

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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SETTING
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It is not unusual for people to set goals and develop plans for achieving physical success. Why do we not do the same to make spiritual progress? By applying the same principles, we can begin to overcome our faults and grow in godly character.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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DESIGN EDITOR

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

MARK BAKER

TED E. BOWLING

JOHN F. BULHAROWSKI

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CARL CHILDS

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BRIAN WULF

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contact

UNITED STATES: P.O. Box 471846, Charlotte, NC 28247-1846 U.S.A.
803.802.7075 / 803.802.7089 FAX

CANADA: Box 30188, Saanich Centre Postal Outlet, Victoria, BC V8X 5E1 Canada

CARIBBEAN: P.O. Box 4870, Tunapuna, Trinidad and Tobago

FRANCE: Hameau Bourg L'Abbe, La Mailleraye sur Seine, 76940 France

THE PHILIPPINES: No. 13 Mt. Daho, Amityville, Rodriguez, Rizal 1860 The Philippines

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PENTECOST REVISITED

PART TWO: JOSHUA 5

In the last issue, we again broached the subject of the count to Pentecost, emphasizing the fact that God's instructions regarding the count should be applied consistently every year no matter when Passover might fall.

Scripture contains no alternative counting method when Passover occurs on a weekly Sabbath, so we are, in effect, adding to God's Word when we alter the count in these infrequent years. This article will focus primarily on Joshua 5, the historical incident that many use to say that the count should be modified when a Sabbath Passover occurs.

That Israel was a holy nation is far more important than is generally realized, and it affects our understanding of wavesheaf requirements. As a prelude to better understanding and properly appreciating many aspects of waving the sheaf, it is helpful to know that God specifically designated Israel a sanctified people. He set the entire nation apart as distinctive from the rest of the world's nations. As such, He gave them responsibilities to perform before the rest of the world as a testimony of their obedient service to God.

Deuteronomy 7:6 expresses this beautifully: "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."

God's declaration of certain things as "clean" and others as "unclean" helped to define this holiness to them. Some things declared unclean could not even be touched without making a person ceremonially defiled until he performed the prescribed rituals. Among the things declared polluted or unclean were the Gentiles, whose uncleanness was not inherent but lay in their idolatry: They did not worship the God of Creation

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who set the Israelites apart. As such, even a marriage between an Israelite and a Gentile was forbidden except within very narrow parameters.

The ceremonial aspects of the Israelites' responsibilities are quite detailed, and God expected them to be followed exactly as instructed because each detail fits precisely within His purposes for His relationship with His sanctified people. Are we wiser than He is? God is not the author of meaningless regulations. Waving the sheaf of grain is one of these ceremonial duties, containing explicit instructions with spiritual ramifications.

JOSHUA 4 AND 5

The following quotation is from the *Pentecost Study Material*, assembled by Dr. Charles V. Dorothy during and following the 1974 study by the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), which provided the paper to its ministry:

Some brethren are concerned over the alleged "arbitrary" decision, especially since Joshua 5:10-11 seems to show the Israelites counted that Pentecost from Sunday, the High Day within Unleavened Bread. More study is needed and more is being done. (p. 73; emphasis his)

It appears that Dr. Dorothy was sensitive to some people's skepticism, otherwise why did he emphasize "seems"? Did he draw attention to the word because he felt that the doctrinal committee was banking on something vague, assuming some points, and reaching a conclusion it could not fully justify?

Joshua 5 is where the majority of the disagreement begins. Joshua 4:19 records that the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River on the tenth day of the first month. Joshua 5:1-9 leads a reader to conclude that the Israelite males were probably circumcised beginning on the eleventh day. But even this may be an assumption because Joshua 5:10-11 does not say that Israel kept Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. In other words, it could have been lawfully kept in the second month (Numbers 9), although this scenario is less likely.

At no time or place in Scripture does God designate what month or day of the week this date fell upon that year. In fact, researchers are unable to give an absolute answer even to what *year* Israel entered the land. We always end up with calculated guesses. Should we build an important spiritual doctrine on a guess?

It is not this article's purpose to prove whether the Wavesheaf offering took place in the first or second month, only that Joshua 5 does not prove that the Israelites offered one at all. If they did not make one, it absolutely destroys the assumptions of a first day of Unleavened

Bread Wavesheaf ceremony, since Joshua 5:10-11 is the source used to "support" this deviation.

So where is the authority from God's Word that Israel's observance of Passover that year was on a weekly Sabbath and that Wavesheaf Day was the next day, a Sunday, the first day of Unleavened Bread, a high-holy-day Sabbath? What positively, absolutely, biblically affirmed events are these conclusions based upon?

Notice that, thus far, the chapter makes:

1. No mention of an altar.
2. No mention of a priest.
3. No mention of the offerings God commanded to accompany the waving of the sheaf (Leviticus 23:12-13).
4. No mention whatever of a harvest.
5. No mention of the waving of the sheaf.

Interestingly, God mentions the circumcisions (which had not been performed during the wilderness journey), yet He makes no mention of what would have been the first altar, first sacrificial offerings, and first formal service in the Promised Land. It would also have been the first waving of the sheaf in the land.

However, Joshua 5:11 does say, "They ate the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread and parched grain, on the very same day." There is nothing wrong with this statement unless one claims that the Israelites had to wave Canaanite-grown grain before God for acceptance before they could eat it. Do the ceremonial instructions give them permission to do this? Do the wavesheaf instructions require that they do this?

The answer to both questions is "No." In fact, such a wavesheaf is strictly forbidden. Exodus 23:16 says this in direct reference to Pentecost: "The Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field" (emphasis ours throughout). The offering had to be made of something the Israelites had sown by their own labors! Pentecost ends the harvest begun on Wavesheaf Day. Therefore, the same "you have sown" qualification applies to Wavesheaf Day as to Pentecost.

The Israelites had surely labored in harvesting grain in Canaan, but they had not sown what they harvested upon entering the land. It was an incomplete production and therefore not qualified. God could not accept such an offering because it did not meet the qualifications He had laid down for a holy people.

For God to accept such an offering would break the spiritual principle Paul mentions in I Corinthians 3:9: "We are laborers together with God." The Israelites were not part of the cycle of cooperation of purpose between them and God in the production of this particular harvest. It was therefore unacceptable for use as the wavesheaf.

"NOR FROM A FOREIGNER'S HAND"

Furthermore, in Leviticus 22:18-25, just before the chapter containing the names and dates of all of God's festivals, He gives the following instruction:

Whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers in Israel, who offers his sacrifice for any of his vows or for any of his freewill offering, which they offer to the LORD as a burnt offering—you shall offer of your own free will a male without blemish from the cattle, from the sheep, or from the goats. Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it shall not be acceptable on your behalf. And whoever offers a sacrifice of a peace offering to the LORD, to fulfill his vow, or a freewill offering from the cattle or the sheep, it must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it. Those that are blind or broken or maimed, or have an ulcer or eczema or scabs, you shall not offer to the LORD, nor make an offering by fire of them on the altar to the LORD. Either a bull or a lamb that has any limb too long or too short you may offer as a freewill offering, but for a vow it shall not be accepted. You shall not offer to the LORD what is bruised or crushed, or torn or cut; nor shall you make any offering of them in your land. *Nor from a foreigner's hand* shall you offer any of these as the bread of your God, because their corruption is in them, and defects are in them. They shall not be accepted on your behalf.

Some claim that, since these specific instructions are given in reference to animals offered to God, the principle of giving one's best to the Master does not apply to vegetable or grain offerings! Does that mean we may give God any old vegetation we happen to have lying around? As living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2), are we free to give God any old thing, and He must accept it or else? Does He not deserve the best we have?

A holy people must give holy offerings! A holy offering is one given according to the details that God lays down. Jesus gives a practical application of this principle in Matthew 5:23-24: "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

He is essentially saying, "First things first." If a reconciliation does not take place, God has no obligation to accept the offering. It has been made based on a corrupt relationship with a brother, making the offering unacceptable. Likewise, God has no obligation to accept a defective, corrupted animal or unqualified grain offered before Him.

