



Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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of Vanities*

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The book of Ecclesiastes famously begins, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Solomon, traditionally acknowledged as the author, suggests that life is brief and ephemeral, like smoke or vapor, here and gone in an instant. Surprisingly, Ecclesiastes indicates that vanity has a place in God's purpose, revealing the emptiness of life without Him.

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Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

Part One

Some have called Ecclesiastes the most puzzling book of the Bible. This is partly because commentators see an extreme pessimism in it, as well as some unorthodox statements that seem out of harmony with the upbeat, positive themes elsewhere in Scripture, especially in the New Testament. However, we must always remember Jesus' statement in John 10:35: "The Scripture cannot be broken." God's Word does not contradict itself. It is the commentators' grasp of the book's purpose that is incorrect. Ecclesiastes is in harmony with the rest of the Bible, filling a niche to ensure that our preparation for God's Kingdom is well-rounded.

Ultimately, God is Ecclesiastes' Author. Its conclusions are drawn from Solomon's varied experiences as king, and are based on his God-given wisdom and understanding. Its statements are frequently blunt and demanding in their assessments of mankind's unthinking foolishness, thus meeting the needs of those who are so spiritually "thick" that they need to be metaphorically struck on the head with a two-by-four to "get" the point.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon confronts the ultimate mystery of life, but he does not reveal what it is because that is not God's purpose for the book. God wanted Solomon to examine some of the knotty problems that confront us in life and reveal a necessary perspective for achieving God's purpose for us. This is why the rest of the Bible is

necessary, as it clearly reveals God's purpose. In realizing that, Ecclesiastes' narrower purpose becomes much clearer.

This modest series of articles will not come close to explaining Ecclesiastes' trove of valuable lessons, but it is hoped that, as it cuts a bit deeper, it will provide some enlightenment that produces a deeper respect for God's mercy—and thus more frequent submission to His commands.

A Little Background

To a Christian, the book of Ecclesiastes may appear to have a forbidding beginning, announcing, "'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher, 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3). The book is part of God's Word, but is it true that life is nothing but meaningless trouble and without purpose and value? Does our Creator intend life to be an unremitting stream of frustrations broken only by the blessed relief of death? One may wonder why such a message is even in the Bible. Such thoughts, however, are far from the truth.

The book indicates in a number of places that it was written by Solomon, a man especially gifted by God with understanding and wisdom. In its first verse, the author identifies himself as the son of David and king in Jerusalem. Most commentators

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believe Solomon wrote it late in his life, following an eventful forty-year reign.

Upon reading Ecclesiastes, many believe that Solomon's outlook on life was decidedly pessimistic despite living in regal glory and with every amenity to make life appealing. Such readers have misjudged him. Once a person understands the reason for his palpable pessimism, then he also understands that it is clearly justified by the record of history.

Ecclesiastes presents the Christian with a unique perspective on life. Though the term "God" is used 41 times, Jesus Christ as Messiah and Savior never appears within its twelve chapters. Within its pages, there are no prophecies of Him, nor does it focus on the wondrous miraculous works of God, such as healing, raising the dead to life, or dividing the sea for His people.

Every reference to God within it uses the Hebrew word *elohim*. The Bible uses this term most frequently in a rather distant sense of "powerful Creator" rather than "One with whom a close, personal relationship exists." Yet, Ecclesiastes reveals Him as deeply involved in the constant operations of His purpose, not only in terms of the oversight of His creation, but in the reality of His unseen hand personally involved in the daily life of His children.

Some commentators have described Ecclesiastes as "gritty," probably because it deals with life's realities and pulls no punches. Life is difficult. The book deals, not with minor issues, but with major goals and events that come up as an individual works out the purposes and challenges of life. Such events, which can be either blessings or curses, fill and change the course of a person's life. They are the kind of happenings that may make one wonder, "Where is God in what I am going through?"

Life can be thought of as being similar to a person trying to navigate toward the exit of a labyrinth. A labyrinth has many possible paths to follow, and thus a person is forced to make many choices that either opens or closes the way toward his goal. Will his choices yield growth and profit in living, or will they block him, causing mystification and frustration?

For a Christian, this means that a reality of life is that everything matters. Not every event and choice matters to the same extent, but whether serious or passing, it does matter to some degree. The record of Solomon's experiences reminds us that our calling is too precious to waste on meaningless vanity. Though some choices are more consequential than others are, none of our choices is totally inconsequential. God gives us the wisdom in Ecclesiastes to help us grasp what the major paths and choices must be so that life is not meaningless.

The major teaching of the book is that, despite the wide diversity of choices available to us in life, in reality only two ways of life exist: God's and man's. Solomon shows us that, if life is to be filled with profitable purpose, then God and His way must not be merely considered occasionally but deliberately chosen with foresight in every matter. Otherwise, life may be filled with a great deal of activity yet prove

to be a futile pursuit of time-wasting and profitless vanity.

Thus, Ecclesiastes is not truly about the meaninglessness of life. Rather, it is about the meaninglessness of living life without God, or as Solomon wrote, living life entirely "under the sun."

Vanity of Vanities

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3)

The book begins abruptly by announcing that it is written by Solomon, son of David, king in Jerusalem. Some commentators dispute this, claiming evidence that it was written as late as the third century before Christ. I cannot grasp how their speculation profits anyone who is sincerely looking for truth about how to live a life that glorifies God and is profitable for themselves. The message is what is important, and ultimately, the message is from our Creator, who inspired it and desires our growth and His glorification.

The first 11 verses act as an introduction, providing several terms that dominate the theme of the book. Three terms particularly important to grasping Ecclesiastes' message are contained within the first three verses: "vanity," "profit," and "under the sun."

"Vanity" (Hebrew *hebel*) is a vivid metaphor used 33 times in the book. Literally, it suggests a breath, something akin to vapor, like one's breath on a cold day, or a puff of smoke rising from a fire. Smoke and breath not only disappear quickly, but neither can they be grasped and held on to. Thus, vanity aptly portrays life as being insubstantial, rather flimsy, and passing.

One of the more vivid explanations is that "vanity" suggests the scum that remains when a soap bubble bursts against a hard surface. Of what value is such a thing? Surprisingly, vanity has some value in life.

