

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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A photograph of two oxen standing in a field. They are wearing traditional wooden yokes with metal tips and leather straps. The ox on the left has brown and white patches, while the one on the right is mostly white. They are both looking towards the right. The background shows a green field with some flowers and a blue sky.

“TAKE MY YOKE
UPON YOU”

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These oxen, yoked to pull a cart on a plow, must work together, and it is the yoke that allows them to do this in the most efficient manner. The Bible uses the metaphor of a yoke to illustrate several ideas, but the most significant concerns taking Christ's own yoke upon ourselves. Instead of implying a burden, taking His yoke suggests ease and rest.

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Where Is God's True Church Today?

In today's confused secular and religious milieu, is there a true church? If so, where is it? In this last generation, secularism has become a much more prominent social force, extending its influences deep into the culture. In this time of political correctness and multiculturalism, we are told by academics and social reformers—and even by some well-known “Christian” pastors—to be especially tolerant of all because no church and no set of doctrines are inherently superior to others. They claim that we all worship the same God but in different ways that seem better from our personal points of view.

On the other hand, there are those deep within what is generally accepted as Christianity who boldly proclaim that the true church is the one that they attend or the one that they pastor. Theirs is the true church because they and they only are preaching the gospel or because they and they only are following the doctrines of a certain teacher. No doubt, they are sincere, for no reasonable person would become part of a church believing it was a false one deliberately misrepresenting the Father and Son.

Only to a limited extent will this article pursue whether Jewish, Hindi, Islam, Shintoism, occultism, Brahmanism, or any other religion outside the world of Christianity is even close to being the true one. They all teach points of truth; all teach some moral principles on a high level. These religions

urge their adherents to be disciplined, self-controlled, and do good works, and thus they produce some individuals of high but carnal character who sincerely follow the religion's teachings. Yet, as important as character development is—it is imperative as preparation in achieving the purpose that the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches—the true religion is about more than character.

There are good, clear reasons why I believe that the Bible contains God's truth. Supreme among those reasons is that no other religion has Jesus Christ as Savior of mankind and Teacher of the truths of God. The Bible states unequivocally in Acts 4:10-12:

... let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the “stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.” Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

The importance of this declaration by the apostle Peter cannot be underestimated. It is supported by numerous other verses that emphasize that Jesus Christ of Nazareth and His teaching are unique.

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Jesus Himself adds quite a few statements of His exceptional position, among them being Matthew 11:27: "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

This assertion affirms the exclusive relationship that exists between the Father and Son, as well as the fact that all access to the Father and all hope of a relationship with the Creator of all things rests in Jesus Christ. This is because the Father has delegated all things pertaining to His purpose to the Son. In John 17:3, Jesus explains that eternal life is to know God, which, combined with the thought contained in Matthew 11:27, shows we will never come to know the Father unless it is allowed through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus is *that* important to us in reaching our destiny. He is truly unique in everything pertaining to salvation.

As early in His ministry as John 3:17-18, Jesus shows that He was thoroughly aware of how necessary He is to salvation:

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus asserts His necessity to salvation frankly in John 14:6, responding to Thomas, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." In I John 5:12, the apostle John adds to the vivid reality of Jesus' exclusive place in everyone's salvation: "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

Any religion can offer salvation and rewards for a life well lived. However, only one religion, regardless of how high-minded and appealing to a person's hopes and dreams, has Jesus Christ as its Savior and centerpiece of truth. That religion is Christianity. This fact eliminates all other religions as of little value in terms of a person dedicating his life to observing their teachings. No true church will be found in them.

Consider the Message of the Messenger

By way of an overview, we will consider some clear reasons why Christianity alone can supply the only true church. Jesus was not the first of God's agents mentioned in the Bible to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Hebrews 4:1-2 makes this plain:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come

short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

The Bible does not name him directly, but Moses is most likely the one who preached to the Israelites. Did he preach it as he and Aaron were preparing the Israelites to leave Egypt? There is a gap in God's revelation here because it is not terribly important who did it.

We can go further back and suppose that Abraham probably heard the gospel from God Himself as he was preparing to leave his homeland for Canaan. Hebrews 11:10 informs us that Abraham "waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." That city is the heavenly Jerusalem that will come down from heaven with the Father when He comes to earth (Revelation 21:1-5). This, too, is an aspect of the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

However, the earliest implication of all appears in Genesis 3:15 within God's pronouncement to Satan of His curse for his involvement in Adam and Eve's sin: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

Early in the New Testament, Matthew 3:2 quotes John the Baptist preaching the gospel, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" However, Jesus certainly gave the most expansive and detailed information regarding the gospel's message. Nobody else even comes close.

He also clearly gives the message's title in Mark 1:14-15: "Now after John was put into 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 the gospel.'"

What is the gospel—the "good news"? "Just believe on the name of Jesus and you will be saved" is a common message of many preachers. Others proclaim that the gospel is that Jesus came to die for our sins. Still others preach a rather insipid and saccharine "Jesus loves you" message. All of those catchy phrases have relevance to Jesus' message—we certainly must believe in Jesus, He did die for our sins, and He surely loves us—but nowhere does Jesus directly state that the gospel is about Him!

Instead, the good news is about a momentous purpose that God is accomplishing. Jesus spoke the words that the Father gave Him to preach, most emphatically confirmed in John 12:49-50:

For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.

What is Jesus' own testimony about the subject of His preaching? Notice these verses:

- Matthew 4:23: "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people."
- Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."
- Luke 4:43: "[Jesus] said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent.'"
- Luke 16:16: "The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time, the Kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it."

Jesus' announcement of the good news is that the Father will establish His Kingdom and His capital city on earth. He Himself will be here, no longer separated from His children—no longer unseen and ruling indirectly through agents from His present location in heaven but ruling directly on earth. It is to this awesome, mind-boggling future that we, as a part of His Family, are being summoned to prepare for and to participate directly in.

Jesus is certainly mankind's Savior, having died for our sins, but to be *properly* understood, that event must be seen within the context of preparation for and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. A kingdom has four basic elements: a king, a territory it occupies, subjects within that territory, laws, and a form of government through which the will of the ruler is exercised. Each of these elements is part of the gospel.

