

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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The Audacity to Hope?

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Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama has campaigned on a message of hope and change, even titling one of his books, *The Audacity of Hope*. Despite his liberal views, this message of hope has rallied many Americans to his banner. Is the political hope that he is advocating the same kind of hope found in the Bible?

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The Second Commandment

Previously, we covered the keeping of the first commandment as having to do with the worship of the true God. He is the Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, and Provider of this universe, as well as the Source of the Christian way of life. Making sure that He is the Source of *our* values is of primary importance because the effects of wrong worship are disastrous. One effect is that, without the true worship of the true God, the standards and ideals of conduct in moral, ethical, and spiritual areas are left totally to human experience. In comparison to God, human experience is shallow, fallible, competitively and selfishly gained, and as history clearly shows, patently destructive of life.

Romans 1 provides a brief overview of the horrific effects of mankind turning its collective back on the Creator God. Verse 28 from the *Revised English Bible* reads, “Thus, because they have not seen fit to acknowledge God, he has given them up to their own depraved way of thinking [*reprobate mind*, King James Version] and this leads them to break all rules of conduct.” The term “reprobate mind” indicates a mind devoid of proper judgment. When God’s judgment against Adam and Eve went into effect, mankind’s choices in daily life became based almost entirely upon human experience.

This passage shows specifically what happens

when people leave the Source of true values out of their lives. They become like a pinball, wandering aimlessly and bouncing from one jolting experience to another. Perhaps humanity can be described as a bull in a china shop, breaking things at every turn and causing an incredible amount of destruction and pain without ever being able to compose itself to create a lasting, peaceful lifestyle. Put another way, people become like animals in a jungle, competing viciously to survive and to eat before they are eaten.

Paul exposes the consequences of a purely secular mind. When God is removed or removes Himself, mankind not only loses godliness, but also true humanity. This degeneration occurs because man is not seeking God. Christ, however, did not seek His own will: “And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him” (John 8:29). This is what made the difference between Christ and the rest of mankind, resulting in His judgment being completely unclouded.

This leaves us with the question, “How can a person discern truth in moral and spiritual areas if he already has the wrong source and is not consistently seeking the right One?” He cannot! John 7:15-17, 24 offers a biblical example of this truth:

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And the Jews marveled, saying, “How does this Man know letters, having never studied?” Jesus answered them, and said, “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. . . . Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”

The people could not perceive their murderous intentions. It is hoped that this confrontation helps us see the vast gap in understanding between the people, whose main source for values was human experience, and Jesus, whose source was God. Those confronting Jesus did not realize that they were being misled by their idolatry, as Paul reveals in Romans 1.

Israel's Idolatrous Example

Ezekiel 20:15-16 refers to a historical situation that shows idolatry's deceptive nature:

So I raised My hand in an oath to them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands, because they despised My judgments and did not walk in My statutes, but profaned My Sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols.

These verses summarize that Israel went into captivity and were scattered primarily as the result of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. As they were breaking those commands, did they believe that doing so would take them into captivity? Probably not, but we can believe it because God records it for our admonition! It is interesting that idolatry and Sabbath-breaking are linked, because the breaking of either leads directly to the breaking of the other.

We can see Ezekiel's general accusation against Israel's idolatry in the specific example of Judah in the writings of his contemporary, Jeremiah. This occurred just before Judah completely collapsed and the Jews were led into Babylonian captivity. At that time, God flooded the nation with godly prophets to give the people a final warning:

From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the LORD has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened. And the LORD has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said, “Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doing, and dwell in the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers

forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hand; and I will not harm you.” “Yet you have not listened to Me,” says the LORD, “that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt.” (Jeremiah 25:3-7)

Many prophets witnessed against the Jews, but no lasting repentance occurred. A key to understanding why nothing changed is found in verses 6-7 in the phrase, “provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands.” “Works of your hands” indicates concepts, ideas, and notions developed from their own minds, not from the Creator's. He refers, of course, to their idolatry. The deceptive nature of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking is such that their damaging effects are more subtle than other sins' effects. The pains of the penalties usually come so much later that most are unable to connect the true spiritual cause with the individual's or culture's moral and spiritual degeneracy.

If one lies, steals, or commits murder, the effects are almost always immediately evident, but this is not so with idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. With those who do not know God, breaking the first commandment leads to breaking the fourth. However, with the converted—those who know the truth—breaking the fourth can just as easily lead to breaking the first.

The Bible reveals that the effect of breaking the first commandment is to break the second, and eventually all the other commandments (James 2:10). In practical experience, this happens because, once a person is no longer responding to the Creator God's values, someone or something else has to be put in His place. Man will worship—that is, give his devotion to—something, and that something is more often than not himself and his own creations!

The Focus of Worship and Desires

Isaiah 40:9-31 is a long, descriptive challenge by the Creator God urging us to compare Him with anything else. By “us,” we should understand “the church” because verses 9-11 are symbolically addressed to the church using the imagery of Zion, Jerusalem, and Judah, all of which are types of the church.

The natural mind—at least partly because it is so physically oriented and tied to the five senses—cries out for something to *help* it worship God. However, nothing in man's imagination can qualify as such an aid because worshipping God in spirit and in truth requires faith and a spiritual connection to God. Thus, when a man devises an image of God other than the true One, a predictable effect takes place, as Psalm 78:40-41 reveals: “How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited

the Holy One of Israel.” God will be limited, in the person’s mind. He is far more than our minds can conceive, so the person will not trust God to the degree he should.

Every description God gives of Himself relates His attributes, the qualities of His mind and character. He is merciful, gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth (Exodus 34:6). How would a person exactly represent those powers on a piece of canvas, carve them into a piece of wood, or sculpt them in stone or metal?

II Timothy 3:1-2, 5 brings this subject right into our time: “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will . . . [have] a form of godliness but [deny] its power. And from such people turn away!” The state of religion in our time is dreadfully deficient. This description, closely paralleling Psalm 78:40-41, reveals a religion similar to true Christianity, but it is infected by a denial of His power! However, it is idolatry because the denial will not allow Him into a person’s life. It results in cultural situations similar to Ezekiel 20 and Jeremiah 25. We need to examine whether we are being affected by it.

Do we limit God in areas such as healing, marriage, childrearing, or tithing through fear that it will not work? Do we refuse to humble ourselves to trust Him in the keeping of His commandments? The basis of idolatry, other than ignorance, is that self-willed man refuses to surrender himself to worship God in the way God commands. Worship is our response to God. It occurs every day in our attitudes and the ways we conduct our lives, not just on the Sabbath and holy days. Prayer and Bible study are aspects of worshipping God. Tithing is part of worshipping God. So are our work ethic and our self-control in not stealing or lying.

Exodus 20:4-6 commands:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Some do not perceive the differences between the first and second commandments. However, the first stresses the uniqueness, the matchless distinctiveness of the Creator God. It draws attention to our obligation to the One without whom there would be no life or hope at all. He is also the Source of truth, right values, and standards that will produce right relationships and peaceful prosperity so that life is not merely lived but has the potential to contain great peace, joy, and accomplishment. Thus, the first commandment deals with *what* we worship.

In contrast, the second commandment covers the *way* we worship. The Father and Son are unique Individuals who come into our lives from beyond this physical realm. They are absolutely holy, pure, and undefiled, uncreated

and eternal. An idol, on the other hand, is someone or something of any other realm that we make and value, giving it devotion that rightfully belongs to the Creator.

John 4:24 instructs us regarding the way God desires that we worship Him: “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.” The second commandment regulates a specific area of idolatry; it deals with God’s spirituality. It thus involves our manner of worship in faith, most obviously in that it prohibits the use of physical “helps” or “aids” in worshipping the invisible, spiritual God.

John 1:18 states that no man has seen God at any time. Deuteronomy 4:15-16 provides an Old Testament parallel:

Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female.

