

# Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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WATCH  
WHAT?



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One of the consistent commands of our Savior Jesus Christ is for His disciples to watch. The word "watch" prompts images of a sentry assigned to guard duty as a first line of defense against attack by the enemy. But what are Christians to watch for? Are we looking for heresy? Signs of the times? Demonic activity? The return of Christ? Or are we to watch for something closer to home?

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**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**  
JOHN W. RITENBAUGH  
**MANAGING EDITOR**  
RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

**ASSOCIATE EDITOR**  
MARTIN G. COLLINS

**DESIGN EDITOR**  
KRISTEN M. COLLINS

**NEWS EDITOR**  
DAVID C. GRABBE

**CIRCULATION**  
DIANE R. MCIVER

**PROOFREADERS**  
PHYLLIS FORD  
CINDY HINDS  
DIANE MCIVER

### CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

JAMES BEAUBELLE  
TED E. BOWLING  
BILL CHERRY  
DAN ELMORE  
CLYDE FINKLEA  
MIKE FORD  
RONNY H. GRAHAM  
WILLIAM GRAY

PAT HIGGINS  
DAVID F. MAAS  
GARY MONTGOMERY  
BILL ONISICK  
JOHN REID  
JOHN REISS  
MARK SCHINDLER  
CHARLES F. WHITAKER

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## contact

**UNITED STATES:** P.O. Box 471846, Charlotte, NC 28247-1846 U.S.A.  
803.802.7075 / 803.802.7089 FAX

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

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

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

## web

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# Ecclesiastes and Christian Living

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## Part Nine: Wisdom as a Defense

Among the characteristics of God that we are to strive for, wisdom has an extremely high value, as Proverbs 4:7 attests: “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.” Pay attention to the word “principal” here. Spelled in this manner—ending in p-a-l, not p-l-e—the term, according to *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, means “first, highest, foremost in importance, rank, worth or degree; chief.” It does not mean “a broad general rule” but “a quality or characteristic of the highest order.” The verse is saying, then, that wisdom is of the highest rank among those qualities under consideration, “therefore get wisdom.” *The New International Version* (NIV) translates this phrase, “Wisdom is supreme.”

Further study on this verse reveals that it is in reality an expansion on verse 5: “Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of My mouth.” Thus, verse 7 exhorts the reader to make every effort in life to pursue and obtain wisdom. In a practical sense, it is as though there is nothing more important in life.

Recall the definition we are using in these articles for biblical wisdom. Whereas the world

associates wisdom with a rather abstract, philosophical dimension of life, the Bible’s wisdom consists of a package of spiritual attributes that are deliberately shaped into a practical skill in living God’s way.

The use of the phrase “deliberately shaped” is purposeful. Wisdom does not just magically appear. It is thoughtfully developed and used in the practical circumstances of everyday life. Its elements consist of such qualities as knowledge of God, understanding, discernment, judgment, prudence, equity, the fear of God, and more. As these elements are blended, shaped, and used, they become a spiritual sagacity combined with practical, useful skills in applying the teachings of God’s way of life as exemplified by Jesus Christ.

### Patient Stick-To-Itiveness?

We will build upon Ecclesiastes 7:8-10 as we proceed through multiple comparisons between wisdom and characteristics of attitudes and conduct that often accompany the unfolding of life’s activities:

The end of a thing is better than its beginning,

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and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools. Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.

Each comparison shows wisdom’s significance to a successful life. We are learning that the best way to perceive the counsel in Ecclesiastes is to recognize that it is written to God’s converted children, not to the world. Solomon’s thoughts, then, tie directly into instructions and commands in other parts of God’s Word. Much of this is counsel to endure the trials of life patiently and meekly because God is directly involved in them right alongside us. Hence, over the long haul, our trials will have a positive result. Consequently, we are urged not to fall into the trap of unreasoning haste to “just get rid of the problem,” as it were. Knowing that Ecclesiastes is aimed at God’s converted children, we grasp that the willfulness involved in haste is really nothing more than an expression of carnal pride.

Verse 8 bears explaining more thoroughly because it relates to a pertinent fact about these comparisons. Recall that they are not to be understood as absolutes but are useful helps according to the circumstances of life’s trials. Each trial may present different nuances that we must think through. Though verse 8 seems to say otherwise, we know that the end of everything is most definitely, absolutely not always better than its beginning.

A clear example is sin. Sin almost invariably begins pleasantly, even pleurably. As with Eve, the fruit undoubtedly tasted good to her, but God kicked her and Adam out of the Garden, and they died. Judas, too, was undoubtedly pleased with his thirty pieces of silver, but then he hanged himself. These examples are so clear: Sin never, never, never ends well.

Circumstances and projects can end well only when they begin with a good purpose right from the start. Yet, even so, they may not end well. Luke 11:24-26 provides a serious example from Jesus of a good project ending badly:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, “I will return to my house from which I came,” and when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

II Peter 2:20-22 provides vivid illustrations of how sin entering a project destroys the idea of the end being better than the beginning:

For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: “A dog returns to his own vomit,” and, “a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.”

Thus, we can see that even good projects must continue in the right way for the end to be better than its beginning, showing that these comparisons are not intended to be absolutes.

## Why Progress Ceases

In Luke 11: 24-26, Jesus uses the illustration of an empty house. When we walk through an empty house, we may see possibilities for it, but because it is empty, it is not a warm, accepting, and welcoming place. Would not making the house a fine place to live be a fine project? However, it is also possible that such a project might produce a number of potential pitfalls. Ecclesiastes 7:8-10 lists some of the reasons why a project, good at the beginning, might not be carried through to its finish.

The context of Jesus’ and Peter’s counsel assumes the individual is called, forgiven, and changing, which are good. Jesus terms it being “swept clean”; Peter calls it as having “escaped the pollutions of the world.” But in their conclusions, the individual’s vision, devotion, and discipline appear to be weak. The person regresses and becomes entangled again in his pre-conversion ways. Thus, weak character prevents a good ending. Recall that Jesus curses the fig tree that produced no figs, and in the Parable of the Talents, the man who buried his money is rejected. In other words, they showed no positive use of their gifts.

