

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 15, Number 10

December 2006

Last Will

— ((and)) —

Testament

— ((of)) —

Consider the End!

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Though many of us avoid contemplating it, we must all face the last enemy, death. Moreover, we do not know when our lives will end: We may be in excellent health yet be caught in a fatal accident. It is good to be prepared for such an eventuality. Scripture suggests that putting our affairs in order before we die is a responsible and proper activity—in fact, it is an act of love toward those who survive us.
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Power Belongs to God

Part Two

Since we believe this world is headed toward the worst time of violent warfare, the upheaval of all nations, and worldwide spiritual confusion—including the prophesied shattering of the Christian church—we must consider and take steps now to ensure we fully understand where real power and strength resides. Growth and safety also reside there. Deep-seated faith in God’s reality, understanding of His promises, and trust in His powers and willingness to save are absolute essentials for the Christian. Any other means we might have opportunity to rely upon will be useless before the onslaught of the full fury of Satan’s efforts to destroy God’s people and plan.

The *Reader’s Digest Complete Oxford Word Finder Dictionary* defines *power* as “having the ability to act; influence; a particular faculty of body or mind; capability.” As explained in Part One, two of David’s psalms provide a foundation for faith, showing that God’s power is the very reason we can trust Him.

His power is not limited to brute strength, but also includes qualities such as love, mercy, wisdom, foresight, discernment, intellectual genius—among other things—combined with His willingness to use it in behalf of those called according to His purpose. Through the continuing fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He demonstrates that He acts for the benefit of the Israelitish people. He has given many powers to them.

Jesus says, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He intends, of course, for us to understand this in a spiritual sense. He is our salvation, and He alone is

able to save us. We are involved in a cooperative effort with Him, and the goal is to grow into His likeness and enter the Kingdom of God. His power enables these efforts to be accomplished. Now is the time, before the major social, cultural, and military storms hit us, to get into the habit of cooperating with Him.

A Critical Issue

A critical issue for the children of God—one that can potentially destroy our cooperation with God through making wrong choices—is our innate fear that, at times, He will not provide for us. Human beings can always fall prey to a nagging fear that, somehow, sometime, He will not respond to our prayerful appeals. In essence, we fear the consequences of a right choice.

Romans 8:18-25 provides a preface and foundation for Paul’s encouraging exhortation beginning in verse 28:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the

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firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

Notice how he lays the foundation by turning our attention to our hope. He reminds us that God purposefully made life subject to futility. Futility is a frustrating quality that wears away at one's confidence. It can produce a sense of hopelessness that leads us to think that nothing will work out. Sometimes our pilgrimage seems so long and arduous that we take our eyes from our Savior, and hopelessness builds. However, Paul reminds us that God does everything in love and wisdom and for our good. Futility is an obstacle that we must overcome through faith in God. Yet, He has willed that futility be present, intending that we use it as a prod to use our faith in cooperation with Him despite its presence.

Paul continues building to a triumphant, encouraging crescendo:

Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:27-30)

With such positive statements about our salvation, why should we be hopeless and fearfully doubt that God will supply all our needs? Does He ever fail to succeed in whatever He undertakes? These verses flatly and dogmatically state that, if we want to cooperate in faith to bring God's purpose for us to its intended conclusion, we *must*, I repeat, *must*, believe that His watchfulness over us involves every circumstance of our lives.

Verses 31 and 32 put a cap on this issue: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

In verse 30, note that the term "sanctified" is missing from the list of the general stages of God's purpose. Sanctification is the only part of the salvation process in which our cooperation plays a major, consistent, and daily

role. Why does Paul exclude it? This was not an oversight; he deliberately leaves "sanctified" out because he wants, for the remainder of this section of this epistle, to focus entirely on the *absolute certainty* of God's providence, not on any works we may perform in cooperation with Him during the sanctification process.

Paul is not saying that God will always do what we might want Him to do; he is reminding us that He will always do what is right according to His purpose. God has the necessary powers to do as He sees fit for His purpose and us. He is watching, which is even more reason for us to draw on that power.

Nobody can successfully stand in His way of completing that purpose in each of us, but based on our knowledge of those powers, are we willing to accept His providence? Do we accept what He provides in any given circumstance, even though what He provides might not be what we would like to have?

All of the things Paul writes here are wonderful, but the key to this particular subject is the answer to the question he asks in verse 30: "If God be for us who can be against us?" God has the power and the will, and He does not make mistakes or empty promises. Paul then lists what God has already done for all concerned. Our responsibility is to choose to put these facts to work in our specific circumstances.

The handwriting on the wall for us is this: Terribly difficult times are coming, and they will affect all of us to varying degrees. The *only* successful way to complete our minute part in God's purpose is to choose to draw on His power. We must begin at once to cultivate the habit of cooperating by faith, accepting whatever He chooses to provide in our circumstances. If this habit is in place through long practice, we will be ready when the pressure really mounts.

Who Have the Enemies Been?

Because He is the Source of our deliverance in every circumstance, it is crucial for us to know God as well as we can. Our relationship with Him through Jesus Christ is the key that gives us access to the deliverance He provides. He has the power, and it is His will to meet our every need. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to use our time now to build on our present relationship with Him, making it stronger and more intimate.

History shows that the primary enemies of the church arise from humans influenced by Satan and his demons—and history continually repeats itself. The clearest examples of where these enemies lie are shown in the lives and ministries of Jesus Christ and the apostles. Did not the established religious and governmental leaders of their day, such as Caiaphas, the Pharisees and Sadducees, Pilate, the Herods, etc., willingly cooperate in persecuting them?

Searching into God's authority over these enemies will help us to see how complete and all-encompassing is His power over everything. Past events show that civil governments and false churches are always the true church's most dangerous adversaries. John 19:10-11 says:

Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and the power to release You?" Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

Here, "power" refers to civil authority, and Jesus informs us that Pilate, a powerful Roman governor of Judea, who had authority over life and death, derived his authority from God. The authority would not be his if God had not given it to him directly. We can infer that Pilate was specifically given his particular civil authority. Why is this important for us to know and believe?

Proverbs 21:1 adds an important truth: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes." *The Living Bible* paraphrases this as, "Just as water is turned into irrigation ditches, so the Lord directs the king's thoughts, He turns them wherever He wants to."

This fact helps us understand God's sovereignty and much of history too. If the thoughts of a king—representing the highest, most influential, and most powerful person in the nation—are in God's hand, and He has the power to influence his decisions toward the outcome that pleases Him, are not all human governors completely under the Almighty's sovereign control? Clearly, God has the power to move all history in the direction He wishes it to go. His desire will always be done. Romans 13:1-2 makes this deduction certain:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

Not only does God have the power to move those already in office, but He appointed them in the first place! Since Paul writes this directly to Christians, and Christians have lived throughout history and in virtually every place on earth, the wording suggests that this command has timeless, universal application. Thus, God reveals that, in the final analysis, all civil magistrates, from the emperor on down to the lower authorities—and religious authorities as well—owe to God their appointments and rights to govern.

