

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 27, Number 3,4

May-August 2018

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white, fringed, long-sleeved dress, is running towards the viewer. She has a determined and intense expression, with her mouth open as if shouting or calling out. Her right arm is extended forward, pointing towards the viewer. The background is dark and filled with swirling, smoky or misty patterns. Bright, golden-yellow light rays emanate from behind her, creating a dramatic, ethereal atmosphere. The overall scene suggests a moment of spiritual urgency or a journey through a dark, challenging environment.

HOLLYWOOD'S
SPIRIT OF FEAR

May - August 2018

Volume 27, Number 3,4

3

PERSONAL from *John W. Ritenbaugh*
Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Three)

7

READY ANSWER
Unity and Division:
The Blessing and the Curse (Part One)
BY CHARLES F. WHITAKER

11

PROPHECY WATCH
Eternal Torment?
BY RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

19

WORLDWATCH
Hollywood Horror:
Promoting the Spirit of Fear
BY JOSEPH B. BAITY

20

BIBLE STUDY
The Fruit of Justification?
BY MARTIN G. COLLINS

Cover

Hollywood almost never comes up with anything new; it just keeps on remaking popular stories from yesteryear. Even so, a recent development in Tinseltown is the mainstreaming of horror movies—to the point that a few of them are being considered for Academy Awards. If nothing else, the rise of the horror genre suggests that a spirit of fear is dominating our entertainment, a spirit that finds its source in “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2).

iStockphoto

Back cover: *iStockphoto*

Forerunner

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
JOHN W. RITENBAUGH

MANAGING EDITOR
RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
MARTIN G. COLLINS
DAVID C. GRABBE

DESIGN EDITOR
KRISTEN M. COLLINS

NEWS EDITOR
JOSEPH B. BAITY

CIRCULATION
DIANE R. MCIVER

PROOFREADERS
PHYLLIS FORD CINDY HINDS
DIANE MCIVER

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

JAMES BEAUBELLE
TED E. BOWLING
AUSTIN DEL CASTILLO
DAN ELMORE
CLYDE FINKLEA
MIKE FORD
MIKE FUHRER
RONNY H. GRAHAM
WILLIAM GRAY
PAT HIGGINS
DAVID F. MAAS
GARY MONTGOMERY
BILL ONISICK
JOHN REISS
MARK SCHINDLER
CHARLES F. WHITAKER

Forerunner is published six times a year as a free educational and religious service in the public interest. Articles, illustrations, and photographs will not be returned unless specifically requested, and if used, become the property of the Church of the Great God. Comments, suggestions, requests, and changes of address should be sent to the nearest address listed below.

This free publication is made possible through the voluntary tithes and offerings of its subscribers and members of the Church of the Great God. All American and Canadian donations are tax-deductible.

© Copyright 2018, Church of the Great God.
All Rights Reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the New King James Version®.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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, Rodriquez, Rizal 1860 The Philippines

UNITED KINGDOM: Barnes CGG-UK, Barnham Court Farm, Church Lane, Barnham,
Bognor Regis, West Sussex, PO22 0BP, U.K.
PHONE 07792 897339

Web

<http://www.cgg.org>
<http://www.bibletools.org>
<http://www.biblicaljesus.org>
<http://www.facebook.com/cgg.org>

<http://www.sabbath.org>
<http://www.theberean.org>
<http://www.truegospel.org>

Why Hebrews Was Written

Part Three

God had specific reasons for supplying the contents of each book of the Bible to His converted children. If asked, not everyone would give the same reasons for each book's presence because each book does not influence every person to the same degree. However, each book is jam-packed with help that everyone needs, though not at the same time in each person's growth and development.

Many have described Hebrews as the Leviticus of the New Testament and the New Covenant. While true in a broad sense, they address far different circumstances, making them very different in the details. One point is certain: Each book remains vital to the spiritual growth of all of God's children. Each enhances the ability of the church to continue to fulfill the work Jesus assigned it after His resurrection and ascension (Matthew 28:16-20).

We will continue exploring a few specific areas that provide a foundation for understanding that Hebrews was written to fulfill several needs for the church at the time. These critical points provide building blocks for a clearer understanding of the epistle's contents. Previously, we speculated about

who wrote Hebrews, when it was written, to whom it is addressed, who was being converted by the gospel, and the Jews' and their leaders' reactions to the preaching of the gospel. We extracted much of that information from the book of Acts.

Acts reveals key reasons why the church needed the epistle to the Hebrews. The Jewish religious leadership realized by the end of Acts 5 that their verbal warnings did not motivate Christians to cease from preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. So, having reached the point of violent opposition to the apostles, the leadership began jailing and beating them. The intensity of resistance against Christian preaching began rising steeply, but these pressures and persecutions did not stop God from converting more people. Acts 6:1-4 records that the number of disciples was not merely increasing but multiplying, signaling that the unconverted Jews' reaction was backfiring.

During this rising intensity of evangelistic activity, Stephen accused the Jewish leaders of being "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart," of betraying and murdering the Messiah, and not keeping the law (Acts 7:51-53), resulting in his martyrdom. These sharp and

pointed truths stung the Jews, thrusting their consciences into fight mode almost instantaneously.

Acts 7:57-58 reveals that at this violent encounter, God chose to reveal that the man leading the mob that killed Stephen was the same man He soon converted to Christianity: “Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” We know him as the apostle Paul.

Stephen’s murder at the behest of the Jewish authorities intensified the Jews’ anger, but it did not stop the church’s strong evangelism from continuing or conversions from happening. Rather, it seemed to ignite activity to an even higher level, increasing the gospel’s spread even farther beyond the Jerusalem area.

A Vital Reaction to Consider

Acts’ recounting of the church’s growth continues virtually unabated. What we have seen so far provides a clear overview that life as a Christian then was culturally tumultuous. Considering the growing political and religious animosity in our times, the kinds of events we read about in Acts

“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.”