Solomon names four possibilities as to why progress ceases. They are pride, impatience, anger, and discouragement. Pride is in reality the father—the generator—of the other three. A person who can control his willfulness, as expressed by the examples of impatience, anger, and discouragement, controls them because he sees a far greater benefit to himself in what he is being asked to endure. Because he, by faith, perceives God to be involved in his trials, a Christian concludes that they are positive preparation for the Kingdom of God.

We can sometimes learn from our children what we may be like in our relationships with God. This scenario has unfolded for many of us: As a long trip begins, the

family piles into the car. Invariably, it is not long before one of the children asks in a whining voice, “Are we there yet?” “When will we get there?” “How much longer will it be?” They do this because young children have little or no concept of time and distance. Their mental clocks move much faster than those of older folks because they have not had the experience to teach them such things.

In our trials as Christians, our lack of experience may be working against us in relation to God and His purposes. That is why we must come to know God and see matters from His longer, broader perspective. These verses in Ecclesiastes 7, then, really compare patient endurance with pride and its fruits of impatience, hasty frustration, and discouragement.

This section, beginning in verse 7, contains a muted suggestion that the long way is frequently superior to the quick-and-easy way that the immature almost invariably seek. We often do things hurriedly just to get them done, without being all that concerned about how well those jobs are done.

In both Jesus’ and Peter’s illustrations, God is clearly not satisfied with the partial solutions the carnal mind so easily considers acceptable. God desires that we overcome the flaws in our character, not merely cover them. In the midst of our relationship trials with God, we must remember that He is the Creator, not us, and He knows what He wants to accomplish.

Thus, Solomon compares patience and hasty anger. We become frustrated very easily and frequently. Often, doing a good job is superior simply because it has been done well and does not have to be inspected by someone else to check and double-check the quality of workmanship. How often does a person’s temper feed into the way and the quality of the job? God is clearly suggesting that a person’s temperament has a distinct effect on the quality and consistency of his workmanship.

Does an angry person make a good spouse? Does an angry person make a good employee? Does an impatient person make a good employee? Does an angry person make a good church member? Does a driver burning with road rage make a good driver? Most of the time, anger is not wisdom. Anger can be good if it is used at the right time, is controlled, is directed toward the right ends, and is not simply an expression of personal, willful frustration because things are not going as expected. Notice how the following verses confirm anger’s ability to hinder good:

- Proverbs 14:17: “A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a man of wicked intentions is hated.”
- Proverbs 14:29: “He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly.”
- Proverbs 16:32: “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”

- James 1:19-20: “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Solomon expressly states in Ecclesiastes 7:9, “Anger resides in the bosom of fools.” He describes an anger ready to burst out at even slight irritations because a person’s pride convinces him that even slight irritations simply should not happen to such a wonderful person as he is. He explodes because of his impatience.

From impatience, it is often but a short step to bribery, which Solomon mentions in verse 7. A bribe is often given or taken because the individual wants to hurry the process of achieving his goal. The recipient convinces himself it is merely a shortcut. It is a means of getting the job done quicker. However, in reality the bribe is a trap that binds him by indebtedness to another and ultimately, to shame.

Do not be misled by the word “end” in verse 8. It does not necessarily suggest a job that is finished. Rather, Solomon is thinking of the outcome, the fruit produced, or the quality achieved. Some things that do not seem to start well actually become quite productive. There is a saying: “All’s well that ends well,” which is the sort of end Solomon means, one that is quite important to growing and overcoming.

Many times, we fear becoming involved with even the first small steps of overcoming a character flaw to improve our conduct, so we procrastinate. We often find, however, that once involved in disciplining ourselves and taking some small hesitant steps, we are encouraged because more good is happening than we ever thought possible. Some insignificant beginnings have endings of major consequence.

A clear example is found in the fact that Jesus Christ was born as a babe, in a second-rate, occupied, and enslaved nation and into an insignificant family—but that “project” will end in the awesome things written in Revelation 22 with billions of glorified, immortal persons gathered into one awesome Family. This illustration feeds into this principle and the overall thoughts about how we think about life now that we are in the midst of our calling and have a much clearer view of how things are going on Planet Earth.

## Are the Good Old Days Really Good?

Ecclesiastes 7:10 contains a thought often heard these days: “Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.” The times we live in are indeed becoming steadily more difficult. Christian values are consistently being attacked. Under such circumstances, a person is apt to say what Solomon warns us against saying. It is easy for us to let ourselves become “down.” But we need to be careful because discouragement is a child of impatience. In difficult situations, we want the trouble to pass quickly.

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However, be aware that in such times it is easy to allow one's carnality to take the bribe of doing a "quick and dirty," less-than-good job in order to make life less stressful and tiring.

To take a quick and easy approach is understandable these days because conditions in this nation give no sign of positive change. It seems that those governing us are delivering us into the hands of the nation's enemies. Others who are illegally invading us are dragging us into the gutter, and at the same time, much of the nation's wealth is flowing into the hands of the few. Jobs are becoming scarcer.

All of those things are indeed true to some degree, but we have to resist allowing this influence to get a firm grip on us, as it indicates that our focus is too much on carnal men and all their self-centered flaws rather than on what God is accomplishing to fulfill His promises. Yes, living is growing less comfortable, but He is telling us to look ahead and focus on what He will accomplish in the future. God wants us to evaluate honestly what we have received by virtue of His calling.

Consider an interesting aspect of the mindset of father Abraham. Genesis 13:2 describes him as very rich in livestock, silver, and gold. Hebrews 11:10 reports that despite all that wealth, he looked for a city whose Builder is God. We know that Abraham was wealthy enough to put together an army of over 300 men, but in this way, God shows us what dominated his mind.

What lay in the future, not the present, motivated his life. Abraham bought no land to call his own, and Hebrews 11:9 records that this very wealthy man lived in tents. A tent is a symbol of temporariness, as well as lack of wealth and status. The wealthy live in solid homes; the poor live in tents because they can afford nothing better. Yet, Abraham was not merely wealthy but *very* wealthy.

Abraham was certainly aware of the riches of the world around him. He came from Ur of the Chaldees, a very prosperous city. He visited Egypt, the world's most powerful and wealthiest nation at that time. Pyramids cannot be built without wealth. Movies like *The Ten Commandments* attempt to depict the splendor. What Hebrews 11:9 does not say is that, all the while he lived in what appears to be a lowly status, he was heir of the world (Roman 4:13)! To a person of faith that means a great deal.