Since no one has ever seen God, whatever is made to picture Him would be a work of man’s hands and a lie. It is helpful to recall that the Holy of Holies contained no representation of God. The Bible frequently uses the image of an altar to indicate the worship of God, yet, except for the Temple’s brazen altar, even they were to be made of simple turf or uncut stones (Exodus 20:22-26). Additionally, the second commandment prohibits the use of anything that represents God or could become an object of veneration. Thus, it prohibits any kind of likeness of Christ such as crucifixes, pictures, and statues.

Numbers 33:52 commands the Israelites, “. . . then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their engraved stones, destroy all their molded images, and demolish all their high places. . . .” This destruction was not to be wanton, but God intended it to involve only religious, worshipped things. Why?

Any representation of God changes Him into a different god from what He really is. Egypt, from whence Israel came, worshipped oxen, heifers, sheep, goats, lions, dogs, cats, monkeys, ibis, crane, hawks, crocodiles, serpents, frogs, flies, beetles, sun, moon, planets, stars, fire, light, air, and darkness. Very likely, an Egyptian could come up with “good” reasons why he did so. As related in the previous article, a man wrote in an email that he did not care whether the Bible said not to worship as the pagans do through the use of Christmas and Easter. He was going to do it anyway because it was *his* way of praising God. He is worshipping a god of his own design.

Idolatry, then, denies the true nature of God, so obedience to this commandment determines the *way* we worship. It must be in spirit and in harmony with His nature, which the Bible reveals. Knowing God’s true nature is important because we become what we worship. Thus, this commandment covers idolatry in a form in which the true God is worshipped through either a false image or a corrupt practice. This false representation perverts His reality. If we idolize, we become the wrong thing.

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Crucifixes and Holidays

Exodus 32:1-4 illustrates how something not directly connected to worship can be twisted into idolatry:

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

On the surface, they were not really seeking a change of gods, but a change of leaders. Some did not like Moses, and besides, he had disappeared. In their impatience, they moved to entrust their leadership to one who could introduce them to a god similar to what Moses had done. However, they immediately regressed to a god of Egypt because that was all they really knew.

Nevertheless, God and Moses were highly offended because, to them, making the Golden Calf was an Israelite attempt to define God's nature and to control Him according to their desires. The man who said he would keep Christmas regardless is doing the same thing except that he carries his false image in his mind.

In a similar way, the pope takes the people's ornaments of gold, silver, ivory, and precious stones, makes a crucifix or Madonna, and says it is only to keep God in mind. The principle, however, is exactly the same. It will not be long before people associate the image directly with God, and they need it to perform their prayers of praise and request. In this, the first and second commandments are directly broken.

The carnal emailer wrote, "It is *my way* of praising the Lord" (emphasis added). The carnal Israelites in Moses' day proclaimed "a feast to the LORD" (Exodus 32:5). Both justify themselves based on a false image of God's nature. In contrast, the spiritual God declared that the Israelites were corrupting themselves by worshipping the Golden Calf, and He showed His displeasure by destroying them. People corrupt themselves by defining God's nature to their own ends.

Mark 7:6-7 defines this travesty further: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the

commandments of men." Jesus joined battle with manmade supplements to God's Word, the works of men's hands. Traditional religious holidays are also done in God's name, but He is not in them. Despite the outward appearance of sincere piety in keeping them, they are a lie because they simply are not true to God's nature. Celebrating them contradicts a Christian's commitment to truth.

The traditions of which Jesus spoke directly distorted the law of God and thus the image of God. The law is a description of God's character, the image He wants us to carry in our minds and follow in our conduct. Christ repudiates every addition, subtraction, and distortion elevated to a specious "divine" authority.

We will take this a step further. Isaiah 1:13-15 describes an Israelite failing:

Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

The context gives no indication that the Israelites were not observing the Sabbath on the seventh day. Rather, their attitude and way they were observing it contrasted with God's desire. Carnally, man feels free to worship God as he good and well pleases. These attitudes, as well as the practices, break the second commandment.

This passage parallels Amos 5:21-27, which was preached about the same time as Isaiah 1:13-15. Both show crowds in a festive attitude, yet God rejects their "worship" as worthless. Their "holiness" was a sham because it was not backed by righteous conduct in their daily lives. The spirit behind their worship was wrong. Their futile sacrifices indicate their hypocrisies: These people had the morals of alley cats; eyes hot with lust and greed; and fortunes built on crime, envy, murder, and deceit. In reality, they were stingy, hateful gossipers who on the Sabbath appeared before God as if everything was okay.

What kind of a god would accept the conduct the Israelites exhibited? Certainly not the true God! They were going through the motions of punctilious observance, but their hearts were elsewhere, as their daily conduct showed. God is more concerned about right relationships between people than an overly scrupulous regard for formal worship on the Sabbath. Worship cannot be separated from the character and attitudes

(continued on page 16)

“AS A THIEF IN THE NIGHT”

As we slide further into the time of the end, and the bright summer days continue to be spiritually dark, it is common for us to look around for an indicator of how long it will be until Jesus Christ returns.

We might scan the horizon for any clue to how and when the end-time prophecies will be fulfilled and Christ will return. We watch events in the world continue to churn seemingly out of control, but we do not see many key prophecies being fulfilled.

In the parables, prophecies, and epistles, a phrase is used frequently with regard to the Day of the Lord and the return of Jesus Christ. Though it may vary slightly from verse to verse, numerous instructions are given to “*watch*, because the Day of the Lord [or else Christ Himself] will come *as a thief in the night*” (emphasis ours throughout). “Watch” in such instances does not mean what many think it means. It is tied closely with our Savior’s return, yet it has little to do with physical observation. Why is such watching important? What does it have to do with Christ returning as “a thief in the night?”

One oft-quoted “watching” verse is Luke 21:36: “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.” It is frequently interpreted to mean that we should be closely watching current events so we know how close we are to Christ’s return. The common paraphrase of this command is “watch world news, so that as you begin to see prophecy unfold, you can escape the horrors of the Tribulation.”

This interpretation has led to a cottage industry of sorts within the greater church of God. A tremendous amount of effort is put into commenting on world events and tying them into biblical prophecy. The underlying assumption is that God wants us to have

our finger on the pulse of the news, and this knowledge—combined with prayer—will make us worthy to escape all those prophesied things. But does this assumption agree with Scripture?

In fact, the Greek word translated “watch” has nothing to do with looking at events or keeping world news under close observation. Even without examining the underlying Greek, we can tell from the context that Jesus has something else in mind. Verse 36 begins, “Watch *therefore*,” signaling that it concludes or summarizes previous material. We cannot understand verse 36 until we know what preceded it.

KEEPING AN EYE ON NUMBER ONE

Verses 34–35 provide the context for Jesus’ command to “watch”:

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.

Clearly, Jesus’ message is not an admonition to watch world events so that we will know when He will return. Instead, His instruction is to watch *ourselves*, which is what “*take heed to yourselves*” suggests. He is talking about being vigilant about our own spiritual state, as well as being circumspect and spiritually awake as we go through life. The danger is that, if we do not “watch” ourselves—that is, continu-

prophecy watch *“As a Thief in the Night”*

ally take stock of our condition and responsibilities—self-indulgence and material concerns will distract us, and we will find ourselves spiritually unprepared when the end comes.

Luke 21:36, then, is not an injunction to be glued to CNN, FOX, the Drudge Report, or any other news source. In fact, a subtle danger exists in being too caught up in current events, as it can distract us from the more vital *spiritual* preparation. The upshot is that the Day will come, and we do not know when.

Watching events unfold is not what makes us “worthy to escape,” but our cooperation with God as He forms His character image in us does. Thus, in addition to prayer, we have to be vigilant in our covenant with Him. We have to “take heed” to ourselves constantly, examining our walk and how we are seeking and imitating God.