The *New International Version* translates Ecclesiastes 1:2 as, "Meaningless! Meaningless! says the teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." *The Message Bible* renders it, "Smoke, nothing but smoke. There is nothing to anything—it's all smoke." In the New Testament, James 4:14 describes human life similarly: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away."

While it makes for an arresting opening, vanity is not useless to God's purpose. We have to grow to understand that, as things stand in His purpose, vanity plays a vital role. The apostle Paul states in Romans 8:18-21:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the

sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility [*vanity*, KJV], not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Without a doubt, life is difficult, and the vanity that Paul mentions plays its part in the difficulty. It seems apparent from Genesis 3:14-19, where God enumerates the curses following Adam and Eve's sin, that He not only pronounced man's subjection to a measure of vanity but activated it at that time. God deliberately subjected the creation to futility as a reminder that sin is the source of the difficulty as well as an obstacle to be overcome for the purpose of growth into His image. We must recognize it and deal with it.

Despite Solomon's exclamation, Ecclesiastes contains sufficient evidence that he never completely lost his view of God, as the book's last paragraph is witness. Instead, he clearly demonstrates that for those who believe God, vanity does not have the last word. Therefore, we can glean a great deal of hope from Ecclesiastes.

Notice how Paul considers the sufferings that this world and nature impose on us and concludes that they are insignificant compared to what lies ahead if we overcome their vanities. In fact, in Romans 8:19, he personifies the creation as burdened and groaning right along with us because of the futility imposed on it, saying that it, too, looks forward to its release from what the Creator subjected it to.

Since God purposefully subjected the physical creation to vanity, therefore we can honestly conclude that all this vanity is a reality that serves our overall good in preparation for the Kingdom of God. It is a challenging obstacle. In His wisdom, He has determined we must first experience the emptiness of life without Him, become thoroughly disillusioned with what it has to offer, throw it off, and depart from it. The sufferings that vanity imposes help us to make a true assessment of the value of His grace and goodness, as well as truly and zealously commit ourselves to Him and His purpose. In such a circumstance, vanity will not have the last word.

Is Life Profitable?

The second of the three terms is "profit" (Hebrew *yitron*). Though it is used only six times in Ecclesiastes, its placement at the beginning of the book adds to its weight. It is used as if Solomon is asking, "In light of the fact that so much of life is vanity, is life really worth living? Is it worth going through life's vanity-packed challenges? What does one gain from it?"

Undoubtedly, life requires a person to expend a great deal of time, energy, and stressful uncertainty, companions of the pains of vanity. On the surface, life appears to be just running in circles, so what does one gain from it? Because of questions like this, Solomon takes the reader through the descriptions of the repetitious cycles of earthly systems that follow. Meditations of this sort make an individual appear so puny against the backdrop of the immensity of

time, the earth's large population, and the monotony of the earth's natural cycles. The reality is that each of us truly is insignificant against such a background.

It is helpful to understand that Solomon's question regarding profit is asked in a rhetorical sense to stimulate thinking at this stage of his writing. Solomon already knows the final answer, but he is attempting to get his hearers to think along with him. As we study this book, we will find that not everyone's life is sheer vanity. Solomon finds that much of life is profitable but not truly lasting. On the other hand, if another factor is added to a person's life, life is not only very profitable because it is pleasing to God, but thoroughly enjoyable and everlasting as well.

Under the Sun

To those unfamiliar with the usage of this figure of speech, "under the sun" may be the most mysterious of the three significant terms in Ecclesiastes. This phrase accounts for much of why Ecclesiastes seems so pessimistic when first read. By using it, Solomon is stating the perspective from which he, and the overwhelming majority of mankind, views life in all of its vain complexities. He is literally telling us that he is looking at these matters of life where the sun shines. For the most part, and especially at this point within his lecture, his perspective does not include what is above the sun—God. To see things "under the sun" is to look at life's events from a carnal perspective. Life from God's perspective is not in view in such a case.

"Under the sun" is to think and act from an earthly point of view, to look at things carnally. Solomon is leaving God out of the picture for a time as his lecture unfolds. His purpose at this point is to cause us to begin to fear that vanity is all there is to life. All too often, in the busy crush of everyday events, we forget to remember God and His purpose. When we do this, even though we may be converted, we are back under the sun once again, looking at things carnally.

Ecclesiastes is not just about meaninglessness. It also opens the possibility of an "above the sun" perspective of life that can teach us that everything matters in spite of all the vanity we face. By being a means of helping Him to form us into what He desires, vanity can play a major role in God's purpose. We will learn as we continue through Solomon's lecture that an internal disgust of vanity can motivate cooperation with God and produce growth to maturity.

We will also find that Solomon is not at all pessimistic about a life in which God is considered in all things. The truth is that he is teaching why everything matters and that God's children need to be aware of making right choices or life will be meaningless. The gift of life is precious, and the gift of having the responsibility to make many choices in life is wonderful. God's calling and the revelation of Himself and His purpose are gifts beyond calculation. Solomon is urging us to make every effort not to waste the gifts God has so graciously given.

Each of us has only one opportunity for salvation. Life is not vain for us because we are being transformed,

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created for a different world. This vain and weary world should serve as a reminder to prompt us to turn our perspective to the right one, “above the sun.” Tremendous profit lies in what the called children of God are experiencing. We must choose to direct our lives to follow an “above the sun” perspective so that our lives are not meaningless. The choice lies between chasing the dreams of the unconverted or submitting to what God has revealed.

Round and Round Life Goes

Following his arresting opening declaration, Solomon launches into a series of illustrations drawn from earth’s natural cycles and applies them as evidence of the kind of environment mankind lives life in.

One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. (Ecclesiastes 1:4-7)

This paragraph’s first sentence sets the tone for the remainder. A great deal of repetitious activity takes place on earth’s surface, but overall, the earth itself and the lives lived on it just keep moving on. Nothing changes. The repetitive activity largely occurs in nature’s cycles, but human life remains generally unchanged, static, going nowhere. The earth and its systems permanently cycle as God designed them, but man is transient, a pilgrim living in a constant state of repeated change. It presents a picture of monotony.

Every 20 to 25 years, a new generation is born into the world, giving the impression that something is actually happening, but nothing really is except that the older generation is dying off. A seemingly endless procession of people comes and goes. Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, wrote, “What is more vain than this vanity: that the earth, which was made for humans, stays—but humans themselves, the lords of the earth, suddenly dissolve into the dust?”

