 and its "unclean and hated birds," symbolizing demons. Birds operate in the same heaven Satan commands.

God gave Satan and his demon assistants substantial authority over everything from the earth's atmosphere on down to the earth itself, which includes us, its inhabitants. We must never forget that, in large part, our wrestling, as Paul terms it, is with these spirits. We inhabit the same space they do.

These evil spirits indeed use deceived people to carry out their plans to destroy those in whom God lives. These people are likely under the strong influence of those spirit authorities, and because they are deceived, they are unaware that they are being used! They are not necessarily possessed, as the Bible shows some are, but influenced by demons to act against our best interests.

## Communicating Through Air

Air is that substance, that realm, through which most communication travels. Sound is possible because of the vibration of air. Communication involving electronic media, satellites, television, radio, the Internet, etc., travels through the air. In fact, when speaking of radio transmissions especially, it is common to refer to them as "air-waves."

An amazing discovery is worth considering in terms of the transmission of attitudes and thoughts. There are forms of communication that require no sound, but they nonetheless involve the ability of air to be the common medium for communication.

Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto authored a small book, *Hidden Messages in Water*, which is a brief explanation of things he discovered in his studies of the crystallization of water. In it, he writes of vibration, saying that every cell in our body is vibrating at the rate of 570

trillion vibrations per second. Perhaps the major reason we are able to see, in addition to being able to hear, is because of the vibrations of the air we breathe and live in! Air makes visible communication possible in addition to audible communication.

The bulk of Mr. Emoto's book is concerned with the structure of water and how it is affected by its environment. As we know, each snowflake, which is nothing more than frozen water, is made up of an endless series of six-sided, crystal-shaped ice formations. It is claimed that nobody has ever seen two of the exact same formations. Emoto discovered that the crystal formations of water become distorted and misshaped under negative circumstances. As long as the water is pure, its crystals are beautifully shaped, but when it becomes poisoned in some way—say, with bleach—the crystals become ugly. In some cases, they will no longer even form.

More amazingly, he also discovered that the crystallization of even pure water becomes distorted in the presence of a human in a negative attitude. Simply, in the presence of anger, envy, frustration, or a negative fear, the beautiful crystals of even pure water begin to deform. Somehow, the person's negative vibrations, their self-centered, angry, and envious thoughts, are communicated to the water, and it reacts.

From our own experiences, we know that things of this sort are possible in the human world. If a person comes into our presence in an angry attitude, we quickly know it because it is communicated. The communication may not be verbal—visual communication is enough. We sense it, and almost immediately, we react by putting up our guard.

Plants, too, respond positively to the loving concern of those taking care of them. We find this acceptable because we know that plants are living entities. But this is water. Is there some form of life in water itself? In John 7:37-39, the apostle writes:

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any one thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of *living water*." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, which those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Is there more to His statement than meets the eye? I do not know.

I cannot personally account for what Mr. Emoto reports. No one can say how the person's attitude is transferred to the water. Is there demonic influence? At present, it seems likely that this ocean of air, in which we move and which supports our lives, communicates the vibrations that alter the crystals.

A factor God wants us to realize more completely and fully is that we are not alone in this ocean of air. Even as vicious sharks and barracuda prowl the water, their

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demonic counterparts, symbolized as foul and unclean raptors and carrion-eaters, inhabit the ocean of air right along with us. It is essential to our spiritual well-being to heed Paul's warning in Ephesian 6:10-12 that our battles are against these creatures, and they are fighting tooth-and-toenail to hang on to what they believe is theirs by first-occupancy rights. Earth, the Bible plainly tells us, was "their first estate" (Jude 6, KJV). They hate us because we are becoming like the Father and Son, and because they know this earth, our inheritance, will be taken from them and given to the sons of God, those who are in His image.

On the surface, they have advantages over us because they are invisible to our eyes. As spirit beings, they apparently vibrate at a different frequency than we do, thus our eyes are not naturally equipped to see them. In addition, they can communicate their thoughts and attitudes to our minds through the very air that supports our lives without us even being aware.

If human thoughts and attitudes can be communicated through the air to plants and water, why can demonic thoughts not be communicated to another living being—us—without them overtly revealing themselves? Most people in this world do not know they are deceived or how they became deceived. Satan and his demons have not sat us all down to tell us, "We are here to deceive you." We know only because God's Word reveals this truth to us, and we believe it. Despite this happening in our lives, deception can still be communicated to us unless we are astute enough to take care that it does not happen again.

Nevertheless, deception and its resulting behaviors have been communicated to us through the culture we were born into. The culture, the world around us, is the medium of this corrupting communication. We have been freed from deception by God's revelation of Himself, but the urgent admonition from our Lord and Savior is, "Don't be passive concerning the responsibilities your liberation has imposed. Take action because the communication can be reabsorbed, enslaving you once again."

## This World's Course

In Ephesians 2:2, Paul writes of "the course of this world." The Greek word *kosmos*, translated into the English word "world," essentially means an "orderly system." To human eyes beholding all the activity throughout the earth, the world looks anything but orderly. It looks confusing, to say the least. However, that conclusion depends on one's perspective.

What is going on to discerning eyes, the eyes of one to whom God has revealed Himself, is an orderly system of *deception* cloaked by restless activity among humans involved in constant wars, thousands of religions, evil conduct, corrupting entertainments, and other distracting,

time-wasting business and social vanities. All of this restless activity is in reality nothing but a smokescreen hiding a sinister influence from discovery.

Notice something to which we generally do not pay much attention. The word "world" appears as the object of the preposition "of." This prepositional phrase modifies "course," showing us that Paul is speaking of a specific "course" available to us to choose from among others. The Greek word translated "course," *aion*, is especially interesting. At first, it indicates "an age," "an indefinite period of time," and by extension, "perpetuity."

However, *Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words* provides an interesting alternative, saying that it also means, "Time viewed in *relation* to what takes place during that period" (emphasis added). *Aion*, then, does not have to mean simply "time" in some form: Vine shows that it is correctly translated "place" in Hebrews 5:6. Other commentators go into greater detail, but we will quote only two highly respected ones that other commentators frequently cite as authorities.

First, Richard C. Trench is a resource virtually every commentator eventually quotes on the definitions of biblical words. He defines *aion* as:

. . . all that floating mass of thought, opinions, maxims, speculations, hopes, impulses, aims and aspirations at any time current in the world, which is impossible to seize and accurately define, but which constitutes a most real and effective power, being our moral or immoral atmosphere which at every moment of our lives we inhale, again inevitably exhale.

