

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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A Blessing in
WINTER

August-December 2019

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The twenty-fourth day of the ninth month—Kislev 24—on the Hebrew calendar falls at the beginning of winter, typically associated with cold temperatures, bare trees, falling snow, and bracing winds. But in Haggai 2:15-19, God declares that it should be associated with blessings, saying, "From this day forward I will bless you." Why is this date so important to God's people?

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Why Hebrews Was Written

Part Seven

The author's exhortation in Hebrews 13:1-13 makes this appeal to the members of God's church:

Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also. Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge. Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the

heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them. We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

The author of Hebrews tells us in his own words at the end of his highly instructive but largely ignored treatise why he concludes as he does. In chapter 13, he encourages Christians to pursue purposeful, practical, and loving conduct that would produce unity among the brethren within the church as well as bring God glory before the world. He concludes that we are to conduct ourselves in this manner before all while supported by our relationship with Jesus Christ under the New Covenant.

A Summary

The following summary is sufficient for those who know some of the background for the writing of the epistle to the Hebrews:

Despite strenuous Jewish objections to particular doctrinal positions and violent persecutions against the church in Judea, Christianity is the only religion in the entire universe led by a spiritual High Priest of the very highest qualifications and character. This High Priest experienced life as a human being, but He is now and forever seated at the right hand of the throne of God in heaven. The writer urges us to move forward without hesitation under His leadership, as there is no one better in all of creation to serve.

Christianity has always existed because it is the way of life practiced by the Creator God. All other religions are but futile attempts to dethrone Him and substitute a way of life that empowers people to live as they please. Jesus' own countrymen strenuously resisted His teaching—though true in every point—to the point that they murdered Him, but the Father resurrected Him. Jesus carried on through the apostles whom He had chosen and taught, and the Jews persecuted the apostles as they had Jesus. Other Jews, however, were converting to Christianity. Thus, despite the persecutions, Christianity continued, even thrived, within the church of God.

However, some Jews fellowshiping with the church objected to Jesus as the clearly acknowledged High Priest within the New Covenant and to circumcision not being required under it. Their arguments eventually had to be met due to their dividing the unity of the fellowship, as Acts 15 describes. During the Council of Jerusalem, the issue was decided. It took several decades, though, before a formal position-paper could be produced within the church. This need was met by what has been titled, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," the great work we have been examining closely in this series.

Within its subject material are two major points:

First, the author highlights the qualifications of this great, towering Personage who holds this vital office, making Him indispensable to the salvation of all of God's sanctified ones.

Indispensable? Absolutely! Jesus Himself tells us in John 15:5: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for *without Me you can do nothing*" (emphasis ours). His statement is blunt and unambiguous. For us to produce behavior and attitudes that bring honor to God, we must have a steady, living relationship with Jesus. We need Him as much as a bud needs a branch to produce fruit. If we fail to glorify God, what good reason would motivate Him to put us in His Kingdom? Therefore, a stable relationship with Christ is necessary for our salvation. He desires to give us many wonderful things.

Second, the book of Acts records the history of the times as Christianity began and grew. The cultural turmoil of the day and region focused largely on the forming Christian church. This fact spawns two sub-points: One, God never intended the Old Covenant and all its attendant features to last forever. He never intended the Judaism of the day at all. He announced the New Covenant in Jeremiah's time, six centuries earlier, long before Jesus Christ appeared as a human being, preached the gospel, and founded Christianity among men to make its mark on the world.

Two, in the transition following the Promised Seed's resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, church members needed explicit, uniform instruction from on high to confirm the direction Jesus wanted the daily religious operations of Christianity to proceed and for spiritual growth to take place in the members' lives. Just as Leviticus contains detailed instruction for the daily spiritual activities under the Old Covenant, so those under the New Covenant needed guidance about what they should do day by day.

Those of us in the twenty-first century need daily instruction every bit as much as those under the Old Covenant. Mankind's carnal makeup has not

***"Let brotherly love continue.
Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing
some have unwittingly entertained strangers."***

—Hebrews 13: 1, NKJV

changed one iota since Adam and Eve. The epistle to the Hebrews contains that instruction so that those who have made the New Covenant with God can make the necessary adjustments to regulate their lives, live by faith, glorify God, and maintain their relationship with Christ while preparing for the Kingdom of God.

Before proceeding more deeply into the actual text of the epistle, and at the risk of repeating material already covered, we need to resolve a few items concerning its production. Doing so may help some understand its vital lessons more clearly.

Who Wrote Hebrews?

The following lengthy section may reinforce the beliefs of those of a conservative mind on the issue of Hebrews' authorship, something only God knows for sure. The apostle Paul, who signed his name in a variety of ways to thirteen other epistles, did not do so at the end of the one to the Hebrews. No one knows the solution to this mystery with absolute certainty either, but the Bible provides some strong indications.

Thus, the answer to this riddle varies, tending to follow one of two general paths. If the researcher is more modern and liberal, his conclusion tends to be that the apostle Paul did not author it. His main objection—a valid one—is that the Bible makes no authoritative statement regarding Hebrews' authorship. The more conservative researcher, especially one who leans toward evangelical beliefs, usually declares the apostle Paul to be the letter's author based on several compelling inferences that together make his authorship wholly probable.

In their commentaries, liberal researchers often cite only II Peter 3:2, 15 in combination with I Peter 1:1-2 as supporting Paul's authorship:

- That you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior. . . . And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also

our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you. (II Peter 3:2, 15)

- To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. (I Peter 1:1-2)

In short, Peter confirms that Paul wrote to “the Dispersion” (Diaspora) of Jews in central and northern Asia Minor. These passages are probably the most persuasive, internal, biblical evidence of Paul writing to Jewish Christians. Otherwise, there seems to be no historical proof that Paul may have written Hebrews. These two passages are meager proof. Peter himself is not a strong candidate for its authorship, as his evangelizing was not widespread, nor did he write extensively (at least we have no record of it).

Acts 9:15 adds some support to Paul's authorship: “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he [Paul] is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.’” The book of Hebrews certainly falls within Paul's areas of assignment from Christ, but its writing style is somewhat different from his other epistles. It lacks the normal, pedestrian roughness researchers expect of the style Paul used in his other letters.