Has the founder of any other religion offered a message and program that can even begin to match what Jesus taught? This is truly the most wonderful message mankind could possibly receive, and it came only through Jesus.

What About Satan and Sin?

Besides Christianity, what can the other religions do to mercifully clear their disciples of the burden of sin's death penalty? Hebrews 2:14-15 says of mankind's cursed state and the remedy for it:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Some religions make no mention of Satan as a reality. Others include him as a reality and enemy, yet they make

little or no accounting of him actively working to destroy mankind and God's purpose. Jesus makes no bones about Satan actively working to destroy men. In John 8:44, in accusing the Jews of unbelief, He puts Satan's nature in plain words:

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

Satan is clearly responsible for drawing Adam and Eve into the first of mankind's sins, opening the floodgate to the sins of all of their progeny, all physical and mental sickness, countless emotional agonies, and the billions of deaths that mankind has experienced.

God makes it clear that the wages—the ultimate penalty that is earned by one's sins—is death (Romans 6:23). The sobering truth of this matter is that it takes only one sin for God to impose the death penalty! He warned Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before they ever sinned, "In the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The death penalty falls immediately on anyone who sins, even if it is the first time!

All of those other religions that are without Christ leave the door open to thoughts that salvation can be earned by means of good works. The idea is that the evil an individual has done in the past can be compensated for by doing good deeds. This is the very charge the apostle Paul lays against the Jews in Romans 10:1-4:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

In order for one to be justified before God and accepted by Him requires a righteousness that no man who ever sinned even one time can achieve. No amount of good works can compensate for even one sin. God will accept only the righteousness of One who has never sinned, and He will accept that payment only when a repentant sinner by faith believes.

Peter's statement in Acts 4:12 confirms that salvation is found nowhere else: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we *must* be saved" (emphasis ours throughout). Christ's involvement in the forgiveness of sin for salvation is imperative; there is no alternative! Peter is not saying we can be saved or may be saved. The word "must" reveals necessity according to God's decree. Salvation is found through no other person and no other way of life except through the sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth.

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Salvation denotes deliverance or preservation from harm or evil. In this case, it is deliverance and restoration from the effects of sin. The result, then, is deliverance from eternal death (unless one goes on from that point to commit blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus says God will not forgive; see Matthew 12:31-32). This is because salvation begins upon one's repentance from his sins and faith in the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This combination of acts justifies a person before God, and no human works, regardless of their quality or quantity, are acceptable for the forgiveness of sins.

Does any other religion have a Savior with the qualifications of Jesus Christ? No other religion offers such a magnanimous gift. Forgiveness, and therefore justification, is available only through that perfect sacrifice, along with the sincere repentance of a believing sinner who exhibits faith in the God/Man Jesus Christ and in God's grace. God will then give us of His Spirit.

He Is Our Sanctification

By revealing that Jesus plays another important role in our salvation, Hebrews 10:14 takes our salvation another step beyond justification: "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Justification and sanctification are both essential to God's purposes regarding salvation. However, most are far more familiar with justification.

Some believe that justification preserves one's salvation through to the resurrection. This cannot possibly be so, though, because that would mean that justification *is* salvation. In Hebrews 6:1, this same author writes, "Let us go on to perfection." At the time one is justified, the perfection or maturity of which he writes is still future.

Sanctification is the inward spiritual transformation that Jesus Christ, as our High Priest, works in a convert by His Holy Spirit following justification. I Corinthians 1:30 informs us that Christ is not only our righteousness but also our sanctification. Hebrews 2:11 names Him as "He who sanctifies," and in the same verse, His brethren are called "those who are being sanctified." During Jesus' prayer in John 17:19, He says, "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also [the converts] may be sanctified by the truth." Ephesians 5:26-27 adds, ". . . that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

If words mean anything, these verses—and there are many more—teach us that Jesus Christ undertakes the sanctification of His brothers and sisters no less than He does their justification.

Hebrews 10:14 is apt to be misunderstood. Perhaps this illustration may help: Imagine an observer, who, looking to his left, sees a perfect work—Christ's sacrificial offering

for our justification—already completed in the past. On his right, he sees an ongoing continuous process—our sanctification—stretching off into the future. The author of Hebrews is showing that Christ's one offering is so efficacious that nothing can be added to it. It will provide a solid foundation for the continuing process of godly character growth to holiness for all mankind for all time.

In the Old Testament, the words translated as "sanctify" and "holy" are derived from the same Hebrew root, and in the New Testament, they come from the same Greek root. In both languages, they are used in essentially the same way, meaning "to be made or declared clean or purified." Because of the sense of cleanliness, both imply being different from others of their kind that are not holy, and thus they are separated or set apart from what is common. One author suggests that the cleanliness of something holy makes it "a cut above."

Justification is essentially a legal operation on God's part by accounting Christ's righteousness to us because of faith on our part. Romans 4:1-5 confirms this:

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

No works on our part are acceptable for justification. There is no way a sinner can "make up" for his sins. By contrast, we are deeply involved in the sanctification process, where works are very important. Ephesians 2:10 from the *Amplified Bible* clearly states our responsibility following conversion:

For we are God's [own] handiwork (His workmanship), recreated in Christ Jesus, [born anew] that we may do those good works which God predestined (planned beforehand) for us [taking paths which He prepared ahead of time], that we should walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us to live].

After being justified, we are required to live obediently, to submit to God in faith, glorifying God by overcoming Satan, the world, and human nature. Sanctification is normally the longest and most difficult aspect of salvation. Real challenges, sometimes very difficult ones, abound within it if we are to remain faithful to God, the New Covenant, and His purpose. This preparation period for the Kingdom of God is vividly exemplified in the Old Testament by Israel's pilgrimage in the wilderness.

Righteousness and Holiness

Christians are clearly identified as saints in Scripture (Philippians 1:1). A *saint* is a “holy one,” separated from the unconverted, who do not have God’s Spirit. We must not confuse righteousness and holiness. Though they function together in the salvation process, they are specifically not the same qualities. Righteousness is the practical and consistent application, the right *doing*, of God’s way of life. At its foundation, holiness is being cleaned, purified, and set apart, distinguished from others, for God’s uses. Holiness is notable by a life as free from the defiling acts of sin as the convert can achieve as he overcomes and grows. Holiness is godliness.

