

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 16, Number 5

June 2007

Answer
Him
or
Not?



june 2007

volume 16, number 5

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When biblical contradictions are discussed, Proverbs 26:4-5 is invariably mentioned. One verse says we should not answer a fool, and the next says we should! What is going on here? How could such an obvious error have sneaked past the Bible's editors—unless there is more to it than meets the eye. Perhaps this seeming contradiction contains a great deal of practical wisdom.

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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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The Christian Fight

Part Two

True Christianity is not an easy way of life. Jesus Himself declares in Matthew 7:13-14, “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” Many of this world’s religious groups that call themselves Christian would have us believe that accepting the blood of Jesus Christ is the end of all of our problems.

That claim, though, is misleading at the very least—and an outright lie at the most, depending on the material supporting such a claim. Many influences attempt to knock a Christian off the path entirely or in any case cause him to stumble. A Christian must be discerning, taking great pains to maintain his balance against three primary enemies: his human nature, the world, and Satan. Regardless of his age, social status, education, or gender, these foes dog his heels.

The Christian truly has a fight on his hands, if he is serious about glorifying God by his life and achieving the growth that will give God abundant evidence of his sincerity in seeking Him and being

in His character image. Many have gone before us in this way. God has faithfully recorded their successes and failures so that we might be encouraged, inspired, guided, and corrected by them.

The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:6, “Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted.” “Examples” is here translated from the Greek *tupos*, though it is translated into a variety of English words in other New Testament contexts, for instance, as “pattern,” “fashion,” “manner,” “figure,” or “form.” In each case, it indicates something shaped or formed, whether in lesser or greater degree, by a measure of pressure. It describes something that can be accepted, copied, imitated, or followed. In this context, Paul is clear that we must not accept, copy, imitate, or follow what those who went before us did. They set us a bad pattern; they were not good models for our behavior.

Previously, we explored the parallel between Israel’s responsibilities in taking over the Promised Land and our spiritual preparations for the Kingdom of God. We saw that some people draw

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a careless assumption from a surface evaluation of Exodus 23:20-33, leading to a shallow conclusion: that if the Israelites had just obeyed God, they would have marched into the land and taken it over without a fight. Such submission would have undoubtedly made their course easier and produced better results.

However, many other contexts show that God tests His people because He is preparing them for future responsibilities. Israel failed many tests. The march through the wilderness and the conquest of the Promised Land was a school, a vast, almost fifty-years-long training ground, for appreciating, using, and governing the Promised Land. This “schooling” included tests by which the Israelites could measure their progress, and at the same time, prove to God their growth and readiness.

We concluded that God’s promises in Exodus 23 were indeed conditional. Their fulfillment depended on Israel’s obedience, and part of that obedience was confronting their enemies, the people of the land, in warfare. The episode recorded in Numbers 13–14 reveals that the Israelite spies fully expected to have to fight the Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites, etc. They did not understand Exodus 23 as a free pass, as many do today. Their responsibility was to drive them out in cooperation with God, as He promised to be with them, enabling them to drive the people out, which they were incapable of doing without His involvement. But they refused to do their part.

They were to drive out the inhabitants even as we, in cooperation with God, are to confront and drive out old habits, attitudes, and loyalties. These are negative characteristics left over from our pre-conversion days. Christian living parallels this Old Testament instruction. This is one reason why the New Testament has so many illustrations and exhortations regarding Christian warfare.

Our warfare is in many ways different. It does not involve bloody engagements featuring swords, spears, or rifles with bayonets. It is a spiritual warfare, one that takes place primarily within ourselves. Nonetheless, it requires qualities such as loyalty, patriotism, courage, self-denial, vision, understanding, and sacrifice for us to be victorious overcomers.

Resisting the World

Resisting this world’s many and varied pressures is a major area of warfare, though it is not as effective an enemy as the heart we always bear within us. Its influences are often tangible and easily perceived. At the same time, however, unless we are aware of the world’s power and take steps to protect ourselves, we can overlook its subtle influences as if they are of no consequence. Much of its danger lies in familiarity breeding contempt. We frequently take the world for granted.

Because of this, we need to remember how Israel was

attracted to the world and began practicing the ways of the people of the land. In Deuteronomy 12:29-32, God makes it clear that we must be wary of the world:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, “How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.” You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.

We must carefully evaluate the world’s dangers because it has been—in the past, before conversion—the primary shaper of our sinful attitudes and characters. So powerful are the world’s evil characteristics that Israelite history reveals that they were drawn into the most perverse and despicable heathen practices. The biblical record proves how easy it is for an individual to return to the old ways and how difficult it is to overcome them.

A baby is not born evil. It is most certainly born with a measure of self-centeredness that God pronounced as very good in Genesis 1:31, for some small measure of self-centeredness enables a person to take care of the self. However, it has a benefit over and above this obvious one:

So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:28-33)

Understood and controlled, a right measure of self-love provides a foundation for the love of others, which proves beneficial for the giver as well as the receiver. This is especially true in marriage because husband and wife become one flesh; to love one’s spouse is to love the self because of this oneness.

It is at least equally true, if not more so, in our relationship with Christ. He is our example. Because of our spiritual oneness with Him, and because we are His body, His loving service of us is the same as loving Himself. This principle works both ways. Our loving service of Him is also the same as loving ourselves. What we see in these two intimate relationships is a practical application and benefit of the Golden Rule—“Do unto others as you would have them do to you”—in operation, with the added benefit to the giver.

The problem with self-love is that, without contact with God throughout life, an individual’s innate self-centeredness can easily develop into an extreme and sharply honed sinfulness and evil. Such an egotist gives little thought to loving others as a way of life; he shows little care for others and rarely looks for ways to serve. Without God, life becomes all about the self. The world, established by and built upon selfish human nature, continues to feed its self-absorbed inclinations and cravings.

The World Is Evil

Our own personal world includes our parents, spouses, siblings, and extended family. It includes the general geographical and cultural area in which we grew up. Just as we did not have to be formally taught our native language, as we do a second or third language, we absorb the characteristics and peculiarities of our environment. These environmental characteristics in combination with our experiences and choices subtly shape our beliefs and perspectives as we age. We feel comfortable with them, make judgments by them, and then execute our choices as a lifestyle.

Paul writes in Galatians 1:3-4, “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 the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” Jesus adds to this picture in Matthew 7:11, regarding the people of His day: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

These scriptures succinctly state how God perceives all the world and its inhabitants, regardless of one’s particular environmental factors. The context of Matthew 7 gives no indication that the people who comprised Jesus’ audience were particularly evil; they were just normal human beings. Yet, compared to God’s standards for His people, their natural self-centeredness was stressful, disruptive, destructive, and calamitous—not beneficial to any concerned. In a word, they were evil.

Jesus and Paul give us comparative statements, but

each from a slightly different perspective. Paul points out the cumulative effect, while Jesus identifies the individual sources that produce it. As the apostle John puts it in I John 5:19, “The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.”

The people to whom Jesus spoke were normal, worldly people. They would not have considered themselves evil, but they were, as God judged them. So are we also evil unless we have been justified and are under the blood of Jesus Christ.

Strenuously Avoid This Evil World

A series of scriptures will highlight the world’s danger to us. The apostle James writes: “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). This epistle is written to a Christian congregation. Even as the Old Testament shows Israel to be a spiritual adulteress to God through the people’s disobedience following the making of the Old Covenant, so are Christians—as part of the bride of Christ, having made the New Covenant—spiritual adulterers when they unfaithfully disobey.

James is not saying these people are lost. He is warning them that they are heading in that direction because they were backsliding, having already been unfaithful. The unstated, yet clear cause of their being drawn back is the world, as if it were the seductive temptress of Proverbs 7.