Some Greek scholars have described the writing in Hebrews as “elegant,” the best-written among all New Testament epistles in terms of quality of grammar. At its beginning, it is organized as a treatise, a formal and systematic account of a subject, and reads as though it were a classroom lecture at a college. However, it ends as a personal letter from a church pastor, as Paul's epistles usually do. Some think it was written by Luke or someone else close to Paul—even Priscilla has been suggested, but that idea is probably off the mark.

*“I am the vine, you are the branches.
He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit,
for without Me you can do nothing.”*

—John 15:5, NKJV

The following lengthy quotation is excerpted from *An Exposition of Hebrews* by Arthur W. Pink, a conservative Scot and a prolific writer. As a young minister, he immigrated to the United States and spent around twenty-five years pastoring churches in the Carolinas. He then returned to his homeland and continued writing for about another twenty years before dying in his native land. He left the following evidence, which shows that Pink was quite thorough and 180° removed from the conclusions of liberal commentators of our time.

To begin with, note its Pauline *characteristics*. First, a *numerical* one. There is a striking parallel between his enumeration in Romans 8:35-39 and in Hebrews 12:18-24. In the former he draws up a list of the things which shall not separate the saint from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If the reader will *count* them, he will find they are seventeen in number, but divided into a seven and a ten. The first seven are given in verse 35, the second ten in 8:38, 39. In Hebrews 12:18-23 he draws a contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Sion, and he mentions seventeen details, and again the seventeen is divided into a seven and a ten. In Hebrews 10:18, 19, he names seven things which the saints are *not* “come unto”; while in Hebrews 10:22-24 he mentions ten things they *have* “come unto,” viz., to Mount Sion, the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, an innumerable company of angels, the general Assembly, the Church of the Firstborn, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator, to the Blood of sprinkling. Compare also Galatians 5:19-21, where the apostle, when describing the “works of the flesh,” enumerates *seventeen*. So far as we are aware, no other Epistle writer of the New Testament used this number seventeen in such a manner.

Again; the *terms* which he used. We single out

one only. In Hebrews 2:10 he speaks of the many *sons* which Christ is bringing to glory. Now Paul is the *only* New Testament writer that employs the term “sons.” The others used a different Greek word meaning “children.”

For *doctrinal* parallelisms compare Romans 8:16, with Hebrews 10:15, and 1 Corinthians 3:13 with Hebrews 5:12-14, and who can doubt that the Holy Spirit used the *same* penman in both cases?

Note a *devotional* correspondence. In Hebrews 13:18, the writer of this Epistle says, “Pray for us.” In his other Epistles we find Paul, more than once, making a similar request; but *no other* Epistle-writer is placed on record as soliciting prayer!

Finally, it is to be noted that *Timothy* was the companion of the writer of this Epistle, see Hebrews 13:23. We know of no hint anywhere that Timothy was the fellow-worker of anyone else but the apostle Paul: that he companied with *him* is clear from 2 Corinthians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 3:1, 2.

In addition to the many Pauline characteristics stamped on this Epistle, we may further observe that it was written by one who had been in “bonds” (see Hebrews 10:34); by one who was now sundered from Jewish believers (Heb. 13:19)—would not this indicate that Paul wrote this Epistle while in his hired house in Rome (Acts 28:30)? Again; here is a striking fact, which will have more force with some readers than others: if the Epistle to the Hebrews was *not* written by the apostle Paul, then the New Testament contains only *thirteen* Epistles from his pen—a number which, in Scripture, is ever associated with evil! But if Hebrews was also written by him, this brings the total number of his Epistles to fourteen, i.e., 7×2 —seven

(continued on page 15)

***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”***

—Romans 8:35, NKJV

Unity and Division: The Blessing and the Curse

Part Five: The Curse of the Leaven of the Pharisees

*“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

In the last article, we looked at each of the twelve curses issued to those individuals standing on Mount Ebal. In this final article, we will discuss the implications of these curses—and of the entire Ebal/Gerizim incident—for the church of God today.

A theme cutting across almost all the curses deserves highlighting: They all, except for perhaps the last one, focus on hidden or *secret* sins, ones committed—at least metaphorically if not literally—under cover of darkness, under the counter. Revelation 7:5-8 makes this commonality vital to us because there, God links the *designation* of the twelve tribes (that is, their names) to the 144,000 sealed saints, 12,000 per tribe.¹

This linkage, which is *spiritual*, is germane to the division of tribes on Gerizim and Ebal.

In Luke 12:1-2, Jesus Christ warns His disciples—and us—to stay away from hypocrisy: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. *Nothing* is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (emphasis ours throughout).^{2,3}

Christ is warning us against being hypocrites, being two-faced. We do this when we say one thing but practice another. Hypocrisy includes “playing church,” all the while harboring unrepented sin, persistently

cloaked sin, secret sin. The hypocrite leads a double life, as it were, a mock life, appearing to be blessed, though all the while under a curse for his failure to renounce all and follow Christ without reservation.

Total Commitment to the Truth

Jesus' statement in Luke 14:33 is applicable here: "[A]ny one of you who does not renounce *all that he has* cannot be My disciple." The narrative of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 provides a dramatic illustration of the fact that God will not accept duplicity in His church. *Partial commitment to the truth is not enough*. In the case of this ancient couple, He judged "the secrets of men by Christ Jesus"⁴ without delay, stopping the lie literally dead in its tracks.

Although unstated in the account, Ananias and Sapphira likely coveted the status and reputation they would receive if God's people came to believe they were "big" contributors. With Satan's prodding (verse 3), they (Sapphira is fully complicit; verse 2) hatched the deceitful plan to sell some property and donate part of the proceeds for the use of the brethren. In reality, they conspire to mislead the church leadership (and ultimately, the brethren at large) into thinking that their generous gift comprised the entire sale price of the land, when in fact they had surreptitiously "kept back" a portion of the proceeds for their personal use. Their level of sacrifice for the needs of the church was not what they led others to believe.

Had God not intervened to abort their plan, they would have lived lives of hypocrisy for who knows how long, daily "practicing" the lie (Revelation 22:15) that they had "given all" to God. Without question, they would have lived the same sort of burdensome lives endured by Joseph's brothers for decades after their clandestine treachery toward their younger brother (see Genesis 37:23-36), as they feared serendipity every moment—a slip of the tongue, the development of an unwelcome and unforeseen circumstance, the vengeance of God, anything which might suddenly reveal the truth to their father, exposing them as the rogues they really were. Theirs was a skulking lifestyle—the way of life of any hypocrite, analogous to perpetually wearing a mask or a disguise to hide the real self, pretending to be one person, all the while being another.