*Aion*, translated as "course" in Ephesians 2:2, is the vague, ever-present immaterial realm that we are surrounded by and live in. It is interesting that Trench ties his definition to air, in that, even as we unconsciously breathe air in and out to sustain life, the course of the world is every bit as necessary to carnal life and is affecting us invisibly and constantly.

Second, Johann A. Bengel adds that *aion* is, ". . . the subtle informing spirit of the Kosmos, or world of men who are living alienated and apart from God." This is what Germans termed *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age—the "informing spirit"! The term "spirit" is used to indicate the invisible, immaterial influence whose characteristics are absorbed and then manifested in the attitudes and conduct of the general population of a given people.

An American commentator, Kenneth Wuest, is very helpful at this juncture:

To distinguish between *aion* and *kosmos*, *kosmos* gives the over-all picture of mankind alienated from God during all of history, and *aion* represents any

(continued on page 14)

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

### PART ONE: ANNUNCIATION

The world, with its catchy ditties, pretty lights, red-nosed reindeer, and candy canes, has taken all the meaning out of Christmas!

That probably sounds strange coming from someone in the church of God. Indeed, God's people should not keep Christmas, as it is nowhere biblically commanded, and its fundamental dishonesty and pagan nature make it unchristian. However, the world's celebration of Christmas has wrung all meaning out of the biblical passages that deal with Christ's birth. Now they are known as little more than lyrics for Christmas songs.

In "The Messiah," George Frideric Handel tried—and in many ways succeeded—to express in music the glory of those biblical passages, but in most cases, they are trivialized, commercialized, or some way denigrated so that their real meaning is obscured or even eliminated. What has come down to us as traditional understanding is a pale imitation of what the Gospel writers, particularly Matthew and Luke, tried to get across to their readers.

The accounts of Christ's birth are now so commonplace and stereotyped that we rarely give them even a thought. Church of God members tend to avoid them because they contain connotations of the world's way of looking at Christ's birth. Many of us rarely even read those passages in the Bible anymore, but we should because they are quite significant. They must be, since God included them in His Word in two different gospels.

Paul writes in II Timothy 3.16-17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Perhaps we think of these passages about Jesus' birth as less than others due to the way the world has hijacked them. However, by seeing them in a correct light, we can come to a greater appreciation for them beyond the traditional Christmas portrayal.

### LUKE'S ACCOUNT

Luke is an extraordinary historian. He not only gives us the facts of what happened, but he also tells an entertaining story while doing so. He is a master of concise writing, and though at times an economy of words omits details that might be interesting to know, Luke includes precisely what is needed. He is also gifted in helping a reader make the right connections between what had happened and what would happen.

"The beloved physician" is probably the most literary of the Gospel writers, having produced a masterpiece of literature. He tends to be a little more artistic in his approach to Christ's life. He employs foreshadowing, makes historical references, uses dramatic effects, all while moving the story along with an economy of words.

As a biographer, Luke wants his audience to know what happened in Jesus' life, but as a member of God's church, and most likely a minister, he also wants to teach us what Christ taught, as well as what He means to a Christian. All this is packed into the gospel of Luke.

We begin in Luke 1. Many people know the wording of these passages by heart, because they are lyrics of Christmas songs, or they are recited in Christmas plays at schools and in Protestant churches. We have heard them regularly for years and years.

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she

# prophecy watch *The Birth of Jesus Christ*

was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (Luke 1:26-30)

Any modern newspaper editor would look at his opening salvo and say, “What a wonderful opening paragraph for this story!” Luke gives the who, what, where, and when right away, and gets to the why in short order. A complex scene is set out in order in just a few words.

Former Catholics will recognize verse 28 from the recitation of the rosary, “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” taken from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, but the Greek does not read anything like that. Nor is there any authority to pray this to her. What the angel, probably Gabriel, really says to her is, “Rejoice, Mary, because you have found favor with God.” She is so highly favored that the Lord blesses her, among all women on earth at the time, to be chosen for the honor of bearing and raising His Son.

Luke is actually suggesting, not that Mary should be adored for her favor with God, but that *God* should receive glory and adoration for bestowing such a blessing on her. *He* is the source of her favor; He gives it by grace to her, not because she was somehow qualified for it. She must have been a pretty good person, but she was not converted at the time. She was an ordinary Jewess of the line of David, though perhaps specially prepared for this blessing. Nevertheless, God displays His graciousness, not Mary’s.

Most commentaries guess that she was about fourteen years old at the time, as that was the age when women commonly married then. Perhaps she was a little older. Tradition says that Joseph himself was an older man and might have desired a slightly older wife than was normal.

Verse 29 states that she was perplexed, agitated, or disturbed by what the angel said to her. She probably had no idea what to think, but to her credit, she did not become flighty or melt into a quivering mass. The Scriptures bring out that Mary was a serious thinker. In Luke 2:51, the evangelist tells us that she “kept all these things [concerning Jesus] in her heart,” suggesting that she was patient, thoughtful, and wise. She did not jump to conclusions but let matters play out.

## QUOTING SCRIPTURE

The angel continues:

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” and the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will

come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:31-38)

The angel is actually quoting or paraphrasing Scripture to her, particularly two Messianic prophecies from Isaiah that many religious Jews probably had on the tips of their tongues. They were expecting Messiah to come soon, and knew these prophecies had to come to pass for Messiah to be born.

The first is from Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the LORD Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” *Immanuel* means “God with us.” Gabriel inserts a different name, one that God’s Son would normally be called: Jesus, which means “Savior.” It is really not so different since only God Himself can save.

The second part of Gabriel’s paraphrase comes from Isaiah 9:6-7:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

How did the angel convince Mary of what was happening? He quoted Old Testament prophecies to her! In effect, he tells her, “Look, Mary. God has chosen you to fulfill these prophecies.”

In response, she asks a very practical question: “How can this be? I can’t have a baby. Joseph and I have not consummated the marriage.” He replies to her in a parallelism, a form of speech that Hebrew and Aramaic speakers often used to add detail to their statements: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” and then he defines what he means: “And the power of the Highest will overshadow you.” Putting these two clauses together, he defines the Holy Spirit as the power of the Highest; it is God’s ability to effect this miracle.