The sun comes up and the sun goes down. The winds constantly move the weather, but the jet streams are generally locked into the same old patterns. They blow past us and then come around once again. Rains and snows fall, and the water drains from the land into streams and streams into rivers and rivers into the oceans, but even the oceans are never filled. These cycles produce no real change in the quality of human life.

There is plenty of motion on earth’s surface but no promotion of a truly profitable life for humankind. Indeed, man is perceived to be living within a closed system similar to a hamster endlessly running within its wheel—like the

cycles of nature, there is plenty of motion but no advancement. Thus, life appears to be a dismal picture of tedious meaningfulness. It is in a rut.

In verses 8-11, Solomon continues with a similar theme of profitlessness except that he draws his illustrations from human examples:

All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, “See this is new?” It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.

None of this means that mankind is not moving about. Earth is witness to a great deal of activity, but it is essentially purposeless, a great deal of sound and fury but with no advancement in quality of life or purposeful direction. Solomon’s word-pictures show mankind striving to see and hear new things, but the reality is more repetition of the same old things. He pictures mankind as little more than a milling mass.

A partial reason for this is that mankind seems to be cursed with a short memory while at the same time having an insatiable thirst for novelty. In Acts 17:19-21, Luke describes the apostle Paul’s experience in Athens:

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Understanding this desire, entrepreneurs take advantage of it to make money. So, there must be new, better, bigger, redesigned, more serviceable, more attractive, faster, safer, and more economical models each year. The entertainment industry thrives on this desire by trying to fill people’s need for emotional satisfaction by devising new angles to tell the same old stories. However, what this need really exposes is that our present life, combined with what we are looking forward to in the future, is not fulfilling enough to satisfy us. A vital element is missing from life: the overall perspective regarding life itself combined with the lack of a relationship with God.

Solomon does not mean that there are no new technologies or inventions. By saying “there is nothing new under the sun,” he is attempting to stimulate the reader to consider what might effectively improve the quality of his life. The bulk of mankind lives by the same basic patterns as Adam and Eve did after God kicked them out of the

Garden. Solomon is searching for a hopeful way of life, one that will fill a person with joy and his mind with pure, godly inspiration and character.

Solomon then states, “All things are wearisome” (Ecclesiastes 1:8, margin). Do we agree with Solomon’s assessment to this point? Is he right in his litany of mankind’s purposeless, hamster-like, monotonous life that leads nowhere? If so, Solomon has achieved his purpose of making us understand that he is making sense—that “vanity of vanities” is the only honest assessment of life on earth as long as people are doggedly, but without a large measure of truth, seeking purpose and profit only “under the sun.”

What Solomon has shown to this point is not the full story. In fact, he has just begun! Using generalities, he has exposed only the broad extent of the problem. Specifics will be added later. Nevertheless, he has already revealed the key to changing our approach to life: It lies in taking on a different perspective. “Under the sun” is equivalent to drawing a horizontal line between earthly and heavenly realities but focusing entirely or almost entirely on the earthly ones. If a person does this, then we must accept the fruit, as described by Solomon, to be inevitable because that is all that carnality can produce. However, a higher reality exists, and it is what Solomon urges his readers to change to. It is the spiritual reality we have been created to participate in.

A Summary to This Point

I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this grievous task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. I communed with my heart, saying, “Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge.” And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)

The book’s first eleven verses do not provide much in the way of hope for one’s life, but Solomon is not yet ready to explain more fully. However, he is looking for some explanations because, unlike an animal, man is created in the likeness of God and has a spirit. A man, therefore, looks for meaning in order to have some direction for living his life. Unlike animals, man does not merely exist within the narrow parameters of instinct. Though his life is difficult, man has an inner, God-given drive that his life is going somewhere. Solomon will later provide further insight into this drive.

The first mention of God appears in verse 13, and Solomon directly states that He gave us the grievous task

of living by wisdom. One thing that Solomon clearly counsels us on, and also shows by his personal example, is that God does not want us to run from life’s difficulties but to meet them and do our best to overcome them. The ultimate escape is through suicide, but some attempt to escape through various addictions, and others simply give up and let others take care of them, as some are now using the government.

Verse 15 contains one of those blunt facts of life that all need to deal with without allowing themselves to become cynical yet also remaining realistic. When Solomon states, “What is crooked cannot be made straight,” he is referring, not to anything material like a piece of steel, but rather to the circumstances and events of communal life. An obvious example is that the past cannot be changed. An injustice might be resolved or an apology given, but many lasting effects remain.

The Living Bible paraphrases this verse as, “What is wrong cannot be righted; it is water over the dam; and there is no use thinking of what might have been.” We must remember, though, that God has the power to straighten out what is twisted and to supply what is lacking, yet even He will not change the past. However, He can change the way the past affects us, which is most encouraging to those who believe.

We do not understand very much. Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:13: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I am known.” In Romans 8:28, in the same chapter in which he expounds on the futility of life, he says, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

Thus, by looking at it through the eyes of faith, we can know about life to some degree, but at this point in Ecclesiastes, Solomon is warning us that it contains a great deal of inequity, disappointment and discouragement, evil, apparent injustice, and pain. Nations enter into wars without our permission, governments and their systems are corrupt, the courts are unfair, and businessmen lie and steal—all clearly caused by the minds and hands of men. There is so much of this, he says, it is beyond count. God could easily stop these events, but He does not!

Is it any wonder Paul says in Galatians 1:4 that Christ “gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”? One of the unwritten questions in Ecclesiastes is, “Why does God not stop these things?” It is not answered completely either, so verse 16 shows Solomon searching for where he might find it.

Sometimes, he seems remorseless in his effort to make us think, but even the wisdom of Solomon cannot break through on the basis of human reason. He sets his mind to study and meditate on resources that he already has on hand to further expand the possibilities of greater understanding.

When he writes in verse 17 that he set his heart to know madness and folly, he means that he will search for answers by exploring the opposites of wisdom so that, he hopes, the contrast might reveal a deeper, clearer under-

(continued on page 14)

Hananiah

Many years after the Kingdom of Israel was taken into Assyrian captivity, the time came for the Kingdom of Judah also to be judged by God for its national sins. God used Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, as His instrument of correction, not only against Judah, but also against many of the region's kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar, however, did not simply conduct a grand military campaign that thoroughly subjugated everyone in one fell swoop. Rather, he made multiple incursions, and over time the various kingdoms became overshadowed by Babylon's power.