Hypocrisy Brings a Curse

But that is only half of the nasty story. Sir Walter Scott well wrote, "Oh, what a tangled web we

weave, / When first we practice to deceive."⁵ The hypocrite, enjoying the benefits of his duplicity (such as wealth, status, etc.) becomes desperately committed to maintaining the façade at any cost, doing all that becomes necessary to keep the charade going, lest he suffer financial, social, or emotional losses that his carnality could not accept. The cause of perpetuating the lie comes to enmesh his spirit. The myth becomes master.

So it was that the Bible's archetypal hypocrites, the Pharisees, became consumed with destroying Jesus' status with the people, ultimately obsessed with killing Him. In John 3:19-20, Christ pulls no punches in speaking to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, stressing the ubiquity of the situation:

This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. *Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure.* (The Message)

This "[running] for the darkness" is the type of lifestyle Revelation 22:15 describes with the term "loving and doing falsehood" (*Disciples' Literal New Testament*). The *Easy-to-Read Version* refers to people living this way as those "who love to lie and pretend to be good." God will have none of that!

Such people find themselves separated from God, having no access to the New Jerusalem. God, capable of "discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12), handily distinguishes reality from appearance. With Him, illusion is impossible. He cannot be fooled. Ultimately, the mask drops to the ground as all is revealed.

One final note about Ananias and Sapphira: Luke does not specify the amount of money they held back. Was it 5% of the sales price or 20% or 50%? We do not know, and it does not matter! A lie is a lie. There are no "little white lies." A life of duplicity can develop around any lie, big or little. It will always bear the same fruit, however.

Looking at the underlying commonality of the Ebal-curses—that they focus on secret sin—we may conclude that the six tribes on Ebal represent those church members whom we could call "wolves in sheep's clothing,"⁶ in whom God finds unrepented sin, individuals living a secret life, closeted in some way, hypocrites.

Conversely, we may conclude that the six tribes atop Mount Gerizim symbolize those people in God's church who exhibit sincerity and wholeness of heart, unwavering commitment to keeping the principle inherent to the Feast of Unleavened Bread—and, by extension, living their entire lives—"not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (I Corinthians 5:8⁷).

Those on Gerizim, unlike their fellows on the Mount of Cursing, represent individuals who break their bread with "singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46⁸), fully committed to abandoning all sin, no matter how stubbornly closeted it may have been at one point in their lives, no matter how tenacious its addiction, no matter how much carnal pleasure it might bring.⁹ On Gerizim stand, symbolically, those of God's people who, recognizing the damnation of the charade, have firmly rejected living a double-life. Those who so shun sham and find no pleasure in the mask really do stand on the Mountain of Blessing!

Postscript: Expect the Unexpected

One final observation serves as a coda.

One of the characteristics of the judgment-leading-to-division model we identified in Part Two is the element of surprise. When God judges His people, dividing them into two groups, the line of division can be quite special—special in the sense of abnormal, extraordinary, or atypical. That line of division can be very much unfamiliar to us. The reconfiguration God effects through the division process may leave us, well, just plain bewildered. God does not always do what we expect Him to do. This element of surprise can catch us off-guard, unprepared for

what comes next.

In the case of the Gerizim/Ebal division, for example, God arranges the tribes differently than He did earlier. The mapping of the tribes in Numbers 2, which describes their spatial arrangement in camp, does not at all match the arrangement of the tribes on the mountains. Likewise, the mapping of the tribes in Numbers 10, which describes the order of march in the wilderness, the way the people walked every day, does not at all match the arrangement of the tribes on the mountains.

Numbers 2 and 10 describe normalcy: A secular, everyday arrangement. A profane one, if you will. However, Deuteronomy 27 describes an arrangement germane to the renewal of the Covenant. And, as we have seen, the Gerizim/Ebal arrangement has profound spiritual meaning for us in God's church. It is congruent with any number of prophecies, even, as we saw in Part Two, the Olivet Prophecy. There is nothing at all profane about the Ebal/Gerizim incident.

This thought gives the lie to a claim, floated all too often by some in God's church, that God will divide His people into two groups—one to go to the Place of Safety, the other to go through the rigors of Jacob's Trouble—along *corporate* lines, along familiar, everyday lines—ones we recognize so easily today. The example of Deuteronomy 27 suggests otherwise. Expect the unexpected, knowing that God is even now watching, evaluating, and culling. We need to be wise, like five of the virgins, lest we become caught off-guard. Remain alert and true to God, so that, no matter into what congregation He has placed us today, we will end up tomorrow on the right mountain—Mount Zion.

—Charles F. Whitaker

End Notes

¹ Of all the sons of Jacob, only Dan's name does not appear in the Revelation 7 catalog. The complement of twelve tribes is made by the tribe of Joseph, which is mentioned twice under the names "Manasseh" (verse 6) and "Joseph" (verse 8).

² Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Scripture are from the *English Standard Version*.

³ Compare I Corinthians 4:5:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

⁴ Romans 2:16.

⁵ *Marmion*, Canto vi.

⁶ See Matthew 7:15, where Christ warns that false prophets

may "come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." See also Matthew 10:16.

⁷ It is noteworthy that Paul, writing in Hebrews 10:18-25 of our ability to enter the "holy place" with confidence, includes the admonition to "draw near with a true heart" (verse 22). The word *true* there can also mean "sincere" and is so rendered in any number of modern translations. It is the adjective *alethinos*, (*Strong's Greek Concordance* #228), appearing 27 times in the New Testament. The translators of the King James Version render it with the adjective "true" ubiquitously. The first appearance of *alethinos* is in Luke 16:11.

⁸ *Worldwide English Bible*.

⁹ It may be this characteristic of total abandonment of sin (except for occasional slips, of course) which at heart defines those who are walking in the spirit, as Paul mentions in Romans 8:1-11.

Cleansing God's People

The Bible contains the record of one extended family of people and its checkered history with God. The book of Genesis reveals the beginning of Israel through the fathers, and Exodus shows their first faltering steps. Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy define what God required of them—namely, for them to be holy. Joshua through II Chronicles contain their many adventures and misadventures as they continually turned from God.

God also inspired seventeen prophetic books in the Old Testament to instruct His people, to correct them, and to warn them. These books were penned mostly before their captivity, but several were written after the Babylonian captivity of the Kingdom of Judah.

