

# Forerunner



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Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Volume 26, Number 4

July-August 2017

SIGNS  
OF THE  
END?

# July-August 2017

Volume 26, Number 4

## 3

**PERSONAL** from *John W. Ritenbaugh*  
Leadership and Covenants (Part Ten)

## 7

**READY ANSWER**  
Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—  
Satan or Christ? (Part Four)  
BY DAVID C. GRABBE

## 11

**PROPHECY WATCH**  
The End Is Not Yet  
BY RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

## 19

**WORLDWATCH**  
Over-Medicated  
BY JOSEPH B. BAITY

## 20

**BIBLE STUDY**  
Does Luke 9:50 Contradict Luke 11:23?  
BY MARTIN G. COLLINS

## Cover

What are we to think about eclipses, increasing natural disasters, and worsening times? Do they really foretell the imminent return of Jesus Christ to the earth? Our Savior Himself gave us prophetic signs, both in His Olivet Prophecy and the book of Revelation, to warn us when the time of His coming drew near, but He also warns us to take care that no one deceives us about these things.

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# Leadership and Covenants

## Part Ten

Questions about God—whether a Creator God even exists and whether He is the Author of the Bible—are being asked with increased intensity as we approach the time of Jesus Christ’s return. The attempt to undermine His sovereign place in the existence of all things and His continuing purposes is led by His and our invisible arch-enemy, the one whom the apostle Paul calls “the god of this world” in II Corinthians 4:4:

For the god of this world has blinded the unbelievers’ minds [that they should not discern the truth], preventing them from seeing the illuminating light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ (the Messiah), Who is the Image and Likeness of God. (*The Amplified Bible*).

What do people mean when, in justifying their behavior, they say, “Even if there is a God, He is following no plan, so no purpose is being worked out”? What?! Did God have nothing better to do that day, so He just threw together this amazing complex of systems, including all its lifeforms, on a mere whim? Such thoughtless drivell!

The true God *is* the Author of the Bible, and He used His sovereign authority to determine the revelations it contains and the sequence in which

they are given. Since Adam and Eve, believing in the existence of the true God and His Word has been the principal challenge affecting the quality of life mankind thinks it must have for happiness and prosperity. These beliefs have eluded human understanding—not because God has hidden Himself, but because men refuse to accept the clear evidence He provides in the creation.

Imagine that the Creator God sat us down in a room by ourselves and presented a short film summarizing the Bible’s first ten chapters. What would we see? What would it teach us about His character, purpose, and plan?

Authors and filmmakers are creators in their own way. They prepare an outline, a story flow, they wish to follow either to entertain or to educate their readers or viewers. Have we ever wondered why God began the Bible as He did? Consider this simple overview as a factor of utmost importance to our well-being in relation to life’s purposes.

Have we ever consciously noted that the Bible begins in Genesis 1 with God creating order from what appears to be the result of either a destruction of a previous system or an array of disparate parts, fashioning them into a form appropriate for His next step? Either way, as the story unfolds, the role He plays emerges. The primary point is virtu-

## Personal

### Leadership and Covenants

ally impossible to miss: Supreme order and direction in what He will reveal originates in and from Him. Though normally invisible to humanity, He is clearly in control, initiating what will happen and also continuing to completion what He began.

The orderly progression of time and activity continues as God arranges, piece by piece, the environment in which later events will take place. Created elements appear in a natural progression. First, there must be light. From this point on, everything coming into view is

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.”

—James 1:17



made new and in sparkling, showroom condition. Last of all, the two humans are designed in the image of God Himself. They, Adam and Eve—who will set in motion the human side of the action—are created, given life, and presented gifts, which are examples of His grace: earth and all it contains for their use within the boundaries He set. They immediately begin to use what God freely gave them as gifts.

What has God chosen to show us thus far? First, He is the Author of all that is. Second, He brings order out of lifeless chaos. Third, perhaps our Lord’s flesh-and-blood brother sums it up best in James 1:17-18:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

What has God revealed of Himself to this point without saying a word except for what He commanded to bring into existence? It is purposefully instructive. Genesis 1 shows that He is a God of order and that He has a distinct purpose for each step He takes. He is a God of awesome powers, moving mountains, seas, rivers, valleys, and vast oceans of atmosphere into place. Greenery and animal life appear. Nothing happens randomly. Every step proceeds as He directs. He is in control as He purposefully establishes His sovereignty over everything He has brought into existence.

As His revelation continues, what mankind produces

neither improves nor even maintains what God gave them. Instead, gradual degeneration begins to tarnish and even destroy the gifts. Adam and Eve have children, and the first one murders his younger brother. The destruction increases as time moves forward and the population grows. God appears again onscreen in the story, giving Eve a child to replace the one killed. Adam and Eve name him Seth. A new—and much better—family line begins with that gift, producing conduct and lives that use God’s creation gifts to Adam and Eve more worthily.

At the same time, the family line produced by Cain, the one who murdered his younger brother, grows ever more violent. God uses Seth’s family line to provide a witness to the original family line, warning them about where their behavior will lead. God then raises up an outstanding leader from

Seth’s family line, giving him abilities as a preacher of righteousness (II Peter 2:5) to make humanity’s plight so clear that the original family line has no excuse for not repenting. What that leader, Noah, predicted occurs, and an entire world disappears from view except for eight people and the animal life God ordered them to save from the massive, devastating Flood.

### Greater-Than-Normal Importance

As the first ten chapters of this most important Book ever written come to a close, a new beginning occurs with an outstanding leader, Noah, as its head. In just these chapters, thoughtful and careful readers can discern an outline and summary of God’s entire purpose and plan. They provide a brief preview of things to come even in the end time, as God continues to provide details of events within His purpose.

Here again is a brief summary of the events of Genesis 1-10 to reinforce this on our minds for our well-being now. Why? Because what happened in Genesis is happening again; we are living as a portion of it transpires. As William Strauss and Neil Howe, the authors of *The Fourth Turning*, showed from the last several centuries of American history, events tend to repeat themselves roughly every 80-100 years. Locations and personalities change, but the same basic events recur. The historical events involving God and His purpose are far more critical, though, and also far more spread out in time.

Initially, God creates mankind and gives gifts to enable right behavior and productive lives. Humanity, though,

proceeds to choose to live violent, destructive lives, determined to destroy itself. God then mercifully raises up a leader to warn about punishment from Him that looms on the horizon. At the same time, the warning provides mankind sufficient time and opportunity to repent.

However, mankind, rejecting God's mercy, fails to change, and the punishment dramatically descends. Humanity has nearly destroyed itself. But then, a new day arises with new leadership and true teaching that enables mankind to reach the potential that He purposed from the beginning. God is indeed the merciful Savior of His creation!

