

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 20, Number 4

July-August 2011



"If the foundations are destroyed . . ."

july/august 2011

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We live in a world of rapidly declining morals and civility. God and Christianity, the foundations of Western civilization for many centuries, have been increasingly banned from public life, and as a result, society has quickly accepted blatant sins that just a generation or two ago would have caused deep shame. Who is in control of the goings-on here on earth? How does a Christian live by faith in a culture of such audacious misconduct?

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This free publication is made possible through the voluntary tithes and offerings of its subscribers and members of the Church of the Great God. All American and Canadian donations are tax-deductible.

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Living by Faith and God's Sovereignty

Recently, an email containing an article from *The Atlantic Monthly* appeared in my computer, declaring in a bold headline, "Gay Is the New Normal." What motivated this headline is a recent poll that found a clear majority of Americans now view homosexuality as morally acceptable. The history of poll-taking on this subject shows that Americans opposed it until 2008. In that year, the people of this nation were for the first time equally split: 48% for, 48% against. In 2010, a majority of 52% approved; 43% still disapproved; and 5% were undecided.

In one generation, beginning in 1962 when Bibles were banned from public schools, the nation has apparently accepted a sin that the Bible consistently condemns. With same-sex marriage also gaining acceptability, will we soon see challenges to state bans against polygamy?

The casual and careless acceptance of this evil has been accomplished largely through in-your-face public-intimidation tactics. Major assistance has come from compliant liberal politicians, who see homosexuals as a large voting-block, and liberal judges, who blind their eyes to the social damages that these sins inflict, calling them insignificant. God has altogether different thoughts, as recorded in Jeremiah 3:1-3:

"They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again?' Would not the land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me," says the LORD. "Lift up your eyes to the desolate heights and see; where have you not lain with men? By the road you have sat for them like an Arabian in the wilderness; and you have polluted the land with your harlotries and your wickedness. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain, you have had a harlot's forehead; you refused to be ashamed."

Zephaniah 3:1-5 adds to this sordid picture:

Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city! She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the LORD, she has not drawn near to her God. Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law. The LORD is righteous in her midst, He will do no

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unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, but the unjust knows no shame.

Amos 6:3-6 fills out this picture still more:

Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near; who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst; who sing idly to the sounds of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.

These passages all have a similar context: They were written just prior to the fall and scattering of either Israel to the north or Judah to the south. Each shows a wealthy people unblinkingly focused on their pleasure. Giving no thought to God, they are casually uninterested in the moral welfare of their nation that is crashing into utter depravity. Shame for sin has disappeared. *The Interpreter's Commentary of the Bible* states that the Bible shows that, in the period before these nations fell, their societies show significant breakdowns in two vital areas: in political and business leadership and in family life, with specific blame falling on women.

In these passages, the following characteristics are either directly named or strongly implied: rebellion, obstinacy, betrayal, distrust, shamelessness, and greed, comprising an audacious self-centeredness against God and fellow man. These are not the characteristics of a nation that would bring honor to God. At one time in the history of this nation, the overwhelming majority of people expressed a strong sense of shame when they sinned. Sin was an ugly thing, and due to this sense of shame, they did whatever they could to hide their moral flaws from others.

Some of that still exists. The period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, was probably the beginning of the end of that attitude. Sin gradually carried less of a stigma, and the sense of shame was slowly replaced by a growing boldness of attitude, a flaunting of sin. Much of that sense of shame has disappeared from the American psyche. Some remains in a small percentage of the population, yet increasingly, bold immorality has become the way of life so that sin is now blatantly committed.

Civility is becoming a thing of the past. Rudeness and open, brazen misconduct is becoming the normal way of doing things. Consider former President Clinton's well-advertised conduct right in the White House! Our current President lies through his teeth about governmental issues.

This is the kind of conduct the "whore's forehead" pictures. It represents the blatant, audacious sin of the

streetwalker who is out in public, openly displaying what she is, promoting herself, and tempting others to engage in sin with her. The whore's forehead represents obdurate practice of sin done overtly with no attempt to camouflage. It is the attitude that is reminiscent of the story of righteous Lot dealing with the homosexuals in Sodom just before God dropped the fire and brimstone on the people of that vile city (Genesis 19). We must be very careful to guard ourselves from succumbing to the temptation of being drawn into the same casual approach. It is our responsibility to overcome.

This relaxed and careless public acceptability of sin did not happen overnight. It gradually became tolerated over decades. Its growth was significantly aided by a so-called Christian church that abandoned its responsibility to "cry aloud and spare not" and show God's people their sins (Isaiah 58:1).

This article will lay a foundation for building perspectives and attitudes that will help us truly live our lives by faith regardless of what others around us in the world are doing. We most certainly do not want to be casual about sin in any form whatever!

Doing this will require more than one article. The subjects will be woven together in such a way as to impress upon us that each is a necessary part of the whole and that they are linked in such a way that a clear picture emerges to guide us in glorifying God through living by faith.

Who Is Running Things on Earth?

In this world, especially in this Western world of high technology and its accompanying sophistication, the spirit of the time's influence is ever toward the deification of the created—meaning man, ourselves—rather than the glorification of the Creator. When we add the constant influence of this nation's secular liberalism flowing from every means of electronic communication, newspapers, magazines, and entertainment, plus from academia and religion, this evil deification of mankind is rapidly permeating the whole of our world.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 10:1-3:

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.

What we observe in the world around us confirms that end-time Israel is following the same spiritual pattern that our ancestors established anciently. Human nature

does not change. These verses verify that some knowledge of God remains within the Israelitish nations.

However, theirs is not an enlightened, discerning, and intelligent zeal for God. Rather, God says in Hosea 4:6 that His people—in this case meaning ancient Israel—are destroyed for a lack of true knowledge. God then lays the greater blame on the teachers for their failure to teach truth. *The Interpreter's Commentary* says that “ignorant” in Romans 10:3 can correctly be translated as “ignoring,” revealing a deliberate disregarding of God’s righteousness.