The book of Haggai is one such post-exilic work. The immediate application of the prophecies contained therein is the work on the Second Temple, but they incorporate definite dualities with end-time events. Of note in the last two prophecies of Haggai—which we will investigate—is God's desire to bless His covenant people, even when they do not deserve it. What we will see is that God blesses to improve the condition of His people, especially spiritually.

Haggai received the last two prophecies on the same day. Haggai 2:10 and 20 identify that day as the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, which is

called *Kislev* (or *Chislev*). Kislev falls during November and December on the Gregorian calendar, near the beginning of winter. This date—Kislev 24—is easy to find on the calendar because it is always the day before the Jews celebrate Hanukkah on the twenty-fifth of Kislev. These prophecies in Haggai were given on, and refer to, the previous day.

Historically, this date has been highly significant on several occasions. It was on Kislev 24 that the Temple was freed from its desecration by Antiochus IV ("Epiphanes"). The cleansing of the Temple began that evening, which, since it was after sunset, was technically Kislev 25. That is the origin of Hanukkah.

A lesser-known fact is that it was also on Kislev 24 in 1917, during WWI, that British troops liberated Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire. We can see that this is a significant date in Jerusalem's history,

and considering the dualities of these prophecies, it may be significant again.

AN UNCLEAN PEOPLE

The first Kislev 24 prophecy concerns the uncleanness of the covenant people and God's response:

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, "If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?"'" Then the priests answered and said, "No." And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." Then Haggai answered and said, "'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. And now, carefully consider from this day forward: from before stone was laid upon stone in the temple of the LORD—since those days, when one came to a heap of twenty ephahs, there were but ten; when one came to the wine vat to draw out fifty baths from the

press, there were but twenty. I struck you with blight and mildew and hail in all the labors of your hands; yet you did not turn to Me,' says the LORD. 'Consider now from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid—consider it: Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded fruit. But from this day I will bless you.'" (Haggai 2:10-19)

It is important to remember what came before this. Approximately 42,000 Jews had just returned from the Babylonian captivity that had lasted seventy years. Haggai 1 concerns God stirring up the people to rebuild His destroyed Temple. The account in Ezra shows that, after getting this kick-start from God in Haggai 1, Zerubbabel and Joshua did everything precisely as Moses had instructed. The priests were consecrated correctly, an altar was constructed, and the proper offerings were made, all according to God's specifications (see Ezra 3:2; 6:18).

In Haggai 2:16-17, the same primary complaint appears as in Haggai 1, and the same necessary reaction from God. The people were looking to their own affairs rather than to God and His will for them. In Haggai 1, they were more concerned about their houses than about the proper worship of God (verses 4, 9). In Haggai 2:17, God says that the people were

not turning to Him.

In both cases, God crippled their productivity. They were putting forth the effort, and there was no end of activity, but they produced little. God was cursing the work of their hands to get their attention. Their efforts to build were in vain since God and His will for them were not their top priority.

We see, then, a humbled people returning from captivity, a newly consecrated Levitical priesthood, a new altar, and the beginnings of a new Temple—yet God still declares the whole nation to be unclean. Because the people are unclean, all the works of their hands are also unclean, including the sacrifices and offerings.

TRUE REMOVAL OF SIN

The fact is, under the Old Covenant, there was no way to be spiritually cleansed. God provided instructions on how to be *ritually* clean, but the Old Covenant did not provide a means to remove sin from the people. The blood of bulls and goats, though required, could not take away sin (see Hebrews 9:11-22). They could only point to the future, perfect Sacrifice that could cleanse them of sin and prepare a people for their Savior (Galatians 3:19, 24). Thus, if they followed God's instructions, they could achieve a level of ritual cleanness or holiness (setting apart), but their sins could not be truly cleansed.

Through a series of questions that Haggai asks the priests, God points out that *uncleanness* is transferable, but holiness is not. Defilement or impurity

*"I struck you with
blight and mildew and hail
in all the labors of your hands,
yet you did not turn to Me . . ."*

HAGGAI 2:17

can spread from an object to a person to another object, but purity and holiness cannot. Holiness is personal and individual.

This principle is especially interesting in light of what was happening at the time. The people and the leaders were finally in the process of building the Temple, the dwelling place of the *Holy* God. It

contained many objects that were also holy, as well as the Most Holy Place. However, even the presence of God could not, by itself, make the people clean. To make them clean, it would take something more than just having the Temple nearby, with all of its holy objects and even the *Shekinah*—the glory of God.

This prophecy has a curious ending. It does not contain a call to repentance, except perhaps by implication. God says that His people are unclean, that the presence of something holy cannot make them clean, and that they had not turned their hearts toward Him. Then He suddenly says that from this day forward, He would *bless*.

In most other places where God begins listing the transgressions of His people, He concludes with something that sounds a lot more like a curse than a blessing. Yet here, His blessing seems to be as a consequence of their sinful state. It is not a *reward* for their condition, but rather, His blessing will be a means to bring them out of it. His blessing is the solution to their wayward hearts and their general uncleanness.

God does not specify explicitly what the blessing will be in this first prophecy, though verse 19 ("Is the seed still in the barn?") hints at it. Certainly, it was a blessing to have a Temple again to restore the proper worship of God. On later dates, it was also a blessing to have the Temple liberated and cleansed, and it was likewise a blessing to have Jerusalem freed from the Ottoman Empire early in the twentieth century. But these are all lesser applications of the blessing that was *truly* needed. Verse 19 will become clearer after examining the next prophecy.

RIGHTEOUS LEADERSHIP

The second Kislev 24 prophecy, found in Haggai 2:20-23, spells out a readily identifiable blessing: righteous leadership:

And again the word of the LORD came to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month, saying, "Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: 'I will shake heaven and earth. I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots and those who ride in them; the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. In that day,' says the LORD of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of

Shealtiel,’ says the LORD, ‘and will make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

This prophecy contains, among other things, the fulfillment of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. God is describing the time when, as it says in Revelation 11:15, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.” It is the time when the divine Stone strikes the Gentile kingdoms on the feet, and they are all blown away and consumed by God’s Kingdom, as Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream (Daniel 2:35, 44-45).