With this article, we will conclude our study into Noah's life and the Flood. As we begin to see what God is working out, we will emphasize why the events covered in overview here are of a greater-than-normal importance to us right now.

The first reason is that Jesus directly names the Flood in His important, end-time Olivet Prophecy (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) as being a preview, a pattern, for the times we live in now. His prophecy provides us with a general listing of events that signal the approach of the return of Jesus Christ, the Great Tribulation, and the Day of the Lord.

Therefore, since his time is a kind of preview of major events that we may have to face, Noah's conduct and accomplishments during his lifetime should be of particular interest to us. His calling and the manner of his life in his relationship with God as he was preparing for the Flood contains helpful understanding for our immediate use.

Because of his faithful conduct during those stressful events, Noah becomes one of the Bible's great heroes of faith. It will help our spiritual wellbeing to ask, "What does God say about how Noah conducted himself? What spiritual characteristics did Noah exhibit that we should strive to emulate?"

Consider why the Bible is organized as it is. We barely get past the first few chapters of God's revelation, and living conditions are already so violently bad that they become a model of the times we are living in, those days leading up to Christ's return. How evil is this carnal heart that we contend with every day? Can we not learn lessons from Noah's life to help us, not merely endure, but overcome during these worsening times?

A second reason is that Noah is a superior example of living by faith, especially taking into consideration what he and his family accomplished within the unusually difficult times they lived through. He can be a considerable

source of encouragement for us to push on in faith.

People refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being the "Fathers" of Israel. They are rightly dignified with high honor for being the faithful progenitors of God's people. How does this compare, though, with Noah, who is literally the father, not merely of Israel, but of all of the Gentile nations as well—all of mankind? This was not a mere chance occurrence! Genesis reveals from the beginning that the merciful and faithful God is the Originator and Power that accomplishes events within His purposes.

Consider Noah. First, God selected Noah as the human leader to accomplish His purpose in the time leading up to the Flood, enduring with his family during the Flood and getting humanity started once again after the Flood. All by itself, this résumé is astounding. Second, so much hinged on what he and his family accomplished. Did any of Israel's later great leaders spend 120 years building something for God as Noah did with the ark? What he built became the very means of saving his and his family's lives. Third, during the time he was building the ark, he also preached God's truth to the world. How many others of Israel's greats were also preachers of righteousness during the turmoil of their times? Fourth, it is established by the Creator Himself that Noah was righteous and faithful.

This man was not the typical, bumbling, clod-busting caricature the world tries to make of the biblical ancients. Noah is a person to admire and use as an example to follow.



"Thus Noah did;  
according to all that God commanded him,  
so he did."

—Genesis 6:22

### Noah's Character Plainly Described

Genesis 6:22 plainly states, "Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did." If a single verse catches the essence of Noah's character and the quality of his relationship with God, this is it. Even if we consider only a general overview of his lengthy life, this verse provides an extensive amount to ponder.

Though the verse offers no details, it suggests how he dealt with the times and carrying out his tremendous responsibilities. It is not intended to imply that he was absolutely perfect in his conduct at all times and under

every circumstance. However, considering the times he lived in, his life was undoubtedly tumultuously stressful, yet he obeyed God.

He certainly was not of the stature of Jesus Christ. The verse, though, is intended to convey an essential truth: Noah was an unusual and distinctively godly person, one among billions. In short, he was humble before God and faithful, dependable in carrying out his responsibilities. He could be trusted.

The wording indicates that he did not deviate from what God charged him to do. He did not add his own thoughts about God's commands in a sort of "here is the way I see it" manner. He humbly did as God instructed him despite the social pressures against him, and what he accomplished he did with determined class.

### What Did the Flood Accomplish?

We can easily reach a conclusion about humanity by comparing the Bible's overview of mankind's pre-Flood activities with our more detailed daily news reports. Together, they suggest that we are experienc-

"Then the Lord said to Noah,  
'Come into the house, you and all your household,  
because I have seen that you are righteous  
before Me in this generation.'"

—Genesis 7:1

ing times increasingly similar to those just before the Flood. This leads us to an unavoidable conclusion: What God did through the Flood proves that the cataclysm did not solve the problems that reside in the hearts of human beings. What is in man's heart created the necessity for humanity to witness that major disaster as part of its history. The internal stain was still there after the Flood waters drained away. God clearly shows the massive execution of earth's population did not erase the evil motivations of man's self-centered nature. That must be accomplished by another means.

By putting them to death, the Flood did clear the population of a vast number of troublemakers. However, only God's merciful and generous grace, as Noah and his family received, changes a person's heart and thus his or her conduct. Our hearts are changed by God initiating our calling, revealing Himself, granting repentance, giving His Spirit, and then personally working with us in a close, personal relationship. By this means, we are created in the image of God. This is the only

permanent solution.

This fact should have the effect of causing us to resolve to follow through by willingly cooperating with God within the relationship created by His merciful calling. What practical, spiritual counsel will enable us to negotiate these times, which are so similar to what Noah went through?

In short, our salvation is to yield to God's guidance, as seen in Noah's story. His attitude and conduct become our practical, human example and spiritual guide. Just as he persevered in building the ark and trusting God to preserve his family through the Flood, we should put the same effort into preparing for God's Kingdom.

Genesis 7:1 provides us with a simple but meaningful instruction: "Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation.'" Noah did not hesitate when God commanded him to do this, as his labors in building the ark were ending. This command states the qualification to meet our time's spiritual challenges. Noah faithfully lived righteously within the difficulties of the times.

The biblical record shows that God oversaw and provided safety for Noah and his family during those challenges beyond their control. He will do for us as He did for them. The Flood of our times is not one of water but an overwhelming "flood" of deception combined with threats of violence against us. It is already upon us to

some small degree. As far as can be determined, nothing of this world will turn it aside. In fact, it is already named in the Bible—our Flood is called the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord.

### God Is Ever Faithful

Take note of what God does in Genesis 7:7, 13, 16:

So Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the flood. . . . On the same day Noah and Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with them entered the ark. . . . So those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.

God sealed the door to protect them from the ravages  
*(continued on page 15)*

# Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat— Satan or Christ?

## Part Four

So far, this series of articles has contended that identifying Satan as the fulfillment of the goat of departure originates with extra-biblical sources, overlooks Scripture’s consistent statements about the responsibility for sin, discounts the principles and requirements of the sacrificial system, and ignores the finished expiatory work of Jesus Christ. Leaping over these foundational planks, some conclude that the *azazel* and the binding of Satan (Revelation 20:1-3) are linked.

However, as shown previously, the stated purpose of Satan’s binding is to curtail his deception of the nations throughout the Millennium. It will be a temporary—albeit lengthy—measure, but it will not be final justice or the true solution to mankind’s estrangement from God. Nothing in Revelation connects Satan’s binding with any sort of expiation of sin.

