

# Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 19, Number 3

May-June 2010



The  
Harvesting  
of the  
Firstfruits

# may/june 2010

volume 19, number 3

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From ancient times, wheat has been harvested by cutting the grain and tying the stalks into sheaves, then standing the sheaves in shocks in the field to ripen fully and dry. Afterward, when the grain was ready to fall from the husks, it was taken to be threshed and winnowed. This process may be more like the spiritual harvest of God's firstfruits than we may have previously thought.

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# Born Again or Begotten?

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## Part One

For fifty years, I believed what I had originally been taught in preparation for baptism regarding the “Born Again” doctrine. What I learned then had been reshaped somewhat from what was normally taught in most churches, and it had been renamed as “Begotten Again” because church doctrine insisted that “Born Again” was a false title and teaching. Through the years, I was constantly exposed to this teaching, and on becoming a minister, taught it repeatedly to others. I never really considered that it might be wrong; thus, I never sought to correct my own misunderstanding of it.

I do not believe that thoroughly understanding the born-again doctrine is absolutely vital to one’s salvation. However, only born-again persons will be in God’s Kingdom; in terms of salvation, it is an *absolute* necessity to have occurred. Understanding it clearly is helpful for fully appreciating what an awesome, divinely given gift we have received. It helps us to establish more firmly our conversion and our faith in God.

This doctrine fleshes out how we come to know God, how God perceives us, and therefore how we should perceive ourselves following our conversion. It clarifies how we should perceive our responsibilities before God after we have been set free from our bondage to Satan, sin, and death. It should clarify that being born again is *entirely* a spiritual matter and that, following the born-again event, an entirely new chapter of life has opened before us. This new chapter emphasizes being

spiritually minded, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, and maturing to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

All analogies eventually break down, but some are distinctly better in fitting a given context. In the biblical context, is the better one “begotten again” or “born again”? This article will consider only these two possible analogies. Does God perceive us as conceived by His Holy Spirit but unborn, growing but still in the womb of a mother? If so, a question must be asked: Is the fetus-in-a-womb analogy capable of portraying any practical works God commonly commands us to do as Christians? Or, does God perceive us, after receiving His Holy Spirit and despite being young in the faith, as fully functioning adults?

## An Easily Understood Book?

We can understand some individual doctrines by putting together a number of scriptures gathered from several places in the Bible. However, achieving complete truth on any given doctrine is not always so easy. Several times, the apostle Paul writes of doctrinal matters that he terms “mysteries” (Colossians 1:26-27). In addition, some mistakenly believe that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make His teaching plain, but Jesus Himself clearly denied this. Matthew 13:10-13 provides a proof of this assertion:

And His disciples came and said to Him,  
“Why do You speak to them in parables?”

# personal *Born Again or Begotten?*

He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

The parables are no doubt picturesque and entertaining, but they can also be ambiguous, indistinct, mysterious, and easily misunderstood. Unless God provides revelation of their true meaning, the truths in them are left undiscovered. Jesus often had to take His apostles aside to explain what He meant by His teaching (Matthew 13:16-23).

Besides parables, the Bible is filled with metaphors, similes, analogies, and other figures of speech that convey truths vital to a fuller understanding of its doctrines. If one does not understand what the imagery means, gaining correct understanding of the Bible’s truths becomes more difficult and time-consuming. Certainly, without them the Bible would be a great deal longer because many details would have to be supplied by more extensive writing.

The Bible’s images and symbols exist to give us pictorial illustrations of godly life and/or evil, and they do this very well. Any object or action we can picture in our mind’s eye is an image. Thus, with biblical imagery, the mental picture provides specific details without the writer having to write down every one. Briefly, a symbol is an image that stands for something in addition to its literal meaning. It is often laden with more specific meaning than many paragraphs of writing would contain. The reader must pay attention because such symbols are used frequently in meaningful circumstances.

The root and trunk of the born-again doctrine is found within John 3. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not speak directly of it at all, though without directly naming it, they supply supporting information. It is not until the epistles of Paul, Peter, and especially John that main branches of this doctrine make appearances. Thus, as we begin, it is helpful for us to perceive the wide treatment of figures John uses to prepare us for how he uses them to support the various elements of this important, foundational doctrine.

He begins using symbolism immediately in John 1, identifying Jesus as the Word, the central Figure in God’s spiritual work in men’s behalf. He continues, speaking of light, darkness, baptism, the Lamb of God, and the Temple, among others, before the reader arrives at John 3.

The imagery regarding the Temple (John 2:18-22) is especially interesting because it immediately precedes Jesus’ teaching on born again in John 3. The Jews listening to Jesus immediately reject what He teaches based on what He says being a physical impossibility. Indeed, it is physically impossible, but note that this is the same reason Nicodemus rejects Jesus’ teaching on born again. Similarly, in John 4:7-15, the woman at the well immediately

jumps to the conclusion that Jesus speaks of natural water, and in John 4:31-38, even Jesus’ disciples fail to grasp the spiritual significance of food.

In John 6:32-63, those who listen to His manna discourse follow the same pattern. In fact, His “eat My flesh and drink My blood” imagery so offends many of His disciples that they stop following Him! This consistent failure to grasp the meaning of His imagery continues through the entire book. If, in studying John 3, we follow the same pattern of misunderstanding His spiritual imagery, like Nicodemus, we will also misunderstand being born again.

We must recognize that this spiritualizing continues in John 3. In fact, for the children of God, it not only continues, but it also increases exponentially in terms of its importance to their spiritual lives! It is an unvarnished truth that only those who are born again will see and enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:5). Jesus is teaching that, besides one’s biological birth, one must also experience a supernatural, spiritual birth. Just as surely as a Christian is not merely biologically begotten but born, there is no such thing as a non-born-again Christian.

## Why a Spiritual Birth Is Necessary

The apostle records in John 3:1-3:

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God: for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John 3:3 begins to show the profound importance of the born-again instruction by the fact that this doctrine is the subject of the very first of Jesus’ discourses recorded by John. It is as if everything regarding our spiritual future begins and proceeds from this point. Interestingly, this discourse does not cover how men should *live* but how men *are made alive* spiritually.

In Ephesians 2:1-6, the apostle Paul reveals a major detail of why a spiritual birth is necessary:

And You He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by

grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Twice, Paul says in these six verses that we “were dead”—not physically dead but spiritually dead. An individual cannot conduct his life before he is born, nor can a dead person direct his steps and regulate his life. Clearly, God perceives a person as spiritually dead before he is born again. Being born again thus begins a convert’s progress toward his transformation into Christ’s image and living in the Kingdom of God for all eternity.