This explains why, in Numbers 16:11, Moses immediately declares that the actions of Korah and his group were rebellion against God Himself. Moses says, "There-

fore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD. And what is Aaron that you complain against him?" Moses perceived that God Himself had appointed him and Aaron to their respective responsibilities. Thus, to rebel against them was in reality rebelling against God.

This also explains why Jesus teaches in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me." To reject His apostle—one sent by God bearing a message—is to reject Christ, and to reject Him is to reject the Father who sent Him.

In John 5:17, Jesus provides insight into God's activity throughout the millennia of this creation: "Jesus answered them, 'My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.'" God's labors are the continuous managing and ruling over the affairs of men. He has not gone "way off somewhere," but is actively involved in bringing His purpose to pass at all times. By His will and in His providence, authorities are appointed to maintain order, to encourage good conduct, and to punish wrongdoing.

Thus, anyone who believes God is confronted by a matter of biblical truth and clear logic. How will any of our enemies "get around," deflect, or nullify the real unseen Power who stands behind and above the visible powers that be? His will *will* stand. So, to whom do we turn in time of need?

Jesus Christ and Power

Let us consider the issue of power with respect to Jesus Christ. He says of Himself in Matthew 28:18, "All authority [*power*, KJV] has been given to Me in heaven and earth." "Authority" is translated from *exousia*, which has wide usage in the Greek language. It can be used to indicate jurisdiction, privilege, capacity, freedom, influence, force, and right, besides authority and power. Obviously, its usage is not restricted to sheer, brute strength. Jesus, then, is perfectly equipped to handle our needs in the widest variety of situations.

Notice that Jesus says authority has been given to Him. For this to be true, a greater Being must be the Giver. In this vein, I Corinthians 15:25-28 transports us into the future, revealing the source of His powers:

For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

The Giver in Matthew 28:18 must be the Father, so the word "all" in that verse excludes the Father, who is

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supreme in authority. The resurrected Son is the channel through which the Father's every purpose and plan are being worked out.

How extensive is Jesus' given authority? Colossians 1:14-19 explains some of His authority more specifically:

... in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. . . .

Paul stresses Christ's positional authority, that is, where Christ stands in relation to all other beings, whether human or spirit. "Firstborn" in verses 15 and 18 does not refer to His being created, as other verses clearly show that He has eternally existed. Here, the word indicates primacy of rank, since the apostle is showing Christ's status in relation to all other beings and institutions. Establishing this is important to what he writes in the rest of the epistle, as a foundation for passages like Colossians 2:6-10:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the [divine nature] bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

In verse 8, the word translated as "basic principles of the world" refers to elementary things. Compared to Christ, in terms of being, every other being is lesser because he or she is created. In terms of teaching, every other instruction is elementary, basic, even demonic. In terms of salvation, no other is able to save human beings.

In verses 9-10, Paul again emphasizes Christ's primacy and superiority, including the facts that He is divine and over demons in authority. He adds in verses 11-15 that, for Christians, Jesus has already defeated the principalities and powers, along with their purposes, through their conversion.

As Colossians 1:16 states, Christ's rank extends back

to the very beginning, as the One used to create all things. Thus, He is the God (John 1:1) referred to in nearly every place in the Old Testament where God is mentioned. This is especially important to grasp.

John 14:10 aids us in understanding His operations as a man: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works." Matthew 26:52-53 clarifies this through an example: "But Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?'"

While He was human, His power as a God-Being was suspended as part of His emptying Himself to become a man (Philippians 2:5-8). He thus operated on the same level as all other men, except for the innate power He possessed due to His divine nature, enabling Him to live by faith sinlessly. Better than all other men, He understood the purpose God is working out, and He believed it. Notice to whom He said He could turn in time of need.

In terms of power, Hebrews 1:1-3 informs us that His similarity to man ended upon His resurrection:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The apostle is extolling the *present* power of the One we worship. His authority and abilities have returned to what they were before He became a man. One of the ideas we are to take from this statement is that, if God were somehow to die, everything would shortly fly apart, so that even the physical life we now possess would end. Thus, anyone who believes God is confronted with an issue of clear, biblical logic about who sits at the controls of the universe under the Father.

What About Satan's Powers?

We also need to consider Satan's powers and operations, which become important to us in relation to the practical use of our faith. We know from passages like Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 that he is a magnificent, mighty being, possessing innate powers far beyond those of any fleshly creation. For example, as far as we know he lives forever. Notice Job 1:6-12:

(continued on page 17)

ALL ABOUT EDOM

PART ONE

Literature and history are full of stories about competing brothers and sisters. The technical term that psychologists and behavioralists use to describe this sort of competition is “sibling rivalry.”

These internecine conflicts go all the way back to Cain and Abel, the first two siblings born of all humanity—and their rivalry ended with the death of Abel. Not only were these two brothers, but the Hebrew of the Genesis account does not eliminate the possibility that they may also have been twins. The classic studies of sibling rivalry have been conducted using sets of twins.

Other examples of sibling rivalry have come down to us through literature, stories, and more recently, movies. *Cinderella*, for example, is a standard story of sibling rivalry between Cinderella and her ugly stepsisters. Shakespeare sometimes included this particular twist in his plays, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which the prince and his brother vie with one another throughout. Steinbeck used it in *East of Eden*, as have many other authors. Producers and directors have used it in movies like *Legends of the Fall*, chronicling a rivalry among brothers, and *A League of Their Own*, which included a subplot of a rivalry between sisters.

However, when we think of sibling rivalry, many of us bring to mind the classic conflicts of the Old Testament: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, and David and his brothers, not to mention the rivalries among David’s sons. There was even sibling rivalry among Christ’s disciples, who were not all blood brothers but as brothers in the faith became caught up in the pursuit

of power (Matthew 20:20-28). The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is, in part, about the rivalry between the responsible older son and his prodigal brother.

Arguably, the sibling rivalry that has had, perhaps, the greatest impact on the entire plan of God is the competitive relationship of Esau and Jacob. It is the classic model of two siblings—twins—beginning on a level playing field, both struggling for attention, power, and wealth. Each one in his carnality employs whatever means necessary to be superior to the other.

Perhaps what is most amazing is that this sibling rivalry persists more than three and a half millennia later, as their descendants continue to contend for dominance over the other!

