

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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MAKE EVERY DAY
COUNT

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The Bible depicts Christians as pilgrims on a trek through the wilderness of this life. Our destination is the Kingdom of God, and the path we must tread is often difficult and discouraging. Each of us, however, has only a limited amount of time to overcome those obstacles—to ford the rivers and cross the mountains—before winter sets in. In other words, we have to make every day count to reach the Promised Land that awaits us.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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NEWS EDITOR

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CIRCULATION

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CINDY HINDS

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

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TED E. BOWLING

BILL CHERRY

DAN ELMORE

CLYDE FINKLEA

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contact

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

803.802.7075 / 803.802.7089 FAX

CARIBBEAN: P.O. Box 7004, St. Anns Post Office, St. Anns Rd, St. Anns, Trinidad, West Indies

FRANCE: Amicale Ruben, 370 Hameau du Bourg L'Abbé, La Mailleraye-sur-Seine, 76940 France

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

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Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty

Part Three: The Fruits

This series of articles began with the purpose of helping us prepare for the times just ahead. It is presented in the spirit of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 of the five wise virgins who made the better use of their time and energies while awaiting Christ's return. Jesus' instruction regarding the sobering events that He predicts in the Olivet Prophecy forms part of the background.

What He says in Matthew 24:13 projects that seriousness: "He that endures to the end shall be saved." Since Jesus spoke this prophecy directly to His disciples, it must be intended primarily as an admonition for His disciples living during the end time. It also indicates that, when compared with the persecution Christians have received all through the times since the church was formed, Christians will have to endure some measure of the Tribulation that Jesus forecasts. Zephaniah 2:1-3 adds:

Gather yourself together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the LORD's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you! Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It *may* be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger. (Emphasis added.)

Some in the church of God today teach that just because a person is part of a certain group, he will escape this wrath. However, the mention of fleeing implies a generality rather than a promise given as an absolute certainty. According to traditions retained from history, all of the apostles except for John suffered violent deaths from persecution.

Are we more deserving of safety than they were? Paul writes in Romans 14:12, "So then, each of us shall give account of himself to God." Revelation 2:23 confirms individual judgment during Christ's evaluation of the Thyatira church, without a doubt part of His church: "I will kill her children with death, and all the church shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works."

We must not allow ourselves to think presumptuously that we deserve to be hidden. God is the Master, and we are slaves bought at a price with Christ's blood. He is the Master Potter, forming and shaping us into the character image of Jesus Christ. If He determines that we need the shaping that Tribulation will bring, then He will not hesitate to set that path before us. If He believes we need to glorify Him before men, He will do the same.

The prophecy in Daniel 11:32 also played a role in motivating this series: "Those who do wickedly against the covenant he shall corrupt with flattery;

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but the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits.” Not only does this show that Christians will undergo intense persecution, but it also shows that they will be doing things to glorify God during that period of testing. God specifically chooses those who know Him to carry out these exploits before men.

In this series, then, we have explored the means that will produce the understanding and traits to prepare us for this eventuality, should God choose us for such an assignment. We are exploring what will help us, not merely to endure the times we live in, but to be prepared to do even more.

Specifically, we will isolate some of the more important positive characteristics that fully accepting God's sovereignty over our lives will produce. Daniel 11:32 mentions one area of growth in particular: We will come to know God with an intimacy not otherwise possible. At the same time, other positive qualities will be added to our lives to bring us ever closer to the true image of Jesus Christ.

To have the clearest and most motivating vision of our invisible God—to the degree that Moses' saw God (Hebrews 11:27)—we must discipline ourselves to seek Him actively and consistently as we come to know Him. Unless we give of ourselves in this way, as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), little of these fruits will be produced and become part of our characters.

The Fear of God

The circumstance prophesied in Daniel 11:32 is gradually taking shape on the horizon. Those who know Him and “see” Him are those who so respect and revere Him that they never want to be out of His presence nor disappoint Him. The Bible describes such people as “fearing Him.” *Fear* is generally defined as an unpleasant emotion caused by exposure to danger or expectation of lack or pain. Its synonyms include “dread,” “terror,” “panic,” “alarm,” and “fright.” Though it contains elements of these characteristics, the fear of God is most certainly not dominated by them. This particular quality of fear is not abject terror.

The fear of God centers on worshipful admiration and appreciation. It is a wonder, awe, delight, pleasure, and warm approval of all He is in His Person. It esteems Him above all others because of the awesome, loving mixture of His intelligence, creativity, generosity, wisdom, kindness, patience, and mercy, all within an aura of overwhelming and yet subdued power. These qualities are not ones that a person immediately recognizes, but rather ones that an individual comes to know as the result of experience with Him. His qualities draw a person to God rather than repel him in cringing terror.

Psalms 34:11, a psalm of David, a man after God's own heart, makes a telling statement regarding this fear: “Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.” This fear is not natural to man; it is not built into the carnal mind. Human nature will reject it because the carnal

mind is enmity with God (Romans 8:7).

Godly fear is a quality of reverence and respect of God that must be learned, and only those whom God calls and converts can learn it, because doing so requires a relationship with Him to come to know Him. The unconverted do not have this relationship. Those who fear God will do great exploits regardless of their human status, great or small. To be in that position, we must make the best use of the relationship that He enables by His calling. We have to respond by seeking Him to remain in His spiritual presence, or we will never learn the fear of God nor have it as part of our characters.

The fear of the Lord is a necessary, foundational plank supporting a life lived in faith. It is a strong influence that drives us toward God and His way, not one that incites us to flee from Him. It is not only foundational to this way of life, it is also a fruit of it, learned and strengthened in the character of those who pay the costs of living by faith. The sons of God live in the present yet always look to the future in the Kingdom of God, humbly accepting His judgments on their lives. They strive to make good, daily use of His Word. Such people will receive God's spiritual blessings and do exploits.

What practical, spiritual effects does understanding God's sovereignty have on us? How are we spiritually helped? Its benefits are the fruits of a growth process. The process begins with God's calling and revelation of Himself, and it is carried forward and grows as we voluntarily, by faith, begin combining the foundation He has given us with seeking Him as a vital part of everyday life.

Since we have the Spirit of God through His calling and our repentance and baptism, the fruits of this relationship, the practical effects, are borne from how we use the Bible. We saw in Part Two how important “eating” God's Word is to seeking Him. The Bible is not given to satisfy our idle curiosity but purposefully written to guide us in preparation for God's Kingdom.