James’ counsel is that we cannot straddle the fence between God and the world. He is expounding the “no man can serve two masters” principle. These two relationships—God and the world—frame a black-and-white issue; this war has no neutral zone. A person cannot pursue his self-centered, worldly ambitions and still remain loyal to God.

The apostle uses the word *philos*, indicating something dear, which the New King James Version translates as “friend.” He is stressing an affectionate, emotional attachment. Interestingly, *The New Testament in Modern English* by J.B. Phillips (1959) renders the warning as, “You are like unfaithful wives, flirting with the glamour of this world, and never realizing that to be the world’s lover means becoming the enemy of God!” Seen this way, James describes them as silly, immature children, thoughtlessly gambling away their futures in the Kingdom of God.

I John 2:15 adds a refinement to James’ warning: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” The Greek word translated as “love” is *agapao*, which suggests a reasoned, determined love. Thus, John’s

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counsel stresses willfulness rather than mere affectionate attachment. In comparison, one could even describe *philos* as an unbidden “puppy love,” but *agapao*—never.

John is saying that we should not have intimate fellowship combined with loyal devotion to the world. Our relationship to it must be a more distant, hands-off one. We certainly must live and do business within it, but we have to fight to keep it from becoming the focus of our way of life. The spiritual reality is that, as we might say today, “The world stands ready to eat us alive.” It chews Christians up and spits them out. If permitted, it can trash spiritual realities that may once have been cherished hopes and dreams.

Galatians 6:14 provides another guiding principle to hold dear: “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” This is an example of Paul’s spiritual outlook and maturity regarding his relationship with the world. As far as any relationship between him and the world is concerned, the world is dead and crucified, and so is he to it. It is vivid imagery. How much willful devotion can a person have in a relationship going nowhere because both parties are “dead” to each other?

John 15:18-23 adds more about why the world is dangerous to a Christian:

If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also.

This is the fruit of the carnal mind’s persistently disobedient attitude shown in Romans 8:7. The whole worldly system is anti-God. Even though the Christian world patronizes Him, in reality, it hates Jesus Christ, and therefore it hates those who truly follow Him. There is a simple reason why this continual reality exists.

Paul had renounced the whole worldly system. It no longer had any appeal to him; he was, in effect, dead in relation to it. However, the world’s pressure never ends, which Paul notes in Romans 12:2, “Do not

be conformed to this world.” The Greek more correctly reads, “Stop allowing yourself to be fashioned to the pattern of this age,” or as the J.B. Phillips translation puts it, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.”

This is the danger we face when we allow the world to become too important. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The world subtly but inexorably manipulates us into conformity with its thinking, its value systems, and therefore its attitudes and conduct. If we are alert and truly guarding against an invasion of worldly attitudes and practices, we will soon be able to notice when others relapse into following the course of the world.

The persistent influence of the world is a reality because Satan, the god of this world, is its driving force (II Corinthians 4:4). The world is Satan’s medium, through which he broadcasts his propaganda and disinformation. By confusing people about what to believe, he intends to manipulate humanity. Satan’s pitch to mankind is aimed directly at exciting human nature’s self-indulgent cravings.

Due to this Satanic effort, even though we are converted, we are apt to become misinformed, lackadaisical, disinterested, and discouraged. We must be aware of it and absolutely resist it. The apostles’ advice about avoiding intimacy with the world is a form of the proverb, “Evil company corrupts good habits” (I Corinthians 15:33). Friendship with the world corrupts.

The context expands on this thought:

If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” Do not be deceived; “Evil company corrupts good habits.” Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame. (verses 32-34)

This well-known proverb is strategically placed in the Resurrection Chapter. In verse 32, Paul reminds the Greek Corinthians of an example of the perverse, immoral morass that they left compared to the liberating and ennobling calling God has so graciously given them. He then verbally punches them in the nose by telling them the company that they keep is destroying them, meaning they are gradually reabsorbing the attitudes and culture of the surrounding world. He then charges them to wake up to what they stand to lose by being too close to the world—even worldly people who might be fellowshiping with

(continued on page 17)

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF REVELATION?

Among the books of the New Testament, the book of Revelation is probably more widely debated than any other, due to its prophetic content, yet it is also the least understood.

People find it difficult to wrap their minds around it because in some places, it contains symbols that must be interpreted, and in other places, it contains literal descriptions or interpretations that must be taken at face value to be understood.

When a person turns to scholars for guidance, he finds as many interpretations as there are interpreters, and the areas in which they agree are rare. To complicate matters further, the timing of the various visions is uncertain. Even though the visions in general follow a linear progression, along the way there are insets and asides that are intended to clarify, yet they can also confuse if applied to the wrong time or context.

Even with these difficulties, though, the book states in its opening that it is meant to show the servants of God things that must shortly come to pass—that is, God intends it to be understood. Yet, because it is prophecy, much of its real value will be realized *after* the fact, for it is only after a prophesied event takes place that we truly understand it.

Thus, even if we rightly divide the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15), and let the Bible interpret itself, we still have only a rough outline of what is to take place. But after it happens, “*then* [we] shall know”—as the prophets say—all that was intended, and we can give glory to God all the more for His sovereign power in bringing it to pass.

But *what is* the book of Revelation? We will not have a chance of understanding the details if we cannot see the big picture of this controversial book. When we understand the book’s scope and the intent, we will be in a better position to divide its contents rightly and catch a glimpse of the future.

THE APOCALYPSE

The book itself tells us, right at the beginning, what it is about, but because of the way it is translated into English, we can read right over it and miss the book’s own declaration of its contents. Revelation 1:1-2 says:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.

We are immediately told that this book contains the *revelation of Jesus Christ*. This phrase is the title of the book. But what does “revelation” mean? It is the Greek noun *apocalypsis*, which is why this book is often called the “book of the Apocalypse.” This noun comes from the verb *apocalupto*, which

prophecy watch

What Is the Book of Revelation?

literally means “to take away the veil,” such as when a painting or statue has its covering taken away. Even though *apocalypsis* is most often translated “revelation,” the best equivalent word in English is “unveiling.”

In common usage, when someone refers to the “Apocalypse,” or describes an event as being “apocalyptic,” he is usually talking about widespread devastation or ultimate doom. Mel Gibson recently produced and directed a movie entitled *Apocalypto*, which portrayed the end of the Mayan civilization—and it was a very bloody end.

Using “apocalypse” this way derives from the content of the book of Revelation, not from the word’s Greek meaning. Simply, *apocalypsis* and *apocalupto* refer to “taking away a veil” or “unveiling” rather than to cataclysmic events. However, in this specific instance of apocalypse, of a veil being taken away (when Jesus Christ returns), widespread devastation will in fact occur as this present age closes with wars and disasters.

In the Greek New Testament, *apocalypsis* appears in two senses. When used figuratively, it has the sense of “bringing someone to knowledge,” as in the English phrase “remove the veil of ignorance.” For example, when we say that a mystery is *unveiled*, we mean that the veil of ignorance is lifted so that the matter can be plainly understood. In terms of the book of Revelation, this is the sense that most interpreters and readers recognize in it. They see it as the unveiling of prophetic events to understanding.

However, when *apocalypsis* is used in a literal sense, it refers to “the visible appearance of one previously unseen,” as a woman shrouded by a veil is revealed when her covering is removed. In Revelation’s case, as the book of the Unveiling, *apocalypsis* literally refers to the visible appearance of One who is now hidden from human sight, and that One is, of course, Jesus Christ.