The broader history of Old Testament Israel shows that God’s Word was available, but the people did not access it to seek God. Thus, their ignorance was not completely the teacher’s fault; the people should have studied the Bible on their own. Paul explains in Romans 1:18-21 that man is without excuse before Him because knowledge of God is available. The contrast Paul provides in Romans 10:1-3 indicates that the teaching the Israelites received produced at best a vague, superficial base of knowledge about God. This is not a foundation of true knowledge that will work to produce a good relationship between God and man.

We can see an example of this kind of teaching in our time. Most of us have seen what is happening in so many churches these days, most especially in the megachurches. Their services come across as superficial entertainment that gives people an upbeat social experience that contains some religious instruction. They come up short in teaching high-quality biblical truths to enhance people’s relationships with God. It has produced a people who believe that they are saved and going to heaven immediately after death, and who think God’s laws are done away. They keep Christmas and Easter, which are obviously pagan holidays, and at the same time fail to keep the Sabbaths, which both Jesus and Paul clearly kept.

How can they be following Christ when they do not do what He did and in fact do what pagans do? Where is God in the minds of those who conduct their lives like this? In truth, what they think about Him is nowhere near the truth because neither they nor their teachers make the effort to know Him.

They know some things *about* Him, but they do not know Him. If they did, they would be seeking Him, and He would be revealing truth. Where should they be seeking Him? They must begin in the Scriptures. In them, two things are beyond dispute: first, that God is the Supreme Sovereign over His creation, His purpose for creating it, and His plan for fulfilling it; and second, that man is responsible to this awesome Creator.

Who Should Be Feared?

Psalm 34:11 enlightens us about an important spiritual reality. King David writes, “Come you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.” Notice that

the fear of God does not come naturally; it must be learned. We are not born with it already existing within. It is a vital quality given through contact with God and someone qualified to teach it, as David surely was.

If we study and meditate on Him, the Scriptures will reveal that God is supreme in everything, including in qualities like love, power, wisdom, forgiveness, mercy, patience, kindness, etc. God is sovereign over all. These virtues alone provide multiple reasons for fearing Him.

In this church, the overwhelming majority of our messages address our responsibilities to the Creator, for this is always a need that must be filled in us. However, what about God? Has He no rights to be a solidly entrenched reality in our minds, always serving as the guide to our lives?

How can we possibly live by a truly vital faith if a strong and true awareness of the reality of His oversight and presence is not our guide in every aspect of life each day? After all, who is regulating affairs on planet earth today—God or the Devil? Intellectually, a person will quickly concede that God reigns supreme in heaven, but that He does so over the world is almost universally denied. How is this denied? Titus 1:15-16 provides the answer:

To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Despite their claims to be Christian, people’s consistent disobedience discloses the falsehood that they are truly Christians and that God is a reality in their lives.

In our time, because of the influence of evolution in education and the weakness of religious teaching in the churches, it is not only commonly denied that God created everything by personal and direct action, but few also believe, as proved by their conduct, that He has any immediate concern about regulating the works of His own hands. Everything is assumed to be ordered according to the impersonal and abstract laws of nature.

The churches contain many members who are either outright Deists or incipient ones. A Deist believes God created the world and then stepped away, taking no interest in its operations. *Incipient* means “just beginning to appear.” We must not allow ourselves to have this attitude. We have to know and obey what we know—that is our responsibility as a Christian.

II Timothy 3:1-5 is a general but nonetheless vivid picture of our world. Notice especially verses 4-5: “. . . traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.” Paul uses these phrases as an overall assessment of the cause of the horrible conduct he describes.

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The root cause is that a true relationship with God is missing. Despite having some knowledge of God, people are not living by faith. They are ignoring Him and feel free to pursue their own desires, on which they place a higher priority than on what God says. Their pleasure is what they desire in terms of conduct, and the behaviors that Paul lists reveal the lack of godly fear. He is simply not an all-the-time reality to them.

Do we do any better? News reports indicate that the pillars of our culture are crumbling and are clearly out of joint (Psalm 11:3). We know from Bible prophecy that living conditions are going to get worse. With that witness so apparent before our eyes, whom do we believe is regulating affairs on this earth—God or the Devil?

Consider an example that is especially close to many of us. As our former church fellowship blew apart, many said Satan did it. Did he? No, he did not. Saying that Satan did it is nothing more than an easy escape from the reality that we may have had a part in causing its breakup. It is more likely that our Father in heaven took us to the woodshed.

Our perspective on this might simply be ignorance of biblical reality. To anyone who understands what the Bible says, only one Person could do such a thing, and that is our sovereign God. Who scattered Israel? Did Satan? The Bible barely mentions him in this context. God boldly takes credit for scattering Israel directly and the church in symbol in Lamentations 2 and many other places. Notice how He makes this principle clear:

How the *LORD* has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! *He* has cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger. The *LORD* has swallowed up and has not pitied all the habitations of Jacob. *He* has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; *He* has brought them down to the ground; *He* has profaned the kingdom and its princes. *He* has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; *He* has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy, *He* has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire which devours all around. (Lamentations 2:1-3, emphasis ours)

Despite this vivid chapter's impressively detailed description of God's personal involvement, does it not appear that, because the world is so evil, Satan has far more to do with affairs on earth than God? Countering that, though, is that God's Word shows Satan has a tight-enough leash on him that he can do only what God permits. The reality is that, despite appearances, God is in *complete* control.

"Faith Comes by Hearing"

How can we know this for certain? It depends on whether we are walking by faith or by sight. What does walking by faith signify? It means that our thoughts about life's events and the circumstances they create and our conduct are regulated and carried out based on the Word of God. It is literally and truly our guide.

Understanding Romans 10:17 helps to confirm this: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The King James Version's and the New King James Version's wording is a bit awkward for our modern ears unless we carefully follow Paul's line of thought from the beginning of the chapter. Isaiah, whom Paul quotes, is saying *the* faith exists when people hear the message, believe it, and then obey it. Three modern versions help to clarify this:

The Revised English Bible: "So then faith does come from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." This helps to show that this verse is a concluding statement, an appeal to believe the facts and the logical reasoning that preceded it.

The New Testament in Modern English, better known as the "Phillips' Translation": "Belief, you see, can *only* come from hearing the message, and the message is the word of Christ." (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Moffat: "You see, faith *must* come from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ."

