

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 16, Number 3

March-April 2007

SHALLOW PONDS and CHARITY

march/april 2007

volume 16, number 3

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What does a shallow pond have to do with acts of kindness and mercy? Modern ethicists use such analogies to explain their theories of human behavior. Christians, however, can rely on the clear instruction of Jesus Christ to inform their moral choices.

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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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Seeking God

Part Two: A Foundation

Matthew 6:33 provides one of the clearest of all of Jesus' commands about what our overall goals in life must be: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." In the conclusion of the previous article regarding our greatest problem in seeking God, we saw that, to win the battles of preparation for His Kingdom, the solution lies in resources that can only be provided by God through our relationships with Him.

Seeking God, or seeking first God's Kingdom, is simply another way of phrasing the Christian's fight. In Ephesians 6, Paul describes what a Christian needs in the fight against his carnal heart, the world, and the Devil as putting on "the whole armor of God." This armor symbolizes the virtues and powers necessary to fight both offensively and defensively. Power belongs to God, and He is very willing to empower His children to fight these battles. Seeking Him is the battle we fight in the face of the three major foes that constantly resist, tempt, or allure us.

Matthew 6:33 gives vital, basic advice about what those fighting daily, spiritual battles are striving to accomplish. These goals are often easily forgotten in the confusion of battle. Ordinary, everyday things like housing, food, and clothing are necessary, and the efforts to secure them can produce anxiety and worry. It may be simple advice, but we need to quit worrying and begin seeking and trusting God, as Jesus says in verses 31-32.

His reasoning follows this line: God is real to us, is He not? He visibly provides for things as seemingly unimpor-

tant as grasses and flowers, does He not? Since we are so exceedingly more important to Him than grass and flowers, will He not provide the necessary, ordinary things of life for us? Note that Jesus finishes with "all these things shall be added to you." This is a promise to those truly seeking God and His Kingdom.

In this context, Jesus primarily promises that material things would be added, but He certainly implies spiritual things too. Are not the Kingdom of God and His righteousness spiritual in nature? God must provide spiritual powers to His children to move their lives in the proper spiritual direction. In addition, we find elsewhere that God is the source of all powers that He alone can add. This fact is a firm platform for anyone truly seeking God's Kingdom to work from. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus is focusing on priorities so that we can devote our greatest efforts toward the most important goals.

Once a person knows what his goal is, does he not normally lay out a plan for reaching it? For instance, each year we have the goal of keeping the Feast of Tabernacles. So, we have to plan to have sufficient money to finance the considerable travel, hotel, meals, clothing, gasoline, and entertainment costs. We use a calendar to reckon when we will leave and return. We will plot the route for driving to our destination. We may contact friends from other parts of the country to plan activities together. Most importantly, we should prepare spiritually, ensuring that we are in the correct frame of mind to make the upcoming Feast the best possible.

The same general principle is involved to a lesser or

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greater degree in the accomplishment of any goal. We consciously or unconsciously execute this principle numerous times every day for any number of purposes.

Do we have a conscious plan to reach the goal that is to be our highest priority for the rest of our lives? Since seeking God is to be our major spiritual occupation once He has established a relationship with us through His calling and justifying of us, what is foundational to our plan for seeking Him?

Many of us have probably never actually written a plan down, and even if we have, it is not something we need to consult every day. This plan would simply lay out a kind of map, a sketch of the major things we want to become part of our characters so that our overcoming and growth is accomplished to a far greater degree than if we attempted to do it in a helter-skelter, come-what-may manner.

This article will suggest overall qualities that must be part of a successful plan. These qualities will be useful every day except perhaps for the occasional times when some unexpected occurrence disrupts everything. Why do we need to do this? Establishing priorities is essential to success. Despite the steps we might lay out, we must determine to have and use a number of particular qualities; otherwise, regardless of how precise and appropriate our plan may be, it will not work.

Commitment and Devotion

Perhaps the highest of all priorities is our commitment. No plan, no matter how perfect, is any good at all unless the planner is committed to achieving his goal. As the adage goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Jesus agrees, saying in Luke 9:62, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

He adds in Luke 14:26-27, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” Clearly, seeking God also requires devotion.

Commitment expresses the idea of obligating or pledging oneself to a certain action, but it does not carry the emotional force of devotion. In fact, *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *devotion* as “to commit by a solemn act.” By definition, then, devotion possesses a quality mere commitment does not have. Devotion includes the idea of consecration, the setting of oneself apart for a higher end; it is commitment plus an intense, loyal attachment.

As a result, having devotion suggests that we have an unusually compelling motivation for our dedication, which accounts for its frequent use in relation to the fulfilling of responsibilities to God. Jesus says, “If you love *Me*, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Does not the love in

this statement also carry an emotional attachment, as in a personal relationship? Thus, devotion includes thoughts of love, whereas commitment often describes the mere performance of duty.

In our impatience, we humanly desire to cut to the chase, to jump straight to the end of a matter, without having to work through all the steps normally required to get there, steps that prepare us for the leadership positions that God desires to give us. Attempting to skip those steps is foolish. God absolutely will not allow us to evade our preparations for His Kingdom.

Proverbs 19:10 describes two similar situations that make interested observers shake their heads in sad wonderment at the waste: “Luxury is not fitting for a fool, much less for a servant to rule over princes.” Luxury in the hands of fools will be squandered on dissipation and useless frivolity because they have never learned to control themselves. The second example of inappropriate waste is directly attached to preparation for God's Kingdom. A slave to human nature, having been subject to it all his life, who is then given power to rule, stands every chance of becoming abusively tyrannical. How quickly he forgets the pain of his slavery!

Proverbs 30:21-23 affirms the previous proverb: “For three things the earth is perturbed, yes, for four it cannot bear up: For a servant when he reigns, a fool when he is filled with food, a hateful woman when she is married, and a maid servant who succeeds her mistress.” Each of these illustrations describes people unprepared for their new status.

We can be certain that God will not allow this to happen in His Family Kingdom. Those who are in it will be prepared to live, work, and rule at the level He assigns to them. Their responsibilities will be challenging, but they will not be constantly frustrated due to being in over their heads. Nor will their offices go to their heads. Despite having great power, they will humbly serve, exhibiting no abusive authority in the conduct of their responsibilities. They will be balanced in all areas of life.

Most dynastic rulers, like the monarchs of Europe, understand this concept well. Recently, *Smithsonian Magazine* ran a long article about Marie Antoinette. Her Austrian Hapsburg parents arranged her marriage while she was very young, promising her to the Bourbon family who ruled France. She was to become the wife of the future Louis XVI, also quite young at the time.

Within a year of this arrangement, the Bourbons sent a tutor to Austria to school Marie to become France's queen. The tutor remained her almost constant companion until Marie was married when she was fifteen years old. Prince Charles of England experienced a similar rigorous education. He has been trained since birth to sit on the throne of England. In one sense, especially in his pre-adult years, he had little time for himself.

We might think that this practice has not worked well,

but we must not forget that these monarchs lacked the ability from God to discipline their human natures. Nevertheless, God follows the same principle of preparation, and our lives must be devoted to these operations. Thus, we must follow the same basic program laid down for Prince Charles except that our preparations are for the Kingdom of God. Just as Charles must devote himself to learning all the particulars of his kingdom's operations, so must we devote ourselves to learning the ways of God's Kingdom because we, too, are to be kings (Revelation 5:10). God will not allow us to escape these responsibilities.

II Corinthians 6:1, a much-overlooked verse by the Christian world's no-works advocates, comments directly on our part in God's purpose: "We then, as workers together with Him, also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain." J.B. Phillips' *New Testament in Modern English* renders this verse, "As cooperators with God Himself we beg you, then, not to fail to use the grace of God." The apostle Paul warns us against receiving grace with no purpose in mind for making the very best use of God's wonderful gift.