The New Testament consistently supports the literal sense of *apocalypsis* rather than the figurative, and that the “revelation of Jesus Christ” is not limited to His testimony or to His unlocking of prophecy. Instead, the “revelation of Jesus Christ” is, in fact, an advance record of His *visible appearance* in glory, to overthrow the spirit and human rulers of this world and to establish His Kingdom on earth.

A key to effective Bible study is to let the Bible interpret itself. Another key is to let the Bible’s usage of a word determine its meaning rather than to rely solely on what it means in secular Greek or Hebrew. *Apocalypsis* appears in eighteen places in the New Testament, and in ten of those places—including Revelation 1:1—it is used literally, referring to a person or a thing. In every case, it denotes the “visible appearance” or “unveiling” of that person or thing, confirming how it should be understood in Revelation 1:1.

An example of this occurs in I Corinthians 1:7-8: “... so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation [*apocalypsis*] of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will

also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In verse 7, *apocalypsis* is translated “coming” in the King James and “revelation” in the New King James. Paul clearly refers to the return or the second coming of Jesus Christ; he uses the word in relation to Christ appearing visibly at a specific time: His day.

This “day” of course does not refer to a specific day of the week, but rather to the period in which the misjudgment of man ends and the righteous judgment of God begins. Mankind, under the influence of Satan, has been trying in vain to rule himself for 6,000 years, or six “days,” using the principle in II Peter 3:8 of one day equaling one thousand years. The seventh “day” is when God intervenes and establishes His government, so that mankind can finally understand how to live. That day begins with the visible appearance of Jesus Christ, coming in the clouds in all of His glory (Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26).

II Thessalonians 1:7-10 speaks of that same day, or that same time:

... and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed [*apocalypsis*] from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, *in that Day*, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

Here again, *apocalypsis* refers to the person of Jesus Christ, and it plainly describes His visible revelation—His unveiling—when He returns from heaven with His angels to take vengeance on those who do not know God and disobey the gospel. When He is revealed in that day, not only will He appear in glory, but He will “be glorified in His saints.” At that time, His saints, people He has separated to Himself, will be resurrected and exchange their earthly glory for heavenly glory (*cf.* I Corinthians 15:40-49).

REVELATION’S GOOD NEWS

Notice that II Thessalonians 1:8 says that God will take vengeance on those who do not *obey* the gospel of Jesus Christ. This idea has a strong tie to the book of Revelation, as the gospel of Jesus Christ is the “good news” that He brought. His good news is not primarily about Himself, but rather it is the message that He brought from His Father about the Kingdom of God being established on earth (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16-17). After the gospel is preached in all the world as a witness to all nations (Matthew 24:14), God will

be justified in punishing all of those who reject it. The end of this present world will come when God takes vengeance on those who have heard the gospel message—which, at that point, will be everyone alive on earth—but who refuse to repent and submit to God’s rule on earth.

The tie to the book of Revelation is that the unveiling of Jesus Christ, when He removes man from governing the earth and takes that responsibility to Himself, is the fulfillment of the gospel message that He brought. When Christ is revealed, the Kingdom of God will be at hand. Revelation fills in the explosive details of how the governments of this world will come under the rulership of God.

Even though the word *gospel* means “good news,” people typically do not think of the book of Revelation as being encouraging or uplifting. For most professing Christians, the gospel that Jesus preached is *not* good news. They prefer a gospel that is limited to the forgiveness of their sins. When they hear that God’s Kingdom includes repentance and obedience to His laws, they cannot tolerate it (Romans 8:7). For those who will not obey the gospel, the book of Revelation is not *good news* at all, because it foretells their judgment for idolatry and disobedience.

For true Christians, though, this book is wonderful news! It may not be “good” news in the sense of being pleasant, enjoyable, or attractive. Instead, its news contains a zealous, righteous goodness—an active pursuit of what is good for mankind, a deliberate and forceful bringing to pass of those things that will make life good for everyone. The entire creation will rejoice when the present principalities, powers, and broken governments of men are replaced with a King who will powerfully impose all that is good upon a sin-sick world.

As we have seen, both I Corinthians 1:8 and II Thessalonians 1:10 refer to “the day” or “that day,” and this is also a necessary piece to understanding what the book of Revelation is about. John says in Revelation 1:10 that he “was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day.” He had a series of visions, not of any specific day of the week, but of that period referred to as “the day of the Lord” (Psalm 110:5; Isaiah 2:11-12; 13:6, 9, 13; 22:5; 34:8; 61:2; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7-8, 14, 18; 2:2-3; Zechariah 14:1).

This reiterates what we have already seen with regard to the book being about the unveiling of Jesus Christ. The time element for the entire book is the day of the Lord and those events immediately preceding His revelation. While there are a few references to earlier events—such as the symbol of ancient Israel in Revelation 12:1 (compare with Genesis 37:9), or the birth of Jesus in Revelation 12:2—the near-complete majority of the book is about the end time. It concerns itself with “that day,” when this present age is wrapped up and the new one begins.

SALVATION REVEALED TOO

The usage of *apocalypsis* can be seen three more times in I Peter 1:3-9, 13:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed [*apocalupto*] in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation [*apocalypsis*] of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. . . . Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation [*apocalypsis*] of Jesus Christ;

These verses link the unveiling of Jesus Christ with our future and all that the Father is working out. Verse 3 recalls to us our status as begotten children of God, reminding us that our hope lies in the resurrection from the dead, when we will be born of spirit, able to inherit the Kingdom (see I Corinthians 15:50). God Himself safeguards this perfect inheritance, which can never be diminished, for all those who are begotten and endure to the end.

Verse 5 reminds us that our salvation will be revealed “in the last time.” This gives us reason for great rejoicing, even though various trials may grieve us. Those trials are necessary, Peter tells us in verse 7, so that the genuineness of our faith—the tried and proven character of our faith—may be found when Jesus Christ is unveiled to the entire world (*cf.* Luke 18:8).

Verse 8 points out the contrast that, at this time, we do not see Him with our eyes because He is still veiled, hidden from the world. His revelation has not occurred yet. Even though we cannot see Him now, we still love Him and can still rejoice because we know that the Father *will* soon send Him back to this earth. Then, every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7).

Verse 13 summarizes what we should be doing as a result of this understanding. We need to brace ourselves mentally, and think, plan, and act seriously and circumspectly, setting our hope wholly on the divine favor that the revelation of Jesus Christ will bring to us. For concurrent with the *apocalypsis* of Christ is the salvation of the saints, both living and dead.

So, when we next study this unique book, it will help to remember that it is almost entirely focused on the Day of the Lord and the events surrounding the triumphant appearance of Jesus Christ, when He returns to intervene in human affairs and to establish His Kingdom on the earth.

—David C. Grabbe

Luke 21:36 is a familiar scripture that we have heard often during our years in the church: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.” To illustrate a common use of this scripture in the church, notice a quotation from Lesson 3 of the Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course, *The Sensational Return of Jesus Christ!*:

That’s why God commands us to “WATCH” (Luke 21:36)—to watch world news so we may be AWARE of the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, and to be accounted worthy to ESCAPE the nuclear holocaust soon to fall upon this heedless, rebellious world!

Because we so often use such familiar scriptures for a specific idea, we can overlook a fundamental truth or instruction that the passage reveals. What is the message Christ gives us in this verse? It may be one of the most important survival instructions, both physical and spiritual, that He gives to those living during the end time. He gives us the essence of how we can escape the worst of the Tribulation and be with Christ in God’s Kingdom.