One of Nebuchadnezzar's incursions took place shortly after Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah and Coniah) became king at the age of eighteen:

At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came against the city, as his servants were besieging it. Then Jehoiachin king of Judah, his mother, his servants, his princes, and his officers went out to the king of Babylon; and the king of Babylon, in the eighth year of his reign, took him prisoner. And he carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house, and he cut in pieces all the articles of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the LORD, as the LORD had said. Also he carried into captivity all Jerusalem: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. (II Kings 24:10-14)

In addition, after deposing Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, as king (II Kings 24:17). The kingdom of Judah was hanging in the balance: Most of its power and wealth had been carried away, but it was not completely destroyed.

At this point, God told Jeremiah to make a number of wooden yokes for himself and for various neighboring kings (Jeremiah 27:1-11). The yokes symbolized servitude to Nebuchadnezzar, and poor Jeremiah spent many days wearing a wooden yoke as an example. Through this visual aid, God was instructing Judah, and the other

kingdoms, to submit to Babylonian rule. Even though doing so would be very humbling for Judah, it would be better for them than to resist Nebuchadnezzar, and thus God's will. He had already sent numerous prophets, with scores of warnings to repent and turn back to Him, and now the time of reckoning had arrived.

BABYLON'S YOKE BROKEN?

Not everyone in Judah was ready to accept this reality. Even though God specifically warned against false prophets who spoke against submitting to Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 27:9-10), this is exactly what happened in the case of a prophet named Hananiah:

And it happened in the same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year and in the fifth month, that Hananiah the son of Azur the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the LORD in the presence of the priests and of all the people, saying, "Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD's house, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. And I will bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, with all the captives of Judah who went to Babylon,' says the LORD, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" (Jeremiah 28:1-4)

Jeremiah had previously prophesied that Judah would be in exile in Babylon for a full seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11-12). He also foretold that Jeconiah (Coniah) would die in a foreign land (Jeremiah 22:24-26) and that the vessels of the Temple would remain there until the day that God brought them back (Jeremiah 27:19-22). Now, though, an obscure prophet named Hananiah came with a message that directly contradicted Jeremiah's prophecies. In Hananiah's vision of the future, Judah's restoration was just around the corner; everything would be back to normal within two years.

Notice Jeremiah's response to Hananiah:

'S ERROR

Then the prophet Jeremiah responded to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the LORD's temple. The prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the LORD do all this! May the LORD make your prophecy come true! May he bring back to this place from Babylon all the valuable articles taken from the LORD's temple and the people who were carried into exile. But listen to what I say to you and to all these people. From earliest times, the prophets who preceded you and me invariably prophesied war, disaster, and plagues against many countries and great kingdoms. So if a prophet prophesied peace and prosperity, it was only known that the LORD truly sent him when what he prophesied came true." (Jeremiah 28:5-11; *New English Translation* [NET])

With a note of sarcasm, he replies that he would be thrilled if Hananiah's vision were correct—it would be a remarkable turn of events. Then he points out that the prophets before them had all prophesied calamity rather than prosperity. Hananiah's words were completely out of sync with God's pattern of warning His people through the prophets.

Prior to Jeremiah, God had sent Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Nahum to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He had also sent Jonah to the empire of Assyria. All of them warned of tragedy and disaster if the people did not turn to God. Such warnings reach all the way back to Moses, who recorded the "Blessings and Curses" of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, detailing what God will do to a people who reject Him. Further, God also warns His people to be skeptical of those proclaiming a message of peace that lacks repentance (Jeremiah 4:10; 6:14; 8:11; 14:13; Ezekiel 13:10, 16). But, as God instructs in Deuteronomy 18:21-22, if what Hananiah said did not come to pass, it would be evidence that God had not sent him.

But Jeremiah's words meant little to Hananiah:

Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke off the prophet Jeremiah's neck and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD: 'Even so I will break the yoke

of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years.'" And the prophet Jeremiah went his way. (Jeremiah 28:10-11)

Hananiah ignored Jeremiah's words of caution and broke the God-ordained yoke that symbolized Nebuchadnezzar's authority over the kingdoms. Jeremiah probably enjoyed a measure of relief at no longer having to wear the yoke, but the gravity of what Hananiah had done overshadowed it.

FALSEHOOD AND REBELLION

Notice the event's conclusion:

But shortly after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke off the prophet Jeremiah's neck, the LORD spoke to Jeremiah. "Go and tell Hananiah that the LORD says, 'You have indeed broken the wooden yoke. But you have only succeeded in replacing it with an iron one! For the LORD God of Israel who rules over all says, "I have put an irresistible yoke of servitude on all these nations so they will serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. And they will indeed serve him. I have even given him control over the wild animals.'" Then the prophet Jeremiah told the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD did not send you! You are making these people trust in a lie! So the LORD says, 'I will most assuredly remove you from the face of the earth. You will die this very year because you have counseled rebellion against the LORD.'" In the seventh month of that very same year the prophet Hananiah died. (Jeremiah 28:12-17; NET)

God charges Hananiah with causing the people to trust in a lie, as well as inciting rebellion against Him. His transgressions were so grievous that God killed Hananiah two months later—a month for each year in his false vision.

Hananiah's prophecy urged rebellion against God in a couple of ways. First, Scripture is clear that God had installed Nebuchadnezzar in a position of power over the

prophecy watch *Hananiah's Error*

known world. Though not a godly man, he filled a position that God had given him, thus to resist his rule was to rebel against the God-ordained order. When Hananiah predicted deliverance in just two years, it encouraged Judeans to think that they did not have to submit to this foreign king. In this way, he encouraged them to disregard God-instituted authority.

Second, Hananiah's lie subtly altered the reason for their crisis. He redefined the foreign domination from something that God deliberately caused (as told by the prophets) into something that He merely allowed and would soon remedy. The false prophet shifted the explanation of their pitiful circumstances from something that God had orchestrated due to the sins of His people into a time-and-chance problem that He would reverse.

