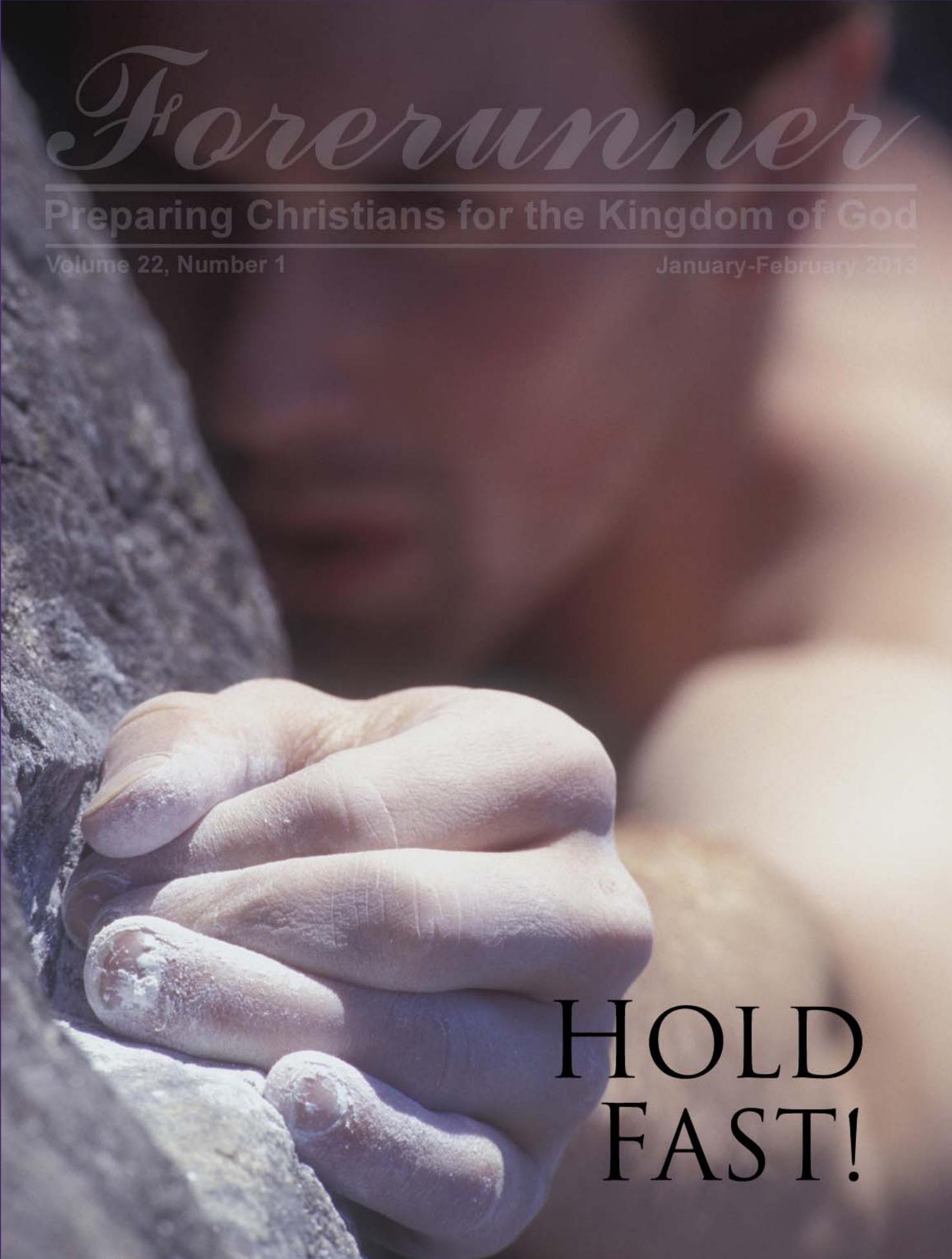


Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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**HOLD
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Christians are commanded to read the signs of the times, and the signs point to the return of Christ in the near future. But that also means an uptick in the troubles that we have to face, implying a need for us to hold fast to the truths that God has revealed to us. Will we prove steadfast in the face of chaos and tribulation?

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Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty

Part Four

In all of these articles on God's sovereignty, the subject of government has in some way and to some degree been showing us that our responsibility to God within the New Covenant is to yield to it.

We tend to think of "govern" or "government" in the sense of a system or a body of people exercising rule over a state or community. Scripture certainly uses it this way, and so it is in terms of God's government, but it would be better for us to think of it more gently in relation to God. These days, the term "govern" has a rather negative connotation, and it might prove more beneficial to us to replace it with a more positive synonym.

"Govern" is derived from the Latin *gubernare*, which simply means "to pilot, steer, guide, and regulate." That is what we are striving to do under God in this way of life: steer or guide ourselves under and according to God's will. In God's operations among His Family, His exercise of authority is loose enough that we are free to sin. Our liberty is similar to driving a car on a busy, high-speed highway: It requires careful attention, or we can quickly find ourselves in a difficult situation. We are free to crash an automobile too.

With God, our obligation to His government is not largely an overbearing burden but acts as guidance to prepare us for living eternally in His Family. Jesus even states in Matthew 11:30, "[His]

yoke is easy and [His] burden is light." However, knowing this does not remove the fact that human nature does not like to be governed, which is largely the source of the burdensome feeling. We feel this burden because we need to be changed.

Romans 13:1-7 provides a general description of God's place in government:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, custom to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

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The subject of government in the Bible is indeed extensive. As we begin, notice that Paul writes that “there is no authority except from God” (verse 1). Though this statement appears in relation to civil authority, God’s oversight is broad and deep. Even Satan’s authority, as god and ruler of this world (II Corinthians 4:4; John 14:30), is assigned by God. Jesus tells Pilate in John 19:11, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.” Those in the church with a position of authority also receive it from God (I Corinthians 12:18, 28). We will cover authority and power below, but these are important statements on God’s overall sovereignty.

In verse 2, Paul mentions “the ordinance of God.” God’s ordinance states His will, and He clearly establishes civil government. Therefore, we are responsible for obeying civil authority also, for in doing so we are obeying God. These verses do not imply that we must always obey civil government. Other verses show that we must obey it as long as the civil authority does not contradict God’s laws. In verses 3-4, Paul comes close to stating that the civil authority somewhat parallels the Old Testament “avenger of blood.”

In verses 5-7, God extends our responsibilities to submit to government as a means to keep our conscience clear, as well as to pay taxes, not only so the state can afford to employ these civil servants of God, but also to submit to community customs regarding them and even to give them honor.

