



"The value of persistent prayer is not that He will hear us, but that we will finally hear Him."  
—William McGill

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## *'How Long, O Lord?'*

This past January marked 19 years since the death of Herbert W. Armstrong, and the beginning of the corporate disintegration of the church. A new administration and "new" doctrines in the [Worldwide Church of God](#) (WCG) served to quickly and effectively scatter the church of [God](#). Nearly two decades later, only a small percentage of the former membership of the WCG can be found following shepherds who have held onto the core doctrines of the church of God. Even now the law of entropy is proved, as the splintering and crumbling of the various church groups continues. How long until an "outside force" intercedes to arrest this momentum and turn it around? How long will we be in this scattered condition?

While we in the church like to think of ourselves as having advanced beyond the carnal and stiff-necked Israelites, it would appear that we are following the same patterns that ancient Israel etched into history. Even though we have been given a new spirit—a heart of flesh, and not of stone; a heart to understand—the carnality that remains is going to lead us in ways similar to the Israelites. As we find ourselves scattered and corporately separated, wondering how long until things improve, it may be helpful to review the time elements of Israel's various punishments, subjugations, and captivities.

Upon initially reaching the border of Canaan, the Israelites' fear caused them to balk at following God's lead in entering the Promised Land. This subtle form of idolatry—disbelief in God's ability and willingness—resulted in God pronouncing a

punishment on the very nation He had just redeemed from Egypt. God caused Israel to march an additional 38 years—two 19-year time cycles—until every man and woman above the age of 20 at the time of Israel's faithlessness had died (Joshua and Caleb excepted). God allowed an entire generation to die out so the Promised Land did not immediately become another Egypt. Israel simply was not ready to take on the responsibilities of entering the land until they understood God to a much higher degree. Like water wearing down stone, it takes a long time to fundamentally change the human mind.

The book of Judges has been called the bloodiest book in the Bible because of the brutality resulting from the immorality of God's people. After the deaths of Joshua and Caleb, Israel went through many repetitions of idolatry, subjugation, [repentance](#), deliverance, and idolatry once again. Israel served the Mesopotamians for 8 years. They served the Moabites for 18 years. They were oppressed by Jabin and the Canaanites for 20 years. God delivered them to Midian for 7 years. The Amorites oppressed and harassed Israel for 18 years. The Philistines reigned over Israel for 40 years, before finally being delivered by God through Samson. (Interestingly, the average length of these subjugations was 18.5 years—just shy of a 19-year time cycle.) Sometimes Israel repented and cried out to God very quickly (e.g. seven years), and God moved to restore the [peace](#). Other times, God let them endure the subservience for many years until the people abandoned their idols and turned back to God.

Perhaps the best known verses in Judges are [Judges 17:6](#) and [Judges 21:25](#), both of which declare, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The entire book takes place before Israel called for a king "like all the other nations," so these statements at first seem self-evident. However, they are significant because in Moses' final blessing on Israel, he showed that there was *supposed* to be a King in Israel—God Himself ([Deuteronomy 33:5](#)). Because Israel would not recognize God as their King, they did what was right in their own eyes, and their repeated subjugation of varying duration was the result.

After the unrelenting idolatries of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, God caused both kingdoms to be led away captive, approximately 100 years apart. Judah's captivity lasted for a full 70 years. A small child at the time of the Judean captivity would have been an old man, perhaps ready to die, when Judah returned. The northern Kingdom of Israel's captivity and subsequent scattering has lasted now for more than *2700 years*. How much longer will it last? It will continue until it has served the purposes God has in mind.

The same can be said of the current scattered condition of the church: *It will continue*

*until it has served the purposes God has in mind.* We cannot know all of those purposes, or when they will all be fulfilled. But looking at the patterns of Israel's history, and the long spans of time that God often uses, there are a number of practical applications that can still be drawn.

First, Israel's history—in Judges especially—highlights that it is not until the people forsake their idols, repent, and cry out to God for deliverance that He moves to raise up a leader. How is the church doing in this regard? Do God's people recognize yet that He is the One who scattered us as a result of our sins? Has there been a thorough contemplation of what caused us to turn our attention from God? If our direction in this regard has not changed, God's motivation for scattering the church will likewise be unchanged. We have the duty to pray for unity, not merely among the churches, but unity with God. In scattering the church, in one sense God only finalized the disunity that we had already created.

Second, as the previous survey of history indicates, it could be quite a long time before God's purposes have been fulfilled and He causes a change in the church's condition. Are we prepared for the long haul? Will we be able to continue growing in our relationship with God even if the corporate organizations continue to splinter and shrink? Would we be able to stay the course without the support of a visible leader or community of believers?

Third, when (or if) God raises up a man to lead His people, the pattern is that the people will recognize God's voice in the leader, and voluntarily submit to that leadership. He will not need to proclaim his own greatness, or humility, or position; God gives His people eyes to see through whom He is working.

God's understanding is unsearchable, and His ways past finding out. We cannot know how long things will continue as they are. But we can be assured that God is overseeing all things, especially those pertaining to the apple of His eye. As calamitous as the events of recent church history have been, they can still be seen as a part of God working out His salvation:

We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet; nor is there any among us who knows *how long*. O God, *how long* will the [adversary](#) reproach? Will the enemy blaspheme Your name forever? Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? Take it out of Your bosom and destroy them. For *God is my King* from of old, *working salvation in the midst of the earth.* ([Psalm 74:9-12](#))

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## *From the Archives: Featured Sermon*

### [What Is the Work of God Now? \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh suggests that the preaching the gospel to the world, held by some to be the only identifying mark of the church, is at best the beginning of a long, complex process of creating disciples and godly offspring through steady feeding and encouragement to overcome (feeding the flock). God, as a responsible parent, is not one-dimensional in assigning responsibilities to His children, but frequently shifts gears, changing circumstances, giving His begotten children a well-rounded education. God - not Satan or an incompetent ministry - engineered the massive scattering of the church of God to move it away from pernicious and fatal Laodiceanism. We need to adjust to the new situation, realizing that God has engineered these events with the real work of God in mind: making man in His image and reproducing Himself.

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## *From the Archives: Featured Article*

### [God's Sovereignty and the Church's Condition \(Part Two\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Having shown that God is involved in world affairs, John Ritenbaugh concludes by showing that God's hand was definitely involved in the scattering of the church. Our reaction needs to be positive: that, if He felt it needed to be done, we should respond by growing and preparing ourselves for His Kingdom.

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