So essential is holiness that the author of Hebrews declares, “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). Holiness must be pursued. Thus, God’s legal declaration of holiness, which we receive through Christ’s righteousness as we begin converted life, is not the end of our pursuit of glorifying God. I Peter 1:13-16 charges us with this responsibility:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Holiness reflects the attitude and way that God conducts His life. Peter’s charge to us is not to add to the righteousness conferred on us by receiving Christ’s righteousness. Never in our human lives will we ever be more righteous than at that moment. The purpose of the pursuit of holiness through living God’s way in our daily lives is to engrain His way into our pattern of living so thoroughly that it becomes habitual, or as we might say, first nature. This effort as a living sacrifice is our contribution that helps transform us into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 12:1).

II Corinthians 5:17 describes what we presently are in God’s purpose: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: old things have passed away; behold all things have become new.” II Corinthians 3:17-18 more specifically defines where God’s creative process is headed:

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

J.C. Ryle, the author of *Holiness*, writes:

Sanctification is the same with regeneration, the same with the renovation of the whole man. Sanctification is the forming and the framing of the new

creature; it is the implanting and engraving of the image of Christ upon the poor soul. It is what the apostle [Paul] breathed after. (p. 317)

In Galatians 4:19, Paul writes, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you. . . .” He also says in I Corinthians 15:49, “And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man.”

Just as surely as Christ’s sacrifice is absolutely vital to our justification before God, so His labor in support of our sanctification forms the reflected image of Him within our very beings, our “hearts,” in preparation for life in the Kingdom of God. There would be no salvation, no entrance into that Kingdom, without His efforts because we would be unprepared to live in that sinless environment.

In John 14:15-20, Jesus makes this meaningful declaration:

If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

In verses 22-23, He clarifies a question, adding a firmer assertion that reveals who will be working in and through us during our sanctification unto holiness:

Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, “Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.”

Jesus Christ Is Our All in All

Hebrews 2:9-11 opens to us a spiritual reality that we must come to understand and appreciate if we are to make the most of this wonderful opportunity of salvation that God gave to us completely unbidden:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

(continued on page 14)

The Agrippas: The End of Ancient Judea

Herod Agrippa I, named Marcus Julius Agrippa, was born around 10 BC and ruled Judea and its surrounding areas after a brief period of direct Roman rule. His first son, Herod Agrippa II, born in AD 28, ruled much of Palestine as king, though never Judea. As father and son, Agrippa I and II were men of similar characters.

Following after the reputations of Herod the Great and Antipas, the Agrippas were masterful politicians who got their way and shaped the cultures of Palestine. Unlike their predecessors, however, the Agrippas won the favor of their Jewish subjects through eloquence, insincere displays of piety, and even standing before the Roman Emperor as the voice of the Jews. The Agrippas were rulers beloved by their subjects, but were mere white-washed tombs with appalling moralities (see Matthew 23:27).

One group that the Agrippas never won over, however, was the followers of Jesus Christ. The Agrippas represented a way of life diametrically opposed to the Way of Christ. Further, Jewish morality declined in reflection of their corrupt rulers, worsening an already hostile relationship between Jews and Christians. Not only did the Agrippas destroy Judea's reputation, but Agrippa II aided the actual destruction of the nation to which Jesus had come.

AGRIPPA I'S YOUTH AND RISE TO POWER

The elder Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great, born of Herod's son, Aristobulus. At the age of six, during Tiberius' reign as emperor, Agrippa was sent to Rome for education. While there, he

dwelt among the most elite of Roman society and developed important political friendships, including Claudius, who would eventually become emperor, and Drusus, Tiberius' son. He also acquired in Rome a taste for luxury and uncontrolled spending.

His mother, Berenice, lived with her son in Rome and curbed Agrippa's wasteful spending habits. Once she died, however, Agrippa lost all self-control. Without his mother's purse and oversight, Agrippa began borrowing far more than he could pay back, hosting feasts and parties with borrowed cash. He also bribed Romans whom he thought would be important players in his rise to power in Palestine.

As was inevitable, the floor collapsed under him. His creditors grew weary, Drusus—his connection to the emperor—died, and he was becoming a public embarrassment to the court. Agrippa was forced to exile himself from the wealthy city of Rome to the impoverished land of his ancestors, Idumea.

In Idumea, Agrippa married Cypros, the granddaughter of Mariamme the Hasmonean, and his new wife proved important in nurturing Agrippa through the miserable years ahead of him. Though Agrippa saw no future for himself and even considered suicide, Cypros contacted his sister, Herodias, the wife of Antipas, and secured a job for him as the "inspector of markets" (*agronomos*) in the city of Tiberias.

Agrippa's new salary did not satisfy his appetites for long. After a public falling-out between Agrippa and Antipas, Agrippa fled to Antioch, seeking his younger brother, an adviser to the Roman governor, to find a job. He was given a position but quickly lost it after he was discovered accepting bribes.

Agrippa decided it was time to return to the world's source of political power, Rome. Visiting moneylenders across Palestine, Agrippa borrowed up to 500,000 drachmas¹ for his trip, which he characterized as a trip to see the elderly and ailing Emperor Tiberius, who was in his mid-seventies. Agrippa, foreseeing the impending death of the emperor, decided to win the favor of the apparent heir, twenty-four-year-old Gaius Caligula. He borrowed an astounding one million drachma to finance his pursuit of Caligula's goodwill.

Conversing one day with Caligula in a chariot, Agrippa expressed the wish that Tiberius would die so his friend could become emperor. The driver of the chariot, overhearing his foolish remark, reported it to the emperor. Showing mercy, Tiberius decided not to execute Agrippa for treason but imprisoned him instead. In less than a year, Tiberius died, reportedly smothered by Caligula with a pillow. The new emperor soon pardoned Agrippa and made him tetrarch over the land his uncle, Herod Philip, once ruled.

AGRIPPA I WINS OVER THE JEWS

After Agrippa had arrived in his new capitol city, Caesarea Philippi, Antipas grew suspicious of his nephew's swift rise to power. Urged by his wife, Antipas went to Rome to accuse Agrippa of treachery and take his crown. Discovering his uncle's plot, Agrippa sent his own representative to warn Caligula. As a result, Antipas was sent into exile and Agrippa given all of Antipas' land.