This removed any need for self-examination. It exonerated the nation and its leaders, removing any thought that the people had misbehaved themselves into this crisis by rejecting God. By eliminating any thought of cause-and-effect regarding sin, Hananiah was in fact encouraging them to continue in their disobedience. Without any apparent consequences for sin, the mind begins to reason that sin is not the problem. Hananiah told them everything would be fine, but God saw it as teaching His people to rebel.

THINGS GETTING BETTER?

Something similar is happening today in a small way. Some are promoting an idea that the world is actually *getting better*. It is not a widespread belief, but some have taken such a rose-colored view of God that they believe mankind's best days are just ahead. They are convinced that there will not be catastrophe and death leading up to Jesus Christ's return.

To arrive at such a notion, one must nullify the pattern of God's prophets, just as Hananiah did. He has to find new meaning even for the words of Jesus Himself in places like the Olivet Prophecy where He plainly says that "unless those days are shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22). Under this view, the bulk of Old and New Testament prophecies become either merely symbolic or already fulfilled, including all of Revelation. And a person must really cherry-pick his evidence to maintain the belief that circumstances in the world are improving! Some are actually doing this for the sole purpose of giving hope. However, like Hananiah's prophecy, it is a false hope.

In this myopic perspective, God loves His creation too much to send real, physical tribulation and destruction. Granted, God loves His creation and the peoples of Israel in particular, as Scripture shows. His love is such that He describes Israel as a cherished son:

For thus says the LORD: "Sing with gladness for

Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, 'O LORD, save Your people, the remnant of Israel!' Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the ends of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and the one who labors with child, together; a great throng shall return there. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, in a straight way in which they shall not stumble; for I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn." (Jeremiah 31:7-9)

This is one place among several where God calls Israel His son. This is an unfulfilled prophecy of the "second exodus," when God re-gathers the nations of Israel and Judah. Notice that God will bring back a remnant—all that remains of decimated Israel. They return with weeping and supplication to God. These are the ones who have survived the sword (verse 2). They have been humbled and returned to God, who returns them to His land.

Why will God humble His son in such a way? The answer is in Proverbs 3:12 (NET): "For the LORD disciplines [corrects, chastens, punishes, scourges] those He loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights." God confirms this in Jeremiah 46:28 (NET): "Though I completely destroy all the nations where I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will indeed discipline you, but only in due measure. I will not allow you to go entirely unpunished."

In Jeremiah's day (and before), God loved the Judeans so much that He would not allow them to continue on their path of self-destruction. They resisted Him strongly, but He loved them far too much to allow them to continue without a course correction that they could not ignore. It was painful and bloody. Yet, it resulted in their being humbled enough that the survivors were at least somewhat more inclined to listen to God.

The same thing is playing out in the nations of Israel and Judah today. God loves His people, and He plans a bright future for them. But He does not love their disregard of Him. He loves them too much to allow them to self-destruct fully. He *will* allow them to make terrible decisions and reap the wretched consequences. He will also intervene to get their attention with pain that will only get worse when they try to ignore it.

Either way, conditions will continue to deteriorate as we approach Jesus Christ's return because they must. If God allowed the nations of Israel to turn away from Him without consequence, their hearts would be fully set in them to do evil. Rather than allow that to happen, God will cause many to die, knowing they can be resurrected and given a new heart. He loves them too much to allow

(continued on page 14)

Misconceptions and Malarkey About the Holy Spirit

Part One

“. . . *having believed,
you were sealed
with the Holy Spirit
of promise. . .*”
—*Ephesians 1:13*

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the teaching of the Trinity is “the central doctrine of the Christian religion” (vol. 3, p. 47), despite the fact that not all Christians accept it. This concept holds that while God is one, He is also three. Perhaps no doctrine in all of Christendom has more of a reputation for obscurity and mind-boggling confusion than the Trinity.

While it can be shown to be one of the oldest concepts in all of civilization—having devotees in Egypt, Babylon, India, Greece, Scandinavia, etc. (nearly every culture that has ever existed on the earth)—the Trinity doctrine was introduced rather late in the history of the “Christian” (Catholic) church. This was done by the so-called Cappadocian Fathers: Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 794), later receiving formal approval by the Council of Constantinople in AD 382. Prior to this time, the Trinity was never given serious consideration by any sect or group proclaiming to follow Christ. In fact, the word “trinity” (*trinitas*) itself was not coined until Tertullian (c.160-230), more than a century after Christ’s death.

When we examine the “proofs” of this crucial doctrine, we find them constructed out of shallow inferences, sophomoric analogies, needless redundancies, and deliberately equivocating abstractions and chicanery. When all the mistranslations are exposed, not one shred of biblical support can be marshaled in favor of the Trinity, except for bits and pieces of obviously forced, contorted, and strained passages that are forced to say things they never were intended to say.

Perhaps the one who feels he has most to gain from the promulgation of the Trinity doctrine is the father of all lies, Satan the Devil, who naturally would loathe to see the Family of God enlarged. Ephesians 1:13-14 clearly indicates that the Holy Spirit is actually the instrument of our regeneration as children of God, and further, it is a pledge or down payment on the life to come.

ready answer *Misconceptions and Malarkey About the Holy Spirit*

In Him . . . , having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

If the Holy Spirit were the Third Person of a closed Trinity, as the teaching claims, we would never be enabled to become glorified or deified.

The Bible variously labels the Holy Spirit as the spirit and mind of Christ. Romans 8:7 tells us that, if this spirit is not part of our constitution—that is, if Christ’s spirit does not displace our carnal minds—we are not in the process of conversion and consequently are not candidates for the God Family. The following verses suggest a similar idea:

- Galatians 2:20: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, *but Christ lives in me*; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Emphasis added throughout.)
- Colossians 1:27: To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which *is Christ in you*, the hope of glory.
- I Corinthians 2:16: For “who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?” But *we have the mind of Christ*.

Pagan in Origin

The concept of the Trinity has its roots, not in Christianity, but in pagan mythology. According to Alexander Hislop in *The Two Babylons*, “Babylon was the primal source from which all of these systems of idolatry flowed, so the deductions of the most learned historians, on mere historical grounds, have led to the same conclusion” (p. 12).