LUKE 14:26

may be not far below the horizon for us. What will happen when Christ “stirs the cultural pot” more aggressively, making more widely known the doctrinal truths that separate the church of God from those who call themselves C

hristian but are not? Satan and those faithful to him, enslaved to their carnal natures, will not stand still and do nothing. When Christ does through us what He did through first-century Christians, the professing-Christian populace will

react as the Jews did.

At this juncture, it may be helpful to ponder Jesus’ admonition to those seeking baptism during His ministry:

Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’?” (Luke 14:25-30)

Both biblical and secular histories show that we need to understand that true Christianity has violent, dangerous enemies. Jesus and eleven of the twelve apostles suffered violent deaths, and through the centuries multitudes of other Christians without positions of authority within the faith have lost their lives due to their faith in Christ. While unpleasant to think about, it is a fact that, when the truth is revealed, many who do not believe God’s truths take their feelings out on those who believe and practice them. The book of Acts and other scriptures present this reality for our admonition. Persecution for the faith may soon be on our radar, so we need to consider it seriously.

A Major Reason for Hebrews

Not every event that had a significant influence on the writing of Hebrews happened amid the turmoil in and around Jerusalem. From His place in heaven, Jesus Christ was arranging another dramatic cultural shock for the Jewish converts, one that would dramatically reshape the church. It produced a far more significant effect for a much longer time in church history.

In Acts 9, God calls and converts the apostle Paul. The far-reaching, momentous event occurs in Acts 10 and involves the apostle Peter and the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family in the city of Caesarea, about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Researchers are unsure about the date of this event, but they generally place it in the early AD 40s. It is interesting to consider that it did

not occur in Jerusalem. God, it seems, was introducing the Gentiles into the Israelite-dominated fellowship of believers away from the most intense center of anger to soften the cultural shock to both Jews and Gentiles, making the acceptance of each other somewhat less tumultuous.

God prepared Peter, his fellow Jews, and Cornelius and his group beautifully for this tradition- and culture-changing event so that their minds were prepared to accept the others without resistance and not to reject them simply because of their different ethnicity. In Acts 10:25-29, Peter mentions an already historical reality for the Jewish-Gentile estrangement:

As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I myself am also a man.” And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”

Incidentally, it was not “unlawful” as a result of a God-given directive in His Word; it was unlawful due to carnal, Jewish adjustments to God’s laws.

Upon reflection, Peter perceived God’s hand in the entire occasion. In Acts 10:34-48, he gives this fuller response to Cornelius and his family:

Then Peter opened his mouth and said, “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God

raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” While Peter was still speaking these

Then Peter opened his mouth and said, “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.”

ACTS 10:34-35

words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

These passages broadly state that God is bringing the prevailing—and at times very heated—spiritual, social, and cultural animosities between Jews and Gentiles into the church’s fellowship to be confronted and solved. God’s action presented the church with a specific problem within an existing general problem that had been agitating community life. The broader animosities soon became close and personal.

God did not allow this beachhead victory in Caesarea to slip away. He quickly began converting Gentiles in other areas in large enough numbers to establish congregations. Converted

people in larger numbers began wrestling with the demands of this new, more inclusive religion. Members needed direction, finding it challenging to adjust to the change from the religion that the Jews had cobbled together under Satan's inspiration over the centuries. We may have difficulty appreciating the emotional upheaval the new converts faced in order to be loyal to their baptismal vows.

What Jewish Converts Faced

From our perspective, we may conclude that what was exerting the pressure on Jewish church members was that God never intended the Old Covenant worship regulations or the Jewish "adjustments" to it to last forever. Hebrews 8 unam-

God is bringing the prevailing—
and at times very heated—
spiritual, social, and cultural
animosities between Jews and
Gentiles into the church's fellowship
to be confronted and solved.

biguously calls the New Covenant "better." However, the mere knowledge of this fact did not change the realities of living through the sometimes-severe disruptions to family relationships (Luke 14:26) or to the broader social and business relations within their communities (Luke 14:27-30) that God's changes imposed on them.

The apostle Paul addresses this issue directly but briefly in Ephesians 2:11-18. He directs his counsel primarily to Gentiles, but we cannot forget that Jews were on the flipside of this issue, so they also profited from his counsel. He provides positive advice to all involved in this life-changing doctrinal advancement, but the converts, both Jews and Gentiles, had to confront the challenges personally in their daily lives:

Therefore, remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from

the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

Because the enmity between Jews and Gentiles had existed for so long, it had become a natural part of both cultures to hold a prejudicial wariness of each other. In some cases, it had grown to outright hatred that had to be overcome in order to accept each other and meet together in the closest bonds of spiritual fellowship.

Following that special Pentecost when God gave His Holy Spirit, the apostles taught the new Jewish converts that they had to abandon what they sincerely believed was a God-instituted religion founded through Moses 1,500 years earlier. Gentiles were accepted into this religion only at a comfortable distance.

As the intensity of the persecution rose, the converts were gradually being revealed to their families and community. This exposure resulted in their exclusion from participating in all Temple activities. Moreover, their unconverted neighbors treated them as worse than Gentiles because they were seen to be recanting from the one and only God-given faith, because, if they accepted the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, they were considered to be giving up on the promises made by God within the Scriptures.

Were the Sanhedrin and priesthood wrong? Had the converts been prospered since declaring their belief in Christ? Would their Messiah return soon? Everywhere they turned in family and community life, converted Jews were being reviled and daunted by painful persecutions that believing in Jesus as Messiah was a delusion, a tragic mistake, a sin of the highest order. An interesting factor within this mix is that, in some cases, they were being persecuted within their

(continued on page 15)

Unity and Division: The Blessing and the Curse

Part One: The Significance of Unity and the Reality of Division

*“And let the peace of God
rule in your hearts, to which
also you were called in one
body; and be thankful.”*

—Colossians 3:15

The tension between unity and division is prevalent throughout the Scriptures. Unity—and the peace it generates—is a central theme in Christ’s prayer on the evening of His last Passover. Concerning His disciples and all the people who would come to know God through their preaching, He entreats

. . . that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in us. . . . I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one. . . . (John 17:21, 23).¹

The Foundational Nature of Unity

Not merely a casual barracks camaraderie but a thoroughgoing unity is fundamental to Christianity. In fact, God facilitates the extraordinary peace that Christ has bequeathed us (John 14:27) by calling us into a unified body. Writing to the people of the Colossian church, Paul admonishes: “Also, let Christ’s peace control you. God has *called* you into this peace by bringing you into one body” (Colossians 3:15, *GOD’S WORD Translation* [GW]²; emphasis ours throughout). That is how tightly coupled Christ’s gift of peace is to the unity for which He prayed.