Furthermore, the principle of holiness comes to the fore in an additional way, for God plainly stipulates in Leviticus 22:25 that nothing is to be offered to Him from a foreigner's hand because the foreigner's corruption is in them. The uncleanness from the foreigner's idolatries is in the thing offered. The foreigner is not a holy, sanctified, or set-apart person.

In the case of Joshua 5, the Israelites clearly would have had to offer produce from the foreigner's hand—if they offered anything, which they did not—because that was all they would have had to offer. Having just come from the wilderness, they had no harvest of a crop they had sown, as Exodus 23:16 demands.

"PREPARE PROVISIONS"

In Joshua 1:11, just before crossing the Jordan into Canaan, Joshua commands the Israelites, "Prepare provisions for yourselves, for within three days you will cross over this Jordan, to go in to possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess." Where did the Israelites obtain these provisions? It could not have been manna because manna could not be stored. There is only one possibility: The Israelites were already gathering food, including grains (remember, it was the spring harvest season), in the area in which they were camped. This leads to the inescapable conclusion that the Israelites were no longer completely dependent on manna.

This is pertinent because Joshua 5:11 says, "And they ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread, and parched grain on the very same day." If this took place on the fifteenth day of the first month, as is most likely, it was a high-holy-day Sabbath, so no manna would have fallen that day.

They did not go hungry because they had the produce of the land (at the very least the provisions of Joshua 1:11) to eat. They could eat it without restriction because it was produce that Gentiles had sown. If they had had to wait until the wavesheaf ceremony had occurred before they could harvest (Leviticus 23:14), thresh, winnow, and grind the grain into flour, then bake unleavened bread or parch the grain "the very same day," they really would have been pushing any Sabbath liberty (Exodus 16:23-24; 12:16)! Instead, their food preparation had been completed before the holy day arrived because they were not required to wait for a wavesheaf ceremony!

It is a well-known historical fact that, despite many differences among their various sects over when the sheaf was to be waved, no Jewish group throughout history ever resorted to observing Wavesheaf Day on any Sabbath. They always kept it on a common workday because the labor of harvesting began immediately after the sheaf was waved.

Consider yet another factor drawn from the wavesheaf

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symbolism: Does not the sheaf above all else represent the true First of the Firstfruits—Jesus Christ? Our Savior was an Israelite, from the tribe of Judah. The Most Holy of all men was born into the holy people (John 1:11). Can grain from a Gentile source—an unclean source in the symbolism—represent this greatest and purest of all Israelites, especially so since it typifies Him as just resurrected?

DEUTERONOMY 12

Deuteronomy 12 is important in clarifying why no altar, priests, wavesheaf, or sacrificial offering appears in Joshua 5:10-11:

These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things. But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes—for as yet you *have not come to the rest and the inheritance* which the LORD your God is giving you. But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and *He give you rest from all your enemies* round about, so that you dwell in safety, *then* there will be the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. *There* you shall bring all that I command you: *your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice offerings* which you vow to the LORD. And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and

female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates, since he has no portion nor inheritance with you. *Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place you see;* but in the place which the LORD chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you. (Deuteronomy 12:1-14)

The WCG's *Pentecost Study Paper* refers to Deuteronomy 12 five times, each time *only* to reference certain words on how to count to Pentecost. Not even one time does it refer to what Deuteronomy 12 is actually saying in regard to a significant subject pertinent to Joshua 5:10-11.

Moses wrote Deuteronomy in the last months before Israel entered the Promised Land. The book is a prelude to renewing the covenant between God and Israel and what would immediately follow. As such, when Israel entered the Land, some of the worship patterns followed in the wilderness were to undergo a radical change.

Moses divided Deuteronomy into at least four sections. The first section serves to remind Israel of the many things God had done for Israel to bring them to where they were just about ready to inherit the land. The second section, beginning in chapter 12, contains instructions on the response God expected from the Israelites once they entered the land. It calls for a number of changes in their worship of Him.

In verses 1-4, He makes it abundantly clear that He would not tolerate even a shadow of syncretic mixing with the gods and religions of the people of the land. Regardless of location, every place where the Canaanites worshipped was to be utterly destroyed, and every idol of stone or wood smashed and/or burned to ashes. They were even to eradicate the names of those places!

The imagery is of God storming into the land as a conquering General who will brook no interference from the conquered people. He shows His disdain for everything they hold dear and important in their worship of the gods they admire and are devoted to. By doing so, He also shows the Israelites the weaknesses of Canaanite gods. They cannot protect the Canaanites.

CHANGE IN WORSHIP

Verse 5 begins to relate instructions for one of the more radical changes involved in Israel's worship of God. Once in the land, they would no longer be permitted to worship by erecting an altar and offering sacrifices at any place, except as God Himself appointed. No Israelite was free to choose for himself where worship

(continued on page 16)

PROPHECY'S PLACE

As the preacher mounts the stage to present his sermon, the faces of church members in the audience reflect their speculations about the topic he will give.

Most of the children, to be sure, just hope that, whatever he preaches on, it will be short. Some of the adults agree. Others are wary, wondering if he will “give it” to some group of sinners—or, God forbid, to them. Perhaps, some seem to be thinking, he will at least talk about something interesting.

Clearing his throat, the minister begins with some introductory comments about his recent visit to a church in a foreign country, and he keys in on the fine fellowship that he and his wife experienced among the members there. A few in the crowd begin to wonder if the sermon will cover Christian fellowship and unity, and they sigh, recalling that it *had* been a while since they had heard a message on those things. However, a minute later it becomes clear that his comments were, in fact, simply expressing his gratitude for the distant church’s warm welcome.

He pauses, glancing at his notes, then launches into a description of Imperial Rome: the extent of the Empire, the major emperors, the importance of the legions and the Praetorian Guard, and some of the persecutions Rome instigated against Christians. Mentally, several listeners exclaim, “Oh, no! He’s giving us a history lecture. What a snore!” They zone out and begin closely examining the maps in the back of their Bibles.

However, his “history lecture” is indeed necessary introductory material, he feels, for his main topic. He is merely laying the groundwork for

something far more exciting, and those in his audience who have stuck with him are soon rewarded. He says, “While I realize that these historical events make for dry listening, they help to provide types for the actions of the coming Beast.”

Immediately, every ear in the building is straining for his next words. At least half the congregation sits up straighter. “Types! The Beast! Prophecy! He’s going to speak on prophecy! What a beautiful day!”

This scenario may—or may not—be an exaggeration of what happens nearly every week at church services. Preachers realize that not every sermon they give will have all of the members of the audience hanging on their every word, and in truth, unless they are truly gifted speakers, their sermons have a good chance of falling on many uninterested ears. Even so, every preacher knows that, if he wants to get a head start in holding an audience’s attention, all he needs to do is to speak on prophecy.

Bible students know that Scripture is about thirty percent prophecy, and it is a good rule of thumb that preachers should give prophecy sermons at most about one-third of the time. In most ministries, prophecy topics are given far less frequently and for good reason: Doctrine and Christian living sermons are where the rubber meets the road, as it were; they are far more essential to everyday life.

PROPHECY IS COOL

Some people, though, seem to hold that most of the Bible is prophecy, and that opinion, frankly, is a shame. While they would admit that the Bible contains more than prophecy, they virtually ignore the other two-thirds of the Book, the parts containing history and instruction.

Biblical history, of course, gets short shrift from most, who equate it with old Mrs. Jones' tenth-grade history class, a dull collection of names and dates and boring lectures on various monarchs, wars, and treaties. Doctrine is equally tedious, bringing up visions of long and involved passages in dusty commentaries written by long-dead theologians, intricate studies of unpronounceable words in ancient languages, and saccharine devotional passages with little application in the real world.

Prophecy, though, is cool. Its imagery and symbolism are fascinating with its strange beasts, lurid women, armies and battles, plagues and destruction, conquering kings, and even a red dragon. It is infused with a sense of mystery and expectation. There are enigmatic numbers to ponder, riddles to solve, and word plays to decipher. Moreover, many prophecy buffs believe that the preponderance of the Bible's predictions will come about soon, which may well be true, heightening the excitement.