These seven verses show three general reasons why humans must be governed. First, law-abiding citizens must be protected. Paul’s life was saved in Acts 21:30-32 when Roman soldiers stepped in to save him from the murderous intent of angry Jews. Second, evildoers must be restrained. Third, the general welfare is promoted by helping to establish peace. In I Timothy 2:1-3, Paul commands us to pray that this function is carried out.

America’s Constitution

The government the Founding Fathers established in America was developed in the late 1700s from a foundation of a combination of rebellion against what they considered oppression by England on one hand and a sincere desire for their perception of liberty on the other.

The people at the core of the revolution were unusually well-educated, particularly in the history of English law and government. They established a Constitution that bears some close resemblances to what God requires of a Christian. When given the opportunity, they established a form of government that provided a great deal more liberty for the individual citizen than any nation before or since has ever enjoyed. The citizens were given a government with very few regulations.

Religiously, the men who crafted the Constitution were a cross-section of the nation’s more prosperous people. America had been colonized primarily by emigrants from England who sought a better life through religious freedom,

and the families of such colonists produced quite a number of the men who framed the Constitution. As products of the Protestant Reformation, Protestant doctrine and the desire for freedom from the Catholic Church dominated their spiritual thinking, which produced concepts that promoted individual liberty. Thus, they laid the foundations for what became known as the American Dream, the Protestant work ethic, and personal prosperity.

The framers of the Constitution understood that the liberties it gave were not only historically unprecedented but also somewhat risky in terms of public peace. Why? The answer contains a parallel to our responsibilities within our relationship with God. For the American Constitution to work, it required a citizenry that wholeheartedly believed in it and was voluntarily and religiously inclined to govern *itself* according to its precepts. The Constitution did not give the federal government much authority to enforce its laws, and among its laws, it contained very few detailed regulations.

Thus, John Adams, one of the foremost and outspoken of the framers, who followed George Washington as president, said: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” He also said, “[T]he people . . . have a right, an indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean, of the characters and conduct of their rulers.” The Constitution requires a truly self-governed citizenry. The nation would prosper in peace as long as the citizens did so.

In like manner, God requires of us that we respect His sovereignty and show Him that we will govern ourselves within the framework of His laws. I Thessalonians 2:11-12 emphasizes this: “As you know how we exhorted, and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would have a walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” It is no wonder that Paul tried so hard to stir them up. Considering how many Israelites failed in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, it sometimes seems incredible that anyone will make it into God’s Kingdom. There are reasons why so many failed. It was not only a lack of faith, but their lack of faith was the primary reason for so many failing.

Another major reason was that God was not dealing with them regarding eternity. Yes, they made the Old Covenant with Him, and they did it sincerely. However, we have something that they most assuredly did not have, something of value beyond price: God’s Holy Spirit along with a personal relationship with Christ. These benefits must be tenaciously guarded.

Self-Government and Help from Christ

God requires that His children make consistent and strenuous efforts to govern themselves. Although “God helps those who help themselves” does not appear in the Bible,

it is overall a true principle. Certainly, He will not help those who make no effort at all. What would His reaction have been if the Israelites in the wilderness did nothing but sit? When they fearfully refused to enter Canaan, He added 38 years to their journey as punishment!

James 2 reveals that a living faith works, and most of the effort is expended in submitting to God in obedience, both in doing good and avoiding evil. Can we expect help from our Savior in these areas to bring glory to God? Can we count on Him to bring things to our minds and to instruct and inspire us?

John 6:32-39 contains an encouraging and comforting revelation from Christ about His responsibility and His determination to succeed in completing it:

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing but should raise it up at the last day."

Early in my conversion, I heard Herbert Armstrong say that, overall, the most important subject in the Bible is government. I do not know what he specifically meant by "important" because I cannot remember its context or even if he went on to explain it more fully. It stuck in my mind, however, and the thought would come back from time to time like a song from the past.

I have occasionally meditated on how it applies, and I think he meant that, to the person called into God's creative purpose, learning to govern himself willingly, freely, joyfully, understandingly, sincerely, and purposely to live under and within God's will is more demanding of thought and effort than any other subject.

Jesus says that He came to do God's will. Should that not also be our purpose now? Are we not to follow in Christ's steps? Is that not following the same basic path as our responsibility under the New Covenant to write God's law in our hearts and put on the image of Jesus Christ?

Christ Gives Help Through Instruction

Another familiar scripture is enlightening in this vein: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but happy is he who keeps the law" (Proverbs 29:18). *The Living Bible* paraphrases the first phrase, "Where there is ignorance of God the people run wild." For us, that ignorance is gone because of God's calling. We have a

prophetic vision, and we discipline ourselves to restrain human nature, to keep it from exercising its will. Thus, we are now governing ourselves as a normal part of life. This has to be, or we will not be prepared for God's Kingdom. We must do as Christ did.

We need to be a people with a sharp vision of where we are headed in life. The gospel tells us why we were born and provides us with detailed knowledge on how to prepare for that goal. The relationship with our God frames these elements into a vision that becomes our goal in life and helps to motivate us to do what is good in God's sight.

Hebrews 11:10 says that Abraham "waited for the city . . . whose Builder and Maker is God." This was a major part of his motivating vision. Hebrews 11:27 tells us that Moses "endured as seeing Him who is invisible." These men followed the vision that formed as a result of their relationship with God and what He taught them. As we walk with Christ, we are led along similar paths.

They believed thrillingly good news that provided them with the motivation to submit their lives to God's will. I Corinthians 9:24-27 shows us Paul's example of what every person who has achieved a great goal has had to learn and do:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Those who achieve must be focused on a goal to a degree given to no other area of life. They must be determined, disciplined, and sacrificial enough to become exceptionally skilled at what they hope to achieve.

However, regarding what we hope to achieve in becoming part of the Kingdom of God, even going all out is not enough! We cannot achieve our goal without Jesus Christ, our sovereign God, Creator, Savior, and High Priest, by whom we are saved because He is alive and oversees our lives. He supplies every need for salvation and sustains us along the way. Salvation is absolutely, totally impossible without help from Him.

Christ Gives Help Through Spiritual Strength

John 15:1-6 deals with the productivity achieved in our lives after conversion begins. This teaching begins to make abundantly clear how much we need Him.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

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Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for *without Me you can do nothing*. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. (Emphasis ours.)

Interestingly, what Jesus teaches in John 6—which also shows how much we need Him—occurred fairly early in His ministry. The exhortation here occurs at the end of His ministry, speaking to His disciples following His final Passover observance. He confirms that what the Father desires to be produced in our relationship cannot be produced apart from Christ. This passage is a final admonition for us to make every effort to remain “in” Him, not allowing what just happened with Judas to happen to us. By betraying His Savior, Judas abandoned the responsibility imposed by the New Covenant.