Not a single scripture shows that Satan is the author of all human sins, an idea based on the “Book of Enoch” and human reasoning. In spite of Satan’s influence, each person is still responsible for his own sins. Satan will pay the penalty for the sins he has committed, and with His own life, Christ has already paid for the sins of those who accept His sacrifice. As Hebrews 10:18 declares, there is “*no longer* an offering for sin” (emphasis ours throughout). The role of the *azazel*—the second part of the Atonement sin offering—has *already* been fulfilled!

### At One-Ment?

Asserting that Satan is the author of humanity’s sins gives rise to the claim that mankind cannot be “at one” with God until Satan is out of the way. Part of the confusion has arisen because the word “atonement” can be separated out into “at-one-ment.”

## Ready Answer

*Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—Satan or Christ?*

Regrettably, this linguistic feature often leads to a wrong conclusion about the meaning of the word.

The primary meaning of *atonement* is “expiation”: “to provide legal satisfaction, such that guilt is removed, and the obligation of punishment is paid.” It can include cleansing, forgiving, pardoning, purging, and covering. The *effect* of atonement is that two formerly estranged parties are brought back into agreement—they are “at one”—because the controversy between them has been legally satisfied.

The focus on the Day of Atonement is the *means* of atonement, which Satan’s binding cannot legally achieve. It will neither remove mankind’s guilt, nor lift the curse of the law. Regarding the separation between God and man, that gulf can only be bridged through the atonement God provides through Christ.

The idea of man and God becoming reconciled through Satan’s binding also overlooks the fact that during the Millennium, the Devil will be unable to influence anyone—yet people will still be sinning. Will the defanged Satan still be the cause of their sins? Will humanity be unified with God just because Satan’s broadcast stops?

On the contrary, during Jesus’ final Passover, He repeatedly returned to the themes of peace, unity, and oneness with God, all of which are possible with Satan still on the loose. All this occurs through Christ’s work, mainly through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Humanity can become “at one” with God only through the Son, not merely by keeping the evil one at bay.

Also, if Satan’s binding were the actual solution to human sin, then all sins committed *after* he is loosed would remain unatoned. Will the people who arise in the second resurrection put their faith in Satan’s prior binding—trusting that it would provide expiation for their sins, too—or will their object of faith be Jesus Christ?

Satan, however, is not the factor keeping us separate from God—our sins are (see Isaiah 59:1-2), which Satan *cannot* cause us to commit. What hinders mankind from being unified with God is *the presence of sin* rather than the presence of Satan. Jesus Christ alone supplies the solution to sin.

### Atonement for the Nation

If Satan’s removal is not what the Day of Atonement pictures, is there still a future fulfillment, something that relates to the plan of God? These articles have shown that Christ’s work of paying for and removing sin is already complete—as Scripture puts it, He “sat down” after finishing the work of expiation. For those who have received His atonement, then, the Day of Atonement memorializes all that He has done in fulfilling the ritual in Leviticus 16. However, this superior atonement has

not yet been universally applied. To see what lies ahead, we will first return to the instructions in Leviticus 16.

Within them, there is a clear emphasis on atonement being made for the *nation* of Israel, seen in repeated collective terms like “congregation,” “people,” “children of Israel,” and “assembly.” Throughout the year, an individual could make sin offerings for unintentional sins, but on this holy day, the high priest made a sin offering for himself and then one for the whole nation. (These offerings only covered unintentional sins; under God’s covenants, no sacrifice covers presumptuous or willful sin. See Leviticus 4:2; 5:15; Numbers 15:22-30; Hebrews 10:26-29.)

Leviticus 16:1-2 provides essential context for everything else that takes place in this ceremony:

Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they offered profane fire before the LORD, and died; and the LORD said to Moses: “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat.

This preamble to the instructions reflects on the failure of the priesthood, represented by Aaron’s sons. The event in question took place in Leviticus 10, but God uses it as a starting point for the annual cleansing and removal of sin. Thus, God’s instructions begin with a reminder of how the priests had incurred His wrath due to their careless approach.

Recall that God instituted the sacrificial system because of Israel’s failure in general; it was added to the Abrahamic covenant “because of transgressions” (Galatians 3:19). God says something similar in Jeremiah 7:22-23:

For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, *concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices*. But this is what I commanded them, saying, “Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you.”

His original marching orders for Israel were simple: Obey His voice, walk in the ways He commanded—just as Abraham did—and the Creator Himself would be their God (Deuteronomy 27:9-10). Israel failed in this, so He added the Levitical priesthood and the sacrifices as a tutor (Galatians 3:24-25), to give Israel a disciplined, practical system of worship—as well as a reminder of sin (Hebrews 10:3)—until the Promised Seed arrived.

## Connection to Failure

Even as the instructions in Leviticus 16 follow a significant failure on the part of the priesthood, we can also credibly link the Day of Atonement with an infamous failure of the whole nation, the Golden Calf incident. By piecing together the dates and spans of time from the scriptural record, a significant possibility arises. Notice these time markers:

- Israel left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month (Exodus 13:3-4).
- Sometime within the following week—between the sixteenth and the twenty-second day—the fifty-day count to Pentecost began.
- It is generally accepted that Pentecost occurred when God gave the law to Israel from Mount Sinai. No verse directly says this, but the text puts Israel at Sinai in the general timeframe of Pentecost. Exodus 16:1 shows that Israel was already near Sinai on the fifteenth day of the second month. Israel was still camped at Sinai “in the third month” (Exodus 19:1), when Pentecost occurs.
- After giving the law, Moses was on the Mount with God for forty days and nights to receive the tablets of stone (Exodus 24:18; Deuteronomy 9:9).
- When Moses came down and saw Israel worshipping the Golden Calf, he broke the stone tablets and spent a second period of forty days and nights beseeching God not to destroy Aaron and the rest of the nation (Deuteronomy 9:15-20).
- Moses returned to the mountain for a third forty-day period to receive a new copy of the stone tablets (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 10:10).

The three forty-day periods mean that there were 120 days between Pentecost and the new copy of the tablets. Adding the fifty-day count to Pentecost brings us to 170 days. The count to Pentecost began between the sixteenth and twenty-second days from the beginning of the year, so the time between Abib 1 and the new copy of the tablets was between 186 and 192 days. This span of days is significant because the Day of Atonement falls on the tenth day of the seventh month, 187 days into the Hebrew calendar.

The Day of Atonement, then, may have occurred when Moses returned with his face reflecting God’s glory (Exodus 34:29-32). It may also have been the day when he gave the law to Israel a second time, after their

blatant sin. Again, this timeline is not definitive, but we are in the ballpark.