Some may perhaps mistakenly think that everybody lived in tents in Abraham's time, so the way he lived was the way every wealthy person lived. This assumption leads one to conclude there is nothing unusual in the Bible pointing these things out. Not so. The way Abraham lived reflected where his heart was, a glimpse into his faith, vision, and humility. Archeologists have compiled and recorded a great deal of evidence about the time Abraham lived. The people of that day built fine houses and huge buildings. The cultures were highly developed, and their building projects were grand and extensive.

It has been said that the "good old days" are the result of bad memory and good imagination. We old folks have a proclivity to look back and say, "The old was better." That is true sometimes. Solomon's advice is trying to help us understand that, though we must look back to learn, the future must nonetheless dominate our minds. If one is looking over his shoulder while trying to move forward at the same time, he is likely either to crash into something or to trip and fall over some impediment. Jesus cautions in Luke 9:62, "No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Solomon is urging *us*, the called, to move on with life and its problems by looking and working toward the future. In context, then, the "former days" refers to the time before we were converted, not some earlier time in the history of our culture. This makes this warning more individual and potent.

Being called creates new difficulties, but it is especially difficult now because we are living in nations that are simultaneously losing both their moral and economic powers. Thus, what we are experiencing can create feelings of despair that keep us focused on just merely making it.

This kind of attitude is not good. God warns us in verse 10 that it is not wise to hold a strong opinion that former days were better. He wants us to keep our minds on His sovereign power and purpose while accepting His governing judgment as to the circumstances of our times. We do not want to be guilty of calling Him into account, but that is exactly what we would be doing. We must never forget that He rules—constantly! His oversight of what is occurring in this world is not merely an occasional giving of His attention. Therefore, He is pleased to give us the world as it is without our calling Him into account.

## Wisdom Protects

**E**cclésiastes 7:11-12 provides this counsel:

Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and profitable to those who see the sun. For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, but the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it.

These verses briefly examine one of the properties that wisdom and money share. The key word is "share." Notice that the term "better" does not appear in the context. The reason is that wisdom is so superior to wealth that it derives no additional glory from it. If a person has both, that is of course good. However, if they are personified, one must conclude that wisdom could do better without wealth than wealth could do without wisdom.

The attribute that they share is the power to protect, to be a defense or a shade, as some translations say, against life's difficulties. Even in regard to this quality, the com-



parison reveals that wisdom is of greater value. The comparison shows that wisdom is like a wall of protection whereas wealth is merely a hedge. In adversity, wisdom provides reserves of strength to the person who possesses it. Wealth, though, continues to feed a person's self-importance and lusts, and so it may even be detrimental to progress.

What does Solomon mean by "Wisdom is good with an inheritance"? This translation is vague and difficult. In its translation, *The Revised English Bible* reinserts "better" into the thought: "Wisdom is better than possessions and an advantage to all who see the sun." The NIV reads, "Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun." The Jewish *Soncino* commentary makes two suggestions: "Wisdom is good when it is an inheritance" and "Wisdom is good when there is an inheritance together with it." Solomon seems to be saying that, even as receiving a family inheritance is an advantage, so also is receiving family wisdom an advantage. It thus becomes an admonishment to young people to learn from their parents.

The *Soncino* commentary catches the essence of what Solomon is saying. Biblical wisdom always gives a person an advantage regardless of age, and the younger the person is when he begins using what he learned from his family the better.

The counsel in the last phrase of this verse—"Wisdom is . . . profitable to those who see the sun"—can be taken in two ways. "Those who see the sun" may be taken generally, thus including all humanity. But it may be directed specifically toward those who truly see God as part of their lives, that is, he refers to "over the sun," converted people. In this way, verse 11 carries strong counsel to those who have God-given wisdom that enables them to "see" God. Such a person's wisdom imparts even better judgment for facing the difficulty of the times with a much steadier walk and broader, deeper sagacity.

At the same time, in order to be realistic, some events may affect our lives that neither wisdom nor wealth can protect us from, such as a national economic cataclysm or a natural disaster like a flood or earthquake that one cannot be physically prepared for. Except for those extraordinary situations, from what does wisdom defend a person? It protects individuals who have this wisdom derived from a relationship with God from the ordinary trials of the times, whatever their time in history.

## The Strength of Wisdom

Proverbs 8:1-11, 32-36 provides an understandable overview of the importance of wisdom, spelling out why it is superior to wealth:

Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice? She takes her stand on the top of the high hill, beside the way, where the paths meet. She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city, at the

entrance of the doors: to you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. O you simple ones, understand prudence, and you fools, be of an understanding heart. Listen, for I will speak of excellent things, and from the opening of my lips will come right things; for my mouth will speak truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are with righteousness; nothing crooked or perverse is in them. They are all plain to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge. Receive my instruction, and not silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her. . . .

Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord; but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death.

Jesus teaches in Matthew 13:22, "Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful." Wealth has a way of deceiving a person. Anyone is susceptible. When a person is poor, he can be deceived into imagining that, if he were rich, he would be happy. When he is rich, he deludes himself that, if he were only richer, he would be content.

The problem is not the wealth. The problem is in the heart because of what we have been taught by our culture about wealth's protective capacity. That belief is often a delusion, since the common understanding regarding wealth is not from God. This delusion really has no end because human nature, without God's help, is insatiable. In contrast, godly wisdom is perfectly balanced and feeds the heart with the right thoughts.

There is no doubt that people of sufficient wealth use it to protect themselves from much of the unpleasantness of life in the world. They tend to eat more nutritious food, which often costs more. They may be careful where they shop; they may make their homes into virtual fortresses; they may travel about only at certain times; they may not make an ostentatious display of their wealth, but they may surround themselves with guards for protection. Wealth is indeed a symbol of strength.

The last statement in Ecclesiastes 7:12 says that "wisdom gives life to those who have it." What a gift! At this point, its superiority over wealth becomes very apparent. Wealth can shelter a person from certain classes of physical evils, but it can do nothing against the far more formidable and dangerous spiritual and moral evils that endanger the continuation of life.

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Wealth may even promote involvement in the temptations of moral evil. It cannot protect one from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life, which may open the door to destroying the person's life. Wealth cannot purchase entrance into the Kingdom of God. God's wisdom arms His people against those foes of eternal life. God-given wisdom can motivate an individual to give himself to God in humble submission. Conversely, wealth may prove an obstacle because it opens a door to spending it for one's own pleasures.