Hislop goes on to add that, in terms of variations of the belief, what is lacked in one country is added in another, a practice that could be analogous to the needless proliferation of slightly different automobile models. Each culture has to modify the stock symbols a little bit to suit itself, but the germinal idea remains. Consequently, from one source of idolatry flows all these tributaries:

- Original Trinity of Babylon: Nimrod, Semiramis, Tammuz
- Sumerian: Anu, Enlil, Enki
- Egyptian: Osiris, Isis, Horus
- Greek: Zeus, Athena, Apollo
- Roman: Jupiter, Hera, Minerva
- Arabian: Al-Lat, Al-’Uzza, Manat
- Hindu: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva
- Scandinavian: Odin, Thor, Frea

Carl Jung, in his investigation of primitive cultures, became convinced that there seems to be a kind of collective cultural subconscious in which is submerged

archetypes of the Hero, the Wise Man, life out of death, fertility rites, and the like. The polytheistic Trinity is no exception. Sigmund Freud concluded, “If man were to live solely by the dictates of the unconscious, the monotheistic religions of the Judaeo-Christian tradition would disappear to be replaced by polytheistic and animistic proto-religions.”

Freud’s observations came several centuries too late. The Catholic Fathers were instinctively political, continually experimenting with the emotions and deep-seated feelings of the peoples to whom they proselytized. The adoption of the European fire festivals as well as of the Roman Brumalia celebrations would indicate that these men would utilize any compromise whatsoever in gaining a greater measure of power.

The Cappadocian Three—Basil the Great (c. AD 330-379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335-395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (c. AD 329-389)—are given credit for adapting, formulating, and finalizing the concept of the Trinity into the Catholic Church. These churchmen hypothesized out of their own fertile imaginations that “the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are in relation to one another like principle, realization, and completion” (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, “Vergilius Ferm,” p. 121). From this crude psychological analogy, the Cappadocians inferred that the three Persons of the Deity have not only the identical energy but also have equality of dignity and nature. Yet Christ Himself contradicted this equilateral notion by simply stating, “The Father is greater than I” (John 14:28).

The Trinity doctrine was originally considered radical, and according to Herman Hansheer, a large segment of the early church regarded these theories as tritheistic heresy. The bitter disputes that ensued from the Council of Nicea in AD 325 were not finally resolved until AD 382 at the First Council at Constantinople. The opportunistic Emperor Constantine, presiding over the earlier Council, was more concerned about political unity (in the church and especially in the empire) than he was at arriving at pure doctrine. He was playing a numbers game, neither knowing nor caring about the theological matters in dispute.

In the booklet, “Is God a Trinity?” George L. Johnson summarizes the aftermath of that Nicene conference with the observation, “The church in all the ensuing centuries has been ‘stuck’ so to speak with the job of upholding—right or wrong—the decision made at Nicea” (p. 20).

Grammatical Misunderstanding

If Protestant tract writers such as the late M.R. DeHaan (the founder of “Radio Bible Class” and co-editor of a devotional guide, *Our Daily Bread*) and Roger Campbell (best known for his weekly newspaper column, “Reflections on Faith,” and daily radio program, “Higher Ground”) had seriously studied a foreign language—or even into the historical background of our own English language!—they

would not have dared to assert so foolishly that Jesus uses the personal pronoun “Him” when referring to the Comforter (or “Helper,” NKJV) in John 16:7: “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.”

The Greek word for “Comforter,” *parakletos*, is in the masculine gender, while *pneumais* (“spirit”) in the neuter gender. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is in the feminine gender.

Consequently, it cannot be deduced that this *parakletos* is a personality any more than we could say a German pen is a girl and a German pencil is a boy—even though the article *die* in *die Feder* (the pen) denotes a feminine word and *der* in *der Bleistift* (the pencil) denotes a masculine word. It may be surprising to learn that “girl” in German, *das Madchen*, is neuter in gender.

Before the Norman Invasion in 1066, English was as much an inflected language as German or Scandinavian. Modern English has only one article, “the,” to use for its nouns, while Old English differentiated between masculine articles, *se mann* (the man); feminine articles, *seo hlaefdige* (the lady); and neuter articles, *daet Maedgen* (the girl, showing its relationship to modern German).

M.R. DeHaan, oblivious to this grammatical differentiation, gullibly asserts in his tract on the Holy Spirit that there has been a faulty translation of the original text into the English Bible. With cocksure, sophomoric naiveté, DeHaan complains that, in many cases, the Spirit is spoken of as “it” or “that” instead of “he,” “him,” or “whom.” To give an example, he quotes Romans 8:16, “The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit.” However, since in this particular verse the pronoun is *auto* and denotes the neuter gender, the pronoun *itself* is correctly rendered.

Analogies That “Prove” the Trinity

Some of the Catholic Fathers, knowing that laymen would not put up with scholarly doubletalk, resorted to rather crude physical analogies to “explain” things, such as:

1. Water can retain its chemical identity while in the distinct states of ice, liquid, and steam.
2. An egg has a shell, a yolk, and albumin, yet all are part of the egg. If we extend the analogy too far, we find that not all of the egg’s components are living.
3. The triangle is the strongest brace in carpentry.
4. The shamrock and pansy have three petals—but they are still one plant. (This also applies to poison ivy.)
5. One interesting metaphor found in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* likens the Trinity to the sun, the ray, and the light.

Psychological metaphors for the Trinity are often just the breaking up of related aspects of the same thing. For instance, Augustine concocts a trinity out of thought, love, and will. Many are the psychological analogies of one

being with three attributes. But why should we ever stop at three attributes? God has literally hundreds (perhaps thousands) of attributes. Are we going to give each one of these attributes a separate individuality?

Essence vs. Entity

Trinitarians suggest that the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 sets a precedent for believing in the Trinity, since, within it, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are juxtaposed. If such entities as President, Congress, and Constitution were taken as a cluster, I suppose Walter Martin (the “Original Bible Answer Man” and author of *The Kingdom of the Cults*) and M.R. DeHaan would consider the Constitution as a living personality.

Matthew 28:19 reads, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” If we consider this verse more closely, we see the prepositions “in” (or “into”) and “of.” Taken together in this idiom, they suggest that the last item in the series would be the means by which the act can take place. Thus, people are baptized into the name of the Father and Son by means of the Holy Spirit.