WRESTLING IN UTERO

Incredibly, the roots of this sibling rivalry had begun to grow even *before* they were born:

Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If all is well, why am I like this?” (Genesis 25:21-22)

Women who have carried a child can relate to

prophecy watch *All About Edom*

morning sickness and fetal movements, but what Rebekah experienced with these two fetuses engaging in wrestling matches in her womb is probably beyond our comprehension! Having an upset stomach or being somewhat queasy just does not compare with the abnormal amount of jostling and grappling the unborn brothers were doing. It grabbed her attention! Being a very wise woman, their mother

went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: “Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” (verses 22-23)

God put this in perspective for her. In these two little babies were the seeds of two great peoples who would become populous and powerful nations that would compete with each other for many generations to come. When we consider that this contentious relationship has directly and adversely affected many nations throughout history, along with the resultant sufferings and deaths of millions of people, it is no laughing matter.

Notice that in His explanation, God predicted who would ultimately prove dominant: the younger, whom we know as Jacob or Israel. The apostle Paul comments on this in Romans 9:10-13:

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

The apostle uses this situation to illustrate that God’s choice, or election, is based entirely on His grace, not on any kind of human merit. The human reasons often advanced for the ongoing strife between the descendants of Esau and Jacob are therefore groundless, as God for His own purposes has chosen to show favor to the nations of Israel and not to Edom. However, despite their being denied national greatness, Esau’s descendants are not without hope of salvation, though they must swallow their pride and admit that “salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22), through the Messiah, who descends from Judah, son of Jacob (see Matthew 1:2, 16; Luke 3:23, 33-34; Hebrews 7:14).

The sibling rivalry of Esau and Jacob showed itself again while Rebekah was giving birth to them:

So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over;

so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob [meaning “heel-catcher” or “supplanter”]. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. (Genesis 25:24-27)

From the outset, these two characters were complete opposites. One was red and hairy, and the other was probably paler and smooth-skinned (Genesis 27:11). One enjoyed the outdoors with all its activities, while the other felt most comfortable indoors, perhaps engaging in more studious enterprises. Esau seems to have been driven to pursue one particular enterprise, hunting, with all of his energy, and he was no doubt quite skilled in it. Jacob, however, is described as a “mild man,” which in Hebrew suggests he was a *complete* person, that is, he had a well-rounded personality and could divide his energies among a number of projects and interests. He was a man of great ability in several areas.

AN ADDED WRINKLE

As the two became young men, their talents and personalities became evident, and it is here that another dimension enters into their rivalry. It seems that their parents played favorites, as unfortunately occurs too often in families. Such favoritism only heightens the competition between siblings.

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. [*Esau*, remember, means “hairy”; *Edom* means “red.”] 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 25:28-34)

This is the account of their first significant conflict, and the differences in their personalities come to the fore. Jacob had a nose for opportunity, and once he recognized that Esau was in a position of weakness, he started negotiating. He was very much a businessman and a wheeler-dealer, trying to get the advantage of his rival, but especially in the areas that really matter. Thus, he made a bold stroke, reaching for the birthright, that is, the double

portion of inheritance that came to the firstborn.

By his reply, Esau showed that he had little grasp of the worth of the birthright. In fact, he valued his life far above his inheritance. He said to Jacob, in effect, “Look, if I survive, this birthright may be of some profit, but right now I will trade anything to live.” In essence, he counted his birthright as worth no more than a meal! Esau’s major problem was that he could not properly discern what was truly important. The Bible’s portrait of him suggests that his complete attention fell on whatever was before him at the time, and thus he took no thought of the future, whether of blessings or problems or consequences. In wits, then, he was no match for cunning Jacob.

As possessor of the birthright, Jacob, with the help of his mother, tricks his father Isaac into passing down the blessing to him as well (Genesis 27:1-29). Upon discovering this duplicitous turn of events, Esau is devastated:

When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me—me also, O my father!” But [Isaac] said, “Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing.” And Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright. And now look, he has taken away my blessing!” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” Then Isaac answered and said to Esau, “Indeed I have made him your master, and all his brethren I have given to him as servants; with grain and wine I have sustained him. What shall I do now for you, my son?” (Genesis 27:34-37)

Even realizing what Jacob had done, Esau did not truly understand what had happened. He cried out, in effect, “It was all Jacob’s doing! I don’t bear any fault in all of this!” God looks at it a bit differently, however. As Paul explained, God had already chosen Jacob, and though He certainly did not approve of Rebekah and Jacob’s tactics, He allowed the blessing to fall on Jacob because it fit into His purpose.

Hebrews 12:17 says that though Esau earnestly desired the blessing, “he was rejected,” for he did not have the strength of character to handle it for God’s purposes. He had already shown that he “despised his birthright,” and God judged that he would have eventually shown the same scorn for the blessing. Esau is a classic example of a despiser of good (II Timothy 3:3).

ESAU’S “BLESSING”

Once Isaac had given his—really God’s—blessing, there was nothing left for Esau. The blessing was an “all or nothing” addition to the inheritance; it could not be portioned between Isaac’s two sons. In reality, the subsequent “blessing” Esau receives is tantamount to a curse. In the New King James Version, it reads as if Isaac blesses Esau in Genesis 27:39-40, yet it is not a blessing but a prophecy:

Then Isaac his father answered and said to him: “Behold, your dwelling shall be [away from] the fatness of the earth, and [away from] the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

As shown here, the two uses of “of” in verse 39 have been mistranslated; in this context, the Hebrew word implies, not “belonging to,” but “from” or “away from.” On this verse, the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* observes, “By a play upon the words Isaac uses the same expression as in v. 28, ‘from the fat fields of the earth, and from the dew,’ but in the opposite sense, *min* being partitive [imparting] there, and privative [depriving] here, ‘from = away from.’” Thus, Isaac prophesies that Esau’s descendants would live in an infertile, arid area.

One consequence of this is prophesied in verse 40: There will be continual strife between the “have,” Jacob, and the “have-not,” Esau; they would engage in a constant, internecine quarrel over “the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven.” More often than not, Jacob would be dominant—until Esau would rebel in frustration and anger. Isaac predicts that they will frequently come to blows, and occasionally, Esau’s descendants will enjoy the upper hand for a time.

Esau’s utterly human reaction upon hearing Isaac’s words is consistent with what we know of his personality: “So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, “The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob” (Genesis 27:41). Too late, he realized the value of the blessing, and now his entire attention was focused in hatred against his brother. Hebrews 12:15-16 describes his attitude toward Jacob as a “root of bitterness,” a profound and deep-set animosity that ultimately corrupts and defiles one who maintains it.

This reveals the mindset of Esau and his descendants, the Edomites. Everything that should have been theirs was now Jacob’s, and they will fight until the bitter end of days to get it back! Yet God says it is not to be. His prophecy in the “blessing” allows Esau only occasional supremacy. Since Jacob’s seed possessed both the birthright and the blessing, they would normally prevail and ultimately have the ascendancy.