Paul writes in II Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” God's instruction is given so that we are well-supplied with knowledge, understanding, inspiration, and motivation to live actually and practically by faith. Yielding to God's sovereignty is not merely the rationale for divine government. *Doctrine* means “teaching,” and it is by means of these teachings that the great realities of our God and Savior are revealed to us. We are spiritually nourished by doctrine, and as we apply it, growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ occurs.

A couple of easily understood scriptures will help us understand how God's Word and living by faith work together to cause growth. Romans 1:16-17 informs us:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is

the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

Add to this Jesus’ words in John 6:63: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.”

Jesus is characterized as the living Word of God. At the most basic level, like any book, the Bible is simply a collection of words. However, its words are specifically instructions from our Creator God who is Spirit and inhabits eternity. Because that God lives and oversees our lives, the Bible’s words are full of dynamic powers, if we believe them and use them. They will guide us to become like the eternal, spiritual God.

It is impossible to be formed into the image of Jesus Christ without His Word in us because we must voluntarily cooperate with God in His purpose in order for Him to do the forming. The forming must be accompanied by our knowing and understanding His will. We must never forget that Jesus says that truth sets free (John 8:32). God’s truths set us free—free from ignorance of God and His purpose; free from the power of evil; free from the wiles of Satan; free from human nature.

The Second Fruit, Humility

The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is foundational to Christian life because, as we move through a life lived by faith, we must firmly, even absolutely, know where we stand in relation to Him and His purpose, or our human nature will rise up and resist conforming to His will. We must know that He is close, that He is love, that He is wisdom, and that He has power over every situation in our lives. God says through Moses in Deuteronomy 8:3:

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

Notice how God’s supplying of manna—symbolic of food and therefore implying eating—shows a spiritual need met in the wilderness. God’s Word is just as essential to spiritual life as food is to physical life. Just as one must discipline himself to provide and eat physical food, so must one exercise discipline to seek, provide, and ingest spiritual food. If one will not do this, just as physical health will decline without adequate food, an inadequate spiritual diet will lead to spiritual weakness and disease.

God provides the Bible to promote righteous living and to motivate us to subjugate our carnal natures to His will. A major effect of seeking God and grasping His sovereignty, then, is that it promotes humility by means of the admiration and appreciation gained from comparing our puny lives and characters to His.

It is a reality that there is an inseparable connection between belief and practice. Proverbs 23:7 reads, “As he thinks in his heart so is he.” If divine truth is in our heart because of our exercising ourselves to seek God, then godly, Christian character should result. The issue of God’s sovereignty covers much more ground than just the exercise of His governmental power. In the fullness of its breadth and depth, it actually indicates His Godhood over all the creation in addition to His character and all of His attributes.

The Scriptures tell us that His power is so great and glorious that no one can look upon Him and live. Some have experienced a glimpse of His glory and lived to report on it, but the rest of us must gather a semblance of the greatness of His sovereignty from the reports those few have left us of their reactions.

As the book of Job concludes, Job is listening to God proclaim a small portion of His glory. How does Job react? “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). Job abased himself before the Almighty. Why? Job recognized God’s glorious sovereignty over all creation and all circumstances.

Isaiah 6:5 records the prophet seeing God and His throne with seraphim above crying out, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of Hosts.” What does Isaiah do? He cries out, “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips living in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” He felt filthy and like nothing in the presence of pure holiness.

In Daniel 10:5-9, Daniel sees a vision of God, and he immediately faints dead away. He is awakened, apparently by Gabriel, and given a message from God. There was no verbal reaction, but obviously, Daniel is stunned, his sense of equilibrium overwhelmed by what he saw.

These examples contain a clear lesson for us as to what happens as we come to “see” God, even though we do not literally see Him with our bodily eyes. As we come to grasp His reality, we are drawn to fear Him. This is of great value because our sense of personal worth is greatly and positively disturbed when we compare ourselves with Him.

Proverbs 1:7 proclaims, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Proverbs 4:7 adds: “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.” Thus, the path to the effects of grasping God’s sovereignty is that, as God becomes greater in the eyes of our understanding, it paves the way and begins removing the barriers for the growth of godly knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, all of which work to produce the character trait of humility. This is very good for knowing God.

Breaking Pride’s Enslavement

In Romans 3, Paul vividly describes why things are the way they are on planet Earth, and he ends with a general statement of the root cause. Romans 3:10 begins a striking nine-verse description of the evil heart and conduct of mankind, writing, “There is none righ-

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teous, no not one.” Verse 18 provides the basic reason why things are as they are: “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

The fear needed is not a servile, cringing, and enslaving terror, but a mixture of love, admiration, and respect for what He is. He is a Father who pities His children; a Ruler who looks on the one who is poor and of a contrite heart; a Physician who heals the body, cleanses the spirit, mercifully forgives, and gives sound counsel so that His children can work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

When the fear of God enters a man's evil heart, godly knowledge, understanding, and wisdom can begin to grow. Why? Because in making better choices, the person begins to break his enslavement to his own evil heart, from which comes all the defiling corruption that leads to death, as Jesus shows in Matthew 15:18-20:

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.

By nature, man is focused on his sense of self-importance, so pride dominates his attitudes and therefore his choices. The corrective is something that will humble, and it begins with him being able to compare himself appropriately with the greatness of God. Man will live either to serve himself or to seek to serve and please God. It will be one or the other because no man can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

When Moses goes before Pharaoh in Exodus 5:2, he says, “Let my people go.” What is Pharaoh's defiant response? “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go.” That was his problem, and it remains a major hurdle for us too. We must come to know the Lord. From this, a simple truth arises: Not knowing God promotes irreverence of God, as Pharaoh clearly shows. Thus, not knowing God promotes disobedience. Knowing God, on the other hand, promotes the fear of God and humility before Him and thus obedience.

Knowing God in His sovereignty works to remove every ground for man to rely on himself and boast. Salvation is of the Lord; it is by His grace through faith. Man wants to think that he is contributing greatly to his redemption and salvation, but John tells us we are born, not of the will of the flesh, but of God (John 1:13). If we understand God's sovereignty, it leads us to praise Him for the glory of what He is: He is our salvation! In addition, we desire salvation for the very purpose of humbling ourselves before Him that we might glorify Him. This means that we can wisely turn only one way: We must choose to submit to His will. Peter gives us wise counsel:

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. (I Peter 5:5-8)

The exercise, the actual use, of humility in daily life is a choice. Once we know what God's will is, we must still deal with choosing to use humility by submitting to it. Each time we submit to God's instruction, we are humbling ourselves before Him. Is that not what God says in Deuteronomy 30:19, that we must choose life rather than death? “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.” Fully accepting God's sovereignty provides us the proper comparisons so that we can wisely make right choices.