Biblical faith, a very specific faith, comes from a person knowing, believing, and using what God says in His Word strongly enough to make it a constant part of his life.

Of concern to this faith is where is the information that is entering our minds and guiding our conduct coming from? Never has mankind lived in a time when powerful and frequent communication is so easily available and seemingly limitless in quantity. Radio, television, the Internet, movies, cell phones, iPads, etc., pound our eyes and ears almost incessantly. Perhaps the most powerful influence is the general attitude of the people and the events in which our lives are immersed within the culture. Few people in the world seriously care any longer about what God says in His Word. This can subtly and silently affect our attitudes and conduct in daily life.

Are we living our lives by *the* faith? Those who have some respect for God are overwhelmed in our culture's civic life, thus public reference to God has been removed from schools, courts, universities, and governments. The

secularism of mankind dominates. The result is abortion, homosexuality, lesbianism, and same-sex marriage as acceptable practices. Thus, it may appear even to those who do care as though Satan has overwhelmed God and is dominating life on earth. We must understand that those not living by *the* faith set the world's spirit, fashions, novels, movie themes, and music in this culture. We must resist being drawn in.

Disrespect of God

Jude 8, 10 reads: "Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. . . . But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves." *Dignitaries* literally means "glorious ones," and it refers to the apostles. However, the indignity does not end there because to disrespect them is to also disrespect the One who sent them, as Jesus reveals in Matthew 10:40.

This evil is covered in Exodus 22:28: "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people." II Peter 3:3 alerts us "that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts." Today, the disrespect is boldly, openly, and directly aimed at God. These vile people not only disrespect God verbally, but they also do so in their public, influential conduct.

On the surface, God's sovereignty appears to have been eclipsed, but we must not think this. God is in absolute and complete control. Though it may appear that Satan and his evil influences are in control, it is not the reality. We can be deceived if we allow this line of thinking to continue.

What does the Bible say to the mind of faith? I Timothy 6:15-16 proclaims who is God and who is in control! "[W]hich He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power." This is He about whom they speak evil and at whom they scoff. His time is coming, and we appear to be on its cusp.

Never has there been such a universal irreverence for our Creator since the period before the Flood. The worst offenders in this nation are those who are younger and who have been thoroughly schooled in liberalism's concepts. What is our responsibility?

All Things According to His Will

Daniel 11:32 is of great importance to us in these tumultuous times: "Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery; but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." We would do well to notice the context of this verse. This prophecy is made of Antiochus IV Epipha-

nies, whom just about every commentator mentions is a type of the end-time Beast. The Beast appears to be rising in our time, so we should pay attention because we may be implied here.

This verse's final fulfillment will be in "the time of Jacob's trouble," a time that Jeremiah 30:7 says will be unlike any other that has ever been on earth. Nevertheless, "the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." Note that those who *know their God* will do these things. Despite what they can plainly see happening, these people know by faith that the unseen and almighty sovereign God is still on His throne, overseeing everything that is going on, and knowing that His will *will* be done, regardless of what those living by sight think.

How do they know that His will will be done? Because they *know* Him intimately as a result of their relationship with Him. For a good part of their lives, they have walked with Him and talked with Him, and He has talked with them through His Word. By faith, they "see" God. They have submitted to Him, and He has reciprocated their attentions by blessing them in ways they know were from Him because, by faith, they were thinking spiritually.

Ephesians 1:11 reminds us, ". . . 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." God does not work a few things or even many things but *all* things according to His will. This "all things" must be qualified, since at least one thing is always excluded from it: God never ordains any of His children to sin. We are always to choose life, not death through sin (Deuteronomy 30:19). When we sin, it is our fault; we should know better. God has already evaluated the situation (I Corinthians 10:13). Do we have any doubt about His power to know what is going on and to make judgments?

God's purpose will stand, and nothing will stop Him from doing His pleasure. He is no distant spectator. Yes, He has given power to Satan, as well as to mankind, but God is all-powerful while Satan and man are but creatures. The Creator is greater than the sum total of all that He has made through Jesus Christ. Yes, God has created what we consider to be natural laws, and much of the material world is to some degree regulated by them, but God "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3).

Life is difficult, and few seem to make it through the entirety of life without becoming shell-shocked. Most muddle their way through, but we would do well to heed what the apostle Peter writes in II Peter 1:19: "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The prophetic word has been confirmed to us. What are we to take heed of specifically? That God's counsel shall

(continued on page 14)

Economics in Prophecy

Over the last few years, as the American debt crisis has deepened, the language of economics has become a part of our daily lives. The word “trillion”—though we can scarcely comprehend its magnitude—trips off the lips of politicians and newscasters as if such a vast quantity of money were mere pocket change.

Most of us have no problem distinguishing the difference between America’s gargantuan “debt” and its growing annual “deficits.” “Stimulus,” “inflation,” “quantitative easing,” “unemployment compensation,” “revenue enhancement,” “unfunded mandates,” and other economic lingo do not seem quite as arcane as they may once have.

Even so, the vast scope of the American economic disaster, which has affected many other nations due to their close ties to the United States, boggles the mind. It is not just that the federal debt is approaching \$15 trillion, but that private debt, which includes mortgage debt, consumer debt, and credit card debt, exceeds federal debt, a whopping \$16 trillion. Beyond that, America’s unfunded liability—what the country ultimately owes to recipients of Social Security, Medicare, the Prescription Drug Program, etc.—is more than a staggering \$115 trillion! This tops the *world’s* gross domestic product by about \$40 trillion.

These numbers are too huge to comprehend. They are easier to understand when we calculate the debt each American citizen would personally bear if it were divided out equally. Looking at it this way, every American’s portion of the federal debt is roughly \$47,000. To this must be added his share of personal debt, which totals over \$51,000. Finally, he must also bear his portion of the unfunded liabilities, a sum of \$1,021,000. His total debt load, therefore, equals a crushing \$1,119,000! Paying this off at \$50,000 per year, it would take each citizen over 22 years to reimburse, provided that no new debt were accrued.