The angel’s use of “overshadow” was undoubtedly comforting to her. To us, it might sound intimidating to be overshadowed by the power of the Highest, but Mary, well-versed in Scripture, gives no reaction that it frightened her. Perhaps she thought of Exodus 40:34-38, in

which similar language is used of God covering the Tabernacle in the wilderness with the pillar of cloud and fire. To an Israelite, it was comforting to think that God would hover above them like an eagle over its nest, with wings outspread, protecting, providing, and helping.

It may have also made her think of the constant miracles that God did on behalf of His people in the wilderness. God provided for them constantly for forty years, and the Bible is clear that nothing happened unless God allowed it. Through Gabriel, God was telling Mary, “I’m going to take care of all of this. There is no need to worry.” And apparently, her anxieties disappeared.

God then gives her a sign to confirm what He has just said. He tells her to visit her cousin, Elizabeth—an old, barren woman, whom she would find to be six months pregnant! This was also a sign to show Mary that everything would be fine. When she went to see her cousin (Luke 1:39-42), the as-yet-unborn John the Baptist leaped in Elizabeth’s womb, confirming to both Elizabeth and Mary that everything that they had heard was true. Moreover, Elizabeth repeats what the angel said to Mary: “Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb” (verse 42).

Verse 37, “For with God nothing will be impossible,” is another comforting reference to the Old Testament. A more literal translation of his statement would be, “For no saying from God shall be void of power,” or “For no word from God shall be powerless.” This makes it a paraphrase of Isaiah 55:11: “So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

In effect, he assures her, “This is certain because God has said so.” Her response reflects that she is completely convinced by this: “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). This is reminiscent of Hannah’s attitude in I Samuel 2. Like her, Mary submits unconditionally to God’s election of her for this task. She says, “I am the Lord’s servant. He can do with me what He will.” She gives her life to it.

## JOSEPH’S DREAM

Matthew 1 contains a second annunciation to a person who would also be very much involved in this whole process, Joseph. It is apparent that God waited several months before telling him, as it had become apparent that Mary was pregnant

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary

your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.” Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.” Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Joseph seems to have been a naturally kind and caring man, well-suited to Mary. Like her, he did not fly off the handle when he found things out. He was thoughtful, considering the best way to handle the situation. In his day, a woman could receive lifelong shame for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. He desired to “put her away” as quietly as possible without bringing any further shame upon Mary or himself, for that matter. While he was still mulling it over, an angel, probably Gabriel again, appeared to him in a dream.

Throughout this episode, Joseph is shown to be a humble, pious, obedient man. He takes what the angel says without complaint or even reply. Once he is aroused from sleep, Joseph does just as the angel commands him. The angel’s word was enough. The man was convinced. He would comply.

Gabriel tells Joseph almost the same things he said to Mary. It is somewhat odd, though, since it was through Joseph that Jesus would physically claim David’s throne, that the angel does not mention that Jesus would be King. This is also interesting because, throughout his Gospel, Matthew constantly mentions Jesus’ royal nature. Instead, Gabriel tells Joseph that Mary’s Son, whom everyone would think is his Son, would be named Jesus, “for He will save His people from their sins.” He also reiterates that He will be God with us and that He was conceived of the Holy Spirit.

These points hint that Joseph was more interested in spiritual matters than physical ones. Perhaps he had not allowed his Davidic lineage to go to his head. He did not need the spur of his adoptive Son becoming King to make him comply. All he needed to know was that God through the Holy Spirit had accomplished Mary’s pregnancy, and that the divine Child, in fulfillment of prophecy, would one day save His people from sin.

God found the perfect couple to raise His Son—as perfect as He could find among the Jews who had the right lineage at that time. They are wonderful examples of submission to God. Even though His intervention in their lives threw a huge monkey wrench into their personal plans, they selflessly said, “So be it, Lord. What would You like us to do next?”

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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

# Are You Teachable?

“Now therefore, listen to me, my children,  
for blessed are those who keep my ways.” —*Proverbs 8:32*

Are you teachable? Are you learning? Do you have a burning desire to learn? Do you know the keys to being teachable? Why is it so difficult for Christians to learn? What does God have to say about His children’s need to acquire knowledge?

Not surprisingly, God has a great deal to say on this subject. For instance, He laments in Hosea 4:6: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because *you have rejected knowledge*, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” God is serious! The penalty for rejecting God’s teaching, for not learning, is that we will be barred from becoming priests, the Christian’s promised vocation if he enters the Kingdom of God (see Revelation 5:10).

God says something similar in Leviticus 26:23-24: “If after all of this punishment *you still do not listen to me*, but continue to defy me, then I will turn on you and punish you seven times harder than before” (*Today’s English Version*). The key phrase here is “if you still do not listen to me.” We must not fail to heed God. What can we do to make sure that we do not fail?

Listen!

Notice the admonition in Proverbs 8:32-36:

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

Three times in this short passage, God commands us to listen to Him! This divine emphasis tells us that many of us have a serious problem with listening. If we are not listening, we are not learning—and as Hosea 4 and Leviticus 26 say, this will lead to our destruction.

In the Cowboy’s Code of Conduct, one maxim states, “Never miss an opportunity to stop talking!” When we are talking, we are not listening—and thus not learning!

In Proverbs 8:34-35, God commands us to watch, wait, and search for Him. These are all action words, and He instructs us to do this *daily*! He wants to teach us every day, and our

job is to be watching daily for those teachable moments from God. “Watching daily at my gates” is not about keeping a lookout for Christ’s return but about looking for opportunities to learn from God. He then promises, “. . . whoever finds me finds life,” implying that we need to search for it. Amos later reiterates, “Seek Me and live!” (Amos 5:4).

In Ezekiel 3, God commissions the prophet to teach Israel. His experience stands as a warning to us: “I am sending you to the people of Israel, and they won’t listen to you any more than they listen to me! For the whole lot of them are hard, impudent, and stubborn” [verse 7, *The Living Bible*, (TLB)]. God is speaking just as directly to us, as spiritual Israel (Galatians 6:16), as He was to physical Israel. God’s people have a terrible habit of not listening!

Just in case we think Ezekiel’s message was only for unconverted Israelites, verse 10 disabuses us: “Then he added: ‘Son of dust, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first; listen to them carefully for yourself’” (TLB). The prophet Ezekiel will most definitely be in God’s Kingdom, and God urges him to listen carefully to the warning message and to let the words sink deep into his heart. God wants Ezekiel—and us by extension—to internalize His message until it becomes a conviction.