For evangelists, prophecy makes a wonderful hook to get people interested in God's Word. For years, the Worldwide Church of God's most-requested literature had prophetic themes: "The U.S. and Britain in Prophecy," "The Book of Revelation Unveiled at Last," "Who Is the Beast?" and many other such booklets. First-timers hearing the radio broadcast or seeing *The World Tomorrow* television program most often requested these booklets. The program itself frequently concentrated on prophetic subjects.

As a hook, prophecy works well, but as a steady staple in our spiritual diet, it eventually produces deficiencies in spiritual health. Yes, we should know the Bible's prophecies. Yes, we should be watching world events. Yes, we should be contemplating how current events might fit the Bible's scenarios. However, we should do none of these things at the expense of studying and applying doctrine and Christian living.

THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY

What is the purpose of prophecy? Ultimately, it is to glorify God. Through prophecy, we can see God at work in His plan over millennia, bringing His purpose to pass with stunning precision in detail and timing. For instance, the Old Testament contains an estimated three hundred prophetic references to the Messiah that Jesus Christ fulfilled in His first coming. These references range

from major proofs like His virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35) to minor details like His burial in a rich man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:57-60). Only Almighty God could hone events to such a fine edge; He alone has the sovereignty to control events so minutely.

In the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, we see proof of God's existence and power (Isaiah 40:12-29). During his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah mocks Baal and his minions for their inability to do anything, let alone consume a sacrifice (I Kings 18:20-29). Similarly, what pagan god has ever foretold anything of consequence? Yet, the God of Israel—the great God of the universe—makes Himself known by speaking a word of prophecy and bringing it to pass hundreds or thousands of years later.

For example, through Jacob, God predicts that the descendants of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, would become two of the world's dominating peoples. "[Manasseh] also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother [Ephraim] shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations" (Genesis 48:19). About 3,300 years later, the brother nations of America and Britain rose to world prominence as one great nation (America) and a worldwide commonwealth of nations (Britain). Through such divine feats of prescience and power, God declares Himself to the entire world, though most regrettably turn a willfully blind eye (see Romans 1:18-21).

Prophecy also exhibits for all to see that God is sovereign in the affairs of men (Daniel 4:17). He places rulers in their positions (Romans 13:1), moving history along at His pace toward His ends. When translated correctly, Hebrews 11:3 declares that the various ages of this world's history were fashioned according to God's direction. Thus, it is no proud boast but the unvarnished truth when God proclaims in Isaiah 55:11, "My word . . . shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

Prophecy, then, is a proof of God, His power, His plan, and His rulership. When we see that God speaks and His prediction happens just as He says it will, our faith and hope are given a firm basis. If He predicts disaster because of sin, and it happens exactly as forecast, we know beyond a doubt that He curses disobedience, spurring us to obey Him in the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 14:26-27; 16:6; 23:17-18). Conversely, when He blesses for obedience, showing He is pleased, we respond in love and gratitude, knowing He is always true to His Word (Deuteronomy 30:16; Psalm 31:23).

This, perhaps, is the true aim of prophecy: as a means to produce faith, hope, and love in God's people. Even prophecy is employed in producing holy, righteous character in His elect!

THE WATCHMAN'S ROLE

Does the Bible contain prophecy so that we can know what is going to happen as the world progresses toward the return of Jesus Christ? Certainly, God assures us in Amos 3:7, “Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets,” but He will not do this to the degree that most people believe. What is written in Amos does not mean that we will have a complete or precise foreknowledge of events.

In His explanation of Ezekiel’s role as a prophet, God informs the man that he was to be a watchman for the people (see Ezekiel 33:1-7). Of what use is a watchman if the enemy’s advance and all the pertinent details of his attack are already known? Anciently, a watchman would stand in a high place, upon a wall or a tower, and scan the horizon for enemies. When he saw them approaching, he was responsible for shouting a warning to the unsuspecting citizens that danger was near and that they needed to prepare for the onslaught. However, he did not know exact details—only what he could discern from his vantage point.

Once war begins, the most precious commodity is precise and timely information, and it is almost never transmitted in time to those who need it most. The best scenario a leader can ask for is to know as far in advance as possible that his enemy is on the march against him, for this gives him time to make the preparations necessary to secure his people and possessions, assemble his forces, and meet the enemy on the battlefield of his choosing. An excellent watchman just might give him the advance warning he needs.

However, this presupposes a *physical* attack. A continued reading of Ezekiel 33 clarifies that the prophet was not warning about a physical enemy but a spiritual one. Ezekiel’s job was to warn the wicked in Israel to turn “from his way” (verses 8-11). His job as watchman was spiritual in nature! He was to warn against sinful lifestyles, against iniquity and wickedness, and to implore them to repent and live righteously. A companion passage in Ezekiel 3:16-21 makes this plain.

In other words, his role as prophet/watchman—just as a Christian minister’s job is today—was heavily weighted toward preaching and teaching God’s way of righteousness. It was essentially, like the gospel of the Kingdom of God, a warning message of repentance and an exhortation to growth in faith and obedience to holiness. In this regard, the prophetic hints about future events were, as they are to us, prods to motivate change before the coming, dreadful Day of the Lord.

“THEN YOU SHALL KNOW”

In Matthew 24:36, Jesus Himself warns us, “But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of

heaven, but My Father only.” Just a few verses later, He tells His disciples, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming *at an hour when you do not expect*” (verse 44, emphasis ours throughout). This is a massive hint that our understanding of biblical prophecy—as much as it has expanded over the last few decades—will still not be enough to remove the element of surprise from Christ’s return!

Paul also warns us in I Corinthians 13:9, 12, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly.” This principle suggests that we will not know for certain how things will work out as the end approaches. We understand in part, meaning we have a vague-to-rough idea of the course of events because of our insight into God’s plan, but we cannot honestly be dogmatic about any speculative scenarios we devise. Every interpretation of end-time biblical prophecy should be accompanied with a proviso such as, “This is how things seem to be headed from what we understand right now.”

The prophet Ezekiel, again, supplies us with a principle of prophetic interpretation that we would do well to heed. More than forty-five times, God uses the phrase “then you shall know” or “then they shall know” to conclude a prophecy or a section of one in the book of Ezekiel. In the vast majority of instances, it is “then you [or they] shall know that I am the LORD,” indicating that the prophecies are intended to reveal the true God and His work in the affairs of men.

However, the pertinent point for us is that this more complete understanding occurs *after* the prophecy is fulfilled: “*then you shall know.*” Until the prophecy happens in history, we are either, at best, completely in the dark or at least uncertain of details of its fulfillment. How all the variables come together and occur at the precise time is among the miracles of God’s works that we do not—cannot—truly comprehend. Complete foreknowledge is a prerogative that God reserves to Himself for His own multifaceted purposes.

During the Last Supper, Jesus echoes this principle in His warning to His disciples regarding His betrayer: “I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.’ Now I tell you before it comes, that *when it does come to pass*, you may believe that I am He” (John 13:18-19). Even after He gave the sop to Judas, John notes that “no one at the table knew for what reason He had said [‘What you do, do quickly’] to him” (verse 27-28). Only later, after instruction and reflection, did they understand how God had worked it all out according to the prophecies of the Old Testament (Luke 24:44-46).

This should not dissuade us from seeking answers from and speculating on the Bible’s prophecies. Not by any means! However, we need to realize from the start

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A major purpose of this series has been to describe how praying always reaches into every corner of our Christian lives. God gives us this tool so that we can be in constant contact with Him and bring every thought into captivity, under His and our control (II Corinthians 10:5). As we conclude, we will see a few other areas that continual prayer affects.

In Romans 8:30, justification comes before glorification. Justification is getting right with God through His calling. From there, we then begin developing a right relationship—the process of sanctification—that leads to glorification, being in God’s Kingdom.

How do we build this vital relationship, the one on which our salvation depends? It is not difficult: We use the same process we use to build relationships with people. What do we do? We spend time with them, converse with them, and experience various activities with them. By that process, we come to know them better.