Having proved himself politically adroit, he was soon given a chance to win over the Jews as well. Caligula decided he was a god and deserving of worship. By imperial decree, statues began to be erected in every place of worship in the empire, including Jewish synagogues. In a show of Jewish defiance, outrage and bloodshed erupted all over Palestine.

Coincidentally, Agrippa was returning to Rome to see Caligula, unaware of what was happening at home. Once in Rome, Agrippa discovered the horrifying news, also catching wind of Caligula's decision to erect a statue of himself in the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem. Agrippa decided to stand up to Caligula for the sake of the Jewish people. History is not definitive about how Agrippa persuaded the emperor, but it seems most likely that he wrote a long letter explaining the Jewish faith to Caligula and providing political reasons for retracting his decree. Whatever Agrippa did, it worked. Caligula desisted,

and Agrippa won the love of the Jews.

In January AD 41, after three years of Caligula growing increasingly unstable, he was assassinated. In his place arose Claudius, Agrippa's childhood friend. Agrippa journeyed to Rome when he heard of Caligula's death to pay his respects, as well as to congratulate Claudius and ensure his continued good standing with the new emperor. When Claudius met with Agrippa, the emperor more than put his mind at ease when he granted him—after 35 years of direct Roman rule—rulership over the prized district of Judea.

The Jews who despised direct Roman rule welcomed Agrippa into Judea with overwhelming praise. He did not disappoint them. While in Jerusalem, Agrippa, who considered himself a Jew, followed the Judaic law precisely. On the Feast of First Fruits (Pentecost), Agrippa even carried his own basket of offerings and made sure everyone saw him do it. At the Feast of Tabernacles, Agrippa followed the tradition of Jewish kings by reading large portions of Deuteronomy, and even shed a tear when he read, "You shall appoint over you a man of your own race; you shall not appoint a foreigner." However, Agrippa was all show. When not in Jerusalem, his morality and way of life was indistinguishable from any other Roman citizen's.

Agrippa soon won over the Pharisees, the most culturally and religiously influential group in Judea. Out of a desire to appease his influential friends, he persecuted the Christians at the Pharisees' request, which the Bible records in Acts 12:1-4 (note verse 3). He made James' execution a public spectacle, killing him by the sword in front of crowds. He also imprisoned Peter, whom God delivered just before Agrippa intended to consign him to a similar fate.

Just after Peter's escape, Agrippa attended athletic games in Caesarea. He dressed for them in a silver cloth that reflected light, causing him to appear as if he shined with fire. In his radiant garb, Agrippa took his seat in front of a full theater of spectators, allowing everyone to catch a glimpse of his grandeur. The crowds murmured that his aura was a sign of his divinity (Acts 12:22).

Unexpectedly, Agrippa was struck with sharp pains in his stomach and within five days died from intestinal worms (Acts 12:23). God chose a death for Agrippa that best demonstrated his character: While he appeared perfect in his outward actions and dress, his insides were corrupt and eaten away. God struck him with the foul sickness at the height of his political career.²

AGRIPPA II'S YOUTHFUL REIGN AND CORRUPTION

Agrippa's first son, Julius Marcus Agrippa II, was born in either AD 27 or 28, and his upbringing mirrored his father's. He was born in Rome and remained in the

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imperial city until he had to flee with his parents to Judea for a brief time to escape his father's creditors. He returned to Rome to finish his education during his teenage years and was there when his father died in AD 44. The younger Agrippa was only 17 at the time.

He and his Herodian family desired that he take up his father's crown as king, but Claudius decided the task would be too difficult for the adolescent, placing Judea back under direct Roman rule. Instead, Agrippa was appointed as head of Temple affairs in Judea. The emperor's decision was the first in a series of events that upset Jewish nationalists, which ultimately escalated into a war against the Romans.

When his uncle, Herod of Chalcis, died in AD 48, Agrippa received the kingship of Chalcis, a town near the border of Lebanon. After Agrippa helped settle a dispute between longtime-rivals, the Samaritans and the Galileans, Claudius sent Antonius Felix to replace the existing Roman governor and awarded Agrippa additional territories. After Claudius died in AD 54, the newly crowned Emperor Nero increased Agrippa's dominion even more.

Agrippa continued his father's legacy of duplicity. Wishing to win the Pharisees' favor, the younger Agrippa consulted them about how to live a pious life as a Jew. The favor of the Pharisees was imperative, for as head of Temple affairs, he appointed the high priest and needed to have his decisions approved in order to keep peace.

Agrippa appeared to live lawfully, but he was just as corrupt as his father, turning the high priesthood into a business venture. Agrippa sold the position to the highest bidder. Following Agrippa's example, the high priests also took advantage of their positions for social and economic gain. At threshing time, they sent servants to collect the tithes that rightfully belonged to the lower priesthood, and after keeping their unlawful money, required the same workers to pay another tithe to make up for what should have been paid to the priesthood. Agrippa's moral corruption caused even the most respected of religious offices to degenerate into nothing more than a position of fraud.

AGRIPPA II'S ENCOUNTER WITH PAUL AND BETRAYAL OF THE JEWS

Around AD 61, this corrupt ruler directly encountered Christianity. In the summer of 58, Paul had traveled to Jerusalem to preach, but had been arrested by the Jews and tried before the Sanhedrin (a full account of this is found in Acts 21-25). After five days of trial, Paul was sent to Caesarea by a centurion who discovered a Jewish plot to kill the apostle. The Roman governor, Felix, heard Paul's case, and to

satisfy the Jews, decided to keep him imprisoned in Caesarea. However, he made it clear to Paul that, with an adequate bribe, he could quietly "escape."

Paul, morally opposite to Agrippa, did not bribe his way out of his imprisonment but trusted in God's will. After two years, Rome replaced Felix as governor with Porcius Festus. The Jews found Festus' appointment an auspicious time to have Paul tried once again, and the apostle, knowing a trial in Jerusalem would lead to his unjust execution, appealed to Caesar, a right allowed any Roman citizen. Before sending Paul to Rome, though, Festus told Agrippa about him, and Agrippa requested a meeting with the converted former-Pharisee.