God will shake heaven and earth, as is described by the Sixth Seal (Revelation 6:12-13) and which is also mentioned back in Haggai 2:6 (see also Matthew 24:29, 35; Mark 13:25; Luke 21:26; II Peter 3:10). At that time, Israel and Judah will be reunited with each other, and more importantly, with God, who will be ruling from a liberated and cleansed Jerusalem. At the time God gave this prophecy, the Jews were still living under the shadow of the Gentile Persian Empire, so it held great hope for those hearing it.

Verse 23 singles out Zerubbabel, and though there may be several lesser fulfillments of this, it is vital to recognize the real, ultimate fulfillment. The name Zerubbabel means “seed of Babylon” or “planted in Babylon.” He became the governor of Judah after the Babylonian captivity. As a scion of the Davidic line, he was also part of Jesus’ lineage on Joseph’s side (Matthew 1:12-13).

Zerubbabel was indeed a prominent figure in what God was working out, but we must keep in mind that the One who ultimately fulfilled his role is Jesus Christ, the epitome of a righteous ruler. In the same way, the ultimate fulfillment of Joshua’s role as High Priest is also Jesus Christ. Zerubbabel is called God’s servant, but so is Christ (Matthew 12:18; John 13:16; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30; Romans 15:8). Zerubbabel was chosen, but so was Christ (Matthew 12:18; Luke 23:35; I Peter 2:4). Zerubbabel received God’s seal, but so did Christ (John 6:27).

Just as God chose Abraham and promised to bless all nations through him, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Judah to bring forth the Messiah, so God chose Zerubbabel and his Descendant—his most important Descendant—to be His signet or signature ring. God set His seal on Zerubbabel, but more importantly, He set His seal on Zerubbabel’s holy Descendant, the Messiah.

A BLESSING IN WINTER

When God takes note of Judah’s uncleanness, and her disastrous focus—idolatry—His promised blessing will be the means by which He will turn those things around. He will restore Israel’s and Judah’s lands and cities to them, and He will give them the definitive Governor and the ultimate High Priest. Zerubbabel and Joshua are just types of what will be fulfilled later by Christ.

“In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

GENESIS 28:14

When we understand this, we can go back to Haggai 2:19 and better understand the imagery: “Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded fruit. But from this day I will bless you.”

Recall that Kislev 24 is in the winter, a time of short days and long nights. Farmers have completed their harvesting, and everyone hopes that they have stored away enough to last until the vines, trees, and crops begin producing fruit again. Remember, also, that this particular harvest was probably sparse because of God’s curse upon their crops.

Winter, even in a good year, is not usually a time of blessing. It is often a difficult time, one of making use of the blessings that came in previous seasons. Nevertheless, God chose this specific date, which in some years could even be the shortest day of the year. He chose this bleakest of times to start His blessing—a blessing whose highest fulfillment will be found in the work and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This scenario sets up an intriguing possibility. We know that Jesus was born sometime in the fall. If we count back nine months from the fall, we arrive at a date in winter. Is it possible, then, that Kislev 24 is the date when the power of the Most High God overshadowed Mary and caused her to conceive the Messiah (Luke 1:35)?

Verse 19 contains a curious play on words that may support this possibility. A question is asked, “Is the seed still in the barn?” The word translated as “seed” is also rendered “child” or “posterity.” Remember that Zerubbabel means “seed of Babylon,”

but also recall that when God tells Abraham, “In your *seed* all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 22:18; 28:14; emphasis ours throughout), the Seed to which He refers is Jesus Christ, forty-two generations later (see also John 7:42; Romans 1:3; Galatians 3:16, 19).

Haggai 2:19 describes a time when the seeds from the previous harvest are not in the barn because they have been planted, but it is before any fruit was produced. It could also, then, describe a Child who has been conceived, but not yet born—and through that Child the blessing on Judah and Israel, the church, and eventually, the entire world would come. Again, this is speculation, but Jesus’ conception on this date could be another application of what God means when He says, “from this day I will bless.”

However, regardless of whether this speculation is correct, we see that God is incredibly active in the lives of His people and quite willing to shake heaven and earth to bless. Yes, God gives physical blessings, but the far more meaningful ones are not material in nature.

A PEOPLE CLEANSED

The book of Haggai exposes the people’s problems to be apathy to God and His purpose as well as their uncleanness. God knew what His people lacked, and He purposed to give it to them. These prophecies are designed to be an encouragement that God will act on behalf of His people, even when they are flawed. In fact, He acts on behalf of His people *especially* when they are imperfect because He is committed to *perfecting* them (see Hebrews 13:20-21).

God promises to cleanse Israel and Judah from all their iniquity—and not just to be near them in the Temple. Zechariah 3 is particularly apt, for Zechariah was another post-exilic prophet and contemporary of Haggai. While Haggai addresses Zerubbabel the governor, Zechariah’s vision in chapter 3 concerns Joshua the high priest, another type of Christ. Zechariah 3:3-5, 8-9 foretells a coming national cleansing that takes place by divine decree and the coming of the BRANCH—the Messiah—rather than through animal sacrifices:

Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, “Take away the filthy garments from him.” And to him He said, “See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will

clothe you with rich robes.” And I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by. . . .

“‘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.’”

Similarly, in portions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God promises to give them a new heart, a heart that is faithful to Him rather than inclined to its own interests. He will give them His Spirit, which will cause them to walk in His ways, and He will make an everlasting covenant of peace with them. Notice:

- And I will cause the captives of Judah and the captives of Israel to return, and will rebuild those places as at the first. *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 33:7-8)

- For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and *you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness* and from all your idols. *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you*; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes*, and you will keep My judgments and do them. . . . *I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses*. I will call for the grain and multiply it, and bring no famine upon you. (Ezekiel 36:24-27, 29)

- “Then say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the

mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. 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. . . . Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore.”” (Ezekiel 37:21-23, 26; see also Isaiah 44:22-23; Jeremiah 50:19-20; Ezekiel 16:62-63; 36:33; Daniel 9:24; Micah 7:18-29.)

Jacob’s descendants have bright days ahead of them, even though we know they will first go through Jacob’s Trouble because of their uncleanness and unfaithfulness to God (Jeremiah 30:7). However, if God has intervened in our lives through His election,

these tremendous blessings that He has promised to the nations of Israel and Judah have *already* been given to us! Through Christ’s sacrifice and our baptism, we have *already* been made clean. We *already* have a High Priest who intercedes for us whenever we repent and seek forgiveness. We have *already* been given a measure of the Spirit that produces holiness and thus the means to develop a pure heart. We have the means to prioritize correctly, turn to God, and seek to be like Him.