Is it any different with God? No! Talking to, spending time with, and experiencing life with God are how we get to know God. Moreover, knowing God is everything, as John 17:3 shows: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

What is a key element in coming to know God? Prayer! Prayer is contact with God, a major tool He provides us to develop our relationship with Him and our knowledge of Him. A thorough and deep knowledge of God—both intellectual and experiential—will go far in avoiding the deceptive traps of the Devil, our nature, and this evil age. When we truly understand the reality of God—who and what He is, how He thinks, what He does, what He purposed—we will be able to discern what motivates a statement or action.

Our relationship with God is our protection against deception, even the self-deception that a Laodicean is susceptible to, as Daniel 11:32 indicates: “He will flatter those who have violated the covenant and win them over to his side. But the people who know their God will be strong and will resist him” (*New Living Translation*, NLT, emphasis ours throughout). The surest way to develop this relationship, protecting us from deception, is through praying always.

The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:33, “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’” Instead, we can choose to fellowship with the very best company in the entire universe—our heavenly Father. That relationship comes through prayer. We talk to Him

and He talks to us by the thoughts He inspires. By building this relationship, we develop the mind of God (Philippians 2:5), the mind that will help us see through the strong delusion promised to occur at the end of this age (II Thessalonians 2:11).

Fellowship

As mentioned above, fellowship—spending time with someone—is how human beings build relationships. The quality and quantity of that fellowship demonstrates the strength of the relationship, and it works similarly in the relationship between Christians and God and Christ, as I John 1:3 shows:

What we have seen and [ourselves] heard, we are also telling you, so that you too may realize and enjoy fellowship as partners and partakers with us. And [this] fellowship that we have [which is a distinguishing mark of Christians] is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (the Messiah). (*The Amplified Bible*)

Someone who is guilt-ridden and conscience-stricken because of sin, rather than seeking fellowship with God, will shy away from Him just as Adam and Eve did. After their sin, they ran, not to Him, but from Him—they hid from God (Genesis 3:8-10). Is there a more powerful act that we, as Christians, can do to demonstrate our desire to run to God rather than from Him—to demonstrate the strength of our desire to fellowship—than to pray always?

A lack of desire to fellowship with God and Christ is a distinctive trait of a Laodicean (Revelation 3:18-20). We live in an era when people are apathetic about having a true relationship with God. No professing Christian would admit that he would not care to eat a meal with and fellowship with Jesus Christ, yet He reports that in His own church, some will not rouse themselves to fellowship with Him, though they know that He knocks at the door. By their inaction, they choose *not* to fellowship with Him.

In fact, they are so far from Him that they do not even see their need! A terrible cycle of cause-and-effect is created: no awareness of need, no desire; no desire, no prayer; no prayer, no relationship; no relationship, no awareness of need. It runs in a vicious circle.

God offers us, not just endless life, but even more—eternal, close fellowship with Him. That is part of our

Praying Always

Part Six

reward as firstfruits (Revelation 3:12, 21). But how does God know if we want to fellowship with Him forever? How can He determine about us, as He said about Abraham in Genesis 22:12: “Now I know”? Simply, if we are earnestly seeking fellowship with Him *right now*, in this life, our actions prove—just as Abraham’s actions were proof—that we sincerely desire to fellowship with Him forever.

What is the major way God gives us to show our desire for eternal fellowship with Him? Prayer! Through prayer, especially praying always, we are consciously deciding to place ourselves in God’s presence—to have fellowship with Him and to acknowledge our vital need for Him.

As an example of this, David writes in Psalm 27:8: “When You said, ‘Seek My face,’ my heart said to You, ‘Your face, LORD, I will seek.’” *The Amplified Bible* expands the idea of “seek My face” as “inquire for and require My presence as your vital need.” In *everything* we say or do, we are to acknowledge His presence in our lives and give thanks for it (Colossians 3:17). Our praying always should also include thanksgiving to God for the many blessings He provides to sustain us, prosper us, and perfect us.

Considering this idea of eternal fellowship, it should come as no surprise that by striving to pray always we are in training to do now what we will be doing for eternity—closely fellowshipping with God. It is one reason why we have been called and elected by God—that we might have fellowship with the Father and the Son (Revelation 3:12, 21; John 17:24).

The book of Revelation does not give the first five eras of the church the same promise of proximity as the last two. That is how important our close fellowship now is in preparing us for our place in God’s Kingdom. If we do not strive to prove our desire to fellowship with Him now, we have rejected one of the very purposes of our calling.

Government

Daniel 7:27 promises rulership to the saints in God’s government, which is why an essential decision in our lives revolves around government. Government is the overriding issue in the Bible. Who will rule in our lives, God or Satan? It is that simple.

Israel rejected God’s rule. When Israel desired a king, it was because they did not want God to rule them (I Samuel 8:7). Will we do the same? That is the critical issue that must be resolved in our lives. How can we reject God’s rule? By insisting on being our own general—by putting ourselves, not God, at the forefront of the battles we fight every day. We simply do not allow Him to be our King and Commander.

The examples of the first and second Adam prove how vital the subject of government is. In the Garden of

Eden, the test that Adam and Eve failed was the test of government. To whose rule would they submit—God’s or Satan’s? The Devil’s temptation of Christ (Matthew 4; Luke 4) was the same test: Would He submit to God’s or Satan’s government? Jesus passed the test, rejecting Satan’s offers for personal gain. Because God neither changes nor varies, He is a God of patterns. We, then, have the same test to pass. To which government will we submit?

There is a direct connection between prayer and submission to God’s government. When we pray, we are prostrating ourselves before Him, calling on His great name, and recognizing His power, omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, wisdom, mercy, and grace. Interestingly, Jesus called the Temple, in which God dwelt, “a house of prayer” (Luke 19:46). We now are temples of His Holy Spirit in which He dwells (I Corinthians 3:16), so we, too, should be houses of prayer.

Prayer is a spiritual blessing God gives to us as a major tool for growth. Prayer at any time is an exercise in humbling ourselves, as it forces us to admit our humanity, inadequacy, dependence, and need. It is an admission that we are not self-sufficient. Those who humble themselves before His sovereignty are those to whom He gives His attention (Isaiah 66:2).

We desperately need a vital relationship with God and all that He will give to us by His grace to achieve His purpose for us. His gifts flow to the humble because they will submit to His government and His will, and for that reason, God will withhold no good gift from them (Romans 8:32; Psalm 84:11). By prayer, and especially by striving to pray always, we are submitting every thought, word, and action to the scrutiny and governance of the great God.

The Israelites did not want God to rule their lives directly; they did not want to submit to His rule. If we are not striving to pray always, we are making the same mistake. Their decision put them in the position of having to fight their own battles. If we make the same mistake, we get the same results—but worse. Why would God want anyone in His eternal Family who demonstrates an unwillingness to submit to His governance on every occasion?

Fiery Darts

When writing about putting on “the whole armor of God” in Ephesians 6, Paul begins to conclude the passage by repeating the concepts in Luke 21:36—praying always and watching (verse 18). He says in verse 16: “... above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.”

Albert Barnes’ *New Testament Commentary* explains these fiery darts:

Paul here refers, probably, to the temptations of the great adversary, which are like fiery darts; or those furious suggestions of evil, and excitements to sin, which he may throw into the mind like fiery darts. They are blasphemous thoughts, unbelief, sudden temptation to do wrong, or thoughts that wound and torment the soul. In regard to them, we may observe:

- (1) that they come suddenly, like arrows sped from a bow;
- (2) they come from unexpected quarters, like arrows shot suddenly from an enemy in ambush;
- (3) they pierce, and penetrate, and torment the soul, as arrows would that are on fire;
- (4) they set the soul on fire, and enkindle the worst passions, as fiery darts do a ship or camp against which they are sent.

What happens when these fiery darts hit their target? The answer appears in James 1:13-15 (Contemporary English Version, CEV):

Don't blame God when you are tempted! God cannot be tempted by evil, and he doesn't use evil to tempt others. We are tempted by our own desires that drag us off and trap us. Our desires make us sin, and when sin is finished with us, it leaves us dead.