The Third Fruit, Obedience

What hinders a person from submitting in obedience to God? Most frequently, we answer that it is human nature. While this is correct, it is also very general. Often, it is sheer ignorance; we simply do not know any better because we do not know God or what He specifically requires. More often, we know what God requires to some degree, but we do not understand how important to our sense of well-being submitting to Him is. At other times, perhaps most often, it is sheer stubbornness, born of innate pride, that drives us not to care about Him and His purpose. Our momentary desires overwhelm feelings of concern about conforming to His will.

However, as God calls us and our awareness of His importance to our life begins growing—and most especially as the sovereignty of the Author of the Word is truly understood and accepted—it should no longer be as difficult a matter of choosing what meets with our approval because much of the confusion will be dissipated. Why? Because as we come to “see” God, His Word will be seen as the only standard that truly meets our approval.

This is, of course, not something that happens immediately and without resistance from our deeply entrenched carnal nature. However, with the addition of humility to our character, gradually supplanting our proud resistance derived from Satan and his world, we now have more than a fighting chance to submit in obedience.

Being enabled to “see” God leads to an awareness of our littleness, indeed our practical nothingness, compared to Him. It gradually creates a childlike attitude, a sense of dependency that opens the eyes of our mind about how

much we need contact with Him. Without contact with Him and without submission to Him and His purpose and plan, there is no salvation. It dawns on us that we must give our whole-hearted submission to Him.

Matthew 18:1-5 reminds us of this requirement:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.”

Suppose we were asked, “Who are the greatest people in your town?” What would we turn to as qualities that exemplify greatness? Would it be money, prestige, learning, or military conquest? Just before this incident, the disciples were arguing about which of them would be greatest among them (Mark 9:33-37). Jesus responds to the disciple’s question by using a child.

He is not saying that heaven is populated by little children. He means that a child’s attitudes of easy dependence, trust, unpretentiousness, awareness of weakness, lack of knowledge, and submission to parents illustrate what we as converted adults must become toward God. Jesus is not saying every child is like His illustration; He is using one to illustrate an ideal. It is essential that we grasp that we must turn, change, to become like the ideal.

By seeking God through the Scriptures, we will find the ideals exemplified by the Father Himself and by Jesus Christ as He walked among the disciples, teaching them. Jesus was perfectly submissive to His Father in heaven in every experience of His life as a man. The Scripture is a revelation from the Most High, communicating His mind and defining His will to us as we move toward lives of greater godliness.

In order to be submissive to Him, we must cry out in appeal to God, as Psalm 119:36, 133 do: “Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness. . . . Direct my steps by Your word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me.” One who is being converted by God and who is seeking God will “see” Him in the Holy Scriptures, and out of humble respect, he will submit in obedience to Him.

Therefore understanding God’s sovereignty opens the door for a third benefit: implicit obedience. It begets an obedient walk through our pilgrimage with Christ.

The Fourth Fruit, Resignation

Among the truly distinctive biblical terms describing the attitudes of those journeying through the wilderness are forms of the term “murmur.” Such words are not used much today, as most would use a form of “complain,”

“gripe,” “grumble,” “protest,” “criticize,” or “whine.” In referring to the children of Israel in the wilderness, the King James Version uses a form of “murmur” 24 times.

It is natural to complain against afflictions, losses, and hopeful expectations dashed. We seem to think that our possessions are ours unconditionally, especially those things on which we had set our hearts. We feel that, having worked diligently, we are entitled to success and deserve to enjoy and keep what we have accumulated. In the same way, when we are surrounded by a loving family, no one has a right to break into that circle and strike down a loved one.

We live our lives under the sovereignty of God, whose watchful oversight is on us constantly. How do we react to Him when things are not going well? It is easy to gripe without even thinking of the ever-watchful God who promises to supply our every need. We may find ourselves complaining to Him about our state of affairs, as if He is totally unaware. Have we forgotten that this One, who by His grace has called us into a relationship with Him, has neither afflicted us nor allowed us to be afflicted anywhere near what we truly deserve as the wages of our sinful lives?

Another benefit of fully accepting the sovereignty of God is one that is not always appreciated because its cause and solution are not always understood. Comprehending God’s sovereignty brings resignation into our life. In this day, being resigned to something almost seems like a position of defeat, as though at best we have to choose the lesser of two evils rather than forging ahead in confidence to grab life’s brass ring.

The Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary defines *resignation* as “the quality of being submissive; unresisting acquiescence.” *The Reader’s Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder* defines it as “uncomplaining endurance of a sorrow or difficulty.” The mention of endurance is noteworthy because of Jesus’ statement in Matthew 24:13 for the need of endurance.

A major benefit of intelligently living by faith, seeking God through His Word, meditating on what we study, and relating everything in life to an awareness of God, looking for His hand in events, is that these activities will gradually produce a much deeper awareness of His loving nearness. It gives us a clearer sense that everything is under control. Recall Jesus’ crossing the turbulent Sea of Galilee during a storm. There are huge waves and high winds. The disciples are terrified, but He is sleeping right through it. In fear, they wake Him. He arises and says to the wind and waves, “Peace, be still,” and they immediately calm. He then asks His disciples, “Why are you so fearful; how is it that you have no faith?”

When we have a right and true recognition of God’s sovereignty, the griping and fears that we are so prone to because human nature is so easily offended can diminish considerably. Understanding God’s sovereignty better teaches us that we must know that our lives are in God’s hands. He owns us body and soul, we are in His view at all times, and we must bow to His will. Therefore, regardless

(continued on page 14)

The Whole Earth

When we think of the king or the kingdom commonly known as “the Beast,” our minds bring up various impressions of the final, anti-God and anti-Christ power that will be given authority for 42 months (Revelation 13:5). Perhaps what comes to mind are the artistic depictions used on the old *World Tomorrow* telecast, which portrayed a conglomeration of characteristics and body parts of multiple animals. The most prominent feature was the head of something like a triceratops but which had ten horns instead of three.

Whatever our exact mental image, this end-time king and kingdom will be intensely militaristic, a merciless, crushing force that serves only its own violent interests. It will be empowered by the great dragon, and because of this, it will be particularly focused on God’s people—the physical and spiritual Israelites. The Beast is prophesied to be allowed “to make war with the saints and to overcome them” (Revelation 13:7). A fearsome and terrible entity, its violent reign lurks in the background of verses like Matthew 24:21: “. . . then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.”