As significant as Kislev 24 is—and it is significant, if for no other reason than that it is mentioned five times in one chapter, directly or indirectly—and as significant as it may be again in the future, we do not need to wait for winter for God’s blessing. God has and is already blessing us. But He is not just blessing us with these things for our sakes. He is blessing those whom He has called so that, through the cleansing, our High Priest, and the Holy Spirit—all of which we already have, along with the pure and clean hearts we are developing—our lives may be a testimony to Israel and Judah of what God is willing to do for His covenant people.

—David C. Grabbe

Personal

Why Hebrews Was Written

(continued from page 6)

being the number of perfection and two of witness. Thus, a *perfect witness* was given by this beloved servant of the Lord to Jew and Gentile!

In the last place, there is one other evidence that the apostle Paul penned the Hebrews’ Epistle which is still more conclusive. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17, 18 we read, “The *salutation* of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in *every* Epistle, so I write, the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ *be with you all*.” Now, if the reader will turn to the closing verse of each of the first thirteen Epistles of this apostle, it will be found that this “token” is given in each one. Then, if he will refer to the close of the Epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude, he will discover a noticeable *absence* of it. Thus it was a *distinctive* “token” of the apostle Paul. It served to identify *his* writings. When, then at the close of Hebrews we read “*grace be with you all*” the proof is conclusive and complete that none other than Paul’s hand originally wrote this Epistle. . . .

Should it be asked, *Why* is the apostle Paul’s *name* omitted from the preface to this Epistle? a threefold answer may be suggested. **First**, it is addressed, primarily, to converted “Hebrews,” and Paul was not characteristically or essentially an apostle *to them*: he was the apostle to the Gentiles. **Second**, the inscribing of his name at the beginning of this Epistle would, probably, have prejudiced many Jewish readers against it (cf. Acts 21:27, 28; 22:17–22). **Third**, the supreme purpose of the Epistle is to exalt Christ, and in this Epistle *He* is the “Apostle,” see Hebrews 3:1. Therefore the impropriety of Paul making mention of his own apostleship. (Author’s original emphases.)

When Was Hebrews Written? To Whom?

Like the other epistles, Hebrews is undated. But internal evidence suggests that, since certain statements are written in the present tense, the Temple was still standing, and sacrifices were still being

offered on its altar. Most commentators conclude that it was written by the mid-AD 60s, or at the latest, before the Temple fell to Roman armies in AD 70.

The title given at the top of its first chapter in most Bibles reads, “The Epistle to the Hebrews.” No truly reputable researcher claims this title is inspired or even present on the original manuscript. However, these facts do not imply that it is entirely wrong because it is a reasonable conclusion from evidence within the Bible itself. The author wrote to Hebrew or Jewish people.

What Are the Epistle’s Theme and Character?

A theme is a work’s primary idea, which the author develops as thoroughly as possible; it is the chief reason for the document or speech. Hebrews’ theme—the contrast between the old approach to God and the new, superior one—strongly suggests that the epistle was primarily intended for a Jewish audience since only they had actual experience with its subject matter and illustrations. Most Gentile converts had little background in its contents because they were generally unfamiliar with Levitical practices.

The epistle’s theme can be best understood in light of the cultural and religious upheaval in Judea due to the clear superiority of Christianity over Judaism, beginning with its central figure. At Christianity’s core stands Jesus Christ, its High Priest. He far exceeds, not only all high priests who had gone before, but He also surpasses literally everybody, including angels, patriarchs, kings, and prophets, regardless of the office they had held within God’s purpose. Virtually every chapter in the epistle pays homage to the Hebrew leaders of old, but they in no way measure up to Christ.

The author of Hebrews asks his intended readers, Jewish converts to Christianity, to compare the old with the new. If they were honest, they could see the astounding difference between what they

had given up—Judaism—with what they had gained by choosing to live by faith in Jesus Christ. He, His way of life, and His promises are far superior to Judaism.

The author proves the superiority of Christ over the prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and the entire ritual of Judaism. He exhibits His superiority over the entire panoply of saints listed in Hebrews 11. In doing so, he makes a distinct statement about the preeminence of Christ over everything and anyone that came before Him to do God’s work. In comparison to Him, who is Reality, all others are little more than misty shadows.

Hebrews features a couple of key terms: “better” and “greater.” They appear regularly within the text in reference to Christ and Christianity. Also, readers are encouraged to look forward rather than back—to the world to come, toward a salvation yet to be revealed, to the coming Redeemer, to the coming city of God, etc.

Everywhere the reader turns, he is drawn toward one overriding reality: Despite their God-given status, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the Old Covenant were all but shadows, symbols. Through Christ and His eternal gifts and purposes, Christians can now deal with far superior spiritual realities leading to full inheritance of the Kingdom of God.

As for the epistle’s character, that the author is unknown is its first and most apparent feature. The author’s anonymity allows the reader to focus on the main character, Christ. It also contains no opening salutation identifying its addressees, implying it is useful and necessary for all.

Its most valuable asset may be that the letter opens the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ to full view. The reader learns just how vital He is to salvation, as well as all the indispensable work He has done and continues to do for the called. The author first mentions Him in Hebrews 1:3, seated at the Father’s right hand, and in doing so, sets an immediate, emphatic tone for the whole letter.

Hebrews focuses on Old Covenant teaching more frequently, thoroughly, and powerfully than

*“If then you were raised with Christ,
seek those things which are above, where Christ is,
sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on
things above, not on things on the earth.”*

—Colossians 3:1-2, NKJV

any other New Testament epistle, allowing the reader to see God's purpose for both, as well as to make accurate comparisons between them. Within its teaching appear strong warnings against apostasy, the most frequent in the New Testament. It appeals to the brethren to remain faithful and steadfast even amid persecutions and the incursions of false teachers. The author emphasizes heavenly realities rather than the natural focus of most people, the earthly and carnal, to raise the reader's sights to the more worthwhile goal.

Finally, the author himself calls it merely a "word of exhortation" (Hebrews 13:22), although it is also a warning and an encouragement. Overall, it is a positive exposition of God's gracious providence in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Covenants Are Important to Salvation

In 2018, I finished a long series of sermons on the covenants God made with those He sanctified, primarily the Patriarchs and the people of Israel. He instituted another one immediately following Christ's death and resurrection, in which the calling of Gentiles—non-Israelites—was an essential addition.