As Barnes says, these darts "enkindle the worst passions," or as James says, "our desires." Actually, these darts have been flying since the day we were born, doing their damage. Where is it better for us to deal with these darts: at the point of the shield or after they have hit their mark? Of course, at the shield!

II Samuel 22:31 tells us what our shield is: "As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him" (see also Genesis 15:1; Psalm 33:20; Proverbs 2:7). *We* are not the shield. *Our faith* is not the shield. *God* is the shield, using the same faith Jesus Christ had. If we let Him, God will protect us in our battles.

How do we erect this "shield of faith?" Notice these verses:

Matthew 17:19-21: Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

Psalm 18:30 (CEV): Your way is perfect, LORD, and your word is correct. You are a shield for those who run to you for help.

Along with fasting, Christ gives prayer as one of the antidotes to unbelief. David says that running to God for help, which striving to pray always is the essence of, will allow Him to be our shield, our source of power and strength (II Corinthians 3:5; 4:7).

Notice the first part of Matthew 26:41 from the *New Life Bible*: "Watch and pray so that you will not be tempted...." Jesus repeats the instruction in Luke 21:36 but shows that the same process will build the shield of faith to protect us from the fiery darts of temptation.

Peace!

Notice that the shield mentioned in Ephesians 6:16 can quench *all* the fiery darts—not some, not most, but *all*. Consider the great peace we would have if *none* of Satan's fiery darts *ever* reached their intended target! This sheds light on why Christ says in Matthew 11:30: "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." We know He used every spiritual tool God makes available.

Consider the great peace that would fall on the battlefield that is our minds if God were intercepting all these fiery darts. Psalm 119:165 says, "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble."

What does "great peace" mean? "Peace" automatically suggests an absence of war, no battling, no fighting. Under temptation, a battle always rages, even if we are winning. In such a case, no peace exists, much less "great peace." As an illustration, initially, the U.S. in Iraq won every battle handily, but it was still war. The spiritual war we fight is caused by temptation from Satan, our human nature, and the world. Remove temptation, and war stops. What remains is great peace.

How do we achieve not just peace, but "great peace"? The last half of Psalm 119:165 tells us: "*nothing* causes them to stumble." What causes a human to stumble? Temptation! This means that we have to be sheltered from it. The *American Standard Version* renders this phrase, "they have no occasion of stumbling," *Young's Literal Translation* puts it as "they have no stumbling-block," and the *Rotherham's Emphasized Bible* reads, "nothing to make them stumble." All of these renderings mean that not even the opportunity to stumble is presented. Other scriptures mention protection from stumbling:

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ready answer

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

Setting Spiritual Goals

**“Therefore,
my beloved, . . .
work out your own
salvation with fear
and trembling.”**
—**Philippians 2:12**

If we were to walk into a local bookstore and head for the self-help shelves, we would discover many titles related to time-management and goal-setting. The authors of such fare know that if a person wants to achieve an objective, large or small, the best way to begin to do so is to set a goal. In setting a goal, an individual’s purpose is to put the objective in the forefront of his thinking in order to continually be reminded of it.

Spiritually speaking, do we use the same approach to overcoming sin?

The idea of having to overcome sin runs through the entire Bible, and it is serious business. Hebrews 3:13 shows us that, if we are neglectful and not self-disciplined, we can be hardened and succumb to the deceitfulness of sin. This hardening is called rebellion. Historically, this led to unbelief on the part of the children of Israel.

As God’s elect, we cannot underestimate the importance of overcoming and being transformed into the image of God.

Since we will soon observe the Passover, the annual rededication to our spiritual walk with God, we are painfully aware of the areas in our lives in which we miss the mark—let us call it what it is: the areas in which we still have sin.

But why have we grown in some areas and not in others? Most likely, it is because we do not set spiritual goals for overcoming in the areas in which we continually fall short and sin. As we rejoice in God’s deliverance of our lives and celebrate our coming out of spiritual Egypt, now is the perfect time to commit ourselves to do better at overcoming than the previous year.

So, how do we set spiritual goals to become more successful in overcoming sin in this coming year?

Admit We Have a Problem—SIN!

The Bible clearly lays out for us the stark reality that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Sin is a reality that we must not only face, but one that we must struggle with our entire being to put out.

Proverbs 28:13 captures the reality of ignoring our sins: “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.”

ready answer *Setting Spiritual Goals*

Four words in this verse—"cover," "prosper," "confesses," and "forsakes"—highlight some valuable instruction for us. According to *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, these Hebrew words mean:

- **Cover** (*kacah*, #3680): "to cover, to conceal, to hide."
- **Prosper** (*tsalach*, #6743): "to advance, to prosper, to make progress, to succeed, to be profitable."
- **Confesses** (*yadah*, #3034): "to throw, to shoot, to cast" and by extension, "to confess" or even "to praise."
- **Forsakes** ('*azab*, #5800): "to leave, to loose, to forsake, to let go."

In other words, if we try to hide or ignore our faults, our chances for success in life are dim, but if we admit them and put them behind us, we will have favor. In *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck remarks that "it is easier for us to try and forget a problem that we know exists than to deal with it." He states a fundamental truth about our problems. If we do not deal with a problem—in our case, sin—it will never go away. It will fester, and it will always come up later or manifest itself in a different form.

Spiritually, then, if we are not honest with ourselves about our sins and shortcomings, we will not reach our full, God-given potential. God can show us our sins, but He cannot and will not force us to overcome—that decision is ours. We must see ourselves for what we are and have the desire to make the conscious choice to change. Thus, Paul instructs us in Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Setting a Spiritual Goal

Personally, I have both heard and been taught many times in my education and career that, if a person wants to achieve a goal, he must write it down. The exact same principle applies to spiritual goals. Somewhere, we must jot down our spiritual goals on paper—in our Bibles, on a notepad, in a journal or datebook, or on a scrap of paper affixed by a magnet to the refrigerator. Writing our goals down makes them real, and we can refer to them from time to time to remind ourselves of where we are headed.

How do we set a spiritual goal? Maybe we have set spiritual goals before and maybe not. The following plan lays out a framework of five steps with each step being joined to the others. No single step stands alone, and no step can be skipped in an effort to speed up the process.

As a prerequisite, this endeavor *must* begin with God in prayer, fasting, and meditation, and we must set the process in motion with the end, the goal, in mind. If we want to overcome in a certain area, we have to envision what it is to be successful in it. For the purpose of illustration, our spiritual goal might be to become more Christ-like. We must clearly fix in our minds how a Christ-like person is and behaves.

Setting a spiritual goal may not always be as simple and straightforward as we would like. We must be clear about what, where, when, and how we will overcome this specific sin.

This plan needs to be easy to remember, so it will follow a useful and hopefully prophetic acronym: S.M.A.R.T.

S.m.a.r.t.

The *S* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Specific*. Breaking our goals into specific and smaller parts is vital because it is the foundation for the process of growth.

Our example of wanting to become more Christ-like, a common goal of everyone who is called, is too broad to accomplish in a single year, five years, or potentially, a lifetime. Therefore, we must be more specific by breaking it down into smaller, more achievable parts.

For instance, we can narrow our aim to Paul's admonition in Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." This in itself is a huge undertaking, if we consider it as "speaking as a Christian should." But perhaps we have a problem with negativity in our speech, a tendency to criticize or make unflattering remarks about others. Turning this trait around is a good place to start.

Our goal is now a bit more specific: to stop speaking negatively about others.

s.M.a.r.t.

The *M* in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Measurable*. What standard can we employ to measure our progress? The most important thing to remember is that God Himself is our standard in the Person of Jesus Christ. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13 of our overall goal and standard: ". . . till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Growing to the measure of the stature of Christ is a tall order. This requires complete and total devotion—seeking God with all our hearts and praying often about the specific sins we are trying to overcome. It takes hard work and dedication, and it will not happen overnight, which means we also need staying power—endurance or perseverance.

It is important that the spiritual goal be measurable, if it is not, then:

- a. It is hard to know when we have achieved it, and
- b. it makes it too easy to give up and become discouraged.

