



"Events tend to recur in cycles."  
—W. Clement Stone

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## **A Pattern of Persecution**

Wise Solomon comments in [Ecclesiastes 1:9](#), "That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun." With this comment, he summarizes the preceding six verses, in which he illustrates the cyclical nature of various processes on earth: Generations come and go. The sun rises and sets. "The wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit" ([Ecclesiastes 1:6](#)). Water cycles from river to sea to air and back to the river.

We have a similar saying: "What goes around comes around." We often use it to mean that the results of our actions will eventually come back to bite us, but it also conveys the same sense as Solomon's statement, that a process goes through a cycle, returning to its original state to play out any number of times. Solomon wants us to understand that, despite time moving relentlessly forward, the cycles of nature and of human activity repeat within it. [God](#) created nature to sustain itself by running in cycles regulated by physical laws, but human nature is the primary force behind recurring human activity. It makes predictable, repetitious decisions because of its propensity for self-promotion and self-preservation.

The apostle Paul uses this principle in [Galatians 4:29](#) to underpin his argument about the difference between those under the Old Covenant versus those under the New: "But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now." The *New International Version* renders this verse, "At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now." (Scripture quoted by permission. THE HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. All rights reserved worldwide.)

He is referring, of course, to the story of Ishmael and [Isaac](#) in Genesis 21. Ishmael had been conceived as a result of Abram and Sarai using Hagar, Sarai's maidservant, as a surrogate to have a child and heir (see Genesis 16). From a more spiritual perspective, we could say that it was their human attempt to fulfill God's promise of an heir "from your own body" ([Genesis 15:4](#)).

However, their plan created nothing but disaster. Sarai naturally became jealous of Hagar's fertility, and Hagar despised her mistress, leading to abuse from Sarai and desertion from Hagar ([Genesis 16:4-6](#)). Later, after Isaac was born ([Genesis 21:1-7](#)), Sarai—now called Sarah—witnessed Ishmael, now in his mid-teens, laughing at, mocking, and generally making fun of the just-weaned Isaac:

So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac." And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called." ([Genesis 21:8-12](#))

God was purposely making a distinction between the humanly contrived birth of Ishmael—"born according to the flesh"—and the divinely appointed birth of Isaac—"born according to the Spirit." The child He had ordained would be the heir; Isaac would inherit what had been promised to Abraham in [Genesis 12:1-3](#); [13:14-17](#); [15:4-6](#), 18-21; 17:1-8; etc. God says unambiguously in [Genesis 17:19](#), after Abraham requests that God make Ishmael his heir: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him." For good measure, He repeats this pronouncement in verse 21.

God was also purposely establishing a precedent within His Word that became a principle His spiritual children could rely on to understand His priorities and purposes. He repeated the principle of divine choice in the next generation when Isaac's wife Rebekah conceived twins, Esau and Jacob, who wrestled with each other in her womb ([Genesis 25:21-22](#)). When she asked God about their struggling within her, He replied: "Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" ([Genesis 25:23](#)). Paul explains in [Romans 9:11-13](#):

. . . (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated" [[Malachi 1:2-3](#)].

God chose to work out His purposes through Jacob and his descendants, not Esau. God's choices continued in the next generation, when by inspiration, Jacob conferred the birthright and blessing on Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, rather than upon Reuben ([Genesis 48:8-22](#); [49:22-26](#)), as well as his bestowing the scepter and the promise of Messiah on Judah ([Genesis 49:8-12](#)). God's election—His calling, His choices—show where and with whom He is working and where His purposes are leading.

Paul, however, back in [Galatians 4:29](#), applies this principle to the then-current situation in the church of God. The epistle to the Galatians, written

perhaps as early as AD 49 or 50, focuses on the bitter struggle between the young church of God and the old and venerable religion of the Jews, who had been persecuting Christian converts to some extent for nearly twenty years. Paul is writing to a congregation on the verge of being pulled into Judaism—into justification by works rather than by grace. He feared that the persuasions of the Jews, which included threats of or real persecution, would sway some or even many of them into recanting their conversion (see [Galatians 4:8-20](#)).

For this reason, combining the principles of God's election and of the cyclical nature of human conduct, he mentions that Ishmael persecuted Isaac. Just as the child of the flesh persecuted the child of promise, the spiritual children of God can expect persecution from those living according to the flesh, especially those whom God has rejected in favor of His elect. Their human nature, in enmity against God ([Romans 8:7](#)), compels them to strike out at their supplanters in a futile effort to maintain their supposed divine favor.

We should not lose sight of an application of this verse to the church of God in the end time. The Jews' role has been filled by millions of nominal Christians in [this world](#) who believe they are God's chosen people but who will learn at some point that God's elect, His little flock, is the true [Israel of God](#) ([Galatians 6:16](#)). Like the first-century Jews, they will not give up what they deem as their place without a fight. Thank God that He, in His mercy, has not yet let this scary cat out of the bag.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Sovereignty, Election, and Grace \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

God is involved in the minute details of every converted person's life just as much as He is in the major historical world events. As a new creation of God, we receive continuous, meticulous, detailed attention through the

creative activity of His grace which never stops. God, as Creator, takes the initiative (as the potter over the clay) for the elect's salvation, enabling us to build the repertoire of habits called character. In this process, bringing certain things together in the lives of the called, both calamitous as well as positive, God fulfills His purpose. Even though we don't at times know where we are headed, we need to develop the faith or trust in God's vision for us.

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

### **[Ecclesiastes and Christian Living \(Part One\)](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Among the Old Testament's books of wisdom, Ecclesiastes stands as one seemingly out of place: full of frustration, blunt, and even a little hopeless. However, since God is its ultimate Author, its themes are realistic and necessary for us to grasp. With this article, John Ritenbaugh begins an extended series on Ecclesiastes and its trove of deep understanding.

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