Parts of the New Testament have been mistranslated to distort what might have otherwise been clear. In the original Greek, in all the verses where *pneuma hagion* (literally, “spirit holy”), a substantive noun, is used, *no article is ever used*, suggesting that the Holy Spirit is not an entity but an essence. Here are some examples from just Luke’s two books:

- Luke 1:15: For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with [“the” not in original Greek] Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.
- Luke 1:67: Now his father Zacharias was filled with [“the” not in original Greek] Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: . . .
- Luke 4:1 Then Jesus, being filled with [“the” not in original Greek] Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, . . .
- Acts 2:4: And they were all filled with [“the” not in the original Greek] Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.
- Acts 4:8: Then Peter, filled with [“the” not in the original Greek] Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: . . .”
- Acts 4:31: And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with [“the” not in the original Greek] Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.
- Acts 6:3: “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of [“the” not in the original Greek] Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; . . .

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- Acts 7:55: But he, being full of [“the” not in original Greek] Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, . . .

These verses, among many others throughout the entirety of Scripture, show that the Holy Spirit is a power rather than a personality.

Probably the most serious tampering of all was the spurious insertion of I John 5:7-8, “For there are three

which testify: the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and the three are of one.’ In a footnote in *The Emphatic Diaglott*, we find, “This text is not contained in any Greek manuscript which was written earlier than the fifth century—and was first cited by Virgilius Tapsensis, a Latin writer of no credit.”

Many more verses from the Bible have been used to “prove” the existence of a Trinity in Scripture. We will examine some of those in Part Two.

—David F. Maas

personal *Ecclesiastes and Christian Living*

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standing of wisdom. The Hebrew term translated as “madness” is somewhat misleading because it is closer in meaning to “recklessness,” indicating error in thinking. It is not the type of recklessness that would bring bodily injury, but it could mislead his search for factual truths.

Verse 18 shows that his efforts were not only unsuccessful but left him somewhat frustrated. Why? He did not give an answer because he had none, and he had none because he was searching under the sun. The truth is that some extremely important facets of this mystery of the ages that Solomon is investigating must be revealed from above the sun.

The conclusion to Ecclesiastes 1 should prove to us that wisdom and experience will not solve every problem in life. We must understand and live with the reality that God is not obligated to explain our problems to us. We are the sinners who chose, as Adam and Eve did, to accept Satan’s deceitful offer that, if they would listen to him and eat the fruit, their eyes would be opened. They indeed gained a great deal of experiential knowl-

edge, but their experiences also alienated them from God. We cannot expect any different result.

Life may seem monotonous and meaningless, but for those called by God, it need not be. Life now is a tremendous blessing. We must accept the reality, though, that we must live by faith in God’s promises. Following His resurrection, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29). Jesus Christ is “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (I Corinthians 1:24). In His mercy, He has miraculously broken into our lives to prepare us for His Kingdom. We must take up the challenges that He has presented, cease living our lives running in circles, and head straight for the Kingdom of God.

We will continue in the book of Ecclesiastes in the next issue.

In Christian love,



prophecy watch *Hananiah’s Error*

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them to become incorrigible.

We have tremendous hope, but our hope is not in the brotherhood of man becoming less dysfunctional on its own. Our hope is in the Creator God who is making man in His image, despite that effort involving pain, death, resurrection, and thousands of years in between. Our hope is in the One who will cut short the days ahead, for the sake of—for the love of—the elect. He loves His creation more than we can comprehend, but that love is sometimes demonstrated in ways that we also do not comprehend.

As the times continue to darken, we do not need to quake in terror. We should be motivated to attend all the more diligently to our walk with God and entrust our lives

to Him, for He can watch over them far better than we can. Only He knows what we need to endure to be prepared for His Kingdom and eternal life with Him. Sometimes that means, like Judah, wearing a yoke that we have rightfully earned and submitting to the consequences of turning away from God. Sometimes that means, like Jeremiah, wearing a yoke that we did not necessarily earn but that God gives us to wear because of what He is working out in our lives or in the lives of those around us.

Whatever the case, the proper response is to look to God, to turn back to Him if we have strayed, and to ensure that our hope does not involve twisting the Word of God.

—David C. Grabbe

An Israel-Turkey Reconciliation?

While Syrians destroy their country and Egyptians fill Tahrir Square with thousands to protest their country's leadership, Israelis find themselves alone on an island in the midst of a seething Islamic sea. Their island bristles with armaments and resounds to the sound of the marching feet of thousands of well-trained citizen-soldiers, yet their confidence in their military superiority over all other nations in the region is an uneasy one.

Not too long ago, before the Arab Spring, they used to be able to rely on a few other advantages. Before the ousting of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Israel could rely on Egypt—as much as any nation can trust another in that part of the world—to abide by the Camp David Accords, forged during the Carter Administration, providing a buffer zone from radical Arab aggression on its southern flank. Now, with the Muslim Brotherhood on the ascendant in Cairo, those days of feeling semi-secure are long past. The Palestinians have a lot longer leash than before, and they could significantly disrupt Israeli security were they not so weakened by internal conflict.

Jordan, too, was once almost neutral in their dealings with Israel, so much so that the prime ministers in Jerusalem could nearly overlook what was happening in Amman to concentrate on greater but more distant threats in Baghdad and Tehran. Even Syria, while it could not be ignored as it propped up Hezbollah in Lebanon and made belligerent feints on the Golan Heights, did not rise to the level of strength and intimidation that would make Israel's military sweat. Except for coddling its Hezbollah fighters, Lebanon itself, handmaiden of Iran, had no hope of attacking Israel meaningfully due to its own civil turmoil. Though these nations are still not strong enough to amount to a serious threat, they would descend on Israel like a pack of hyenas if they smelled weakness and fear.

Until the present administration, the United States has always stood solidly behind the State of Israel. President Obama, however, seems to ignore Israel as long as possible during any crisis, flying in to save the day with strong-arm tactics worthy of a Mafia godfather. And so he did during Israel's ongoing dispute with former ally Turkey, forcing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to express sincere regret and promise compensation to Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Erdogan for the 2010 Israeli commando raid on a blockade-running Turkish ship that resulted in nine deaths. While Obama smiled at the cameras and flirted with Israel's press corps, saying, "The United States deeply values our relationships with both Turkey and Israel, and we attach great importance to the restoration of positive relations between them, in order to advance regional peace and security," he made Israel surrender its position on the matter, weakening it and giving the diplomatic and public-opinion victory to Turkey.