In our example goal, we might set our standard based on Matthew 7:12: “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” We certainly do not want others to speak negatively about us, so we should not speak negatively about them. Thus, if we want others to say nice things about us, then we have to begin being positive in our speech about others. We can then measure—count—how often we fulfill this standard of Christ.

Another measure may be that we will see improvements in our relationship with others. This is a longer-term standard because improvements will take weeks, months, or years to become noticeable. However, if we are patient, we will begin to see marked improvements in time.

Ensuring the goal is measurable will enable us to recognize and to build confidence in the progress that is being made.

s.m.A.r.t.

The A in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Action*. Nothing will ever be accomplished on our goal if we never do anything about it. And not just any kind of action will do. It has been said, “If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail.” So we must ask ourselves, “How can we make an effective plan of action to overcome?”

Solomon understood this and captured it for our learning in Proverbs 20:18: “Plans are established by counsel; by wise counsel wage war.” This verse drives home the need for us to make a plan. We should never let it escape our minds that we are engaged in a war, a spiritual war for our eternal lives—a war against sin and the myriad influences in the world to forsake God. Satan would love nothing more than to destroy us.

An obvious action item in our plan would be to replace negative talk with positive, uplifting words. We can resolve to say something complimentary—but true—to everyone with whom we converse on a given day or in a certain week: “That sure is a nice tie” or “I’ve always admired your handwriting.” It does not have to be anything deep or complex, just sincere and true.

Our plan for overcoming negative speech about others might also include writing down specific situations and people that we struggle with. We should be honest about why we respond to them as we do, and consider if our response is truly justified. Then, we need to strategize about how we will react differently the next time we encounter such an instance or person.

Solomon tells us in Proverbs 27:17, “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.” If

we take action by planning to respond more positively, our character will eventually be “sharpened” by our friends and acquaintances, and we will make progress toward our goal.

s.m.a.R.t.

The R in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Review*. Notice Proverbs 29:19 in *The Bible in Basic English*: “A servant will not be trained by words; for though the sense of the words is clear to him, he will not give attention.” Giving instruction just once is not enough; repetition is the best form of emphasis. A student or an employee may not understand a concept or process after the first time he hears it, but he will probably grasp it more fully after a review or two.

In the context of setting and working toward a spiritual goal, even though we have put our goal into words and have written it down, we must review our plan often, or we will forget it. “Out of sight, out of mind,” the saying goes.

In our example, because we have recorded specific incidents of speaking negatively of others, it should be easy to review our plan and make any necessary adjustments. We should also be able to recognize increased incidents of more positive speech and resulting better relationships. A journal or diary in which we write about our successes and failures in attaining our goals could prove to be an invaluable resource in reviewing progress.

Depending on the goal and the degree of struggle we have, we may want to review our goals biweekly, weekly, or even daily. We should set some time aside on a regular basis to review our spiritual goals prayerfully. This will keep them at the forefront of our minds.

s.m.a.r.T.

The T in S.M.A.R.T. stands for *Time*. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Procrastination will always be the thief of time.” What a very true statement! We are all guilty of putting things off and wasting time. Because human nature will tempt us to procrastinate, we should never leave a goal open-ended.

The apostle Paul warns us against this in Ephesians 5:15-16: “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” *Circumspectly* means “carefully considering all circumstances and possible consequences,” which applies directly to overcoming. Since we are living in spiritually treacherous times, and our days are limited, it is best to begin to work on our goals promptly and persistently.

As we go through this life, one of the hardest things we have to do is be patient with ourselves. It would be nice to overcome a sin like flicking off a light switch, but that is unrealistic. It is going to take time, especially when we delve into the areas we constantly struggle in.

ready answer *Setting Spiritual Goals*

The spiritual goal, then, must not only be time-bound, but the time period must also be realistic. If not, we will end up dragging our feet or giving up all together. So, we need to give ourselves a reasonable amount of time to accomplish each goal we set. In our example, we could say, “*In thirty days I want my speech to be filled with positive and uplifting comments about others.*” There is nothing like a deadline to get a person motivated!

We Are Not Alone

Setting spiritual goals offers an invaluable means to chart our efforts to overcome. Thoughtfully applying the acronym S.M.A.R.T. to spiritual goals can provide a simple and effective way to measure our spiritual growth as we approach the Passover—and throughout the entire year.

God the Father and Jesus Christ have promised to ensure our achievement of our spiritual goals. Paul assures us in Philippians 1:6, “... being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” We are not alone in this process. We have access to the help and guidance of the greatest power in the universe to accomplish our spiritual goals. We would be smart to take advantage of it.

—Warren Lee

personal *Pentecost Revisited*

(continued from page 6)

could take place. God would be worshipped at His Tabernacle, His dwelling place in Israel, and it would be located and erected where He and He alone would choose. There and there only, on the Tabernacle’s brazen altar—just outside His front door, as it were—would they be able to offer their sacrifices.

God had already given Israel a prelude to this. Once the Tabernacle was constructed in the wilderness, all religious and civil affairs revolved around the location where it was set up. Every time Israel camped in one place long enough to erect the Tabernacle, it became the center of their encampment, and each tribe was assigned its never-varying place in relation to the Tabernacle. All religious and civil affairs were thus conducted in His presence.

The context of Deuteronomy 12 makes it clear that, to God, there are two overriding issues behind these commands. The first is loyalty to Him only as God. The first commandment reads, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” meaning “no other gods in place of Me.” God will not brook sharing the relationship with Him with another “god” on any level of devotion. The second issue is the Israelites’ unity with each other as a nation. Unlike other nations, Israel’s national unity was not driven by political or military forces but by religion, the one God gave to them through Moses. This is why the central sanctuary is of supreme importance to them as a nation.

In the wilderness, the Israelites had already shown themselves to be easily attracted to heathen practices. They had also exhibited a strong, independent spirit that drove them to go their own way, to do their own thing, whether or not religion was directly involved. Once settled in the land, they would be scattered over an area far larger than any wilderness encampment. Their free moral agency was thus about to be severely tested. They needed a

central sanctuary to retain their relationship with God and their unity as a nation.

The charges given to them in Deuteronomy 12 are strongly reinforced by the demand of verse 32: “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” If they were to remain the holy people of God, no deviations were allowed!

Beginning in verse 8, God strictly forbids them to do as they had done in the past, erecting altars virtually wherever they wished. They are to understand that they were no longer a wandering people but a nation anchored in the land, and their worship of God and actions as a nation must reflect that. Their days of transition in the wilderness from a slave to a free people, from a loosely scattered, blood-related people to a united nation, were over! Their real birth as a nation under God had begun.

Central to this idea is that all sacrificing, except for the Passover, had to be done on one national altar. The festivals, especially the three major ones, had to be kept in one central location, and all tithes were to be sent to that same central place of worship. This did not mean that they could not hold Sabbath services in their home locations, but any local services would have to be conducted without the sacrificing of animals or any of the rituals assigned to festivals, daily acts of worship like evening and morning sacrifices, and voluntary offerings that an Israelite felt compelled to give. This general prohibition against local sacrifices included the waving of the sheaf, which was always done at the Tabernacle/Temple within the “Passover season,” which continued from Passover until Pentecost.

The Tabernacle was not erected until the land had rest from the warfare of conquering the Canaanites. This occurred as God appointed in Deuteronomy 12:9-11. The period of peace that satisfied God’s requirements was not reached until seven years after the Israelites crossed over

the Jordan. At that time, His choice of location for the Tabernacle and its altar was Shiloh: "Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of meeting there. And the land was subdued before them" (Joshua 18:1).

Does this mean that no sacrificing as part of the normal worship of God was done for seven years? Yes, but consider that, regarding the Joshua 5 circumcisions, Scripture says that no Israelite male born in the wilderness had been circumcised (Joshua 5:2-7). In fact, only two people alive at the time, Joshua and Caleb, had lawfully been able to partake of perhaps the most important of all rituals—Passover—for the entire forty years!

It also means that none of those uncircumcised males—probably a million or more men!—had been able to make the Old Covenant with God (Exodus 12:43-49). Seven years spent doing God's work of conquering the land was a drop in the bucket compared to other long-term works He had them do by His command. Even so, He would have that work done by a circumcised people. This is another case of God saying through His example, "First things first."