God gives grace to be *used* by those who receive it. The sanctification process that follows justification requires our cooperation with Him so that the right qualities, understanding, and sensitivities are produced by His creative efforts. This cooperation produces Christian works. We must stop resisting Him through neglectful drifting—thus receiving God's grace in vain.

The combination of commitment, devotion, and cooperation works to produce godly conviction, a strength that is vital to our success in this warfare. More will be written about it in another article.

Vision Is Essential

A second element we *must* have is vision. Following baptism, we are often dismayed because human nature is still very strong and always with us. In addition, we become distraught because we find ourselves easily distracted by peripheral issues. If we allow ourselves to become discouraged, it takes firm devotion to turn around to focus on the task at hand. These factors amplify why vision is so important in assisting and encouraging devotion.

Notice how frequently Hebrews 11 mentions vision as a quality that assisted the heroes and heroines of faith in past ages:

- **Verse 13:** These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.
- **Verse 20:** By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

- **Verse 21:** By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.

- **Verse 22:** By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

- **Verses 24-27:** By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

On and on the testimonies to the vision of these heroes of faith are recorded. Like us, when they were called, they faced difficult circumstances within the world around them. They obviously evaluated their situations and made serious choices to go God's way rather than one that was more easily available to them.

Do we seriously consider the vast difference between what God offers us—His royal children—as compared to the hopelessness, violence, and confusion this world has produced since Adam and Eve? How much evidence does it take to convince us that this world's system is going nowhere but to destruction? Do we soberly ponder where today's events are headed? With what or whom are we—as judged by the pattern of our lifestyles—casting our lives and futures?

Perspectives of Time

A third high priority in our spiritual plan has to be time management. Overall, how do we, as Christians, perceive time? Every day we are witnesses to its progression. Daylight comes and passes, and night arrives only to be followed by daylight again. We can look at a clock and see that its hands are moving. But how—in what manner—is time moving? Ecclesiastes 1:3-11 provides an intriguing insight into the movement of time:

What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of

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labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new?" It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.

As a culture, the Greeks have become known as a people sensitive to the rhythms of time, and this, though written by Solomon, a Hebrew, is a decidedly Greek view of life and of time's movement. This perception of life and time—their acute awareness of things like the perpetual ebb and flow of tides, the continuous cycle of the four seasons, and the constant repetition of weather patterns—became a major building block of Greek philosophy, leading them to develop the concept that time is cyclical.

They concluded that man's life is lived within a series of continuous, changeless recurrences. To them, time works like a wheel turning on an axis, and the events that mark time's progress repeat themselves endlessly. They believed that nothing could be done about it because such events will happen eternally. Thus, a person is born, lives his life on a stage, and when his part is done, he exits. Such belief inexorably leads to a fatalistic view of life.

Notice verse 8 especially. The *Soncino Commentary* opines that Solomon is saying that this inescapable repetition in life is such weariness that he lacked the words to describe it aptly. Despite what Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 1, the general Hebrew outlook is decidedly different. The Hebrew concept of time greatly benefited from God's revelation. In Jude 14-15, the apostle quotes an Old Testament personality, Enoch, whose pre-flood prophecy deflected Hebrew thought about time in a far different direction:

Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." (Jude 14-15)

This quotation shows that the Hebrews who believed God knew that time was headed on a very different path from the Greek view. Events do not just happen in a vacuum; they are moving in a definite direction. Enoch is warning that a time is coming when men will have to answer for what they have done during their lifetimes.

Even so, he is nowhere near the earliest indicator that time and the events within it are moving in a specific

direction. Notice Genesis 3:14-15:

So the LORD God said to the serpent; "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

God had revealed Himself to the Hebrew descendants of Abraham, and some among them, like Moses, believed what He said. Thus, they knew that time was not cyclical, as the Greeks perceived it, but linear: The Creator is moving time and all that happens within it in a definite direction.

The prophet Amos receives credit for giving that "sometime" a general title, or at least the term is first used within his prophecy. He called it the "Day of the LORD." Generally, he appears to mean the time when God will intervene with a strong hand in the affairs of this world—an act that is definitely not repetitious.

Time Management

However, it remained for the Christian church to define time and its right usage for its members. The church's conception of time blends the cyclical concepts of the Greeks and the linear concepts of the Hebrews. It is true that many things in life—things like wars, economic depressions, and political revolutions—do recur in an inexorable manner. Yet, as the New Testament shows, much of this happens as a result of man's self-centered nature. In other words, they do not have to happen, but they do happen because man's choices make them happen. Man continually makes bad choices because his nature is unchangingly anti-God.

Thus, in general, the Christian view is that time indeed contains stressful, repeating cycles, as Solomon describes, yet the New Testament calls these cycles "evil" (Galatians 1:4). However, it also shows that time is moving in a definite direction and that God Himself is orchestrating many of the events within its progress toward the return of Jesus Christ, the Day of the Lord (the seventh one-thousand-year day), and the establishment on earth of His Family Kingdom.

This led the church to develop, under the inspiration of Jesus Christ, an overall concept of time management unique to church members. It has its roots in the Old Testament: Isaiah 55:6 urges us to "seek the LORD while He may be found."

Why should we seek Him? Because He has the power and the willingness, if we will trust Him, to give us a completely new nature, breaking the vain, frustrating, repetitious cycle. Isaiah 61:1-2 adds helpful understanding:

(continued on page 16)

ALL ABOUT EDOM

PART FOUR: OBADIAH AND EDOM'S SIN

One might imagine that, because of all the trouble Israel and Judah have suffered at the hands of the Edomites down through history, Obadiah would have written his prophecy against Edom with great antagonism: “These are our enemies, and they deserve this!” This, however, does not seem to have been the case.

A sadness seems to run through the book; there is a sense that Obadiah's poetry is a lament for an entire people caught in the act of rebellion against God. From time to time, his message takes on an imploring tone, suggesting an ephemeral hope that they—or at least some of them—will change. Between the lines are hints that perhaps some Edomites will read this message and not do what their fellow Edomites are prophesied to do. This slight hope may spring from God's command in Deuteronomy 2:2-6:

And the LORD spoke to [Moses], saying: “You have skirted this mountain [Mount Seir] long enough; turn northward. And command the people, saying, ‘You are about to pass through the territory of your brethren, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. Therefore watch yourselves carefully. Do not meddle with them, for I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as one footstep, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession. You shall buy food from them with money, that you may eat; and you shall also buy water from them with money, that you may drink.’”

God tells Israel, “Treat the Edomites with kid gloves as you go through their land.” Later, in Deuteronomy 23:7, He warns them again, “You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother.” By God's command, Israel was to approach the Edomites with fraternal care in all their dealings. Brothers have a bond by virtue of birth; they are of the same blood. They should get along, and cooperate with each other. Each should guard the other's back.

The two sons of Isaac rarely treated each other in this manner, but this is the standard to which God held the Israelites. Obadiah may have written his message with God's standard in mind. In his vision, he sees Edom's mistakes as the Edomites stubbornly head toward destruction. The prophecy takes the form of a brotherly warning for them to turn from their course before it is too late, but by all indications, Obadiah's warnings will go unheeded.

EDOM THOROUGHLY RANSACKED

Galatians 6:7 provides the theme for the second section of the prophecy against Edom: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” Human nature tries to

prophecy watch *All About Edom*

foist the blame for misfortune on outside factors, but the apostle Paul succinctly quashes such self-justification. We generally cause our own troubles.