Paul testified before Agrippa, appealing to his status as a Jew and his knowledge of Jewish history and affairs. The apostle also provided a personal history, an explanation for his actions, and a brief summary of Christ and His teachings (see Acts 26). In reply, Festus accused Paul of lunacy, while Agrippa asked, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28 ESV).

Agrippa found Paul innocent, but disparaged Christianity. He was a religious pragmatist, "believing" only what was politically, socially, or financially beneficial. Many scholars interpret his comment as mockery of Paul, an analysis consistent with his insincere and reportedly comic character.

In AD 63, the Temple at Jerusalem, which Herod the Great had begun in 20 BC, was finally finished. The many artisans who relied on the Temple construction as their source of work were now unemployed, and Roman taxes on the Judeans at this time were crippling. The civil unrest against Rome that began to flare up in AD 48 at Felix's appointment boiled over into hostile aggression, with tax riots erupting in Judea in 65. In an attempt to save the province he aspired to rule, Agrippa delivered a speech in Jerusalem that tried to justify Rome's actions and argue the futility of rebellion against Rome.

The Jews ignored Agrippa's plea, and war broke out between the Jews and the Romans. Though Agrippa was himself a Jew and part of the Hasmonean bloodline, he betrayed his people and sided with the Romans. He not only gave Rome his vocal support, but also supplied it with troops. After the Romans took the city of Jotapata, he even celebrated the victory with the Roman general Vespasian and his troops in drunken festivities for several weeks.

In AD 68, Nero was assassinated and succeeded by Galba, who himself was also killed within several months. Two men, Otho and Vitellius, vied for the imperial crown of Rome, plunging the empire into

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ready answer

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

“Take My Yoke Upon You”

“For My yoke is easy
and My burden is
light.”
—*Matthew 11:30*

Every year, after spending eight days at the Feast of Tabernacles and being filled with spiritual food in abundance, we must return home. Most of us just do not want it to end because it means we have to return to our everyday routines, deal with the world, and face the same old problems. We have to go back to the same old job—or perhaps we do not have a job to go back to! After the respite of the Feast, life in the world seems so burdensome.

Life was pretty burdensome to the Israelites during the reign of Solomon. When Rehoboam, his son, began to reign as king, there was a general hope among the people that he would ease their workload. Their appeal to the king is recorded in I Kings 12:4: “Your father made our yoke heavy; now therefore, lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you.”

Though Solomon may have been the wisest man who ever lived, his many extensive building projects placed a heavy burden of servitude on the people, and they had had enough. Notice that the people did not ask Rehoboam to remove the load, just lighten it a bit so that they could handle it. It was not an unreasonable request.

When the people had first asked for a king more than a century before this, God had warned them that this would happen. That story is told in I Samuel 8, and in verses 11-18, Samuel tells them that the king would take all the good things for himself and make them his servants. Nevertheless, the people wanted a king “like all the nations” (verse 19-20), so God gave them one. We should always be careful what we ask for; we might just get it.

Solomon and Rehoboam’s government sounds a great deal like our government today—it just keeps taxing and taxing, and the burden gets heavier and heavier. Sooner or later something has to give. In this nation, there is a growing tension between the government and the people. Things seem to be spinning out of control, and no one seems to be able to stop it. Our leaders lack sound judgment, no matter what the issue. This increasing pressure seems to indicate that we are drawing ever closer to the fulfillment of God’s prophecies concerning modern Israel.

ready answer “Take My Yoke Upon You”

Something quite similar was occurring as Solomon’s reign ended, and along came Rehoboam, who made it worse! I Kings 12:10-14 shows that he took some bad advice from his young friends. He answered the people, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke” (verse 14).

Many of us feel our yokes are not getting any lighter either. How are we handling our load? Do we feel that it is just too heavy and that any minute we are going to collapse?

What Is a Yoke?

Symbolically, a yoke in the Bible can suggest merely hard work (Lamentations 3:27), but more often it indicates bondage or servitude, as we see in the slavery of the children of Israel in Egypt (Leviticus 26:13). In Isaac’s “blessing” of Esau, the yoke of servitude was placed on his elder son because he became subject to Jacob, the holder of both birthright and blessing (Genesis 27:40). We all placed ourselves under the yoke of bondage to sin (Lamentations 1:14). The yoke is also used to indicate joining of two together in union (II Corinthians 6:14).

An actual yoke is most often made of wood that has been shaped or carved to fit around the necks of two cattle, oxen, or other beasts of burden, allowing them to pull heavy loads, carts, or wagons. Animals are often yoked for plowing as well. Because of their anatomy, cattle are more suited to working with a yoke. Yokes are easy, effective, and economical ways to harness the locomotive energy of the ox.

There are actually three basic yoke designs, based on the way the yoke is used to capture the power of the animals. These variations are called the “head yoke,” “neck yoke,” and “withers yoke.” The task to be done often determines which yoke is best-suited for the animals to maximize their effectiveness.

The *head yoke* is fitted to use the hard part of the forehead to pull the load. This yoke provides better animal-control and better management of carts or wagons on hilly terrain. An interesting characteristic of the head yoke is that it keeps the yoked animals from fighting and jawing at one another, as it constrains their heads from moving much side-to-side.

The *neck yoke*, which obviously fits around the neck, gives the animals comfort on uneven terrain and more maneuverability in the field or forest, allowing them to push with their shoulders, neck, and chest. The neck yoke also permits the animals to move faster with more flexibility. The downside to the neck yoke is that it allows the two animals to fight, and if the two are not well-matched, it allows them to pull away from each other. It is also not as well-suited to hilly terrain.

The *withers yoke* is most suitable for cattle that have a hump. The yoke fits against the withers or hump, keeping the shoulders free from the staves and thus not

interfering with the movement of the shoulders. All around, the withers yoke is most flexible.

No matter what the task, the most important part of the yoke and the animals chosen to do the job is how well the yoke is made to fit those particular animals. Heavy work in the field or on the road will quickly show where the weaknesses are in any yoking system.

A good yoke or harnessing system is one that minimizes breakdowns of both animals and equipment. A properly fitting yoke will not produce any discomfort or cause sores to form but allow the animal to work at its full potential. Of course, the yoke does not take away the work but aids the animal in performing the task.