In the mid- to late-1990s, Israel's military alliance with Turkey was the centerpiece of a peace-through-strength initiative designed to deter regional hotheads from even considering setting

a match to the Middle East powder keg. Their cooperation expanded to include commercial and trade exchanges and even a fair amount of tourism to and from both nations. Many in Israel would like to see such cooperation return, if for nothing else but to have a friend in the region, but that occurred in a far less radicalized Middle East, before Islamization became such a powerful force in the world.

Turkey itself has become more Islamic than it was at that time. Since 2001, when he founded it, Erdogan has been the leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (also known as the JDP or AKP) in Turkey, which bills itself as a center-right, social conservative political party despite its roots being firmly in the pro-Islamic camp. He has been Turkey's Prime Minister since 2003. In his early years in the post, he withheld or soft-pedaled his criticism of Israel, but since 2006, his rhetoric has escalated to the point that, in February, he labeled Zionism a crime against humanity.

Even so, because reconciliation between Turkey and Israel is a top strategic priority, Netanyahu apologized and promised compensation. Erdogan accepted Israel's apology, and both countries announced that they would reinstate ambassadors and completely restore diplomatic relations. But so far, after the three rounds of talks, these promises have not been fulfilled. Jerusalem is not willing to admit that the compensation payment is the result of a wrongful act. For its part, Ankara demands ten times the amount of money Israel offered, wants Israel to accept blame for a wrongful act, and requires proof that living conditions of Palestinians are improving.

If relations between Israel and Turkey somehow return to normal, they will not look like their former strategic ties. The rapidly changing geopolitical map of the Middle East contains more seeds of conflict between the two nations than before. The huge natural-gas reservoirs that have been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean will certainly raise economic and territorial tensions. Jerusalem's stronger relations with Cyprus and Greece will be viewed suspiciously in Ankara.

That said, they have shared interests. Both want to limit the spread of radical Islam in the Middle East. Both nations border on Syria, and neither wants spillover into their territories or Hezbollah to get its hands on Syria's chemical weapons. Both countries are wary of Iran and its nuclear ambitions. Both are democratic, pro-Western, and U.S. allies. Both want stability in the region.

Relations between Israel and Turkey have a long history of ups and downs. While reconciliation seems unlikely and new regional realities make cooperation even more difficult, both nations would probably benefit by seizing today's opportunity to reestablish close ties. For Israel, especially, a friend in the neighborhood would help to ease its stressful isolation.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Healing a Man Born Blind (Part Two)

The miracle of healing recorded in John 9 displays Jesus Christ giving sight to the blind. Healing is a work of the God of the Old Testament, as seen in Psalm 146:8, “The LORD opens the eyes of the blind . . .” (see also Exodus 4:10-12). Giving sight to the blind is also a work of the Messiah, as prophesied in Isaiah 35:4-5, “He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened. . . .” Jesus’ healing of the man born blind, then, is another testimony of His Deity and of the fact that He is the Messiah.

In spite of this great testimony, most of the witnesses missed the miracle’s message, and the religious leaders persecuted the newly healed man. Moreover, they condemned the Healer, Jesus Christ, calling Him a sinner. Greater blindness existed in their lives than in the man Christ healed; he was only physically blind but their blindness was spiritual, of the heart and mind.



1. How does the blind man respond to Christ’s command? John 9:7, 11.

COMMENT: It is significant that the command is simple, containing only seven words: “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” It was also personal, directed to the blind man alone. In addition, the command involved a test of obedience, requiring a response to Jesus. Finally, it encouraged the man, despite his not being able to see the compassion in Jesus’ eyes. He somehow knew that the One whose voice he heard would help him.

Christ’s command tested the man’s faith, confirming and strengthening it. Without delay or reluctance, he obeyed the divine command: He went and washed and saw. Many would consider it a useless chore for a blind man to do such a simple thing to obtain his sight, but having obeyed, the man was healed. Blessing still comes through obedience. In one sense, he obeyed Christ blindly, but as a result, he immediately received his sight, beginning down a path by which he eventually also received true spiritual sight.

In the same way, the gospel that comes to us is simple. God requires us to respond in faith, and when we do—when we understand and believe that the Son of God became human to enable mankind’s salvation—our spiritual blindness begins to be removed.

2. Why does Jesus heal the blind man on a Sabbath? John 9:14-16.

COMMENT: What is the true purpose of the Sabbath? God’s instruction about the Sabbath is contained in general principles that we are to apply properly. To do this, we have to understand its purpose.

From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus instructs us on how to live His way of life using these principles. The Sabbath is so significant that His ministry formally began on one and ended on a preparation day for another. In His inaugural sermon (Luke 4:16-19), He spells out His work: setting people free from captivity. He specifically mentions revealing His truth to the poor (that is, the weak), broken-

hearted, captives, blind, and oppressed (see Isaiah 61:1-2).

The Sabbath—which, He says in Mark 2:27, “was made for man”—is a key element in this work of delivering people from oppression. God established His Sabbath law, including the weekly and annual Sabbaths, to prepare a people to come out of and stay out of spiritual slavery. Each Sabbath reminds Christians that God is their Liberator, and by keeping it, they show that they are free and want to remain free.

We need to recognize that the blind man’s life was not in immediate danger, but the liberating healing Jesus performed was done to one who was chronically ill. Spiritually, we are the same, beset by lingering sins. God provides the Sabbath to free us from the chronic problems caused by the desires of our human nature.

3. Do all Christians receive opposition and persecution? John 9:8-17.

COMMENT: Every genuine believer in Jesus Christ will have conflict at times, and in one form or another, every Christian will be opposed for the sake of God’s truth. The apostle Paul alerts us that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (II Timothy 3:12), and that “it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29).

God will not abandon us in the conflict any more than He abandoned the once-blind man. When challenged about his opinion of Jesus, he bravely answered, “He is a prophet” (John 9:17). God has His purposes in allowing persecution, and among them are at least two seen in John 9: Opposition will 1) sharpen our testimony and 2) deepen our understanding of God’s purpose and way of life. No less than the man born blind, we should be humbly bold in our testimony. If the blind man, who had merely met Jesus and knew little about Him, could be so, why should we Christians not be also in our defense of God’s way of life?

—Martin G. Collins