Ready Answer

Unity and Division: The Blessing and the Curse

As Christ anticipated in His prayer, there are many believers, all in one body. Paul elaborates:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (I Corinthians 12:12-14, 20)

Paul draws on the same analogy on the occasion of his comments to the people of God dwelling in Rome:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are *one body* in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Romans 12:4-5)

Unity is a foundation supporting a plethora of counterparts, each one of them singularities basic to God's truth. Paul catalogs seven such singularities in his concluding remarks to God's people in Ephesus.

[I] urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Unity, of course, implies a lack of friction or competition between the parts that make up a whole. Unity thus facilitates the peace that Christ established between Jews and Gentiles, as Paul explains earlier in his letter to the Ephesian church:

For he himself is our peace, who has made

us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility, . . . that He might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

*“For as in one body
we have many members,
and the members do not all
have the same function,
so we, though many,
are one body in Christ,
and individually
members one of another.”
—Romans 12:4-5*

Finally, but by no means least, Paul uses the incontrovertible fact of our unity as part of his argument against idolatry in writing to the Corinthian church:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. . . . The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we

all partake of the one bread. (I Corinthians 10:14, 16-17)

Division, the Result of Carnality in God's People

Contrasting the unity that Christ died to establish is the division sown by the Adversary as part of his “divide and conquer” strategy. Paul writes of factions (or divisions) in relation to the members of the Corinthian church of God:

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions [*schisma*] among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions [*haireisis*] among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. (I Corinthians 11:18-19)

In general, the nouns *schisma* and (to a lesser extent) *haireisis*³ receive pejorative treatment in the New Testament. The thrust of the apostle's comments on the topic of church factions is that they showcase the presence of human nature at

work in Christians. Schisms are the result of carnality alive-and-kicking in the church. They emerge where God's people are not fully committed to living His way of life, where they deny God His rightful place as Sovereign Ruler of their lives. Axiomatically, the lack of unity in a congregation reflects a proportional lack of repentance on the part of its members.

Paul introduces the concept of division, using the same Greek word as he does in I Corinthians 11:18, *schisma*, in the book's first chapter:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions [*schisma*] among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. (I Corinthians 1:10-11)

Quarreling is a manifestation of the unity-dissolving "friction or competition" mentioned earlier.⁴

The apostle reiterates his appeal for unity in chapter 14, the same passage we reviewed earlier concerning Paul's use of the body as an analogy for the unity of the church.

. . . But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division [*schisma*] in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all

rejoice together. (I Corinthians 12:24-26)

In Galatians 5:20, Paul lists divisions or sectarian thinking (*haireis*)⁵ as one of the "works of the flesh." The apostle Peter uses the same word to refer to the consequence of listening to false teachers:

But there were also *lying* prophets among the people then, just as there will be lying religious teachers among you. They'll smuggle in destructive divisions [*haireis*], pitting you against each other—biting the hand of the One who gave them a chance to have their lives back! (II Peter 2:1-2, *The Message* [MSG])⁶

. . . *that they may all be one,
just as You, Father,
are in Me, and I in You,
that they also may be in us. . .*
—John 17:21

Without question, unity and division are as irconcilable as day and night. Unity connotes order, harmony, and integrity, while division connotes opposite states like randomness (entropy), chaos, disorder, and confusion—a cosmos of *tohu* and *bohu* (see the Hebrew of Genesis 1:2). Personifying unity and division, respectively, are God and Satan.

But, frankly, it is not quite that black and white! There remains a species of division, which, though linked to the working of human nature, though prompted by human carnality, is clearly inspired by God and executed by Him. This divinely created division is the kind that invariably proceeds from His judgment.

Next month, we shall take a look at this important type of division in His church.

—Charles F. Whitaker

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

² GOD'S WORD®, © 1995 God's Word to the Nations. Used by permission of Baker Publishing Group.

³ The neuter noun translated "division" in verse 18 is *schisma* (Strong's Greek Concordance #4978), occurring eight times in the New Testament. The King James Version (KJV) translators render it as "division" (5x), "rent" (2x), and "schism" (1x). The first use of *schisma* is in Matthew 9:16, referring to a rent in a cloth. The English noun "schism" obviously derives from *schisma*. The noun "heresies" (or "factions") in verse 19 is *haireis* (Strong's #139), a feminine noun appearing nine

times in the New Testament. It is rendered by the King James translators as "sect" (5x) and "heresy" (4x). *Hairesis* first appears in Acts 5:17, referring to the sect of the Sadducees. The English nouns "heresy" and "heretic" derive from *haireis*.

⁴ The noun "quarreling" ("contention" in the KJV) is the Greek feminine noun *eris* (Strong's #2045), which appears nine times in the New Testament. KJV translators render it as "strive" (4x), "debate" (2x), "contention" (2x), and "variance" (1x). The first use of *eris* is in Romans 1:29, where the KJV translators render it "debate."

⁵ See End Note iii, above.

⁶ Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Eternal Torment?

It is the stuff of nightmares and horror films. Dark clouds hang low, and bits of smokey fog writhe past. The land, the sky—everything—glows a pale red, the reflection of the fires raging on a huge crater of burning brimstone. The odor of sulfur mingles with the acrid stench of charred flesh. Screams of pain and anguish occasionally drown out the pitiful weeping and the angry blasphemies echoing all around. The biblical Lake of Fire makes Hollywood horror films seem like B-movies.

Ever since the apostle John experienced the visions of the book of Revelation in the late first century, this image has fascinated people. Hell, Hades, Gehenna, the Lake of Fire, and similar places of eternal torment have often been the subject of books, poetry, art, philosophy—even humor. Parents and clergy have used it as a threat to pull offenders back into line, while others have even considered it comforting that the “bad guys” will get the justice they deserve in the end.