A Review

To begin to understand Luke 21:36, we need to review Luke 21 as a chapter. For most of it, Christ gives the warning signs that signal the end of the age (Luke 21:6-7; Matthew 24:2-3). Luke 21:7-33 prepares us for the various physical events to look for, and verses 34-35, as we shall see, prepare us for spiritual events.

In verses 7-19, Jesus informs us about the visible signs, the world events, which signal that the end is near. In verses 20-24, He is still talking about these visible signs, but specifically about those that involve Jerusalem. Verses 25-28 describe the cataclysmic events in the sky and on the earth, heralding His imminent return. Thus, through verse 28, our Savior reveals to us the events presaging His return in the world (verses 7-19), in Jerusalem (verses 20-24), and in the sky and earth (verses 25-28).

Next, Christ relates the Parable of the Fig Tree (verses 29-33) to give instruction regarding His warnings in the previous verses. The “these things” in verse 31 refers to the question asked in verse 7 and Jesus’ subsequent answer in verses 8-28. “These things” are the events foretold to happen as the end nears. In the parable, Christ provides the perspective we should have as we anticipate the unfolding of the previously described events.

What owner of a fig tree would spend hours each day scrutinizing his tree to see if it was budding? Would he make the fig tree the focal point of his day? Of course, no one would. An owner of a fig tree would be aware of its location, its level of health, and its progression through the annual cycle of growth, but these matters would not require his all-consuming effort.

The parable, then, shows us that we should be aware of prophecy, we should keep an eye on what is happening in the world, but it does not require—and we should not allow it to become—our primary focus. In the fig-tree analogy, Jesus illustrates for us the balanced view we should have toward prophecy. We *must* be aware of what is taking place, but we need not be over-attentive.

Some make the mistake—a spiritually dangerous mistake—of ignoring the lesson of this parable by making prophecy a major or even sole focus that distracts them from their primary spiritual responsibilities. It is easier to focus on prophecy and world events than it is to give the same scrutiny to the evils lurking in our corrupt human nature (Jeremiah 17:9). In Luke 21, Christ definitely does not overlook the latter, as we see in verses 34-35:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth.

With the opening “But” in verse 34, Christ’s message takes a definite turn. He is still talking about preparing us for the end of the age, but He shifts from the external events of verses 7-33 to the internal: “take heed to *yourself*s, lest *your* hearts. . . .” He is no longer talking about world events, the physical and external, but our “hearts,” the spiritual and internal. He gives a warning to those who are not spiritually aware and focused—those who are distracted. They will be caught completely off guard—“that Day come[s on them] unexpectedly”—because their hearts are misdirected.

Verse 35 re-emphasizes that the end will be a surprise to some people, one that Christ compares to a bird snared or trapped. Why? Verse 34 supplies the reason: They are burdened by the “cares of this life,” not focused on what counts. They are looking in the wrong direction, and the trap springs on them without warning. Rather than overcoming

Praying Always

Part One

the world (I John 5:4), as Laodiceans, they are being absorbed by it (Revelation 3:14-22).

Between verses 8-33 and verses 34-35 of Luke 21, we can also see a contrast in the awareness levels we need to have regarding the physical versus the spiritual. For the physical, we are to be aware but not over-attentive. For the spiritual, however, Christ raises the level of vigilance: “Take heed to yourselves,” or be on guard! He exhorts us to be in a high state of spiritual alertness.

Watch What?

With verses 34-35 as an introduction, Christ commands in verse 36: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

According to *Strong’s Concordance*, *agrupneo*, the Greek word translated as *watch*, means “to be sleepless, i.e. keep awake.” Frequently, when the Bible mentions being asleep or tells us to wake up, it refers to our spiritual state (Matthew 25:5; Romans 13:11; I Thessalonians 5:6-8). Instead of “watch,” some Bible versions use words such as, “don’t go to sleep at the switch” (The Message), “be always on the watch” (NIV), “be ready all the time” (New Century Version), “keep awake” (Amplified Bible), “keep on the alert” (NASB), “stay awake” (ESV), “keep a constant watch” (Living Bible), and “beware of slumbering” (New Testament in Modern Speech). This is a call to the spiritual, not the physical.

Just over two decades ago, an elderly man named Herbert Armstrong cried out, “Wake up!” and he was not talking about any other waking up than a spiritual one. Because we did not heed his warning then, the church has experienced twenty years of apostasy and scattering. If we do not wake up eventually, God has a three-and-a-half-year plan guaranteed to

get our attention.

In our former association, we obeyed the instructions in Luke 21:7-33 to watch world events, but we did not closely follow Christ’s commands in Luke 21:34-36 to guard our spiritual condition, hence the scattering. Interestingly, the condition of the church at that time mirrors how Luke 21:36 was generally applied—physical rather than spiritual.

It is always a good practice to allow the Bible to interpret itself rather than adding extra-biblical interpretations (II Peter 1:20). Because the Bible uses sleep and waking from sleep as spiritual metaphors, why would we want to add another meaning to the “watch” of Luke 21:36? That would be walking on shaky ground (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32), and we want to avoid repeating past error.

To emphasize that “watch” in Luke 21:36 is all about the spiritual and *not* about the physical, notice how *agrupneo* is used in its only other appearances in the New Testament:

Mark 13:33: “Take heed, *watch* and pray; for you do not know when the time is.” (This verse parallels Luke 21:36.)

Ephesians 6:18: “. . . praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being *watchful* to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.” (The context of this verse is putting on the whole armor of God—definitely a spiritual exercise.)

Hebrews 13:17: Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they *watch* out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (The ministry’s first priority is the spiritual health of called-out Christians.)

These facts lead to the conclusion that “watch” in Luke 21:36 has little, or perhaps even nothing, to do with watching world events.

Prove All Things

It may just roll off the tongue to say “watch world news,” and Luke 21:36 seems to make that very easy. Just because it is easy and comfortable, having been saying it for decades, does not justify clinging to an old notion unless we have a solid foundation *in the Bible* for that belief.

I Thessalonians 5:21 instructs us to “test [*prove*, KJV] *all* things,” which would include our old notions, and *then* “hold fast” to the good ones—the ones that pass the test. A mistake many make is to follow tenaciously the instruction of Revelation 3:11 to “hold fast to what we have” while completely ignoring the additional instructions of I Thessalonians 5:21 to test first.

Experience proves that not all that we believe is truth, even if held fast for forty years—a Sunday rather than a Monday Pentecost is but one example. We have to test our beliefs continually and rigorously against the only standard that counts—the Bible (Acts 5:29).

Human nature is lazy and takes the easy road at every opportunity. It will rely on human reasoning, the word of others, or tradition rather than do the hard work of studying the Bible and believing what it actually says. Human nature also will not naturally do the humbling work of allowing the Bible and its plain, unambiguous verses to prove matters rather than following humanly devised ideas. The church’s history over the last few decades displays the fruits of taking doctrine for granted rather than allowing clear scriptures to guide our understanding of the truth.

Why do people have so many different opinions about what the Bible says? Generally, people come to the

Bible with preconceived ideas and latch on to any scripture that *seems* to prove their belief. At the same time, they will ignore or make light of a clear verse that obviously contradicts their belief.

God can use this as a test to determine the true intents of the heart. Where does one's allegiance really lie? Will a person humbly submit to the clear instructions of God, allowing them to lead him or her to create a true spiritual foundation (Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Psalms 149:4)? Alternatively, will they choose instead to hold on to their preconceptions or other ideas of men—their idols (Revelation 21:8)—desperately grasping at the straws of unclear scriptures to build a shaky foundation?

When doctrinal disputes arise, if a person cannot or will not prove beliefs using clear and unambiguous scriptures, that fact should raise a red flag. Clear scriptures are a solid-rock foundation. Ambiguous scriptures, open to private interpretation, lead to a foundation of sand. Only one of these foundations will stand when storms come (Matthew 7:24-27).

