

Following The Bean

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Forerunner, "WorldWatch," June 2007

Sometimes, watching world events can be a little like a street-corner shell game. We carefully watch where the bean is placed under one of the shells, and we try to follow it as the dealer, or "operator" as he is known, rapidly slides the shells around the table in a dizzying, chaotic course. Yet, somewhere along the line, our eyes become distracted, and we lose the bean in the confusing flurry of hand movements. Where the bean is becomes a mere guess.

Right now, and for the past several years, the bean has been passed among the shells labeled "Iraq," "Iran," and "Al Qaeda." We have watched news pour out of the Middle East in an almost incessant stream of bombings, attacks, retaliations, offensives, captures, initiatives, talks, and a host of other significant and trivial events. They are enough to make one's head swim! Where is the bean, the nugget of knowledge that will indicate where world news and prophecy begin to align?

In actuality, the news game is worse than the shell game because the former contains far more than three shells. Obviously, there is an "America" shell, a "Russia" shell, a "China" shell, a "Japan" shell, a "Germany" shell, a "Vatican" shell, a "U.N." shell, an "Israel" shell, a "Palestine" shell, an "Arab" shell, an "environmentalist" shell, an "IMF" shell, an "NGO" shell, a "rogue regime" shell, and a bucketful of others. Which ones do we follow? We need more than a scorecard to keep track of them all as they converge, crisscross, scatter in various directions, change speeds, and generally follow no rational pattern. We fear that if we look away for more than a few seconds, we might miss something important and lose the bean.

The game intensifies even further because we have to watch more than just a little table. Though they are rapidly losing market share, newspapers—especially giants like *The New York Times*—still lay out the playing field. Television and radio news outlets pick up the newspaper headlines and run brief stories based on what the print editors deem to be newsworthy. Internet news sites give the headlines their due, but because of the web's nature, they can also feature stories that hit the cutting room floor at the *Times*. Beyond this, bloggers have the ability to dig even deeper still, supplying the curious surfer with minute details—and opinions—on just about any news event in the world. Also to be considered are news magazines, governmental and corporate analyses, foundation studies, and of course, private-party knowledge. The amount of available information is staggering.

Perhaps the most worrying feature of the news game is that the bean may not actually be under *any* of the shells on the table. In other words, there is always the nagging fear that events are happening "under the radar"—and so far out of sight that very few people even become aware of their significance. Because of this worry, a whole cottage industry has sprung up around the edges of the news business, the shadowy realm of conspiracy theories. Here, facts mingle with suppositions and distrust of institutions in an uneasy alliance. Could the bean be hiding out of the mainstream?

One element in the shell game remains to be considered: the operator. In reality, the shell game is a confidence trick, not a fair game of chance. A skilled operator can shift the bean in and out of any shell he desires, and the player will never be the wiser. On the mean streets of New York and other

metropolises where this game is common, the operator often works with a pickpocket, further swindling distracted players and spectators. In the end, the shell game is a ruse, a distraction, to carry on other nefarious purposes.

Thus, we must ask the question, how profitable is watching current events in a world awash with information? Is it vital to our salvation, or does it distract us from more important spiritual activities? Does it keep us keyed in on what is really happening in the world, or are we being suckered by Satanic sleight-of-hand? Can we be ready for Christ's return if we are not riveted to the news ticker?

Jesus warns in Luke 21:34-36:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and the Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.

It is plain that He commands us to watch, but watch what? He does not say, "Watch world events." We have traditionally interpreted verse 36 to mean that, but the context only tells us to be observant, aware, on guard, alert, on duty. What we focus on is up to us, but Jesus' introduction to His command to watch is heavily weighted toward "watch your step" rather than "watch world events."

The parallel passage in Matthew 24:36-51 gives equal time to being aware of conditions around us and of our behavior toward others. This argues that we take a more balanced approach to following the news bean. Becoming fixated on the intricacies of world news will lead to neglect elsewhere in our lives, and ironically, too often it is our relationship with God that suffers. If fact, we must give priority to prayer, study, overcoming, and living God's way of life, and if we do, God will be sure to reveal the bean's location to His saints when the time comes (Amos 3:7).