Debt is nothing new. Throughout history, govern-

ments have time and again outspent their treasuries. Many monarchs and countries have gone deeply into debt to finance wars of conquest and expansion. And it is not only wars that are expensive. Vast national building projects—palaces, temples, tombs, and even whole cities—have been undertaken on loans from wealthy usurers since the beginnings of finance, when taxation and plunder could not provide the means. Most of these nations—even whole empires—were weakened and fell, largely because of their vast debts.

Not just the aristocracies of nations dabbled in debt; many an average citizen, desirous of certain property, advancement, education, or some extravagance, went into arrears to fulfill his dreams. Others had little choice, plunging into debt after crop failure, business failure, war, drought, economic disaster, and sheer profligacy. Debtors often had to flee for their lives to find greener pastures elsewhere. Many nations imprisoned debtors, often under atrocious living conditions. The Bible does not turn a blind eye to such cases, allowing Israelites to sell themselves into slavery for a time when the circumstances of life turned sour (Exodus 21:2-11; Leviticus 25:39-40; II Kings 4:1; etc.).

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS

It may be surprising to many Bible readers to learn that Scripture covers economics in great detail. From commanding just weights and measures (Leviticus 19:35-36) to regulating fines and punishments for stealing (Exodus 22:4, 7-8) to statutes concerning the charging of interest (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37), the Old Testament, especially,

lays down many good principles of a sound economy. Beyond these, the larger principles of labor, management, taxation, tribute, property, trade, buying and selling, saving, inheritance, and many others are frequently mentioned in commands, narratives, psalms, and proverbs throughout God's Word.

We do not normally think of them as such, but at least four of the Ten Commandments—those regarding the Sabbath, stealing, lying, and coveting—regulate economics, and arguments could be made to add a few others to this list. Many of our favorite sayings from Jesus also have economic bases, as these from Matthew's gospel bear out:

- "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away." (Matthew 5:42)
- "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12)
- "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19)
- "You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24)
- "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (Matthew 6:31)
- "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will." (Matthew 10:29)
- "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:45-46)
- "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

In just these few sayings, Jesus alludes to borrowing, debt, saving, wealth, money, filling basic needs, buying and selling, investing, and taxation—all parts of a functioning economy. Parables like the Prodigal Son, the Sower and the Seed, the Talents, the Workers in the Vineyard, the Rich Fool, and the Unjust Steward take full advantage of the language of economics to illustrate their points. Jesus knew that economic issues, high on everyone's list of priorities, make excellent illustrations of higher, more spiritual lessons.

But what about prophecy? It only stands to rea-

son that, if economic issues were important to people of Bible times and are equally important to those of us living in the end time, biblical prophecy would be concerned with economic issues, too, not just political and military matters. Somewhere in Bible prophecy, we should see indications of economic factors that cause, drive, and heighten end-time events. If we have concluded that, we would be correct.

FROM THE BEGINNING

The inclusion of economics in prophecy begins early in Scripture, as early as the third chapter of Genesis. In this case, God curses Adam for his sin in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:17-19), and it has profound consequences on the human condition. The curse dooms sinful mankind to hard labor to produce what he needs to live. He is pitted against nature in a brutal struggle for survival, and in the end, tired and worn by a lifetime of arduous toil, he returns to the earth having lived a futile life and accomplished little or nothing.

This part of the First Prophecy has profound implications on the course of human history. It implies that man's life will be focused on meeting his needs, subduing his environment, and trying to get ahead. He will have little time or energy left for more important pursuits, especially that of seeking God—and besides, as the next verses record, most of humanity would be cut off from God and His way of life. Human life, therefore, would be based in conflict, fear, aggression, and misery, making war, greed, lack, and death the rule, not the exception. As other verses show, this situation will get worse and worse until a time comes when, "unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22).

The book of Genesis also includes the promises God made to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Jacob's prophecy of "what shall befall [the tribes of Israel] in the last days" (Genesis 49:1). The promises, which are in effect prophecies of God's blessing of the patriarchs' descendants, dwell on economics to a great extent. Even God's first promise to Abraham, "I will make you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2), intimates a large, prosperous, mighty people—a powerhouse of wealth and sway. The additions and clarifications of this promise in later chapters simply add increasing detail to this picture. God promises to give Abraham's people fertile lands, agreeable climate, fruitfulness, dominion, strategic holdings, etc.

Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49 showers these blessings primarily on the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 49:22-26), but gives royal power to Judah (verses 8-12) and blesses the other tribes with various specific gifts, some of which are economic in nature. Zebulun is prophesied to be "a haven for ships" (verse 13), meaning that its economy

will be tied to the sea. Issachar (verses 14-15) will find itself in a pleasant land and will subject himself to others to remain there. Asher will be known for producing rich foods (verse 20), while Benjamin will have a reputation for violence and plunder (verse 27). All of these are economic indicators of the tribes' end-time locations and conditions.

All these "economic prophecies" are recorded in just one book of the Bible!

EXCESS AT THE END

Perhaps the next major prophecies dealing with economics are the well-known "Blessing and Cursing" chapters of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In them, God promises good economic rewards for obedience to His commandments and dire punishments for forsaking Him. The economic blessings include precipitation, productivity, prosperity, peace, and power. Alternatively, if the Israelites turned to idols, they could expect terror, confusion, disease, defeat, drought, famine, infertility, invasion, enslavement, and exile. These chapters bear deep study because the nations of Israel, once blessed tremendously for Abraham's faithfulness, are now reaping the whirlwind for their sinfulness.

Less well-known than Jacob's blessing on Israel is Moses' blessing of the tribes just before his death (Deuteronomy 33). Like Jacob's blessing, Moses' blessing is a prophecy concerning the dispositions of the tribes down through history and includes some economic features. For instance, he asks God to bless Levi's substance (Deuteronomy 33:11), Naphtali will be "full of the blessing of the LORD" (verse 23), and Zebulun and Issachar, treated together, will "partake of the abundance of the seas" (verse 19). As in Genesis 49, the primary economic blessings go to Joseph (Deuteronomy 33:13-17).

The later prophets predict that various economic factors will be involved in the increasing troubles before the return of Jesus Christ. Many of these conditions mirror the situations faced by Israel and Judah in their respective declines and falls in Old Testament times, showing that economic elements accompany the political and military indicators that we are more likely to recognize.