We often unconsciously insert another description of the Beast: Because of its descriptions in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13, we usually refer to the Beast as a “world-ruling empire.” Yet, because of the human nature that remains within us, a potential pitfall for us appears in this: What if a world-ruling empire is not on the horizon? We know that world conditions are bad and getting worse, yet no world-ruling empire seems close to coming in existence. No current nation appears capable of dominating the globe.

The closest nation to a world-ruling empire right now is the United States, yet it is more interested in trade than in demolishing the world’s nations—not to mention, as one of the foremost Israelitish nations, it is prophesied to go through Jacob’s Trouble (Jeremiah 30:7). Not only is the U.S. in decline, but it also seems to be a perfect manifestation of Babylon the Great, the woman whom the

Beast hates and will burn with fire (Revelation 17:5, 16).

We do not yet see a king or kingdom rising up to threaten the whole earth. The danger, then, is that in the absence of an obvious world-ruling empire, we may think that we have more time. However, the parables teach that, if we start thinking that “our Master delays His coming,” there is a temptation to let down, become distracted, and drift away.

Just what is the scope or the breadth of the end-time Beast’s dominion? Is it truly global? Will every last nation come under its sway before the end? Numerous scriptures contain descriptions of the Beast, but they also allow for something that may be unexpected: The kingdom of the Beast does *not* have to stretch over the entire globe. If we are waiting for a world-ruling empire to arise before we begin to seek God earnestly, we may be taken by surprise.

DEFINING “THE WORLD”

In Daniel 7:23, an angel explains to Daniel the infamous fourth beast in his vision: “Thus he said: ‘The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all other kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, trample it and break it in pieces.’”

This fourth beast—the one that struck the most terror in Daniel’s heart—is described as devouring *the whole earth*, trampling it, and breaking it into pieces. The Aramaic phrase translated as “the whole earth” is comprised of two words: *kol* (Strong’s #3606) and ‘*ara*

(Strong's #772). Considering the basic meaning of these two Aramaic words, "the whole earth" is a correct literal translation. However, this same word-combination appears in a number of other places, and it does not consistently mean the entirety of the globe or even the entirety of the civilized world.

We can see this in Daniel's explanation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream: "But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over *all the earth*" (Daniel 2:39, emphasis ours throughout). We understand this third kingdom to be the empire of Greece under Alexander the Great. His empire stretched from the Ionian Sea to the Himalayas, and included Anatolia, Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Some would say that Alexander conquered the "known world," but this is a misnomer. Every part of the world is known to those living in it, and there were peoples living in essentially every part of the world at this time.

During Alexander's time, substantial civilizations existed in the rest of Europe, and in particular, the descendants of Israel had settled there. Unconquered tribes lived throughout Africa, Arabia, Tibet, Mongolia, not to mention the civilizations in the Americas—all were completely untroubled by Alexander. Also, ancient cultures inhabited India, the South Pacific, and the Far East. The third kingdom in Nebuchadnezzar's vision encompassed the Middle East and the Near East, but it did not rule over "all the earth," as most English-speakers would interpret the phrase. It was a "world-ruling" kingdom only for a specifically defined "world."

Therefore, if we are on the lookout for a kingdom that can devour "the whole earth," we have to understand that the scope of that Aramaic phrase can be significantly limited, and in most cases, it is. This phrase is also found in Daniel 4:1, 11, 20, where it describes the scope of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom (which was also not truly global), and in Daniel 6:25, where King Darius writes "to all peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth"—yet Darius did not have a global audience.

The one place where the phrase "the whole earth" actually does imply the entire planet is Daniel 2:35, where "the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled *the whole earth*." This great mountain represents Jesus Christ's rule on earth, which will certainly be a world-ruling Kingdom in the fullest and truest sense of the word (see Revelation 11:15).

There is an equivalent Hebrew phrase to the above Aramaic one, and it can also be used idiomatically. For example, in Daniel 8:5—in the book's Hebrew portion—the prophet writes, "And as I was considering, suddenly a male goat came from the west, across the surface of *the whole earth*." This male goat also refers to Alexander, coming eastward to defeat the Medo-Persian Empire. His impressive empire covered roughly two million square miles, but it is only a fraction of the 57 million square miles of land on planet Earth.

A similar description is found in Ezra 1:2, where the Persian king Cyrus makes a proclamation after God

stirred up his spirit. The first thing Cyrus says is, "The LORD God of heaven has given me *all the kingdoms of the earth*. . . ." A map of the nations at the time, however, would show that Cyrus did not rule "all the kingdoms of the earth," as we would generally interpret it. Thus, what Daniel, Cyrus, the interpreting angel, and others considered to be "the whole earth" or "all the earth" or "all the kingdoms of the earth" was often substantially smaller than what those phrases mean to us.

From the biblical usage of these Aramaic and Hebrew phrases, we can summarize that the "whole earth" and "all the earth" do not refer to all parts of the inhabited world. Instead, they typically refer to the entire territory of the Near East, Middle East, and North Africa that in any way relates to the land given to Israel—the land where God Himself made a garden, and the land He promised to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:18-19; 17:8; 26:3-4; 28:4, 13-15; 35:12; 48:4; 50:24; Exodus 6:8). This is the region that God and His Word are most focused on.

So, while "the whole earth" or "all the earth" can at times mean the entire globe (such as the scope of the great Flood), they do not have to. The scale of the end-time Beast's rule could be localized to the region around the Promised Land, as were the Gentile powers that preceded it.

EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE, AND NATION

The book of Revelation contains another well-known depiction of the Beast:

It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (Revelation 13:7-8)

In the phrase, "all who dwell on the earth," the Greek word translated as "earth," *ge* (Strong's #1093), is just like the Aramaic and Hebrew words for "earth." It, too, is used for a whole range of geographic areas, thus it is variously translated as "world," "country," "ground," or "land." In some places, it describes the whole globe, but elsewhere it refers to something as small as the land of Judah or the land of Zebulun—not a very big area at all. While it is certainly not wrong for translators to render this as "all who dwell on the earth," it is just as correct to render it as "all who dwell in the land," indicating a specific land—like the Promised Land or perhaps a particular region.