A yoke ties two animals together, and they *must* work together, or the work will not be done. Cattle are good work animals because they are naturally herd animals and normally work well together. When cattle interact, one will establish dominance over the others, making one animal the leader. A teamster or plowman may have several yokes of animals, but there will be only one leader. In I Kings 19, when Elijah called Elisha to succeed him as prophet, the younger man was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. When oxen are yoked together, however, though one animal is dominant, it should not be recognizable when they are working. Each animal has to pull its own weight.

The animals also need to be close to the same size, age, and breed. If they are “unequally yoked” (II Corinthians 6:14), the team will face great difficulty in getting the job done. For instance, an ox and a donkey are both good work animals, but they do not work well together at all. They are different breeds, different sizes, and have different temperaments. When used together, they are unequally yoked.

The Yoke of Iron

Another type of yoke is the human yoke. These, too, were made of wood and fitted to the shoulders so that a person could carry a load more easily. In Deuteronomy 28:48, God warns the Israelites that, if they failed to serve Him properly, He would allow their enemies to fit them with a “yoke of iron.” Clearly, the yoke of iron—a heavy, uncomfortable, unyielding, confining restraint—is an implement of destruction used by God to punish His people for their sins.

As this passage indicates, people bring this yoke upon themselves through disobedience to God’s law. If we are feeling that our yoke is too heavy, maybe we are wearing the wrong yoke. If so, we need to examine ourselves (II Corinthians 13:5). Have we brought the yoke of iron upon ourselves? If we do not repent, a heavy yoke of sin will destroy us!

How many times do we blame God for our trials, when in fact, by our ingratitude and worldliness, we have fitted ourselves with an iron yoke! When we refuse to recognize our sins or to evaluate our spiritual condition soberly, we are returning to the bondage from which we have been so

graciously freed. Jeremiah writes in Lamentations 1:14: “The yoke of my transgressions was bound . . . , and thrust upon my neck. He made my strength fail; the Lord delivered me into the hands of those whom I am not able to withstand.”

1 Corinthians 10:13 is a familiar scripture where God tells us that He will never give us a trial that is more than we can handle. He will never allow us to be tempted without providing a way out. In other words, we do not have to sin! We do not have to bring the curse of the iron yoke upon our necks! The apostle John tells us that keeping God’s commandments is not burdensome (1 John 5:3). Our “burden” is not as burdensome as we may think; we can always lighten it by doing what God says is right.

Even so, it is not easy. The discipline required to be a disciple of Christ is hard work. Anyone who thinks that the Christian life does not involve work is wrong. Contrary to popular belief, God never said that we would not have to work. He never said we would not have to endure. He never said that the Christian life would be without pain or weariness—but He did say that He would supply our needs and that He would finish what He started in us.

The Easy Yoke

Jesus encourages us in Matthew 11:27-30:

All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Our Savior Jesus Christ understands perfectly the burdens of this world. He understands perfectly the burden of sin and the devastation it causes. Sin has the power to destroy what God is creating, His Family, but Christ has already defeated sin. We do not have to carry that burden. He did it fully and completely, for when God does something, we do not have to redo it!

When we think of a yoke, we often think of bondage, servitude, or grueling work that will drive us into the ground. Some may recall the movie in which Samson, blind and bald, struggles to push a huge grindstone, and every step of the way is painful. In reality, however, a yoke is nothing more than a tool to do a job, and as we have seen, a well-designed yoke allows the user to work at maximum capacity and efficiency. Most importantly, *our Savior has offered us His yoke*. Would any other yoke fit us more perfectly?

Recall the details mentioned earlier of two oxen working together in the yoke, and then consider how closely Jesus is working with each of us. We need to picture ourselves sharing the same yoke as Jesus, like a couple of oxen with a load to pull. We should also add to this scene God the Father as the teamster, just as we saw in verse 27 that He has given Christ “all things” needed to get the job done. Jesus is right beside us in the yoke, working diligently to guide us and pull His share of the load to ensure that we finish the job.

What is our reward? Verse 28 says that He will give us rest, “rest for your souls,” as verse 29 adds. Jesus’ yoke is one of rest, the same rest that is discussed in Hebrews 3-4—the rest of God in His Kingdom!

Then, in verse 30 appears Jesus’ heartening proclamation, “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” Jesus has already cut the road, so all we have to do is to follow His lead, and we will find rest from all of our burdens.

—Ronny H. Graham

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civil war. Otho committed suicide, and Vitellius was dispatched by troops loyal to Vespasian, who decided he deserved the crown. Meanwhile, his son, Titus, along with Agrippa, returned to Judea to continue the war.

In AD 70, the war ended with the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. Agrippa went from Palestine’s “pious” king to the very enemy that aided in destroying and dispersing the Jewish people. Newly crowned Vespasian rewarded Agrippa with additional territories in Syria, and he ruled as king over much of the land

of Palestine—except for the one province he had desired from the beginning of his political career, Judea. Agrippa died in AD 100, ending the Herodian line in bloodshed comparable only to the dynasty’s founder, Herod the Great.

The Agrippas embodied a pragmatic, two-faced philosophy that was the exact opposite of what Jesus had taught. Jesus was crucified before either man ruled, yet His followers used His teaching and God’s Holy Spirit to endure the chaotic culture that the Agrippas created.

—Staff

¹ While it is nearly impossible to provide a modern-day equivalent to ancient currencies, one can grasp the amount borrowed by knowing well-paid workers earned about a drachma a day.

² Acts 12:20-23 gives no mention of Herod’s death occurring during athletic games, but it seems probable that the elite of Palestine, including those mentioned in Acts 12 from Tyre and Sidon, would have been at the games. There is no contradiction between the secular and biblical accounts of Agrippa’s death.

personal *Where Is God's True Church Today?*

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Because of our disobedience and the resulting curse of death placed on us, we could never experience what is said of us in Psalm 8:4-8, which the author of Hebrews refers to here. However, Jesus suffered death and gained the victory for us. As a result, He wears the crown of glory and rules the universe. We know this Being as God-in-the-flesh, but the author uses His earthly name, Jesus, so that we can see the historical setting of His victory.