Therefore, a careful reading shows that the “watch” of Luke 21:36 is only minimally directing us to watch world events. Overemphasizing that meaning of this verse has overshadowed its real message, perhaps the most important survival instructions Jesus gives to Christians living at the end.

Overcoming

In our day, “watch” has lost much of its original power. Is there anything more passive than watching television? We live in a spectator nation. We watch movies, news, the markets, and sporting events. Watching has become an activity that puts us on the sidelines and not on the field of battle, an idea foreign to the original meaning of the word. At the time of the King James translators, “watch” emphasized the carefulness, attention, and vigilance in the way a soldier kept alert for

any sign of enemy movement.

A concept that has more meaning to us today can be found in the word “overcome.” This word implies that we watch ourselves to spot our problems, do battle with them, and overcome them. “Overcome” better communicates the battle we have joined (Romans 12:21; I John 5:4-5; Revelation 21:7).

If we watch ourselves spiritually, we are not just watching our human nature, but doing battle with it. We are not just watching the world and its influences as they bombard us, but fighting against them. We are not just watching Satan's devices as they toy with us, but defending ourselves against them. In other words, “watch” as originally intended covers the entire process of overcoming that is our calling. We are to be identifying the problems, engaging them, and putting them to flight (Revelation 3:2; 16:15; I Corinthians 16:13; I Thessalonians 5:6-8).

Therefore, “overcome,” more clearly than “watch,” communicates to someone living today what Luke 21:36 says we should be doing as we near the end of the age. The premier end-time book, Revelation, repeatedly emphasizes that overcoming is “job one” for us (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 21:7).

The Message

Luke 21:36 suggests that those who alertly overcome and pray always are those that may be counted worthy to escape and stand before Christ in God's Kingdom. In verse 36, Christ ties together all He has said throughout the chapter. If we do not neglect the spiritual (verses 34-35), and instead watch and pray always, we can “escape all these things” (verses 7-33) and enter God's Kingdom.

Luke 21 is a chapter about the end time, and in verse 36, we have spiritual instruction directly from Jesus to anyone living during that time. He is telling us how to escape the final effects of the turmoil that is ahead and to enter God's Kingdom. This, therefore, becomes an ex-

tremely powerful verse in helping us to understand *exactly* what we should be concentrating on at this time. It is a roadmap to safety and salvation.

What if someone told us where to find two tickets, which if purchased by us, would grant us escape from the end-time tumult and entrance into God's Kingdom? What price would we pay? Two such “tickets” exist, and we have the wherewithal to purchase them. Luke 21:36 shows us the two tickets. One is the “watch/overcome” ticket and the other is the “pray always” ticket. If we choose to be lackadaisical about overcoming or prayer, are missing either ticket, or have only a partial ticket, we will likely be required to “buy” those same two tickets at a very dear price in the Tribulation.

The Bible states quite a few “formulas” for producing certain things. We need to understand that none of these formulas stands on its own. They fit into a whole that includes other factors supplied from other instruction found elsewhere in Scripture. However, there are formulas, and then, there are *formulas*. Those that Jesus gives tend to be “trunk of the tree” formulas. They *must be* our base, and then we can stack other instruction on them.

These “trunk of the tree” formulas not only form a foundation that supports everything else, but they also give direction and boundaries for what and how we can add to them. Once a builder lays a foundation for a small, three-bedroom house, it automatically limits what he can and cannot construct on it. Consequently, we cannot build a beautiful spiritual temple on the wrong foundation. Luke 21:36 is an integral part of the right foundation for those of us living at the end.

As we have seen, in Luke 21:36, Christ reveals that the roles of watching—or paying careful attention to overcoming—and praying always are vital to our Christian lives at this time. Just how vital they are will be the focus of the next article in this series.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

—Pat Higgins

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

To Answer a Fool— or Not

**“Do not answer a fool
according to his folly,
lest you also be like him.
Answer a fool according
to his folly, lest he be
wise in his own eyes.”
—Proverbs 26:4-5**

A recent Google search on the topic, “Contradictions in the Bible,” yielded over a 1,360,000 hits. On one side of the debate appeared the strange bedfellows of Islamic fundamentalists and secular-progressive atheists proclaiming Christian fundamentalists “brain-dead” for not accepting their carefully studied positions. On the other side, Christian fundamentalists and apologists systematically countered each alleged discrepancy with a reasonable and scholarly explanation.

One “point-counterpoint” standoff rages between *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*, edited by Dennis McKinsey and the *Tektronikon Encyclopedia Apologetica*, edited by James Patrick Holding. The latter not only offers chapter-by-chapter rebuttals to McKinsey’s massive tome, but also for many other less ambitious works such as *101 Clear Bible Errors*, plagiarized under many different names on the Internet. In his article, “Is Proverbs in Contradiction on Answering Fools?” Holding feels that the alleged contradiction between Proverbs 26:4-5

wins a major award for silliness. What we have here is not contradiction, but *dilemma*—an indication that when it comes to answering fools, you cannot win—because they are fools, and there is no practical cure for foolery (as this citation demonstrates). So: It is unwise to argue with a fool at his own level and recognize his own foolish suppositions, but it is good sometimes to refute him soundly, lest his foolishness seem to be confirmed by your silence.

Reasonable Expectations

In his *Alleged Contradictions in the Bible*, B. J. Clarke points out that the close proximity of these verses (back to back) would rule out the idea

of discrepancy even for the most sophomoric of scholars. James Jackson, in his article, “Answering the Fool,” suggests that “such close proximity reflects design, not disorder.”

Dr. E. W. Bullinger suggests that the connection between these verses can be explained by an *ellipsis* (something deliberately left out to grab the reader’s attention) beginning in verse 3, which compares reasoning with a fool to reasoning with a donkey. Rather than considering these proverbs as absolute commands, the reader finds cause-and-effect cautions: If you answer a fool, you will be like him, but if you do not answer a fool, he will assume you are like him. Either way, we would lose.

Along with ellipsis, the technique of *parallelism* (repeated similarities used for rhetorical effect) is used throughout Proverbs to amplify meaning. Consider Proverbs 28:1: “The wicked flee when no one pursues; but the righteous are as bold as a lion.” In this light, Proverbs 26:4-5 can be read: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him. [But on the other hand,] answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

Paradox provides another explanation for the alleged “contradiction.” Lynn Anderson, in his article “The Case for Mystery,” asserts that the Bible embraces paradoxes throughout. The apostle Paul, for example, in the same chapter (Galatians 6:2, 5), urges, “Bear one another’s burdens,” and three verses later suggests, “Each one shall bear his own load.” Similarly, Paul warns Christians not to be “burdened again by a yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1), while teaching elsewhere that we are to become “slaves to righteousness” (Romans 6:18). Jesus Christ provides the most sterling example of paradox when he warns His disciples that whoever desires to lead must become a servant (Luke 22:26) and whoever would save his life must be willing to lose it (Luke 17:33).

A special instance of paradox is the *conundrum* or riddle. Stephen Tecklenberg, in his article “No Matter What You Do,” maintains that the “Answer not a fool . . . Answer a fool” juxtaposition is just that, a conundrum focusing more on the “readiness” to answer rather than on the answering. He adds, “If appropriate, give answers. If not, withhold.”

Thomas Henry Reardon, in his article “Folly to Be Wise?” points out that while much of Scripture demands making right choices, certain decisions, especially in the Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc.), demand discernment, prudence, and choosing wisely between alternatives.