Interestingly, Romans 4:17 states that “God . . . gives life to the dead.” Being born again is also likened to a resurrection, but nowhere does the Bible show resurrected people as begotten as a fetus confined to a womb. Rather, Scripture shows the converted as adults freed from spiritual death and at liberty to move about, live life, make choices, and interact with others, putting their new spiritual life to practical use.

Luke 9:60 confirms Paul’s declaration in a statement by Jesus that illustrates how God perceives the overwhelming majority of people on earth. Jesus commands the man who said he would follow Him but first wanted to bury his dead father, “Let the dead bury the dead.” He obviously means, “Let those yet physically alive but spiritually dead bury one of their spiritually—and now physically—dead companions.” Jesus thus confirms that God perceives those not yet truly Christian as spiritually dead and in need of spiritual resurrection to spiritual life.

Psalms 115:17 adds to this: “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor any who go down into silence.” Though this statement obviously applies primarily to the physically dead, it also suggests that the spiritually dead cannot praise God with true spirituality. Jesus’ teaching on being born again speaks of a new birth, a new beginning from a state of spiritual death imposed on us because of our sins. Thus, a person cannot begin spiritual life and truly praise God as a Christian until he is first born spiritually. Plainly, discerning figurative language is vital to understanding this doctrine.

## Spiritual or Physical Birth?

The born-again teaching’s importance is also emphasized by Jesus’ introduction of the doctrine by proclaiming, “Verily, verily”—or “Truly, truly,” “Most assuredly,” or “Amen, amen,” depending on the translation. All of His “Verily, verily” statements appear in the book of John, and they are used by Christ only when He is about to teach on a profound matter. The doubled “verily” denotes that what follows is of especially weighty and solemn significance, so we are to pay special attention.

It is evident from Nicodemus’ words as he approaches Jesus that he desires to be taught and has a readiness to hear. He acknowledges that Jesus has been sent by God and offers that His miracles are evidence that God is with Him. Even so, it seems to him as if Jesus speaks to him in a foreign language.

The Jews call Jesus’ statement in John 3:3 a *mashal*, a difficult saying. Nicodemus is obviously puzzled by its intent. The interesting thing is what triggers Nicodemus’ response. If he understood some of the ramifications of Jesus’ statement that “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” he would realize that even he, a Jew of high position, was already disqualified unless he met the requirement of being born again! That would have been shocking to one so highly placed and regarded.

He grasps that Jesus is speaking of a birth. The Greek word following “born,” *anōthen*—translated in our Bibles as “again,” “anew,” or “from above”—magnifies his puzzlement. It is this word that he questions when he asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4).

As an adult man, he is perplexed by the second occasion of being born. His reply indicates, not that he is contemplating being conceived again and entering his mother’s womb, but that he is thinking of the end of the pregnancy, departing the womb in birth. He obviously does not understand that, in God’s view, despite being physically alive, he is a spiritually dead man who needs God to resurrect him and give him the spiritual life that he lacks.

He immediately relates Jesus’ words to a literal, physical, fleshly birth, thus his thoughts take him in the wrong direction. Jesus’ spiritual intent has nothing to do with a second *physical* birth of a human being. Commentator Albert Barnes suggests that Nicodemus’ spiritual prejudices turn Jesus’ words into an absurdity, illustrating how disconnected he is from Jesus’ spiritual intent.

The Greek term *gennao* (*Strong’s Concordance* #1080) underlying “born” can be confusing because it broadly means “to procreate” or “to father,” and figuratively, to regenerate.” It can also be used as “to bear,” “to beget,” “to be born,” “to bring forth,” “to conceive,” “to be delivered of,” “to engender,” and “to make.” The Greeks used the term for both conception and birth, for the entire gestation process. Therefore other parts of Jesus’ and the apostle’s instruction must be sought to reveal more clearly which Jesus means.

In his *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, p. 313, Spiros Zodhiates reveals that *gennao* in this verse is aorist subjunctive and in the passive voice. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, “John,” p. 44, confirms that *gennao* is “aorist passive subjunctive” here. *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, p. 104, relates that, in the passive voice, *gennao* means “to be born.” In addition, the *Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8, p. 505, states, “Birth can be considered either from the father’s side, in which the verb is to ‘beget,’ or from the mother’s side, in which the verb is to ‘bear.’ The Johannine metaphor uses the former verb, with the meaning ‘beget’ (verses 3, 5, 6, 8).” Thus, it is translated grammatically correct in English Bibles as “born,” not “begotten.”

The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines the English word *born* as “brought into life; brought into existence; created and resulting or arising.” In brief, it indicates a beginning, whether that beginning is an actual

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birth of a human, animal, concept, circumstance, process, or organization.

When *anōthen* (*Strong's* #509) is combined with *gennaō*, the phrase most strongly indicates a second birth, not a conception. This is why Nicodemus responds by saying in verse 4, “How . . . can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born [also in the passive voice]?” He does not say, “How can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be begotten?”

## Spiritual Birth and Regeneration

Another term that needs further thought is “regeneration,” Greek *paliggenesia* (*Strong's* #3824). As seen above, it is a synonym for *gennaō anōthen*. The prefix *palin* means “again,” while the root is *genesis*, meaning “beginning” or “start.” In this context, it means “spiritual rebirth” or “spiritual renovation.” It is used twice in the New Testament, once by Jesus in Matthew 19:28 and once by Paul in Titus 3:5. Regeneration stresses the inception of a new state of things in contrast with the old.

When Jesus uses it, the setting is when He “sits on the throne of His glory.” In Paul’s usage, the occasion is the beginning of a person’s salvation. Both settings indicate new beginnings. The *American Heritage College Dictionary* states the English meaning of *regeneration* as “to reform spiritually or morally; to form, construct, or create anew, especially in an improved state; to give new life or energy to; revitalize”—which is almost perfectly synonymous with *paliggenesia*. It describes a new beginning, a new birth.

## Seeing the Kingdom of God

At the end of John 3:3, Jesus makes a revealing statement that contains a significant term: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “See” is the significant word. One’s first reaction to the word “see” is to assume a literal, visual observation. However, the Greek word here is *eidon* (*Strong's* #1492), which means “to know, be aware, consider, perceive, be sure, and understand.” Its usage also includes “behold,” “look on,” and “see.” The Bible frequently uses it in the sense of mental apprehension rather than visual sight, that is, as “I get it,” “I understand,” or “now I see it.”