For the moment, consider the beginning of the relationship. We can overlook the arresting fact that, without Jesus paying the penalty for our sins, there would be no future except for death. Without it, there would be no looking forward to a joyous and productive life in the Kingdom of God. In fact, there would be no relationship at all. Without Him providing this for us, there would be no hope at all. Could we pay the penalty for sin and continue living?

Understanding the symbolism Jesus used is helpful in grasping how much we need what Christ did and does. To glean as much as we can from this, we need to tie it to its wider context, Jesus’ final Passover with His disciples. Certain references to bread are made as part of Jesus’ change of the Passover symbols, which helps to tie the symbolism together with His crucifixion for our forgiveness. Paul writes in I Corinthians 11:23-24:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “Take eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”

In John 6, bread plays an important role. It is frequently used as a metaphor for Christ Himself. I Corinthians 11 clearly ties bread, also named in John 13:18, to the giving of His body in the crucifixion. I Corinthians 11:25-26 adds:

In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying. “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.

This second symbol is important to grasping what Christ teaches in John 15:1-6 correctly. The vine He speaks of is obviously the grape vine. He clearly states that He is the vine and that we are the branches attached to Him. Just as grapes can be produced only by a shoot that remains attached to the vine, we can produce spiritual fruit that pleases the Father and thus be in the Kingdom of God only if we remain attached to Jesus Christ. In this illustration, all nourishment that results in fruit must come from the vine. He not only pays the penalty of our sins, but He also supplies the spiritual nourishment to produce fruit that glorifies the Father and prepares us for life in God’s Kingdom.

John 8:31-32 reminds us that continuing in His Word is the key to knowing the truth and becoming free. This greatly enhances the production of fruit. Thus, if we fulfill our responsibility, we are in that sense in partnership with Him in performing our duties under the New Covenant. A wonderful additional benefit of remaining in Christ is that those who faithfully fulfill their roles are not gathered up and cast into the fire, as John 16:6 warns.

Christ Is Always Present

John 6:31-40 is an encouraging passage, showing that we are never alone. Therefore, guidance and help in governing ourselves is ever-present as we walk the path toward God’s Kingdom.

“Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always.” And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

These verses give people of faith solemn assurance that Christ is always present in our lives and always willing to help. Jesus makes the ironclad promise in Hebrews 13:5 that He will never leave nor forsake us. A large portion of Jesus’ preaching in John 6 is a comparison between food

that satisfies a person's hunger and also provides strength and energy to carry out his responsibilities. At the same time, we understand that food enters the body as one eats and becomes a more or less permanent part of the body as the body uses it.

The illustration is drawn from Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness when God mercifully and miraculously provided food in the form of manna. God produced that daily miracle for the Israelite's benefit so that they could physically make it to the Promised Land, in addition to giving us encouragement by His assurances.

Jesus' concern for us is spiritual, and accomplishing our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God is the goal we strive for. Producing fruit along the way greatly pleases the Father. Bread symbolizes the means of internal, spiritual strength and energy, whereas the fruit metaphor of John 15 is external, something seen and produced because the individual uses the spiritual strength and energy drawn from the "bread."

(We may understand Jesus' instruction in this important discourse more clearly if we focus, not on the term "bread" specifically as bread, but more broadly as including a wide range of strengthening and energizing food.)

Jesus begins in John 6:32 by declaring that He is the true bread. In John 13 and I Corinthians 11, bread is specifically used as a metaphor in a different circumstance. Here, bread is figuratively used as the source of spiritual nourishment, strength, and producing fruit by those making the pilgrimage.

The manna is a type of Jesus Christ. It descended, as it were, from heaven, but the Father was the real Giver. Thus, in the wilderness Moses did not literally provide the manna but only gave instructions for its use. The manna indeed satisfied their immediate need for nourishment for physical strength and energy, but by way of contrast, Jesus, the true bread of God, gives *life*, not mere nourishment. Verse 34 shows that the Jews, as with virtually everything else He taught, did not grasp His teaching spiritually.

Thus, in verse 35, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." He explains His mysterious teaching more plainly, essentially saying, "I am the One who both imparts and sustains life." He is, of course, emphasizing spiritual teaching. The Greek shows that He completely identifies Himself with the bread, as it actually reads, "I am the bread of *the* life." It is not mere life but *everlasting spiritual* life. He means that through faith and an intimate, spiritual union and relationship with Him that, as the body assimilates actual bread physically, so spiritual assimilation with Him gives everlasting life (John 6:63).

Continuing in verse 35, He adds that "he who comes to Me"—meaning the one who believes in Christ, coming with nothing but sin and needing everything—will in no way become spiritually hungry or thirsty. In other words, he truly will be fed, unlike those in the wilderness who became hungry. Those who come to Him will be given complete and enduring spiritual satisfaction.

Verse 36—where Jesus says to the Jews, "You have seen Me and yet do not believe"—is interesting in that it

shows that God does not hold unconverted man guiltless. Indeed, as soon as a person sins, the death penalty immediately falls on his head. Here, Jesus places the entire blame for the Jews' rejection of Him on them. Why? Because, being of Israel, they should have known better by recognizing the fulfillment in Him of familiar scriptures. Thus, their rejection of Him contained a large measure of deliberateness.

Verse 37 ought to be especially encouraging to us because John 6:44 implies that a calling must be given for fuller understanding of what Jesus is teaching. Obviously, we do understand what He is saying, or we would not be in our present circumstance in relation to Him. Verse 37 is a strong promise that He will make every effort to provide us with salvation.

Verse 38, then, asserts to us that, if God calls a person, it is definitely God's will to do so. It is no mistake or happenstance. God's will is being worked in the called one's life. In verses 39 and 40, Jesus adds that it is the will of the Father, and therefore the Son's also, that all those given to Christ should be resurrected to everlasting life!

Christ's Promises Are Sure

Verses 39-40 are the closest statements regarding a guarantee of salvation as one will see in God's Word. Verse 58 confirms His words, "This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever."

God has appointed Jesus Christ as largely responsible for our salvation. He has already given His life's blood for us so our sins can be forgiven. He has paid the penalty that inhibits us from receiving everlasting life. Once that penalty is paid, the responsibility falls on us to give of our energies to change our lives so that they exhibit consistent obedience.

Whereas in times past we did not care much about our responsibilities to God, it has now become incumbent upon us to be very concerned. In making the New Covenant, we owe submission to the Father and Son, to conform our conduct to agree with theirs. Thus, we will be formed into their image. We must submit to their rule, then, as well as those parts of their rule that they have assigned to others.

Yet another gift has been given to assist us along the way as we begin to yield to God's sovereignty. Jesus says in John 14:15-17:

If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.