If this timeline is valid, then the Day of Atonement contains a reminder of a colossal failure, such that the law had to be inscribed a second time by the finger of God. God does not waste effort, and He does not repeat Himself or duplicate things unnecessarily. Thus, the Day of Atonement could well provide a reminder that the whole nation was on the brink of destruction, and it was through God’s mercy and Moses’ intercession that the people and high priest were not all blotted out.

It is no wonder that the Day of Atonement is such a solemn day! It is tied to the failure of Aaron’s sons, and perhaps to the more widespread failure of the nation, resulting in the addition of the sacrificial law. It may also have been when the Creator had to repeat His holy law. The law defines sin, and breaking it requires atonement. When the author of Hebrews 10:3 writes that the sacrifices were a reminder of sins each year, he may have had some highly significant national failures in mind.

## Atonement’s Unique Features

Adding to the uniqueness of the Day of Atonement is God’s requirement that absolutely no work be performed (Leviticus 16:29; 23:28-31; Numbers 29:7), symbolizing that human effort is completely useless in making the proper atonement needed to keep living after sin. The Israelites could do nothing but observe what occurred at the Tabernacle, watching as the young goat was led away with all their sins. Likewise, we can do absolutely nothing to add to Christ’s atoning work. Thus, it is a day without work for us as well.

Israel’s works nearly condemned the nation to obliteration. In particular, the Golden Calf was a work of Aaron’s hands (Exodus 32:4-5). No matter how he tried to pass it off, he deliberately fashioned an idol out of gold, something he had to work at. Similarly, the work of Nadab’s and Abihu’s hands included offering profane fire (Leviticus 10:1). In Haggai 2:14, God remarks on Israel’s spoiling of everything she puts her hands to: “‘So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,’ says the LORD, ‘and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.’” The works of men always contain defilement, so on the day when God removes the filth, no work can be done, lest more corruption be introduced.

The only work permitted on the Day of Atonement was performed by the high priest and the man who led the *azazel* away, and both had to have an atonement made for them. For us, it is a day of solemn remembrance of the perfect work of our High Priest, who gave us precious access to the Father and removed our sins.

Atonement is also a day of afflicting one’s soul. This

## Ready Answer

*Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—Satan or Christ?*

requirement could serve as a reminder of the fasting Moses did during his interactions with God. There is overwhelming gravity in all that was involved when he fasted for forty days on back-to-back-to-back occasions. Two of those times involved meeting directly with God, receiving a pattern for life from His incomparable mind. The middle period of fasting reflects how seriously God regarded the sins and the enormity of what was at stake due to Aaron's and the nation's transgressions.

### Zechariah 3 and Atonement

With this background, we can now return to the question of the future fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, beginning with the book of Zechariah, written after Judah's return from Babylon. Even after that national chastening, the people were still carnal, just as Israel is today. In chapter 3, the prophet receives a vision of the high priest, Joshua. Notably, the chapter contains the same elements and sequence as Leviticus 16. It starts with the cleansing of the high priest and ends with the cleansing of the nation. What is missing is the sacrificial animals, and this is because God is providing the atonement through a different means here.

The essential function of the high priest was to represent the nation to God, which is part of why the Golden Calf incident was so appalling—the nation's representative was directly involved in the sin of idolatry. Similarly, in Zechariah 3:3, the high priest is depicted in filthy garments, yet in verse 4, the filth and iniquity are taken away. The high priest receives rich robes, symbolic of righteousness from God Himself (compare Revelation 19:8).

Verse 5 mentions the high priest's turban. Exodus 28:38 reveals that the purpose of the turban was to bear iniquity, so the high priest symbolically carried iniquity throughout the year. Then, on Atonement, the iniquity was symbolically transferred to the goat of departure and sent away. In Zechariah's vision, the priestly garments are filthy, and a clean turban is needed. The high priest's defilement shows that the nation had been completely unclean. But God restores the high priest, giving His explanation in verses 8-9:

Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, you and your companions who sit before you, for they are a wondrous sign; for behold, I am bringing forth My Servant the BRANCH. For behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua: Upon the stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and *I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.*

Remember, Zechariah makes no mention of animal sacrifices. This removal of iniquity can only come through the Messiah, the Branch mentioned in verse 8 (see also Isaiah 4:2; 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Zechariah 6:12).

Leviticus 18:28 speaks of the land becoming defiled and vomiting out its inhabitants. The Day of Atonement is an annual type of bearing away of sin, out of the land, so the land and its people become clean before God. This national cleansing of land and nation, however, did *not* happen at Christ's first coming. Though the *means* of that true cleansing was created through His sacrifice, it has not yet been applied. God's cleansing of the land and people of Israel is still future.

The beginning of this vision contains another significant factor:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" (Zechariah 3:1-2)

Note that God rebukes Satan before He cleanses the nation. There is a possible connection here with Satan's binding: In other instances of God rebuking a party, it typically goes beyond divine words and involves divine action (see Psalm 9:5; 68:30; Isaiah 17:1-3). God's rebuke may find its fulfillment in Satan's binding, and Israel's cleansing follows it.

The critical point is that atonement—expiation, satisfaction of the legal debt—can come only through Christ's removal of guilt, not through anything that happens to Satan. The nation is cleansed by God removing the iniquity, not through rebuking the accuser. In this vision, if Satan were only rebuked—and in parallel, if Satan were just bound—the nation would remain in its defiled state, still separated from God, unatoned.

### Seventy Weeks Atonement

The Seventy Weeks prophecy also contains a national cleansing:

Seventy weeks are determined  
For your people and for your holy city,  
To finish the transgression,  
To make an end of sins,  
To make reconciliation for iniquity,  
To bring in everlasting righteousness,  
To seal up vision and prophecy,

*(continued on page 17)*

# The End Is Not Yet

The world has experienced a rough stretch of crises over the past several months. A handful of major natural disasters and a few manmade ones have put thousands of lives in jeopardy: hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria; the massive fires in Washington State, Oregon, Utah, Montana, and California; the 8.2 and 7.1 earthquakes in southern Mexico; the monsoon flooding and landslides in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh; and others around the world. Something huge and deadly seems to crop up on us every few weeks.

Many people assert that the number and cost of these disasters are increasing. According to government statistics, since 1980, 212 disasters have hit the United States, causing over \$1.2 trillion in damage. A typical year in the '80s saw an average of 2.7 major disasters (meaning disasters causing damages over \$1 billion, adjusted for inflation), while in the '90s and '00s, the average climbed to 4.6 and 5.4 per year. So far this decade, each year has averaged 10.5 disasters. By this reckoning, an additional major

disaster has been added to the average every four years.

This is somewhat deceiving, though, because these statistics are based on *cost*. We are suffering more costly disasters because the economy has doubled since the '80s. In areas where disaster has struck, increasing numbers of homes, businesses, factories, roads, hospitals, etc., have been built and suffered damage. Accounting for this economic growth, major disasters have been increasing, not by one every four years, but by one every quarter-century—an increase still, but not nearly as much as it seems.