Wisdom is a greater strength because this kind of wisdom is a gift from the Creator, who expects it be used spiritually to enhance the relationship with Him through prayer, study, obedience, and service. If one cooperates by living by faith, God adds what we as individuals lack by giving more gifts. He can even defend us from illness, which money cannot. Can money protect one from the satanic spirits responsible for the moral breakdowns of life? In times like these, if we are living within God-given wisdom, we have the greatest, strongest, and only reliable defense available.

Wisdom gives life. In contrast, Proverbs 8:36 declares starkly, "Those who hate wisdom love death."

## Some Things Are Unavoidable

**E**cclésiastes 7:13-14 adds other ways in which wisdom is a defense:

Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him.

As good a shelter as God's wisdom is, it cannot shield us from every possible event we might consider a calamity. Everybody faces such situations. Wisdom will aid us to resign ourselves to the circumstances of those times. "Resignation" is too often understood to have the sense of throwing up our hands and giving up, thus quitting under fire. It indeed can have that connotation, but not always, and such is not the implication here. The wisdom in this case is that we are to submit to the fact that there are times that nothing can be done to avoid certain situations.

This verse marks the third time such counsel is dealt with, and this is just the seventh chapter. It is important because we are dealing with the Sovereign of this entire creation. There are things that He is doing that He absolutely will not change for us. Similar instruction appears in chapter 3.

Therefore, we have to discern those times, resign ourselves to them, and gracefully and humbly accept them, allowing Him to work out His purpose without constant complaining from us. Job 12:13-16 makes this point clearly:

With Him are wisdom and strength, He has counsel and understanding. If He breaks a thing down, it cannot be rebuilt; if He imprisons a man, there can be no release. If He withholds the waters, they dry up; if He sends them out, they overwhelm the earth. With Him are strength and prudence. The deceived and the deceiver are His.

If one tries to fight God, there is no possibility of winning. To do so is stupid beyond the bounds of reason, but mankind constantly attempts it. This concerns us on a daily basis because we live in this world too. What is going on in the world is not pleasant to experience or even to contemplate, so our becoming angry, depressed, and weary with the entire matter is a likely possibility. Nevertheless, the situation will not go away because God has willed it for the present.

Wisdom, in this case, is to be resigned to it. We must think this reality through and accept what is impossible for us to change. All too often, though, we allow it to depress us and dominate our lives to such an extent that we do virtually nothing positive about the things we can change. That is when Satan wins because, having put ourselves into a weakened attitude, we more readily cave to his devices.

Verse 14 contains further wisdom to defend against those difficult times when it seems that nothing can be changed. Solomon essentially counsels us to learn to "roll with the punches." We must make careful efforts to make the best of the situation, understanding that God has seemingly withdrawn Himself for our good. God is love; He is neither forgetful nor a harsh taskmaster. We have a hard time seeing that the level of difficulty we are experiencing is good for our growth. He is not doing it to smother us but to benefit us in the end.

The last phrase of verse 14 tells us that God, from His sovereign height, has determined to keep man somewhat off-balance for His purposes. God has commanded that we must live by faith. Thus, trying to figure out the precise reasons for a situation is not only often impossible, but also a huge waste of time and energy. This counsel may not satisfy some people because of its simplicity, but it is right: Trust Him!

In Christian love,





## Watch WHAT?

In Mark 13:37, Jesus Christ commands us to watch: “And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” Many translations, as it does here, add the exclamation point after the word “watch,” or to the synonyms they use for “watch,” to convey the force of this command. The Greek word here, *gregoreuo*, translated as “watch,” is in the imperative mood, expressing a command by the order and authority of the one commanding. Thus, it is an unequivocal command *to all* by the order of our authority, Jesus Christ, that therefore requires strict attention and obedience by us all.

Are we obeying His command to watch? Do we know what Christ is commanding us to do? Many do not. Because this is a direct and emphatic command by our Savior, it is vital that we *know*.

Christ uses this Greek word for “watch” fourteen times in the Gospels. To get a clear picture of what He means by it, notice the context each time that He commands us to watch (*gregoreuo* is in bold in the verses that follow):

**Watch** therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have **watched** and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matthew 24:42-44)

**Watch** therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:13)

It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to **watch**. **Watch** therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find

you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: **Watch!** (Mark 13:34-37)

Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find **watching**. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have **watched** and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Luke 12:37-40)

Two clear thoughts run through all these examples where Christ uses “watch.” First, we do not know when He will return. Second, we should be watching so that we are ready no matter when that happens.

### WHEN DOES CHRIST RETURN?

Do we know when we are going to die? That is when Christ is going to return for us. Consider that, for all who have already died, He has, in a sense, already returned for them. In the next moment of their conscious existence, unaware of even the lapse of thousands of years, they will be rising to meet Christ in the air (I Thessalonians 4:16). For any number reading this, His return will also be when they die, at their next conscious moment.

Again, do we as individuals know when we will die? That could be today because of a fatal car accident or tonight while sleeping. Who do we know that has died unexpectedly, without warning? For them, Christ’s return came suddenly. They knew neither the day nor the hour. Neither do we.

For this reason, watching is serious business and is necessary to our being ready for His immediate return in our lives. While in these verses He commands us to watch as the way we prepare for His return, He does

# prophecy watch *Watch What?*

not tell us what that means.

Thankfully, Christ practices what He preaches. By His example, He shows us what He means by watching, and we are to follow that example (I Peter 2:21). Notice the remainder of the fourteen uses of “watch” by Jesus in the Gospels (again, *gregoreuo* is in bold in the verses that follow):

Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and **watch** with Me.” He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, “What? Could you not **watch** with Me one hour? **Watch** and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.” And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. (Matthew 26:38-44; an additional three usages appear in Mark 14:34-39)

Here, we see that Jesus is watching and asking the disciples to watch along with Him. Just as He commands us to watch to be prepared for the biggest event in our lives, He watched to be prepared for the biggest event in His human life.

Conversely, His disciples did not watch but instead slept! Learn the lesson. They did not watch. They did not prepare. As a consequence, they failed miserably (Matthew 26:56, 69-75; Mark 14:50-52).