Much of this imagery derives from Revelation 19:20 and 20:10, 14-15, where the Lake of Fire is

specifically mentioned. This burning lake as a place of final punishment seems straightforward until Revelation 20:10. This verse ostensibly describes the Lake of Fire as a place where God torments people forever. This assumption raises three questions:

1. If the Beast and False Prophet are mortal men, why are they still alive after the Millennium when Satan is cast into the Lake of Fire?
2. If they are mortals, how can they “be tormented day and night forever and ever” in an inferno that would soon consume them?
3. What kind of God would devise such a “cruel and unusual” punishment?

IMMORTAL SOUL?

Before answering these questions, we must briefly consider whether human beings have an immortal soul. For several biblical reasons, our understanding

“The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

—Revelation 20:10, NKJV

of the Scriptures compels us to maintain that they do not:

1. Job recognizes that man has a spirit (Job 32:8), which the apostle Paul shows in I Corinthians 2:11 endows humanity with intellect. This spirit in man comes from God (Zechariah 12:1) and returns to Him upon death (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Acts 7:59). It records an individual's life, character, and personality, which God stores until the resurrection of the dead. However, the Bible never describes this spirit as immortal or eternal; in fact, I Corinthians 2:6-16 explains that man needs yet another Spirit, God's, to be complete and to discern godly things. According to Ecclesiastes 3:21, animals also have a spirit, "which goes down to the earth," suggesting that it ceases to exist at the animal's death.

2. The Bible flatly asserts that all people die: "[I]t is appointed for men to die once" (He-

brews 9:27). Ezekiel says distinctly that souls die: "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4, 20; see Romans 6:23). Jesus warns in Matthew 10:28 that God can **destroy** *both* soul and body in Gehenna, a type of the Lake of Fire.

3. In death, life and consciousness are gone. "The dead know nothing," says Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:5, and he later adds, "[T]here is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (verse 10). In Psalm 146:4, the psalmist writes about men's death, "His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish" (see Genesis 3:19).

4. Scripture also confutes the idea that people go to heaven or hell after death. Peter says to the crowd on the day of Pentecost, "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with

*"And Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.
This is the second death.
And anyone not found written
in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."*

—Revelation 20:14-5, NKJV

us to this day. . . . For David did not ascend into the heavens” (Acts 2:29, 34). Our Savior confirms this in John 3:13: “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.” The biblical usage of *Sheol* and *Hades* simply means “the pit” or “the grave.”

5. Men cannot have immortality unless God gives it to them. Paul writes, “For the wages of sin is death, but *the gift of God* is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23; emphasis ours throughout). In I Corinthians 15:53 he tells the saints, “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality”; that is, immortality is not inherent in us. At the first resurrection, God will give “eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality” (Romans 2:7). If we already had immortality, why should we seek it?

6. Only God has immortality. He is, Paul writes to Timothy, “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality” (I Timothy 6:15-16). John says of the Word, “In Him was life” (John 1:4), meaning as Creator of all things (verse 3), He had life inherent. Jesus affirms this in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” In other words, humans must go through Him to receive eternal life.

With such overwhelming proof, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, believed by so many, proves false. Man is not immortal, nor does he possess any “spark of God” unless God has given it to him through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). A Christian’s hope of life after death rests in the resurrection of the dead (I Corinthians 15:12-23). Conversely, the wicked only await eternal death as recompense for their evil lives.

THE TIME FACTOR

To understand Revelation 20:10 correctly, we must put it into its proper chronological context. Once we know when it occurs, much of the confusion about this verse clears up.

Though only twelve verses separate Revelation 19:20 from 20:10, one thousand years elapse between their respective events. The Beast and the False Prophet are cast into the Lake of Fire when Christ returns (Revelation 19:11-21). Soon afterward, a strong angel imprisons Satan in the bottomless pit for the thousand years of the Millennium (Revelation 20:1-3). When the thousand years are about to pass, Satan is released, and he gathers Gog and Magog to fight against the saints (verses 7-9). After God defeats this futile attempt, He casts the Devil, a spirit being, into the Lake of Fire to “be tormented forever and ever” (verse 10).

Obviously, the flames of the Lake of Fire will utterly consume mortal men like the Beast and False Prophet. The apostle Peter describes the end-time fire as an all-devouring holocaust: “[T]he elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (II Peter 3:10). In no way could the Beast and False Prophet survive a thousand years of such high-temperature burning! The laws of nature simply will not allow it.

The translators of the King James and New King James versions render the final clause of the first sentence of Revelation 20:10 as “where the beast and the false prophet *are*.” The present-tense verb “are” is not in the Greek text; it is an understood verb. In English grammar, such silent verbs take the same tense as the verb in the main clause of the sentence. The translators ignored this rule, however. The primary verb of the sentence, “was cast” (an aorist verb usually translated as simple past tense), demands that the understood verb should be “were [cast]” (past tense) to agree with the plural subject “the beast and the false prophet.”

Deceived by the unbiblical doctrine of the immor-

***“For the living know that they will die;
but the dead know nothing,
and they have no more reward;
for the memory of them is forgotten. ”***

—Ecclesiastes 9:5, NKJV

tal soul, the translators had to deny nature and break the rules to make this verse fit their understanding! On the other hand, we can confidently assert that our teaching agrees with Scripture, nature, and grammar.

WHO IS TORMENTED?

Before the explosion of modern translations, the final sentence of Revelation 20:10 roused no one's skepticism. However, the newer versions bring out the fact that the verb here (*basanisthçsontai*) is plural and is correctly rendered "they will be tormented." Who are "they"? Does this include the Beast and False Prophet? Does God torment wicked human beings eternally? There are two ways to explain these questions:

1) We have already seen that the Bible denies any idea of men having innate immortality. These wicked leaders of men in the last days will die and burn to ashes soon after being thrust into the Lake of Fire, their souls and bodies destroyed by Him who can do this in Gehenna fire (Matthew 10:28). This fact would preclude any human from being described as "tormented day and night forever and ever."