The Greek word translated “watch,” at its most basic, means “to be sleepless,” implying continuous and wakeful concern, such as being on watch when a loved one is ill. It means to be intent or to exercise constant vigilance over something, as a shepherd watches over his sheep or a leader watches over his charges (Hebrews 13:17). Watching signifies a state of being untouched by any influence that may cloud the mind; one “watching” guards against drowsiness or confusion. Hand-in-hand with “pray always,” it denotes being alert for spiritual dangers and beguilements. Obviously, this state will not transpire from following—or even deeply analyzing—current events.

Luke 12:35-40 provides a good illustration of watching:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning [that is, be prepared]; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. . . . And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

In verses 37-38, Jesus pronounces a blessing on those whom the Master finds watching *when* He returns. It is not that they have their noses pressed to the glass, watching *for* His return. Instead, those who are vigilant and careful in their responsibilities will be blessed. They are watching over the Master’s house, ensuring that all is in order, even if it means sleepless nights. “Be ready” in verse 40 is a simple summation of the “watching” He desires.

Verse 38 warns that He might return in the second watch or in the third. Regardless of whether the Master returns early or late (from our perspective), He wants His servants to be ready and His household in order. He wants them to

be maintaining the house, diligent in their duties, so that all is prepared for His return. If they spend their days staring out the window, watching the road for His return rather than fulfilling their duties, they will be neglecting what He has charged them to do.

The duties of a typical servant include many mundane, monotonous, and repetitive chores. It is easy for a servant to think, “What is the use? Do I *really* have to do this *right now*? Since there is no sign of the Master right now, perhaps I can just relax, and prepare quickly when His return seems near.” Such a servant would be inclined to spend more time watching from the window for the Master’s return than he would be performing his assigned tasks. Yet, a servant’s responsibility is to be prepared and to make sure the household (the church) is prepared, not to anticipate the timing of the Master’s return.

Jesus says repeatedly that we will not know. If we believe Him, our focus will be on being faithful and vigilant in the things He has given us to do. His return will take the household by surprise—there is no other way to understand His many statements. The critical point is the state of readiness and the usefulness of the household and the servants when He returns. If the household is not ready, or if the servants have been sleeping rather than working, they will face His wrath.

A STEWARD’S RESPONSIBILITY

In verses 42-47, the instruction to watch continues. However, this time Jesus focuses specifically on the responsibility of the steward—the one given authority over the household while the Master is away:

And the Lord said, “Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.”

His theme is preparation and faithful continuance of duty. He tasks the steward—a type of the ministry—with giving the household “food in due season.” Similarly, Paul outlines the responsibilities of church leadership in his letter to the Ephesians. Notice that the focus is on the church, not on the world: “And He Himself gave some to

be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, *for the equipping of the saints* for the work of ministry [service], *for the edifying of the body of Christ*. . .” (Ephesians 4:11-13). Church leaders are responsible for feeding and preparing God’s household and encouraging them to watch *themselves*.

If the steward does not properly watch, however, the human proclivity is to let down—and abuse. The steward in Luke 12:45 is focused on the Master’s return—or lack thereof—rather than on his own alertness and attention to his duties. As a result, he falls into excesses of eating and drinking (rather than providing food for the household). He ends up beating those he was supposed to watch over, as if he thought they belonged to him. Clearly, those who have stewardship responsibilities in the church have an added weight to “take heed to themselves” lest they neglect or even damage those for whom they are supposed to be providing spiritual food.

Mark 13:32-37 provides another illustration of watching:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. *Take heed, watch and pray*; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!

In this parable, it is even more apparent that the Master intends for the servants to be watchful—diligent, alert, taking heed to themselves—in their work and authority rather than for His return. Twice, He says that no one knows the timing of His return—not even Himself! Here, He tells us that we do not know the “day and hour,” but after His resurrection He expands this unknown variable to “times or seasons” (Acts 1:6-7).

So, even though we might be able to have a rough idea when that time draws near (see Matthew 24:32-33; Luke 21:29-31), in general, it is secret and indeterminable. Our time, then, is best spent focusing on our responsibilities before God rather than being caught up in the details of how it *might* unfold. These things are unknowable, but even if one *could* correctly anticipate them, it would all be for naught if the individual is not *spiritually prepared* for Jesus Christ’s return (see also Matthew 24:42-44).

COMING IN THE NIGHT

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) uses a different metaphor, but the critical admonition is the same. A cry awakens them all at midnight, but it leaves them no time for preparation—it announces the Bridegroom’s presence and commands them to meet Him. At that point, there is no opportunity to get things into shape

quickly—to grow hurriedly, overcome, develop a relationship with the Father and the Son, and take on their character image. The period of preparation has ended; the time that has been prepared for has come. The Bridegroom tells those who had not made advance spiritual preparations, “I do not know you.” They lose out on the opportunity that God had given to them because they would not watch themselves—not make the necessary preparations.

In I Thessalonians, Paul also addresses the Day of the Lord coming “as a thief in the night”:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. . . . But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 5:1-2, 4-9)

Like us, the return of Christ was much on the minds of first-century Christians, yet Paul tells them he felt no need to write concerning its timing. Why? Because they should have known that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. There was no point in Paul trying to outline it all, as it will happen at a time that nobody can anticipate.

However, he writes something that seems contradictory in verse 4: Since they are not in darkness, that Day should not “overtake [them] as a thief.” What is actually meant is that the day of God’s wrath would not *possess* them—literally, “take them over.” God’s wrath would not swallow them up, or the destruction of that Day does not need to *have power over them*. He does not mean that it would not *surprise* them, but as a parallel verse clarifies, “For God has not appointed us to wrath” (verse 9), even though they *will* be surprised.

Verse 6 contains the same admonition seen elsewhere to be awake, to be sober, and to watch. Though we are not *appointed* to wrath, other verses show that we can certainly still incur it if we are not taking heed to ourselves (see Hebrews 10:26-31). So we are instructed to watch—to be vigilant about our spiritual state, to have continuous and wakeful concern over fulfilling our part of the covenant, to be on guard against spiritual dangers, spiritual drowsiness, and deception. Those who do these things, along with praying always, will be accounted worthy to escape the wrath. Simply watching down the road for a sign of the Master’s return really does not prepare us for anything at all.

(continued on page 18)

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great by his wife, Malthrace, inherited the two regions of Galilee and Perea. Like his father, Antipas had great political wit, knowing how to work situations to his advantage. In terms of governance, he seems to have taken a page from Herod's example, placating whichever group needed to be appeased to keep the peace. Antipas was not, however, as ruthless nor as paranoid as his father. His subjects never revolted against him, but lived quietly under the tetrarch's rule. (*Tetrarch* is a Greek title given to governors of some Roman provinces.)

Herod Antipas may be one of the most important secular figures during the life of Jesus Christ, for he ruled in Galilee, the region where Jesus performed the majority of His ministry. Antipas is also the Herod responsible for the death of John the Baptist.

History has also remembered Antipas' impact on the ancient world: his avid continuation of Herod the Great's Hellenization. His greatest flaw was his lack of character, and as this study will show, this failing was his undoing.

Antipas' Struggle for Power

The story of Herod Antipas' reign opens amidst the turmoil surrounding his father's death. The year of 4 BC was filled with political, social, and religious chaos. Before his death, Herod the Great had written numerous wills, appointing different sons to different offices in each will. In his final will, he named Archelaus as king of Judea and his brothers, Antipas and Philip, as tetrarchs subject to the king.

Archelaus assumed this final will would be followed, making him king, but Antipas angled for the throne by claiming to be the rightful heir, citing his father's fifth will. Archelaus decided against appointing himself king and instead sailed to Rome to allow Emperor Augustus to appoint him. Antipas followed his brother and brought a suit against his brother before Augustus.