The birthright made Jacob the recipient of a double portion of the inheritance, and the blessing was a gift of God by which the patriarch passed on the promised family blessings. These blessings included the patriarchy—“Be master over your brethren” (Genesis 27:29)—which was now Jacob’s! This meant that, upon Isaac’s death, the leadership position in Abraham’s family passed not to the elder, Esau, but to the younger, Jacob. Esau was left to form his own house, but without the power, position, and

(continued on page 12)

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO GNOSTICIS

PART TWO: DEFINING GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is difficult to define because it comes in so many flavors and interpretations. It is not a separate denomination or religion but a religious philosophy. It is a framework to explain the nature of God, creation, good and evil, man, and the purpose of life. Gnostics focus exclusively on the inner life of the spirit, which they clearly differentiated from

Author R.V. Young, in his book *Harold Bloom: the Critic as Gnostic*, summarizes Gnostic teachings this way:

The Gnostics' teaching places the origin of evil, of pain and suffering, in the conditions of the *material creation*; salvation involves *overcoming ignorance* and escaping these external conditions by *finding divinity within*. . . . The Gnostic finds the beginning of the path to salvation in the *realization* that the world is a great imposture, a prison of pain and frustration. His escape lies in *recovering the intrinsic good within himself*, the principle of illumination that he shares with other enlightened spirits. . . . What makes it possible for the self and God to commune so freely is that *the self already is of God*. (Emphasis ours throughout)

Gnosticism contained only a few core beliefs, but as long as they were adhered to, they could be infused into any number of religions, including

Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and even Islam (the Gnostic form of which is known as *Sufism*). The Gnostic concepts are typically traced back to the religions of Persia and India (Zoroastrianism and Hinduism), but they have been added to and modified over time, especially as they became entrenched in Greek culture. As Plato's writings are full of Gnostic concepts, he furthered the cause of the Gnostics tremendously.

Today, Jewish mystics practice a religion known as *Kabbalah*, a Gnostic version of Judaism. Its most famous spokesperson right now is none other than Madonna, but other celebrated practitioners include Demi Moore, Britney Spears, and Mick Jagger. Kabbalah—a Hebrew term that literally means “receiving”—holds that it is the “soul” of the Torah, and that the secrets of life are hidden within its text. It also uses and tries to give the true meaning of the Jewish “Oral Law.” Thus, it takes elements of Judaism and arranges them according to secret knowledge about the nature of God, good and evil, and

the origin and destiny of man. Its adherents believe that they have found enlightenment, even as they live notoriously debased lives.

Galatian Gnosticism

Paul penned the book of Galatians because church members in Galatia were turning away from the true gospel and had embraced a false one (Galatians 1:6-7). Early on, Paul had to establish his credentials—that the gospel he preached did not have its source in any man, as Gnostic ideas do, but had come directly from Jesus Christ (verses 11-12). The Galatians were returning to the “weak and beggarly elements” (Galatians 4:9), referring to the demonism they had been involved in prior to their conversion (verse 8). The Gentile Galatians were observing certain days, months, seasons, and years that had nothing to do with God's holy days (verse 10), but were part of a system that elevated rites and ceremonies above the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, even while paying lip service to Christianity.

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that *knowledge*, typically secret knowledge—knowledge from angels, from the stars and planets, from the ancients—was the path to holiness and salvation. They believed that the path of redemption was through knowledge, and that the worst evil was *ignorance*.

Thus, they did not endeavor to overcome sin but ignorance. If they could just become wise enough, they reasoned, sin would not be a problem because they would be more *spiritual* than *physical*. Obviously, they overlooked man’s incurably sick heart (Jeremiah 17:9), and the struggle that a person must undertake to overcome it. The Gnostics believed that the solution was found in greater understanding, rather than in a Savior and High Priest who justifies and guides us through a process of sanctification. In essence, *Gnostics would rather learn than submit*.

What is more, the knowledge that the Gnostics sought always originated in something other than God and His Word. We know that knowledge itself is not the problem. In the Bible, knowledge is generally presented as a good thing. God goes so far as to say that Israel is “destroyed for *lack of knowledge*” (Hosea 4:6). However, the knowledge He means is the knowledge of Himself and of His way of life, not knowledge as an end in itself.

In the New Testament, Paul tells the congregation at Rome that Israel has “a zeal for God, but not according to *knowledge*” (Romans 10:2). Israelites like to think they are serving God, but the way they go about it is contrary to the instructions that God gave them. Jesus Himself says that eternal life is to *know* God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3), by which He means the *experience* of an intimate relationship with the Father and the Son, something the Gnostics would never accept. They believed that a spiritual and thus pure God would have nothing to do with what they considered to be entirely evil matter and flesh. They did not care that God called His physical creation “good”—even “very good”—for they still saw it as corrupt, a prison from which to be liberated.

Gnosticism in Colossae

Colossians 2:8-10 gives another general definition of Gnosticism, as well as how to combat it:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the [divine nature] bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Paul writes of a *philosophy* like Stoicism, not a specific religion, such as Judaism. This is important to recognize, since in verse 16, Paul mentions the Sabbath and holy days, and it is commonly assumed that Paul condemns their observance. Yet, he does not—he warns against a philosophy that disparaged the feasting and joyous observance of the Sabbath and holy days. This is why Paul tells the Colossians to “let no one judge you” with regard to eating, drinking, or observing the weekly and annual Sabbaths—rather than what is commonly read into Colossians 2:16: “There is no reason to keep the Sabbath or holy days.” Christians in Colossae were being pressured by the *ascetic* society around them, which would have looked down on their feasting.

This is confirmed in the rest of Colossians 2, which deals primarily with asceticism (see especially Colossians 2:21-23). Some branches of Gnosticism adhered to asceticism as a way to free the eternal spirit by living regimented, plain, and insular lives. (Conversely, some Gnostics went to the other extreme—practicing hedonism—believing that what they did with their bodies did not make any difference since only *spirit* mattered.)

Paul says that this philosophy and its associated doctrines were plausible, but they were not based on solid arguments. He calls them “vain deceit” (KJV) or “empty deceit” (NKJV). They may sound good, depending upon one’s inclination, but

they endanger church members. The apostle writes that they would be “spoiled” (KJV), which does not necessarily mean being “corrupted,” but rather of being “plundered,” hence the NKJV’s use of “cheated.” This empty philosophy would rob or cheat them of their faith, their hope, their understanding of God, their relationship with God, their vision, and the purpose that God is working out. Once introduced, it would begin to steal away all of their true, spiritual riches.

Paul also provides two possible sources of this unsteady philosophy: “the traditions of men” and the “rudiments of the world.” Examining the “rudiments of the world” first will help to explain the traditions of men. Other translations call them the “elements of the world,” the “basic principles of the world,” or “the powers of the world.” In using this term, Paul is referring to the demonic powers that make this world, this *cosmos*, what it is. The source of this philosophy of salvation through special knowledge is Satan and the demons.