Verse 7 says that the Beast is given authority "over every tribe, tongue, and nation," which would seem to indicate that it will have global authority. However, the Babylonian Empire is described in exactly the same terms:

O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty, glory and honor. And because of the majesty that He gave him, *all*

prophecy watch *The Whole Earth*

peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. (Daniel 5:18-19)

In describing Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, Daniel writes that all *peoples* (meaning *kindreds* or *tribes*), all *nations*, and all *languages* trembled and feared before him. These are the same three groupings given in Revelation 13:7: "every tribe, tongue, and nation." Yet, as with Alexander's realm, Nebuchadnezzar's did not extend to all ethnic groups, languages, and nations that then existed on earth. The world that he ruled, which trembled before him, was a limited one, yet it included the Promised Land.

In Revelation 13:11-17, John describes "another beast coming up out of the earth." This one has "two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon." He "exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence" (Revelation 13:12), indicating that his authority is the same as the first beast's. If the first beast's authority is global, so is the second beast's; if the first beast's authority is more localized to the environs of the Near East, Middle East, and North Africa, then the second beast's authority is the same.

In the same verse, the second beast "causes *the earth and those who dwell in it* to worship the first beast." The Greek word translated "earth" is the same one used in verse 8. It could mean "the world," "the country," or "the land." So what is the scope of the second beast's authority?

When it comes to imposing the Mark of the Beast, Revelation 13:16 seems to ascribe universal authority to him: "He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads." These three pairs of opposing classifications of people seem to include every person on the planet. However, they have to be seen within the context of his authority, rather than as a definition of his authority. That is, he will impose the Mark across all social, economic, and political strata within the realm of the Beast—there will be no exceptions because someone is rich or has high rank in the Beast's government. The Mark will be universal for those over whom the Beast rules.

SMALL AND GREAT

Acts 26:22 contains another example of this phraseology. Paul says he is "witnessing both to *small and great*." This does not mean that he was witnessing to all people on earth but to the "small and great" who were in his audience. Revelation 19:17-18 uses the same rhetorical device to describe the aftermath of the war between the returning Messiah and the Beast:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather

together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and *the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great.*"

Will the birds devour the flesh of every person on the planet? Again, these classifications of people (free and slave, small and great) describe universality *within an already-defined grouping*—in this case, the people who "gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army" (Revelation 19:19).

Will the Mark of the Beast be a truly global phenomenon, imposed on every man, woman, and child on earth? If so, the biblical math does not add up! Consider: The second beast "causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark" (Revelation 13:16). However, in Revelation 14:9-11, an angel proclaims that anyone receiving the mark

shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out *full strength* into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.

If every person (aside from the saints) receives the mark, then every person (aside from the saints) will die at Christ's return! Yet, numerous other prophecies show that not all nations will be destroyed at His coming; instead, all nations will be *ruled* by Him. Hence, a substantial number of people—enough to make up nations—will not "drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out *full strength* into the cup of His indignation" because they did receive the Mark of the Beast. Thus, the Mark is not imposed on every person because the second beast is not given the power to impose it on every person. Rather, he causes all *within the rule of the Beast* to receive it.

A final indicator of the scope of the Beast's kingdom can be found in Daniel 11:21-45, which describes the movements and conquests of the final "king of the north," the figure also represented by the "little horn" (Daniel 8:9, 23-25), whom we understand to be the end-time Beast. This passage shows that the King of the North conquers and rules in the same general region ruled by Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, and Alexander, kings that each ruled "the whole earth." The King of the North arrogantly conquers—but not every nation on the globe. In Daniel 11, he never seems to get very far from the Promised Land. The scope of his empire

(continued on page 14)

ready answer

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

Make Every Day Count

*“I press toward the
goal for the prize
of the upward call of
God in Christ Jesus.”
—Philippians 3:14*

Back in 1975, an American singer named Freddy Fender had a hit song called “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” in which he bemoaned the fact that he was wasting time on the wrong girl. King Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 9:10, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”

Wasted days cannot be recovered; they are gone. Lost opportunities are just that—lost! We say to ourselves, “I’ll pray later or study tomorrow,” or “I’ll write that card when I get time.” In Psalm 89:47, the psalmist beseeches God, “Remember how short my time is.”

We are all guilty of wasting time, but perhaps the story of the famous Donner Party will inspire us all to be more cognizant of how short life is and how we must make every day count. There are numerous physical lessons here, but we should cast it into spiritual terms to see how it might apply to our own lives. The instruction will be obvious, but because our lives vary so much, we will likely take different lessons from it. This story has false prophets, friends turning on each other, people seeking the easy way, and a slide from energy and enthusiasm into fatigue and complacency.

Journey to a New Life

In the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, caravans of wagons carried settlers emigrating from the eastern United States to various areas of the West. On April 16, 1846, nine covered wagons pulled by oxen left Springfield, Illinois, on the 2,000-mile journey to the area around Sutter’s Fort, California, present-day Sacramento. The leader of this group was James Reed, a successful businessman who hoped for even greater fortunes in California.

Along the way to Independence, Missouri, the jumping-off point for wagon trains in those days, other families joined the caravan: George Donner, along with his brother, Jacob, and their large families; the Graves;

ready answer *Make Every Day Count*

Breems; Murphys; Eddys; McCutchens; Kesebergs; and Wolfingers. These people left behind family and comfort to seek a new life and—they hoped—a better one. The trip was to take four months, and they would cross rivers, plains, deserts, and mountains. A difficult journey, to be sure, but thousands of others had made the trek already by then and left a trail to follow.

What made this wagon train different is that both James Reed and Jacob Donner had read a book, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, by a promoter named Lansford Hastings. It told of a shortcut to “paradise” called the Hastings Cutoff that would trim 350 miles from their journey. Trouble was, no wagons had ever taken this course, and even Lansford Hastings himself had yet to try it, on foot or horseback!

The group, now comprised of about eighty folks, reached Independence in three weeks, where they resupplied then immediately struck out on the trail in the middle of a thunderstorm. They had such a sense of urgency that they did not wait for the storm to pass! A week later, they caught up to a larger wagon train and joined with them. They were making good time.

Their first delay came at the Big Blue River in present-day Kansas. The waters were too high to cross, forcing them to wait a week. They made Fort Laramie in what is now Wyoming on June 27. There, James Reed ran into an old friend from back home, James Clyman.

Mr. Clyman is a story unto himself, a famous explorer, Indian fighter, and mountain man. He had just traveled the Hastings Cutoff, west to east, with Lansford Hastings. Clyman told James Reed the route was barely passable *on foot*, and it would be impossible with wagons. Reed chose to ignore the warnings of a man he knew and respected to follow a man he did not know. He then used his persuasive powers to sell his family and others on this shortcut as well.