“If thieves had come to you, if robbers by night—Oh, how you will be cut off!—would they not have stolen till they had enough? If grape-gatherers had come to you, would they not have left some gleanings? Oh, how Esau shall be searched out! How his hidden treasures shall be sought after! All the men in your confederacy shall force you to the border; the men at peace with you shall deceive you and prevail against you. Those who eat your bread shall lay a trap for you. No one is aware of it. Will I not in that day,” says the LORD, “even destroy the wise men from Edom, and understanding from the mountains of Esau? Then your mighty men, O Teman, shall be dismayed, to the end that everyone from the mountains of Esau may be cut off by slaughter.” (Obadiah 1:5-9)

This is quite grim. Edom will not just be defeated but annihilated. Normally, if a thief enters a home, he takes only those things of value and interest; he does not take every item in the house. He takes only those things he can either fence or use himself. Similarly, when grape gatherers go through a vineyard, they take the best for their purposes, leaving the rest on the vine. Some of the clusters might not have ripened, or some might simply be missed. Biblically, a farmer was supposed to leave some of his crop behind for the poor to glean (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

Obadiah 1:5-6 indicates that such selectivity will not be the case when Edom is punished. It will be as if the thieves came and stole *everything*—to the bare walls! Nothing will be left—even the hidden things will be searched out and taken. God lays out the terrible consequences for Edom’s rebellions; He is serious about punishing this people for what they have done. This is what Edom will reap—and what he has sown will shortly be revealed.

The New King James soft-peddles some of the Hebrew verbiage. For instance, in verse 6, “Oh, how Esau shall be searched out!” should be, “Oh, how Esau shall be ransacked!” a much more aggressive and violent expression. “His hidden treasures shall be sought after” suggests a functionary making a thorough search for valuables. The Hebrew, however, describes a pillaging army invading and taking everything of value and destroying the rest. Edom will be completely sacked.

Conversely, one of these two phrases and another in verse 5 also hint at Obadiah’s empathetic attitude. “Oh, how you will be cut off!” (verse 5) is a typical Hebrew expression of grief. Obadiah repeats his heartache in verse 6, “Oh, how Esau will be searched out!” The prophet laments that this people must come to such a horrible end.

While verses 5-6 focus on the ransacking of Edom’s wealth, verses 7-8 home in on the diminution of their wisdom and understanding. In other words, their “smarts” will be taken from them. A parallel prophecy in Jeremiah 49:7 asks, “Is wisdom no more in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?”

These rhetorical questions presuppose that both counsel and wisdom are Edomite hallmarks. Historically, Edom was known in the region for its sagacity, having produced some notable wise men. In Job 1, the narrator relates that Job is from Uz, thought to have been in the area of Edom, and Job 4 introduces Eliphaz the Temanite, one of his (supposedly) wise friends who counseled him.

That Edom has a reputation for wisdom makes its removal a more personal, significant, and ghastly punishment. Indeed, it is a stern lesson for the reader: For their sins and crimes, the Edomites are prophesied to lose, not just their wealth, but also their less tangible riches—even their common sense! The worst part may be that they will fail to recognize that it has deserted them.

Verse 7 also describes their confederates and allies betraying them to the point that even Edom’s ambassadors will be shown to the border, yet the Edomites will reckon that their “friends” are acting in good faith toward them. This is the essence of the last clause, “No one is aware of it,” suggesting that none of the Edomites understands that they have been betrayed.

Obadiah paints an illustration of Edomites sitting down to eat with their allies and not perceiving the treacherous trap being laid for them. Something clouds or blinds their eyes. Similarly, the disciples on the road to Emmaus could not recognize Jesus, despite having spent many years with Him (Luke 24:16). One day, God will blind Edomite eyes to their peril just as He, for His own purposes, has blinded the minds of Israelites in the reading of His Word (II Corinthians 3:14-15). In Edom’s case, He will remove her wisdom so that she will be unable to avoid betrayal and destruction.

Verse 9 relates the consequence of the loss of wisdom: Edomite leaders and warriors will lose their courage, leading to annihilation. Edom will reap what she has sown, which Obadiah details in the next section.

PERPETUAL HATRED

Leviticus 19:17, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart,” succinctly describes the fundamental flaw in Edom, hatred. Edom’s hatred is the primary consequence of her pride. Because he always felt that he should have been the master and received his father’s wealth and blessings, Esau nursed his wounded feelings of superiority, and it boiled over into hatred of his brother. This flaw became a prime feature of Edomite character.

For violence against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. (Obadiah 1:10)

Hatred against a brother can lead a person to terrible acts, most often underhanded ones. In the case of the Edomites, their vile attitudes first manifested themselves in such things as gloating and rejoicing over Israel's catastrophes, and led to actions such as pillaging, selling into slavery, and taking the other's territory when Israel and Judah were weak.

God encapsulates the reason for His terrible judgment against Edom into a single word: "violence." In Hebrew, this word is *chamas*, believe it or not, so strikingly similar to the name of the Palestinian terrorist organization, Hamas. In actuality, Hamas is an acronym for *Harakat al-Muqawima al-Islamiyya*, the Islamic Resistance Movement. Along with Hezbollah, it has been Israel's chief enemy for many years. It is difficult to see this as a mere coincidence.

Could this be a scriptural clue as to the modern-day identity of Edom or perhaps Amalek? The details revealed in Obadiah support such a conclusion. A survey of recent Middle East history shows how Hamas has set itself against the Jews; no other group bears such vehement hatred for them. Even though it has secured political power in Palestine, it will not renounce its perpetual hatred against the state of Israel—not even to become a viable player on the world stage. Members of Hamas simply want to annihilate Israel.

Chamas suggests immoral, cruel violence, going hand-in-hand with "slaughter" in the previous verse. The two words are undoubtedly linked. Edom will be cut off with the same slaughter and in the same manner by which she treated Israel: with violence, with *chamas*!

Why does God describe Esau in these terms? What drives Esau to hate Israel so viscerally? Deuteronomy 32 succinctly illustrates God's attentive relationship with Israel, how He found her, cared for her, and formed her into a great nation. God's love for Israel undergirds why hatred and violence against Israel is such a terrible transgression. Indeed, God's relationship with Israel is a driving factor behind Edom's hot anger—it is essentially jealousy!

Zechariah 2:8 describes Israel as "the apple of His eye." If a person pokes another in the eye, it hurts the recipient terribly. Because Esau's perpetual enmity and violence against Israel are fingers in God's eye, He takes extreme umbrage. The Edomites, rebelling against God's will, picked on one whom God has chosen. This is sin, not only against Israel, but also against God. Rather than humbly bowing before His will that the older shall serve the younger, Edom has waged perpetual war against Jacob's descendants. In doing so, she has, in effect, declared war against God—a very serious sin.

EDOM'S RAP SHEET

The Edomites' record of brutality and aggression against Israel is found throughout Scripture. Earlier, we saw Esau's personal hatred and murderous vow against Jacob (Genesis 27:41), the Amalekites' sneaky attack against the Israelite stragglers in the wilderness (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19), Amalek's alliances with other nations against Israel (Judges 3:12-14; 6:1-6), and even Haman's attempt to exterminate the Jews in Persia (Esther 3:1, 8-11, 13). Beyond these, the Bible provides more examples of Edom's almost incessant hostility against Israel and Judah and against God's will.

Psalms 137 is a lament describing the Jews' grief and longing for Jerusalem while they were held captive in Babylon. They were too forlorn even to sing "the LORD's song in a foreign land" (verse 4). The later verses tell of the Edomites' role in the sack of Jerusalem, and the psalm ends with the Jews' hope that the Edomites will suffer as they had:

Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom, the day of Jerusalem, who said, "Raze it, raze it, to its very foundation!" O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, happy the one who repays you as you have served us! Happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock! (Psalm 137:7-9)

Evidently, in 586 BC, the Edomites had joined with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian forces against Judah and reveled in the Jews' defeat, committing atrocities against defenseless babies and youngsters.