Every semester, I propose a dilemma to my Advanced Composition classes when I ask them to explain the conundrum: “You can write a research paper in 20 hours,

but you cannot write a research paper in 20 hours.” When I assure them that there is no contradiction, they finally realize that it all depends on the distribution of the 20 hours. Clustering these 20 hours one week before the paper’s due-date will lead to panic or plagiarism. On the other hand, intelligent spacing of these 20 hours (over the period of a month), with scheduled periods of rest, will provide the necessary energy and resources to complete the research paper.

A Turn of Phrase

Closely related to paradox and conundrum is the *turn of phrase* given to a group of words. Norman Geisler, in his book *When Critics Ask*, cites Andrew Fuller, who insists that the meaning is altered depending on the twist given to the words. For example, “according to his folly” in one sense implies “in a foolish manner” or “behaving like a fool.” In another sense, it could imply “in the manner which his folly requires.”

Another way of explaining this turn of phrase would be the *fallacy of accent*, in which the meaning changes depending on which part of the sentence is emphasized. Much Yiddish humor succeeds by accenting different parts of the sentence. Jewish humorist Leo Rosten provides this gem:

1. I **should** buy two tickets for her concert?— meaning: What, you’re giving me a lesson in ethics?
2. I should **buy** two tickets for her concert?— meaning: I wouldn’t go even if she were giving out free passes!
3. I should buy **two** tickets for her concert?— meaning: I’m having enough trouble deciding whether it’s worth one.
4. I should buy two **tickets** for her concert?— meaning: She should be giving out free passes, or the hall will be empty.
5. I should buy two tickets for **her** concert?— meaning: Did she buy tickets to our daughter’s recital?
6. I should buy two tickets for her **concert**?— meaning: You mean, they call what she does a “concert”?

Applying this formula to Proverbs 26, we accent the following parts of verses 4 and 5:

Do not answer a fool according to his *folly*, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool *according to* his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

As in Fuller’s turn of phrase, the first accent refers

to behaving like a fool, and the second accent refers to the manner that his foolishness requires. David Jon Hill, in his article “Twelve Rules for Bible Study” (*Tomorrow’s World*, July 1969), substantiates the turn of phrase and accent explanations, asserting that differing circumstances account for the so-called contradictions:

Actually, these two verses are not contradictory—but complementary!

The use of either verse—that is, its principle applied to a particular use—depends on the set of circumstances. Both these verses contain gems of wisdom that each one of us needs to learn to properly apply in answering other people’s questions.

The LAST PART OF EACH VERSE holds the KEY which unlocks the meaning of these verses—and shows them to be practical, usable and wise principles.

Verse four reads, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him.” The last part of the verse holds the KEY: don’t degrade yourself by descending to HIS LEVEL in an ARGUMENT! Don’t harangue—don’t bite back—don’t try to “argue back” with someone who is obviously trying to stir contention.

Robert Deffingbaugh, in his Bible study, “The Fool,” says of Proverbs 26:5:

WE SHOULD NOT ALLOW THE FOOL TO DRAG US DOWN TO HIS LEVEL. The fool is exasperating; he is looking for trouble, and he often tempts us to oblige him. Since the fool will spout off and speak his mind, we are tempted to lose our temper with him as well. Proverbs instructs us not to allow him to get the best of us, lest we be lowered to his level.

When Donald Trump mistakenly got into a name-calling contest with Rosie O’Donnell, it gave her a fallacious, elevated estimation of her debating abilities, deluding her into a false sense of importance and wisdom, and at the same time, it artificially boosted the ratings of *The View*. Fred Thompson, on the other hand, when asked to debate the merits of “universal” health care with Michael Moore, who lauds Fidel Castro’s system in Cuba, made it clear that he would not lower himself to Moore’s foolishness.

Not Answering the Fool

Stephen Tecklenberg, reflecting on his protesting of the blasphemous movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*,

observes, “In those areas where the protests were the loudest, the film received the best attendance. It was as if our best efforts simply backfired. Perhaps it would have been better if we had done nothing!”

Scripture provides numerous examples of biblical figures falling short of successfully following Proverbs 26:4. Consider the example of how Moses answered folly in a foolish manner:

And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: “If only we had died when our brethren died before the LORD! Why have you brought up the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here?” . . . Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.” . . . And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “*Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?*” Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. . . . (Numbers 20:3-4, 7-8, 10-11)

Jesus Christ used a better tactic. A group of gainsaying Pharisees tried to push his buttons, provoking an argument, but Jesus kept his cool, answering their question with one of His own. Using this strategy, he placed this pack of weasels on the horns of an untenable dilemma, successfully answering their foolishness *according to their folly*.

But He answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, and answer Me: The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men?” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet.” So they answered that they did not know where it was from. And Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (Luke 20:3-8)

In another instance, Jesus was confronted by Herod Antipas, who had been manipulated by his wife to murder John the Baptist. Jesus realizing the man to be a compromised fool, held his peace (Luke 23:8-9).

Following His example, the apostle Paul twice cautions Timothy—and thus us—that there are times when a fool’s comment does not warrant a reply:

II Timothy 2:23: But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.

I Timothy 6:3-5: If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

Answering the Fool

Occasionally, silence is not golden but just plain yellow. When Job's wife urged him to curse God and die, he did not turn a deaf ear but gave her a cease-and-desist order:

Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!" But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 2:9-10)

The apostle Paul, despite his cautions to Timothy, realized at one point that if he did not challenge the foolish challenges of his enemies (concerning his apostolic authority and methods), naïve members of the Corinthian congregation might believe them. His lengthy answer spans II Corinthians 11 and 12. Notice, however, II Corinthians 12:11-13:

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Obviously, Paul felt extremely uncomfortable about answering these allegations, as is evidenced by his self-effacing reference to himself as a fool, but he also realized that his silence would have tacitly endorsed the charges. Likewise, our Savior, when confronted about His identity and credentials,

knew the timing was right to put the gainsaying Pharisees in their place:

Then the Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, 'If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.' Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make Yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, 'I do not know Him,' I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:52-58)

As one minister said, "If you are going to preach a warning message, you had better be mindful of your exit strategies, or be prepared to die on that hill of battle." There certainly are times when diplomacy fails and silence is no longer appropriate. Our society is replete with foolish teachings, ideas, theories, and misconceptions—both secular and religious—and under the right circumstances, they should be confronted and shown to be false, lest they be accepted as factual.

For instance, on a recent radio talk show an astute listener observed that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., a guest, had concocted a bogus definition of *fascism*, referring to it as "corporate control of government," attributing this spurious definition to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which says nothing of the sort. In another example, during a recent presidential debate, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, after being questioned about his views on Creation versus evolution, gave a well thought-out, reasoned, and impassioned defense of the Creationist position, effectively deflating the surreptitious anti-God position.

As maturing Christians, we must learn to discern when it is proper to answer a fool *according to* his folly (in the manner his foolishness deserves), and when it is a bad idea to answer a fool according to his *folly* (lowering ourselves to his undignified level). The right exercise of God's Spirit in us, which Paul calls "the mind of Christ" (I Corinthians 2:16), provides the potential to have and use this ability.

—David F. Maas

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them at services but do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perceiving that some of them are on the verge of losing their salvation, he says, "Shame on you!"

The world's influences are, for the most part, subtle rather than overt. Being familiar to human nature, we find them easy to fall into or return to. What is the problem with the world? Its ruler, Satan, has designed it to lead people to live only for themselves. Therefore, we must fight and resist its attraction, which influences our hearts, because so much is at stake!