At this point, the Donner Party was still traveling with the larger wagon train they had joined, but on July 19, they parted with the majority of the wagon train taking the known path to California. The 74 people taking the Cutoff elected George Donner as their captain, adding his name to the history books. They felt that James Reed was a little too high-handed and haughty to be their leader. The very fact that they could not elect the man whose advice they followed should have been a strong indicator of trouble to come. Bad fruit, as it were.

On July 28, the Donner Party rolled into Fort Bridger, in what is now southwest Wyoming, near the Utah border, expecting to meet Mr. Hastings, but he had left with another wagon train some days earlier to try his own shortcut. He left a letter extolling the virtues of his “cutoff” and encouraging them to follow. More bad fruit.

Enter Jim Bridger, a famous mountain man and proprietor of the fort and trading post. He also knew that taking this route was foolish, but he figured that, if enough wagon trains took it, they could carve out a road and make it

passable, increasing trade at his post. He encouraged the Donner Party to go.

They chose to rest four days at Fort Bridger. Remember the seven days waiting for the waters to subside on the Big Blue River? Now the party had lost eleven days. Their sense of urgency should have been heightened, but instead, it appears to have waned.

The Critical Cutoff

Their first week on the Cutoff, they made good progress. On August 6, they reached the Weber River, finding a note from Lansford Hastings stuck on a forked stick. He wrote that the canyon ahead was virtually impassable and that they should take another trail through Salt Basin, in what is present-day Utah. Another bad sign! They were following a man who had only just taken wagons down this trail, and now he advises them to go another way!

Another group had already gone down Weber Canyon, and while it may have been bad, at least something of a trail had been carved. This wagon train made it through to California, and history barely remembers them. The Donner Party sent three men on horses ahead to find Hastings, but when they did, he would not come back and lead them. Instead, he took the three men up on a peak and pointed out the alternate route—one never used!

While all this went on, the Donner Party waited five days. While waiting, more wagons pulled up to join them, bringing their numbers to 87. Sixteen days had been lost to this point, but Hastings assured the men that this alternate route would take a week, and then they would rejoin his cutoff.

When they found Hastings note stuck on a stick, they were only a week out of Fort Bridger. They could have admitted that they were following a self-promoting blowhard and backtracked, but they took a vote and decided to head off even further into the unknown—all in the mistaken belief that they were taking a shortcut. They were 87 men, women, and children, without a guide or a map, over two weeks behind schedule, heading into the wilderness, desert, and mountains.

So they began the grueling journey through the Wasatch Mountains. Clearing trees, filling gullies, and dislodging boulders so that their wagons could move, they made eight miles in six days. They had to abandon some of their wagons, leaving behind family heirlooms and precious memories. Morale began to sink, and they blamed Hastings *and* James Reed. Yet they still did not turn back.

On August 25, they reached the Great Salt Lake Desert. In the 21 days since leaving the Weber River, they had traveled just 36 miles. Now they had to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert, which Hastings had said would take them two days. On the third day, their water was nearly

gone, and some of the oxen had run away. It took five days to cross 80 miles of desert. In doing so, they left another four wagons behind and lost 32 oxen. They should have been in California by now, but they still had 600 miles to go!

They rested a few days, took inventory, and found the food was running low. Things looked bleak. That very night, snow powdered the mountain peaks. They sent two young men ahead to Sutter's Fort to bring back supplies.

Finally, on September 26, the "new" trail joined back up with the Hastings Cutoff. The detour that Lansford Hastings told them would take one week had instead taken six—an extra 125 miles through mountains and desert. They were now over fifty days behind schedule. This late in the year, in the mountains of present-day Nevada, if ever there was a time to make every day count, this was it.

No End of Troubles

On October 5, two wagons became entangled, and there was a fight. One of the wagon drivers, John Snyder, began to hit James Reed with his whip, so Reed stabbed Snyder to death with his hunting knife. Some wanted to hang him on the spot, but he was instead banished from the wagon train. Leaving his family, James Reed rode off into the west.

On October 7, with food running low and tempers running high, Lewis Keseberg put a Belgian man named Harcoop out of his wagon. The old man had severely swollen feet and could not keep up. He sought a ride in the other wagons, but no one would take him in. He was last seen sitting under a large sage bush, completely exhausted, unable to walk, left there to die.

On October 12, the group, attacked by Paiute Indians using poison tipped arrows, lost 21 oxen. On October 16, they reached the gateway to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their food was almost gone, but three days later, one of the young men sent ahead showed up with seven mules loaded with beef and flour. With him were two guides from the California settlements, and he brought news of a clear but difficult path through the mountains.

This should have lifted their spirits and fired them up. They are only fifty miles from the summit, and once over the summit, it was literally downhill from there. It was the middle of October, in the High Sierras, and they were 51 days behind. What did they do?

Well, it would be nice to say that they made every day count and immediately headed for the pass, but that is not what happened. If they had, the Donner Party would be unknown, just another wagon train that endured much hardship to reach the "Promised Land." Instead, they rested five days!

Snow was already on the peaks! When they finally started for the summit, snow began to fall. Three men traveling out front made it to the summit but could go no farther in five inches of new snow. Twelve miles from their goal, the Donner Party was snowed in for the winter—they

were one, maybe two days, from cresting the mountain and heading downhill. No doubt, they wished they had back any one of those 56 wasted days and wasted nights.

They built shelters and tried several more times to get over the pass, now buried in twenty inches of snow. They would end up spending over four months in the High Sierras, enduring a fierce winter with no food and pitiful shelter. To read the individual stories of this horrible time, left behind by diaries and interviews later, will move a person to tears.

After the normal food ran out, the oxen and mules were killed and eaten, although many had wandered off in the storms and been lost under the snow. The last of the oxen was killed on November 29. They then boiled the hides and ate those. Next, they ate twigs, bones, and bark. On December 15, the first person died of malnutrition. There would be many more. Those that survived resorted to eating the flesh of those who died.

The first relief party made it over the mountain on February 19. They found that many had died, some had gone crazy, and the rest were barely clinging to life. This was still the dead of winter, and they could not carry everyone out. They managed to get 23 of them out, but two of the children died on the way to Sutter's Fort.

On March 1, the second relief party arrived and discovered the grisly evidence of cannibalism. The relief party of March 12 found the same, as they also came across partially eaten bodies. In the end, 44 people died, mostly from starvation, and 47 survived.