This explains why, when we read the histories of various religions and their branches, the same patterns arise time and again. Man does not have it within himself to pass along accurately and dependably ideas that go back to the very beginning. With an incessant drumming, the powers of the world keep prompting men and women in the same vain deceits that directly contradict the truth about God and His purpose for mankind.

Humans certainly play a role in

handing down these traditions. Sunday school teachers and theologians perpetuate the Gnostic myths of the immortality of the soul, of eternal consciousness, of progressive revelation, of each person having a spark of goodness within that just needs to be fanned into a flame, and of each soul or spirit existing before in heaven and returning there upon death. Men pass these traditions on to other men, but the powers of the spirit world keep these messengers on their track and blinded to the truth.

A Counter to Gnosticism

The last phrase in Colossians 2:8—“not according to Christ”—is a simple one, but it encapsulates what this is all about. Not a single branch of Gnosticism had the truth about Jesus Christ. That knowledge can be found only in God’s Word.

At every turn, it seems, the main object of Gnosticism was to twist the nature of Christ. Some Gnostics believed that *Jesus* was a man, but that *Christ* entered into Jesus when He was baptized and left Him right before He died. Other Gnostics believed that Jesus did not really die—because, after all, if He died, then He was not really God. Others believed that He could not have been perfect and sinless because He created matter, which Gnostics believed to be evil. And there were also those who believed that Jesus Christ was a created being—an idea that is still affecting the fringes of the church of God today.

So if we want to counter Gnosticism, we must begin with the truth of Jesus Christ. Paul emphasizes this in verses 9-10: Jesus was the fullness of the divine nature in bodily form, and He is the head, the leader, the sovereign, of every principality and power. Though the Gnostics in their various views always twisted or denied some aspect of the nature and role of Jesus Christ, these truths brought out by the apostle are bedrock beliefs for true Christians.

Also foundational to countering Gnosticism is the truth that Jesus brought. To combat the false knowledge that threatens to plunder our spiritual riches, we must take the Bible as the complete and inspired Word of God, against which we can test any concept, tradition, doctrine, or philosophy, no matter how good it sounds on the surface. Gnostics would not readily accept the Bible as God’s inspired revelation, or if they did, they also held that other ancient, secret writings were on par with Scripture, and could be trusted to provide greater insight.

In addition, Gnostics were also avid proponents of “progressive revelation,” the belief that God is continuing to reveal His will to mankind, but with the implication that Holy Scripture is not as important as hearing directly from the spirit world. Thus, some today, while not entirely rejecting the Bible, believe that “God” is personally revealing things to them—things which often contradict what He has already given to mankind in the His written Word.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—David C. Grabbe

prophecy watch *All About Edom*

(continued from page 9)

wealth inherent within the birthright and the blessing.

In these prophecies, the Bible shows that dominant family traits are passed down to succeeding generations. Therefore, even today, Israelites generally think and behave much like their father Jacob, while Edomites still retain the attitudes and drives of Esau. Though not every Israelite or Edomite will imitate his ancestor’s personality to the letter, these traits will surface as national characteristics, allowing perceptive observers to identify their ori-

gins and fit them into Bible prophecy.

For Jacob’s thefts of the birthright and blessing, Esau hated his brother enough to begin to plot his death! This burning hatred has been passed on from generation to generation ever since that time, for approximately 3,700 years. This, then, provides us with a basic understanding of the contentious relationship between these two peoples.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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

Consider the End!

**“Thus says the Lord,
‘Set your
house in order . . .’”
—II Kings 20:1**

In reading Leo Tolstoy’s book, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, I became familiar for the first time with the Latin maxim, “*Respice finem*” which in English means, “Consider the end!” (see Deuteronomy 32:29 for a similar admonition from God). Spiritually, we all know that we must do this. We hear at least some reference to it virtually every Sabbath and holy day at church services. However, we should be considering the end physically too—the end, of course, of our physical lives. As Hebrews 9:27 reads, “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment. . . .”

Although, this second reference may initially seem unconnected with the first, Herbert W. Armstrong frequently opined that Christians can express God’s way of love by living His *way of give*. Every act of God is done in love, and the Bible frequently admonishes us to imitate the manner in which He lives.

How do these two concepts, considering the end and living God’s way of give, tie together? For this article, these two major principles converge when we live God’s way of give by preparing for old age and death. Although it may be unpleasant for us to think about it in such practical terms, we can do a great deal of giving by preparing for our end!

Lately, I have learned some worthwhile lessons from helping some good friends with the financial and estate aspects of their senior years. They are well worth considering. (*Nota bene*: This article is not meant to replace or to serve as legal advice. If one should need legal advice on estate or any other matters, the individual should contact a lawyer or other legal expert.)

Mentioned in Scripture

Although this article may appear to tackle a rather physical subject, we all realize that living God’s way of give is a spiritual matter. The physical and the spiritual are interwoven through our lives, and separating them leads to

unwholesome extremes and away from God’s true path toward His Kingdom.

Are such things as preparing for death and for the distribution of our earthly goods mentioned at all in the Word of God? Yes, as these examples prove:

And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead. (Hebrews 9:15-17)

The author of the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ, the Testator mentioned here, made a testament—another term for a will—for the benefit of His heirs, those called to share in His eternal inheritance. Knowing that we are to emulate our Elder Brother in all things, these verses give an implied recommendation that each of us should prepare a will as He did.

The Old Testament contains two well-known references to men organizing their affairs before they died:

Now when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey, and arose and went home to his house, to his city. Then he put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died; and he was buried in his father’s tomb. (II Samuel 17:23)

This man did one thing right and one thing wrong. The very *wrong* thing he did, of course, was to break the sixth commandment by murdering himself. The very *right* thing that he did was to put his house—his physical and financial house is implied—in order.

The subject of the second reference to preparing for the eventuality of death is King Hezekiah:

In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’” (II Kings 20:1)

This command must have been quite important because God repeats it for emphasis in Isaiah 38:1. If He recommended this to King Hezekiah, arranging for it to be recorded twice in His Word, perhaps He recommends it to us too.

Many of us have believed—and perhaps still do believe—that Jesus Christ would return in our lifetimes, and so we would not have to suffer old age and that death we have called “the first death.” Perhaps He will—

it is certainly our sincere hope that He will! Yet, if God’s timing is otherwise, He might then be saying to us, as He said to Hezekiah: “You shall die and not live.” Perhaps the wisest One in the whole universe is also advising us, “This being the case, set your houses in order.”

Will

At the very least, in order to organize our affairs before we die, each adult should make a **Will**. A *will*, according to Lloyd Duhaime, a Victoria, British Columbia, lawyer, is “a written and signed statement, made by an individual, which provides for the disposition of their property when they die.”