For instance, in Isaiah 1:22, the prophet records that in Jerusalem, "Your silver has become dross." Though this speaks primarily of the people's spiritual condition, it certainly applies literally too. So, a sign of Judah's decline was the devaluation of her currency; money would not buy what it used to be able to purchase. The illustration pictures what had once been pure silver and of full value is now so diluted by

baser metals that it is essentially worthless. The debasing of currency, then, becomes a recognizable precursor of decline and eventual national collapse.

The next chapter says that, just before the Day of the Lord, the Israelites' "land is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots" (Isaiah 2:7). Israel at the end is tremendously wealthy, and everyone in the land lives like a king. The people have so many vehicles that they seem to cover the whole country! Does this sound familiar?

Isaiah 3:16-23 describes the wealth, finery, and attitudes of Israelite women as the end nears, and it does not paint a pretty picture (see also Amos 4:1-3). He depicts them as "haughty" and "wanton" with more clothes, jewelry, makeup, and accessories than they know what to do with! Economically, the passage indicates a society of so much wealth and leisure that its women are indulged and free to pursue their desires to excess.

Just a few chapters away, in Isaiah 5:8, God pronounces a "woe [on] those who join house to house; they add field to field, till there is no place where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land!" His curse is against those who buy land in great swaths and develop huge housing tracts on them, giving each family little room to live. He promises in the next verse that many of those houses will lie empty, and all that land will yield little profit.

This is just a sampling of the economic elements brought out in Old Testament prophecy. Nearly every chapter brings out some detail—sometimes major, sometimes minor—regarding the financial circumstances we should see at the end time.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT TOO

While the New Testament has by comparison only a handful of passages that can be considered purely prophetic in nature (that is, the Olivet Prophecy, I Corinthians 15, II Thessalonians 2, the book of Revelation, etc.), we should not limit our search for economic prophecies to these areas. Sometimes an economic element will pop up in a parable or an admonition when we least expect it. For example, Paul inserts "lovers of money" and "lovers of pleasure" in his list of attitudes of people of the last days in II Timothy 3:1-5.

The Olivet Prophecy (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) mentions very little about economic conditions at the end time. Jesus speaks of famines as a sign of His coming (Matthew 24:7; called the Third Seal in Revelation 6:5-6), and scarcity of food often results from declining economic circumstances.

(continued on page 13)

ready answer

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

Devoting Ourselves to Fellowship

“And they continued
steadfastly in the
apostles’ doctrine and
fellowship, in the
breaking of bread, and
in prayers”
—Acts 2:42

On the day of Pentecost in AD 31, Peter preached an inspired sermon to Jews and proselytes from around the Roman world who had gathered in Jerusalem for the holy day. When he finished, three thousand of his listeners stepped forward to be baptized and accept Jesus Christ as their Savior (Acts 2:41). Just that quickly, the church—a sizable one, at that—was inaugurated.

Suddenly, three thousand people, who may have had little else in common, were thrown together as brethren. Things could have gone very badly very quickly, but to their credit, as Acts 2:42 in *The New English Translation Bible* (NET) informs us, “They were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

Among the four things to which these early converts devoted themselves was *fellowship*. Fellowship immediately became an important part of their reasons for meeting together. It was one of their prime objectives.

What is fellowship? We talk about fellowship, and we often tell one another that what we need is more fellowship. However, our modern ideas of fellowship may have become so watered-down that the word no longer carries the same meaning that it did during this infancy stage of the church, which is highly praised for its unity (see verse 44; 4:32-33; 5:12; etc.).

We are not surprised to read that the early church devoted itself to “the apostles’ teaching” and “to prayer.” These two—essentially, study and prayer—are the most important means of growth and effectiveness in the Christian life, and this is everywhere evident in the rest of Scripture. Yet, Luke records that these early Christians also devoted themselves to fellowship. They just did not *have* fellowship, going through the motions of being with each other; they *devoted* themselves to it.

This means that fellowship was a priority, and one of their foremost objectives in gathering together. To them, just being with one another was not necessarily fellowship. Instead, it was something that they devoted themselves to accomplish when they were together.

We often view fellowship as what we do. We have casual conversations and common activities. This is not wrong and can contribute to fellowship,

ready answer *Devoting Ourselves to Fellowship*

but it falls far short of fellowship according to biblical standards, as well as falling short of the meaning and use of the Greek words that underlie the English word “fellowship.”

We may be thinking, “My view of fellowship is much richer and deeper than mere social activity. True fellowship involves getting together for spiritual purposes: for sharing needs, for prayer, and for discussing God’s Word to encourage, comfort, and edify one another.” And we would be right. These things are certainly aspects of Christian fellowship, but even they do not comprise the full meaning of Christian fellowship in the New Testament.

“Fellowship” Defined

In order to grasp what it means to devote ourselves to fellowship, we need to understand two Greek word groups: *koinōnia* and its derivatives and *metochos*, a word that will become important because of its spiritual relationship to *koinōnia*.

Before we consider the Greek words, we need to take a look at “fellowship” from an English dictionary to see what it might add to our understanding. An English dictionary can shed a great deal of light on God’s Word if we would use it in our Bible study. When we study Scripture, we often assume that we understand the full significance of a word as it appears in our English translations, but too frequently, our ideas are incomplete or maybe even off base.

This may be particularly true of the word “fellowship.” According to *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, it means: a) companionship, company; association; b) the community of interest, activity, feeling, or experience, *i.e.*, a unified body of people of equal rank sharing in common interests, goals, and characteristics, etc.; c) partnership, membership. The last definition has become an obsolete usage, but it is an important one, showing how our ideas of fellowship have changed over the years.

Three key ideas come out of this:

1. Fellowship means being a part of a group, a body of people.
2. Fellowship means having or sharing with others certain things in common.
3. Fellowship can indicate a partnership, which involves people working together.

But what about Christian fellowship according to the Greek words for “fellowship” as used in the New Testament?

Koinos is the root word, which means “common, mutual, public.” It refers to that which is held in common. For instance, the common Greek spoken across the Roman Empire is called *Koine*.