Note well that the condition for receiving this gift: We must keep His commandments.

Jesus gives a specific reason for gifting us with the Holy

(continued on page 14)

But Will You Love Me TOMORROW?

Back in 1961, the vocal pop group, the Shirelles sang a popular song composed by Carole King entitled “Will You Love Me Tomorrow?” The lyrics to the first verse went:

Tonight you’re mine completely
You give your love so sweetly
Tonight the light of love is in your eyes
But will you love me tomorrow?

The last line stresses the poignant concern that the relationship, which seems so permanent in the present, might fade or dissolve in the future. In the backdrop of the sixties, when Haight-Ashberry, Woodstock, LSD, and free-love were happening events, the prospects for a steadfast, rock-solid relationship seemed to be drifting away in a cloud of smoke. The popularity of Carole King’s song may have actually been a cry of anguish concerning the uncertainty and temporariness of commitments.

In his book, *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler describes a disturbing new phenomenon in the late-twentieth century called *modular relationships*. In such relationships, people, losing the security of the extended family and small community, would begin to form short-term commitments with barbers, mechanics, plumbers, bankers, grocers, doctors, dentists, etc., replacing them frequently as disposable modules rather than forming decades-long or perhaps lifetime commitments, as formerly would occur in small rural communities. This “disposable” aspect grew more prevalent when the entire society became more mobile and the extended family (Grandpa, Grandma, Dad and Mom, and the children all lived in the same locale—

as in the old TV show, “The Waltons”) was replaced by the nuclear family (Dad, Mom, and baby against the world). Now, sadly, in our morally relativistic culture, even the components of the nuclear family have become modular and recyclable.

This lack of commitment, an inability to stick with anything for any lengthy period of time, may have consequences in this end time.

THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Interestingly, remaining committed and steadfast looms large in the commendations, reprimands, and recommendations for the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. We will see that all seven passages contain commentary from our Savior on this point.

The Ephesian church:

- Commendations: “. . . and you have *persevered* and *have patience*, and have labored for My name’s sake and *have not become weary*” (Revelation 2:3; emphasis ours throughout).

- A reprimand for wavering in the commitment: “Nevertheless I have this against you that you have left your first love” (Revelation 2:4).

- A recommendation to renew the commitment to steadfastness: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen [weakening of steadfast commitment]; repent and do the first works” (Revelation 2:5).

The Smyrna church:

- A recommendation to remain steadfast: “Be *faithful until death*, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). Notice how steadfastness and reward have a cause-effect relationship.

The Pergamos church:

- A commendation: “And you *hold fast* to My name, and did not deny My faith” (Revelation 2:13).

- A reprimand for syncretizing or compromising with the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:14-15).

- A recommendation to repent of the wavering compromise (Revelation 2:16).

The Thyatira church:

- A commendation for past steadfastness: “I know your works, love, service, *faith*, and your *patience* [inextricable ingredients of steadfastness]” (Revelation 2:19).

- A reprimand for tolerating Jezebel leading to spiritual sexual immorality: (Revelation 2:20).

- A recommendation to be steadfast: “But *hold fast to what you have* till I come” (Revelation 2:25).

The Sardis church:

- A reprimand for letting what they had received become in danger of perishing (Revelation 3:1).

- A recommendation: “. . . *hold fast* and repent,” warning them that He will come “as a thief” (Revelation 3:3).

The Philadelphia church:

- A commendation for past steadfastness: “Because you have kept my command to *persevere*, I will keep you from the hour of trial which will come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

- A recommendation to stay steadfast: “Behold, I

am coming quickly! *Hold fast what you have*, that no one may take your crown” (Revelation 3:11).

The Laodicean church:

- A reprimand for their lack of commitment and lack of steadfastness: “. . . you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot” (Revelation 3:16).

- A recommendation to become steadfast: “Therefore be zealous and repent [of the wishy-washy lack of commitment and steadfastness]” (Revelation 3:19).

Christ had something to say to each of these congregations about steadfastness and commitment. *Steadfastness* could be defined as “doing things we have to do with the same ardor as the things we like to do.”

THE FATHER SETS THE TONE

One of my fond, early memories of my Dad was his passion for routine in so many areas of his life. One routine I recall was how he secured the car against the bitter Minnesota winter cold. I could almost set my watch by his predictable behavior.

After driving the car up to the pump house, Dad would open the hood, plug in the block heater, place the trouble light on top of the engine, gently close the hood so as not to latch it, throw a canvas tarp over the hood, grab the snow scoop next to the pump house, shovel one-two-three-four-five-six scoops of snow on the hood, place the shovel near the pump house, and trudge up the walk into the house. Through the winter months, whether in snow, high wind, sleet, or blizzard, the behaviors Dad exhibited were rhythmical, steady, and predictable, leaving me a sterling model of steadfastness.

Through his devotion to routine, method, and sequential order (in hundreds of similar tasks), Dad, as the head of our family, inspired a sense of trust, confidence, and well-being in all the family members.

Likewise, God Almighty as the Patriarch of our spiritual Family has developed the reputation for absolute, steadfast, routine-like behavior in all things. One of the most inspiring psalms, Psalm 121, focuses on God’s steadfast watchfulness: “Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (verse 4). Psalm 119:90 affirms this steadfastness: “Your faithfulness endures to all generations: You establish the earth, and it abides.”

After God created our world, He set Himself the task of faithfully executing the daily routines of maintenance. Notice Psalm 104:10-14:

He sends the springs into the valleys; they flow among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. By them, the birds of the heaven have their home; they sing among the branches. He waters the hills from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works. He causes the grass to grow

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for the cattle, and vegetation to grow for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth.

The Patriarch of our spiritual Family has undertaken—without complaint—billions of repeatable, cyclical chores, including maintaining the steady lub-dub of our heart chambers, turning the earth on its axis, and maintaining the stars in their courses. Sir Isaac Newton was so impressed with the cyclical regularity of the universe that he referred to God Almighty as the “Divine Mechanic.” Years ago, my son rarely forgot to give the cat his daily bowl of water, but when he did forget, my wife and I pointed out the myriad daily chores that God has set Himself to perform without ever forgetting.

EVEN WHEN WE DON'T FEEL LIKE IT

Steadfastness (doing things we have to do with the same ardor as the things we like to do) is one of the most essential principles in Christian character. The apostle Paul admonishes us, “Therefore my beloved brethren, be *steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord*, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (I Corinthians 15:58). In the same vein, Paul encourages the Galatians, “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (Galatians 6:9).

Doing things that *have to be done* on a routine basis is not always enjoyable or fun. For years and years, my grandfather would adhere to a self-imposed schedule of waking up every morning at 4 o'clock to feed the livestock and take care of routine chores. It seemed that he actually accomplished more in those early hours before breakfast than some individuals accomplish the entire day. One time, when I asked him where he got the energy to keep on keeping on, he replied with a resigned tone, “Somebody has to do this.”