Be Alert and Wary of Satan and His Cohorts

What about the Devil? Satan is a formidable enemy, to be sure, but in a personal sense, he is not as directly dangerous to us as the other two. The chances of him confronting us individually are small in comparison to the influences of our ever-present hearts and the world in which we conduct our lives. Certainly, as our Adversary, he "walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:8), but unlike God, he is not omniscient. While he can be only at one place at one time, he has many assistants.

We are far more likely to be confronted by one of his demon assistants than the Adversary himself, which is bad enough. However, he and his demons have constructed attitudes, institutions, systems, and entertainments into the course of this world, which they effectively use against us, even when they are absent from the scene. Most of their evil influence comes from the system.

We need to remember, though, that God has put a wall of protection around us, so demons can go only so far in their attempts to corrupt us and destroy our loyalty to God and His truth (Job 1:6-10). Their major responsibility before God at this time appears to be to provide tests for us to meet and overcome, in the same way God used Satan to test Job and to tempt Christ (Matthew 4; Luke 4). In this respect, they play a large role in helping us to recognize evil.

God gives us advice regarding them in I Peter 5:8-9: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world." In essence, His advice is, "Be self-controlled, be alert, and resist him!" Peter's first term, "be sober," urges us not to let fear of him fluster us to the point that we cannot think clearly. The second term, "be vigilant," charges us to be fully awake, to set ourselves in a state of watchfulness and readiness. The third term, "resist him," is a command not to turn and run but to stand firm.

This instruction lets us know that Satan is not all-powerful. With the protections God provides, including

His continuous presence and alert regard for his children, Satan can be beaten. The same Jesus who has already defeated Satan is on His throne, overseeing our well-being. His protection is not something we flaunt, but is power we can rely on.

James 4:7 adds additional advice: "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Again, the charge is to resist, but it is directly coupled with submission to God. Submission is the voluntarily act of placing oneself under the authority of another to show respect and give obedience. If we submit to God, Satan will flee.

Ephesians 6:11 parallels the other two instructions. "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." "Stand against" is yet another way of saying "resist him." "Stand" in the Greek indicates that one must hold fast a critical position as an army must do in warfare. However, it is not a passive term, describing something like an unmoving brick wall, but an aggressive, attacking term. In other words, we are to hold the ground we have already gained by going forward.

How, then, do we resist? How do we hold our ground by going on the offensive? We must return in thought to I Peter 5:9, where the first phrase is better translated as, "Resist him, standing firm [or solid] in the faith." Putting this into military terms, a soldier would be likely commanded, "Do not surrender! Do not give up any ground! Do not back down! Move forward with all you've got! Reinforcements are right behind you."

We have the God-backed promise that Satan will flee! Who can resist God's will? The key words here are "standing firm" and "faith." "Standing firm" or "solid" is used in the sense of "unmovable." When linked with faith in practical terms, it means we are absolutely sure or immovably convicted in the face of a strong test.

Overall, the apostles' instruction suggests that what we experience vis-à-vis Satan is common to this way of life. Their advice does not say that he will flee immediately, but flee he will. As used here, "faith" can be understood as either a personal trust in God or confidence in Christian doctrine, as either one fits the context. Ultimately, if we use our relationship with God properly, the confidence in Christian doctrine becomes trust in God Himself.

Ephesians 6:12-17 makes especially clear that we are involved in a war, a spiritual war, and thus our weaponry must also be spiritual.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done

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all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The Christian must tend to his weapons, as every soldier in warfare must, for not only is his life on the line but also the lives of his buddies, as he is their keeper too. Without serviceable weapons, the battle is often lost even before it begins. It is a terrifying thought to imagine oneself on a battlefield with nothing in hand to fight the enemy.

The Bible makes it clear that God has willed that this warfare is an absolute necessity for the development and preparation of His children to live in His Family Kingdom. It cannot be avoided; we cannot remain neutral. In one sense, we really have no choice. We must either fight or be lost.

Seeking God Is the Christian's Fight

Recall that David's psalms show that the heart and core of his confidence was his trust in God and His powers. It was not that David was never fearful while under threat, but that he stood firm. Standing firm in faith provides the solid foundation from which to fight this war.

The antagonism between good and evil, right and wrong, wisdom and foolishness, love and hate, sacrifice and self-indulgence, etc., creates choices, tests that we must take, for God to have a clear means of judging us and for godly character and attitudes to become ingrained in our way of living.

Frequently, what we really fear is the sacrifice required to make the right choice. Sacrificing to serve God and fellowman demands a payment we, in many cases, are loath to make. We need the gifts of God's Spirit to move us along the correct course. Jesus tells us in Matthew 7:11 that our Father in heaven is very willing to give good gifts that enable us to carry out our responsibilities to Him.

Our earthly spiritual father, Abraham, had an abiding faith in the vision that motivated him. The Faith Chapter says that he looked forward to "a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). His faith was so strong that, to please God, he was willing to sacrifice Isaac, the one he loved more than anyone else (verses 17-19). Undoubtedly, he had made many other sacrifices leading to that great test. His sacrifices began when God called him and told him to leave his homeland. He embarked on a new way of

life, not even knowing where he was headed.

He became God's friend and the father of the faithful, setting us an outstanding example. If there is one quality that Abraham and others of the faithful had that gives them an edge, it is that they knew God. Their conception of Him and their vision of His purpose were big and sharp enough for them to give them staunch trust and therefore their undivided, devoted loyalty in submission to Him.

To sharpen one's vision of God is the very reason J.B. Phillips wrote his book, *Your God Is Too Small*. He believed that a major reason why Christians are so insipid about Christianity is that they do not have a conception of God great enough to motivate them to give their lives wholeheartedly in His service. This is the same basic reason that A.W. Tozer concluded that God Himself is the church's greatest single problem.

Consider the tremendous number of conceptions people have about God's character and purpose! This might discourage some, but for those truly seeking truth, it should spur them on to find the truth about Him. This is why Christians are absolutely required to seek God *after* they are already converted. It can be said that the seeking of God *is* the Christian's battle on his course to the Kingdom of God.

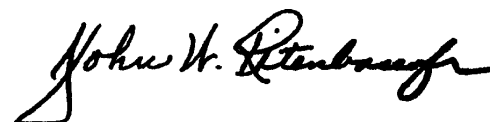
If one wholeheartedly and consistently seeks God, it will result in:

- an increasingly solid base of faith from which to work;
- a sacrificial patriotism for the Kingdom of God;
- a loving devotion and loyalty to God Himself, for the more intimately a person knows Him, the greater his admiration for God becomes;
- a stronger sense of loving duty to one's fellow soldiers, unifying him into a tight, serving fellowship.

Seeking God is the exercise whose fruit provides the strengths we need to assure our being transformed into Christ's image and our entrance into God's Kingdom. The major parts of this exercise are battling against the flesh, which is hostile to God and His way of life; the world, which attempts to lure us away; and the Devil, who wants to destroy us outright.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

In Christian love,



Following the Bean

Sometimes, watching world events can be a little like a street-corner shell game. We carefully watch where the bean is placed under one of the shells, and we try to follow it as the dealer, or “operator” as he is known, rapidly slides the shells around the table in a dizzying, chaotic course. Yet, somewhere along the line, our eyes become distracted, and we lose the bean in the confusing flurry of hand movements. Where the bean is becomes a mere guess.

Right now, and for the past several years, the bean has been passed among the shells labeled “Iraq,” “Iran,” and “Al Qaeda.” We have watched news pour out of the Middle East in an almost incessant stream of bombings, attacks, retaliations, offensives, captures, initiatives, talks, and a host of other significant and trivial events. They are enough to make one’s head swim! Where is the bean, the nugget of knowledge that will indicate where world news and prophecy begin to align?