Koinōnia is the primary word that is translated as

“fellowship.” Two main ideas are contained in it: a) “to share together, take part together” in the sense of partnership or participation, and b) “to share with” in the sense of giving to others. The New Testament usage emphasizes that what all parties involved share in common is in some way a *relationship*.

Koinōnos is the noun form of the word, though used less often in the New Testament, meaning “a partner, associate, or companion.” A similar word, *synkoinōnos*, meaning “one who shares with” or “a partaker of,” is used in Philippians 1:7: “For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel all of you became *partners* in God’s grace together with me” (NET, emphasis ours).

It is easy to see that “sharing” and “partaking together” are central to fellowship.

The same idea is found in the other relevant Greek word, *metochos*, an adjective, along with its verb, *metechō*, and its noun, *metoche*. The basic notion in all of these words is “to have with” or “to have together.” Specifically, *metochos* means “sharing in, partaking of,” and thus its noun form means “a partner, associate.” The verb, *metechō* means “to become a partaker of” or “to have a share in.”

We can observe these two Greek word groups in II Corinthians 6:14, where the apostle Paul uses them in parallel fashion: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship [*metoche*] has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion [*koinōnia*] has light with darkness?” Obviously, these questions are rhetorical. We know that these concepts are polar opposites; they share nothing in common.

Two Key Ideas

Based on the meanings and uses of these words, two key ideas develop that are important if we are to grasp the biblical teaching on “fellowship.” The first is that, in the New Testament, what we have in common is shared, to begin with, because of a common *relationship* that we all have together in Christ. We can have fellowship and share with each other because we have a relationship with Christ; we share Him in common.

Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:9, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” *The Revised English Bible* translates I John 1:3 as, “It is this which we have seen and heard that we declare to you also, in order that you may share with us in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.”

Fellowship is first the sharing of a common life with each other through a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We were all individuals with little in common until the Father’s calling separated us from everyone else in this

world, and we became part of Christ's body through His Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13, 27). In this, we can see that true Christian fellowship is primarily a relationship rather than an activity.

In Acts 2:42, the young church was not merely devoting itself to common activities but to a vital, spiritual relationship. It was this relationship that produced an active sharing in other ways. Many of us have gotten this backwards—that the activities produce the relationship. Not so! The relationship comes first, then the common activities follow.

It is so important that we grasp this. Fellowship means that we belong to each other in a relationship because we share with one another the common life and grace of Jesus Christ. From this flows additional sharing of our time, experiences, wisdom, and many other things.

The second key idea derives from the fact that both *koinônia* and *metochos* mean “to share together” in the sense of a *partnership*. As sharers together with Christ, we are automatically copartners with Him and with our brethren in His enterprise here on earth. His work is our work.

A business partnership is always formed in order to attain a known objective, such as providing a service to the public at a profit for the partners. In the same way, the concept of a spiritual partnership implies that it is created with godly objectives, the most important one being glorifying God. Just as we are united in a relationship, so we are all united in a partnership formed to glorify God by completing His work.

Paul writes about Christian unity in Romans 15:5-6, explaining that its aim is to glorify God: “Now may the God

of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Peter also states that our service for God is ultimately to bring Him glory: “If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (I Peter 4:11).

Thus, fellowship also means that we have been brought into partnership with our Savior and with each other to fulfill God's will and glorify Him.

To summarize what true Christian fellowship is, *relationship* describes what we are, a community of people bound together by our common life that we share through our union with Christ. *Partnership* describes how we interact within that relationship—we are partners in a calling and an enterprise in which we are to work harmoniously with a shared purpose to achieve mutual objectives to glorify God and to do the work of Jesus Christ.

While many today consider it to be of little importance, fellowship in the body of Christ is certainly no side issue. In Acts 2:42, as one of the four activities to which the early church devoted itself, it was listed alongside Bible study and prayer. God has called us and put us together as His Family to accomplish His purpose in us and ultimately in all of mankind. We should not forget that when we fellowship, we are sharing and working together toward a common goal, the Kingdom of God.

—Clyde Finklea

prophecy watch *Biblical Economics*

(continued from page 10)

Later in the prophecy, Jesus speaks of conditions before His return being like “the days of Noah,” describing them as a time when people will be conducting their affairs as normal, unaware of the great calamity that is about to befall them (Matthew 24:37-39). He goes on to speak of people “taken” in the midst of their everyday work (Matthew 24:40-41). He does not seem to describe a situation of total economic breakdown.

Of course, the book of Revelation is the New Testament's main prophetic source. Because it often deals in symbols, some of its economic allusions are somewhat obscure. For instance, Jesus castigates the Pergamos church for “hold[ing] the doctrine of Balaam” (Revelation 2:14), who hired out to Balak to curse Israel for money, so Balaam's doctrine may have to do with preaching lies for financial gain. The problem of the church of the Laodiceans has its basis in their thinking that they are “rich” (Revelation 3:17).

Revelation 13:16-18 contains the infamous “mark of the beast,” which allows those who accept it to “buy and sell,” making it an economic necessity to those who have no faith in God. Many of the plagues of the last days will cause severe economic disasters all over the world, and the fall of Babylon, described in Revelation 18, triggers worldwide mourning as leaders, businessmen, and people of every class watch the whole system crash before their eyes. Yet, after Christ's return, bringing on the Millennium and later the New Heavens and New Earth (see Revelation 21-22), the world will enjoy true prosperity for all eternity under God's rule.

This quick survey of economics in biblical prophecy should make us aware of the importance of watching for economic clues in God's Word. The world's economy is a huge factor in the geopolitics of nations, and this state of affairs will certainly continue until the return of Christ. It bears our keeping a close eye on it.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

personal *Living by Faith and God's Sovereignty*

(continued from page 7)

stand! He will do all His pleasure, and His pleasure is written in His Book, that is, what He has prophesied will happen.

Consider God First

Therefore, instead of looking at all the problems on planet earth and then turning to God, we must begin our thinking with God because the Word, which is now ours too, came from Him, and He has the will and the power to carry out what He has said He will do. What does His Word say that in general covers the dangerous, even life-threatening evils that we see so clearly displayed today? Here is a summary.