The only group left is the fallen angels—Satan and his demons. But, one may counter, "the devil" in Revelation 20:10 is singular, and "they will be tormented" is plural. How can we reconcile this plural pronoun referring to a singular antecedent?

In this case, "the devil" is used in a figure of speech called *metonymy*. Technically, it is "the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated." More simply, one part of a thing represents the whole. Thus, "the devil" represents in himself all of the group we call demons, devils, fallen angels, or angels who sinned.

A parallel verse, Matthew 25:41, says that sinners will be cast into "the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Jesus intimates that the Lake of Fire's primary purpose is for the punishment of demons, but it will also be

used as the means of execution for the wicked among humans, those people who unrepentantly live as demons do.

2) If we understand "they will be tormented" to include the Beast and the False Prophet, we must explain the phrase "forever and ever" (*eis tous aiōnas tôn aiōnōn*). Literally, this means "to the ages of the ages" and would seem to imply perpetuity. However, we must be careful with the word *aiōn* and its various forms. Its range of meaning runs from "a space or period of time" to "a lifetime" to "an age" to "eternity." As in all such cases, the context must give the sense.

Having rejected the immortality of the soul, we have no recourse but to understand *aiōn* here in the sense of "as long as conditions exist" or "as long as they live." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* concurs:

AION . . . signifies a period of indefinite duration, or time viewed in relation to what takes place in the period. . . . The phrases containing this word should not be rendered literally, but consistently with its sense of indefinite duration. (p. 43)

Moreover, *aiōn* can also be rendered as "unto the ages of ages," "until the eternal age," or even "up to the vanishing point"! As should be plain, a precise definition of this Greek word proves extremely difficult. Dogmatism on it is not advisable.

Thus, the Beast and False Prophet will be tormented "day and night"—unceasingly—for an indeterminate period until they die, probably within a few minutes or a few hours, which is about as long as a human being can live in a fire. As long as they remain breathing, they will suffer excruciating pain as their just reward, and in an indefinite time, they will pay for their sins with death.

WHAT ABOUT THE DEMONS?

If we accept that "they will be tormented" refers to Satan and his demonic followers, we must also

***"Then He will also say to those on the left hand,
'Depart from Me, you cursed,
into the everlasting fire
prepared for the devil and his angels.'"***

—Matthew 25:41

accept that “forever and ever” may not necessarily imply that these once-angelic creatures will suffer torture and pain eternally. True, Jesus does say in Luke 20:36, “Nor can [resurrected saints] die anymore, for they are equal to the angels,” which some assume means that both godly angels and sinful demons possess eternal life. However, Jesus—or for that matter, the Bible—never explicitly makes such a statement. Our Savior may be referring only to those angels who remain His faithful servants, to whom He has granted continuing life.

Regarding “the angels who sinned” (II Peter 2:4), the Bible asserts that “God did not spare” them, meaning that He has not pardoned their sins, just delayed their punishment. The verse goes on to say that, in the meantime, He has “cast them down to hell [*tartaroo*] and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.”

E.W. Bullinger writes that their prison, Tartarus, “is not Sheol or Hades, . . . [but] denotes the bounds or verge of this material world” (*A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, “hell,” p. 370). Tartarus, then, is a holding place—this material world—where the demons are awaiting their final judgment. Their ultimate penalty is not “chains of darkness” or “everlasting chains under darkness” (Jude 6), but something far more permanent to be rendered in “the judgment of the great day.” This appointed time of judgment still awaits them (see Matthew 8:29).

As mentioned above, Paul writes unambiguously that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). God also says in Ezekiel 18:4, 20, “The soul who sins shall die.” Scripture does not stipulate that this applies only to humans (*soul* means “living being”—even God is a soul; see Leviticus 26:11, 30; Isaiah 1:14; Jeremiah 6:8; Zechariah 11:8; Matthew 12:18; Hebrews 10:38; etc.), nor does God’s Word ever say that sin can be paid for by a lengthy, even eternal, imprisonment (as many speculate will be the demons’ fate). According to these verses, all sin requires death for

expiation, and since the Bible does not indicate that demons will repent of their sins and accept Jesus Christ’s death to pay for their transgressions, only their own deaths will cover their many terrible sins.

So, can demons die? The evidence of Scripture does not disallow it. Indeed, Ezekiel 28:11-19—a well-known passage describing Satan’s origins, character, rebellion, and fate—prophesies in verses 18-19:

Therefore [because of your iniquities] I brought fire from your midst; *it devoured you*, and *I turned you to ashes* upon the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; you have become a horror, and *shall be no more forever*.

Many people believe this applies to a physical “king of Tyre” referenced in verse 11, but the context describing the one who became Satan—“the anointed cherub who covers” (verse 14), who was “the seal of perfection” (verse 12) and “in Eden, the garden of God” (verse 13)—continues without interruption through verse 19. Taken at face value, this passage tells us that God, who created the angels who chose to sin, can extinguish their lives through an annihilating fire. Trying to explain verses 18-19 as a metaphor for Satan and his demons being imprisoned in darkness forever makes a mockery of their plain sense. In fact, the words of Ezekiel 28 sound amazingly like death in the Lake of Fire.

(For more complete information on this subject, please see “Do Angels Live Forever?” by John W. Ritenbaugh in the January-February 2017 issue of *Forerunner*.)

Thus, if those suffering torment in Revelation 20:10 are Satan and the demons, they, too, will experience the torture and excruciating pain of the fervent heat of the Lake of Fire. Perhaps with them, being composed of spirit, it will last for a

(continued on page 18)

“Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

—II Peter 1:10, NKJV

(continued from page 6)

communities through actions originally organized by the pre-conversion Paul.

Both spiritually and physically, the church members were being convinced that their highest need was for instruction from God on how to understand their dilemma and overcome it. In organized epistle form, it would not be made available for more than 30 years after the crucifixion. Until then, the members would have to be taught through Sabbath sermons and Bible studies given by the ministry. This testing of their faith was a challenging period of life for them. It is no wonder that Hebrews contains a warning not to forsake the assembling of themselves together (Hebrews 10:23-25), which Jewish converts might have decided to do to hide their association with Christianity.