One who teaches human relations and morality desires to see evidence that his students have truly learned from his instruction. The proof appears when a student’s life changes. When that happens, it is easy to see that he was redirected from the wrong path of thinking and living to the right way.

Do we have a burning desire to learn? Are we curious about knowing how God thinks? Do we want to know what He knows? Are we motivated to become wise? Wisdom is skillful application of what we learn. If we are not curious, we will not be paying close attention to our teachers, and we will be passing up opportunities to learn. We must feel a real *need* to understand.

Many people have a curiosity toward God, but it is usually short-term. A sustained desire for understanding, a keen curiosity to know more about God so as to have a closer relationship with Him, comes from Him, as Philippians 2:13 says: “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

## Fearing God

If we find ourselves sagging in our desire to learn, as evidenced by not listening, not studying, praying, and meditating daily, then we must pray fervently for God to give us a greater desire to obey Him, learn from Him, and have the proper fear of Him. Proper fear of God is paramount to learning: “Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses” (Psalm 25:12).

God has unique instruction for each of us that He desperately wants to teach to those that fear Him. We cannot properly fear God if we do not include Him in every aspect of our lives. If our world is framed by God, then we will be highly sensitized to His work within us. He uses every part of our daily lives to teach us, including how we relate to our mates, children, co-workers, friends, neighbors, and brethren. We are judged by how we respond to the situations in life that God specifically arranges for us.

A few good questions that we ought to ask ourselves are:

- How do we respond to our mates when they do not meet our expectations? Are our solutions anger, bitterness, fatalism, depression, insolence, and disrespect—or even divorce? We have to realize that the nature of the trial is ideal for us. God formulates the perfect lesson plan for us individually that will yield the maximum growth from us. If we do not pass this particular test, God does not just skip the lesson but brings it back later so that we will yield and truly learn the lesson. The later trial is usually more severe because learning occurs best when the student’s attention is focused, and when there is pain or loss associated with failure.
- How do we respond to our children? Children are our first tests in being teachers like God. Are we molding and instructing them, or are they raising themselves—or worse yet,

is Satan's world raising them? Do we communicate well with them? Do they love, respect, and honor us? Do they come to us for advice and counsel? Or are they afraid, sullen, rebellious?

- How do we respond to a bad boss or co-worker? Do we murmur against him? Do we beat our chests and say that we could do a much better job?
- How do we respond to people in God's church? Do we avoid certain ones? Do we hold grudges against those who may have offended us?

God uses our little worlds to teach us how to live His way. The trials of life are really pop quizzes that God gives us to see how we are doing. A few tests come pre-planned for each of us: the travails of growing up, the death of our parents, choosing a mate, dealing with children, becoming old and sick, etc. We know that these big trials are coming.

The apostle James admonishes us in James 1:2-4:

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience [or *perseverance*]. But let patience have its perfect work that you may be perfect [or, *mature*] and complete, lacking nothing.

Our testing through trials comes from God, so we should feel happy to know that God is working with us in such an individual, personal way. Testing is a natural consequence of His teaching and brings us to spiritual maturity. His teaching gives us the critical skills necessary to do the work He has in store for us.

## Keys to Being Teachable

What are the characteristics of a teachable person?

### 1. A teachable person *studies God's Word*.

**Deuteronomy 17:18-20:** Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book. . . . And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom.

**Acts 17:11:** These [in Berea] were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

### 2. A teachable person is *attentive*.

**Isaiah 51:1:** Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD. . . .

**Matthew 13:16-17:** But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear. For assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

### 3. A teachable person *seeks God*.

**Jeremiah 29:13-14:** "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you," says the LORD. . . .

**Proverbs 2:3-6:** Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD

gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. . . .

#### 4. A teachable person is *humble*.

**Psalm 25:9:** The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way.

**Proverbs 11:2:** When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom.

#### 5. A teachable person is *meek*.

**James 1:21:** Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

**James 3:13:** Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.

People are rarely truly interested in learning from others; they are more interested in defending their position. Most will staunchly defend their position in the face of all of the evidence to the contrary. That is pride at work. Such people cannot learn because they are always trying to convince others rather than receive instruction.

### Our Cup—Full or Empty?

Consider the insight of Dr. Scott Baker, a psychologist, which he learned from many years of teaching martial arts:

The student's attitude is the most significant aspect of their nature which contributes to either their success or failure in learning this complex system of skills. Attitude has a greater impact upon a student's success than natural ability, and physical capacity. One can build capacity and endurance, and one can teach skills and abilities even to the un-talented, but one cannot teach the un-teachable!

There is an old Taoist story about a student who comes to a master and asks him to teach him. The master invites the student to sit with him and have tea. While they are sitting, the master starts to converse with the eager young student. But every time the master starts to explain a point, the student would interrupt him and say, "Oh, I know that, I do this when that happens, or I don't have that problem because. . . ." Soon the master stopped talking and picked up the teapot. He began pouring tea into the student's cup. As the cup filled, he continued pouring until the cup overflowed and spilled out. The student shouted, "Stop! It is enough! My cup is full!" With that, the old master smiled and replied, "Yes, your cup is full, therefore I can teach you nothing until you empty your cup."

The moral of the story should be clear. The student had an un-teachable attitude. Instead of listening to the master, he wanted to show how much he already knew. He was not open to learning anything new that he believed he had already learned. His cup of knowledge was full. He had to empty that cup before he could learn from the new master. Emptying your cup does not mean you must give up all you have learned, forget all that you know. That would be absurd. To empty your cup simply means to adopt a teachable attitude. To put what you know about something out of your mind and listen to a new explanation, a new insight. If you are asked your experience or opinion, then by all means share it. Otherwise, hold what you know in abeyance so that you can benefit from this new learning opportunity.

All your natural talent, your eagerness and hard work, your willingness to pay the price to master a skill, all of this amounts to little or nothing if you do not have an attitude that enables you to be taught. Most of the great instructors I have seen deal with the un-teachable student in much the same way. They leave them alone; let them spout off

their great knowledge, and often do not correct what is wrong or confirm what is right. Remember this, if you are talking, then you are not learning, that is, with one exception: If you are asking questions, then you are in a learning dialogue with your teacher. Most competent teachers encourage students to ask questions.

Asking questions is not the same as questioning the validity of an answer. Although most instructors have a permanent cure for that skeptical attitude: They simply do it on you! There is no substitute for experience! Once you have experienced it, you will accept the validity of your teacher's explanations.