Before the brothers' departure, prominent men in the Jewish community began planning to revolt against the ruling Herods in revenge for Herod the Great's countless killings and offenses. Archelaus chose to deal with the revolt by killing 3,000 Jews on Passover. Believing the problem solved, Archelaus and Antipas embarked for Rome. However, while the brothers were abroad, the Jews' began a revolution that destroyed several cities (two of which Antipas would later rebuild), and the trouble did not end until Varus Sabinus, the Roman procurator of Syria, intervened.

Meanwhile, Archelaus and Antipas fought in court before Augustus for the throne of Judea. Archelaus undoubtedly considered his argument irrefutable: Herod clearly made him king. Simply refusing to accept this, Antipas made numerous charges against his brother before the emperor. He charged, first, that his brother was not an able ruler, citing his massacre of the 3,000 as evidence; second, that *he*, Antipas, had more support, as nearly all of Herod's family sided with him; and third, that Herod the Great was insane when he wrote his final will, his fifth will being the last one written while sane.

Ultimately, Augustus sided with Archelaus and made him ethnarch and his brothers, Antipas and Philip, he named as tetrarchs (the difference between ethnarch and king is that, as ethnarch, Archelaus would not be superior but equal to Antipas and Philip). Antipas lost his case because Augustus, having been counseled by a mutual friend of his and Herod the Great, ruled that Herod was sane when he wrote his final will.

In addition, the Herodians who pledged their support to Antipas were actually only against Archelaus. To them, Antipas was the lesser of two evils, and direct rule by the Romans was preferable. Thus, Antipas was advised by his influential aunt, Salome (not the Salome who asked for the head of John the Baptist) to take the offensive and not defend against Archelaus' accusations. Salome herself

HEROD ANTIPAS

“That Fox”

then argued before Augustus, in many ways costing Antipas the throne. However, she won land for herself in addition to the small portion she had been bequeathed by Herod, as well as a payment from Augustus.

This trial demonstrates the consistency of character in the Herodian family. From the first Herodian ruler, Antipater, to Herod the Great's sons, the Herods were voracious for political power and desired approval by and friendship with their Roman rulers at any cost. A notable exception was Herod Philip, whom history records to have been kind and benevolent to his subjects.

In the spring of 3 BC, Archelaus and Antipas returned from Rome to Judea to begin their independent reigns. Antipas proved himself an able ruler by maintaining relative peace within his two districts. Archelaus, on the other hand, was as oppressive as his father, though not as politically savvy. Antipas ruled for 43 years, while Archelaus was deposed in AD 7, during his tenth year. Archelaus' regions then came under direct Roman rule, and Pilate was eventually appointed procurator.

Back in the spring of 3 BC, Antipas returned to a Palestine ravaged by war. The revolutionaries, incited by Archelaus' massacre, were led by Judas the son of Hezekiah (whom Herod the Great had illegally put to death), and they destroyed as much Herodian property as possible until Roman troops ended their rampage. Once Rome's intervention settled the people, Antipas eased tensions by launching building projects to benefit his subjects.

He built three cities, two of which were significant to Jewish history and even to the life of Christ. Antipas rebuilt the destroyed city of Sepphoris in Galilee and Livias in Perea, and founded and built a new city, Tiberias, in Galilee, named after the Emperor Tiberius. Sepphoris was the location of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish high court), and it may have been a place of employment for Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, who lived only four miles southwest in Nazareth.

Antipas founded Tiberias around AD 20. It was possibly

the most historically important city built by *any* of the Herods, as it became both the center of government in Galilee and a center for Greek culture in Judea. Antipas' two regions, Galilee and Perea, contained a large majority of Jews, but because of Antipas' Hellenization, he was able to direct his subjects' allegiance to Rome, resulting in relative peace in his regions and good standing in the eyes of Rome.

Antipas and John the Baptist

Herod Antipas is more significant to Christians for his direct involvement in the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. To follow the chronological order of events, Antipas' involvement in John the Baptist's life must be considered first, and it begins with a theme familiar to the Herods: marriage for political interest.

Around AD 27, Antipas married the daughter of Aretas IV, the king of Nabataea, a region just south of Perea that often contended with Antipas' regions. The relationship between the regions was not overtly violent, but war always threatened. Antipas' marriage to the Nabatean princess won the favor of Aretas, but more important to Antipas, he gained security.

However, two years later, Antipas left for Rome with his brother, Philip (not the tetrarch). They were accompanied by Philip's wife, Herodias, who, as the daughter of Herod the Great's first wife's son, Aristobulus, was both Philip's and Antipas' niece. Antipas became enamored of Herodias and asked for her hand in marriage, and she accepted on the condition that Antipas divorce the Nabatean princess. Somehow catching wind of Antipas' plan, the princess fled to her father's court. Predictably, Aretas took severe offense to Antipas' caprice and began nurturing a grudge against the tetrarch.

Between AD 28 and 29, after Antipas and Herodias had married and returned to Palestine, John the Baptist began

his ministry (see Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; John 1). In AD 30, Antipas imprisoned John. Matthew 14:3-4 and Mark 6:17-18 both state that he did this in response to John's public denouncement of Antipas' marriage, which violated the marriage laws established in Leviticus 20:21. Herodias also took great offense, hating John from then on.

Josephus adds that John was imprisoned because of the political threat he posed in accumulating a faithful following and proclaiming a soon-coming King. Such a threat may have reminded Antipas of his father's last few years, when a new "King of the Jews" was born.

In AD 31, Antipas put to death the man about whom Jesus said, "None greater was born." At a birthday celebration in honor of Antipas, Herodias' daughter, Salome, was sent to dance before the men, and she performed so well that Antipas granted her a wish. At her mother's bidding, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. Antipas—whom Matthew says was saddened by this request, and whom Mark records had even developed a friendship with John while he held him in prison—kept his promise to Salome and executed the innocent prophet.

This episode reveals much about Antipas' character. As noted above, he had imprisoned John, not only because of his seeming political threat, but also because he and his wife took offense to John's righteous judgment. Unlike Herod the Great, Antipas did not ruthlessly slaughter, but he did throw an innocent man in his dungeon mostly because of his wife's feelings (Matthew 14:3). Secondly, Antipas kept John, as stated in Mark 6:20, knowing *who* he was, a holy and just man. Finally, Antipas was foolish enough to grant his stepdaughter an unconditional wish.

These actions show that Antipas had little moral fiber or personal conviction, but was pliable and easily influenced. It is no mystery why, in Luke 13:32, Jesus called Antipas "that fox" (compare Ezekiel 13:4; Songs of Songs 2:15). Jesus saw straight through Antipas: The tetrarch used his intellect and power for personal gain, even if it meant putting a righteous man to death to smooth relations between himself and his spouse.

Antipas and Christ

Antipas played as important a role in the life of Jesus Christ as he did in the life of John the Baptist. Not only did Antipas eventually participate in Jesus' trial, but Antipas' regions, specifically Galilee, were the geographical context of much of His ministry. For example, Antipas' heavy taxation of Galilee created a gaping divide between economic classes: The rich—who were very wealthy—lived far better than the poor, with no middle-class as we would understand it today.

Thus, when Christ told the rich young man to give everything to the poor and follow Him (Matthew 19:21), the instruction and principle would have struck the Galileans quite hard, since they knew how destitute the

living conditions were for the vast majority of the region's population. In addition, this economic context would have caused all Galileans to consider the true value of the Kingdom Jesus preached, especially if the upper crust were willing to give up their vaunted status to obtain it.

Antipas' direct encounter with Jesus is recorded in Luke 23:6-12. After Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, and questioned by the Jews, He was brought before Pilate. Pilate asked if Jesus was a Galilean. He was following a Roman law that required criminals to be tried by the governor of the region in which their offense was committed. This law, however, had lost its official status, and by asking this and then sending Jesus to Antipas, Pilate was being uncharacteristically kind to a man with whom he had a history of strife.