Other Old Testament chroniclers add to the tally against Edom. God, through the prophet Ezekiel, relates the same account of fratricide, as well as what He has determined to be His just response to Edom's cruelty against His chosen people. These prophecies agree in full with Obadiah's:

- Because of what Edom did against the house of Judah by taking vengeance, and has greatly offended by avenging itself on them, therefore thus says the Lord GOD: "I will also stretch out My hand against Edom, cut off man and beast from it, and make it desolate from Teman; Dedan shall fall by the sword. I will lay My vengeance on Edom by the hand of My people Israel, that they may do in Edom according to My anger and according to My fury; and they shall know My vengeance," says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 25:12-14)

- "Because you have had an ancient hatred, and have shed the blood of the children of Israel by the power of the sword at the time of their calamity, when their iniquity came to an end, therefore, as I live," says

(continued on page 18)

The Gift of a Leper

Matthew relates the story of a leper coming to Christ and being cleansed of his leprosy, thus giving him a chance to change his life for the better. This story is an example of the love and mercy of the One named God-Who-Heals in the Old Testament. It is the same God, Christ our Healer, who cleanses us from all unrighteousness. The gift of this leper witnesses to us even today the power and nature of God.

When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." (Matthew 8:1-4)

After relating the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew brings the reader back into the story flow by reiterating how great multitudes followed Jesus. Verse 2 begins, "And behold a leper came. . . ." This statement becomes significant when we consider that no man can come to Christ unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). That the leper came to Christ—amongst a great multitude, no less—was in itself an act of faith in response to what he heard (Romans 10:17). For him to come to Christ as he did, God had to have revealed to him that Christ was the only One who could truly cleanse

him and provide him the fresh start he so desired (Matthew 16:15-17). Notice, too, the humility the leper portrays in expressing his understanding of Christ's abilities.

What makes this encounter so interesting is that, under Old Testament law, the leper was completely defiled in his uncleanness. He was to live alone and warn any who would venture near of possible contamination (Leviticus 13:44-46). Albert Barnes, commenting on Leviticus 13:45, notes, "The leper was to carry about with him the usual signs of mourning for the dead. . . . The leper was a living parable in the world of sin of which death was the wages."

In fact, all disease and degeneration are ultimately products of sin and neglect, but none is so gruesomely picturesque of the effect sin has on a person and a community as leprosy. The disease progresses slowly at first, deeply seated in the bones and joints, essentially undetectable until spots appear on the skin. Gradually, these spots grow to cover the entire body. They give the appearance of foul wounds, sore and festering as the body slowly wastes away in a ruinous heap. Parts of the body actually begin falling off, leading eventually to the individual's death.

A leper can live up to fifty years in indescribable misery, as he watches himself die bit by bit, falling to pieces as a hideous spectacle. For the leper of Matthew 8, it was a hopeless predicament; nothing could be done, apart from God's miraculous intervention (Isaiah 1:4-6; Jeremiah 13:23).

Cleansing Is Not Free

Knowing these gruesome details, one can easily imagine the crowd hastily

parting as this man worked his way toward Jesus. Yet, He, in contrast, reaches out to touch the leper, signaling His willingness and power to heal. In Exodus 15:25-26, God reveals Himself as *Yahweh Ropheka*, or "the Eternal-Who-Heals," at the incident at Marah. Nathan Stone writes in his book, *Names of God*, that this name means "to restore, to heal, to cure . . . not only in the physical sense but in the moral and spiritual sense also" (p.72). Dying to sin and living for righteousness are a kind of healing through Jesus Christ.

Ordinarily, uncleanness is transferred among men, but holiness is not (Haggai 2:10-14). This scene of the leper coming to Christ pictures divine reconciliation, since what is holy and what is profane usually do not mix. This is overcome through the work of our Savior. Jesus stretches out His hand and commands the leper to be cleansed, showing God in action as the Eternal-Who-Heals. This is why the leper's uncleanness does not transfer to Jesus—at first.

Later, however, the death penalty for sin was transferred to Jesus. A price had to be paid for the leper's cleansing. "Clean" has a sense of purity and holiness, so to be cleansed was to be made pure. Proverbs 20:9 says, "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin'?" The leper could no more pronounce himself clean than we can pronounce ourselves sinless (I John 1:10). Proverbs 20:30 adds, "Blows that hurt cleanse away evil, as do stripes the inner depths of the heart." Comparing these two verses from Proverbs suggests that a certain chastening is required for cleansing.

Fresh starts in life are often an exhilarating experience.

Isaiah 53:4-5 adds another piece to the picture:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

These verses place the emphasis of our cleansing from spiritual impurity on Christ: He paid the price to heal us and restore us to fellowship with God.

Thus, when Jesus Christ became sin for us, on Him was transferred all uncleanness. For those who have repented and accepted His sacrifice, there is increasingly more responsibility to continue this cleansing process in cooperation with and submission to Him. Peter summarizes this idea in I Peter 2:24, “[He] Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.”

The Gift

In addition to His command for the leper to be cleansed, Jesus gives the now-healed man specific instructions to tell no one, but to go and show himself to the priest. He is also to “offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” On Matthew 8:4, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* suggests that Jesus’ command for the leper to keep silent shows that He “was not presenting Himself as a mere wonder worker.” He was fol-

lowing the simple adage, “Actions speak louder than words.” What this man was to do would be seen as testimony, a reminder to us that our obedience to God’s commands is perhaps our strongest witness, in which we do not have to say a word.

Before giving the gift that Moses commanded, something else had to occur about a week in advance, beginning outside the camp. First, the leper had to be inspected by the priest, who would confirm that he had been healed. Leviticus 14:4-8 continues the instructions:

[T]hen the priest shall command to take for him who is cleansed two living and clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop. And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water. As for the living bird, he shall take it, the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed from the leprosy, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose in the open field. He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, and shall stay outside his tent seven days.

Commenting on these verses, Barnes writes:

The details of a restoration to

health and freedom appear to be well expressed in the whole ceremony. Each of the birds represented the leper. . . . The death-like state of the leper during his exclusion from the camp was expressed by killing one of the birds. The living bird was identified with the slain one by being dipped in his blood mixed with the spring water that figured the process of purification, while the cured leper was identified with the rite by having the same water and blood sprinkled over him. The bird then liberated was a sign that the leper left behind him all the symbols of the death disease and of the remedies associated with it, and was free to enjoy health and social freedom with his kind.

Barnes further comments that the cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop were commonly used in purification rites. The resin, or turpentine, of the cedar was a preservative against decay, and it was also used in medicines to treat skin diseases. The color of the twice-dyed scarlet band of wool—with which the living bird, the hyssop, and cedar wood were tied together—reflected the rosy complexion associated with health and energy. Hyssop, too, was thought to have cleansing virtues.

The ceremony of the two birds pictures the change in a healed leper’s life: death to the old way that leads to death, and life and freedom to live a new way. Dying to the old self combined with living life anew in Christ is a concept repeated throughout the New Testament. Notice, for example, Romans 6:4-13:

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life. For if we had been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

After the ceremony with the two birds, the leper was to wash himself and his clothes, and shave off all his hair, but he was not yet completely clean. However, he was allowed back into the camp, though he had to remain outside his tent seven days. On the seventh day, the man was to wash and shave a second time before going to the Tabernacle or Temple on the eighth day (Leviticus 14:8-9). This continuing procedure is comparable to Paul's instruction in II Corinthians 7:1, that we "cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

An Ear, a Thumb, a Big Toe

Finally, on the eighth day, the

former leper and the priest offered the regime of offerings ordained in Leviticus 14:10-32. These offerings consisted of a wave offering and a trespass offering with a log of oil, a sin offering, and a burnt offering with its grain offering. An unusual thing was done with the blood of the trespass offering and the log of oil. Leviticus 14:14-17 records that blood from the trespass offering and then oil were to be placed on the tips of the right ear, right thumb, and right big toe. Interestingly, a similar procedure was done only when priests were consecrated (Leviticus 8).