Because God is holy and just, His Word says that His anger burns against sin. Because He is righteous, His judgment will fall on those who rebel against Him. Because He is faithful, the threats of His Word will be fulfilled. Because He is omnipotent, no one can successfully resist Him and overthrow what He wills to do. Because He is omniscient and omnipresent, no problem can escape His eye, and no difficulty can master Him and baffle His wisdom.

Let us make this all-important issue as logically clear as possible since it is of absolute importance to living by faith: There is no middle ground; God is either God or He is not. If He is God, then *He* does as *He* pleases—only as *He* pleases and always as *He* pleases. It is difficult for us to keep this in mind because we are so oriented to the visible world in which we live and move and have our being. However, a right appreciation of God's sovereignty promotes humility, inspires deeper worship of Him, motivates more frequent obedience, and rouses greater zeal for service.

This does not give us an easy answer for all the mysteries of life. When we were children, we did not understand why our parents acted as they did. We failed to understand simply because we had not lived long enough and lacked experience. Isaiah 55:8-9 shows that same inexperience is working in our relationship with God. "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" We are just not competent enough to form a proper, complete understanding of God's mind. It is simply beyond us. His mind is so far above ours that there is no comparison at all in terms of purpose and wisdom.

Thus, when we speak of the sovereignty of God, what do we mean? Sovereignty implies His supremacy over all that is of importance to His purpose. How far do His attentions and supremacy extend?

John 6:44 reminds, "No one can come to Me unless

the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Are we not important to His purpose? Were we not important when He personally and individually called us? Was He not present when we were baptized? Did He not personally give us His Spirit? Notice what David says to those important to His purpose, which should provide comforting assurance:

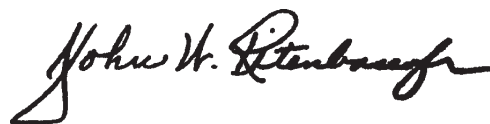
O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You comprehend my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You. (Psalm 139:1-12)

He is aware of everything regarding our lives. Not even a thought can be hidden from Him regardless of where we are, regardless of what justifications we might give for what we decide to do. So, when it comes down to the issue of sovereignty, do we allow God to be sovereign in our lives? One of His names, *Yahweh Shammah*, means "The LORD Is There." Since we are His children, wherever we are, He is. If we allow ourselves to entertain ideas that He is unconcerned about us, we are gravely mistaken.

God's supremacy is so great that He can keep track of all that is happening across the entire expanse of what He has made. Therefore, He is allowing what is occurring in the world. He is permitting it to occur and even directly causing some of the calamitous events to happen. He is not detached from what is going on—in fact, everything is under control. He who sees every sparrow fall also has His eyes on us for our good.

Whatever we do, we must not allow Him to slip from our thoughts. Every thought of those who live by faith should begin with Him and His will.

In Christian love,



Israel's New Crisis

Backed up against the Mediterranean Sea on one side and facing a sea of Islam everywhere else, the tiny state of Israel is accustomed to constantly reviewing external threats. Since its declaration of statehood in 1948, its history has been marked by major and minor wars with its neighbors, as well as continual *intifadas* and other guerrilla actions against it. Because of its location, lack of defense-in-depth, and general hostility from the Arab world around it, Israel is never far from an existential crisis. One way it has staved off such crises is through a series of peace treaties and other understandings with its neighbors.

It has been observed that nations do not have friends—they have interests. When those interests significantly align, nations can develop an understanding that will last until the interests diverge again. Thus, the United States had an understanding with the Soviet Union during World War II, when Nazi Germany was seen as a common threat to the interests of both nations. However, that alliance devolved into the Cold War shortly thereafter, when the interests of Washington and Moscow collided rather than aligned.

The same is true for the state of Israel. It has had an ally in Turkey, not because the nations are friends, but because for decades the threat of the Soviet Union was great enough to cause Israel's and Turkey's critical interests to align. Israel has had a peace treaty with Egypt since 1978-79, not because Israelis and Egyptians feel good about each other, but because the regime in each country has perceived it to be in its interests not to have a hot war with a neighbor. Likewise Jordan: In 1994, the two countries signed a peace treaty to end the declared war that had been in existence since 1948. Israel's relationship with Syria is not as officially stable, but Israel does have an interest in the continuance of the present Syrian government, perceiving that the current relationship is more manageable than what would emerge out of the (Islamist) Sunni majority in Syria.

But time waits for no man—let alone a nation—and Israel's current understandings with its neighbors and allies are not static. The alignments of interest that it has struggled to achieve on all compass points are coming under pressure at the same time. Significantly, much of what is threatening the alignment of interests stems from shifts within the Middle East away from secularism (especially of the old Pan-Arab movement) and toward Islamism. Secularism is a religion-vacuum, so it is only a matter of time before it is filled. Though many Middle Eastern governments are officially secular, they are sitting atop restive Islamist populations that do not perceive any common interests with Israel—including its right to exist.

To the south, Egypt has recently seen its president, Hosni Mubarak, deposed, even though the ruling regime—the military—remains intact. Egypt's ruling class is still interested in maintaining the peace treaty with Israel; it is not ready for a third round with the Israeli military. However, the largest faction in Egyptian politics is rooted in the inherently anti-Israel Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian military has

promised parliamentary elections later this year as it turns over the reins of day-to-day governing (so that it can go back to ruling), but this risks empowering Islamists within the government. Then again, if the regime is seen as siding with Israel, the protests of last spring may increase in intensity, putting undue pressure on the military. Either way, Israel is looking at the possibility of Islamists in Egypt undermining the peace treaty, and with it a major pillar of national security.

To the far north, Turkey has been undergoing changes of its own. It is turning from an inward-looking shell of an empire, whose military guarantees its secular underpinnings, to a more Islamic-minded regional strongman that has recently brought the military under civilian control. As it rises, its interests have begun shifting from having common cause with Israel to increasing its influence in the (Islamic) Middle East—and nothing burnishes credentials in that part of the world like distancing oneself from Israel. Last year's controversy over the Gaza-bound flotilla can be understood in this light, as can Turkey's refusal to let the matter drop—not to mention cutting its defense ties with Israel. On top of this, the U.S. wants Turkey to shoulder the responsibility of regional security, as America winds down its wars in the neighborhood. In some areas, then, it is willing to let Israel's interests be subjugated to Turkey's for the sake of placating Turkey.