So many people believe disasters are unrelentingly snowballing due to hysterical media coverage. During Hurricane Irma coverage, the viewer endured a solid week of “this will be the most damaging storm ever to hit the U.S. mainland!” reporting. Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine ratcheted up the rhetoric even further when he called Irma a “nuclear hurricane” while ordering a mandatory evacuation.

*“And so we have the prophetic word confirmed,  
which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a  
dark place, until the day dawns  
and the morning star rises in your hearts . . .”*

—II Peter 1:19, NKJV

We must realize that the media are not interested in giving us a straight story. They know that negative news sells; it gets people's attention. The worse the world seems, the more viewers. So they report a great deal more bad news—hyped, fluffed, and interminably repeated—than good news. To them, it is all about ratings and advertising dollars, not the truth, so the mainstream media set us up to think that things are far worse than they truly are.

## *SPIRIT AND TRUTH*

For us, true Christians who believe the return of Jesus Christ is just over the horizon, this presents a special problem. We want Him to return soon—in our lifetimes. We desire to see God's Kingdom bring peace, security, and prosperity to the earth so that our children and grandchildren can live in the wonderful World Tomorrow. But this can make us vulnerable to false hope if we are taken in by the media's negative drumbeat, which is signaling with every disaster that the end of the world is upon us.

Some will think that this article is “putting far off” Christ's return or saying that He delays His coming. That is not the case at all! We want Jesus to return as soon as possible. However, there are two dangers we need to avoid: 1) being manipulated by a truth-deficient media, and 2) placing our desires above what Scripture reveals about Christ's return. As Peter writes in II Peter 1:19 (King James Version [KJV]), the word of prophecy is more sure than anyone's eyewitness testimony. We can trust what God prophesies about His Son's return far more than the news.

The world, then, can tell us nothing about the return of Christ. At best, it can provide vague indications of how evil society is. On the other hand, all that is true and worth knowing about His second coming is found in Scripture. We do ourselves a great disservice when we cling to wrong-headed, human-generated speculation, and we suffer disappointment when our hopes are dashed. Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.”

We need to make sure our hope is based on truth so that we can await its fulfillment with faithful endurance, as God expects.

John 4:23-24 is an essential passage in terms of our relationship with God:

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

The phrase “in spirit and truth” describes our approach and service to God as being completely sincere and completely real. The reality or truth that our worship must be based on is, of course, God's Word. If an idea or belief does not square with what God reveals in Scripture, it should not enter our understanding of God's way, His purpose, and His plan. This includes our understanding of prophecy—and especially that of Christ's return.

Yet, church members still fall for strange and extreme speculations from prophecy enthusiasts and conspiracy theorists about “the end of the world.” These theories are not founded on biblical truth but on the imaginations and reasonings of men. Our source of prophetic vision has a higher origin. As Isaiah 8:20 says, “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” Believing outlandish theories is like clutching at straws.

## *PRECURSORS TO WRATH*

What, then, are we to think of the disasters this nation has been experiencing of late? If they are not direct signs of the apocalypse, what are they? What God says to Israel in Amos 4:6-12 provides the best answer:

“Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. “I also

*“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

—John 4:23-24, NKJV

withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. . . . Yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. . . . “Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (Amos 4:6-8, 12)

Between verses 7 and 12, God also mentions sending them drought, blight and mildew, locusts, plague, military defeat, and divine punishment for sin, yet after every disaster, Israel still refused to repent. So, God warns them in verse 12 that He would bring on them a major judgment—His wrath, their Day of the Lord, a day of “darkness, and not light” (Amos 5:18-20).

This passage suggests that the disasters we have recently seen are warnings to the nation that God is aware of its sin and the people’s drifting from Him. He is trying to get their attention so that they realize that they need to repent and return to Him. These disasters, then, are precursor judgments and threats, prods to motivate repentance and a restored relationship.

The ultimate judgment of God comes later, and Christ’s return happens according to the prophecies recorded in Scripture. They are straightforward—not esoteric, not discernable only to biblical numerologists or experts of some mysterious Bible code. The prophecies will be fulfilled in real, visible, unmistakable events.

### GROUND RULES

Our Savior Himself sets some necessary ground rules in Mark 13:32-37:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. 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!

He gets the timing of His return out of the way first: No one knows but the Father, not even Himself! So that should not be an issue with us—we should not worry about it or even be eager to figure it out, as it is a futile task, a time-waster. We will never be right, and it is unverifiable until it happens. Besides, most importantly, doing so provides little-to-no spiritual benefit.

What, then, are we to do? “Take heed, watch, and pray.” Because we do not know when He will return (notice He says the more general “time” in verse 33, not just the specific day and hour), we must be ready for His return *constantly*. We do this by taking heed and watching.

“Take heed” is Greek *blepete*, which means “to notice carefully,” “to be ready to learn,” “to pay attention,” “to be prepared to respond appropriately.” The word-picture within it is a runner on a starting line who hears, “Ready. Get set. . . .” and is poised to explode out of his stance as soon as the gun fires.

“Watch” is Greek *agrypneite*, which means “to keep oneself awake,” “to remain alert,” “to be sleepless,” “to be on the lookout,” “to be vigilant,” “to be on watch [duty].” The obvious illustration is a guard standing watch, keeping himself awake and alert to notice anyone approaching.

These commands are modified by “pray,” which implies being in constant communication with God. This modification suggests that our taking heed and watching are *spiritual*, not physical. The parallel verse in Luke 21:36 says explicitly that our watching and praying are focused on being counted worthy to escape the dangers of the end times and to stand before Christ.

That is how true Christians will be prepared for the Master’s return—and for the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, for that matter: by being diligent in keeping themselves on the straight and narrow path to God’s Kingdom. This advice is the essence of Jesus’ three

***“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 13:35-37, NKJV

# Prophecy Watch

*The End Is Not Yet*

parables in Matthew 25: We are not to sleep but to keep our lamps full of oil, faithfully use our talents for growth, and serve the brethren as we wait for the coming of our Savior.

## SIGNS OF HIS COMING

Even so, Jesus also gives us signs of His coming so we will know when our redemption draws near. These prophetic guideposts are necessary to motivate us to trust Him and endure to the end.

In Matthew 24:3-8, Jesus lays out the first four seals of Revelation 6, but He twice emphasizes that these kinds of things will happen almost as a matter of course. He says, “All these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet” (verse 6), and “All these are the beginning of sorrows” (verse 8). As such, they do not indicate that the end is imminent. At best, these sorts of events mark the beginning of the end. Of course, religious deception, wars, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes have been happening all along, from before Jesus spoke this prophecy up until modern times. Their value in assessing how close we are to the end lies in their frequency and intensity.