The apostle Paul is a dramatic example of a man who made a sudden sharp turn in conduct and attitude when he “saw” that he was in reality a hardened sinner and not headed into the Kingdom of God. Here in John 3:3, then, Jesus’ emphasis is on the Kingdom of God being something to be understood or comprehended rather than visually observed.

His remark has this sense: “Except a man be born again, he cannot come to know the things of God; he cannot be fitted for it or enjoy its benefits.” In this context, He teaches the Kingdom of God as an entity of valuable spiritual and moral force. *Vincent’s Word Studies of the*

*New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 91, explains its intent in this context: “The things of God’s kingdom are not apparent to the natural vision. A new power of sight is required, which attaches only to the new man.”

## Is the Kingdom a Present Reality?

After hearing Nicodemus’ query, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can He enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus responds, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In this verse, He introduces a second facet of the Kingdom of God, teaching that a person can enter into it, as well as that one must be “born again” to bring about the entrance. The question arises, “How long must one wait before entering it?”

Jesus preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, as did Paul. Mark 1:14-15 proclaims: “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.’” Acts 28:30-31 records, “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”

The Bible states plainly that the Kingdom is an entity that one can enter into even before Jesus’ return. Note Matthew 5:20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus adds in Matthew 7:21, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” Moreover, Jesus declares in Matthew 18:3, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Clearly, a person can enter into God’s Kingdom, but there are also requirements. Can one meet the requirements now?

In Mark 1:15, Jesus dogmatically states, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” “The time is fulfilled” implies that nothing can be added to it, that time will be extended no longer. That the Kingdom is “at hand” means that it is near or close. It does not suggest distance in either space or time. By using these phrases together, Jesus indicates that it can be entered into *at once* when God’s basic requirements are met. The most basic requirement is taught in John 3—to be born again. Jesus thus announces when the Kingdom could be entered—immediately.

## A Spiritual Entity

Luke 17:20-21 finds Jesus speaking to a group of Pharisees:

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

It is evident that the Pharisees’ conception of the Kingdom of God differs from that of Jesus. They believed in a spectacular, visible establishment of the Kingdom, even as we look forward to its fulfillment in the near future. However, in Luke 10:9, 11 and again in Luke 11:20, Jesus plainly says that it was already present, whether in the persons of the apostles or Himself, as exhibited in their acts. Acts can include miracles, conduct, and their messages. His statement in Luke 17:20-21 explains that they should not expect a visible manifestation of the Kingdom as they perceived it at that time.

Theologians may argue over the interpretation of words, but Jesus’ own testimony undoubtedly implies that the Kingdom of God was in their presence in His Person and ministry. Therefore, the last phrase of Luke 17:21 should be translated as, “The kingdom of God is among you.” *Barnes’ Notes, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, The New International Biblical Commentary, and The Interpreter’s Bible* all agree on this conclusion. He was in their midst, and He was within the Kingdom of God.

When this is combined with John 18:36 (where Jesus declares that His Kingdom “is not from here”) and many other scriptures pointing to the establishment of God’s Kingdom with power at Christ’s return, we can understand that it is both a present and a future reality. In addition, it has both heavenly and earthly aspects. On one hand, it is present and near in the people to whom God has given His Spirit and has chosen to represent Him. On the other, it is distant in terms of time and as a geographical and governing reality. As a present reality, it is small, goes virtually unnoticed, and rules over little. Yet, in the future, at Christ’s return, it will dominate and rule the earth. It is certainly not established in its fullness on earth now. Nonetheless, Scripture also proves that it is a present, earthy reality having earth-bound, flesh-and-blood citizens who are, in the Bible’s terms, “spiritually minded” or “in the Spirit.”

We are all familiar with Matthew 13, in which almost every parable begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like” (verses 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52). Jesus then illustrates a matter that directly involves instruction for the church and its membership. In doing this, He is using the term “kingdom of heaven” in place of “the church”—He is virtually equating them. Why? Because church members are citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Notice especially verse 41. How can angels gather tares, not just from any old place, but from out of Jesus’ Kingdom on earth, if it does not yet exist on earth? Christians are not only presently God’s children in the Kingdom, but tares fellowship with them in the church! Again, in Mark 12:28-34, Jesus converses with a scribe

whom He had complimented after seeing the man respond wisely, saying, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” He means that the scribe is not far from being converted and entering the Family of God.

When Jesus and the apostles preached the gospel, they were inviting people to become part of that Kingdom immediately without having to wait for the resurrection at Christ’s return. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual entity. Its headquarters is in heaven, but at the same time its agents—initially Jesus of Nazareth then later the apostles and the church—were, as children of God, laboring on earth to make it better known and expand its citizenry.

## Sons of the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is that entity in which those who are part of it recognize and submit to the rule of the Father and Son. A person becomes part of it by being born again, and those who are born again become sons of God. God’s Kingdom as presently configured consists of God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and all the children of God who have entered the Family of God by means of God’s calling, being born again, and receiving God’s Holy Spirit.

God considers these sons as “in Christ,” and surely, Jesus Christ is in the Kingdom of God! Paul eloquently writes in Ephesians 1:3-5, 7, 11 13:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. . . . In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. . . . In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. . . . In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.

The apostle also declares in Colossians 1:13, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” In terms of our responsibilities to God, the implications of this verse are tremendous. It dogmatically informs us that we have already been conveyed, translated, or transferred into His beloved Son’s Kingdom. How can some say we are not already in God’s Kingdom? We absolutely do not have to wait for the resurrection at Christ’s return to be considered by God as part of His Kingdom. Are we who call Him “Abba, Father” not already His children? Is not His Family His Kingdom?

Philippians 3:20 further informs us of our status before

*(continued on page 14)*

## The Harvesting

In the Old Testament, the Feast of Pentecost is called the “Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field” (Exodus 23:16). It culminated a grain harvest that began with the “Feast of Firstfruits,” which we know as the day of the wavesheaf, when the firstfruits of the barley harvest were offered before the Lord (Leviticus 23:10-14). As we understand, Jesus Christ fulfilled the wavesheaf offering, being the first of the firstfruits of God’s spiritual harvest, which ultimately includes those He calls into His church (I Corinthians 15:23).

Because it parallels Israel’s spring grain harvest as opposed to the fall harvest of fruits and vegetables, this “harvest of the firstfruits” has often been referred to as the early harvest of the children of God, the members of which become the Bride of Christ. These connections are well-known in the church of God, but the “how” of this harvest has not been so clear. How will Christ reap the harvest of firstfruits?