Perhaps we can identify with the social tumult then taking place in the Jewish Christians' lives by imagining what will happen in our "Christian" nations when our fellow citizens are exposed to the fact that the religious doctrines that they believe are true Christianity are not God's truth. By remaining faithful to Jesus as Messiah, the first-century Jewish Christians were being banished from participating in areas of life they had held important before God called them. However, Hebrews 12:4 reminds us that these Hebrews had "not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." But in their case, it was at the door.

Hebrews' Theme

A theme is a topic to be developed and discussed for a purpose within a document or speech. It is also the purposeful development of the reason for the document or speech. The theme of Hebrews lends convincing evidence that the epistle was primarily intended for Jewish converts because they were the only converts who had experience with its subject matter and illustrations at the time it was produced. The new Gentile converts had little background to deal with its subject matter because their familiarity with the Old Covenant worship system extended only to what they had gathered from sermons at services. Hebrew's theme can be best understood if we recall what was happening culturally among the Jews because of the awe-inspiring excellence of Christianity over Judaism.

Central to its superiority is Jesus Christ. Hebrews develops the theme of the immeasurable superiority of Christ, Christianity's High Priest, over all that

had gone before. He is superior, not merely to all high priests who had served Israel, but to everybody—including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, or anybody else in Israelite history—regardless of their office within God's creative purposes. In other words, Hebrews' dominant theme is the contrast between the traditional religion of the Jews and what Jewish converts had chosen by deciding to live by faith in Jesus Christ and casting

And let us consider one another
in order to stir up love and good
works, not forsaking the
assembling of ourselves together,
as is the manner of some,
but exhorting one another . . .

HEBREWS 10:24-25

their lot with His people.

The following provides an overview of how Hebrews' theme is arranged:

- Hebrews 1:1-3: Christ's superiority over the prophets
- Hebrews 1:4-14: His superiority over angels
- Hebrews 3:1-6: His superiority over Moses
- Hebrews 4:6-10: His superiority over Joshua
- Hebrews 5:1-11: His superiority over Aaron
- Hebrews 6:1-10:39: His superiority over the entire ritual of Judaism
- Hebrews 11:1-12:3: His superiority over all the heroes of faith

Hebrews 10:1-10 compares the ministry of Jesus Christ to that under the Old Covenant:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacri-

fications, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. Therefore, when He came into the world, He said; “Sacrifice and

“Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

ROMANS 8:7-8

offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God.’” Previously saying, “Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them” (which are offered according to the law), then He said, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God.” He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

This passage makes a distinct statement about the comparison between Christ and everything or everyone who came before He arrived on earth to complete the work of God. Jesus’ teaching, leadership, and personal example is reality compared to the misty shadows cast by everything else.

The key term throughout Hebrews, then, is “better.” The author uses the comparative “better” a number of critical times: Hebrews 1:4 (“so much

better than the angels”); Hebrews 7:19 (“a better hope”); Hebrews 7:22; 8:6 (“a better covenant”); Hebrews 8:6 (“better promises”); Hebrews 9:23 (“better sacrifices”); Hebrews 10:34 (“a better and enduring possession”); Hebrews 11:16 (“a better . . . country”); Hebrews 11:35 (“a better resurrection”); and Hebrews 11:40 (“something better”).

Not only is “better” emphasized, but “greatness” is also mentioned several times: Hebrews 2:3 (“so great a salvation”); Hebrews 4:14 (“a great High Priest”); Hebrews 7:4 (“how great this man was”); Hebrews 9:11 (“the greater and more perfect Tabernacle”); Hebrews 10:32 (“a great struggle with sufferings”); Hebrews 10:35 (“great reward”); Hebrews 12:1 (“so great a cloud of witnesses”); and Hebrews 13:20 (“that great Shepherd of the sheep”).

The author draws the Hebrews’ attention to the contrast between what they gave up in converting and what they gained: Christians have “a great High Priest” (Hebrews 4:14); “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19); and an exclusive altar (Hebrews 13:10). Christians are also exhorted to look forward to “the world to come” (Hebrews 2:5); to “the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5); to the New Covenant being made with the united houses of Israel and Judah (Hebrews 8:10); to “the good things to come” (Hebrews 9:11); to Christ’s second appearing for salvation (Hebrews 9:28); to the receipt of the promise at His coming (Hebrews 10:36-37); and to a future heavenly city (Hebrews 11:14-16; 13:14).

Everywhere a reader turns within Hebrews, by means of sheer repetition of comparisons revealing the superiority of Christ, Christianity, and the New Covenant, he or she is quietly but forcefully drawn to one overriding reality. The center of Judaism was the Temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices, all of which were fine teachers and good experiences as God intended them. Even so, they are not what God desires for His children at this time within His purpose. They are not good enough for His children now. The author writes in Hebrews 8:4-6, 13:

For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, “See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But now He has

obtained a more excellent ministry inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. . . . In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Though the Jewish converts were indeed deprived of the distinctive symbols of the past, they were but shadows, symbols, mere copies of heavenly things. Through God’s calling and the gifts He provides, they were then, as we are today, dealing with realities and preparing for the realities of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

The Epistle’s Character

The *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines *character* broadly as “the combination of qualities and/or traits that we discern in an individual, group, or thing.” In this case, we are trying to discover characteristics in a document by an unknown person.

That the author is unknown may be one of its more important characteristics. Why did God hide the identity of this specific writer when He had revealed the authors of virtually every other book in the Bible? It may be that, combined with the tenor of the times, the identity of the author—whom many may have disliked or distrusted—might have complicated the impact of the material covered in the epistle. Hiding the author’s identity may have diminished resistance to its message. Perhaps God permitted nothing that might distract a reader’s focus from the main character, so the author is unnamed to keep readers focused on the main character.