These body parts represent areas of a person's life, and they are all meant to work together so that he may function effectively. The blood and oil, then, cleanse and anoint his hearing (the ear), his works (the thumb), and his walk or way of life (the big toe). His hearing affects his ability to work, and his works affect the way that he lives. Without hearing, a person cannot discern truth, and the ear is also the organ of balance. The hands, symbolic of works, are almost useless without a thumb (for a possible connection to Christ, see John 15:5). Without a big toe, a person walks clumsily and haltingly; it is hard for him to remain upright. To the leper, restored to wholeness, were returned the tools to hear and apply knowledge that could lead to an abundant life.

What a person hears affects what he does, what a person does affects how he lives, and how a person lives greatly affects both his health and his relationship with God and fellow man. The blood, used in cleansing almost all things (Hebrews 9:22), ultimately represents the blood of Christ shed for our sins. The oil symbolizes God's Holy Spirit, so when we are cleansed from all unrighteousness through the blood of Christ, we are able to live a new life in Christ by His Spirit.

After the ritual of the blood and oil, and the offering of a sin offering, burnt and grain offerings were given, signifying the former leper's restoration to God and his fellow man. As a leper, the man had been cut off from society and thus unable to serve God or his neighbor, and incapable of walk-

ing in godly love. In the type, then, leprosy, the effect of sin, prevented a true keeping of God's commandments.

The effects of sin, as leprosy, progress slowly. They are undetectable at first but deeply rooted, leading to spiritual dismemberment, a diseased mind, and death. The only possible redemption from both leprosy and sin, and their consequence, is through Jesus Christ, the Eternal-Who-Heals. He cleanses us through the washing of water by the word (Ephesians 5:26), since He paid the price for our healing. We cannot heal ourselves, nor change our nature without His intervention (Jeremiah 13:23).

After God acts to restore us to Himself, we bear an increasing responsibility to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness in cooperation with Him. Doing our part in cleansing ourselves—overcoming—helps prepare us for complete reconciliation and fellowship with the Father, but it is through Christ's shed blood that we have access to Him. We are exhorted in Hebrews 10:19-22:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness [confidence] to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The Bible records no examples of the gift that Moses commanded ever being offered before Matthew 8. Yet, imagine the exhilaration the former leper must have felt as he began his fresh start. Jesus Christ provides us an example of God as Healer, as He took on our infirmities and cleansed us from all unrighteousness. The gift, which Moses commanded by order of the One who later became Jesus Christ, is really to us, that we might believe, have hope, and draw near to Him. The testimony, the witness, is to us.

—*Benjamin A. Wulf*

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

Jumping into the Shallow Pond

Part Two

**“But he, wanting to
justify himself,
said to Jesus, ‘And who is
my neighbor?’”
—*Luke 10:29***

The Soviet Union of the 1980s provides a textbook illustration of economic collapse engineered by collectivism. Communism presents itself as high-minded in its redistribution of wealth, leveling the playing field between rich and poor and producing utopian prosperity for all. However, real world economics fails to adhere to collectivist theory.

In reality, rather than the haves and the have-nots meeting somewhere in the middle, the haves are eventually reduced to the level of the have-nots, and everyone suffers. In Mikhail Gorbachev’s U.S.S.R., the capitalist West, led by the United States, had to ride in on white horses to save the nation from total economic and political chaos.

That is history, and rather recent history. The failure of redistributionist policies to secure world prosperity is clear to anyone who knows economics. This apparent inability of economic policies to provide help has led some environmentalists to advocate the wholesale—and violent—depopulation of the planet as the only way to save both the ecosphere and humanity. These radical greens vocally assert that only the destruction of *four billion* individuals can ease the pressures that are causing war and poverty. While their voice is still offstage, heard as it were at a distance, far-Left environmentalists may move center-stage as growing numbers of people become convinced that social programs are intrinsically incapable of resolving world-poverty problems.

Many, of course, recognize the murderous solution offered by radical environmentalists to be no solution at all. It is so colossally immoral that it

should be consigned to the silent domain of the unspeakable, the rarified realm of the unthinkable. It is a sad indictment on our educational system that it so often permits the voice of these radicals to be heard in our classrooms.

The kill-two-thirds-of-the-people solution to world poverty is just as mindless and immoral as the “final solution” the Nazis submitted for eradicating Germany’s so-called “Jewish Problem” in the fourth and fifth decades of the last century. It is a non-solution that deserves no discussion whatsoever. The real alarm is not the radicals’ voice, but the airtime afforded it by the liberal media.

The Persistence of Poverty

Every day, the radicals’ voice rings truer in the minds of some because the problem of world hunger and disease appear to be at once endemic and incorrigible. Obstinate, stubbornly, they resist the panaceas mountebank humanitarians have provided for them over the years. Yet, some thinkers refuse the proposed cure-all of murder on an unprecedented scale. For example, Lester Brown’s is a voice that offers viable, if not always palatable, answers.¹

He believes that the scope of the threats to our civilization—“environmental degradation, climate change, the persistence of poverty, and the loss of hope”—mandate abandoning Plan A and clinging to Plan B. Plan A is the economic model we have grown up with: dependence on non-renewable energy sources (e.g., coal and oil) and reliance on disposable commodities. Plan B touts sustainability using non-depletable energy sources (i.e., wind and sun), the widespread use of recyclables, and the mining of the ocean for food and minerals. He submits that Plan B could be underwritten at a cost of about \$161 billion, about a third of the 2006 United States military budget.

God’s people, of course, cannot subscribe to Brown’s Plan B; some of its provisions are fanciful, while others are just plain misguided.² What he offers, however, is a sensible, though admittedly not a final, solution to the problem of poverty—sensible compared to Peter Unger’s socialist advocacy for wealth redistribution and the radicals’ incredibly defeatist call for mass murder.

Every voice recognizes hunger and disease to be immense and persistent problems destroying the lives of millions every year. However, the answers tendered by Peter Singer and Unger, by Brown, and by the radicals provide no real solutions. Their inability to submit workable solutions is the result of their inability to answer the Judean lawyer’s question, “And who is my neighbor?” If these educated

shepherds of our society, as misguided as they are, cannot answer that question, can we expect the sheep who hang out on Main Street America—or in the tree-lined avenues flanking it, or the urine-befouled alleys aside it—to answer the question any more satisfactorily?

Who is my neighbor?

The Good Samaritan

Christ, like Singer and Unger, shuns the “nearness test.” For, that “certain man” (Luke 10:30) who traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho clearly did not live across the street or down the lane from the Samaritan who ultimately befriended him. Jesus also makes it clear that shared values (religious or otherwise) are not the defining characteristic of neighbors. If that were the case, the priest and the Levite of verses 31 and 32 respectively would have provided assistance immediately. Instead, both “passed by on the other side.” To them, apparently, out of sight was out of mind, as they hurried about their business. The Samaritan, on the other hand, was racially and religiously distinct from the inhabitant of Jerusalem he helped.

So, who indeed was that “certain man’s” neighbor? The lawyer answered correctly: “He who showed mercy on him” (verse 37). A neighbor is defined as one who has compassion (verse 33) *and* puts that compassion to work by providing tangible relief from some distress. Such level of relief may (and indeed usually will) involve a financial commitment (verse 35).