For sure, steadfastness does not involve doing things when we *feel* like it. Occasionally, we may feel a strong desire to pray and do our Bible study, but most of us realize that many times we do not feel like it. Herbert W. Armstrong once claimed that prayer to him often seemed like an arduous chore, but he did it anyway. The steadfast individual will execute his spiritual obligations whether or not he is in the mood or feels like it. Many students disappear from graduate school because they have not developed the *sitzfleisch* (literally, “sitting flesh”—padding on the backside) to endure long hours of dull, routine research.

Dr. David Burns in his book, *Feeling Good*, has identified *emotional reasoning* as a major cognitive distortion (twisted thought). In this distortion, the indi-

vidual is tempted to say, “I don't feel like doing the assignment or chore, so I won't do it.” This attitude is prevalent among young people in the public schools, as a large segment of the present generation are governed by their feelings and have developed no tolerance for discomfort or inconvenience. Dr. Burns aptly points out that the motivation to continue doing something occurs only after we have started the project. If we wait for the right moment or the good vibration, we may never feel inclined to do anything. Axiomatically, we should expect that the motivation to do something irksome will only come after we have initiated that action.

We can be sure that Jesus Christ did not always feel like going through what He obligated Himself to do, but He always moved steadfastly toward the task at hand. In Mark 14:36, His emotions do not exactly correspond to His steadfast commitment to duty: “Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will.” By contrast, His weary disciples gave in to their feelings, shirking their obligation to remain watchful in prayer (verse 37).

HOLD FAST!

A large number of Christ's parables focus on the quality of steadfastness and commitment. The Parable of the Talents measures spiritual success in terms of faithfulness and steadfastness more than native skill or exceptional accomplishments. The Lord commended both the recipient of many talents and few talents with the same approbation: “Well done, good and *faithful servant*; you were *faithful* over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things” (Matthew 25:21).

Steadfastness involves continuing to do a thing even when the novelty wears off and it is no longer fun to do it. Keeping watch over our spiritual condition is fairly easy when we have peak energy in the middle of the day, but can we maintain the same intensity of watchfulness during the graveyard shift? God the Father does (Psalm 121:4). Our Elder Brother does (Hebrews 13:8). But are we expected to maintain this same steadfastness when we are weary and do not feel like it?

Apparently, Jesus puts a high priority on this character trait. In the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants, Jesus commends those servants who steadfastly keep alert during the second and third watch (Luke 12:38). Can we maintain steady perseverance if we find ourselves on the graveyard shift? Our Lord may have it in mind that we need to “keep on keeping on” when it is no longer fun, when it is no longer novel.

At this stage in the history of the greater church of God, many individuals no longer want to hold fast or

(continued on page 14)

Taking the Kingdom by Force?

*“And from the days of
John the Baptist
until now
the kingdom of heaven
suffers violence,
and the violent take it
by force.”
—Matthew 11:12*

In the midst of His explanation of the role and character of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ makes an easily misunderstood statement, raising a number of questions: “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). A parallel verse in Luke’s gospel is likewise prone to misinterpretation: “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it” (Luke 16:16).

Part of the difficulty in understanding the meaning of these verses stems from the fact that the pivotal Greek words are rare, which means we cannot examine their usage in other places in the Bible to understand how they should be used here. In addition, the preconceptions and biases of the translators influence the way they render passages. But it is vital to understand what Jesus Christ is saying here, so it is worth the effort to more thoroughly examine His words.

In Matthew 11:12, the Greek word translated as “suffers violence” (*biazo*; *Strong’s* #971) is used in only one other place, as we will see. The word rendered as “the violent” (*biastes*; *Strong’s* #973), a closely related word, is used nowhere else in the Bible. The verse revolves around these words, but their narrow biblical usage limits our technical understanding.

In Luke 16:16 (“the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it”), the Greek word translated as “pressing” in the New King James is the same word translated as “suffers violence” in Matthew 11:12 (*biazo*). In secular usage, this word means “to use force on; to use power; to behave violently; to assault; to afflict; to oppress; or to constrain.” The translation “suffers violence” in Matthew 11:12 springs easily from this meaning, but “pressing into” in Luke 16:16 obscures it. “Pressing” is a weak translation, suggesting a group of people squeezing together to get in the doors of an amusement park. We must keep in mind that it is the same verb translated as “suffers violence.”

To briefly summarize these two verses, then, everyone is pressing into the Kingdom, the Kingdom suffers violence, and violent people take it by

ready answer *Taking the Kingdom by Force?*

force. But this raises some questions: What sort of violence is indicated? Who are the violent people? How do they take the Kingdom by force? We will see that understanding these verses begins with a more complete understanding of the Kingdom of God.

What It Is Not

Another word plays an important part here—the word “into” in Luke 16:16. The Greek word behind it, *eis* (*Strong’s* #1519), a common preposition, is indeed frequently translated as “into.” However, depending on the context, it can also be translated as “against” or “toward.”

So, the Greek allows for the subdued translation of “everyone is pressing into [the kingdom],” but it could just as accurately be translated as “everyone is *behaving violently against it*.” The *Douay-Rheims Bible*, which predates the King James, renders the last part of Luke 16:16 as “everyone use[s] violence towards it.” In this way, it matches perfectly with Matthew 11:12: “the kingdom suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.”

Before plunging into what Jesus is saying in these verses, it is helpful to consider what He cannot be saying if Scripture is to remain unbroken (John 10:35). In the various translations and commentaries of these verses, certain prejudices influence how scholars interpret them. The New King James translators chose the phrase “everyone is pressing into it,” despite the Greek just barely supporting it. Other translations at least acknowledge the forcefulness inherent within the Greek words, rendering it as “everyone *strives violently to go in*” (*The Amplified Bible*; emphasis ours throughout) or “everyone *forces his way into it*” (*English Standard Version*). These all suggest the idea that the gospel message was so popular that everyone who heard it was beating down the doors of the Kingdom, as it were. They also contain the idea that everyone could enter the Kingdom at that time.

But both of those ideas are false.

It was *not* possible for everyone who heard the gospel to enter the Kingdom, no matter how vigorously one might try, and that is true even now. Only those whom God draws to the Son can enter the Kingdom (John 6:44). Matthew 16:17 shows that only by an act of the Father did Peter recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Acts 13:48 says specifically that “as many as had been *appointed* to eternal life believed,” indicating that those who have not yet been appointed to eternal life did not (and cannot) believe.