What did Jesus do while watching that His disciples did not do? *How* did He watch? We see here that watching is about spiritual preparation that, in this case, consists of intense prayer. On a broader scale, He spent a lifetime watching His human nature so closely that He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). In these last hours, He intensified His watching in the extreme, as recorded in Luke 22:41-44:

And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

By His example, Jesus shows us that watching is

about spiritual preparation. He also stresses that same point the last time in the Bible He uses the word “watch,” *gregoreuo*: “Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who **watches**, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame” (Revelation 16:15).

Just as He does in the many verses we saw above, He again warns us that He comes as a thief, in a day and hour we know not. Here, He emphasizes *what* we are to watch—our garments, our character. We are to be removing every spot and wrinkle from them (Ephesians 5:27; II Peter 3:14). We want to be sure there are no holes in our character (James 5:2) when He returns.

Therefore, here in Revelation 16:15 and by His example, we see that watching is all about spiritual preparation. He consistently links watching with His return. There is no hint of anything else in Jesus’ use of the word “watch” (see also Revelation 3:3, where He underscores watching as required spiritual preparation for His sudden return). Thus, we see that when Christ says “watch,” He is commanding us to be spiritually prepared for His return no matter how sudden and unexpected it may be in our lives.

## WATCHING MISAPPLIED

The kind of watching Christ commands requires diligent, focused activity, *daily*. I Corinthians 7:35 warns us about distractions: “And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.”

One way that some are distracted is by misapplying the concept of watching. In Luke 21:36, Jesus says, “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.” There are those who believe that this verse instructs us to watch world events and prophecy. Because of that, they spend much time on those subjects, believing that they are properly preparing for the return of our Savior to this earth.

We have seen that, when Christ talks about watching, it is all about spiritual preparation, not physical preparation. Why would He change the meaning of “watch” in this one place? The answer is that He does not. Rather, people have added their own private interpretation (II Peter 1:20) that distracts from the imperative of our Lord’s warning.

In Luke 21:36, the word “watch” is the Greek word *agrupneo*, which appears only four times in the New Testament, twice from Christ and twice from Paul. Here are the other three occurrences of *agrupneo* (it is in bold in the verses that follow):

Take heed, **watch** and pray; for you do not know when the time is. (Mark 13:33)

(continued on page 14)

## What Is the Holy Spirit?

*“Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”*

—I Corinthians 2:11

Acts 2 records the event of God’s pouring out of His Spirit on the church, as well as the accompanying manifestations that testified dramatically that something extraordinary was taking place. Subsequently, the Holy Spirit is a significant theme throughout the rest of Acts, as the gospel was preached and more people were called into the church. The epistles of Paul, Peter, and John likewise feature the Holy Spirit frequently. Yet, for all that is written about it, the Holy Spirit is still commonly misunderstood. Many theologians claim to know what the Holy Spirit is, yet they simultaneously profess it to be an incomprehensible mystery!

Part of the difficulty in understanding God’s Spirit comes from the common challenges that arise whenever a text is translated from one language, with all of its nuances, into another. In this case, the Greek word translated as “spirit” is *pneuma*. E.W. Bullinger, in *The Companion Bible*, catalogs fourteen different meanings or usages of that one Greek word. It should not be surprising, then, that when Greek texts are concisely translated into English, some of what is intended by *pneuma* can become clouded.

Further confusion has been introduced by the so-called “early church fathers,” whose writings are often looked to for guidance in understanding early Christian doctrine. They may have been early on the scene, yet they were also influenced by Greek philosophy, Plato in particular. Plato’s worldview—one not based on the Bible—promoted a triune godhead or a single god that mysteriously expresses itself in three different persons or personalities. Plato himself developed this view from much older trinities found in the Babylonian mystery religions, as well as Egyptian beliefs.

One of the more rare usages of the word *pneuma* is “a spirit being,” thus it was not a great leap for early scholars—looking through a lens of pagan concepts—to regard the Holy Spirit as a third God-Being. Because those involved were already inclined to think in terms of a god consisting of three persons, they were able to find “evidence” of such an idea in the Scriptures.

It has been said that heresy crawls in its first generation, it walks in the second, and then it runs. Once the notion of the Holy Spirit being a third person got its start, it walked and then soon sprinted throughout the Western world with such force that now the overwhelming majority of professing Christians take the idea as a given.



# ready answer *What Is the Holy Spirit?*

It is worth remembering that there is indeed a spirit being striving for equality with the Father and the Son, but that spirit—Satan the Devil—is anything but holy. He has, though, created a place for himself in the minds of millions by guiding Catholic and Protestant doctrine to include a mysterious third spirit being within a three-part godhead, just as the ancient pagan religions held. Yet, that construct is nowhere found in the Hebrew Scriptures, nor is it unambiguously seen in the Greek Scriptures. It is a doctrine that must be read into the Greek text, but doing so only creates contradiction and confusion—neither of which are from God (John 10:35; I Corinthians 14:33).

## “The Spirit of God”

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul gives a simple framework for understanding spirit in general, as well as the Holy Spirit:

But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But 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. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (I Corinthians 2:9-16)

Verse 11 teaches that each person has a spirit: “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” This echoes Job 32:8: “There is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding.” In this usage, the word “spirit” is synonymous with “heart” or “mind.” This is the intelligent, non-physical part of a person that allows him to think, reason, and comprehend. Verse 11 teaches that a person’s spirit is the source and overseer of his thoughts. This spirit in man is not another being within the person but simply the person’s center of reason.

Next, verse 12 reveals that the world has a spirit. Like the spirit in man, this spirit is also not a separate being. But this usage of “spirit” is slightly different. Rather than being the center of reason, the spirit of the world is the world’s

*attitude*, its inclination, tendency, atmosphere, mood, or frame of mind. The spirit of the world is also the motivating impulse of the culture, which can manifest in many ways, but it will always be anti-God (see Romans 8:7).

Paul describes this spirit in Ephesians 2:2-3, saying that we “once walked according to the course of this world.” The course, or way, of the world is the invisible and immaterial motivating impulse at work in the sons of disobedience. The spirit of the world moves people whom God has not redeemed to conduct themselves in lust, fulfilling the desires of their flesh and mind, putting themselves under the wrath of God. The spirit of the world sweeps mankind along a spiritual channel to keep them in opposition to their Creator.