Lessons to Learn

If those of the Donner Party could have a "do over," they would not have gone off following someone whom they did not know over a trail that had never been used. They would have striven mightily to get along with one another. The lessons that can be pulled from this story are many: lessons on proper planning, being prepared, choosing leaders wisely, getting along with others, working as a team instead of against one another, kindness, forgiveness, faith, salvation, and the list goes on.

There is even a spiritual lesson in the Donner Party's cannibalism. Paul warns in Galatians 5:15, "But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" We should avoid spiritual cannibalism as much as we would its gruesome physical counterpart.

Finally, we need to learn from this story to make every day count. Making every day count is different for each of us because our weaknesses are not the same. Whatever our weak spot(s) might be, we cannot let complacency settle in. It is somewhat discouraging to note that in the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), all ten of them "slumbered and slept." We must realize that, for us, snow has already powdered the peaks (Romans 13:11)! Now is the time to press toward our goal (Philippians 3:14).

In I Thessalonians 5:1-7 (J.B. Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English*), the apostle Paul writes:

ready answer *Make Every Day Count*

But as far as times and seasons go, my brothers, you don't need written instructions. You are well aware that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. When men are saying "Peace and security," catastrophe will sweep down upon them as suddenly and inescapably as birth-pangs to a pregnant woman.

But because you, my brothers, are not living in darkness the day cannot take you by surprise, like a burglar! You are all sons of light, sons of the day,

and none of us belongs to darkness or the night. Let us then never fall asleep, like the rest of the world; let us keep awake, with our wits about us.

Moses prays in Psalm 90:12, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." *The Contemporary English Version* renders this verse, "Teach us to use wisely all the time we have." Each day that passes is one less in the physical life God has given us. Make every day count!

—Mike Ford

personal *Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty*

(continued from page 7)

of circumstances, He can take care of us.

He never afflicts us with more than we deserve nor more than we can bear (I Corinthians 10:13). If He chooses poverty, poor health, or family problems for us, we must understand that He never piles more on us than we deserve. After all, we killed His Son, and besides that, He has great plans for us in His Kingdom for which we need to be prepared.

An upset woman once complained to her minister that church members had heaped much scorn on her and her family by saying derogatory things about them. She asked the minister if anybody else in his memory had had to endure such things. He replied, "Yes, Jesus Christ. All His disciples abandoned Him, and the government put Him, an innocent man, to death. He not only did not complain, He accepted God's will, and before He died, He forgave them all."

There are other examples: Job says, "The LORD gives and the LORD takes away." God took away seven sons and three daughters, as well as his wealth and home. As a young boy, Samuel delivered God's judgments on Eli's two sons. That surely must have stung the old priest, but Eli responded, "Let the LORD do as seems good to Him."

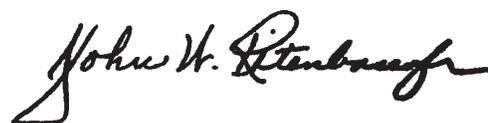
Aaron accepted God's verdict of death on his two sons without a murmur.

The resignation issue is why James 4:13-15 is in the Bible:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

As we live by faith, we must never forget God's loving wisdom that we are the clay and He is the Potter, shaping us according to His purpose. Four valuable fruits will be produced by fully accepting God's sovereignty: the fear of God, humility, submissiveness, and uncomplaining endurance.

In Christian love,



prophecy watch *The Whole Earth*

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there seems to be less than what we would consider to be "the whole earth."

In summary, the various descriptions of the end-time Beast's empire have a range in the way they are used. While they can describe a dominion that is truly worldwide in scope, they can also just as easily describe one that is geographically much smaller, though no less fearsome and terrible for those people in its path. We do

not need to wait for a leader to arise who can bring the entire globe under his heel. These prophecies can be fulfilled even without global domination. The language that is used allows for a global kingdom as well as a more limited one, but either way, the Beast's focus will be the region around the Promised Land. As we watch the world turn through this present axial period, we should allow for such a range as well.

—David C. Grabbe

Mass Shootings in Today's America

The end of 2012 came with a bang. Many bangs, a reported 152 of them. The December 14 school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, not only took the lives of 27 people, including 20 children, but the horror of the mass murder also reverberated across America, immediately spawning a national debate on school safety, mental illness, and of course, guns and the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Occurring less than six months after the Aurora, Colorado, “Batman” shooting, which killed 12 and injured 58, the Sandy Hook tragedy seems to have caused many Americans to say, “Enough is enough.”

Such a reaction is natural. It is upsetting and disheartening to learn of the deaths of so many children, realizing that they were mercilessly slain by an assailant whose demons were his own. Without defense against the young man’s murderous and insane rage, they died essentially alone and without comfort. It chills the heart of any parent or of any feeling person.

The death of anyone at the hands of another is cause for grief and consternation. It should cause law enforcement, government, and those involved to review what happened and ask the hard questions: Did the school, the school system, local police, and government do enough to provide a safe learning environment? Were there lapses in the safety protocols? Were reaction times fast enough? Was the school sufficiently hardened against assault? Were school employees trained in how to react? What additional measures could prevent such atrocities in the future? Responsible citizens consider it a solemn duty to undertake such an investigation to prevent anything like this massacre from happening again.

Some of these questions have been asked, but the final one on prevention has received the most ink. From what appears on the news, it seems as if the only “additional measure” that many in public office want to discuss is banning so-called assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, not to mention tightening licensing guidelines and limiting ammunition sales. Their fellow travelers in the mainstream media also jumped to this conclusion almost immediately, inaugurating a gun-control campaign as soon as the news hit the wires.

In an instant, progressive forces in America decided that the tragedy in Newtown was the perfect crisis to help erase over two centuries of constitutionally unrestricted freedom to own firearms. In defense of their crusade, they also downplayed and dismissed suggestions from Second Amendment advocates to place more armed guards in schools or to arm teachers themselves, as occurs in Israel. Gun-rights groups like the National Rifle Association were marginalized, with many in the media rolling their eyes in disbelief that anyone could defend the ownership and use of firearms.

However, they are the ones who are out of touch. According to a Harvard study, the average gun-owning American household contains about five firearms. America’s more than 300 million citizens own more guns than there are cars on its streets. As a whole, these firearms collections comprise nearly half of the world’s guns, a real deterrent to both internal tyranny and

foreign invasion, as the Founding Fathers intended by including the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights. It is not surprising, then, that those who favor greater governmental control—as progressive political thought advocates—would desire to limit further gun sales and even reduce the number of firearms in private hands. Middle America, though, stands in their way.