The idea that everyone hearing the gospel of the Kingdom is pushing to get in completely overlooks the specificity of God’s calling and election (Romans 8:30) and the fact that He is working with only a few during this age, the firstfruits of His spiritual harvest. A person cannot truly seek the Kingdom or its King until God changes something in his mind (John 5:39-40), and simply hearing the words of the gospel does not necessarily accomplish that.

True Christianity is not a popular way of life today, and it was no different during the first century. After three and a half years of preaching, Jesus Himself had only about 120 disciples (Acts 1:15), which does not support the idea that “everyone” was trying to enter the Kingdom upon hearing the gospel. God was not calling everyone then (or now), and so everyone was not “pressing” to get into His Kingdom.

In addition, the way that one enters the Kingdom is not simply through a confession or profession of faith. Rather, Jesus says in John 3:5 that one must be “born of water and Spirit” to enter the Kingdom of God, a reference to the Father’s cleansing and engendering of a person that makes him a new, spiritual creation within a physical body. It is something that only the Father does—no amount of human effort forces Him to open the door. However, once that regeneration has taken place, then we are “conveyed into the kingdom of the Son of His love,” as it says in Colossians 1:13. We are already a part of that Kingdom! But the bottom line is that this is an operation that happens according to the Father’s will, not any human’s.

Therefore, “everyone is pressing into it” not only misrepresents the underlying Greek, but it is also out of sync with what the scriptures reveal concerning God’s calling and election. A rendering that is faithful to the rest of Scripture and fits with the Greek would be something like “everyone *uses violence towards it*” or “everyone is *behaving violently against it*.” This may raise other questions—to be examined shortly—but it is at least not contradictory.

Similar misconceptions need to be dealt with in Matthew 11:12. A common explanation is that believers with holy zeal and earnestness are laying hold of the Kingdom with absolute determination. *Barnes’ Notes* is typical: “Since ‘the kingdom of heaven’ or ‘the gospel’ has been preached, there has been a ‘rush’ to it. People have been ‘earnest’ about it; they have come ‘pressing’ to obtain the blessing, as if they would take it by violence.”

Zeal and earnestness are absolutely needed for the sanctification process. In one context, this can even include the implication of metaphorical violence: Paul speaks of disciplining his body to bring it into subjection, so that he is not disqualified (I Corinthians 9:27). Thus energy, determination, and self-discipline are wonderful traits—but they do not match with what Jesus describes in Matthew 11:12.

One problem with this interpretation is that it puts men in the position of “taking” or “seizing” the Kingdom, another false concept. Whether we are considering our being conveyed into the Kingdom after our regeneration or inheriting it when Christ returns, in neither case is it fitting to say that we *seize it* or *take it by force*. Instead, Jesus says, “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to *give you the kingdom*” (Luke 12:32). Any reward, prize, gift, or instance of grace that comes to us from God—including the Kingdom—can be received but not seized by force.

Perhaps the clearest statement of this is Luke 18:17, where Jesus says, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom

of God as a little child will by no means enter it.” The kind of child He means does not violently seize anything, especially not the Kingdom. The child receives rather than takes it.

What Did He Mean?

Having seen what these verses cannot mean, what then did Jesus mean? As mentioned earlier, the key lies in understanding how the phrase “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” is used. We know that the Kingdom of God has a *future* aspect, when Christ will rule over the nations and His glorified brothers and sisters will reign with Him. There is also a *present* aspect, as we have already been conveyed into the Kingdom, and now our citizenship is in heaven. We are already part of that heavenly Kingdom. It is a present reality for the firstfruits—though not in its fullness—and in the near future, it will be a worldwide reality.

Yet, there is another way to understand the Kingdom. When Jesus said that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17)—meaning nearby—He was referring to Himself. When He told the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God was among them, or in their midst (Luke 17:21), He referred to Himself. The king is always the highest representative of a kingdom, so when the king is present, the kingdom is also present.

We can see this in a couple of scriptures: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). Here, God’s Kingdom is defined as Jesus’ exercise of His power. The King, in exerting His authority over unclean spirits, displays the reign or the rule of God. The *Kingdom* of God is found in the Person of Jesus Christ.

This can also be seen in Mark 9:1-2:

And He said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.” Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them.

Jesus tells them they will see the Kingdom of God present with power, and within a week they see Him transfigured. His being revealed to them in glory was a demonstration of the power of God’s Kingdom. Even without the glory, what stood among them was still the Kingdom of God. Because He is the King, as the central figure of the Kingdom, wherever He went, the Kingdom was present. In the book of Acts, the message of the Kingdom is inextricably tied to the central Being in that Kingdom (Acts 8:12; 19:8-10; 28:23, 31). To take this a step further, where the King abides in any person or where a person is in Christ, the Kingdom is also present.

We can now apply this principle to Christ’s statements. Matthew 11:12 says that from the days of John the Baptist’s preaching until that of Jesus—and even to today—*Christ and those in whom He dwells* suffer violence: physical or verbal assault, affliction, oppression, constraint, and perhaps even martyrdom. This world’s forceful and

self-willed people “seize” that Kingdom as they would a fortified city, through opposing its citizens in some way.

Similarly, in Luke 16:16, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone uses violence against it, signifying opposition in one form or another, to constrain or repress the King and His citizens. As John records, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

In other words, the gospel message was *not* popular. It bore fruit in those who were being called (Isaiah 55:11). Others hoped that the kingdom of Judah would be restored, and they were probably content to wait and watch this Man as He went about—as curiosity-seekers rather than opponents. However, for those who had a vested interest in maintaining the political and religious status quo, the gospel was seen as a threat, and those linked with the Kingdom of Jesus Christ were the object of all manner of resistance and persecution, both before and especially after His death.

Notice, for example, Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:13: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, *nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.*” Some were then in the process of entering the Kingdom, and the resistance and oppression of the scribes and Pharisees were obstacles to that entrance. John 9:22 records that “the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue.” The scribes and Pharisees, as well as those influenced by them, persecuted those God was drawing into His Kingdom. There was such animosity that the King Himself suffered the most awful violence that has ever been perpetrated: a mob of creatures wantonly crucifying their sinless Creator.

We face a similar circumstance today. Even nominal Christians suffer Muslim persecution in one part of the world, while others are blocked, ridiculed, and constrained by secularists and humanists in another. True Christianity is denounced as being heretical and cultic, and its adherents suffer violence in various ways. This violence does not have to be physical violence. It can be verbal. It can be passive. It can be persecution or opposition in any number of ways.

Wherever the spirit of Satan is present, his children make the way difficult for those who are in Christ or who are being drawn to Him. They reject the royal law of the Kingdom and ridicule God’s sovereignty. They sneer at His inspired Word. The violence that the Kingdom suffers will vary by degrees, but it is found wherever the ruler of this world has influence.