Throughout God’s Word, the writers use agricultural imagery to explain what God is doing. As we have seen, many of the festivals have agricultural themes, and Herbert Armstrong taught that God’s holy days spell out His plan for mankind. In keeping with the agricultural metaphor, if the process of reaping grain parallels the spiritual harvest of God’s children, perhaps we should ask, “Just how was barley reaped in Christ’s day?”

In addition, we should also consider whether the harvest of the firstfruits has already begun. The answer that will appear in this article is pure speculation at this point. However, if we believe that the harvest analogy holds true to this extent, the argument that it is already in process can be convincing. At worst, it is good fodder for meditation and conversation.

### ANCIENT GRAIN HARVESTING

The harvesting of grain in biblical times was not just a one- or two-day chore as it is today, when a modern combine harvester can cut, thresh, and clean the grain in a large field in a matter of a few hours. In addition, within a very short time, the grain can be hauled to storage bins for later use. Today, this process is done when the grain is fully ripe and ready for immediate use, yet such was not the case in ancient times, as we will see.

When fully developed and ready for use, grain is golden brown in color. Most of us have observed fields of grain at harvest time, and waves of that golden brown color is what we see. Farmers know that the grain must be this color to be mature and ready to be released from the husk that attaches it to the head of grain. At this stage, it is hard and can be ground into fine flour.

Unlike today’s method, in early times the grain harvest had to begin *before* the grain was fully ripe so that it would not fall out of the husk prematurely, for instance, while it was being cut. Even though it was harvested earlier, the grain was sufficiently developed to ripen on its own, but the important element to note is that the husk still held the grain securely until it dried, hardened, and was ready to go through a process known as threshing.

Determining when the time was right for the grain to be cut was of prime importance, since cutting it too early would result in immature grain and cutting it too late would mean losing some or all of the harvest. The landowner had to decide when the grain was developed enough but not yet fully ripe, that cutting it would not cause it to be loosened from the husk.

Christ provides a clue as to when it was the best time to cut the grain in John 4:35: “Do you not say,

# of the Firstfruits

‘There are still four months and then comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” Obviously, in an agricultural year, there are many more crops to be harvested after the barley, which would take as many as four months to accomplish. However, Christ refers to the early harvest of His church, which He says is ready to harvest.

His statement gives us information about when the harvest began in those days: The cutting, no doubt, began when the crop was “white.” This is the transition color between the green of immature grain and the golden brown of fully ripe grain. At this stage, when the grain is still white, a reaper, using a very sharp sickle, cut down the standing grain.

At this stage, one might ask, what happened to the grain until it reached full maturity? Did the farmer just leave it lying in the field after it was cut? The answer is a resounding, “No!” To have done so would have subjected it to the ground moisture, causing it to rot before it was dried and ready for threshing.

The solution to this problem was relatively simple. After the stalks were cut and lying on the ground, harvesters came along and gathered them, tying them into small bundles known as “sheaves.” The sheaves were then stood upright by leaning several sheaves against each other, the resulting shape resembling an Indian tepee. These groups of sheaves were called “shocks.” Normally, between 15 to 20 sheaves made up one shock.

The cone shape of the shock provided support for the sheaves, keeping them from falling to the ground, and allowed the air to pass through the standing stalks, giving the grain the opportunity to age to maturity. It also allowed any moisture from rain or dew to drain from the heads of grain.

Many shocks were scattered around the field, where

they would stand until it was determined after a period of many days that they were ready to be threshed. Then, the shocks would be carefully hauled to the threshing floor, and once there, the fruits of grain were secure. Once inside the threshing floor, the grain was ready for the next step in the process, threshing, when the grain was separated from the husks.

The stalks were held and shaken to remove the grain from the husks, and if they proved stubborn, the grain heads were gently beaten with an instrument. Once removed, the next and final step, winnowing, had to be done to prepare the grain for food. Winnowing is done by throwing the grain up into the air on a breezy day and letting the wind blow any remaining chaff from it. Any foreign matter—tares or any other unwanted substance—would be removed, and only clean, ready-to-use grain would remain.

Incredibly, this method of harvesting was used until the early 1900s, when a machine called a “Binder” was invented. This machine, pulled around the field by draft animals, cut and bound the sheaves and deposited them behind it to be picked up by harvesters and put into shocks. They used the same method to dry and mature the grain as had been done for centuries.

A threshing machine had also been invented to thresh the grain. Unlike the more modern combine, however, the shocks of grain had to be carried to it and fed into it in order to be threshed. These were the precursors to the modern-day combine.

## *THE SON OF MAN'S HARVEST*

So, has the harvest of the firstfruits already begun? We can apply these parallels to what has happened in the church during the last few decades, and perhaps come to a conclusion. Notice Revelation 14:12-16:

# prophecy watch *The Harvesting of the Firstfruits*

Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them." Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, "Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Notice that the first statement made in verse 12 is that the saints who are keeping God's commandments will need to exercise a great deal of patience and trust Christ to lead them through the trying times ahead. Verse 13 indicates that some of the saints will die during this time of great duress. However, He reassures us that those who do so will be at rest from their labors and their works will not be forgotten.

Verse 14 presents a description of Christ as the Reaper, and we see Him with a sharp sickle in His hand in preparation for starting the harvest. In verse 15, He is given the order to begin "the harvest of the earth," or more particularly, the harvest of those on the earth who are His and who are "ripe" and ready to be reaped. Remember, this is *His* harvest, that of the firstfruits. Other harvests will indeed be reaped in the future, but this one is a "special harvest" of His Bride.

Verses 17-20 shows another harvest being done at about this same time or just afterward. However, the reaper is an angel, and this harvest is not of grain but of grapes, which are thrown into the winepress of God and crushed. Obviously, a great deal of blood is shed in this reaping. We do not want to be included in this second harvest.

Returning to the details of harvesting in ancient times, we can draw a few parallels to what has happened to the church in the last few years. The time at which the church began to fracture may be when the cutting of the harvest began.

Unless he had a very small field, the reaper would not be able to cut his whole field in one day. The harvest in Revelation 14 encompasses the whole earth, possibly implying that it might be done in stages. What would be cut first would be determined by how ripe the grain was in a particular part of the field. As we know, after the apostasy had begun, a few "smelled a rat" early and began to leave.

However, as it became apparent to more people, the exodus from our former affiliation proceeded at a much faster rate.

Recall that the standing grain was mature enough to be cut, but not so ripe that it would be dislodged from the husk. Each newly cut stalk was removed from its source of nourishment and had to become fully mature, hardening and enduring the elements without direct contact with the earth.