While spirit cannot be seen, we can see the effects of spirit. It is not a coincidence that the word for “spirit,” *pneuma*, can also be translated as “wind” or “breath”—just as Job 32:8, quoted above, parallels the spirit in man to “the breath of the Almighty.” We cannot see the moving air molecules in wind, but we can observe leaves and branches being moved and know that wind is present. In the dry areas of the West, tumbleweeds roll along and dust-devils form, spin, and disintegrate, revealing that the wind is at work.

In the same way, we cannot see spirit, but we can see the actions and attitudes of mankind, and thus find evidence of the spirit that is working. The spirit of the world influences and stirs up the spirit in man, inducing the individual to think and feel in a certain way, and ultimately, to act.

## Not a Being

Returning to I Corinthians 2:12, Paul mentions a spirit that we have received. This is in addition to the spirit in man, with which we were born, and in opposition to the spirit of the world. This additional spirit is from, and of, God. We can conclude that, like mankind, God also has a Spirit. God has a mind, one of unfathomable depth, capability, and intelligence. But more than simply an overwhelming intellect, God’s Spirit includes His attitude, principles, thoughts, feelings, temperament, character, disposition, and will. To put it simply, God’s Spirit is the essence of His incredible mind, and it is the new motivating principle that God’s children receive.

I Corinthians 2:16 shows that God’s Spirit is not another supernatural being. It begins with a quotation of Isaiah 40:13 (“who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?”), but then Paul follows up with, “But we have the mind of Christ.” This is Paul’s explanation of the spirit we have received. It is a principle, a disposition, a motivating influence that comes from God Himself. “Spirit,” “heart,” and “mind,” while not identical, are used interchangeably. It is the mind of Christ that we have received that allows us to know the things of God, to know what God has prepared for us, and to know the things that have been given to us. Thus, Paul equates the Spirit of God to the mind of Christ. The essence of His mind enhances our minds, giving us spiritual understanding.

The Father and the Son are *one*, not in the sense of being

the same Person, but in the sense of being perfectly united in will, thought, and intent. They are of the same mind, the same heart—the same spirit. It is that Spirit that we receive when we are baptized and have hands laid on us. As a result, we can begin to understand the things of God, which the world cannot understand. Without God’s intervention, mankind is only influenced by the spirit of the world, which has its source in “the prince of the power of the air.”

Because God is holy, His Spirit is also holy. God has many facets and qualities, yet the four living creatures in Revelation 4:8 praise Him day and night for being “holy, holy, holy.” The fact that they say “holy” three times does not mean that He is three persons. It means His holiness is superlative—it is the very highest possible. Our holy God’s Spirit, the essence of His perfect mind, is also holy. That holiness is not merely an attribute, but it is also what God’s Spirit will incline His people toward: holiness in conduct, in attitude, in speech, in every facet of living. God says, “Be holy, for I am holy,” and His Spirit will move us toward His holiness, *if* we cooperate.

Paul further describes the Holy Spirit in II Timothy 1:6-7:

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

As before, the apostle is talking about a spirit that has been “given [to] us.” It is identified here as a “gift of God,” and it is something that can be “stir[red] up.” It is bestowed through the laying on of hands, as we see throughout Scripture. Paul says that God’s Spirit is not about human fear. Later in this letter, he reproaches Timothy for being ashamed of the gospel message and of Paul. The younger man seems to have been in some danger of letting down and needed to be admonished to be strong and to endure hardship. All of this is part of the fear toward which Timothy was apparently inclined.

Paul contrasts the frame of mind—the spirit—that would curtail Timothy’s effectiveness with the Spirit given by God. Paul calls the latter “a spirit . . . of power and of love and of a sound mind.” Again, God’s Spirit is linked with *mind*. If we are yielding to His Spirit, then our minds will be sound; they will be disciplined and self-controlled. Our minds will be sensible, sober, balanced, and restrained, and we will have wisdom, discretion, and solid judgment. Through the guidance of God’s Spirit, our minds will operate in a way different from, and often incomprehensible to, those in the world, because we are being impelled by the essence of God’s own mind, which is the absolute epitome of sound-mindedness and the opposite of the course of this world.

## Love and Power

The Spirit of God is also a spirit of *love*. We can combine this with Romans 5:5: “. . . the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” Along with that, the first element of the fruit of God’s Spirit is love (Galatians

5:22). Godly love is an action—doing the right thing toward God or another person, regardless of the personal cost involved. Its foundational definition is in the commandments of God. A fear of sacrifice—a fear of giving up what is valuable to us—comes from the spirit of the world, but God’s Spirit enables us to love through doing what is right and trusting that God will work things out.

The remaining attribute listed here is *power*. It is the Greek word *dunamis*, which can also be translated as “ability,” “strength,” or “mighty works.” *Dunamis* is the capacity for achieving or accomplishing. The Holy Spirit gives a person the capacity for God’s will and work to be done through him. But this is not a personal power. Even the miracles with which Jesus Himself is associated were actually performed by the Father (John 5:19; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). Thus, the power of the Holy Spirit is the outworking of God the Father, rather than something we can use for our own ends.

It is critical to understand that the power of God’s Spirit is under the constraint of the love and sound-mindedness of God’s Spirit. In other words, it is not simply power for the sake of power, nor is it for self-gratification or self-glorification. The evident power in the Acts 2 account of Pentecost has given rise to churches that seek after similar supernatural displays, yet those displays are entirely divorced from the love and sound-mindedness of God.

People can seek this power for the wrong reasons, and it can be misused. Simon Magus tried to buy the power of God to use for his own ends (Acts 8:9-24), and even the congregation at Corinth had to be admonished because they were not using their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the Body (I Corinthians 12). In the midst of his discussion of God’s various gifts, which are simply the outworking of God’s power, Paul spends a whole chapter explaining godly love (I Corinthians 13), implying that the Corinthians’ approach to those gifts did not include enough love or sound judgment.

He spells out that anything they received—such as spiritual wisdom or the ability to heal or do other miracles, to prophesy, to discern spirits, to speak in tongues, or to fulfill the office of apostle, prophet, or teacher—whatever the spiritual ability, God’s Spirit is the source of it all, so there is no ground for boasting. The use of the power of God has to be constrained by the love and sobriety befitting the Most High God, so that *He* is the focus, not the individual.