Second, unlike the other epistles, it has no opening salutation identifying for whom all its vital information is intended. This omission was intentionally done as a clear signal that the issue at hand has significant doctrinal ramifications and applies to the whole church. It is not a mere local problem between a few members.

Third, perhaps its most valuable asset, the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ and His character are opened to full view, including His origins, words, works, and personal character. It reveals that He is worthy of all honor and trust.

Fourth, the epistle focuses on “Old Covenant teaching” more frequently, thoroughly, and powerfully than any other New Testament epistle. The author provides this instruction so all Christians, but especially new converts, can see clear purpose in

the comparisons Hebrews contains.

Fifth, its warnings against apostasy are the strongest and most frequent in the New Testament. They are a testament against the temper of the times, especially the turmoil within the Jewish culture.

Sixth, its appeals to the brethren for faithful steadfastness and perseverance are numerous and firmly stated.

Seventh, an exceedingly important trait, the first time Christ is mentioned in the epistle is in Hebrews 1:3, where He is described as seated “at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” This description sets an emphatic tone for the entire epistle. From the very start, the reader knows the position of authority from which Jesus operates.

Hebrews’ emphasis is heavenly in contrast to the fact that, throughout our entire lives, our natural focus has been earthly, carnal.

The author himself describes what he has written:

Now may the God of peace [Who is the Author and Giver of peace], Who brought again from among the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood [that sealed, ratified] the everlasting

The epistle to the Hebrews pulls together the doctrines the church’s small membership needed to have and process so they could steadfastly move forward in fighting the spiritual battle with truth and faith.

agreement (covenant, testament), strengthen (complete, perfect) *and* make you what you ought to be *and* equip you with everything good that you may carry out His will; [while He Himself] works in you *and* accomplishes that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ (the Messiah); to Whom be the glory forever and ever (to the ages of the ages). Amen (so be it). I call on you, brethren, to listen patiently *and* bear with this message of exhortation *and* admonition *and* encouragement, for I have written to you

Personal

Why Hebrews Was Written

briefly. (Hebrews 13:20-22, *The Amplified Bible*)

The author gives it a barebones character trait: a “word of exhortation.”

Its Value to Us Today

The epistle to the Hebrews would not make the top of many professing Christians’ list of favorite Bible books. If anything, most Christians would assess Hebrews as among the more difficult epistles to understand. Their evaluation would probably consider it “heavy.” This assessment is understandable, as the epistle is heavily doctrinal and deals with important technicalities. No bloody wars are fought within its pages. It contains no soaring poetry or poignant songs. No dashing personality like David or Joshua graces its pages, nor any wise personality like Moses. That is not its purpose.

In the midst of difficult persecution, it addresses a crucial issue facing the almost brand-new church of God. The church was just barely “out of the womb,” and the enemy was already marshaling its forces to destroy it through the

combined pressures of doctrinal disputes and persecutions that, in some cases, had assaulted their families. The epistle to the Hebrews pulls together the doctrines the church’s small membership needed to have and process so they could steadfastly move forward in fighting the spiritual battle with truth and faith.

Its purpose is not merely to encourage church members to hold fast to what they have been given, but also to grow as the war rages on. Each Christian is fighting his own little war, as it were, so he needs the understanding contained within Hebrews to give him confidence that he has access to Christ and the spiritual tools that, with His help, can enable him to fight and win.

Never forget that Christ declares, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). We need the instruction in Hebrews to move forward in faith, knowing that we are on the right path and following the one and only Leader and Savior we need.

In Christian love,



Prophecy Watch

Eternal Torment?

(continued from page 14)

longer, though still indeterminate, time before they expire. The Bible’s use of *aiôn* makes the length of their torment vague. Perhaps they will suffer some form of torment while imprisoned in the abyss (see Isaiah 24:21-23). In any case, we can understand their torment “day and night forever and ever” to indicate unstinting thoroughness—that God will not shirk in giving them the most painful and complete punishment, as they rightfully deserve.

THE PERFECT JUDGE

Our Savior is the great Judge of all (II Timothy 4:1). His judgments are flawless; He demonstrates perfect justice and mercy at all times. Though the punishments that the wicked and the demons will receive may seem ghastly, they fit their crimes. There is no unrighteousness with God (Romans 9:14).

As Christ’s disciples, resurrected to eternal

life in God’s Kingdom, we will be able to look forward to an eternity of peace and security, of never-ending joy and growth, because He will have removed all evil from the universe. Peter tells us that once God purifies all things, only righteousness will dwell in the new heavens and new earth (II Peter 3:13). There will be no taint of sin anywhere in creation, which can be true only if God has completely erased the existence of all sin and all sinners, including the Adversary and his demons.

As Peter writes in the same passage, we must soberly consider God’s perfect judgment for sin and His wrath against it. We are living through our time of judgment right now, and falling away and falling under God’s wrath are still possibilities if we fail “to make [our] call and election sure” (II Peter 1:10). Knowing God’s perfect judgment should spur us to live holy and godly lives, “hastening the coming of the day of God” (II Peter 3:11-12, 14).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Hollywood Horror

Promoting the Spirit of Fear

The years of 2017 and 2018 heralded many notable, fear-inducing tragedies in the United States, along with political upheaval and deadly natural disasters that negatively impacted virtually all Americans. Traditionally, America turns to Hollywood in search of an uplifting escape from fearful news, and typically, Hollywood delivers.

However, in opposition to common-sense expectations, recent movie-goers, in search of even more fearful experiences, have instead flocked in record numbers to the onscreen terrors depicted in horror movies. Never before have we witnessed so many successful horror films in such a short period. According to Emily Dunn of Screenrant.com, “It feels like we’re in the middle of a real horror renaissance at the moment.”

In fact, the horror genre topped one billion dollars in revenues for the first time in 2017 and totaled nearly ten percent of all cinematic ticket sales—the highest percentage ever for the frightful category—with the summer blockbuster, *IT*, becoming the highest-grossing horror film in history.

Even more noteworthy, this phenomenon occurred while the rest of the movie industry was experiencing an unprecedented, panic-inducing slump in ticket sales—down 16 percent in 2017—amid widespread criticism for failing to meet the quality standards of the movie-going public.