One may ask, however, “Why should *I* make a will?” Perhaps we feel we are much too young to be concerned about such a morbid document. Yet, if we ask ourselves the following questions, we will see how much a will is necessary, no matter what one’s age: “If I were to die tomorrow . . .

- . . . what would happen to my minor children?”
- . . . who would look after them?”
- . . . would their guardians maintain God’s standards (for example, with respect to the keeping of the Sabbaths and holy days, clean diet, church attendance, etc.)?”
- . . . what would happen to my belongings?”
- . . . what would happen to my money?”
- . . . who would perform my funeral or memorial service?”
- . . . what would happen to my remains?”
- . . . would my wishes regarding burial or cremation be adhered to?”

All of these concerns, and many more, can be determined beforehand by making and maintaining an up-to-date will.

To make a will, a person can enlist the expensive help of a lawyer. However, in most nations, states, and provinces, one can, quite legally, do it oneself with the aid of self-help books and/or computer software. In the United States and Canada, Self-Counsel Press publishes an excellent series of publications for this purpose. In addition, a little program produced by Intuit software, “It’s Legal,” is a simple program, but it works very well (this software package is now titled “Will Expert”).

Once the user has answered a series of plain-English questions that the program asks him in an interview-style session, it prints out a legally binding will, including all the necessary legal terminology.

Because of changing requirements and family circumstances, a person should ensure that his will is current. Depending on one's situation, of course, it is recommended that an individual review his will and other documents every two or three years. One can make minor changes to a will, without revamping the whole document, by use of an addendum called a **Codicil**.

In most areas, it is advisable for the testator (the person making the will) to have an **Executor**. An *executor*, according to Lloyd Duhaime, is "a person specifically appointed by a testator to administer the will ensuring that final wishes are respected (i.e. that the will is properly 'executed'). An executor is a personal representative." Although this may not be the case in all areas:

- In most jurisdictions, the executor can also be a beneficiary in the will (for example, a family member).
- One or more witnesses are required to observe the signing of the will by the testator. These witnesses should not be beneficiaries in the will.

Power of Attorney

A will sets out our wishes for the period after we die. But what if an individual is still alive yet unable to look after his affairs? It is not at all unusual for people, due to old age, illness, or accident, to become unable to make proper decisions about finances and other matters.

The Bible records an example of this, when Jesus prophesies of Peter:

Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish. (John 21:18)

We could very well apply His words to our senior years too. When we are old and infirm, we may need help with everyday matters that we take so much for granted when in our strength. As indicated here, we may need assistance even to dress ourselves and to get around. If we get to this stage, we will also certainly need help with our financial matters. This is where a **Power of Attorney** becomes useful. Mr. Duhaime informs us that this is

a document which gives a person the right to make

binding decisions for another, as an agent. A power of attorney may be specific to a certain kind of decision or general, in which the agent makes all major decisions for the person who is the subject of the power of attorney. The person signing the power of attorney is usually referred to, in law, as the donor, and the person that would exercise the power of attorney, the donee.

In most cases, a close family member is usually advisable for such a post. For church members, a close family member who is also a fellow church member is an even better choice.

Living Will

There are matters beyond money to be considered for the time when we get old and are less able to make decisions. For instance, there is the concern of medical preferences. In such cases, a **Living Will** might be useful. Mr. Duhaime relates:

A *living will* is a document that sets out guidelines for dealing with life-sustaining medical procedures in the eventuality of the signatory's sudden debilitation. Living wills would, for example, inform medical staff not to provide extraordinary life-preserving procedures on their bodies if they are incapable of expressing themselves and suffering from an incurable and terminal condition.

We may include other stipulations into a living will, too. For example:

- Even if I am in poor physical and/or mental shape, I want to keep attending Sabbath and holy day services with a solid church of God congregation as long as I am reasonably able.
- I wish to continue to tithe and to give offerings to the church.
- If I still have minor children, but become unable to look after them, I would like such-and-such a person to be their guardian.
- Rather than going into a care home when the time comes that I can no longer look after myself, I would prefer to stay with one of my children, for as long as they are reasonably able to look after me.
- When the time comes that my children are no longer able to look after me properly, I would like to go into Such-and-such Care Home.

- Whether with my children or in a care home, I would like arrangements to be made to maintain a clean and healthy diet, to observe God's Sabbaths and holy days, and to avoid celebrations such as Christmas, Easter, Valentine's Day, Halloween, etc.
- When it becomes obvious that I am getting close to the end of my life, I would like advance arrangements to be made for me to be looked after by the palliative care people, and eventually to go into the local hospice.

Many of these arrangements must be discussed with and approved by those affected by these decisions and preferences. It would not be an expression of God's love to blindside a relative or friend with responsibilities of this nature.

Life Insurance

Over the years, different points of view regarding the affairs of our senior years have been heard in the church. Two of the most disturbing are these:

- "I won't be around, so why should I worry about it?"
- "I have faith that God will heal me but, if He chooses not to, the church will look after everything!"

Neither of these approaches expresses God's way of give. Contrary to some, the purchase of life insurance does not indicate a lack of faith in God and His ability to heal. Rather, it is an act of love and concern for loved ones who survive us. Life insurance can be money extremely well spent, unless:

- one is rich!
- one would rather prepay his funeral expenses. After a recent negative experience with poor customer service by the funeral directors, I cannot recommend this option.
- one would rather put some money away specifically for that purpose. This preference contains a few problems, the most obvious being that it is so easy to dip into these funds to spend on other things.

For obvious reasons, life insurance premiums usually increase with the age of the insured person. Life insurance terminology may differ from area to area, but when purchasing, a person should shop around and make sure that he knows exactly what he is buying. Some plans simply pay out a set amount when the insured dies.

Others involve a built-in savings plan that matures after a certain period. Be careful with this type, as a much better savings interest rate may be available elsewhere.

Finally, an individual should keep the payout of his life insurance separate from his will so that, when required, the funds will not be tied up until the **Probate** (the proving of the validity of the will) is complete.

Downsize!

Many of us have seen the humorous saying, "The one who dies with the most toys wins!" Of course, we know that this is not true. Another well-known proverb, which *is* true, contradicts the first: "You can't take it with you." Solomon writes of human beings: "As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take nothing from his labor which he may carry away in his hand" (Ecclesiastes 5:15).

Herbert Armstrong frequently urged the church membership to simplify their lives, pointing out that having and maintaining too much physical "stuff" can even, if we are not careful, impede our spiritual growth. Failing to *downsize* can have its *downsides*! If we die with our whole life's collection of belongings still in our possession, there will be at least two negative effects:

1. They add to the value of one's estate, and therefore increase the amount of the taxes and/or probate fees one's heirs must pay to the government.
2. One's beloved heirs may have to tidy this stuff up, sort it, move it, store it, inventory it, and if they do not want it, get rid of it somewhere.