Why did Pilate do this? Perhaps, not believing Jesus was guilty (Luke 23:14), he sent Jesus to Antipas because he did not want the guilt of wrongfully condemning an innocent Man. Or, possibly Pilate did not feel adequately informed as a Roman to judge a Man whose accusers were of the Jewish religious community. To Pilate, Antipas would have been better suited to weigh the merits of the case.

Jesus appeared before Antipas in Jerusalem, for the tetrarch was in the capital for Passover. Antipas again shows his true character in Luke's short passage. At first, Antipas is excited that Christ is brought before him, hoping to be entertained by a miracle. Then Herod engages in an interrogation to which Jesus refuses to respond, most likely because Antipas—"that fox"—asked questions in such a way that, if answered, would entrap Jesus. After both of his expectations fail to materialize, Antipas "treated Him with contempt and mocked Him." Like a child, the tetrarch became upset when Jesus did not do what he wanted.

Despite this, he determined that Jesus was innocent of all the charges the Jews raised against Him. Antipas returned Pilate's politically polite gesture and sent Jesus back to the Roman procurator. It is interesting to note that this mutual show of politeness healed the strife in the two rulers' relationship (Luke 23:12). Also fascinating is that both Pilate, a legalistic, fully Hellenized pagan and foreigner to Palestine, *and* Antipas, a half-Jewish tetrarch who spent most of his life in Judea—both examining Christ from differing perspectives—found Jesus Christ completely innocent, a historic testament to His perfection.

Antipas' Final Years

About five years later, Herod Antipas' fall from power began. The events leading to his downfall were all caused by his own actions. First, in AD 36, Aretas IV, whose daughter Antipas had abandoned for Herodias, launched a successful invasion of Perea. When Emperor Tiberius heard about this, he ordered Vitellius, a

(continued on page 15)

The Audacity to Hope

“For we were saved
in this hope, but hope
that is seen is not
hope; for why does
one still hope for
what one sees?”
—*Romans 8:24*

The subject of hope is much in the news these days, due in great part to American presidential candidate Barack Obama, who has been called the “candidate of hope.” A sermon titled “The Audacity to Hope,” given by his then-pastor, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, almost 20 years ago, supposedly greatly inspired Mr. Obama. I use the term “supposedly” because, in his comments recently, he says he did not hear much of what his minister said over the many years that he sat in his church.

Nevertheless, he must have heard at least this one sermon because he has appropriated a form of the title—*The Audacity of Hope*—for his own book and speeches. The transcript of this sermon is readily available, and it is very well done. Dr. Wright begins with a description of a George Watts painting entitled “Hope.” It shows a bandaged woman with a broken harp, sitting on top of the world. Dr. Wright verbally paints a vivid picture of all that the artist was trying to convey. He then moves on to the story of Hannah from I Samuel 1.

Throughout the sermon he weaves the theme of hope. This wounded woman, he says, despite her obviously sad state, has the audacity to pluck the one remaining string on her harp in praise to God. Hannah, as well, had the audacity to hope and pray when, says Wright, “there was no visible sign . . . that what she was praying for, hoping for, and waiting for would ever be answered in the affirmative.”

Some readers may have seen the YouTube clips of Dr. Wright preaching. He is lively to say the least, not to mention profane and angry. His style is so energetic that one might miss the meaning of his words.

Not long ago, my son Cody and I went to the funeral of the mother-in-law of a friend. We sat near the back, in our black suits and white shirts, while everyone else was in their best T-shirts and windbreakers. The Pentecostal minister doing the service had not known this lady, but he did not let that stop him from preaching her up to heaven anyway. The funeral service was nothing more than his previous Sunday’s altar call with a few modifications.

However, the man was animated, emotional, and demonstrative while speaking without notes or opening his Bible. He bounced all over the stage, and at one point, his waving arms knocked an empty plastic water pitcher down onto the top of the closed coffin! He was not on a par with Dr. Wright,

ready answer *The Audacity to Hope*

but in his own simple, country way, he got the job done.

Cody had never experienced preaching like this, and he said later that he could see how people would buy into this kind of religious hype. An observer does not pay enough attention to the words because he is so busy watching the show. Highly charged and emotional sermonizing can sway people, but are they listening to the words or are they watching the show?

The Uncertainty of Hope?

Senator Obama is a highly effective public speaker. The speech he gave in Philadelphia, addressing the flare-up over his pastor, was good, even very good. He first came to national attention when giving the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. That speech, too, was very well done. The words push all the right buttons, and they were delivered so well! At one point he said, “We worship an awesome God.” Speaking of hope, his rhetoric soars:

Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God’s greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead.

The words sound good, do they not? These words, if they stood alone, are true. Yet, just as a minister might spring around on a stage and lift a verse out of context to “prove” his point, we must look at the context here also. Remember, Senator Obama was introducing John Kerry as the Democrat candidate for President at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when he said these things.

After invoking God, and quoting a piece of Hebrews 11:1, he continues:

I believe we can give middle class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. I believe that we have a righteous wind at our backs, and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices and meet the challenges that face us.

All this will happen, he then goes on to say, if the people elect John Kerry and John Edwards.

Notice how “we the people,” led by his nominees, can do all this? What happened to our “awesome God”? It appears that what hope means to God’s called-out ones and what it means to the rest of the world are two different things. If one of God’s elect is out of work, it is not to government that he will look for help in finding a job. The same is true if he is homeless or his children are drug

addicts and running with gangs. The government is the last place he would look for help! The hope of a member of the Body of Christ is in God and His promises.

This is not true for most, however. The people of this world view hope as some future thing that they are uncertain of attaining. They want more money, a luxury car, a beautiful home, or whatever else they greatly desire, but they may or may not get it. *Webster’s Dictionary* says that “hope implies little certainty but suggests confidence or assurance in the *possibility* that what one desires or longs for will happen” (emphasis ours). Is that how *we* define hope?

Expecting Good

Dr. Jeremiah Wright ended his sermon on “The Audacity to Hope” with these words: “And that’s why I say to you, hope is what saves us. Keep on hoping; keep on praying. God does hear and answer prayer.” Is there anything to disagree with there? No, not at all. If this were all we ever read or heard from this man, we would have no dispute with him. Unfortunately, much of his other rhetoric is vile and hateful.

He again quotes from the apostle Paul without reference, “Hope is what saves us.” We could take a bit of exception to this statement, as it leaves much unsaid, but it is a true statement nonetheless. Paul writes this in Romans 8:24: “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?”

The archaic meaning of *hope* in the English language is “to have confidence or trust,” while the current meaning is “to *wish* for something with expectation of its fulfillment.” Over time, words can experience “semantic drift,” meaning simply that their definition morphs. It is the word “wish” in the modern definition that dilutes what hope should mean to us. When politicians speak of hope, they are merely creating “wish lists.” Government will make our lives better by giving us stuff. No personal responsibility is required on our parts; we need simply to hold out our hands, and we *hope* it will be filled.

The New Testament uses only one Greek word, *elpis*, for “hope.” Its verb form is *elpizo*. It means “expectation of good”—not a wish that something good will fall into our laps but a full expectation of good to come, especially in a religious sense.

These words are found over eighty times in the New Testament, though they are not always translated as “hope.” Sometimes, especially in older translations, they are translated “faith” or “trust.” Whereas the current meaning of “hope” lends itself to wishing, its original sense was to trust and have faith. *Elpis*, according to one lexicon, is synonymous with faith. The King James Version translates *elpizo* as “to trust” eighteen times.

In the King James Version, Hebrews 10:23 reads, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith [*elpis*] without wavering; (for He is faithful that promised).” Most mod-

ern versions have translated it literally as “hope.” The great American scholar Noah Webster is said to have known at least fifteen languages (and some claim as many as twenty-six), including Hebrew and Greek. He published his translation of the Bible in 1833. In many places, he changed the wording of the King James, but he left the word “faith” in verse 23.

Paul tells us to hold *elpis* fast, without wavering. Can we do that with a wish? No, not really. But if our hope is in God’s promises, if our faith is in God and His unbreakable Word, then, yes, holding fast is possible.