Dr. Baker's final statement that believing one's teacher comes from practicing or applying his teaching in life is perhaps the most important. The same holds for us spiritually: If we apply God's teaching, we will also come to see the validity and greatness of God.

Is our cup empty, or do we know so much that we say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17)? We must approach learning from a humble and meek disposition. Have we put what we think we know aside long enough for God to put His instruction in? Are we really teachable?

—Bryan Nelson

## personal *Communication and Leaving Babylon*

(continued from page 6)

distinct age or period of human history as marked out from another by particular characteristics.

*Course* in *Roget's International Thesaurus*, under the heading "tendency," has such synonyms as "thoughts," "zeitgeist," "spirit," "disposition," "character," "nature," "makeup," "bent," "slant," "frame of mind," "attitude," "inclination," "mind-set," "drift," "perspective," and many more. It may be easier to understand "course of this world" by rephrasing it into statements such as, "according to the disposition of this world"; "according to the character of this world"; "according to the nature of this world"; "according to the makeup of this world"; "according to the mindset, drift, or perspective of this world."

This is the spirit from which we must be converted. It is the unseen foundation and fountain of our pre-conversion conduct, and it is the same spirit still motivating us when we act carnally or in the flesh. Despite conversion, it remains within us, compressed like a spring that is ready to jump into action and influence our conduct.

### Men Choose Evil

A major characteristic of this spirit is that it is habitually self-centered rather than God-centered. A simple example illustrates how it became this way. In Genesis 1:31 God takes satisfaction in all He had made, declaring it "very good." Included in this is Adam and Eve's nature, as they were already created by this time.

Thus, at the beginning, mankind's nature was not corrupted by contact with this world. Genesis 3 records

the episode of their confrontation with Satan that began the evil transformation of their basic nature. God did not create their nature as evil, but it *became* evil through the influence of another spirit that *they* chose to follow without any intervention from their Creator.

The same process continues to this day, as each of us is born into this world and comes under the influence of the same spirit that influenced Adam and Eve to turn from God. We are all born with a slight pull toward self, but not with the evil that eventually develops and manifests itself in our conduct. Evil is not—cannot be—passed on through procreation, but it is fashioned anew by the spirit of the age into which each person is born. It is a converted parent's responsibility to God and his children to ensure the right spirit dominates his home so the children can be properly nurtured.

People in the world understand this to some extent when they observe with maxims like, "The apple doesn't fall very far from the tree," "Like father, like son," or "Like mother, like daughter." This world's Christians, to avoid responsibility for their evil, have blamed God for creating us this way. But God did *not* make us this way. Mankind, represented by Adam and Eve, *chose* to become this way, and all of their descendants, including us, have chosen the same path under the influence of the same evil spirit who offered Adam and Eve the choice. This accounts for the course of this world.

Jeremiah 17:9 shows us how evil God judges the source of our unconverted motivations to be: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The *Revised Standard Version* translates this as, "The natural heart of man is desperately corrupt;

incurably sick.” It is so bad, so evil, it cannot be salvaged by repairing it! It must be completely replaced. This is what the conversion process—our calling, repentance, justification, and sanctification—accomplishes.

We need to understand more completely why this aspect of God’s command to flee Babylon is so important. We can be easily deceived about it, misunderstanding why God says the human heart is incurably sick. In Luke 11:13, Jesus makes an easily overlooked comment: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” The way He says this implies that those before Him were thoroughly, not partly, evil.

He flat out calls them evil! There is no equivocation, no modification of this verse in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus Himself was called “good” in Matthew 19:16, but He immediately corrects the speaker, saying, “No one is good but One, that is, God.” This is God’s assessment of human nature, not man’s.

Jesus is saying that, just because human nature knows how to and actually does some good things, it does not alter the fact that it is still incurably evil. Our pride tends to blunt God’s assessment, rising to defend us from the condemnation of what we are compared to, the standard—God.

Consider this example: Most people judge Adolph Hitler to be thoroughly evil. However, many of his closest companions claimed that he loved children and dogs. Most people would judge that as good. This dichotomy even in such a man begs a look into another set of scriptures.

## An Evil Mixture

The apostle writes in James 3:8-12:

But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

People say human nature is a mixture of good and evil, but in terms of living in the Kingdom of God, that evil mixture is unacceptable. Is God Himself a mixture of good and evil? I John 3:2 makes abundantly clear that we shall be like Him, and there is not one spot of evil in Him.

We are seeing what we need to repent of. Unless we realize that it is not merely what we have done but what we *are* that needs radical changing, we will have a terribly difficult time overcoming and growing.

By now, we should have plenty of evidence to understand that salvation absolutely must be by grace. Human

nature is an evil mixture that we cannot make good. Even in a converted person led by the Holy Spirit, the course of this world is still just below the surface. Matthew 16:21-23 shows how easily a disciple of Christ can become the means of communication from demons:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”

Peter did the speaking, but Jesus spoke to Satan, attributing the source of the disciple’s action. His verbal outburst was against God’s will that Jesus suffer and die. Without recognizing it, Peter permitted himself to be a willing conduit for Satan’s will!

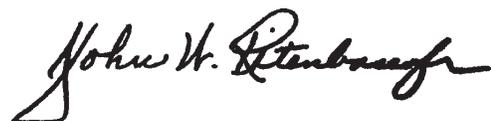
Several years ago, I clipped an abstract of a book, *Wrestling with Dark Angels*, which was advertised in a book catalog. The abstract reads:

They’re those inner “voices of reason” that try to convince you that wrong is right, that evil is good. They’re Satan’s dark angels, and you fight them every day. Some of today’s most respected theologians help you better understand these supernatural forces so you can combat them effectively—and win the war for your mind.

There is a time coming, represented by the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day, when these dark forces of reason will no longer be free to influence mankind as they can now. Those who are now facing them without understanding what is happening will have died, been resurrected, and will live again with the knowledge of why life was so difficult before. God will not make them face these dark angels’ subtle but powerful influence again. It will have had its effect, which will still have to be overcome. However, the possibility of that influence being refreshed each day will not exist.

The solution for us today is to combat that influence by means of the continuous influence of God’s Holy Spirit flowing from our relationship with God through Bible study, prayer, meditation, occasional fasting, and obedience. Being in the spiritual presence of God and His Son Jesus Christ is the antidote. It is our shield and the means to flee Babylon, but expounding these areas will require further articles.