As we go through our adult lives, we tend to accumulate "treasures" of all kinds: furniture, tools, literature, hobby materials, cars, etc. Eventually, we find that much of our "stuff" is merely taking up space. In addition, if we, as many seniors do, decide to move to a smaller home, space can become valuable.

Once diminished health and strength no longer allow us to use many of these items, they become completely worthless to us, so we may as well get rid of them. Sell them or give them to someone who can make good use of them. If neither of these courses of action fit the bill, donate them to a local thrift store.

God's way is loving and giving. This is the bottom line. If we love our heirs and want to give them something practical and constructive, consider the end! Begin making preparations for old age and for facing that final enemy, death (I Corinthians 15:26). In a way, we will still be expressing God's way of give from the grave!

—John Plunkett

personal *Power Belongs to God*

(continued from page 6)

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. And the LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" So Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it." Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?" So Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

This clearly illustrates that, despite having far greater natural powers than a man, Satan can do nothing against any of God's children that God does not permit. God is overseeing our preparation for His Kingdom, and the Devil is, in reality, a dupe in God's hands to that end. Verse 10 shows that God puts, as it were, a protective wall around us, commanding Satan, "This far and no farther."

Revelation 20:1-3, 7 adds:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while. . . . Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison.

Like everybody else, Satan has only the power God created in him and the latitude to use it only as He permits and no more. The power given to him is meted out for what God wants him to accomplish for *His* purposes. Seeing all of the horrible things happening on earth, we may suppose that his power is unlimited, but it most assuredly is not.

Bringing It Around to Us

Consider this: We all know Jesus did wonderful things in healing people, preaching, and working miracles—even

walking on water—yet John 14:10-11 declares that the works He performed were done by the Father. It will help to make this personally applicable to our Christian lives.

Jesus says to His disciples in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." He speaks directly to us, stating a principle we must learn to live with. The power to do spiritual works, to overcome, to produce the fruit of God's Spirit, to be used by God in any righteous manner comes from above. Israel's journey through the wilderness illustrates this. Every step of the way was physically empowered by the manna and water God provided.

Understanding God's hand in our preparation for the Kingdom of God is also advanced by remembering that we are the clay sculpture our Creator is molding and shaping (Isaiah 64:8). Does any work of art—any painting, carving, drawing, tapestry, work of literature, or fine meal for that matter—have inherent power to shape itself?

The natural man, even apart from God's purpose, is a magnificent work of art. David writes in Psalm 139:14, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Yet, when born into the Kingdom of God, we will be the most magnificent masterpieces there are, far superior to what we are now. To mold and shape us into God's image requires love, wisdom, and multiple other powers far beyond anything any person—even Jesus as a human being—has.

We must explore this subject even more specifically so that we can grasp the importance of doing everything we can to protect and to make our relationship with God ever better. What we will find indicates how much God empowers us in our salvation and preparation for His Kingdom.

Jesus says in John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." God summons us to reveal Himself to us. Paul adds in Romans 2:4, "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" God gifts us with repentance. Ephesians 2:8 advances us another step farther: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." God gives us grace and faith to perform what He requires of us (verse 10).

Acts 5:30-32 declares more of God's gifts:

The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit which God has given to those who obey Him.

personal *Power Belongs to God*

These verses contain three more things God provides:

1. He provides our Savior through the perfect life and death of Jesus of Nazareth;
2. He resurrected that Savior following His death; and
3. He gives us His Spirit.

Beyond these are many more gifts, as Romans 4:25–5:2 explains:

... who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

God justifies us, grants us peace with Him, and gives us access into His very presence. Romans 5:5 then tells us His love comes to us by His Spirit. Verses 9-11 show God provides us with the resurrected Christ as our High Priest, and it is He who saves us because, as the living Head of the church, it is His job to save us prepared for His Kingdom.

Hebrews 2:10-11 adds another gift:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

God sanctifies us through Jesus Christ and graciously justifies us by means of Christ's blood, providing us with His Son's righteousness and granting us entrance into a relationship with Him. The sanctification process writes the laws of God in our hearts and minds, making His righteousness real and practical to daily life. During this process, which requires our cooperation with Him in His purpose, we literally become conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. The overwhelming majority of Christian works come to the fore within this process as part of the preparation for God's Kingdom.

In I Corinthians 12:4-11, Paul identifies a multitude of gifts beyond the love that God provides for His people by means of His Spirit. Ephesians 4:7, 11-14 gives more specifics as to why the gifts are given:

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. . . . And He Himself

gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive. . . .

God gives gifts to each of us to enable us to perform our functions in the church and in His purpose. His gifts aid us in doing the works of sanctification. Additionally, He provides the ministry to supply human guidance as well.

John the Baptist says in John 3:27, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven." He responded in this manner because others had told him how Jesus' fame was eclipsing his own, thinking he would be jealous. But John understood and submitted to God's governance. God does not gift everybody in the same manner but according to His purpose for him or her. In Philippians 4:19, Paul supplies an overall guideline: "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Do we trust the apostle's statement?

This is why our relationship with God must be protected at all costs. James instructs:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. (James 1:17-18)

This relationship is the source of everything pertaining to salvation. God asks of us to give Him our lives as living sacrifices in cooperation with His will so that His purpose for us can be completed.

What appears in these two articles can significantly impact our lives both now and especially in the future as the pressure of the time of the end intensifies. Virtually everything hinges on what we choose to devote ourselves to in becoming prepared. The articles that follow will address what we must do now.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

In Christian love,



Is France Ditching the EU?

The inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania into the European Union on January 1, 2007, marks a significant turning point in its history—though not necessarily in a positive way. Strategic Forecasting (Stratfor) puts it this way:

The inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania in the European club will transform the fundamental character of the union—more so than the addition of any other members to date—and help to usher in its downfall as a political grouping. (“Geopolitical Diary,” October 27, 2006)

The accession of Bulgaria and Romania is attractive to the EU for a number of reasons. For one, it brings the Balkans further under the umbrella of the West, allowing the EU to absorb the remaining Balkan states slowly. Additionally, both Bulgaria and Romania border on the Black Sea—to which the EU has previously not had access. This is significant for both strategic and economic reasons.

Nevertheless, not all is rosy in the addition of these two new members—at least not for the core European states. Until recently, France and Germany have largely been the EU’s driving forces, both politically and economically. Yet, with each new EU ascension, France and Germany must struggle harder to impose their combined will upon the rest of the union. But, as Stratfor says, “[I]n a union of 27, the fundamental math changes,” for when making union-wide decisions, each member state has a number of votes more or less proportionate to its population. Under a 25-member EU, France and Germany held sufficient voting weight together to block any measures they did not want. However, the two new members tip the balance; combined, the other EU states will have the voting power to override a Franco-German veto.