This is why Jesus says in John 16:33 that in the world, we *will* have persecution, but He also says to “be of good cheer.” He does not say He will remove persecution right away, but instead, He says that He has overcome the world. He sets limits on how much violence He will allow, and what He does allow He will redeem for His own good will. The violence we suffer will never compare to the violence that He suffered for us. One day soon, though, the violence against the Kingdom will be defeated, and the violent will be given the opportunity to worship the King whom they have pierced (Zechariah 12:10).

—David C. Grabbe

personal *Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty*

(continued from page 7)

Spirit: that God may be in and with us forever. His wording is very important in this regard. The Holy Spirit is power to be directly in contact with the God Family, but in this case, the way He says it emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is a Person. Though God is Spirit, we must fully grasp that, in this spiritual family relationship, we are dealing with real, living Persons of awesome power, generosity, mercy, and kindness who are willing to deliver us fully into their Family. Verse 23 reveals that the Holy Spirit is the Father and the Son, not a third person in a non-existent Trinity.

However, we live in an age when the vast majority all but ignore Him. Some give Him a measure of lip-service, making an occasional mention of Him. Certainly, the ruling elite and the leaders in government and education openly flout His Word and denigrate Him. Irreverence—the failure to ascribe to the Majesty on high what is due Him—is the hallmark of this age in America.

Many within this nation's leadership are humanistic secularists. At creation, man was made in the image of God, but today, gods have been made in the image and likeness of man. They do not bow before the true God because, to them, men stand at the apex of life on earth, and science is their powerful tool. They worship their own intellect and accomplishments, not even realizing that they are flatly denying the true God's sovereignty, ignorant that they are at the disposal of the Divine Ruler.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 19:21, "There are many plans in a man's heart. Nevertheless the LORD's counsel—that will stand." Men plan what they are going to do and even take steps to fulfill them. Even so, behind the scenes, God is ruling and over-ruling from heaven above, fulfilling His eternal purpose, not only in spite of,

but also by means of His enemies.

On the plain of Shinar, men had a plan to make the world one under them. Pharaoh had a plan to keep his slaves. Balak had a plan to curse the Israelites. The Canaanites had a plan to prohibit Israel from settling the land. Saul had a plan to kill David. Jonah had a plan to avoid going to Nineveh. Nebuchadnezzar had a plan to throw three men in the fire. Herod had a plan to kill Jesus.

All failed. Who is sovereign, God or man?

II Chronicles 20:6 records a confident statement by King Jehoshaphat of Judah, one that each of us needs to live by:

O LORD God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You?

This describes the God who created us, called us, converted us, brought us into His Family, and is preparing us for His Kingdom. He has assured us that He can save us. It is His will to do so, and who can resist His will? Nobody can, for He will accomplish it through Jesus Christ.

Our part is quite small compared to what Christ does, but it is important. We must willingly accept His sovereignty over us and yield in submission so that we will become like Him. God's promises are sure. There is but one realistic conclusion. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose except what is not in the image of God.

In Christian love,



prophecy watch *But Will You Love Me Tomorrow?*

(continued from page 10)

maintain iron-clad commitment. Too many of our brethren have allowed the lack of fun and the lack of novelty to lead them to be "tossed to and fro, carried away by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14, Jude 12). In the words of the Carole King song mentioned above, we have already arrived at "tomorrow." The novelty has perhaps worn off, and we may find ourselves in an advanced state of fatigue, feeling weary of well-doing. What we need now more than ever before is some spiritual *sitzfleisch* or steadfastness.

Many years ago at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington, Texas, our family endured nine innings of a disappointing game in which the Rangers trailed the Kansas City Royals 3-0. By the top of the seventh inning, disheartened Rangers fans started trudging to their cars. With

my son's binoculars, I tried to catch Manager Johnny Oates' facial expression. He maintained a stoical wry smile. To bolster the crowd, film clips of Ronald Reagan as George Gipp telling Knute Rockne, "Win just one for the Gipper," played on hundreds of television screens throughout the stadium.

And something electrifying happened in the bottom of the ninth. The Rangers, through dogged persistence and steadfastness, tied the game, and in the tenth inning, they won it by one run.

In a similar way, we must in these times take to heart Paul's admonishment to Christians in Ephesians 6:13, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." By standing firm to the end, we win!

—David F. Maas

Old Pope, New Pope

When Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation from the papacy, very few had seen it coming. The Bavarian pope cited his declining health as the main reason for leaving his office, stating, “I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry.” Many knew that the 85-year-old pontiff’s health had deteriorated of late, but no Vatican observer ever thought that he would step down—especially because no pope had resigned from office since 1415, when Gregory XII ended his nine-year papacy. Benedict XVI’s voluntary resignation is only the third such resignation in the nearly 2,000 years since Roman bishops have ruled the Catholic Church.

Despite few anticipating such a move, *The Economist* reports in a February 16, 2013, article, “The Pope’s Resignation: See You Later”:

Benedict had been toying with resignation for almost four years. Visiting the earthquake-stricken Italian city of L’Aquila in 2009, he left his *pallium*, the woollen band that is a symbol of the papal office, at the tomb of Celestine V, a reluctant pope who resigned [in 1294] to pray. In 2010 he said that a pope who became unable to do his job properly “has the right, and in some circumstances even the duty, to resign.”

And so he did, retiring initially to the Papal Palace in Castel Gandolfo, and later, once its renovations are completed, to the newly refurbished *Mater Ecclesiae* monastery in the Vatican.

Considered by many in the media as far too conservative and boring, Benedict’s papacy has been reported as having been a failure. The truth is that, overall, his pontificate was quite successful. He steadfastly defended Catholic doctrine, as would be expected from the former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (known historically as the Inquisition), the Church’s doctrinal enforcement agency. He preserved his office and Church against the relativistic and progressive attitudes and ideas that so dominate today’s world. Though the Vatican suffered a handful of scandals during his administration, Benedict did not allow them to soften his beliefs or approach. His holding the line against such staunch opposition obviously took its toll on his health and strength.

He has been succeeded by 76-year-old Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a native of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the son of Italian immigrants. The new pope, the first Jesuit to wear the papal mitre, chose the name “Francis” in honor of Francis of Assisi because, he said, he is especially concerned for the welfare of the poor. Of Francis of Assisi, Bergoglio once expressed, “He brought to Christianity an idea of poverty against the luxury, pride, vanity of the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the time. He changed history.” His admiration for the founder of the Franciscan Order may portend how he will frame his papacy.