Historically, most movies of the horror genre fail to attract critical acclaim or attention from the major movie-industry awards committees. However, 2017’s *Get Out* received four Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and it won for Best Original Screenplay. Currently, many industry observers and critics claim that *A Quiet Place*, released in 2018, is also deserving of Oscar consideration.

Along with the increased box office and critical acclaim, the horror genre is now attracting A-list screenwriters, directors, and actors. “Horror is not a niche genre anymore,” according to veteran movie producer, Ed Pressman. Scott Roxborough, a writer for *The Hollywood Reporter* adds, “One thing is certain: Horror, for better or worse, has gone mainstream.”

Of notable concern, beyond the graphic violence and the glorification of evil, is the newly transgressive nature of the typical horror screenplay. The new screenwriters are weaving transgender and homo-

sexual themes into the disturbing, blood-soaked storylines. There seems to be a strong desire within the genre to push the envelope, to violate all moral boundaries. Director Dee Rees, for example, has just contracted to head up a horror film about black lesbians in rural America. According to acclaimed director, Luca Guadagnino, “The most avant-garde, the most transgressive work in cinema right now is being done in horror.”

Even worse is how the genre tends to target young people. For its opening weekend, better than 60 percent of the audience for *Happy Death Day* was under 25, and this trend continues in 2018.

Amid this “horror renaissance,” should a Christian be concerned, or do we risk overreacting to yet another distraction—best ignored—coming from Hollywood? After all, much of our television and movie entertainment these days, even so-called “family-fare,” employs an element of mystery, surprise, and varying levels of violence and fear as plot devices.

However, the horror movie typically deals with greater extremes, while preying upon and exploiting our most basic and instinctive fears, often using the depiction of graphic violence and demonic influence to render us weak, vulnerable, and frightened. It may be “only a movie,” but these are dangerous themes to be flirting with so casually. Moreover, the viewer runs the risk of becoming desensitized to the wicked thoughts and activities that dominate the nefarious plot.

Perhaps we are living through mankind’s most fearful days, when a spirit of fear is dominating even our entertainments. But, in the midst of the bad times, is it wise for us to lower our guard—to subject our minds voluntarily to images that depict uncontrolled demonic activity and the glorification of evil? After all, Psalm 101:3 declares, “I will set nothing wicked before my eyes,” while Ephesians 4:27 warns us to, “give no place to the devil.”

Finally, wisdom from the apostle Paul would dictate the pursuit of activities and diversions, not designed to stoke our fears, leaving us weak, hostile, and insecure, but instead, “to stir up the gift of God which is in you. . . . For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (II Timothy 1:6-7).

—Joseph B. Baity

The Fruit of Justification

In Romans 5:6, the apostle Paul declares that “Christ died for the ungodly.” The Greek word for “ungodly” is *asebēs*, meaning “those without any reverence toward God.” The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, showed little reverence toward God. They were heedless when He warned them of the deadly outcome of their disobedience (Genesis 2:17; 3:3).

Since then, all humans have followed their example, falling from God’s favor because of unbelief, “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Essentially, man is unwilling or unable to recognize God’s sovereignty and holiness, which causes him to fall short of being what God intends him to be.

The countermeasure for man’s sinfulness is the perfect, sacrificial life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, culminating in our opportunity for *justification* (Romans 4:25). The objective of justification is not merely to render a guilt-free verdict for the repentant sinner, nor does it provide a special certificate of eternal life to its recipient. Instead, it is a spiritual act—part of a spiritual process—with spiritual effects that open the way to salvation and eternal life.



1. Does justification cleanse us of all our past sins? I John 2:2, 12; Ephesians 5:26; Hebrews 1:3; Zechariah 13:1.

COMMENT: Although it can be difficult to fathom and easy to forget, the repentant sinner is cleared of all past sin upon receiving justification by faith through the blood of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:1). The Old Testament speaks frequently of God’s promises to cleanse His people of their transgressions (Isaiah 1:18; Ezekiel 36:25; Jeremiah 33:8), while in the New Testament, the apostles Peter, John, and Paul frequently refer to God’s cleansing forgiveness (II Peter 1:9; I John 1:7, 9; Titus 2:14).

2. Does justification enable greater access to God? Romans 5:1-2.

COMMENT: Without a doubt, our sins separate us from God (Genesis 3:24; Isaiah 59:2; Galatians 5:19-21). Graciously, our heavenly Father desires a closer relationship with us, His elect (John 17:3, 20-21). In Leviticus 26:12, our Creator promises, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.” In John 14:6, that same divine Being—in the form of Jesus Christ—testifies that He provides our ultimate path to God the Father. In Romans 5:1-2, the apostle Paul flatly asserts that justification brings us access to His grace, the undeserved favor that He grants to His faithful, humble children through Jesus Christ (James 4:6). In Ephesians 2:18 and 3:12, Paul mentions this same access, strongly implying that such access is exclusive to our calling and not available to the world.

3. Does justification bring us peace? Romans 5:1.

COMMENT: Paul provides the answer in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, *we have peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ” (emphasis ours). By declaring the repentant sinner not guilty, justification helps to remove, not only the disturbing guilt from his conscience, but also the fear of being called before God and condemned (Isaiah 57:20-21; Romans 5:9), replacing the guilt and fear with hope (Romans 5:2; Titus 3:7). Such peace enables the justified to draw even closer to God with a more confident assurance of His mercy (Hebrews 4:16; 7:19; 10:19).

4. Does the fruit of justification provide a pathway for our salvation? Titus 3:4-7; Romans 6:22.

COMMENT: The apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that before justification, our sins only led to death (Romans 6:20-21). “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (Romans 6:22). In Titus 3:7, Paul declares “that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Peter also expresses that the fruit of our faith is “the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:9).

The repentant Christian, cleansed of his sins through the divine act of justification, has ample reason to hope, not only for a special intimacy with God the Father and His Son, but also for the unique, spiritual peace he receives along the path that leads to eternal life (John 16:33; 17:2-3, 20-26).

—Martin G. Collins