Commentators Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown remark on this verse, “Hope . . . is indeed faith exercised as to the future inheritance. Hope rests on faith; at the same time quickens faith, and is the ground of bold confession.” One might say it is a matter of convictions versus preferences: The hope of the apostle Paul was born of conviction, while the hope of political rhetoric is a preference.

Faith and Hope

The problem with the catchphrase “the audacity to hope” is that it removes faith from the picture. Jeremiah Wright says that Hannah had “the audacity to keep on hoping and praying when there was no visible sign . . . that what she was praying for, hoping for, and waiting for would ever be answered in the affirmative.” In other words, she had the boldness, the daring, the courage, the nerve—even the *gall*—to pray and keep on praying. The implication is that God had given her no indication that He was listening, but she had the bravery to pray nonetheless.

This is taking hope in the wrong direction—toward wishing. Hope is not based on the audacity to make the request, but on faith that God is true (John 3:33) and that His Word cannot be broken (John 10:35).

Many will have seen an old movie where an orphan

comes to live with a kindly aunt, and the aunt says to the child, “I trust you will be happy here.” She means, “I expect you will,” “I believe you will,” “I have every confidence you will,” and “I *hope* you will be happy here.” To hope is to trust. To trust in someone is to have faith in that person.

Extending this principle, we could say that to have faith in someone is to love that person. To have faith, trust, and hope in another, we have to know him. We must have a relationship with him, believe in him, and what he represents. This is especially true with God.

Can anyone outside the Body of Christ truly have hope? Paul gives us the “big three” virtues in I Corinthians 13:13: faith, hope, and love. Clearly, they are all connected.

Notice Romans 8:24-25 again: “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, then we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” The King James reads, “We *are* saved by hope,” meaning that our hope is so strong that it supports us. Adam Clarke says of this verse, “We are supported and are comfortable in the expectation we have of receiving from the hand of our God all the good we need in the troubles and adversities of this life, and of having our bodies raised from corruption.”

“The audacity to hope” implies that we really have no reason to hope. No sign has been given from above that anyone is listening, yet we boldly hope nonetheless. This may be true for those in the world—and it is undoubtedly true for those waiting for the government to improve their lives. But this is not true for us. We are saved by our hope, a hope so strong that it carries us and supports us through trials.

We do not come out of this world and its politics because of a wish or a dream, but rather, we come out of sin as a response to the hope, the trust, and the faith that God has given us.

—Mike Ford

Herod Antipas: “That Fox”

(continued from page 12)

Roman general in Syria, to reclaim the region.

However, the previous year, after Vitellius made a treaty with Parthia and set off to deliver it to Tiberius, Antipas hurried to reach the emperor first with news of the treaty and took credit for its success. In AD 36, then, Vitellius was less than eager to help Antipas. Further, in the following March, Tiberius died, leaving the throne to his grandnephew, Gaius. Vitellius then completely abandoned his efforts to help Antipas, leaving Perea occupied.

Also during that year, the new Emperor Gaius gave Agrippa—Herodias’ brother and Antipas’ nephew—the region Herod Philip had ruled up until AD 34. Agrippa had been educated in Rome, and through family connections, grew up as a close friend of Gaius. Agrippa accrued so much debt growing up in Rome that Tiberius, who must have seen him as a parasite, forced him to return to Palestine. After Tiberius’ death, Agrippa requested politi-

cal promotion from his old friend, which was granted.

Finally, Herodias advised Antipas to follow Agrippa’s example and request the title of king from Gaius. Antipas decided to go to Rome and appear before Gaius. What neither Herodias nor Antipas knew was that Agrippa had sent a letter to Gaius that accused Antipas of secretly planning a rebellion against Rome with her long-standing nemesis, the Parthians. Roman historians record that Antipas approached the emperor’s throne as Gaius was reading Agrippa’s letter. The emperor, trusting his friend, promptly exiled Antipas to Gaul, giving Galilee and Perea to Agrippa.

So ended the political life of Herod Antipas, who received no less than he deserved for his intrigues and unrighteous acts. In the end, “that fox” was outfoxed by a man of even baser character than his own.

—Joseph Bowling

personal *The Second Commandment*

(continued from page 6)

displayed in daily life. It is a person's reaction to God all through the week, not just on the Sabbath, that matters. We cannot mock God and somehow believe that we will get away with it.

In Isaiah 2:5-18, God testifies of a culture immersed in all sorts of idolatry. He sees a people enslaved by the superstition of astrology—they do not seek God's judgment, but they will seek and do what the omens read! Their material success has produced a self-confidence that deceives them into believing that God is unnecessary. This chapter reveals what resides at the foundation of much idolatry—*pride*, as expressed in the phrases, "The lofty looks of man" and the "haughtiness of men." Pride drives mankind to resist God, so they will not submit to the way He wants our response—our worship—done.

So far we have learned about this commandment:

- The most obvious form of idolatry is the worship of a false god using a material representation. The idol does not begin by being a god, but a symbol of the god, and its function is to make the worship of the god easier. Soon, though, people are worshipping the symbol rather than the reality behind it (Acts 19:23-28, 35).
- Some have deluded themselves into thinking that as long as they are sincere they can adapt into Christianity almost any practice, as has been done with Christmas, Easter, Halloween, etc. However, those who do this have, in effect, made their own religion (John 4:23-24; Mark 7:6-7).
- The first commandment concerns *what* we worship. When the first commandment is broken, it prepares a path for the breaking of the second, which deals with the *way* we worship.

Idolatry and the Tenth Commandment

Paul writes in Colossians 3:5, "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." This definition of the tenth commandment has sobering ramifications. Covetousness, the unlawful desire to obtain, sets a person up for pursuing extreme acquisitiveness.

The actual mechanics of the process begin when the individual creates an idol in his mind in order to get something: a spouse, money, power, praise—even a feeling. None of these things are inherently evil, but in the process of achieving them, the person gradually allows the desire to have them to so dominate him that possessing them becomes his only worthwhile activity in life.

For a time, it actually shapes his existence. In desire's grip, he increasingly becomes consumed by it until he is committing other sins in order to achieve his aim. He will lie,

steal, or ignore his spouse and children. The desire to get ultimately takes the place of God in many facets of his life, which affects the way that person responds to the true God.

Ephesians 5:5-7 declares this sin's seriousness:

For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.

This is not a sin to fool with! The essential nature of this idolatry is selfishness, the worship of the self. A person's desire becomes the object of his affections and devotion.

The emailer mentioned earlier in regard to Christmas knows the truth, but he certainly does not understand what "bow down" and "serve" indicate, as the commandment states. He is serving, bowing down, to his false image of Christ. *Bow* means "to bend the neck or waist," and it is usually done to indicate reverence, worship, assent, or submission. *Serve* means "to work for, promote the interests of, aid, help, obey, wait upon, or satisfy the requirements of." He is doing both to the god of the Christmas tree.

There are at least three forms of idolatry: The first occurs when the true God is rejected outright, and the individual's devotion is completely given over to another. The second happens when a person uses an aid in defiance of the second commandment. The third form breaks the spirit—the intent of—the law. The ramifications of breaking the spirit of this law are almost endless, as it could involve any other commandment that is habitually broken because of a lack of self-control. One can do this even while worshipping the true God.

A simple desire becomes coveting—a lust—when it drives us to sin in other areas of life. The sin may be actively or passively committed. Suppose we ask God for something He has promised, something good that He desires us to have—perhaps prosperity or healing. If our desire for that good thing becomes greater than our desire to submit to the way He says we must live in order to be prospered, it will motivate us to use carnal, sinful means to satisfy our lust. Did not Abraham do something similar in his desire to have a son?

This is the essence of the sin of covetousness and reveals why it is idolatry. God permits us to serve ourselves equal to the degree that we serve others. But if we serve ourselves at the expense of others—including God—and without regard for breaking God's other commandments, it raises mere desire to covetousness and then to idolatry. This idolatry is clearly serving the self.