James makes a similar point when comparing faith with works. A neighbor is not one who, seeing someone without clothing or food, takes no action apart from “encouraging” him with the words, “Depart in peace; be warmed and filled” (James 2:16). Such cold-hearted indifference in the face of authentic need is not a characteristic of a true neighbor at all.

So, to address the issue raised by The Envelope metaphor: Do we have a moral responsibility to send UNICEF the \$100? Yes, but we cannot be as unequivocal as Unger is in his book. Wisdom dictates that we attach more reservations:

- First, we should always keep in mind the needs occasioned by those ever-more-common, extraordinary catastrophes, as with Hurricane Katrina, and then those needs resulting from the tsunami in Asia, and then the needs arising from the earthquake in Pakistan and then . . . who knows what is next?³ At the same time, we ought not to forget the hunger experienced by approximately 100 million youngsters in India, plus

40 million in China, plus 100 million in the remainder of Asia, plus 100 million in Africa, plus 30 million in Latin America! The size of the global village limits what one person can do. Wisdom plays an important role in being neighborly.

We should not step out of a reasonable course. There are many people in the world: As much as we may want to, we cannot give to them all. Even Bill Gates would be pinched in his wallet if he tried that. Likewise, there are many relief organizations, some much more reliable than others. Some are just plain scams. If we decide to donate, we should give through reputable agencies.

Always keep in mind that *the compassion that underlies neighborliness is itself a component of agape love*. That type of love is neither unreasoning nor driven by emotion. Rather—and by definition—*agape* love is logical, composed of equal parts of care and thought. So, in this case, a Christian should think with his head, not with his heart!

- Second, we must recognize that there *will* be waste and corruption in this world. That is the way it is today. If we discover that we have supported an unworthy agency, we should not become discouraged. We dare not fall into the category of the “many” in Christ’s statement of Matthew 24:12: “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” We must not let lawlessness render us unresponsive to others’ needs.

- Third, “We can’t give what we don’t got,” as Herbert Armstrong used to say. Our minds should rule our hearts. After God’s tithes (and despite what Singer and Unger say), our first financial priority is to our own families. The apostle Paul is plain: “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (I Timothy 5:8). Elsewhere, the same apostle writes:

For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened (II Corinthians 8:12-13).

- Fourth, charity really does begin at home. If giving UNICEF that c-note takes *necessities* from our households, we should not tender it. We must not lose our sense of priorities, as Martha Nussbaum, in refusing to help her daughter obtain a

college education, has evidently done. Today, a college education is virtually a necessity, especially if one’s child is a keen student. We should not shun education for our children. It should come before our aid to those with unpronounceable names.

- Fifth, before we look for shallow ponds in Mongolia, we ought to narrow our vision a bit to our family in the faith, God’s church. The apostle Paul addresses this point in Galatians 6:10: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.” For those who have eyes to see, opportunities abound in God’s church. If an individual is isolated and unaware of real needs among God’s people, any of the elders would be happy to point him or her in opportunity’s direction. Before we send our checks to UNICEF, we should think of the needs of God’s people.

- Finally, we need to plan our charitable giving. Paul instructed the members of the Corinthian church to store up according to each individual’s prosperity, and to do so in advance so that there would be no last-minute flurry of activity upon his arrival in Corinth (I Corinthians 16:2). Once again, *agape* love, which underlies the mercy a true neighbor shows, is reasoned and thoughtful. It is neither impulsive nor imprudent.

Neighborliness Is in the Doing

Concerning their collection for the church at Jerusalem, Paul offers God’s people in the Corinthian church this advice: “It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it . . .” (II Corinthians 8:10-11). It is vital to remember that we are not neighbors with our talk, but with our walk—our *work* of compassion and mercy to others. Those others should be primarily those of our immediate families and then of the household of faith. However, beyond that, our neighbors include everyone, the “all” of Galatians 6:10.

That is *who* our neighbor is. It is global, yes, but at the same time, local—pretty much limited to those opportunities (Galatians 6:10) that come our way. To be neighborly is to have compassion, to show mercy, as opportunities afford. To be a good neighbor is to exploit opportunities to do good to all.

Paul says, as well, that we must “complete the doing of it.” Charitable intentions, unimplemented and

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personal *Seeking God*

(continued from page 6)

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God.

This is a prophecy that Jesus partially quoted as He began His ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth where He grew up (Luke 4:18-19). These passages suggest an element of movement toward something soon to happen. Isaiah 55:6 suggests we seek Him urgently because the Lord is moving on, and if we do not seek Him now, it will be too late. Time and events within it are moving. Isaiah 61:1-2 is similar: *Now* is an acceptable day for those called of God. If we wait, the acceptable day will pass, and the day of vengeance, even now moving toward us, will be here. It will be too late to avoid its destructive powers!

Recall that, in Solomon's complaint about time, God was nowhere mentioned. Events just go around and around endlessly, effectively describing Solomon's frustration. However, in the prophet Isaiah's description, God is involved in the movement of events that impact directly on His people's lives.

II Corinthians 5:20-6:2 from the *Revised English Bible* helps us to see the sense of urgency in a New Testament setting:

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. It is as if God were appealing to you through us: we implore you in Christ's name, be reconciled to God! Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with human sinfulness, so that in him we might be made one with the righteousness of God. Sharing in God's work, we make this appeal: you have received the grace of God; do not let it come to nothing. He has said: "In the hour of my favor I answered you; on the day of deliverance I came to your aid." This is the hour of favor, this the day of deliverance.

These admonitions to "seek God now," "now is an acceptable time," and "do not let it come to nothing," all indicate a passing opportunity. The Christian is dealing with a specific period during which events are working toward the culmination of some process, and if he does not take advantage of the present opportunity, it will never come again. The parable in Matthew 25:6-13 illustrates our need to make the most of this opportunity now:

And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!" Then all those

virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise answered, saying, "No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves." And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" But he answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you." Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

This parable's major lesson is that both life and time are moving. The precise time of Christ's return is unknown, so He urges us to take advantage of the knowledge and time we already have in hand. Those who reject His advice will find their way into the Kingdom blocked.

Recall that II Corinthians is written to Christians. Paul's message is a call to strike while the iron is hot! Both Jesus and Paul remind us that our calling is rife with possibilities, so much so that we can consider each moment as big as eternity. That is how important this "day of salvation" is to us! The New Testament's instruction to Christians is, "Now is the time!" Everything is in readiness for success. It is as though the New Testament writers are saying, "Don't be like the slave who refuses when presented with freedom, or the diseased person who rejects help when offered healing. God's door is open to us! Charge through it by cooperating with Him!"

Time Is Precious!

We must take care not to imitate the poignant moment portrayed in *The Shawshank Redemption*, when the timid inmate, played by James Whitmore, was released from prison after about 25 years of incarceration for a foolish moment of passion in which he committed murder. Upon his release, the prison provided him clothing, an entry-level job as a supermarket bagger, and a small sum of money to live on for a while. But the world was now far different from what it had been when he entered prison. He soon found that he missed the familiar, repetitious, and relative security of the prison, and out of fear he committed suicide.

What is the Bible's advice? The familiar Ephesians 5:14-17 urges us to "make hay while the sun shines":

Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Notice the encouraging reason Paul gives to wake up and carefully mind how we live: “Christ will give you light.” This is an outright promise that He will give us the help to do what we must do. Backed by this promise, we are to redeem the time “because the days are evil.” If his days were evil, what would Paul think of ours?