Covenants are essential to our spiritual well-being. God's overall intention in making covenants is to provide specific, binding instruction about what He desires of those called and living by faith within His purpose. This is especially important to us because we are already on the path toward the completion of His purpose in our lives.

Recall the author's conclusions to his epistle in Hebrews 13. We see that he is not looking for qualities the world extols and for which they reward with praise, prestige, and even riches. Instead, he seeks to encourage his readers to continue to develop personal leadership in terms of character and attitude molded and shaped in God's own image: practicing brotherly love, extending hospitality, aiding persecuted brethren, maintaining marriage vows, etc. Those attributes bring glory to God, pleasing Him. They are intrinsic parts of the

teaching contained within the covenant He makes with us.

A review of a few basic functions of covenants will set them firmly in mind and help us to understand the New Covenant. Much of the Bible's recording of both biblical and worldly history revolves around three covenants: the covenant God made with Abraham, the one He made with Israel in the wilderness (commonly called the Old Covenant), and finally, the one the epistle to the Hebrews calls "a new covenant" and "a better covenant."

The simplest definition of a covenant is nothing more than "a formal agreement between parties to accomplish a mutual goal." Throughout the world, such contracts are commonly used in business for establishing and guiding the specific obligations of each party involved. Covenants are the primary way in which the Bible formally assigns overall responsibilities within the relationship between God and His people. To a more limited extent, they also serve as a general guide for all humanity, providing a basic awareness of its obligations to the Creator.

Converted church members gain a substantial advantage in having clearly assigned and defined responsibilities within a covenant. It removes all doubt about their obligations to God and fellow man in accomplishing the purpose God has called them to achieve with Him. Yet, if the called would follow God by keeping His commandments as He does, a formal covenant would perhaps not even be necessary!

The most basic requirement is that no covenant with God excludes this absolute obligation: Covenants with God—including the New Covenant—*always* require the keeping of His commandments. It does not matter if they are literally stated or not. Why? Because God's overall purpose is not just to pay for sin but to eradicate it altogether in His people. However, even the best of us do not do this as well as we should. History shows that humanity has never demonstrated a willingness to set and follow such a high standard.

***"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God;
for it is not subject to the law of God,
nor indeed can be."***

—Romans 8:7, NKJV

Only the converted—those genuinely living by faith—will set their minds to accomplish this towering objective. It is a serious business. Even as carnal minds are fixed on earthly things, the converted mind must be fixed on heavenly things to accomplish this lofty goal (Colossians 3:1-2). Such resolve can only be established within a converted individual's heart. The unconverted person cannot do this because his carnal heart is always at war against God (Romans 8:7).

Another, always-present standard is that all covenants made with God are between unequal partners. God is the sovereign Creator who initiates the covenants. He makes our obligations clear, and He blesses when we fulfill them and penalizes when we break them. He is actively involved. The language of God's covenants gives a distinct impression that He is conferring a good thing upon men. In them, His voice is transcendent. There is no bargaining with God; He sets the terms of the covenants. His promises and rewards for obedience are always generous but also require thoughtful, faithful devotion.

Why do the obligations within God's covenants seem so demanding? It is partly because the agreement is being made with God. The First Party in the contract is no ordinary fellow human, and that makes the covenant intimidating. Dealing by faith with Him is daunting because there can be no fudging whatever on anything. He is always fully aware.

Attached to this fact is the overwhelming wonder that helps produce a realization of the purpose of the covenanted relationship. In accepting it, we literally become part of God's personal Family. We must never forget that, though the standards seem so high, they are never unreasonable and always fall within what we can accomplish. Why? Because God is sensitive about losing any of us.

The twenty-first-century Christian can easily struggle in attempting to understand the epistle to the Hebrews because its subject matter is so tied to the Old Covenant and its rituals. Even those

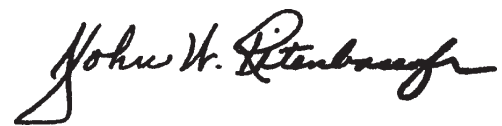
who attend a church regularly may have church pastors who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Old Covenant. They may also be somewhat ignorant of the history of God's relationship with the Israelites. This is undoubtedly true of Christians of this world, who have written off the Israelites as cut off from God and "lost." For these reasons, their preachers rarely teach from Hebrews. A sort of stand-off ignorance of the epistle prevails in the mainstream churches.

It is interesting that, when the author concludes his declaration of our Savior's significant involvement in the history of Israel and now in the church, he does not sound a war cry, charging us with the responsibility of storming the battlements as Christian soldiers. He could have written, "Let's go save the world!" or "Be zealous and take the gospel to all nations!" Instead, he exhorts us to engage in the mundane responsibilities of daily Christian conduct—all things that are well within the capabilities of every converted person. What he asks of us can be done.

I hope that we come to see Hebrews as a goldmine, a veritable treasure-trove of spiritual riches containing, among other things, an overview of thousands of years of the occasional appearances of our Creator and Savior to men and women and of His actions in support of the purpose He is working out. That same purpose is being worked out in our lives. Hebrews 1-2 are exhilarating regarding the future placed before us.

We must not allow the epistle's many fervent exhortations to drift through our minds without heeding their appeals. As the author writes in Hebrews 2:1, "Since all this is true, we ought to pay much closer attention than ever to the truths that we have heard, lest in any way we drift past [them] and slip away" (*The Amplified Bible*).

In Christian love,



"Since all this is true, we ought to pay much closer attention than ever to the truths that we have heard, lest in any way we drift past [them] and slip away."

—Hebrews 2:1, *The Amplified Bible*

Rebels With a Cause

For generations, outraged or marginalized citizens of the world have occasionally resorted to some form of civil disobedience to air their grievances publicly against the established order.

History is replete with the passionate protests of genuinely marginalized adults. However, a more modern picture of the “civilly disobedient” is that of a less-marginalized but overwrought college student demanding an over-idealized solution to a trendy, complex issue. Take, for example, the Occupy Wall Street movement or the anti-nuclear protests of the past decades.

However, as our agitated world lurches forward into a frightfully uncertain future, particularly from an economic perspective, weightier issues are inspiring people—young and old alike—to take to the streets.