“Jesus” calls to mind the concept of salvation, as it means “savior.” The author writes that Jesus accomplished the redemption of His people by “tast[ing] death,” not—interestingly—by merely “dying.” To taste death is a graphic illustration of the painful way He suffered and died. He was not spared this excruciating trauma because He was the Son. He experienced suffering, both physical and emotional, to the very marrow of His bones.

In Hebrews 2:10, we find that the “everyone” of verse 9 is, in reality, not in this context the whole world, but it is limited to the “many sons” being brought to glory—in other words, the church. He bore the suffering that should have come upon us as the wages of our sins. He is the Author, the Pioneer, the Trailblazer, the Forerunner, going before us to our salvation. He is the One clearing the path, as it were, as we make our way following our calling. In Hebrews 12:2, He is called “the author and finisher [or perfecter] of our faith.” The Father made Him pass through gruesome suffering in our behalf.

He completed His preparation for the responsibility that He now holds as our High Priest; the Father has charged Him with the task of preparing many others to share life with them in the Kingdom of God. Jesus, therefore, is the One who makes men holy. The path to sanctification lies in obedience to doing God’s will, and that obedience is to be given out of gratitude because one understands and knows the Father and Son from within an intimate relationship (John 17:3).

Hebrews 2:12 quotes Psalm 22:22, putting the words in Jesus’ mouth: “I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praises to You.” In the holy Family of God, this spiritual relationship supersedes all human aspects. Jesus died for our sins; He redeemed us from the curse of sin; He forgives our sins; He gives us gifts; and He leads us to glory. Because of His sacrificial work, He is not ashamed to give us the name “brothers”! This implies that we, in turn, may call Jesus our Brother. What a privilege to be called brothers of the Son of God!

Christ and His Bride, His Body

Ephesians 1:21-23 describes in a limited way His exalted place in the Father’s purposes:

[The Father has seated Him] far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Despite its smallness and visible weaknesses, as the complement of Christ, the church is also in an exalted position. We members do not literally add a thing to Christ’s divinity, but in His view, He is not complete and will not be complete until united with His bride. Thus, as He sanctifies and shapes us in holiness, He gradually fills His bride’s every part with every gift needed to enable her to function effectively so that she, as a whole, can glorify God in her overall responsibility to our Father and to our Lord and Savior. Since everything in Christ’s spiritual body comes from Him, He *is* everything to every member within it.

No religion but Christianity offers such an exalted and loving, spiritual Being sent to labor on behalf of its adherents. He is our Creator, our Lawgiver, the Forgiver of our sins, the Dispenser of His Spirit, the Giver of eternal life, our Guide through life who blazes the trail before us, and the Enabler of true spiritual growth and overcoming.

This body of believers is not contained within one corporate entity, and an individual cannot just go out and join it. The Father must lead a person to it (John 6:44). When He does, the newly called person will find people who are keeping God’s commandments—*all ten* of them—in both letter *and* spirit. They will worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24) without dodging spiritual realities, and they will sacrifice themselves despite personal costs. They will be honest to a fault, trustworthy, and uncomplaining. They are not driven by envy and covetousness, nor are they fixed on immediate or self-gratification.

The Kingdom of God is the vision that drives them. They strive to transform into the image of Jesus Christ and to glorify the Father and Son in everything. They live solidly in the present, aware of many of its harsh realities, but they make every move with their gaze on their eternal future. They truly are pilgrims, people who humbly see themselves as mere tiny specks in a vast and awesome purpose yet privileged beyond all bounds. They believe that purpose, and in gratitude, give themselves by faith to see it accomplished in their lives.

In Christian love,



The Geopolitics of Israel

A nation's or region's geography constrains its policy choices, especially in its international relations. This is essentially the definition of *geopolitics*. Where a nation is located—landlocked or coastal, northern hemisphere or southern, Eastern or Western, high latitude or low, etc.—and what geographical features the land possesses—mountains, rivers, coasts, deserts, forests, etc.—dictate to a great extent how it can and will react to most events and crises that affect it. Other factors, such as mineral wealth, arable land, and natural harbors, also play their parts.

Geopolitics is not an exact science—nations do act “outside the box” on occasion—but it provides a framework for understanding why nations decide to do one thing over another. For instance, a large nation like Russia, which has almost no natural barriers to invasion, will endeavor to create a series of buffer states between itself and its most powerful enemies to forestall aggression against it. Thus, since its rise to great power status, Russia has sought to establish and protect its “near abroad,” the quasi-independent republics that line its western and southern perimeter. This fact of geography helps to explain Russia's domination and intervention in nations like Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and the like.

Despite its small size, the land of Israel, on which the Bible's actions center, is not exempt from geographical and therefore geopolitical realities. Its size, shape, topographical features, and climate all shape its rulers' courses of action, as well as its enemies' options in coming against it. A serious student of the Bible will keep these factors in mind, especially when reading through the historical narratives found from Genesis to II Chronicles and beyond.

Israel has been an independent actor in three general periods in history: 1) from the invasion under Joshua until Judah's defeat by Nebuchadnezzar; 2) from the return of the Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel until Titus razed Jerusalem in AD 70; and 3) in its current manifestation as a nation since 1948. In all three periods, Israel has found itself struggling to retain its independence due to external imperial ambitions and internal tensions. This consistent political situation is a result of its unchanging geography.

Generally, Israel has stretched from southern Lebanon and the hill country in the north (often including the Golan Heights) to the Negev in the south—in effect, “from Dan to Beersheba,” a Hebrew phrase that implies “all Israel” (Judges 20:1; I Samuel 3:20; II Samuel 24:2). On occasion, Israelites also ruled areas east of the Jordan River, but they never encroached far into Arabia or even into Sinai, for that matter. Only under a strong leader like David or Solomon did the borders venture much beyond the “Dan to Beersheba” rule. This holds true even today.

Deserts protect Israel from three directions, providing fairly deep buffer zones from enemies to the southwest, southeast, and east. The Sinai Desert holds off the Egyptians except when they are particularly strong, as in the days of Thutmose III and Ramses II, for example. The southeastern desert guards the approaches from Eilat/Aqaba at the northern end of the eastern

arm of the Red Sea. Thus, it has not had to worry a great deal about an invasion from Arabia. Finally, the eastern desert, along with the Jordan River, makes attacking from that direction a risky proposition, especially if Israel holds both Judea and Samaria. Today, however, air forces considerably lessen the deserts' effectiveness as barriers to invasion.