In Christian love,



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TAKING  
OUR  
LEAD  
FROM  
GOD

Obviously, the poster was directed toward a room full of salesmen, all there to take their companies to the next level or to bury their nearest competitors in the dirt. And from the dog-eat-dog perspective of this world (pun intended), that was the real focus of the conference. It is also the focus of the super-competitive of this world who work to annihilate and dominate rather than to cooperate and produce a quality product or service.

Most of us never expected to see this type of worldliness become so blatant in God's church—aside from a few prominent exceptions who, using worldly ways, sought a coveted office—before the major organization housing the members of the church began to break up. Sadly, the physical church is continuing to splinter, and many Korah-like individuals have sprung up, striving for lead-dog status (see Numbers 16:1-50). In fact, the church's experience has paralleled what happened in the Wilderness: Those who were chosen to serve most prominently within Israel were those who were most culpable for this uprising, the tribe of Levi (verse 7; see also James 3:1).

What is probably the most compelling factor in this side-by-side comparison of present activities within the church and the world is how many have forgotten that God determines right leadership qualities versus wrong ones. Even though the ministry obviously plays a major role in

A number of years ago at a business conference, my eyes caught a rather humorous poster in one of the breakout rooms, featuring a group of single-file, Alaskan sled dogs tugging vigorously at the harness lines connecting them together. The caption read:

“If you aren't the lead dog, the view is pretty much always the same.”

this (as did Korah and the “leaders of the congregation”), this worldly mindset has influenced every single member of God's church. God is not blind to this.

How does God view all that is transpiring as group after group breaks even further apart? So many modern-day Korahs are professing their willingness to “stand in the gap” (Ezekiel 22:30), while forgetting the real implication of that verse as a prophetic warning and indictment of wicked leadership!

Perhaps it is better to ask: How many of us take our lead from God in what we do, who we follow, and what we believe, instead of following a man's version of Christian teaching and the work of the church? We see it all the time in this world, as thousands follow this or that evangelist, despite what God's Word says—and now we see it happening within the churches of God.

#### KORAH'S EXAMPLE

The example of Korah has often been used to indict people of certain attitudes and actions like rebelliousness, contentiousness, disrespect of authority, and similar evils. It is indeed a viable example of all of these. What happened to cause God to take such drastic measures?

The issue was mostly about power and wrongly desired

roles. In accordance with God's original purposes, Moses and Aaron were in charge, and it eventually became a smoldering issue. Initially, it only affected a few, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, but quickly involved others (Numbers 16:1-2). The charge first presented to Moses and Aaron dealt with unwarranted self-exaltation: "You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?" (verse 3).

At first glance, this would seem to be a reasonable argument, since God called all of Israel holy (Deuteronomy 7:6). Of course, the same could be argued today from a New Testament perspective using scriptures like I Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people. . . ."

But the most glaring sin here is the same sin that plagues today's church: presumptuousness, or as *Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* defines it, "being too bold or forward; taking too much for granted; showing overconfidence, arrogance, or effrontery."

Sadly, the presumption did not stop with just these three men. It quickly built into a "cause" or a "movement," with the addition of 250 "men of renown" within the congregation. Eventually, this sin ensnared almost 15,000 people (Numbers 16:49), all of whom died as a result of their involvement in the fray. Every single person among them made the conscious decision to blame Moses and Aaron, without realizing that they were actually blaming God.

One might imagine that seeing 250 leaders of Israel consumed by "fire . . . from the LORD" (verse 35) would have been a major wake-up call for the rest of Israel. Instead, the blame-game continued toward Moses and Aaron, as the people accused them of killing "the people of the LORD" (verse 41), as if this further act of disobedience would succeed any more than their dead leaders' presumption had.

Can we see how this attitude has become a prevailing approach today? Instead of allowing God to place whom-ever He wants in whatever place or position He wants, we often see a more secular tactic used, often clouded with religious or biblical rhetoric, but one with the same undertone of rebelliousness and self-righteousness exhibited by Korah and company.

And the saddest part of all is that, instead of learning from this as an example of what not to do, dozens of self-proclaimed "leaders," beating their own drums of godliness and truth, attract many misguided "sheep," who follow them right to the slaughterhouse of self-determination, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness. What happened to following God's lead?

Perhaps like the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), this Korah-like rebelliousness begins as something almost invisible yet quickly grows into a huge tree, making some suppose there is great depth to a leader's ideas or goals. Maybe even some of his arguments have some truth or relevance. However, when the tree begins to draw others

to it in ways unsupported by God's Word—the Bible may speak of this in terms of "factions" (I Corinthians 11:19), "contentions" (I Corinthians 1:11), or "preach[ing] Christ . . . from envy and strife" (Philippians 1:15)—it does not matter how many truths or rights are taught or believed. Following God's lead is always the right way.

## HUMILITY, MEEKNESS, AND CONTRITENESS

Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:26, "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." Yet, often left out of this passage are the various reasons why this is so. What was Paul trying to teach the people of Corinth about himself, themselves, and ourselves—all who would one day be called?

We need to see this in context. Paul makes it clear what his role and purpose was: He was to preach the gospel (verse 17). He also makes it plain that it was not his job to employ "wisdom of words"—perhaps he means too worldly, intellectual, or self-exalting speech. That seems somewhat humorous, considering how Paul's letters are frequently misunderstood due to their complexity (II Peter 3:15-16)! Nevertheless, his statement has as much to do with what he could not or should not do than anything else. Paul knew his limitations and what his past behaviors had caused, so he knew not to take on more than God wanted from him.

He then breaks down various philosophies of the time (I Corinthians 1:18-25). Some people, like the Greeks, were constantly looking for arguments that made them or their beliefs look better, while the Jews were always seeking a sign of their perceived preeminent position over others. Yet, Christ, virtually unknown and humanly unremarkable—a man who had been condemned to crucifixion!—was the role model Paul preached and strove to imitate.

Because of this, God would choose His called-out ones from similarly unremarkable circumstances. He wants His chosen people to strive after and embrace humble ways (Titus 3:1-7), meekness of heart (Colossians 3:12) and contriteness (Psalm 51:17), unlike the arrogance of this world (see Isaiah 66:2). Any real wisdom and righteousness are to be based on Christ, His teachings, and His example, not on even the "wisdom" of this world.