## Witnesses of God

Acts 1:8 provides the underlying reason for the visible manifestations of power shown in Acts 2. The resurrected Christ tells the apostles, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Again, God’s Spirit is linked with power—the effective capacity for God to work through a person. But this also shows what God intends when He gives the power of His Spirit: That person is to be a witness of Jesus Christ and ultimately of our Spiritual Father. This capability is not just for the apostles. We may not receive this power in the

# ready answer *What Is the Holy Spirit?*

same dramatic way, and we may not be used in an apostolic role, but everyone who has received God's Spirit has the capacity to be a witness of God.

Remember that the Spirit of God, which is the same Spirit motivating Jesus Christ, imparts spiritual knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. It impels us toward holiness. It is a Spirit of power, love, and sound-mindedness. It is the essence of God's mind and enables the outworking of His will. God gives a measure of His own remarkable Spirit to incline His children to think the same way as He thinks and to live as He lives.

The more that we yield to, and make use of, God's Spirit, the more He gives. As we seek God's direction and instruction, and are careful not to quench or grieve the Spirit of our holy God (Ephesians 4:30), His character image takes shape in us. And as we grow in His image, we become witnesses of Him—our lives become testimonies of the goodness of God, the mind of God, the love of God, the holiness of God, the stability of God, and so much more. God gives us the essence of His mind so that we can reflect His glory to the world, through becoming just like Him.

—David C. Grabbe

# prophecy watch *Watch What?*

(continued from page 10)

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being **watchful** to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—(Ephesians 6:18)

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they **watch** out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)

We see in these three verses that the subject is spiritual, just as we have seen in all the other verses reviewed. Luke 21:36 is no different. To see that the context conclusively proves this, and to see the principle Jesus gave before it to govern how we should approach world events and prophecy, please see the June 2007 *Forerunner*, "Praying Always (Part One)."

Those who misapply Luke 21:36 can become distracted, spending time on the less important and neglecting what is required. It is much like the principle of misplaced priorities that Jesus illustrates in Matthew 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

Yes, we should be aware of world events and prophecy, but our greatest energies should be devoted to the far weightier matter of spiritual preparation. What if we died tonight? What value would it be if, after countless hours spent in intensive study year after year, we were right about world events and prophecy but because of inattention we were wrong about the true state of our character (Revelation 3:17)?

If a person were a sentry posted to watch for the enemy from the south, and all his preparations were for an attack from the south, an attack from the north would

catch him just as unprepared as those who prepared not at all. For watching to have its benefit, we have to be watching the right thing.

That is the problem with being overly attentive to prophecy: There are many different interpretations from which to choose. At best, all are wrong but one. If we believe one of the many wrong ones, we will be looking in the wrong direction, and we will be blindsided. All the time and effort spent would be for naught, or even worse, if it caused an individual to neglect watching his spiritual condition. It is vital to focus on the latter rather than the former. Matthew 13:37 is a command by Jesus to do just that.

The following example, while not about watching, does highlight the folly of misplaced attention:

Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry."' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'" (Luke 12:16-20)

All the time spent by some in looking to the future return of Christ rather than concentrating on cleaning their garments overlooks the fact that their lives could end tonight. The important question is not, "Are we prepared for the events leading up to Christ's future return?" but rather, "Are we prepared for His return in our lives *today*?"

That is why we need to understand and heed daily the command given by Christ in Mark 13:37: "And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!"

—Pat Higgins



## Ginning Up Racial Strife

On August 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson, 28, a white, six-year veteran of the Ferguson (Missouri) Police force, shot to death an 18-year-old black man, Michael Brown. Brown and a friend, Dorian Johnson, 22, had just robbed a nearby convenience store and were walking to the Canfield Green Apartments, when Wilson, having heard on his police scanner to be on the lookout for men of their description, encountered them. Remaining in his patrol car, the officer ordered the men to get out of the middle of the street.

What happened in the next ninety seconds has embroiled the nation in controversy ever since. The ensuing argument between Brown and Wilson escalated into a fight. Wilson's gun fired twice, and Brown ran away. At this point, Wilson climbed from his car to chase the teenager on foot, continuing to fire. In all, Brown was shot six times, including twice in the head.

The police say that in the initial scuffle, Brown reached for Officer Wilson's gun, a detail that eyewitnesses deny, saying that he had his arms in the air. The grand jury later found that many of these witnesses gave contradictory accounts, one finding among several that led it to rule that no charges would be brought against Officer Wilson for Brown's death.

Wilson said that Brown, who stood 6'4" inches tall and weighed over 290 pounds, repeatedly punched him in the fight in the car. His swollen face and cuts on his neck testified to the brutal struggle. In addition, experts agree that the official autopsy report does not support eyewitness accounts that Brown was shot while running from Wilson or while his hands were raised.

In a post-grand jury interview with ABC News, Wilson said that his conscience was clear about the matter: "The reason I have a clean conscience is that I know I did my job right." While admitting that he was sorry for the loss of Brown's life, he asserted that he reacted as he had been trained and that he would not have done anything differently if Brown had been white.

That, however, is exactly the crux of the matter plaguing America over the last few months. The outcry of the protesters, demonstrators, and looters in Ferguson and elsewhere across the country—facts notwithstanding—has been that the slaying of Michael Brown was a racially motivated murder of an innocent black man. Despite every indication pointing toward a criminal justice system—from police officers to grand-jury members—that worked carefully and dispassionately, the civil-rights juggernaut, a compliant, even activist media, and a sympathetic administration have advanced the notion that blacks, particularly young black males, take the brunt of a heavily racist nation's abuse.

The problem for them is that study after study has found that no institutional racism exists in the criminal justice system. No less than President Barack Obama has repeated falsehoods on this subject, saying during his campaign in 2008, "In our criminal-justice system, African-Americans and whites, for the same crime . . . are arrested at very different rates, are convicted at very different rates, receive very different sentences." A 2012 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll found that 84% of blacks believed that the justice

system treats whites differently from minorities.

While a cursory examination of incarceration statistics (for instance, that blacks make up 36% of prisoners nationwide but only 13% of the general population) might appear to support the claim, the disparity is not a result of racial discrimination. Hoover Institution scholar Thomas Sowell points out that the problem with such statistics is that they are "based on blacks as a percentage of the population, rather than blacks as a percentage of the people who do the kinds of things that cause police to stop people and question them." Simply put, blacks are more often arrested because they commit more crimes.