Israel's greatest vulnerability lies in the north where few natural barriers exist, and history shows that this is the route most of its conquerors—excluding Egypt—have taken when invading the land. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans have all marched down the northern trade routes and through the northern valleys to lay waste to Samaria and Jerusalem. The only real check is the chokepoint between Mount Hermon and the Sea of Galilee, a hilly area about 25 miles wide, where either direct confrontation or guerrilla tactics can stymie an approaching army.

Once through this area, to reach the wealthy coastal cities or to turn south toward the heart of Israel, an invading force would have to fight its way through the rich valleys of the northern hills. A decisive victory for the invader here could open the rest of the land to exploitation. This fact explains why Megiddo—Armageddon in Revelation 16:12-16—has been the site of many bloody battles in which imperial powers and determined defenders have contested for possession of the land.

Imperial powers have coveted the land of Israel because it forms part of a land bridge connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe. As geopolitical analyst Dr. George Friedman notes, “Israel therefore occupies what might be called the convergence zone of the Eastern Hemisphere.”¹ If this area is successfully gained, it allows for both swift movement of troops and supplies along the eastern Mediterranean coast and secures maritime shipping lanes. As the crossroads of three continents, control of this narrow strip of land is fiercely contested.

Because it is an international magnet (attracting other ethnicities, religions, and commercial/cultural/political influences), and because its own internal geography creates different types of people (coastal, cosmopolitan merchants; northern farmers and warriors; and southern herdsman and fighters), Israel's leaders must also deal with domestic tensions that threaten to tear the nation into a hundred pieces. When these divisions are minimal, Israel tends to be strong and able to hold off foreign incursions. However, when the nation is deeply divided, its chances of being overrun increase. Even today, Israel's prime ministers must often cobble together coalition governments to provide enough stability to hold its neighbors at bay.

As we read biblical history, these geopolitical factors frequently come into play in understanding why Israel's leaders acted as they did when faced with both internal and external crises. Keeping them in mind may also help us make sense of today's news accounts—and the events of the end time.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

NEWS AND TRENDS

WORLDWATCH

¹ Friedman, George, “The Geopolitics of Israel: Biblical and Modern,” May 4, 2008 (http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/geopolitics_israel_biblical_and_modern).

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Feeding the Five Thousand (Part One)

Christ's miracle of feeding the five thousand is unique in that it is the only one that all four gospel writers mention (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). It illustrates Jesus' authority over nature and His divine intervention on behalf of others, showing that He is concerned about both humans' physical *and* spiritual needs.

Jesus is moved with compassion at the sight of thousands of people who had made a great effort to hear His message of hope. Although He is tired after a long day, He embraces the opportunity to teach them and heal the sick among them. As evening descends, His disciples suggest that the hungry crowd be disbanded to seek necessary food from the surrounding villages, but Jesus has something else in mind.

To test Phillip's faith, He asks him how the people could be fed. Not only does Philip learn a lesson of faith, but all of the disciples learn that true faith must rely on divine resources, not physical and material ones. Phillip begins to tally all of the meager supplies the disciples had among them, and somewhat stymied, says, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them." One denari was a day's wage at the time.

Then Andrew tells Jesus, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish." Yet, because of their lack of faith, the disciples cannot see any possibility of feeding the great multitude with their scarce funds and the scanty food on hand. However, faith enables us to see that with the omnipotent God, all things are possible.

This miracle is a magnificent act of creative power. No amount of human reasoning can reduce this miracle to a natural phenomenon. Indeed, complete understanding of miracles is beyond human capability to understand. By an act of His own creative power, Jesus revealed proof of His deity to thousands.

1. What is characteristic of Jesus' handling of the crowd? Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:39-40; Luke 9:14-15; John 6:10.

COMMENT: Jesus is very calm through all of this, for to Him, nothing is impossible. The disciples would have driven the hungry crowd away, but Christ is the One who had given manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. He had provided Israel sustenance in an orderly way, and here, Christ handles it likewise. He commands the people to sit down in manageable groups of fifties and hundreds, avoiding confusion and preventing injury to women and children should the whole multitude surge forward. Order is a characteristic of all of God's ways, as Paul asserts in I Corinthians 14:33.

Mark's description of the ordering of the crowd is very specific. Using the plural of the word that signifies "a garden plot or bed," he describes the people as reclining in sections, so that the separate groups resemble detached garden plots. As was the custom among the Jews, the 5,000 men sat apart and were the only ones counted. No one knows how many women and children were there, but the number must have been substantial.

2. What is significant about the first thing Jesus does? Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; John 6:11.

COMMENT: Jesus gives public thanks to God for the food, revealing the importance of acknowledging who provides everything and from whom blessing comes. Thanksgiving is the primary ingredient in receiving blessings from God.

People who neglect a close relationship with God forget to appreciate and thank Him for His daily, continual miracles. Paul writes, "Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened"

(Romans 1:21). Yet, he commands the saints, "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (I Thessalonians 5:18).

3. Why does Jesus send His gift of food by His disciples? Matthew 14:16, 19; Mark 6:37, 41; Luke 9:13, 16; John 6:11.

COMMENT: Christ performs the miracle, but for both practical and spiritual reasons, His disciples present the food to the people. It was more organized and took less time to distribute the food this way than by doing it Himself. More importantly, Jesus and His disciples were becoming a team, and it was essential that they share in His work to have firsthand experience. Their involvement in Christ's generous, compassionate, loving act of providence would be a lasting memory to fuel their faith and zeal in their future apostolic work.

Jesus' miracle provided them an opportunity to serve Him, while teaching us lessons in responsible service. Though God does not need us, He gives us the privilege and blessing to be involved in His service. Some people do not wish to be encumbered by a duty at church, but this is a wrong perspective of service. God provides opportunities to serve so that we might experience great blessing.

The disciples had a responsibility to give to the people what Christ had given them. When God gives to us, we are to share faithfully with others, not hoard His gifts for ourselves. Ministers are to preach the whole truth of God and not change the message or withhold parts of it (Acts 20:27). Church members should look out for the welfare of others, sharing our blessings. If we are wealthy with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3), we should pass them on to others by living God's way of life as a witness.

—Martin G. Collins