Jeremiah 17:5-13 provides excellent counsel regarding holding desire in check while waiting for God to provide:

Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in

man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. For he shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when good comes, but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land which is not inhabited. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes; but its leaf will be green, and will not be anxious in the year of drought, nor will cease from yielding fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings. As a partridge that broods but does not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by right; it will leave him in the midst of his days, and at his end he will be a fool." A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You shall be ashamed. "Those who depart from Me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters."

God called us to glorify Him through faith, which we show by giving ourselves in obedience to Him, patiently waiting for Him to provide, and learning to serve, to give as He gives. We cannot truly be committed to God if we are serving only ourselves because, as Jesus says, "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). Psalm 37:34 adds, "Wait on the LORD and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it."

Romans 7:8-9 shows that even the learned Paul did not fully understand the spiritual aspects of God's law until God converted him: "But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died." Lust is idolatry because it is serving the self despite what God says. Mere desire becomes idolatry when we willingly, through self-centered foolishness, push aside more important responsibilities to God and men to achieve what we have our hearts set on.

The apostle writes in Ephesians 2:3, "Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others." Idolatry through lust is related directly to Satan and the *cosmos* he established. He accomplished this because the unconverted see little reason to hold desires in check. In fact, human nature is a perfect vehicle for expressing lust.

Because the unconverted human heart lacks a believing, understanding knowledge of God and His purpose, it relentlessly pursues its desires to serve the self at the expense of anybody in its way. As a result, the world is filled with crimes of lying, stealing, murder, rape, muggings, car-jackings, house-breakings, vandalism, Sabbath-break-

ing, corporate greed, and war.

In contrast, Christianity is a way of life designed to suit God's purpose: to produce godly character, to bring glory to Him through the Holy Spirit, and to bless His people with health and wealth in both physical and spiritual areas in the right measure and according to His purposes. Those who know and believe this and trust Him will hold their desires in check to please Him, thus avoiding idolatry.

Fulfill Any Desire?

Paul teaches in I Corinthians 6:9-12:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

How can Paul give a long list of conduct forbidden by God, and then say, "All things are lawful for me"? Does he have a special dispensation to commit sin? Can any Christian have the same privileges Paul seems to enjoy? What does he mean, "All things are lawful for me"?

First, it is helpful to understand that the phrase is better translated as, "I have permission to do anything," "I am free to do anything," or "I may do anything." This removes the strict sense of law and legality that the word "lawful" suggests. Paul is referring to our God-given free-moral agency. This liberty to sin appears in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, where God says we are free to choose either death or life, but He commands us to choose life, clearly implying that we are also free to choose death! History reveals that mankind, under the power of Satan, human nature, and this world, has overwhelmingly chosen death, becoming slaves to wrong choices.

When God calls us, He opens our minds to our nature, the serious purpose of life, the certainty of death, and the sacrifice of Christ for us. We may freely choose to take advantage of God's offer, enter into a covenant with Him, and receive His Spirit, and He frees us from our slavery to Satan, human nature, sin, and death. This begins the process of becoming permanently free from our slavery to wrong choices. Once in this position, we can see why Paul says, in paraphrase, "As a son of God, I still have permission to do anything, but not everything is helpful, or expedient, to fulfilling God's purpose for me if I desire to fulfill the covenant and enter God's Kingdom."

He then makes the strong statement, paraphrasing verse 12, "I will not allow myself to be mastered by human nature's lustful desires. I will control myself because, otherwise, I'd just be serving myself, not God or my fellow men."

I Corinthians 9:27 confirms Paul strong desire and efforts to guard himself against sin: “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

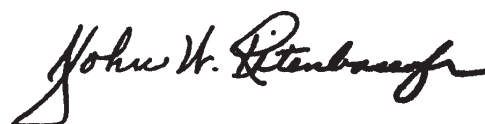
He writes in Romans 14:22-23: “Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.” Happy—blessed—is the person who overcomes lust, which in reality is idolatry, because it affects the way he worships God.

It is crucial that we have a conscience that does not condemn us. A great deal of guilt and self-condemnation comes from failing to live up to what we know we should do but fail to do because we are serving our own lusts. We

cannot worship God with love, joy, enthusiasm, zeal, and deep devotion with a defiled conscience. In this regard, a helpful rendering of God’s advice to Cain in Genesis 4:7 is, “If you do well, shall not your countenance be lifted?”

A person who really knows God through a combination of communication with Him in prayer, knowledge of Him through study, and an understanding of Him through obedience needs no material representations of Him. Such people know His truth, character, and purpose. They believe them and trust Him, and their minds are at peace.

In Christian love,



“AS A THIEF IN THE NIGHT”

(continued from page 9)

LETTER TO SARDIS

Finally, Jesus writes this same message to a portion of the end-time church:

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.’” (Revelation 3:1-3)

After calling them essentially the “church of the mostly dead,” He instructs them to “be watchful.” He complements this with, “strengthen the things which remain,” which qualifies the meaning of “watch.” There is still a glimmer of life within this church, but the letter gives the impression that they have relaxed in their spiritual responsibilities so much that they are nearly comatose. They have not been vigilant in their core responsibilities or on guard against deception, apathy, or neglect. They have not had sleepless nights over their standing with God.

Interestingly, in the Bible’s first mention of the Day of the Lord (Isaiah 2:12), it says that it “shall come upon everything *proud* and *lofty*, upon everything *lifted up*—and it shall be brought low.” The primary target is the proud—the self-assured. The ironic thing is that this state of spiritual near-death could easily come about even while they are avidly watching world events. They could be quite adept at following the news reports and may know better than anyone what is really going on in the world and how

it fits with prophecy.

But that does not fulfill Christ’s and the apostle’s commands to *watch*! It is not that it is wrong to keep tabs on world news, but watching world news is chiefly about *observing*. True watching emphasizes *diligence*; it is being *alert* to *spiritual* dangers more than physical ones. It is about faithfully carrying out our God-given responsibilities, like a servant in the Master’s house. None of that results from simply being a news- or prophecy-addict.

In verse 3, He tells them to call to mind the previous lessons and instructions they have heard. He tells them to repent and to guard and maintain their position so they backslide no further. As before, His description gives little indication of spiritual vibrancy or zeal. There probably *is* a great deal of activity, since He says that they have a name—or reputation—for being alive. Yet, in the areas that truly matter—like growth, faith, seeking God, and overcoming—not much is happening.

He also warns them that, if they will not watch *themselves* and their covenant responsibilities to their Master, He will come upon them like a thief. He implies that they will not be counted worthy to escape. They may not be appointed to wrath as the world is, but they certainly are not immune to it. In fact, they stand a good chance of experiencing some of it, having not been vigilant and alert in watching over the things that God has given them.

Plainly, Christ will return when we do not expect Him. We may be able to observe some general indicators when key prophecies are fulfilled, but the overall timing will be a mystery. His coming will be like a thief in the night, *purposefully* hidden from all. Rather than trying to discern the timing, we are instructed to “watch”—not world events, but to *watch over* all that God has given to us, so that when that Day arrives, we are ready. He knows that if we are faithful in little—in the mundane, the monotonous, the unexciting—we will also be faithful in the truly great things that lie ahead.

—David C. Grabbe

Geopolitics: Scope and Limitations

Politics among nations has been occurring since ancient times. Ever since one government needed to interact with another—whether because of a boundary dispute, rival claims to a resource, or fear of a powerful neighbor—some kind of intergovernmental relations have sought means to forge solutions for mutual benefit. These relations take various forms: exchanging diplomats, signing treaties, making alliances, voicing accusations and threats, or perhaps dispatching a hostile army or navy.