To preserve the grain, the farmer had to provide a method in which this process would occur, so he had his harvesters gather the stalks into sheaves and tie them together. Might the sheaves represent the small groups that meet each Sabbath in their homes or other places provided for them?

Remember that the sheaves were then stood with other sheaves and leaned against each other, forming shocks, which provided the support needed while the sheaves dried and continued to mature. The various groups of God's church scattered around the world, in whatever way God has ordered them, can be likened to the shocks. They provide a haven for the "stalks and sheaves" to continue to mature.

## PROTECTED FOR THRESHING

To ensure that none of the grain is lost on the way to the threshing floor, it must be closely watched so that it will not become too ripe and fall out of the head. After all his hard labor, the landowner wants to ensure that he reaps a complete harvest. Notice what Jesus says in John 6:39-40: "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, . . . [and] that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

The time between cutting the grain and hauling it to the threshing floor can be many days—just as many years have passed since the apostasy began. The reaper, as we have seen, must constantly watch the grain to see when it is the right time to take it to the threshing floor. He will do this about two or three days before the threshing, so that the grain is still being held by the husks and none will be lost in transit from the field to the threshing floor.

Once inside the threshing floor, protected from the elements of the weather, the reaper must wait for the grain to harden, when it can be easily removed from the husks. Perhaps we could say that, at this stage, the grain is representative of the church in a Place of Safety, protected from the "grape" harvest described in Revelation 14:17-20.

Once the harvest is protected from the elements

*(continued on page 14)*

# ready answer

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

## Is the Love of Many Growing Cold?

“And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.”  
—*Matthew 24:12*

In the Olivet Prophecy found in Matthew 24, Jesus Christ answers His disciples’ questions regarding the timing and sign of His second coming and the end of the age. In describing the persecution and tribulation that corresponds to the Fifth Seal (Matthew 24:9-14; Revelation 6:9), He gives some specific indicators: “And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:12-13).

In recent years, the indicator in verse 12 about “love . . . grow[ing] cold” has often been cited when a grievance toward a particular church organization or group arose. This verse, however, can easily be misapplied, so it behooves us to more fully understand what it means so that we can know if or when it is being fulfilled.

Understanding the word translated “love” is a vital first step. It is the well-known Greek word *agape*, the love that people have only because God has given it to them (Romans 5:5; II Timothy 1:7; I John 2:5; 4:7-8). The people whose *agape* love is growing cold must have had it in the first place, so it refers to those whom God has called into a relationship with Him (John 6:44).

It is important to differentiate between this *agape* love and the other types of love mentioned in the Bible. *Phileo* love means “to be a friend to” or “to be fond of” a person or object, indicating “having affection for,” whereas *Strong’s Concordance* notes that *agape* “is wider, embracing especially the judgment and the *deliberate assent of the will* as a matter of *principle, duty and propriety*” (emphasis ours). Similarly, *philadelphia* love means “fraternal affection” or “brotherly love.” *Agape* love, though, is manifested first toward God, because it is a dutiful, submissive, obedient love, one that does what is right regardless of how a person feels about it. In other words, *agape* love has a *moral* core rather than an *emotional* one.

The Bible shows that, in general, we show *agape* love to the Father through our obedience and submission, especially to His law (John 14:15-23; 15:10; I John 2:5; 5:2-3; II John 6). We show *agape* love to each other through sacrifice, just as Jesus’ example of love—to those around Him and to us—was through sacrifice (John 13:34; 15:12-13; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13;

Ephesians 5:2, 25; I John 3:16, 18; 4:9-12).

The meaning of Matthew 24:12, then, is that *agape* love will grow cold because of lawlessness, even though there may still be brotherly love, kindness, and human affection. Remember, we show *agape* love to God through obedience—the opposite of lawlessness—so when disobedience increases, *agape* grows cold. An example of this appears in the letter to the Ephesians, where Jesus says that they had left their first love—their first *agape*—and He commands them to repent (Revelation 2:4-5), that is, to turn away from their lawlessness. When there is compromise, or the setting aside of God’s standard of righteousness and holiness, then the submissive love toward God and the sacrificial love toward man will begin to grow cold. It is a simple cause-and-effect relationship.

In this prophecy, Jesus Christ is describing an ongoing breakdown in the relationship with God. Since that most important relationship is the source of *agape* love, if it is waning, then it will be evident in other relationships. A symptom may be that sacrificial love toward other people is decreasing, but the real cause is that the relationship with God is cooling off.

A cause of this deterioration is found in the preceding verse: “Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many” (Matthew 24:11). While a true prophet always upholds God’s law (Deuteronomy 13:3-4; Isaiah 8:19-20; Romans 8:7), a false prophet is willing to compromise with God’s standard of holiness when it suits him. Those following a false teacher will likewise slide into lawlessness, becoming separated from God (Isaiah 59:1-3).

## An Incomplete Love

Even though we might fancy ourselves as expert judges, at times it can be tricky to determine by observation whether the *agape* love is truly cooling. This is because the word “love” can be a subjective term, and even the phrase “sacrificial love” is wide open to interpretation.

To illustrate this, suppose I asked you to turn in your Bible to page 949. In my Bible, on page 949, in the left-hand column, about half way down, are Jesus Christ’s words, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Are we on the same page? Technically, we are, but at the same time, we may not be looking at the same passage. My page 949 is probably at least a little bit different from yours—maybe even very different—though, strictly speaking, we are on the same page. My page 949 contains parts of John 13 and 14; the quotation above is John 13:35. Chances are good that your page 949 is not only different from mine, but that it also differs from page 949 in other Bibles you may have.

This exercise demonstrates that, while we are on the same page with regard to sacrificial love and the need for it, the exact application of that love may be different for each of us, even though it is still exercised within the bounds of God’s law. How we show love to others and what we look for in terms of love from others will not always be the same.

This is because we each have facets of God’s love, but we do not have the totality, the whole, of it. Each child of God resembles Him to a degree, but each of us resembles Him more strongly in some areas than in others. Each of us learns or is directed to sacrifice in slightly different ways. This does not mean that *agape* love is absent. It simply means that *agape* love is not complete in us in the way that God’s love is complete.

For example, some people are quite outgoing and excel at making people feel welcome and cherished. They know how to build up, affirm, and encourage people verbally. These are modern types of the apostle Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement” or “son of consolation.” However, not everybody has that facet of God’s love to a significant degree. There was, after all, only one Barnabas among the apostles. Though the other apostles were probably encouraging and affirming in their own ways, only one was named for that aspect of God’s love.