Since the fourth quarter of 2019, we have witnessed frequent, passionate, and often violent demonstrations in the streets of Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Hong Kong, India, Iraq, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Tibet, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, among many others.

Not only are the causes more weighty, but the frequency and intensity of the protestations among the many angry movements are increasingly destabilizing society at large.

CNBC Journalist David Reid, in his recent online article titled, “Almost 40% of the world’s countries will witness civil unrest in 2020, research claims,” cites data from a study by Verisk Maplecroft, a socio-economic and political analysis firm, that indicates nearly forty percent of all nations—75 out of 195—are experiencing rising levels of civil unrest.

Though the details behind all the unrest are as varied as the countries, there are common cores of causality: growing economic inequality, socio-political animus, and surging nationalistic pride.

Since the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009, a growing number of people around the globe find themselves in dire financial straits, living anxiously from paycheck to paycheck, if they are working at all. Many approach retirement with nothing to fall back on but anemic government programs and forced austerity. Meanwhile, usually with governmental blessing, the rosters of the hyper-rich multiply along with the respective segments of the global economy that cater exclusively to their extravagant desires and whims.

At the same time, even more social and political pressures are mounting throughout the world as diverse cultural, religious, generational, and political ideologies clash.

In Hong Kong, the streets are teeming with ideologues wishing to prevent the creeping authoritarianism of mainland China. In France, a pension crisis has many fearing for their retirement security. Small hikes in public transportation fares sparked the riots in Chile. The Muslim minority of India seeks to gain clout against a hostile, Hindu majority. Iraqis are protesting to rid their country of Iranian political influence. Venezuelans are marching for their very lives against a powerful socialist regime that has destroyed the country’s economy. Americans seem intent upon civil war, spurred by animus against the administration of Donald Trump and the upcoming presidential election. Virtually every nation has experienced some degree of LGBTQ and climate-change protest madness.

If there is a bottom line to all of this, it would appear that the 2020s will be a decade of growing instability, crisis, and attack on the established order, the likes of which could easily distress and distract all Christians—particularly those who are overly anxious. Therefore, we need to exercise discernment (Matthew 24:4; 1 John 4:1) while gathering and sharing news, being especially cautious not to fall for—or engage in—rumor and speculation, which promise to be rampant (Matthew 24:23; Proverbs 15:14).

Although immediate resolutions for the core group of troubling issues seem unlikely today, history shows that civilization has a way of adapting and moving on. Unfortunately, it tends to move toward other troubles that will one day dwarf those we are experiencing today.

Eventually, a series of crises will set off an astonishing succession of prophetic events such as the world has never seen. As wise Christians, we should pay attention to these disconcerting developments while also maintaining a safe distance and perspective—to avoid experiencing or causing unnecessary anxiety (Matthew 24:6). In this way, we can concentrate our greater energies on overcoming our worldly ways while developing a stronger relationship with God, our only shelter from the coming storms of the end.

—Joseph B. Baity

Excellence in Character

Part Two

If a person thinks of something often enough, he will come to the point where he cannot stop thinking about it. His thoughts become locked in and focused to the point that he will not be easily distracted from them, and his behavior will begin to reflect those thoughts. It is therefore essential for our character growth to discipline our thoughts, setting them on admirable, commendable things—those *excellent* things of God—that define a distinctive standard of character for living a praiseworthy life of moral excellence and obedience to Him.

A common word used to describe moral excellence is “virtue.” *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines *virtue* as “general moral goodness; right action and thinking; uprightness; rectitude; morality.” According to *Webster’s Dictionary of Word Origins*, the Romans derived the noun *virtus* from their word *vir*, “to denote the sum of the excellent qualities of men, including physical strength, valorous conduct, and moral rectitude.”

The Bible expends a great deal of space to define and emphasize God’s standards of virtue against which all Christians should measure their lives. God even defines His saints as “the excellent ones, in whom is all My delight” (Psalm 16:3). Herein, we continue our study on excellence in character.



1. How does the Bible define and portray virtue? Ruth 3:11; Proverbs 12:4; 31:10; II Peter 1:5; Philippians 4:8; Mark 5:30.

COMMENT: In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *chayil* can be translated as “virtuous,” and it is used to refer to strength, force, power, valor, and worthiness (Ruth 3:11; Proverbs 31:10). The New Testament renders two Greek words into English as “virtue.” The first, *arete*, means “excellence or valor” (II Peter 1:5; Philippians 4:8). The second, *dunamis*, refers to the remarkable and miraculous power of God (Mark 5:30; Luke 6:19).

Whether denoting a mighty force or power (II Samuel 22:33; II Chronicles 26:13), an admirable or praiseworthy character trait (Ruth 3:11; Proverbs 31:10; II Peter 1:5), or the immeasurable capacity of God’s grace, goodness, and might (II Corinthians 12:9; Hebrews 11:11), these words indicate a gold standard of excellence, something all Christians should aspire to and revere.

2. What specific virtues does the Bible list? Galatians 5:22-23; I Timothy 6:11.

COMMENT: The Bible has several lists of virtues. Perhaps the most noted and quoted is found in Galatians 5:22-23 as the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Within these excellent character traits, we discover the virtuous mind and nature of our Creator. We glorify Him when we, as members of the Body of Christ, display these virtues, and our efforts remind the world of the infinite power and beauty of His moral character. Moreover, our virtuous acts serve to separate us from

a morally unhealthy and impure world.

The apostle Paul also encourages Timothy to pursue another special list of virtuous traits in I Timothy 6:11. Some of this list overlaps with the fruit of the Spirit while adding the virtues of righteousness and godliness.

3. Is discipline a virtue that God wants us to develop? Philippians 4:8-9; Colossians 3:2; II Corinthians 10:5.

COMMENT: In Philippians 4:8, Paul encourages the reader to discipline his mind with virtuous thoughts:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

As Paul builds toward his uplifting conclusion in the epistle to the church in Philippi, he urges the members to focus their thoughts on truth, nobleness, justice, purity, loveliness—all of which further define the absolute moral excellence of God. The apostle emphasizes the benefits of a mind disciplined with noble thoughts, enabling a person to concentrate on God’s very nature, empowering the good fruit of Christian virtue to be produced (Philippians 4:13). By doing so, Paul declares, “My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

In our next issue, we will conclude our study of excellence in character by focusing on the relationship between virtue and good works.

—Martin G. Collins