Philosophers have been studying such relations for many centuries. For instance, Plato's *Republic* is his vision of the perfect society and in part deals with how rulers should conduct the affairs of state. Scholars of every major empire and nation have weighed in on the subject, from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* to Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Today, a steady stream of books and papers on foreign policy flows from the minds of pundits, politicians, and academics the world over.

While there are many theories of international relations, perhaps the most pragmatic and even scientific is what is known as *geopolitics*. The central idea of geopolitics is that geography—along with demography and economics—is the determining factor of any nation's relations. In other words, *where* a nation is, along with the composition of its population and its natural resources, will indicate how it will act and react on the world stage. In some cases, a nation will have no choice but to behave in a certain way simply because of its location on the globe.

Japan is a prime example of geopolitical reality. It is a mountainous island nation with a relatively large, well-educated population and a high standard of living. However, it is resource-poor, especially in mineral resources that form the basis of its high-tech industries. To feed and supply its people, then, it must rely on other nations to provide a great deal of food and resources.

Japan thus has two alternatives: It must either use force to take what it needs or trade peacefully with its neighbors. Imperial Japan tried the former method early in the twentieth century and ultimately failed, seeing two of its large cities evaporated by atomic weapons. Democratic Japan since World War II has been far more successful in employing peaceful trade. While the pendulum could swing back to militarism, it is far more likely that Japan's foreign policy decisions will continue to favor peaceful trade as long as it remains a viable means of prosperity. This is especially true due to its security guarantees with the United States and its formidable navy.

Biblically, the land of Israel is another example of practical geopolitics. In essence, it stands at the center of the world. The great Western civilizations of the past—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—ranged about it, and in order to expand their territories, these empires had to cross the narrow land-bridge of the land of Canaan. There, they would encounter the descendants of Israel.

Israel's history is in many ways a record of the rise and fall of these empires and their impact on God's people. When the dominant empire of the time was weak, Israel could strengthen itself and expand, but when the empire was strong, Israel usually suffered humiliating defeat and subjugation. In their carnality, many Israelite kings were trapped by geopolitics to reveal their real loyalties. God used this ebb and flow of international power to great effect in leaving good and bad examples of faithfulness for us.

Geopolitics even constrains a global superpower like the current United States. Despite having an overwhelmingly powerful military by several orders of magnitude, it can only project its power along the lines of its geopolitical advantages. As alluded to earlier, the United States is primarily a sea power—even its vaunted air power is dependent on the reach of its naval strength. This means that long-term military actions far from American shores pose a significant problem for shapers of U.S. foreign policy.

The geopolitical limitations of this became apparent in the Iraq War in 2003. American firepower made quick work of the Iraqi army and air force, but the subsequent Iraqi insurgency revealed the Achilles' heel of U.S. power. It was terribly effective at invasion but embarrassingly unprepared as an occupying force. Ultimately, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld lost his job due to miscalculating the geopolitics of invading a turbulent Middle Eastern nation like Iraq from 6,200 miles away.

Such geopolitical constraints help to predict the foreign policies of different administrations. In effect, policy differences will be minor from one President to another because the nation's geography, demography, and economy are either fixed or vary only marginally. In reality, basic American foreign policy has changed little since the Truman administration, no matter which political party happened to control the Oval Office.

Every Chief Executive is forced by geopolitical reality and entrenched State Department policies to protect and expand American power throughout the world against the same rogues' gallery of nations. Hence, only so much leeway to act exists, and it is usually revealed, not in policy, but in a President's resolve, as can be seen in the stark disparity between Jimmy Carter's pacifism and Ronald Reagan's intransigence. As this example indicates, a President's personality can make a huge difference.

Geopolitics, then, gives us a starting template to view the world and to attempt to predict the actions of nations. It is not perfect, and exceptional personalities can arise to shake the assumptions of even the most experienced observers. True Christians await the rise of just such a dominating and paradigm-shifting individual in the Beast (Revelation 13:1-10; 17:9-17). We can be certain that he will turn today's geopolitics on its head.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Withered Hand (Part One)

In a synagogue in an unknown town in Galilee, Jesus Christ healed a man with a withered hand, of which three of the Gospel writers give an account (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11). Mark tells us that Jesus “entered *again* into the synagogue” (Mark 3:1), indicating that this was His usual custom each Sabbath. Luke (Luke 4:16; 6:6) and John (John 18:20) inform us that Christ regularly taught in the synagogue service. Jesus, then, regularly attended Sabbath services, and in doing so, He was a familiar figure who spoke and took part in the worship of God.

More than irritating Him, it angered Christ to hear the Pharisees and Sadducees misconstrue and burden the people with their misinterpretation of the law of God, by which they loaded it with trivial laws and overly restrictive rules. Luke records another situation, which is indicative of their approach: “But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day’” (Luke 13:14). They had perverted the Sabbath into a day of miserable constraint instead of its true intent, which is to free people from the pressures of the world, allowing them to have a personal relationship with their Creator. The accumulation of superstitious rites had exchanged the spiritual for mere ceremonial obedience.

In sharp contrast, God made the Sabbath for mankind, not mankind for the Sabbath, and He appointed Christ as its Lord (Mark 2:27-28). God intends that people use the Sabbath to rest physically from their normal work, but more importantly, to receive spiritual rest and to improve their relationship with Him and their worship of Him. For God’s people, the Sabbath is an eagerly anticipated spiritual sanctuary from the material worries and activities of the world.



1. What was the mood of the Pharisees when Christ entered the synagogue? Matthew 12:10, 14; Mark 3:1-2; Luke 6:7, 11.

COMMENT: On this particular occasion, the Pharisees were at the synagogue ready to entrap Jesus for His use of the Sabbath. When He came to the man with the withered hand, they watched and waited, suggesting that the Pharisees expected Christ to intervene and heal the man. They resolved that no matter what He did, they would find fault with it, to use it as the ground of an accusation before the local tribunal. The rabbis allowed Sabbath healing in cases of life and death, but a withered hand did not meet the criteria.

From the beginning, the scribes and Pharisees had persistently opposed Christ’s teachings because He exposed their hypocrisy, lessening their esteem and influence among the people. Jesus knew of their animosity toward Him even before they began to hinder His work. As the word “watch” implies, they were spying on Him, scrutinizing every move He made. Their hypocrisy was obvious.

Christians should not expect to fare any better—in fact, we should count it all joy (James 1:2) because the “sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared” with the coming glory (Romans 8:18). In trying to uphold righteous standards, Christians are often watched by a suspicious and spiteful world. Jesus says, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. . . . But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. . . . They hated Me without a cause” (John 15:20-21, 25).

In order never to give the enemies of Christ a reason to blaspheme, our lives must be sterling examples of God’s way of life. The Father gave Jesus a full measure of the Holy Spirit, empowering Him with the discernment and ability to know people’s hearts. We need to rein in our thoughts and

bring them under control. Every day a vast number of vain and worldly imaginations pass through the average person’s mind. Others never notice them, but God does. Nothing is hidden from Him.

2. How important is it that the man was in the synagogue on the Sabbath? Matthew 12:10, 13; Mark 3:4-5; Luke 6:9-10.

COMMENT: The man Christ healed is described as having a “withered hand.” With professional accuracy, Luke alone tells us that it was his right hand, as ancient medical writers always noted whether the right or the left was affected. Since most people are right-handed, his right hand was especially important to him since he likely needed it to work. In addition, only the man’s hand was withered or shriveled, not his whole arm, apparently the result of paralysis due to some accident or disease rather than a congenital deformity.

He was in the right place—where he should have been—on the Sabbath day. If he had stayed home that day, would he have had this wonderful opportunity to be healed? The same principle holds true regarding our own Sabbath attendance with others of God’s church, when possible. If we fail to attend the commanded “holy convocation” on the Sabbath, we may miss out on the spiritual healing God provides through the inspired messages from His Word, as well as the encouragement of the brethren to press on in faith and obedience to God. As the author of Hebrews writes:

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

—Martin G. Collins