Others may not have as much to say, but they will give the shirt off their backs to the needy. They will even have it dry-cleaned first. If it needs to be a different size, they will make sure of that, too.

Some serve behind the scenes, and we may not even be aware of all their sacrifices. They resemble the tireless service of an ox, just as Christ did. Nevertheless, not everyone is able to sacrifice in this way.

Still others have the means to give materially. That may mean giving financial assistance or slipping someone a small token of appreciation or admiration that, even though it does not have much intrinsic worth, stands for a more meaningful sentiment.

As another example, a man I know has a plaque in his office with four short words that explain another facet of God’s love. The plaque reads simply, “I teach. I care.” But not everyone has that kind of sacrificial love. Other people may instead reflect God’s love differently.

On the flipside, because of the way we are as individuals—because our page 949 is not universal—we may not easily recognize the sacrificial love of another if we are looking only for one application of it. Because of the way some people are wired, they may not feel like they are loved unless they receive a hug every time they see you. That is not a shortcoming but simply the way they are. Yet, for others, hugs may make them uncomfortable. We may have to give them more personal space.

Some feel as if they are out in the cold unless they receive an occasional handwritten note. Others may get such a note, but it is not as valuable to them as the sender spending meaningful time with them. Both the card and the time can be examples of sacrificial love, but each means more to one than another.

Some may feel unloved unless the love is verbally expressed to them; for them, “silence is deafening.” For others, though, “talk is cheap,” and the real evidence of love on *their* page 949 is some form of physical service or gift.

Thus, although we are all on the same page in one sense, we are not all seeing the same thing. If God is our spiritual Father, then we know that His love is poured out in our

hearts (Romans 5:5), and it will be evident in some way. However, that evidence will not be identical in every case. If we are only looking for one facet of God's love, we may miss a great deal of His workmanship, His outworking, and His image in His other children.

## An Imperfect Love

To compound this challenge, even the aspects of God's love that we do express will be demonstrated imperfectly. The bar is quite high when it comes to love, as Jesus tells a scribe:

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31)

The apostle John declares that sin is the transgression of God's commandments (I John 3:4, KJV), including the two great commandments Jesus spoke. The word translated as "sin" literally means "to miss the mark." Combining these principles gives us a very broad definition of sin: *Sin is imperfectly loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and imperfectly loving our neighbor as ourselves.*

Romans 3:23 declares that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In other words, all have sinned in the past, and in the present all fall short in reflecting God's love, which is a major part of His glory. Godly love does not have to grow cold for it to be shown imperfectly. It is going to be shown imperfectly when it is demonstrated by God's still-imperfect children. We all are in this state.

Not that we should give up trying to perfect God's love. On the contrary, we have every responsibility to do our utmost to perfect it (I John 2:5; 4:12, 17-18). At the same time, it should not shock us when our spiritual brothers and sisters show God's love to us imperfectly, for we are guilty of the same toward them—and toward God.

Perhaps we find ourselves in a situation where it appears that God's love is growing cold. Maybe we see God's standard of holiness being ignored or compromised, and some form of lawlessness is beginning to show up. We may see little evidence of sacrificial love, and relationships are beginning to be strained. What should we do?

There are two possibilities. The first is that our discernment is correct, and what Jesus Christ foretold is coming to pass, perhaps not in its ultimate fulfillment, but at least in type. The second is that our discernment is incorrect, and that God's love is actually present and not growing cold, but we are having trouble seeing it.

If our discernment is correct, and we truly are in a

circumstance where *agape* love is waning, Jesus has already indicated what He wants us to do. Matthew 24:13 says, "But he who *endures to the end* shall be saved." When many are letting their relationships with God deteriorate, the emphasis is on patient, active endurance.

I Corinthians 13 gives a beautiful description of *agape* love, which parallels Jesus' exhortation to endure in several points. Verse 4 says that godly love "suffers long." It displays patience and endurance, even in the face of being loved imperfectly. Verse 7 adds that godly love "bears all things" and "endures all things." However, if we are not showing patience or endurance in response to imperfect love, then we are simply responding with carnality rather than with God's love.

Similarly, verse 5 says that godly love "thinks no evil." True love pays no attention to a suffered wrong, nor takes account of the evil done to it. It does not keep a running list of all the ways it has been offended or loved imperfectly. That, again, would be responding to imperfect love with carnality. So, if we do find ourselves in the midst of a fulfillment of Matthew 24:12, we really have our work cut out for us because we will have to endure patiently and continue to display God's love rather than allow our own *agape* to also grow cold in response.

Conversely, God's love may be present, but our discernment may be incorrect, and we are missing it by looking for *agape* only in one application. We may be continually waiting for a specific type of sacrificial love, and if we do not receive it, we may suppose that God's love is absent. However, as we saw, we are not all the same in how we show love or how we recognize it. We may need to take a step back and look for facets of God's love that *are* present, rather than focusing on what may be absent.

In addition, given that human nature is still present within us, we also have to remember that nothing inhibits or damages our ability to see things clearly like focusing on the self. That is, we tend to evaluate whether God's love is present based on how *we* feel or how *we* are affected, rather than on objectively looking for God's spiritual workmanship in the overall situation.

Remember, even where God's love is present, it will most likely be demonstrated imperfectly, just as we also love God and neighbor imperfectly. Only one Man has ever loved God and man perfectly and completely. Even with all that God has done and continues to do with us, we are pale reflections of that glory. Yet, part of showing God's love to our neighbor is patiently enduring our neighbor's imperfect love, just as we would like God and our neighbor to have similar patience with us as we strive—and yet fail—to show perfect love to them.

Regardless of whether we truly are in the time of Matthew 24:12, our individual responsibility is to work on perfecting God's love in our lives. We do this, in general, by submitting to God and by sacrificing for others. If—when—we are loved imperfectly in the process, whether in our perception or in fact, it gives us the opportunity to demonstrate God's patient love all the more.

—David C. Grabbe

# personal *Born Again or Begotten?*

(continued from page 7)

God: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Our citizenship is already registered in heaven, the headquarters of the Kingdom of God. Does any nation confer citizenship on the unborn, those merely conceived? Nations register children *after* they are born, not while still in the womb.

II Corinthians 5:20 carries yet further our present assignment into the Kingdom of God: "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God." Though this assignment applies primarily to the ministry, it nonetheless applies to all who are part of the brotherhood and are sons of God because they all represent Christ and His Kingdom in every circumstance. If this is not so, why is God concerned about our witness

before men? Can the unborn be representatives of Christ when they have not even left the womb?