To the northeast, Syria is currently experiencing its own popular uprising. While the regime of Bashar al-Assad is not now in grave danger, a favorite lever of despots in the region is to stir up anti-Israel sentiment to divert attention from the regime. Syria is in a position to take this one step further, however, because it is a major patron of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Islamist group dedicated to Israel's destruction. If the Assad government becomes too uncomfortable, it may arrange for Hezbollah to reignite its war with Israel to draw the focus away from its policies and problems.

To the east, Israel's understanding with Jordan is coming under pressure because of September's United Nations vote for Palestinian statehood. Jordan has its own restive Palestinian faction, which it would rather not have to contend with, so when it comes to the future of Palestinians, it continually sides against Israel. Though Jordan respects its treaty with the Jewish state, it is certainly not the same thing as having an affinity for Israel. Jordan is very interested in a Palestinian state (to which its Palestinians can immigrate), regardless of—or even because of—the strategic and political cost to Israel.

The state of Israel is thus surrounded, not by armies, but by the steady erosion of semi-stability that it has enjoyed in recent years. The national interests of the neighboring players are undergoing significant shifts, and as those interests begin to fall out of alignment with Israel's, the potential for major turmoil is ratcheting up—in a region that is on edge by default.

—David C. Grabbe

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Exorcising a Syro-Phoenician (Part One)

When Jesus exorcised a Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), it was a time of peril for Him. Herod was suspicious, and the Pharisees no longer concealed their loathing of Him, having become openly hostile toward Him. Although many of the common people were enthusiastic over His marvelous works and profound teachings, many were also deeply offended by some of His words, which exposed them as sinners.

So Jesus saw a need to seek seclusion to rest and instruct His disciples in private. Mark records, however, "But He could not be hidden." The glory of Christ's teaching and miracles could not be concealed in this darkened world.

The disciples' appeal to get rid of the woman reveals their weariness of the crowd's incessant pleas for Jesus' intervention. Her persistent cries for her daughter's healing were just another aggravation and too much to deal with.

• • • • •

1. Why would a Gentile woman approach Jesus, a Jew, for miraculous help?

COMMENT: As a Phoenician, the woman would likely have worshipped the mother-goddess "Ashtoreth" or "Astarte," also known as "the Queen of heaven," who was thought to be the giver of all life. This goddess supposedly allowed her worshippers to do all sorts of evil. This woman, then, from a background of total paganism, sought divine mercy both for herself and for her demon-possessed daughter.

Matthew's account expresses that the daughter was badly demonized, totally insane and disabled. Her anxious mother, unable to do anything for her relief, pleads with Jesus for mercy on her and her daughter. She addresses Him as "Lord," revealing her respect for Him as having authority and superiority. In calling Him "the Son of David," she recognizes Him as Israel's Messiah. She identifies herself with her daughter's need, implying that healing her daughter would mean mercy for her, as her child's misery was her own. No doubt, the merciful Jesus anticipated her need for Him as He had with others (John 5:6).

2. Why does Jesus seem to her put off? Matthew 15:24.

COMMENT: Jesus seems to encourage the woman's hopelessness by saying, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (see also Matthew 10:5-6). As a Gentile woman, she normally would not have had any right to receive help from and access to Jesus, since His responsibility at the time was to those of the circumcision, Israelites.

A contradiction seems to lurk here, since He came as the Promised Seed in whom *all nations* would be blessed (Psalm 72:11; Luke 2:32; Romans 15:9-12). He had also declared that other sheep, not only Israelites, must be brought to Him (John 10:16). Although He came as Savior of the world, there was purpose in restricting His ministry to Israel (specifically to the Jews). His first priority was to fulfill the Messianic, redemptive promises to them. He was reserving the good news of the salvation of the Gentiles until He had fulfilled His God-given responsibility. In following this plan of salvation, His initial work was specifically to Israelites.

Jesus' work thus began locally in preparation for it to spread to all nations. His followers would go into the entire world and preach the gospel, which His death and resurrec-

tion made possible. Therefore, Jesus' personal, physical ministry was limited to Judea and Galilee where He performed the majority of His miracles and delivered His teachings. The scattered instances of Gentiles receiving His goodness are forerunners of the Spirit being poured out on Israelite and Gentile alike (Acts 10:1-31; Romans 11:11).

3. What is the significance of Jesus' use of the terms "children" and "dogs" in Matthew 15:26 and Mark 7:27?

COMMENT: When the Gentile woman says, "Lord, help me," Jesus up to this point had spoken only to His disciples. Now He speaks to the woman, telling her she is not of Israel and that, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." By "children" He means Israelites (Acts 10:36), while "dogs" were symbols of unclean Gentiles, a proverbial expression used by the Jews to represent their sense of national superiority over the nations.

Jesus does not Himself call the Gentiles "dogs," using the term only here to point out the normal antipathy between Jews and Gentiles, which His disciples had echoed. The word He uses for "dogs" is a mild one, meaning "little dogs" or "puppies"—not large, wild dogs native to the area but domesticated animals like those the Romans had introduced during their occupation. It suggests the family puppy under the table at dinnertime, begging for a scrap.

Because of her faith and humility, the woman does not take offense at this. His words do not discourage her because she was hopeful with faith, and her works demonstrate that hers was not a dead faith, but a strong one. She was resourceful and knew enough about Jesus to believe that He was both compassionate and powerful. Feeling deeply unworthy and contently accepting her place among the dogs, she merely asks for spiritual crumbs from His merciful table—a little crumb for her daughter is all she seeks.

Counting herself a "puppy," she faithfully looks forward to being counted by God as His child (Galatians 3:26). Although she stands outside of the elect family of Israel, she trusts that Jesus' goodness would impart a blessing. By intervening on her and her daughter's behalf, Jesus shows that the Gentiles' potential for salvation is no less than that of Israelites.

—Martin G. Collins