TWO ALTARS

The concept of one central sanctuary and altar was so deeply and emotionally ingrained that Joshua 22 relates the history of a war that nearly erupted between the tribes on the east side of the Jordan River and those on the west. The western Israelites charged those in the east with building an altar, breaking God's commandment. Such an altar would compete with the sanctuary altar in Shiloh for the loyalty of the people. Building another altar would be a direct, rebellious act of idolatry against God, and it would destroy the unity of Israel as a nation under the God of Creation.

The west-side tribes were poised to launch a war against their eastern brethren until they heard the easterners' explanation. The "altar" was actually a monument, a memorial in the shape of an altar, raised to serve as a constant reminder of the east side's unity with their western relatives in common cause under the God of Israel. The memorial's shape was to remind them that their unity was in and through the God they worshipped.

Another altar, appearing briefly in Joshua 8:30, is also easily explained. It in no way conflicts with God's commands in Deuteronomy 12. Why? God Himself had commanded this particular altar to be erected as part of an important ceremony—a renewal of a covenant. The event in Joshua 8 has its beginning in Deuteronomy 11:26-32 where the ceremony is commanded. Immediately after, God begins His charge in Deuteronomy 12 concerning His expectations of the Israelites after they crossed into the land.

In Deuteronomy 29-30, which occurs while the Israelites were still outside the Promised Land but just about to enter into it, a special covenant is made between God and Israel. This covenant, with Moses presiding, served as a specific and immediate preparation for entering the Promised Land. Part of its purpose was surely motivational,

highlighting the powerful, steadfast faithfulness of God.

In Joshua 8, with the conquest of the land just beginning, the tribes—in another solemn ceremony, this time presided over by Joshua—carry out God's command to repeat the renewal of the covenant within the land on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. This one-time erection of an altar in no way conflicted with God's commands in Deuteronomy 12. It was not part of the normal worship of God. It was nonetheless an important reminder of their weighty responsibility to carry out God's work of conquering the land of their inheritance, and of His ever-present faithfulness in assisting them.

A BRIEF SUMMARY

Joshua 5:10-11 gives absolutely no evidence of any wavesheaf ceremony. According to God's instructions on the matter, the Israelites had nothing acceptable to offer to Him. Any wavesheaf lifted before Him from Gentile-grown grain would have been an abomination!

Deuteronomy 12 absolutely forbids the erection of an altar for the normal ceremonial worship of God until the land had been conquered, Israel had peace, the location of the central sanctuary (the Tabernacle with all its furniture and priests standing to serve) had been determined, and the Tabernacle set up.

Due to the facts that no wavesheaf ceremony was possible, no accompanying sacrifices were permitted, and the Israelites' preparation for the holy-day Sabbath was finished in time, one cannot extrapolate with absolute certainty that that particular Passover occurred on a weekly Sabbath immediately prior to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Further, one certainly cannot use such an assumption as permission to begin the count to Pentecost from a holy-day Sabbath, which can never be a common workday.

Leviticus 23 specifically states that the wavesheaf must be made on the day *after* a Sabbath, not *on* a Sabbath. The present practice of most of the churches of God is so unusual that no one else in the world of Christianity or Judaism may have ever done such a thing.

Basing an important doctrine on symbolism is a shaky proposition in the first place, especially when its application is tied to a lunar calendar with its annual shifting of days and dates. Should we build major doctrines on symbolism or the solidity of a direct statement or example?

Joshua 5:10-11 cannot be used as the basis to change God's firmly set rule established in Leviticus 23:15-16, which says to begin the count to Pentecost with the day following the weekly Sabbath that falls within the Feast of Unleavened Bread. When building on sandy assumptions, the foundation is inherently weak, and the conclusion will crumble when put to the test.

In Christian love,



(continued from page 9)

that full comprehension of the prophecies is beyond us until they are fulfilled. Part of the reason for this is that God wants us to be watching and seeking, aware of what is happening spiritually in us individually and in the church collectively, culturally in society, and currently in politics and in world events. For if we had all the answers, we would soon doze off spiritually or spend our time on our own pursuits. God keeps us interested and active by keeping a few secrets to Himself (see "Why Does God Keep Secrets?" *Forerunner*, January 2005).

It is good for us to remember what the apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:8: "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; . . . whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away." The point of Christianity is not to know the final score before everyone else does; it is enough for us to know that God will ultimately stand in complete triumph. Instead, He has called us to glorify Him by putting on the image of His Son (II Corinthians 3:18). We must be careful that we do not let ourselves be distracted from what is most important.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Praying Always

(continued from page 12)

Psalm 121:3 (NLT): He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber.

I John 2:10: He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

Jude 24: Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. . . .

God through the gift of His Holy Spirit is the only power in the universe that can accomplish such a feat. If God does not place that shield around us, we have no hope of success. Alone, we are powerless in the face of temptation. We overcome it not by our strength, but by God's power, the shield of faith (I John 5:4) given to us as His gift (Ephesians 2:8). It is our only sure defense.

To acknowledge God and to pray always are to be in alignment with one of Christ's most basic principles, a principle found in Matthew 6:33—to "seek first the kingdom of God" in all things. Praying always is stepping out in faith, believing that if we seek God *first*, He will add *all* the things we need (Philippians 4:19), including the strength to overcome, to finish this journey, and to enter His Kingdom.

When faced with the myriad decisions we have to make during each day, if we are not acknowledging God's presence, we have placed ourselves in the position of fighting our battles on our own. Israel made the same mistake, choosing the hard road in their fight, one littered with bodies. We probably all know of some bodies that now litter the spiritual road we have walked. We veterans carry scars from the battles we have lost.

Skirmishes

Our battles to overcome are more like skirmishes than battles. In fact, we experience our most severe tempta-

tions and trials in everyday events like eating, conducting business affairs, or relating to others in the family or community. Luke 16:10 acknowledges this: "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much."

What better way to win those little skirmishes than to have an invincible Champion, God, in the van of the battle? Because these skirmishes are in the myriad of details we deal with every day, only striving to pray always during the day gives us that unyielding first line of defense.

Our deceitful human nature has in its arsenal countless ways, reasons, and excuses to avoid confronting the real issue of life—overcoming and allowing God to form and shape us into His image. Just bringing God into the picture unleashes forces that will not only help us to overcome, but will also protect us from the pitfalls that litter our path (Psalm 91:12). It is this striving to pray always that a Laodicean naturally avoids because he feels no need.

Jesus says in Matthew 26:41, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates says the Greek word behind *weak* means "without strength, powerless." "Weak" implies *little* strength, while "without strength, powerless" suggests *no* strength. The difference is significant. God has all the strength, and we have none to fight spiritual battles of any kind. Praying always gives us access to the only strength that works—God's.

In Luke 21:36, Christ tells us who will be counted worthy to escape the troubles ahead and to stand before Him in God's Kingdom. It will be those who depend on God (praying always) to win (overcome) the battles we face. His instruction looks simple, yet as we have seen, implementing it has far-reaching consequences in every area of our lives. Our Savior presents us with the two "tickets"—the two vital tools—we will need to escape to a place of safety and be with Christ in God's Kingdom. Will we now pay the required price of those two tickets—to put them into practice?

—Pat Higgins

Global Rebalancing: Money, Power, and Islamic Banking

In world history, no nation has been as staggeringly wealthy as the United States. In 2007, its gross domestic product (GDP) was about \$13.8 trillion—over one-quarter of all the goods and services produced in the world that year. America's GDP is larger than the combined GDPs of the next four countries (Japan, Germany, China, and the United Kingdom). Despite being post-Industrial, last year U.S. industrial production exceeded \$2 trillion, which equals Japan's, China's, and Germany's industrial production *combined*. Truly, America is a financial behemoth.