The church is God's Kingdom on earth, but it is not yet manifest in its fullness. The Scriptures clearly show that God perceives us, those having His Spirit, who are thus His children, as already part of His Kingdom. Scripture clearly states that we are "in Christ." Jesus Christ is definitely in God's Kingdom, and because we are perceived by God as "in Him," we are too! The Kingdom of God is both a present and future reality. We can both see it and enter into it in the here and now.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

In Christian love,



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# prophecy watch *The Harvesting of the Firstfruits*

(continued from page 10)

and fully mature, the threshing can begin. Recall that this is done by shaking or gently beating the heads of grain to loosen them from the husks. We have often surmised that the Place of Safety will have its share of trials—parallel to the shaking and gentle beating of the grain—to remove us from our self-centered shells.

At this point, the grain from one stalk is mixed with grain from other stalks, and there is no way of determining which grain came from which stalk, sheaf, or shock. In the analogy, then, our group affiliations will no longer be of any consequence. We will all be at one with Christ and with each other. God will do an amazing work to bring His harvest to such a unity that there will no longer be any egos and schisms in the body.

The harvested grain is now ready for its final phase, winnowing. In our parallel, this is the resurrection. The grain is thrown up into the air, and the wind removes all foreign debris and other chaff, leaving only usable grain. So will God's firstfruits be lifted into the air and purified, completing the harvest.

## WHAT ABOUT TARES?

Many may wonder when the tares will be removed. Jesus answers the question in Matthew 13:30: "Let both [wheat and tares] grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

The reapers would avoid cutting any tares unless

they grew among the grain. However, if it meant leaving any grain in the field, they would cut it along with the grain, and let others pick it out when bundling the sheaves. As a last resort, it would be left until winnowing, when the wind would blow it away. Tares in the church, then, may be removed in stages as Christ's return nears.

Finally, how does this analogy account for the grain left in the corners of the field or missed by the reapers, so the poor of the land could eat (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19)? Even though the landowner did not harvest the grain, the poor nonetheless gleaned it for food in their time of need.

We can perhaps understand this grain as those of God's children whom He leaves in the world (that is, outside the Place of Safety) to feed the many spiritually starving people who will need guidance and help in the Great Tribulation. This opportunity to serve under these most difficult conditions may cost many of them their lives, but if they are faithful in doing so, they will prove their worthiness to God.

Never forget the tremendous opportunity God is giving each of us to be one of the firstfruits in His Family. The way may be difficult at times, and we may become weary, but the rewards far outweigh any of the trials we may have to endure. As Revelation 14:12 intimates, we need to hang on and exhibit patience. Nevertheless, as Christ says in John 4:35, "The fields . . . are already white for harvest!" If the early stages of that harvest have already begun, we do not have long to wait.

—Bill Keesee

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# The Catholic Church: Declining or Reviving?

The world at large became uncomfortably aware of the Roman Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal in the mid-1990s, when news of priestly pederasty sparked a public outcry against both the occurrence of such perversion and the Church's lackluster response to it. However, the problem is far older. As early as the 1950s, bishops were routinely sending abusive priests to various "facilities" operated by the Church for therapy—either spiritual or psychological—but clearly, the Church, which mandates a celibate clergy, had been dealing privately with such deviants for a very long time.

A series of criminal cases have made national and international headlines. In a 1981 case widely covered by the media, a priest from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Father Donald Roemer, pled guilty to felonious sexual abuse of a minor. Four years later, Gilbert Gauthe, a priest from Louisiana, pled guilty to 11 counts of molestation of boys. Even so, it took a Pulitzer Prize-winning exposé by *The Boston Globe* in 2002 to bring the scandal to real prominence, encouraging many victims to come forward with their stories of abuse, as well as lawsuits against the offending priests and the Church.

Coincidentally, a 1980 abusive priest case in Munich, Germany, came to the attention of the Archbishop there at the time, Joseph Ratzinger, who is now Pope Benedict XVI. He has recently been accused of covering up the abuse—just as many bishops and archbishops all over the world seem to have done routinely—by reassigning the offender to another parish or other duties, rather than defrocking him and remanding the case to civilian justice.

Later, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Catholic Church's enforcer of orthodoxy, Cardinal Ratzinger had oversight of these cases under Pope John Paul II. Yet, during that time, the Church continued to handle the bulk of them internally and with great secrecy. For instance, in response to one case, Ratzinger wrote:

This court, although it regards the arguments presented in favor of removal [from the priesthood] in this case to be of grave significance, nevertheless deems it necessary to consider the good of the universal church together with that of the petitioner, and it is also unable to make light of the detriment that granting the dispensation can provoke with the community of Christ's faithful, particularly regarding the young age of the petitioner [a pederast priest who was 38 years old at the time].<sup>1</sup>

Because of such statements seeming to give greater weight to the Church's needs than the victims', radical atheists Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have gone so far as to demand that the Pope be prosecuted for crimes against humanity for his role in covering up abuse by priests. However, in this instance, Hitchens and Dawkins have misrepresented the facts. When Ratzinger wrote this, the offender had long before been removed from all pastoral duties and contact with parishioners, and what is more, had already been convicted and sentenced for his crimes!<sup>2</sup> Evidently, the Church hierarchy desired the priest to leave the priesthood on his own (which he did after completing

his prison sentence) to avoid provoking a crisis of confidence among church members. It got the crisis anyway.

This ongoing scandal, along with rampant secularism and humanism in the Western world, has made many wonder if we are witnessing the slow demise of the Roman Catholic Church—and by extension, of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The political power of the Pope and the Church's various institutions has waned considerably in recent years—certainly since John Paul II's triumph over Communism in Eastern Europe. Its moral authority has similarly declined as leaks of abusive priests, vicious intra-Curia feuds, and even Vatican ties to Nazi Germany have made headlines around the world.

Nevertheless, we should not be so quick to toss the Catholic Church into the dustbin of history. It is a nearly 2,000-year-old institution with deep ties to Europe's most powerful elites and multiple billions of dollars in assets around the world, including universities, nonprofit organizations, and think-tanks. While the sexual abuse scandal is certainly embarrassing and annoying, it does not have the power to bring down the world's largest Christian denomination. On the contrary, the scandal is showing signs of actually *strengthening* the Church.

Some Vatican watchers wonder aloud if the 83-year-old Benedict XVI can use the scandal to force a scouring, whether selective or wholesale, of the Curia, the central governing body of the Church. Most, however, do not believe that he can accomplish this at this point in his papacy. He may have the clout to force out a few of the older cardinals, particularly those who have championed the traditional cover-up policy, replacing them with younger cardinals loyal to him and his conservative theology. But a more sweeping housecleaning may be too long-term a project for the aging pontiff.