Are blacks more likely to get harsher sentences at trial? A landmark 1997 study by Robert Sampson and Janet Lauritsen found "little evidence that racial disparities result from systematic, overt bias." The U.S. Commission on Sentencing reported in 2012 that sentences for black men averaged almost 20% longer than those for white men for similar crimes, yet the Commission warned that its finding should not be taken as proof of discrimination. Why? A study of 58,000 federal cases showed that differences in criminal record, the arrest offense, gender, age, and location explained 83% of the sentencing disparity between blacks and whites.

None of this denies the existence of racist citizens, policemen, lawyers, jurors, or judges. Every part of the country has its instances of racial discrimination, and a great many anecdotal arguments perpetuate the claim that the United States is a racist nation. To the contrary, however, statistics and indicators show Americans to be far less conscious of racial differences and that minorities have greater wealth and opportunity than ever before.

So why are cars and businesses burning in Ferguson, Missouri? Why are tens of thousands protesting in more than 170 cities across America? The facts have stopped mattering in this circumstance, if they ever did. What matters is that this ginned-up racial strife provides an opportunity for powerful people and groups to maintain their power and to push toward their political goals. They will squeeze as much political capital from it as they can and then move on to the next issue.

We should not forget the words of former Obama Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel: "You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that, it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before." The current administration uses such crises as leverage to force concessions from its political foes and advance its agenda to cut America down to size. The Ferguson riots, now spreading nationwide, are—to them—a welcome gift after a dispiriting defeat in the midterm elections.

God tells us plainly that, if we fail to obey Him, "The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He . . . shall be the head, and you shall be the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:43-44). That scenario is progressing into reality before our eyes.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

WORLDWATCH

## The Miracles of Jesus Christ

### What Is an Abomination?

The English word “abomination” has become somewhat antiquated nowadays, losing its usage in today’s secular culture. Its value in modern language has diminished because of the Western world’s massive rejection of God’s truth, the one place that defines what abominations are. Why continue to use the term when most of society ignores God’s standards and utterly rejects the idea of sin?

Does it matter whether something is an abomination or not? Even though God calls some things an abomination, does He really care whether we do abominable things? Is an abomination a sin?

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#### 1. What is an abomination?

**COMMENT:** God calls numerous objects and actions “abominations.” Most have a common trait that indicates why they are abominable. *Webster’s Dictionary* provides the secular meaning of the word: “something worthy of or causing extreme disgust or hatred,” and its synonyms are “abhorrence,” “anathema,” “detestation,” “evil,” “hatred,” “horror,” “loathing,” “shame.”

Is the biblical meaning any different? *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* defines it as: “Something that excites disgust and hatred. The term is applied to heathen gods, idolatry and various pagan practices.” The secular and biblical meanings are similar, but the biblical meaning adds the religious element, applying it directly to anti-Christian gods, idols, and sins.

#### 2. What Hebrew words are used for “abomination”?

**COMMENT:** Five Hebrew words are translated into the word “abominable” or “abomination,” all expressive of God’s greatest disdain. First, *za’am* is used once (Micah 6:10) and means “to be indignant” or “to account abominable.” Second, *ba’ash*, also used once (I Samuel 13:4), meaning “to become odious.” Third, *piggul* appears four times (Leviticus 7:18; 19:7; Isaiah 65:4; Ezekiel 4:14) and relates to impurity and uncleanness: “a foul thing; refuse.”

The final two words appear the most. Fourth, *sheqets*, used 11 times, means “a detestable or unclean thing.” It is primarily used in contexts concerning idolatry or to refer to things that may not be touched, eaten, or worshipped. Fifth, *to’ebah* is the Old Testament’s primary word for “abomination,” being used 117 times. It defines something or someone as “dangerous,” “sinister,” and “repulsive.” It is easy to see how this came to be connected with idolatry and its practices, things that are morally disgusting or abhorrent and spiritually dangerous.

#### 3. Are only idolatrous things abominable?

**COMMENT:** Things referred to as “abominations” are consistently associated with idolatry. However, God’s Word shows that many other human actions are abominable: uncleanness, unjust weights and measures, incest, adultery, homosexuality, sodomy, lying, stealing, offerings to pagan gods, sacrifice of children, sorcery, the hire of a prostitute, and eating of unclean meat. Proverbs 16:5 mentions even the proud as being abominable, indicating that pride constitutes idolatry in the human heart.

An abomination is anything we place before God, that is, idolatry. If God tells us not to do something, and we do it anyway, we have committed a sin, which is an abomination. All sin is an abomination to God. Some sin, however, is suggestive of a greater degree of depravity and rebellion (I John 3:4; Isaiah 59:1-2). We must remember God does not always see things as man does (Luke 16:14-15).

#### 4. What is the Greek equivalent of these Hebrew words?

**COMMENT:** In the New Testament, the writers used Greek *bdelygma* to describe abomination. Its root, *bdeo*, means simply “to stink.” *Bdelygma* primarily means “that which is reprehensible or detestable,” and in the New Testament, it usually refers to a form of idolatry.

The New Testament writers indicate that what is too highly valued by people constitutes idolatry in a person’s mind. Christ says to the Pharisees, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Anything—ourselves, our house, our car, our job—that we hold to be more important than God can be considered as an idol.

People can be abominable too. Paul writes in Titus 1:16, “They profess to know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.” Here the word suggests being “loathsome” and “detestable”; their hypocrisy made them horrible and disgusting. A person becomes abominable when living a sinful way of life.

In Revelation 21:8, we see the seriousness of being abominable: “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” God does not take this lightly. The abominable—those who sin, especially by idolatry—will receive the Lake of Fire rather than salvation.

The foregoing references are often not appreciated today. “You are judgmental and too intolerant,” we hear. However, God’s Word remains true, whether we like it or not! Man may laugh at the idea of abominations, but to do such things is a stench in the nostrils of God. Briefly, “abominations” are anything we make a higher priority than God. They can also be any detestable thing we say, think, or do against others. Abominations show a rejection of God’s way of life and acceptance of Satan’s.

—Martin G. Collins