By all accounts, Pope Francis is a mild-mannered, soft-

spoken man of the people who is known for his sense of humor. He has “a well-earned reputation for holiness and humility,” as one writer for *Maclean’s* put it. In the dozen years that he was head of the Catholic Church in Argentina, he never lived in the ecclesiastical mansion but shared an apartment in downtown Buenos Aires with an elderly priest, heating the place with a small stove. He took public transportation and cooked his own meals. He regularly visited the city’s slums and washed the feet of the poor, the sick, the elderly, or the imprisoned every Maundy Thursday. In 2011, he did this for newborns and pregnant women.

As his papacy begins, he has not changed his habits in this regard. He has a “no frills” style that endears him to the public yet exasperates his Vatican handlers. Just after being elected, he chose to take the bus with his fellow cardinals back to his hotel rather than the papal car, and the next day, he picked up his own luggage and paid the bill himself. He has refused to take up residence in the papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace, preferring to live in the Vatican guest house, though he has conceded to an “upgrade,” a suite of rooms where he can conduct meetings and receive visitors. On his first Maundy Thursday as pope, he continued his practice of footwashing, washing and kissing the feet of twelve juvenile offenders in Rome.

His easy, gentle manner could make some underestimate him. Underneath his plain white cassock and iron cross is a forceful personality that brooks no argument on the tenets of his heartfelt positions. He is solidly in the conservative wing of Roman Catholic theologians, as a disciple of John Paul II and fellow of Benedict XVI. Though holding traditional views on most doctrines, he cannot be said to be a hardliner in the sense that his predecessor was thought to be. His sermons and writings often contain language that makes fine distinctions between theological dogma and measured, merciful responses in light of living in a sinful world.

One of his heartfelt positions—one that could bring him into conflict with certain parts of the Western world—is his left-leaning criticism of global capitalism, calling it a “tyranny” that values human beings solely by the goods they consume and a “cult of money” that makes people miserable. Believing that unbridled capitalism has exacerbated poverty and led to the disregard of ethics, he advocates more stringent controls over financial markets.

What his papacy accomplishes only time will tell. Despite rumors of its decline, the Catholic Church, 1.2 billion strong, is still a force to be reckoned with, especially in Europe, Africa, and particularly in Latin America, where more than two-fifths of its adherents live. There are already a few signs that this new pope may flex the Vatican’s political muscles more than the old pope did—if only in his insistence that Catholics need to live out their faith in the world—and that could make for some interesting times ahead.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Man Born Blind (Part One)

As his gospel begins, the apostle John writes that Jesus Christ “came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). That He “came to His own” describes the content of John 9, where we find Him healing a man born blind (John 9:1-38). Chapters 9–12 emphasize Jesus’ calling out a people of His own in the midst of, and in spite of, growing hostility from Jewish authorities. As His own people are rejecting him, Christ begins to call out a new people, first exemplified by the story of His calling of the blind man.

This miracle, which John alone relates, occurs in a conspicuous setting. The sixth of eight miracles recorded in his gospel, it is an illustration of the previous day’s significant affirmation of Jesus Christ as “the Light of the world” (John 8:12). He is the Light of divine salvation that overcomes the darkness of man’s moral and physical blindness.

Thus, as the Light, He gave sight to a blind man.



1. Can anything or anyone frustrate God? John 9:1-5.

COMMENT: The first lesson to be learned from this miracle is that sinful man cannot frustrate God. Rather, God accomplishes His purposes sovereignly, saving by grace those whom He chooses to call to Himself. Even man’s hatred cannot frustrate God, seen clearly in this miracle story. Jesus seems undisturbed by the religious leaders’ attempt to stone Him, an action that would have created great turmoil in the Temple precincts. Yet, a moment later, after Jesus had removed Himself, we find Him stopping beside a blind beggar sitting near the Temple gate. In a similar situation, most of us would scarcely have seen the beggar, being more concerned with being pursued and distancing ourselves from the enemy. Not Jesus!

He had God’s perspective and acted accordingly. Therefore, instead of complying with the prohibitions of sinful men, Christ simply perseveres in His task and begins to elect some to salvation. As Paul writes of God in Romans 9:15, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

The poor blind man symbolizes the state of the lost apart from the creative and transforming power of Christ. On the one hand, the rulers of the people, the Pharisees, can see physically but are spiritually blind. On the other, the blind man cannot see physically, but Christ makes him see both physically and spiritually. By the end of the story, we find him worshipping Jesus as the Son of God.

2. What is the blind man’s plight? John 9:1.

COMMENT: Obviously, he cannot see, which means that he cannot see Jesus. This is the plight of the lost today: Jesus is taught, but they cannot “see” Him. Even when the Bible is explained, they cannot understand it. Why? Usually, it is because they think that they do not need God. Paul writes, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (I Corinthians 2:14). For there to be spiritual sight, Jesus must first open blind eyes.

Second, because the man born blind was unable to see, he could not seek Jesus. How can the blind seek anything? In spiritual terms, this means that an uncalled person is

unable to seek God and His truth. Paul declares in Romans 3:11 that “there is no one who . . . seeks God.”

Third, if the blind man could not seek Jesus, he was unable to find him, nor as a beggar, could he hire someone else to seek Christ and find Him. What a condition—unable to see, seek, or find Jesus, and incapable of procuring help in finding Him. It is a sad state—and doubly sad in that it describes the spiritual condition of most (Revelation 3:17-18).

3. Do believers and non-believers suffer in the same way for the same purpose? John 9:2-3.

COMMENT: At some time or other, every human being experiences suffering. A baby causes pain by being born. Many live by inflicting pain on others. We all suffer pain and eventually experience death. Granted, believers alive when Christ returns to this earth will be transformed in a moment, but with this exception, the lot of all is to suffer and die (Hebrews 9:27). Eliphaz spoke truthfully to Job when he told the suffering patriarch, “For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble spring from the ground; yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:6-7).

Although everyone—Christians as well as non-Christians—suffers at some point in life, it is not true that all suffer alike. Seen from the outside, a Christian and a non-Christian suffering from the same incurable disease may appear to undergo the same experience. According to God’s Word, however, the two are not equal (II Corinthians 6:15-16). From God’s perspective, the non-Christian is suffering without purpose, or perhaps he is suffering at the whim of Satan, who is merely doing as he pleases with a member of his own kingdom. In the case of the Christian, though, an all-wise heavenly Father is permitting suffering in a carefully controlled situation to accomplish a desirable purpose. God is a Father who disciplines His children (II Corinthians 6:18; Hebrews 12:5-8), which the book of Job vividly teaches.

So what is the purpose of a Christian’s suffering? To learn from it, we must ask what we are to learn; if we are to benefit, we must ask how. As we will see, some of Christ’s words spoken when healing the man born blind suggest the answers to these questions.

—Martin G. Collins