This is most certainly not what we see in Korah's circumstance, and unfortunately, this principle seems to have been lost in the shuffle even among many leaders and members of God's church today. How many self-proclaimed leaders have taken on so-called biblical roles and titles? This seems more destructive than edifying, making Christianity more about them than about God and His truth!

Has the church become more about the leaders' messages, ideas, beliefs, and interpretations than glorifying God and proclaiming His Word? Paul concludes by warning, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD" (I Corinthians 1:31).

The same is true for individual members. We must identify whom we follow by God's standards and not some human methodology or some proclamation of "new truth" that is more grounded in man's way than God's.

It is instructive to study how many of God's chosen leaders landed in their roles. Think about Moses' almost desperate unwillingness to take God's message to Pharaoh. Consider that David was the youngest boy in his family, yet he ascended to become the king of Israel. Jesus called His apostles from jobs like fisherman and tax collector, and Paul from a life of persecuting the church! God saw in these people a potential for humility, meekness, and contriteness, even though they occasionally stepped on these virtues along the way. In the end, God determined their roles, not themselves.

It can be very hard to know the heart and intent of each leader among the smorgasbord of church organizations. Yet, it is true that God is placing the members where He wants them. If we still have a Berean way of thinking—which is not confrontational or nitpicking, but also is not easily fooled by misplaced loyalties, nepotism, cronyism, false humility, human reason, etc.—we can make godly determinations regarding church leaders.

#### ONE BODY, ONE CALLING

Many things have been written about the broken body of the church and why it happened. Some blame Satan, others involve God at various levels, many point the finger at ambitious men, and still others offer nothing but excuses. Yet, so many seem to miss the fact that what has happened to the church replicates past situations like the example of Korah or the punishment of Israel for sin.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:1-7, we all have responsibilities from God:

- to walk worthy of our calling with all lowliness and gentleness with longsuffering;
- to bear with one another in love;
- to strive to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Elsewhere we are instructed:

- to live by God's commandments (James 1:25; I John 2:2-5; 5:3), and
- to mirror our lives to the sinless Christ's life because ours have gone astray (I Peter 2:21-25 I John 2:6).

Paul reminds us that there is only one body and one Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:4), which should be reinforced by all of us having the same hope in our calling and the same faith. This is where it gets confusing for so many in God's church, as they proclaim, defend,

and excuse their own or their group's definitions of God's truths and purposes versus what the Bible says they really are.

Regardless of whom we follow, what we might believe is truth or heresy, what we feel should be the direction and responsibility of God's church during the end time, etc., we must take our lead from God. Or, have we abrogated our responsibility to make such critical judgments to someone else? Are we just blindly following a lead dog? How many of God's people truly believe they are following God's lead but instead are allowing Korah-types to steer them off in a completely different direction? How much rationalization and human reasoning are the various groups and leaders using in determining doctrine, organizational structures, and the direction of their works? Or, more positively, are they based on what God reveals in the Bible as His way?

Being of one body and one mind requires repentance, overcoming, and hard work. We are on a very difficult road to perfection, learning to do as God designs and not just whatever happens to make us happier, more visible, or more relevant. Real unity is allowing the same Spirit, given as a gift from God, to be the prevailing factor in all our lives.

It is constantly surrendering and yielding, as James 3:13-18 states:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

No one truly knows how, when, where, or even if God will bring His church to the place where "one body and one Spirit" will once again equate to "one organization" in our lifetimes. A mindset of repentance, a spirit of cooperation, a willingness to edify God's people, and a humble desire to obey God will surely be integral parts of the equation. All the modern-day Korahs—perhaps all of us on some level—must regain a humble, meek, and contrite heart that produces a godly way of life, one that is lived daily and not just professed.

As with most things in a Christian's life, it comes down to this: Whose lead are we really following: God's perfect, proven path or man's shortsighted, selfish course? As we grow in this way over time, it should increasingly become second nature to follow God obediently in everything, as He leads His saints to glory in His Kingdom.

—Rod Keese

## The Red Dragon Rising or Falling?

Recently, the media—intentionally or not—have sketched an image of China as a bold, tenacious contender in the present uni-polar world. Its roaring market economy is growing at double-digit rates. The current high price of oil is due in large part to the increased demand from developing nations such as China and India, which seek larger pieces of the petroleum pie. U.S. officials have publicly noted the advances in China's armed services, particularly its reported plans to build its own aircraft carrier. China also boasts of developing a manned lunar program, a technological feat that would set it apart from every nation but the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Finally, ubiquitous "Made in China" labels bear out the impact of this manufacturing giant.

However, all is not well beneath this dragon's formidable scales.

Where it was once conventional wisdom that China's population was undergoing a boom, the current reality shows an opposite trend. China now has a sub-replacement fertility rate: By 2025, there will be a 1-to-1 ratio between senior citizen and worker. Without a national pension system, senior citizens will either have to be supported by their child(ren), or else join the growing class of low-paid, part-time laborers to survive.

In addition, the gender imbalance caused by its "one child policy," in effect since 1979, is currently about 120 boys for every 100 girls—and growing. Analysts suggest that this imbalance will affect the Chinese family: 10-15% of Chinese men will be monogamously unmarriageable, and this phenomenon will cause social tensions in China—and perhaps social turbulence.

Even as long-range indicators point to instability on various fronts, current events in China suggest trouble may break out sooner rather than later.

In early December 2005, a demonstration in Shanwei in Guangdong province (about 100 miles from Hong Kong) occurred over farmland confiscated by the government to develop a power plant. While protests are nothing new in China—74,000 mass demonstrations were reported last year, up from "only" 10,000 a decade ago—this one was significant because it involved the police killing a number of armed protestors. Officially, three died and eight were wounded, but some journalists say 20 died—and one report even claims 50 deaths. These are the first deaths of demonstrators in China since 1989, when pro-democracy protests were held in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

While the shooting was unusual, the underlying tensions have been simmering for years. Due to the booming economy, the Chinese government is confiscating more farmland for use in government-sponsored industrial projects. While Beijing allocates money to compensate the displaced small farmers, they frequently never see the money. George Friedman explains:

Money is issued to local officials by state-owned enterprises and other investment groups to cover

the cost of the land. That money passes through the regional and local bureaucracies. By the time it should reach the owners, there often is nothing left; it has been stolen by officials at various levels. No one denies the farmers' claims to the land, but no one acts to compensate them. The laborers go from being small farmers to being destitute. This is a critical process at the heart of Chinese industrialization. The purchase of land, including forced sale, is considered necessary for Chinese economic development. However, Chinese economic development is driven as much by corruption as by land. . . . But the diversion of funds is hard-wired into the process. It is one of the primary means for capital formation in China. ("The Shanwei Shootings and China's Situation," *Stratfor Geopolitical Intelligence Report*, December 13, 2005)

He further describes a common method for Chinese entrepreneurs: become a government official who can leverage his public position for personal financial gain, as well as making useful contacts. To hold onto his job, a public official must maintain a system of relationships—based on money—with superiors, colleagues, and subordinates. Land-compensation programs provide the capital for bureaucrats to maintain their positions, and the farmers end up with little more than growing rage.