This passage reveals how the early church regarded time as it applies to a Christian. For us, all days—every period in which God’s people have had to live their lives by their God-given understanding, thus by faith—are evil. God’s truth has always run counter to the course of this world. Thus, the truth adds a peculiar, stressful difficulty to life regardless of when it is lived. Moreover, since each called-out individual has only one opportunity to lay hold on eternal life, and must overcome, grow, and prove his loyalty to God during that time, he must make use of every experience.

Galatians 1:3-4 confirms this perspective: “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” In terms of growing and overcoming, living in a particular period in history gives a Christian no advantage. Every era, every age, is against him, and within it, he must make the most of his calling. The times have always been evil.

To the church, then, because it must operate responsibly toward God within a highly specialized understanding of life and its purpose, every age is full of the cyclical, frustrating, repetitious events that Solomon called futile vanities. Such events lead nowhere and produce a discouraging fatalism.

However, a Christian also knows that God is directing time and events to His desired end. Thus, the church’s view of time is an elegant combination of both realities, realizing that it has a work to accomplish as an organization and that each individual Christian must grow and overcome within it. So, as Christians, we must face the evil of repetitious vanity produced by sin, which history clearly records, with faith in the hope of a glorious victory for God’s called-out ones, which God’s Word prophesies.

Thus, Paul advises in Ephesians 5:17, “Therefore . . . understand what the will of the Lord is.” As we live our lives each day, we should never let what God says slip from our minds. His point is that we need to make the most of every opportunity because time is inexorably moving toward God’s desired end, and it will not stop and wait for us. We do not want to be left behind! No occasion is too insignificant to do the right thing. Time is precious! We, like God, must take it very seriously.

We must not make the mistake of relegating Christian living to a mere couple of hours on the Sabbath. Christian-

ity involves *every* aspect of life. Personal study and prayer are times of clarifying God’s will. But we must not neglect the doing of His will as occasions arise—and they will arise every day. Woe to us if we disregard them, for they comprise the very circumstances that challenge us to overcome and grow in our seeking of God.

Proverbs 4:7 advises, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom,” excellent counsel about what to do within the time given to us. This verse is a proverbial way of instructing us to seek God, as seeking wisdom is very similar to seeking God, only more specific. Wisdom is the practical application of the knowledge of God, and we can attain it because we understand such knowledge, believe it, and choose to use it. We can achieve these things because we use our relationship with God to reach the right results.

Proverbs 2:1-12 amplifies two basic instructions. First, finding understanding and wisdom will not come easily. Seeking them will become a lifelong search. We will need conviction, vision, and focused time management to find them. We must seek them as a prospector would seek gold and silver. Solomon’s emphasis is not on obtaining gold and silver due to their value, but on the hard work required to obtain them.

Second, the passage instructs us on why we should seek them: their many valuable benefits. They are almost unimaginable—seemingly too good to be true—but they are indeed true.

Taken together and applied, these elements tend to produce conviction, the certainty that what we believe is true. Conviction produces fervency, a passion for using our knowledge of God so that our faith rises above the merely intellectual. Proverbs 2 presents us with a time-consuming activity—in fact, a lifetime occupation—in seeking wisdom and thus seeking God. In summary:

1. To seek God, our foundation must be commitment combined with personal devotion to Christ.
2. To have an inspiring, correct vision, we must evaluate this evil world and its imminent destruction against what God promises.
3. To make proper use of the time that remains to us, we must be acutely aware of its passage and manage it effectively.

There is not a moment to waste. Strike while the iron is hot!

In Christian love,



prophecy watch *All About Edom*

(continued from page 9)

the LORD GOD, “I will prepare you for blood, and blood shall pursue you. . . . Because you have said, ‘These two nations and these two countries shall be mine, and we will possess them,’ although the LORD was there, therefore, as I live,” says the LORD GOD, “I will do according to your anger and according to the envy which you showed in your hatred against them. . . . The whole earth will rejoice when I make you desolate. As you rejoiced because the inheritance of the house of Israel was desolate, so I will do to you; you shall be desolate, O Mount Seir, as well as all of Edom—all of it! Then they shall know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 35:5-6, 10-11, 14-15)

- Surely I have spoken in My burning jealousy against the rest of the nations and against all Edom, who gave My land to themselves as a possession, with whole-hearted joy and spiteful minds, in order to plunder its open country. (Ezekiel 36:5)

Jeremiah also refers to Edomite perfidy in the same destruction of Jerusalem:

Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz! The cup shall also pass over to you and you shall become drunk and make yourself naked [see Jeremiah 25:15-38]. . . . He will punish

your iniquity, O daughter of Edom; He will uncover your sins! (Lamentations 4:21-22)

Among these, the prophecy in Joel 3:19 is most interesting, since the prophet Joel lived in the latter half of the ninth century BC, 250 years before Jerusalem fell to the Neo-Babylonians! He writes, “And Edom [shall be] a desolate wilderness, because of violence against the people of Judah, for they have shed innocent blood in their land.” Amos, writing in the mid-eighth century BC, accuses Edom of similar crimes:

For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because he pursued his brother with a sword, and cast off all pity; his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever. But I will send a fire upon Teman, which shall devour the palaces of Bozrah. (Amos 1:11-12)

In the Bible, we have a comprehensive record of the violence that Edom has perpetrated against ancient Israel and Judah. The evidence from Obadiah reveals that the Edomites will continue their anti-Israel crime spree until God Himself intervenes in the last days. He takes great offense to these heinous acts, and thus He promises, they “shall be cut off forever” (Obadiah 1:10).

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

ready answer

(continued from page 15)

lacking follow-through, do not count toward our reward. Wishful thinking—“I wish I had helped that elderly woman upstairs before she died”—merits no praise. After-the-fact remorse—“I knew I should have taken Joe some food”—just does not cut it. In the Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32), Christ makes it clear that the son who

actually *worked* in the vineyard did the will of his father. The other son, though he said, “I go, Sir,” failed to work and failed to do his father’s will. We must act, not just talk.

As Christ said to the lawyer at the conclusion of His comments on the Good Samaritan, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

—Charles F. Whitaker

Endnotes

¹ Brown, Lester R., *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*, W. W. Norton, 2006. See The Earth Policy Institute’s website at www.earth-policy.org/Books/PB2/index.htm for more details.

² As an example, consider one of Brown’s strange ideas: Beef and sheep are inefficient sources of protein. Presumably, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were unaware of this lack of efficiency. It is doubtful that they would buy into Brown’s proposal to use fish as

a primary source of protein.

³ James Morris avers that natural disasters are taking place with increased frequency and ferocity: “According to the World Bank, natural disasters have increased fourfold over the last 30 years. . . . That means several billion people need instant help over the course of a decade” (“UN: Hunger Kills 18,000 Kids Each Day,” Edith M. Lederer, Associated Press Writer, February 21, 2007).

The Paradox of U.S. Power and Defeat

Since World War II, the United States has rocketed to previously unimagined heights of geopolitical power. Paradoxically, though, this—sometimes lone—superpower has simultaneously suffered a number of strategic stalemates and even defeats, apparently succumbing to lesser foes that a global superpower theoretically should not have any trouble overcoming. Even as its strategic defeats mount, the overall might of the United States has continued to increase. Stratfor's George Friedman summarizes the history:

In spite of stalemate and defeat during the Cold War, the United States was more in 2000 than it had been in 1950. . . . On a pretty arbitrary scale—between Korea (1950-53), Cuba (1960-63), Vietnam (1963-75), Iran (1979-1981) and Iraq (2003-present)—the United States has spent about 27 of the last 55 years engaged in politico-military maneuvers that, at the very least, did not bring obvious success, and frequently brought disaster. Yet, in spite of these disasters, the long-term tendency of American power relative to the rest of the world has been favorable to the United States. (“Geopolitics and the U.S. Spoiling Attack,” March 20, 2007)

In analyzing this paradox, Friedman contends that these conflicts were never as significant as they appeared to be—public sentiment and government rhetoric notwithstanding. That is, compared to the wholesale mobilization of men and industry for the war effort during WWII, only a portion of available U.S. resources and energy were tapped during the aforementioned wars. The conclusion is that if the national survival of the U.S. were truly at stake during any one of these conflicts—as opposed to there just being *important* national security issues—total war would have been fought as it was in Germany and Japan in the 1940s. The stalemates and strategic defeats in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, and the present Iraq conflict, have thus been “acceptable” because it was not necessary for the U.S. to vanquish its foes absolutely in order to maintain its overall security. As Friedman puts it,

. . . the United States consistently has entered into conflicts in which its level of commitment was extremely limited, in which either victory was not the strategic goal or the mission eventually was redefined to accept stalemate, and in which even defeat was deemed preferable to a level of effort that might avert it. Public discussion on all sides was apoplectic both during these conflicts and afterward, yet American global power was not materially affected in the long run.