Herbert W. Armstrong’s favorite prophecy of the end appears in verse 14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” He believed he was fulfilling it, and maybe so. He, however, has been dead for more than thirty years, and the churches of God are continuing to spread the gospel around the world by various means. This, too, is not a precise indicator of how close we are to the end. At best, we can say we are somewhere in the ballpark of the last days.

Many believe verses 15-22 refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, while others say it is end time. It is probably both, an example of type/antitype. However, verses 21-22 are certainly end-time:

For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this

time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.

The tribulation at the end—what we have traditionally called *the* Great Tribulation—will be the worst the world has ever seen. It will be far worse than the fall of Jerusalem; the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Holocaust; the World War II bombings of Dresden, Hamburg, London, and Tokyo; the famines in East Africa and elsewhere; the Spanish flu—perhaps all of them put together! The world has never seen anything like this.

However, the terrors of the Great Tribulation are possible now, and they could happen soon. But, as Jesus said, the end is not yet. Humanity *could* erase itself from the planet—kill off all life through its technology and weaponry—so we are near, but other things must happen first.

In verses 23-28, Jesus sounds a warning to those who are so eager for His return: Do not be snookered by those who claim that Christ has returned. He is not out in the desert or hiding in some inner room. He cautions us that “false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (verse 24). We need to be discerning about the information we swallow.

We can extend this in principle to cover those who think they know when, how, or where Christ will return. These are only distractions and deceptions because He has told us Himself what to look for. His return will not be secret or sneak up on us! It will be a tremendous show, as it were, like a massive flash of lightning and a roll of thunder that encompasses the whole of the sky (verse 27). His coming will be a worldwide phenomenon that no one will be able to miss. And it will happen during a time of war (verse 28).

In Christ’s description of His second coming in verses 29-31, He depicts it as a unique occurrence:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the

*(continued on page 18)*

***“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened.”***

—Matthew 24:21-22, NKJV

(continued from page 6)

of the Flood. His oversight did not end with that act of protection.

Genesis 8:1 carries His watchful care another step further: "Then God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the animals that were with him in the ark." This statement translates into English rather awkwardly, but in Hebrew, it expresses God's continuous awareness of Noah and his family. He did not suffer lapses of memory; God was always aware of them. This should offer us significant reassurance. His character remains ever the same. He is the faithful God, providing meaningful support for our faith.

It will help us to grasp with more understanding what God's sanctification of Noah means to us personally. Our gratitude to God and our faith toward Him is strengthened when we realize that we share similar times with Noah and can learn so much by understanding the interaction between him and God.

Genesis 6:5-8 leads up to God's calling of Noah:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, "I will destroy man who I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

It was the Creator God who initiated a work through Noah. He and his family did not volunteer. Within this is an awesome truth: Those who received grace in this context were also the only ones who were set apart from the violent, churning mass of humanity on earth, becoming the only ones to survive the Flood. Take note of when they received this grace.

Did the grace they received place them in a favorable, in fact, an enviable position? There is absolutely no question it did! Grace, then, including its direct connection to God's gift of sanctification, becomes the starting point for some encouraging, stimulating thoughts since this particular grace appeared in the midst of a life-threatening situation.

As the Flood story unfolds and the devastating Flood actually comes as God said it would, it becomes clear that our Creator *specifically* sanctified Noah and his family for deliverance *before* the Flood occurred. They were specially set apart to be saved from certain death in the Flood.

Do not misunderstand, though. The apostle Paul admonishes in Philippians 2:12-16:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

The grace God gave them was not a get-out-of-jail-free, do-nothing ticket to life. Paul's warning is not presented in the sense that we must work for salvation but that we must continue what we have begun as a result of God's calling. We must be witnesses before others of what we have received. Noah and his family had to faithfully carry out responsibilities that God's grace enabled them to accomplish. They built the ark, testifying by it to those around them. They carried out their responsibilities because they lived by faith.

In like manner, as time and God's purpose have moved on, we now understand that we, too, have received grace and are, like Noah and his family, specifically sanctified by God for our calling into the church and for deliverance from what lies ahead. We, too, have not received a free ticket to everlasting life but bear responsibilities within our calling. We, too, must faithfully live God's way of life, glorifying Him by our conduct. God knows how to deliver us out of temptations (II Peter 2:9), but He will not necessarily draw us away from them. We are already facing such temptations, which are gradually intensifying in the pressures they apply as time moves toward Christ's return.

## Noah Did Not Forget Either

What does this mean to us practically? Recall the reassuring encouragement of Genesis 8:1, when God remembered Noah in the midst of the devastating Flood, even as it was killing everybody not in the ark. This is written to reassure us, not Noah, as his trial was over when this was written. Despite circumstances, God never forgets us. This is what is essential to exercising our faith. He is the faithful God who is our support!

The marvel in this is not that God remembered but that Noah remembered. Through the 120 years of building the ark, then after entering the ark when the rains came, and the fountains of the great deep erupted with gigantic earthquakes, spouting huge and powerful gushes of water, still Noah did not forget God. A boiling sea pitched him and his family about like a cork. For a

year and ten days, their every view was only of incessantly lurching water. How quickly would that get old?

It is truly one of the amazing realities that, in the midst of this churning maelstrom of wind and water, Noah remembered. How easy it would have been for him to be focused entirely on his own safety! In addition, the first thing he did upon leaving the ark was to sacrifice in thanks to God (Genesis 8:20). Like God, he had not forgotten.

The lesson for us is that God was right there with them as they bore the events He was accomplishing through them. Because of His presence, they were saved. It thus becomes clear that grace given in the process of sanctification is the first step toward salvation because God is with us the entire way.

Can we believe that? Briefly, here is a summary vital to strengthening our understanding, our faith, and our will to move on in submitting to God: Sanctification leads us directly to Jesus Christ and salvation—but not merely to Him, but also to repentance, justification, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, overcoming, producing fruit, glorifying God through living by faith, and finally, resurrection. Thus, we see a chain of events in our spiritual creation.

The church needs to expound on grace because everything—everything!—in God’s plan of salvation for us hinges on His loving and merciful generosity. Grace must be greatly appreciated to help establish and strengthen humility within us. And never forget: *A lack of humility ruined Satan.*

Genesis, indeed the entire Bible, reveals that everything in God’s purpose begins with Him. He is the Initiator, the Source. In its biblical usage, the term *grace* essentially indicates either “a freely given act by God on our behalf” or the gift itself. What we need to appreciate is that, within God’s spiritual purpose, *everything* we have ultimately comes from Him as an enabling gift, that is, gifts that empower us to carry out our responsibilities.