For decades, the dollar has been the reserve currency of choice due to its stability and competitiveness. In the last few years, however, a trend called “global rebalancing” has become increasingly evident. In short, global rebalancing is a shift away from growth dominated by the U.S. toward a configuration in which more countries contribute. U.S.-based assets are regarded as too risky, and investing in the infrastructure of developing countries with strong growth is a more attractive option. Some portfolio managers even say that “the economic center of the world is changing”—slowly moving away from the U.S.

One recipient of such financial attention is the United Arab Emirates. The seven tiny countries of the UAE are awash in more money relative to their size—slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Maine—than perhaps any region in history. The Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) of two of them—Dubai and Abu Dhabi—manage an estimated \$500 billion and \$1 trillion, respectively. Dubai is a banking hub that attracts immense wealth from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Syria, Iran, Russia, and Jordan, largely because of record-high oil prices. In addition, Dubai is considered a safe haven because there is no risk of accounts being frozen or money being seized by the U.S. in its anti-terrorism efforts. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum’s vision for Dubai is to be the financial center of not only the Middle East, but also of India and Pakistan.

Because the dollar has been the reserve currency for so long, as well as the currency of oil trade, a “dollar bloc” has been created. Even though the dollar is currently weak, and U.S. financial institutions are facing a liquidity crisis, the massive reserves of dollars in the foreign SWFs act as a stabilizing force. Dollars are flowing back into the U.S. economy from China and the Arabian Peninsula, keeping things propped up.

This appears fine on paper, yet a high price is being paid: greater foreign ownership of commercial real estate, large portions of U.S.-based financial institutions, and other businesses. For example, Dubai, through its company, Dubai Ports World, tried to buy the management of six American ports in early 2006, only to have Congress scuttle the deal. Yet, in November 2007, when Abu Dhabi purchased a significant chunk of ailing Citigroup—the nation’s largest financial institution—not a single governmental eyebrow was raised. With its 4.9% stake, Abu Dhabi now ranks as Citigroup’s largest shareholder. U.S. institutions are remaining liquid, but control is ebbing away.

Another factor beginning to come into play is Islamic banking (also known as *Sharia banking*), a system of banking or finan-

cial activity in alignment with Islamic law (*Sharia*). As such, it

- requires that 2.5% of revenue be donated to Islamic charity (though Islam and the West clearly differ on the definition of “charity”);
- prohibits borrowing and lending with interest (though paying for the “time value of money” is accepted, as long as it is seen as a “gift” rather than a guarantee); and
- requires “socially responsible investing” (meaning that a bank cannot invest in something that is against Islamic principles).

Banks that offer Islamic banking products and services are required to establish a *Sharia* advisory council to ensure that the operations of the bank comply with Islamic principles—according to the interpretation of the council.

Exactly how large the *Sharia* banking sector is at present is unknown (not all Muslim financial institutions follow *Sharia* banking), but estimates range from a very conservative \$500 billion up to \$1.5 trillion. Western financial institutions, including Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Ernst & Young, and McKinsey and Co., are eager to tap into this “emerging market.”

But financial institutions are not the only ones interested in *Sharia* banking. On June 13, 2006, then-Finance Minister (now Prime Minister) of Britain, Gordon Brown, spoke at the Islamic Finance and Trade Conference:

...the foundation for making Britain the gateway to Islamic trade, is to make Britain the global center for Islamic finance. . . . Today British banks are pioneering Islamic banking—London now has more banks supplying services under Islamic principles than any other Western financial center. . . . All these changes are vital to increasing trade with Muslim countries and making London the location of choice for Islamic investment, but they are also vital to ensuring the Muslim community in Britain can trade, build successful businesses and create jobs.

Brown later pledged that the British government will issue its own “*Sharia* compliant bonds” (*sukuk*)—government debt compliant with Islamic principles—in 2008.

The U.S., facing a liquidity crisis, is being kept afloat in part by dollars flowing back from oil-rich Middle Eastern nations and banking centers. Western Europe is confronted by a rapidly-growing Muslim immigrant population—along with a related “clash of civilizations”—and its governments are responding by changing banking practices to accommodate Muslims without regard to the true price. Western money and power are gradually slipping away and collecting in the Middle East.

—David C. Grabbe

WORLDWATCH

Bible Study

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Cripple by a Pool (Part One)

Jesus' healing of the crippled man beside the pool called Bethesda is one of nine healing miracles involving water and one of seven performed on the Sabbath. Only the apostle John records it (John 5:1-16). It is impossible to be sure when the miracle occurred other than it happened on a Sabbath day.

John's reference to "a feast of the Jews" (John 5:1) rather than a "feast of the Lord" (Exodus 12:14; Leviticus 23:2,

37) illustrates the spiritual decline that had occurred among the Jews regarding God's feast days. People may typically start out with God being central to their worship, but they end up getting in the way and become the main focus themselves. The people had made this festival a feast of the people instead of continuing it as God's feast. In His journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus expended a considerable amount of effort to be there in time for this Sabbath. In doing this, He set an example in terms of spiritual priorities and the sacrifices involved in putting spiritual matters first. Some Christians are unclear about spiritual priorities, desiring a convenient religion that requires little inconvenience and no sacrifice. Frequently, those who complain most about not getting enough out of church are often those who attend sporadically and involve themselves the least in church activities. Jesus, on the other hand, took great pains to fellowship and to help the people, especially on the Sabbath.

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1. Why does Jesus choose this location? John 5:1-2.

COMMENT: John writes, "[T]here is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches." *Bethesda* means "house of pity or mercy." Locals believed that the pool could restore health to the sick and infirm. The pool had five porches like covered verandas, open on one side but protected from the sun and rain overhead. The community kindly provided these porches to protect from the elements the invalids who waited for someone to help them to the pool.

In Scripture, the number five often represents grace, and it is grace that was given at Bethesda. Certainly, the grace and mercy of God provides the Lamb of God for our spiritual healing (John 1:29). The Sheep Gate is where sheep were gathered, so perhaps Christ, the Lamb of God, chose this location to aid in identifying Himself to the people.

2. Why does Jesus heal this particular man? Same verses.

COMMENT: Christ chose to intervene for this one man, but why him and no one else? More revealing, perhaps, is why He healed any of them. They were all sinners; none of them deserved to be healed. Whenever God chooses to heal someone, it is an act of compassion and grace, but it must also fit into His purpose and time frame. God hated Esau but loved Jacob (Romans 9:13; Malachi 1:2-3). Both were sinners, but God chose only one to accomplish a specific purpose. Jesus chose the crippled man to glorify God and in a small way advance His plan of salvation for all mankind.

3. What does this account tell us about the condition of sinners? John 5:3; Romans 5:6.

COMMENT: In this account, five physical details represent a sinner's spiritual condition:

- First, some were too sick and disabled to walk to the pool. Sins are physically—and even more so—mentally incapacitating, keeping the sinner down emotionally and spiritually.

- Second, some were too weak to do anything about their condition. Sin leaves people without the vigor and resources to overcome it.

- Third, some were blind. Sin maintains spiritual blindness, producing a lack of discernment between right and wrong.

- Fourth, some were lame or crippled. Sin debilitates so that one cannot walk uprightly in God's way of life.

- Fifth, the limbs of some had withered and atrophied through paralysis. Sin paralyzes people's efforts to improve themselves, and without the power of God's Spirit, they are unable to produce the fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:21-22).

4. Why does Christ ask the crippled man, "Do you want to be made well?"—a question that would seem to have an obvious answer? John 5:6.

COMMENT: By being at the pool, the crippled man indicated that he wanted to be healed, yet Christ asks him if he wants to be cured. Why did He not just heal the man? Frankly, some ailing people do not want to get better because they like the sympathy and attention they receive. When asked how they feel, some of them launch into a laborious, nauseating account of every ache, pain, and bodily function they experienced the previous week! They thoroughly enjoy describing their sickness no matter how long it takes.

Applying this spiritually, some people really do not want to be made well, using their illness as a reason not to make any effort of devotion to God or to overcome personal failings. In a milder example, some who have nothing contagious will often miss Sabbath services, yet they will show up for a social that evening or a sports activity the next day. It is really an issue of the heart, of sincerity and commitment to God. What ranks highest on our spiritual priority list? Do we really want the help God and Christ have to offer?