How can a superpower retain its title while suffering a string of such stalemates and strategic defeats by much smaller nations? Friedman points out that these conflicts can be seen as what military strategists call a *spoiling attack*—an offensive operation designed not to defeat the enemy, but only to disrupt him and prevent a defeat. The enemy need not be crushed for a spoiling attack to be considered successful—he only needs to be disrupted or forestalled. The side making the spoiling attack can thus economize its force rather than bleed itself dry with every operation.

Viewing the concept of a spoiling attack on a global scale, one can consider the wars in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, and Iraq as offensive operations designed only to keep the enemy off-balance or distracted rather than to defeat it. In the first four conflicts, the real enemy was the Soviet Union. Absolutely defeating Korea, Fidel Castro's Cuba, Vietnam, or the pre-revolution Iran was not necessary to keep the Soviet Union from conquering the United States—but strategists believed that engaging in those conflicts was necessary to keep the Soviet Union from asserting itself further geopolitically and militarily.

Likewise, the present enemy of the United States is militant Islam, and the Bush administration evidently went to war in Iraq to keep the Islamists from attacking the American mainland in a significant way. In this, the strategy has been successful. Even though the Islamists have not been entirely defeated in Iraq and probably never will be (or the Taliban in Afghanistan, for that matter), the fact that the United States has approached the war with such restraint demonstrates that, on some level, the strategic defeat it is currently enduring is acceptable—American national security has been preserved. Had Iraq truly been a threat, the Pentagon would have prosecuted the war far differently.

Likewise, if Iran actually posed an existential threat to the heartland, the present dance between it and the U.S. would be of a much different tempo. American policymakers seem to be “satisfied” with the current status quo, even though it gives the appearance of weakness.

If this analysis is correct, it should give us pause as we attempt to crosslink current events and Bible prophecy. Circumstances are not always what they appear to be—or how the media paint them to be. If strategic defeat consistently results in the garnering of greater U.S. power, an adjustment in thinking is necessary. If nothing else, it demands a more judicious perspective that accounts for high-level, high-stakes strategic thinking. Watching world events just became a bit more complex.

—David C. Grabbe

WORLDWATCH

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Exorcism in a Synagogue

Four of Christ's thirty-three miracles concern the casting out of demons. Satan always tries to counter God's work, and thus the years surrounding Jesus' ministry saw a marked rise in demonic activity. Scripture shows that exposing and casting out Satan and his demons is the responsibility of Christ (I John 3:8).

Evidently, some demons crave embodiment, and so demon possession consists of one or more demons inhabiting a human or even animals (Luke 8:32-33). Mental diseases, with their erratic or even insane behavior, along with physical diseases, often accompany demon-possession, for demons perversely desire to destroy even the bodies they inhabit.

The exorcism in the synagogue (Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37) occurs on a busy day for Jesus. He teaches in the synagogue, casting out a demon there. He then goes to Peter's house to heal his mother-in-law. Later in the evening, the whole city gathers at Peter's door, where "they brought to Him all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed" (Mark 1:32). All this activity shows His power over demons and great compassion for the people.



1. Why are demons called "unclean spirits"? Mark 1:23, 26.

COMMENT: Mark calls the usurping demon "unclean," indicating moral impurity. It is also a troublemaker, as seen in its contrary attitude. It is interesting that the demon violently recoils when faced with the authority of the spiritually clean Christ. Recognizing His holiness and unwilling to remain in Jesus' presence, it cries out in fear.

We see a similar uncleanness in those who trouble a congregation; they invariably live spiritually impure lives. They may talk about God's love and other virtuous things, but it often merely camouflages their evil intentions. These troublemakers are not peaceable, righteous people, but, like their spiritual father, Satan, they are of the lie (see John 8:44; II Thessalonians 2:9-12), and oppose those who truly serve Him.

2. Why do demons invade people? Mark 1:23; Luke 4:33.

COMMENT: The demon invaded the man's mind, overriding his conscious personality, which allowed the unclean spirit to speak through him (Mark 5:7). Knowing that God's Son would come in the flesh to save humanity, and that God is raising firstfruits for His Family among humanity, the demons resentfully lust for victory over people. Though God mercifully limits demon possession, He often allows demons to influence people heavily, as seen in the unclean spiritual condition of this society. Thus, Christians must beware of worldly relationships (II Corinthians 6:15-18).

3. Does the demon recognize Jesus as the Son of God? Why does He prohibit its testimony? Mark 1:24-25; Luke 4:34-35.

COMMENT: The great archangel who later became Satan and his legions of angels were once clean spirits until they rebelled against the Most High God. In the ages before human history, they dwelled in the preincarnate Christ's presence, and thus they are very aware of His attributes. Thus, the demon in the synagogue does not hesitate to acknowledge "the Holy One of God."

Jesus does not let it speak of Him because He would not receive testimony from such a lying, diabolical source. For the same reason, Paul refuses the public witness of a fortune-telling spirit in Philippi (Acts 16:16-18). There can

be no association between Christ and Satan. Jesus does not even carry on conversations with demons, but He commands and instructs them by the power and authority of His heavenly Father (Matthew 8:31-32; Mark 1:34).

4. How does Jesus expel the unclean spirit? Mark 1:25-28; Luke 4:35-37.

COMMENT: Jesus commands the demon to leave, giving it a short, direct order backed by God's authority. He does not rebuke the man, because the unclean spirit had possessed him, yet each of us must resist the influence of demons (I Peter 5:9). Jesus tells the demon, "Hold your peace," which actually means "be gagged or muzzled," a phrase He also uses to calm the storm in Mark 4:39. The unclean spirit does not speak again, but obeys in rage and anguish.

By his own power or authority, no man can cast out demons. Even the archangel Michael, not daring to revile Satan, called on the power and authority of God to rebuke him (Jude 9), setting a right example for us. Similarly, in rebuking the "spirit of divination" at Philippi, Paul says, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (Acts 16:18).

Because of Christ's authority in performing this miracle, the people in the synagogue are "amazed," a word meaning "to stupefy" and "to dumbfound or flabbergast." They express their astonishment in questions: "What is this? What new doctrine is this?" (Mark 1:27), as well as by immediately rushing away to tell everyone they can. The word translated "amazed" also can mean "to terrify" and "to be frightened." The people are not only astounded but also fearful of God's power through Jesus.

The focus of the testimony is on how Jesus exorcises the demon: simply by His command, which shows the power of God's Word. Contemporary Jewish doctrine for casting out demons was much different, as exorcists among them sometimes appeared to cast out demons by prayers or chants. Christ, however, does not cajole or request demons to leave, but authoritatively commands them to come out. The world has its weak and useless methods to appease evil and entice it to surrender, but Christ commands its defeat.

—Martin G. Collins