Knowing a little about the reported mental state of the Sandy Hook shooter, a thinking person might wonder if some sort of mental-health measure could be effective in preventing similar tragedies. Some have suggested that a psychological checkup be added to the background check required for licensing a gun, but this idea has been dismissed as overly intrusive and open to both wild subjectivity and easy corruption. Besides, a mentally unhinged individual will find a weapon if he wants one badly enough, no matter how illegal it is for him to possess one.

Another factor that is only just beginning to be discussed is the known link of psychiatric drugs to mass killings. The Citizens Commission on Human Rights International reports in “School Shooters Under the Influence of Psychiatric Drugs” (<http://www.cchrint.org/school-shooters>):

Between 2004 and 2011, there have been over 11,000 reports to the U.S. FDA’s MedWatch system of psychiatric drug side effects related to violence. These include 300 cases of homicide, nearly 3,000 cases of mania and over 7,000 cases of aggression. Note: By the FDA’s own admission, only 1-10% of side effects are ever reported to the FDA, so the actual number of side effects occurring are most certainly higher. (See also, “A Brief History of Psychotropic Drugs Prescribed to Mass Murderers”; <http://www.ladailypost.com/content/brief-history-psychotropic-drugs-prescribed-mass-murderers>.)

The article links to 31 school shootings in which such drugs played a part, resulting in 72 dead and 162 wounded. Its findings do not include the Sandy Hook shooting, but its perpetrator had been prescribed Fanapt® (iloperidone), a controversial anti-psychotic medicine used to treat schizophrenia.

In all this finger-pointing, do we, as Christians, see anything missing from the discussion? To most of the politicians and pundits pontificating on the issue, the problem is inadequate safety measures, firearms, mental health, or drugs—or other factors like violent video games, a violent culture, or societal inequalities. We see that, yet again, they have left God entirely out of the picture. America’s once staunchly Christian value system is fast eroding, and in its breakdown, its citizens have lost most of the internal controls that keep atrocities like these from occurring so often.

So comes to pass in modern America a fulfillment of one of the most horrifying of the Bible’s prophecies: “Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hosea 4:6).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

The Coin in the Fish's Mouth

The miracle of the coin found in the fish's mouth (Matthew 17:24-27) may be among the least dramatic of Christ's miracles, but it is certainly instructive. The context involves the paying of the Temple tax, and not surprisingly, only Matthew, the former tax collector for Rome, reports it. Although he did not collect this particular tax, it still interested him. His account of Christ's life tends to highlight the King and His Kingdom. Why, then, should the King be subject to a tax? Is He not the Son of God, the Heir of all His Father's house?

Coming to Capernaum, the tax collector asks Simon Peter, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" and Peter replies in the affirmative (verses 24-25). This tax was not a Roman civil tax but a religious one supporting the Temple in Jerusalem. God inaugurated this tax in the wilderness, instructing Moses to take a half shekel from every male twenty years and older (Exodus 30:11-16). It provided for the work of the Tabernacle and later of the Temple, including during the time of Christ. This tax was not an evil one per se, helping to cover legitimate costs of the worship of God, but as with almost all taxation, the money was often misused.

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1. Does Peter err in how he answers? Matthew 17:25, 27.

COMMENT: Peter appears concerned that Jesus would not be esteemed a good Jew if He did not pay the tax. Not wanting to bring dishonor and danger on Him, he acknowledges Jesus' liability to pay the taxes as if He were a mere son of Israel. His reply implies that Jesus had paid the tax and would continue to do as every devout Jew should. When Peter enters the house, Jesus immediately asks him about taxation: "From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" This demonstration of Christ's knowing what Peter had discussed elsewhere proves to the disciple that His divine omniscience is not limited by distance.

Peter answers the question with the only possible answer, "From strangers," and Jesus replies, "Then the sons are free." He refers to Peter and Himself as both sons of the Father, the Sovereign of the Temple, and therefore, free from the tax. However, rather than cause offense, Jesus arranges for the money to be found in a most miraculous way.

Technically, Peter errs about the legality of taxing the Son of God, but Jesus uses the principle of not needlessly offending a brother (Luke 17:1-2) to positively express His divinity and spiritual power: He performs a miracle. Christ is so considerate that He would rather pay any amount, however unjust or objectionable, than endanger God's work by unnecessarily provoking negative comments that would hurt its credibility, saying, "lest we offend them" (Matthew 17:27). His example should inspire us for when we feel slighted or taken advantage of (Romans 14:21-22).

2. How much control over the situation does Christ demonstrate? How precise is this miracle? Matthew 17:27.

COMMENT: Jesus' miracle consists, not only in His omniscience—knowing that the fish would yield the necessary money—but also in the fact that the first fish that took Peter's hook contained the precise sum required. The purpose and pleasure of Christ's will—which all creation obeys—guided that single fish out of multiple schools in the lake to Peter's hook. Christ, the Lord of Creation, controls all things, even the sea's fish and the earth's silver.

In describing Christ as the Word, the apostle John writes, "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:3). Paul confirms this in Colossians 1:16, "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."

Using His spiritual power, He makes a fish produce the exact amount of silver coin to pay the Temple dues. This miracle reminds the disciples that He is indeed the omnipotent Son of God who controls all creation.

3. How carefully conceived is this miracle? How does Jesus view His relationship with His disciples? Matthew 17:24, 27. **COMMENT:** The Greek word behind "tax" (NKJV) or "tribute" (KJV) in verse 24 is *didrachma*, equivalent to the Jewish "half-shekel," the Temple rate paid by every male Israelite above age twenty. Those responsible for collecting these half-shekels came to Peter. Unlike tolls, which were duties on goods, the Temple tax was levied on individual Israelites. The collected money, paid into the Temple treasury, defrayed the cost of Temple services. The Jews were much more willing to accept this collection than to pay the despised publicans who extracted taxes for Rome.

The miracle's preciseness is seen in the coin found in the fish's mouth, a full shekel (two *didrachmas*)—half a shekel each for Christ and Peter ("for Me and you"; verse 27)—the exact amount to satisfy the requirement. In this way, Jesus puts Himself alongside Peter as sharing His position and relationship as a son of the Kingdom. All true Christians fill this amazing position: They are no longer servants, but sons in Christ (Galatians 3:26). With His brethren Jesus shares His family relationship to His Father (John 20:17).

This account contains two principles. The first is doctrinal, teaching Jesus' place in God's Kingdom as the rightful Son. The second is moral, showing that greatness in the Kingdom derives from service and humility. Jesus' phrase, "lest we offend them," should motivate us to employ meekness and wisdom.

—Martin G. Collins