More likely, the Pope will use the scandals as a catalyst for reformation within the Church. Conservative cardinals and bishops consider this crisis to be an opportunity to emphasize the traditional, orthodox doctrines of Catholicism—particularly its teachings on sexual matters, including priestly celibacy—and they are willing to go so far as to reject and even excommunicate Catholics who will not toe the line. Benedict XVI may utter profound apologies where these abuse cases are prevalent, and he may go so far as to repeat the Day of Pardon (enacted by John Paul II in March 12, 2000, to confess the Church's historical sins) to atone for the hierarchy's errors during this crisis. As his nicknames, the "Panzer Cardinal" and "God's Rottweiler," suggest, this Pope's tendency is to go on the offensive to encourage and enforce greater orthodoxy among the faithful.

While the Catholic Church may take a momentary drubbing in the court of public opinion, it is old and strong enough to endure the beating and come out swinging in the next round. As it has done several times during its history—through the fall of Rome, barbarian invasions, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the onslaught of modern and post-modern ideas—it will adapt to the vicissitudes of societal change and maintain its dominant place among the professing Christian churches of this world.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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**WORLDWATCH**

<sup>1</sup> Dawkins, Richard, "The Pope Should Stand Trial," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2010 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/apr/13/pope-prosecution-dawkins>).

<sup>2</sup> Mees, Paul, "Here's a Crazy Idea: What If the Pope Is Innocent?" *Crikey.com.au*, April 23, 2010 (<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/04/23/here%E2%80%99s-a-crazy-idea-what-if-the-pope-is-innocent/>).

<sup>3</sup> Israely, Jeff, & Chua-Eoan, Howard, "The Trial of Pope Benedict XVI," *Time*, May 27, 2010 (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1992171,00.html>).

## The Miracles of Jesus Christ

### *Resurrecting Jairus' Daughter*

In Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:22-43; and Luke 8:41-56 appears the account of the resurrection of Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. Having recently performed the astonishing exorcism of the legion of demons, Jesus' renown was quickly spreading. As He is thronged by a multitude of curious and desperate people, a distraught father bows to Him, desperately asking Him to heal his dying daughter.

Jesus responds by going immediately to the home of the father, Jairus (Mark 5:22), a ruler of the same synagogue that the centurion had built for the Jews and whose servant Christ had healed (Matthew 8:5-13). On the way, He heals a woman with a serious issue of blood (see *Forerunner*, "Bible Study," March-April 2010).

It is obvious that Jairus knew all about Jesus' enlightening teachings, and because of His miraculous ministry, he was convinced of His power. Although he expresses unhesitating faith in Christ's ability to heal, his faith is not equal to the centurion's, who believed that distance was no hindrance to limitless power. Jairus believes Christ's presence in his home is necessary and so beseeches Him to come and touch his daughter.

Notice the details that Mark and Luke add about this girl: Mark records that her father calls her "my little daughter," while Luke relates that she was an only child, highlighting how precious she was to her father.



1. What does Christ's immediate reaction to the news that the girl is dead tell us about Him? Mark 5:35-37; Luke 8:49-50.

**COMMENT:** As Jesus walks to Jairus' home, a friend informs Jairus of the sad news, "Your daughter is dead." In the Greek, "dead" is placed first for emphasis; it literally reads, "Dead is your daughter." Such a statement would have been devastating, but being in Christ's presence would have given the grief-stricken father hope. Jesus is seen as the Encourager. He is willing, even eager, to help the sick and dying. Though He refuses to flaunt His power, He is quick to glorify the God of powerful healing.

As soon as Jesus overhears the news, He intervenes to curb the fear welling up in the brokenhearted father, countering with encouragement: "Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well." With a word of hope, He changes the father's focus, and with gentleness and compassion, comforts him. In II Corinthians 5:5-7, the apostle Paul assures us that our consolation abounds through Christ.

2. Why does Jesus say that she is "but sleeping"? Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52.

**COMMENT:** In that culture, crowds of relatives and neighbors commonly showed up at the dwelling of the deceased to mourn. In the midst of this confusion and noise, Jesus declares, "The child is not dead but sleeping." Being ignorant of His use of "sleep" for death, the mourners deride Him.

Christ says the same of His dead friend, Lazarus, in John 11:11. Death as sleep is a euphemism common to many nations. It intimates that, even more sure than morning comes to a sleeper in bed, an everlasting morning will be provided for the righteous dead waiting in the grave for the resurrection. Jesus views death as a temporary sleep because His Father has the power to resurrect anyone from death. God can resurrect whom He wants when He wants, but He has an organized plan, purpose, and schedule for resurrections (I Corinthians 15:20-24; Revelation 20:5-6).

3. Why does Christ exclude the mourners from observing

Him heal the girl? Matthew 9:25; Mark 5:40; Luke 8:54.

**COMMENT:** Not wanting to cast His pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6) or to make a spectacle in front of unbelievers (Matthew 13:58), Jesus expels all but the girl's parents. By clearing the room of an excessively noisy, grieving crowd, He brings privacy, peace, quiet, and stillness to the situation.

In addition, these neighbors and curiosity seekers had already seen His mighty works, and He does not want God's gift to be considered entertainment. He never meant His miracles to coerce belief or amaze humanity. Nevertheless, He is quick to intervene when misery and suffering need to be relieved and people need to be exposed to God's glory.

Jesus resurrects Jairus' daughter in the presence of five appropriate witnesses: the father, mother, and only three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John. To establish the miracle's veracity, He uses two unconverted people and three who were being converted (Deuteronomy 19:15; II Corinthians 13:1).

4. Why does Jesus command the girl's parents to feed her when she has just been healed? Mark 5:43; Luke 8:55.

**COMMENT:** His attention to such detail reveals His characteristic kindness and sympathy. That He orders nourishment suggests that her body was still weak and needed to be strengthened, showing that she was resurrected to physical existence. Those who saw her did not see a spirit but a human. Her body, still dependent on natural laws, needed to be nourished.

Christ finishes by requesting that the parents "tell no one what had happened" (Mark 5:43; Luke 8:56), partly to save the little girl from rude gawkers, but most probably so that fame would not hinder her future spiritual life. The world scorns the reality of resurrection because sin separates them from God, but the day is not far off when the "dead in Christ" will respond to His simple but powerful command, "Arise!" (John 5:28-29; I Thessalonians 4:16).

—Martin G. Collins