In addition, much of China's industrialization is financed through debt that will almost certainly never be repaid. This is creating a bubble that will not burst quietly. Friedman explains:

China . . . is a country where the banking system has been saved from collapse by spinning off bad debts—at least \$600 billion worth, or nearly half the GDP of China—into holding companies. This maneuver cleaned up the banks' books and allowed Western banks to purchase shares in them, shoring them up. But it also left a huge amount of debt that is owed internally to people who will never see the funds.

In sum, China is growing militarily and technologically; it is producing a generation of young men with uncertain family futures and thus inherent instability; its economy will be undermined as its population ages; its economic growth, rather than being driven by "market forces," is spurred by officials and institutions who need growth to maintain their positions, and who are more than willing to use bad debt and sacrifice the working class for "progress." Economically, socially, and politically, China is experiencing great tension. While it may not be on the verge of complete meltdown, the dragon is becoming increasingly volatile—with the potential to affect many nations, businesses, and people as its disorders converge.

—David C. Grabbe

## The Parables of Matthew 13

### Part Three: The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

To a multitude gathered before Him, Jesus spoke the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43), in which He exposes the work of the mystery of sin against the church and the extent to which the evil one is allowed to go in his opposition to it. This parable reveals a slightly different aspect of the same truth taught in the preceding Parable of the Sower. In the Tares, the mixed character of the church culminates in the ultimate separation of the religious hobbyists—and worse—from the saints.

In this parable, there are two sowers, two kinds of seed, and two harvests: one good, the other bad. The Parable of the Sower depicts four kinds of soils, but in the Parable of the Tares, the field, which Jesus says represents the world (verses 24, 38), contains all the soils interspersed over its entirety.



1. What do the two sowers represent? Matthew 13:24-25.

**COMMENT:** Jesus illustrates two sowers of different character. In the Parable of the Sower, the sower stands for all teachers of God's truth, including Jesus. Here, "the sower" is exclusively Jesus. He is the "owner" (verse 27), and "the son of Man" (verse 37). The other sower is called "his enemy," "an enemy," "the wicked one," and "the devil" (verses 25, 28, 38-39). To describe this enemy, Jesus uses the word *diabolos*: the accuser, deceiver, liar, and betrayer, one who is against all that is true and righteous.

The enemy sowed in a field that was not his while the servants slept. This does not necessarily mean that the servants were not watchful and were thus to blame for the mixed field. The wording implies that it was the normal time for sleep, night. Satan's sly nature is revealed in his choice of the darkness for doing his diabolical work. Also, note that he does not bother to sow the wicked among the wicked, but the wicked among the good.

2. Are the tares easily distinguishable from the wheat? Matthew 13:24-29.

**COMMENT:** Satan's malicious intention in sowing tares among the wheat is to cause problems and confusion (James 3:16). The bad seeds grow to become poisonous weeds that allow only the healthiest of the wheat to survive. Tares, like weeds, have never been a marketable product. "Tares" are actually darnel, a seed hardly identifiable from the wheat seed, and immature wheat and darnel look alike. To try to destroy the darnel would mean destroying much of the wheat, and separating one from the other would be beyond the servants' abilities. Only when the wheat has matured can the tares be detected. Then the tares are gathered together in bundles in the field and destroyed by fire.

Many who are not in the process of conversion resemble those who are. Just like true Christians, they go to church, pray, and read the Bible, but they are only religious hobbyists. Jesus calls them "sons of the wicked one" (Matthew 13:38), and being tares, they will be destroyed. The tares are not originally from the wicked one, but they develop character according to his strong influence. They are led by him and so are his children (John 8:44).

3. How does this parable relate to the church?

**COMMENT:** This parable exposes the problem of evil intermingled with good within congregations, just as the same

mix confronts nations, communities, and homes. No matter how society tries to legislate or separate out lawbreakers from the rest of society, the seeds of sin and crime find a place to grow. God's church is similarly affected by Satan's constant attacks. The genuine and the counterfeit wheat are always together in the church.

The servants' perplexity about the sowing of the tares shows that the presence of sin is often a mystery to people (II Thessalonians 2:7-10). God cannot be blamed for them because He does not sow evil—Satan does (James 1:13). By this parable, Jesus prophesies that the church of God on earth would be imperfect. The spiritual church has members with the Holy Spirit who are dedicated and loyal, yet have personal defects. It also has within it unconverted people who may recognize the truth but are there only to enjoy association with God's people. Jesus' intent is to enlighten and warn the saints of this fact, not to expose the tares at this time (Acts 20:29-32). God will root out the bad seed when the good seed has matured.

4. What is expected of the good seed?

**COMMENT:** "The good seed," "the wheat," and "the sons of the kingdom" refer to baptized members of God's church in whom the Holy Spirit dwells—the saints, the elect, the righteous (Matthew 13:43). In the previous parable, the seed represents "the word of the kingdom" (verse 19), but here, the good seed is the product of that word received, understood, and obeyed. The Son of Man, as the Sower or Owner, sows only good seed, those who are righteous due to walking worthy of God—living His way of life, and becoming the "children of the kingdom" (I John 2:6; II John 6; I Thessalonians 2:10-15).

It is God's will that Jesus Christ the Redeemer sow His redeemed ones in this world of sin and misery for the purpose of training and testing them to become true witnesses for Him in preparation for the Kingdom. Therefore, He has placed Christians where He wants them. Jesus tells Peter in Luke 22:31 that he was wheat, and as such, he was to be sifted by Satan. All of God's saints should heed this warning to watch and pray that the field of our heart not be sown with tares by the enemy. God has bought us with a price and given us His Spirit, making us new creations in Him and heirs of His Family and eternal life. He expects us to bear fruit in our corner of the field of this world in which He has sowed us.