## We Are the Clay

In blunt terms, God’s purpose is the increasing of His kind that He might share with others what He has to give. He is the Creator, and He Himself is the model He is following. For us to become a completed product, He must add to what we presently are. He creates and prods by mercifully gifting us. Never forget for even one second that He is the Creator, and we are the clay. So, for us to be in His image, for us to be enabled to respond by faith, He, our Creator, must first give us the power to fulfill our responsibilities.

Despite all His gifting, there remains for us a small part in His purpose: We must respond by using the gifts

He has added. Yet, sometimes it seems that what we must do is a challenging task. However, recall the promise in I Corinthians 10:12-13:

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Our great God is not in the business of making us fail. He does not want us to fail. He is a Creator, and as He builds, He must test to ensure a quality product.

Has clay ever shaped itself into a thing of beauty? The artist must add certain elements to the process for the clay to become what he or she envisions. Therefore, God’s gifts, the powers, the graces that enable us to do what is right and good, always precede what His human creations do in terms of what is righteous.

What Noah did that is truly noteworthy is that he believed God and yielded. Thus, he walked with God and was blameless and righteous—but only because God gifted him first. This is why Genesis 6:8 tells us that “Noah found grace.” The powers to accomplish what he did were not in him by nature. He found grace, and it changed his life.

Hebrews 11:7 comments on Noah’s accomplishments:

By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

The Bible does not explain how Noah became aware of the grace he had been given. Even so, it enabled him, first, by sanctifying him and giving him the spiritual faith to respond properly to the warning God gave. Hebrews 11:7 reveals that Noah reacted by moving with godly fear, that is, with a deep reverential respect, indicating that, though he was awed by the complexity and size of what God had charged him to do, he nonetheless immediately accepted the task and began doing what he could.

Genesis 6:9 adds detail to Noah’s character, describing him as “just,” “righteous,” or “godly,” and saying that he “walked with God.” The latter phrase suggests that, despite all the conflicting corruption surrounding him, he moved through life in step with God, doing his work alongside Him.

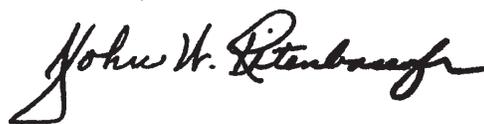
It also says he was “perfect in his generations” or “blameless among his contemporaries.” “Blameless” is

a kind of code word that indicates he was justified by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ. He was a converted man.

Notice that the verse does not say Noah received grace as a result of already conducting his life with all those good attributes. Instead, he was leading his life righteously *because* he had first found God's grace, the gifting by which God enabled him. The way he lived his life is the proof that he had found God's favor and *then* began conducting his life as Scripture describes. The favor, the grace, empowered him to accomplish what is recorded. God follows this pattern with everyone He sanctifies.

James 2:17-18 tells us that true faith will reveal itself by what it produces. The product will be in agreement with God's righteousness, and it will separate, set apart, that person from those around him who do not have the same faith. The grace, the favor, the gifts of God, always precede anything produced within the purpose and calling of God.

In Christian love,



## Ready Answer

*Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—Satan or Christ?*

*(continued from page 10)*

And to anoint the Most Holy. (Daniel 9:24)

This prophecy is God's assurance to Daniel that He will intervene to lift Israel out of her degenerate spiritual state. The word translated "reconciliation" is the same one translated as "atonement"—*kaphar*—throughout Leviticus 16. Nearly everything mentioned in the prophecy relates to the Day of Atonement and what is typified in Leviticus 16 regarding the cleansing and removal of sin. Even the Most Holy Place receives attention (see Daniel 8:14). In other words, the fulfillment of the Seventy Weeks prophecy closely intertwines with the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. It is for "your people *and* for your holy city"—for removing the guilt of Israel and Jerusalem, representative of all the land promised to Abraham.

The Feast of Trumpets looks forward to the return of Christ, and it is also tied to the regathering of Israel (see Isaiah 27:13; Matthew 24:30-31). The second exodus (Jeremiah 16:14-15; 23:7-8) may begin on Trumpets with our Savior's arrival, and the Day of Atonement symbolizes the completion of the regathering, with Israel back in the land after God has atoned for her. Notice these prophecies:

- I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you. Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel. (Isaiah 44:22-23)

- I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have

sinned and by which they have transgressed against Me. (Jeremiah 33:8)

- "But I will bring back Israel to his home, and he shall feed on Carmel and Bashan; his soul shall be satisfied on Mount Ephraim and Gilead. In those days and in that time," says the LORD, "the iniquity of Israel shall be sought, but there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, but they shall not be found; for I will pardon those whom I preserve." (Jeremiah 50:19-20)

- "And I will establish My covenant with you. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be ashamed, and never open your mouth anymore because of your shame, when I provide you an atonement for all you have done," says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 16:62-63)

- Thus says the Lord GOD: "On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will also enable you to dwell in the cities, and the ruins shall be rebuilt." (Ezekiel 36:33)

- They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. (Ezekiel 37:23)

- Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of

## Ready Answer

*Who Fulfills the Azazel Goat—Satan or Christ?*

the sea. (Micah 7:18-19)

Along the same lines, the Jubilee year is announced on the Day of Atonement, and a significant aspect of the Jubilee is the return of each family to its ancestral land (Leviticus 25:9-13)—which, for Israelites, means the Land of Promise. It is a day of proclaiming liberty, which will be particularly relevant to Israel in the future since she is prophesied

to return from captivity. She will be freed from spiritual captivity as well as physical, and indeed, Satan's binding will be an aspect of Israel's future spiritual freedom.

Yet, in all the references to Israel's future restoration and the cleansing of her defiled land, not a single word mentions the Devil bearing her sins, nor of the God of Israel having a counterpart in providing a sin offering for His people. Israel will be atoned for in the same way that the church has been: through the perfect work of the Savior.

—David C. Grabbe

## Prophecy Watch

*The End Is Not Yet*

*(continued from page 14)*

sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

His return will be so astounding and powerful that the people of this world will quail in fear, thinking that they are all doomed to destruction. His return will not be in secret or done in a corner. It will be wonderful, glorious, frightening, and decisive. And it certainly has not happened yet.

### THAT DREADFUL DAY

Isaiah 66:14-16 is a parallel passage:

When you see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like grass; the hand of the LORD shall be known to His servants, and His indignation to His enemies. For behold, the LORD will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and

His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by His sword the LORD will judge all flesh; and the slain of the LORD shall be many.

After building His church, the Bride, to the point that she is complete and ready for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, Jesus Christ will return in wrath and power as the great Judge to slay His enemies and set up His Kingdom. It will not be a good or fun time. The Day of the Lord is a time of death and destruction. As Amos 5:18 says, "It will be darkness, and not light," and not an event in God's Plan that we should desire. While it is necessary for God's justice to be satisfied, it will be a time of appalling loss of life and devastation. In Malachi's words, it will be a "great and dreadful day" (Malachi 4:5).

