



"Man must cease attributing his problems to his environment, and learn again to exercise his will—his personal responsibility in the realm of faith and morals."

—Albert Schweitzer

**22-May-09**

## **Change and Responsibility**

My last essay ["Change and Constancy"] addressed the fact that change is always present in every person's life. [God](#) has created an earth in which major natural laws are constantly at work producing change. He deliberately did this to force us to deal with change as part of our preparation for His Kingdom. In addition, people's actions force changes on the environment and on our relations with one another. Economies change, earthquakes occur, rains bring floods, and a lack of rain brings drought. We will have weather whether or not, but it will constantly change.

The present worldwide economic crisis provides us with an excellent illustration. Theodore Roosevelt said, "Americans learn only from catastrophe and not from experience." He was generalizing, of course, because some people do learn from theirs and other's experiences. Yet, a great mass of people, though taught and even strongly warned about an impending crisis, do nothing and become trapped by the catastrophe they were told would occur.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where I grew up, two large rivers course into the city, one from the south, the Monongahela, and one from the north, the Allegheny. Eventually, they meet in the downtown area at what is called the Golden Triangle, forming the Ohio River. When I was a boy, the rivers flooded, usually in March or early April, due to snow runoff from the Allegheny Mountains. Every year, on the banks of those rivers, virtually the same people—whether owners of homes or businesses—were flooded. Every year, they would clean up when the waters receded and move back in, and so they would be there to flee the next spring flood.

Following a particularly bad flood, an article in a Pittsburgh newspaper asked, "Why do people do this?" Despite being warned by experience, the people voluntarily subjected themselves to it year after year. Perhaps there were a few years when the normal flooding did not occur, but even so, each spring they gambled against what history recorded as an almost-certain event.

Today's present economic crisis did not come without warnings either; in fact, there were many warnings. Articles appeared in major news magazines, especially those devoted to financial matters, warning that many Americans were on a buying binge of unprecedented proportions. They were not warning against consumption itself, but that much of the buying was on credit, and that the mounting indebtedness was alarming.

Eventually, the articles revealed that the debt binge was endemic through both the business and private sectors of the economy. Banks had extended so much credit and held too little capital to support the loans they were making that they were putting themselves in great financial straits. Yet, the lure of even greater gains to be had through making more loans was too much to resist.

In due course, the credit bubble burst. The banks in the worst capital positions failed, and almost all the others have put themselves into debt to the government to avoid collapse. We must not forget that God says in [Proverbs 22:7](#), "The borrower is servant to the lender." By being unwilling to prepare themselves for potentially calamitous change, even as they were receiving warnings, the banks have forfeited some of their liberty to operate.

The Bible virtually shouts God's warnings about the devastating events prior to Jesus' return. In [Jeremiah 6:10](#), God—in a voice that hints of a building cry of despair—appeals to those living in our time: "To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot heed. Behold, the word of the Lord is a reproach to them; they have no delight in it." Those who warned of an impending economic collapse must have felt just like this as people rejected their warnings as "old fashioned" or by saying, "It can't happen today. The system has too many built-in safeguards." But it did happen.

[Jeremiah 11:7-8](#) carries God's warning theme further:

For I earnestly exhorted your fathers in the day I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, until this day, rising early and exhorting, saying, "Obey My voice." Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone followed the dictates of his evil heart; therefore I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but which they have not done.

Jeremiah alone carries this solemn warning from God Himself ten times! Mankind, it seems, has a tragic flaw in its character, so strong that it drives him to gamble away his life—and perhaps his loved one's lives—despite strong warnings from a truly trustworthy and authoritative Person. Somehow people manage to convince themselves that they know better ([Proverbs 16:25](#)).

This message is of special importance to God's children. At this point, my concern is not about preparing to escape the end times' painful calamities, but about taking warning to prepare for God's Kingdom. This is far more important than avoiding the rigors of persecution, the pains of disease, the pangs of hunger, the fear of earthquakes, or the panic and deprivations of warfare. As real as those events are—and they are coming—they are nothing compared to losing out on the [Kingdom of God](#) because we failed to heed the Bible's exhortations while distracted by other things that burned up our time and energy.

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of those now laboring under the weight of indebtedness have done just this. At the time when they could have

heeded the warnings, their minds were consumed by their desires to make even greater profits while the getting was good. Jesus warns in [Matthew 24:37-39](#):

But as the [days of Noah](#) were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

This failure to [self-discipline](#) responsibly has been mankind's practice from the beginning. At Christ's return, people will be engaging in everyday life as if it would go on without change today, tomorrow, and forever. We, however, have been warned by truly trustworthy and authoritative persons. [Jeremiah 30:7](#) warns that just ahead is the time of Jacob's Trouble, a time so disastrous that no other period in mankind's history can equal it. It would be wonderful to escape it because God chose to grant us that blessing ( [Zephaniah 2:3](#)), but to lose out on the Kingdom of God would be a tragedy of far greater proportions.

Massive changes in the earth's political, economic, and religious configuration are coming. Wars will be fought on a scale never seen before, and weapons of mass destruction, held in abeyance since 1945, will be used. The ball is in our court. Now is the time to show God that:

- we have taken His warnings seriously.
- we [love](#) Him and His way of life.
- we appreciate all He has done for us and has given us.
- we are loyal and intensely desire to be like Him and His Son.
- through prayer, study, and submission, we are ready and willing to give our all as living sacrifices to be in His Kingdom.

Will we responsibly submit to Paul's appeal in [Romans 13:11-14](#)?

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.

Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord [Jesus Christ](#), and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

Let us diligently and responsibly conform our lives to the image of Jesus Christ that we might share life with Him forever.

- John W. Ritenbaugh

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## **From the Archives: Featured Sermon**

### **[Self-Government and Responsibility \(Part One\)](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

A major distinguishing characteristic of mankind is his free moral agency, presenting him with choices and the right to make decisions. We need free moral agency to be transformed into God's image. The volition to do right has to come from the core of our character or nature. Paradoxically, the way to maximum freedom is to yield to God's way of doing things. Unless one has the Spirit of God, he cannot exercise the necessary internal control to be subject to the government of God. Even though the church is not the government of God (John 18:36; I Corinthians 15:50), we need to respect the ministry as well as lay members, being subject to one another (I Corinthians 11:1). The operation of God's government absolutely depends upon each person governing himself, never going beyond the parameters of the authority God has given him.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility: Part Eleven](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

God's sovereignty and free moral agency set up a seeming paradox. John Ritenbaugh shows just how much choice we have under God's sovereign rule.

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