In other words, the EU—a project proposed and driven by France, essentially to allow Paris to punch above its weight—has now outgrown its “master.” It is now theoretically possible for the EU to make a decision without France having any recourse to counter it. How long will it be until France wearies of this and quits its own project?

Some indicators suggest that France is already on its way out—albeit slowly. For starters, the French—along with the Dutch—voted against the EU constitution. When this foundational document was put before the French people, they rejected it, realizing that the EU was slipping outside the bounds of what they desired. Rather than institutionalize something against their desires, this core country rejected the EU constitution.

Additionally, France’s leadership has begun challenging the EU’s common monetary policy (Stratfor Global Intelligence Brief, “France: Second Guessing the Eurozone,” November 16, 2006). In an interview on November 11, 2006, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin

challenged the authority of the European Central Bank (ECB)—the institution responsible for Europe’s common currency and monetary policy—to set policies that affect exchange rates and interest rates, warning that current policies hurt exports. Europe, he said, needs a “monetary shield,” implying a desire for an artificially weaker euro to strengthen the competitiveness of European exporters—though the exporters he is most concerned about are those in France.

He is essentially saying that the ECB should stop being independent—and thus immune to political meddling—so that some of the member states (read, France) can influence monetary policy. His desire is for monetary policy that allows France to keep certain inefficient aspects of its social welfare state, while simultaneously allowing fast economic growth through low interest rates. In short, de Villepin wants the ECB to cater to the interests of France. It will not do this, and with the addition of Bulgaria and Romania—both of which are much more pro-America and pro-free-market—France will be unable to muscle through a change by passing a law.

France’s ability to manipulate the EU is becoming increasingly more difficult. As Stratfor says,

This means that many French leaders are beginning to second-guess not only France’s rationale for being in groupings like the eurozone, but even in organizations like the European Union. . . . If France is to remain in the union in the long-term, one of two things will need to change. Either the bloc’s other 24 (soon to be 26) capitals will have to begin acceding to French desires, or France will have to become just another country. Those who know Europeans know that neither is particularly likely.

Along these same lines, the CIA warned in 2004 of the potential collapse of the EU within fifteen years, based largely on what France decides:

One view has been that since the EU is a primarily French creation—an attempt to preserve French power in Europe and to enhance France economically—its fate will depend on France. In crises, the French either [will write] a new constitution or violently [dismantle] the state [the EU]. This suggests that Europe may end in an explosive collapse. (National Intelligence Council Europe Workshop, April 28–29, 2004).

If France is already beginning to believe that the EU has outlived its usefulness, fifteen years may be rather optimistic.

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Water Into Wine, Part Two

Sometimes, God's commands are puzzling to the human mind. He tells us, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). We may not understand why He gives them, or we may feel they are out of touch with our circumstances, but we are to obey His every command, for His wisdom is greater than ours. In fact, as Paul writes, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Corinthians 1:25). We can see this factor at work in Jesus' miracle at Cana.

In the ancient Near East, with its scarcity of water, wine was a necessity rather than a luxury, so it came to symbolize sustenance and life. Due to its close relationship to the ongoing life of the community, in association with grain and oil, wine is also representative of the covenant blessings God promised to Israel for obedience, and which He would withhold for disobedience. Finally, wine also represents joy, celebration, and festivity, expressing the abundant blessings of God.



1. What is the quality of Christ's miracles? John 2:6-7.

COMMENT: Normally, the water pots supplied water for the ceremonial washings in accordance with Jewish tradition (Mark 7:3-4). Each water pot could hold two to three firkins of water, equivalent to 17 to 25 gallons. This means that the six water pots could hold a total of about 150 gallons of water! When Christ blesses, He does it abundantly! On other occasions, Jesus miraculously provided more than enough food (Mark 8:8; John 6:13). His generous abundance in giving coincides with the wealth of His lovingkindness.

2. Could a person abuse the abundance of a miracle?

COMMENT: Potentially, wine can generate either positive or negative results. Negatively, wine can be abused, causing a person to lose self-control. "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Proverbs 20:1); and "do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation" (Ephesians 5:18). When Jesus made the water into wine, He did not intend for the wedding guests to get drunk. He provided the right amount for the number of people in attendance to enjoy themselves but not lose control.

3. Is Christ running a welfare program with His miracles? John 2:7-8.

COMMENT: Jesus shows us that God is pleased to use human instruments in performing the wonders of His grace. He did nothing in changing water to wine that was unnecessary for Him to do. The servants filled the vessels and took the wine to the master of the marriage feast. There was no reason for Christ to do this kind of work for them. Instead, He did what no one else could do. This principle applies to His work in us: He does not do things for us that we can do ourselves. Further, He will not perform miracles if they would destroy industriousness or encourage laziness and irresponsibility. Miracles do not excuse us from carrying out our responsibilities.

Likewise, faith without works is dead (James 2:14-19). It is an honor to work with God in faith to accomplish His will, and if done with the right attitude, no one ever regrets his involvement in that service. God's commands are usually not easy to do, but they are possible—and necessary to do—if we want His blessing. In light of this principle, Paul

states, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (II Thessalonians 3:10). This miracle prods all who follow Christ to grow in faith.

4. What part does obedience play in the receipt of blessings?

COMMENT: When Christ desires to bestow a blessing, He often first gives a command, but since the carnal mind is enmity against God (Romans 8:7), humans often do not like God or His servants "telling them what to do." People want to have privileges without responsibilities and blessings without faithful obedience. Some of Christ's miracles are associated with commands, which must be obeyed for the miracle to occur. Thus, a person who lacks spiritual blessings may be lacking obedience, so an improvement in obedience to God often increases blessings. Obedience is a key to great blessings.

Similarly, James reveals God's command regarding sicknesses and injuries that interfere with our normal activities: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14-16). God does not always tell us why we should do something, and frankly, we do not need explanations in order to obey. Puzzlement only shows our lack of wisdom, not God's.

Running out of wine at the wedding feast could potentially have resulted in serious legal consequences for the wedding couple. Christ made up the deficiency, just as He does regarding our salvation (Acts 4:12). Wine is a symbol of joy. When the wine ran out, the wedding feast began to lose its joy, but Christ's miracle brought it back to the wedding. This parallels the sinner's need for salvation. When we accept Christ as our Savior, repent, and are baptized, we become a new creation just as the water was changed to the finest new wine. Great joy is the result.

John 2:11 says that this miracle manifested Jesus' glory. Making water into wine glorified Him, as does bringing sinners to salvation. Sin makes us fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), but salvation brings glory to God (Ephesians 1:12) and eventually to us (Romans 8:17, 30).

—Martin G. Collins