In one way, we can be thankful that that Day has not yet come. Would we have been ready if it had? As the days darken toward the return of the King of kings, true Christians need to heed the warnings embedded in these latest disasters and repent of their sins and move even closer to God. Christ is preparing His Bride, and she will make herself ready for His glorious appearing (Revelation 19:7). If we desire to be part of that Bride, we should do as the apostle Paul advises in Ephesians 5:15-16: "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil."

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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and the slain of the LORD shall be many."***

—Isaiah 66:15-16, NKJV

## Over-Medicated

Despite enjoying the planet's highest standard of living and representing only five percent of its population, Americans consume half of the world's pharmaceutical drugs, including nearly eighty percent of the global opioid supply. Add in Canada and Western Europe, and their combined opioid consumption increases to a staggering ninety-five percent of the world's inventory.

In a recent speech, President Donald Trump declared the United States to be in the throes of a prescription-drug crisis. "This epidemic is a national health emergency," the president claimed, adding, "As Americans, we cannot allow this to continue." His speech noted:

- Annual deaths from drug overdoses now outnumber those from traffic crashes or shootings, becoming the foremost cause of injury death in the U.S.
- Over 300,000 Americans have died from opioid overdoses since 2000.
- In 2015 alone, there were over 52,000 drug overdose deaths, with better than 33,000 of those involving the use of opioids.
- In 2016, over two million Americans were addicted to prescription or illegal opioids.
- Drug-overdose deaths in 2016 are estimated to be over 64,000.

Even worse, in 2014, an additional 124,000 people died in the U.S. due to "adverse drug effects." These are injuries caused, not by abuse or overdose, but by unexpected, harmful reactions that occur with the normal use of a single medication or when a patient takes more than one prescription drug.

Sadly, for 2017, most experts expect yet another increase in drug-related deaths.

Why are American doctors prescribing so many dangerous pills, and why are their patients so eager to consume them? Are these medications providing for the health and welfare of the patient, or have the leading pharmaceutical companies—that is, Big Pharma—simply replaced the street-corner drug dealers of decades past?

A common criticism of Western-style medicine is that it tends to emphasize symptomology and pain mitigation over the treatment, healing—or even prevention—of the underlying causes of disease. It is far too easy for an overworked doctor to write a hurried prescription for a drug that will provide immediate relief to the patient, especially in light of the enormous efforts of Big Pharma to promote (or push) the latest and most profitable drugs.

In addition, a recent survey by the National Safety Council indicated that up to 99 percent of physicians exceed recommended dosage limits—commonly prescribing ten times the recommended amount—when writing prescriptions for pain and anxiety relief. According to Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, "The majority of . . . misused prescription opioids are coming from legally written prescriptions."

Most Americans have health insurance or adequate resources for drug purchases. Since many drug formulations—particularly opioids for pain and benzodiazepines for anxiety relief—provide patients a temporary feeling of well-being or even euphoria, then most patients become an easy mark for exploitation. The doctor expends little time or energy, the patient feels better quickly, and Big Pharma rings up another sale—everybody wins! That is, until the patients start experiencing adverse effects.

Efforts to combat the prescription-drug epidemic proliferate but with little success, so far. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued stricter guidelines for prescribing pain medications but did so in the form of non-mandated guidelines that doctors and patients can easily choose to ignore.

Bona fide reform will require an extensive paradigm shift in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries and in the expectations of many patients. Absent that, concerned observers hope, at least, for legislation to impose meaningful restrictions on Big Pharma and the prescriptive practices it encourages, along with weightier penalties for abuse. But as long as the public demands medicated relief and Big Pharma seeks more profits that it is willing to share with complicit doctors and legislators, the outlook for long-term reform is bleak.

—Joseph B. Baity

## Does Luke 9:50 Contradict Luke 11:23?

In Luke 9:50, Jesus Christ declares to His disciples, “He that is not against us is on our side.” Two chapters later, in Luke 11:23, Christ exclaims “He who is not with Me is against Me.”

A superficial reading of these two scriptures, both of which reference the casting out of a demon, has led some to conclude that Jesus made conflicting statements. In fact, many who argue against the authenticity of the Bible or the harmony of Scripture point out this supposed scriptural discrepancy. Even those less inclined to doubt the veracity and consistency of the Word of God still struggle to reconcile the two statements. However, when we establish the audience and the context of each account, we remove any conflict.

We will take a closer look at these two statements of Jesus Christ to determine their contexts and discover the harmony that always exists within the Word of God.



1. Who comprises Christ’s audience in each of these verses?

**COMMENT:** In both scriptures, we are better able to establish the respective settings by referencing parallel narratives. For the first account, in Luke 9:49-50, we look to Mark 9:33-41. Here, Mark reveals that Christ and His disciples arrive at a house in Capernaum, presumably Peter’s home, where He gathers them together in an intimate and friendly setting.

For the second account, in Luke 11:14-23, we look to Matthew 12:22-30 to establish the backdrop. As opposed to the cordial environs of Peter’s home, we find that Jesus and His disciples are surrounded by a far more challenging crowd, including a hostile contingency of outspoken Pharisees.

2. To what is Christ responding in each account?

**COMMENT:** In the first account, He responds to the statement from John: “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us” (Luke 9:49).

In the second account, having just cast out a demon from a man, Christ responds to the Pharisees’ accusation in Luke 11:15: “But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.’”

3. What is the essential meaning of Christ’s answers in both accounts?

**COMMENT:** In Luke 9:49, within the first account, John implies that since the person casting out demons in Christ’s name was outside of their fellowship, he should not be trusted or empowered to invoke Christ’s name, even if for the performance of a good work. But

in Mark 9:39, Jesus corrects John: “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me.”

In essence, Jesus cautions John and all of His disciples to avoid interfering in the works that others are doing in support of the overall work. There is no good reason to discourage or make enemies out of those who are not working *against us*, including those whose level of belief and understanding we might judge as lacking. God can and does work with any and all persons as He sees fit, even compelling them to work *for us*.

In the second account, the Pharisees had charged Jesus with using the power of Satan, the ruler of demons, to cast out a demon. Beginning in Luke 11:17, He begins to deconstruct the accusation as being preposterous. In essence, He shows how, in the two-sided fight between the Kingdom of God and Satan, neither side can gain—or continue to stand—by assisting the opposition. Since there is no neutral ground between God and Satan, why would Satan help Jesus cast out his demons? By applying simple logic, Christ uses the Pharisees’ own words against them, easily concluding, “He that is not with Me is against Me.”

Jesus’ words in these two accounts are not at all in conflict. In fact, by combining them, we discover a unique harmony that exists between them. Though there is no neutral ground in our battle with the satanic forces arrayed against us, we should proceed with circumspection when we judge the actions of others, to be sure we understand the spirit that motivates them.

—Martin G. Collins