In actuality, the news game is worse than the shell game because the former contains far more than three shells. Obviously, there is an “America” shell, a “Russia” shell, a “China” shell, a “Japan” shell, a “Germany” shell, a “Vatican” shell, a “U.N.” shell, an “Israel” shell, a “Palestine” shell, an “Arab” shell, an “environmentalist” shell, an “IMF” shell, an “NGO” shell, a “rogue regime” shell, and a bucketful of others. Which ones do we follow? We need more than a scorecard to keep track of them all as they converge, crisscross, scatter in various directions, change speeds, and generally follow no rational pattern. We fear that if we look away for more than a few seconds, we might miss something important and lose the bean.

The game intensifies even further because we have to watch more than just a little table. Though they are rapidly losing market share, newspapers—especially giants like *The New York Times*—still lay out the playing field. Television and radio news outlets pick up the newspaper headlines and run brief stories based on what the print editors deem to be newsworthy. Internet news sites give the headlines their due, but because of the web’s nature, they can also feature stories that hit the cutting room floor at the *Times*. Beyond this, bloggers have the ability to dig even deeper still, supplying the curious surfer with minute details—and opinions—on just about any news event in the world. Also to be considered are news magazines, governmental and corporate analyses, foundation studies, and of course, private-party knowledge. The amount of available information is staggering.

Perhaps the most worrying feature of the news game is that the bean may not actually be under *any* of the shells on the table. In other words, there is always the nagging fear that events are happening “under the radar”—and so far out of sight that very few people even become aware of their significance. Because of this worry, a whole cottage indus-

try has sprung up around the edges of the news business, the shadowy realm of conspiracy theories. Here, facts mingle with suppositions and distrust of institutions in an uneasy alliance. Could the bean be hiding out of the mainstream?

One element in the shell game remains to be considered: the operator. In reality, the shell game is a confidence trick, not a fair game of chance. A skilled operator can shift the bean in and out of any shell he desires, and the player will never be the wiser. On the mean streets of New York and other metropolises where this game is common, the operator often works with a pickpocket, further swindling distracted players and spectators. In the end, the shell game is a ruse, a distraction, to carry on other nefarious purposes.

Thus, we must ask the question, how profitable is watching current events in a world awash with information? Is it vital to our salvation, or does it distract us from more important spiritual activities? Does it keep us keyed in on what is really happening in the world, or are we being suckered by Satanic sleight-of-hand? Can we be ready for Christ’s return if we are not riveted to the news ticker?

Jesus warns in Luke 21:34-36:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and the Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.

It is plain that He commands us to watch, but watch what? He does not say, “Watch world events.” We have traditionally interpreted verse 36 to mean that, but the context only tells us to be observant, aware, on guard, alert, on duty. What we focus on is up to us, but Jesus’ introduction to His command to watch is heavily weighted toward “watch your step” rather than “watch world events.”

The parallel passage in Matthew 24:36-51 gives equal time to being aware of conditions around us and of our behavior toward others. This argues that we take a more balanced approach to following the news bean. Becoming fixated on the intricacies of world news will lead to neglect elsewhere in our lives, and ironically, too often it is our relationship with God that suffers. If fact, we must give priority to prayer, study, overcoming, and living God’s way of life, and if we do, God will be sure to reveal the bean’s location to His saints when the time comes (Amos 3:7).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

WORLDWATCH

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Leper (Part One)

The Bible shows Christ healing people of leprosy twice during His ministry. The first case, in which a single man is healed, appears in Matthew 8:2-4; Mark 1:40-45; and Luke 5:12-16. The three parallel accounts provide a more complete witness by adding valuable details. The second healing of lepers, involving ten men, is found only in Luke 17:12-19.

Throughout history, few diseases have been as dreaded as the horrible affliction known as leprosy. It was so common and severe among ancient peoples that God gave Moses extensive instructions to deal with it (Leviticus 13 and 14). Biblically, leprosy refers to several skin diseases and even some kinds of fungus, such as those found in the walls of houses and in clothing. The leprosy that Christ healed was similar to what is today called Hansen's Disease, a detestable infection that can greatly disfigure and destroy the human body. Though not as contagious as scarlet fever, it can still be transmitted through an infected person's secretions. Dr. Richard H. Pousma, a missionary in Asia and a hospital superintendent in New Mexico, explains:

Leprosy was greatly feared by the Israelites, not only because of the physical damage done by the disease, but also because of the strict isolation laws applying to leprosy, making patients feel like feared outcasts of society. . . . Leprosy [in the Bible] appears in two principle forms. The first, and by far the more dangerous, is called *lepromatous*; and the other, more benign type is designated *tuberculoid*. Both start with discoloration of a patch of skin. . . . In the lepromatous type of leprosy, the patch may spread widely in all directions. Portions of the eyebrows may disappear. Spongy, tumor-like swellings grow on the face and body. The disease becomes systemic and involves the internal organs as well as the skin. Marked deformity of the hands and feet occur when the tissues between the bones deteriorate and disappear. . . . Untreated cases may be sick with lepromatous leprosy from ten to twenty years, death occurring from the disease itself. . . . The tuberculoid type is less severe. . . . [It] tends to be limited and even untreated cases heal completely in from one to three years. (*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, "Leprosy.")

In biblical times, it was almost universally believed that only God could heal. Even the king of Israel, to whom the king of Syria sent his general, Naaman, for healing, remarks, "Am I God, to kill and make alive, that this man sends a man to me to heal him of his leprosy?" (II Kings 5:7). The prophet Elisha intervenes, suggesting how Naaman could be healed. The belief that only God could heal leprosy is key to Christ's use of this miracle to prove who He was. Beyond that, in His healing of the leper are timeless spiritual truths applicable to our lives today.

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1. What can we learn personally from leprosy in Scripture?

COMMENT: Leprosy vividly illustrates sin and its fruits. The disease's effects on the body demonstrate the effects of sin on the mind. Leprosy represents God's view of sin, as detestable, deforming, and unclean. Both leprosy and sin begin small then grow relentlessly until they infect the whole person. They also both cause heartrending social problems, as the quarantine laws suggest. Families are often split. Lepers suffer both the disease and ostracism from society. In the end, they both destroy their victims' lives.

Luke the physician, in describing the man as "full" of the dreadful disease (Luke 5:12), implies that he was about to die. In this advanced stage of leprosy, he was living apart from other people. According to Leviticus 13:45, he had to wear a cloth over his mouth and cry, "Unclean, unclean."

In this situation, as in others, Christ performs a miracle in which there can be no doubt that God alone healed him. God's healing power is most obviously seen when He provides deliverance in a "hopeless" situation. He often works this way with us, allowing trials to become increasingly worse before He works His will. Though He seems deaf to our prayers as the situation deteriorates, He may simply be letting the situation progress so that we have no doubt about who has

come to our aid and whose power solved the crisis. In persevering, we grow spiritually, and He receives greater glory.

2. What national lesson can we learn from leprosy in Scripture?

COMMENT: The condition of the leper parallels the spiritual condition of today's sinful society, which is reminiscent of ancient Israel as Isaiah the prophet describes it in Isaiah 1:6-7:

From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire; strangers devour your land in your presence; and it is desolate. . . .

America today wallows in immorality and deals treacherously with other nations, while thumbing its nose at the merciful God who has given it abundant blessings. Like men, nations reap what they sow (Galatians 6:7). We have, and still are, sowing curses, and we are beginning to suffer loss—of freedoms, sovereignty, land, culture, and many other long-cherished things. The loathsome signs that this country is spiritually sick are easily seen. It is leprous!

—Martin G. Collins