

THE
WORLD
THE
CHURCH
AND
LAODICEANISM

IT'S IN THE WORLD!

In August 1987, a well-known evangelist in the church of God said, “You would be surprised how often the Work internally mirrors the world externally. I don’t think we realize how often this is true.” Members of the church must take this observation into consideration because we have an urgent and critical responsibility to prevent the world from impressing itself upon us. Impossible to do before conversion when the world held full sway, preventing the world’s encroachment is difficult under the best circumstances. Though contact with the world has perhaps diminished since conversion, it has not ceased.

Realistically, there is no way to get away from the world entirely. It presses in on us through television, radio, magazines, newspapers, business contacts and social intercourse. God’s people just have to deal with it. Being converted makes no difference in the fact that the world is always there. It is always right outside the door, an ever-present reality. With modern technologies like television, it is right inside the house! It is almost impossible to escape!

Fortunately, God provides His people with a formula for escaping. With that formula, each person must do the best he possibly can.

Flee from Babylon!

A prophecy against Babylon in Jeremiah 51:6 shows the basic formula. Speaking to the Israelite people regarding their responsibility, God warns, “Flee from the midst of Babylon, and every one save his life!” Remember that! To save one’s life, one must *flee* from Babylon, go out from her, leave her in some way. “Do not be cut off in her iniquity, for this is the time of the LORD’S vengeance.” Later, He says, “My people, go out of the midst of her! And let everyone deliver himself from the fierce anger of the LORD” (verse 45).

God often urges His people to “come out.” He commands Abraham to come out from among his people (Genesis 12:1). Through two angels, He implores Lot to flee from Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:12). Even Noah, in receiving instructions about building the ark, is told to come out—that is, to get into the ark and leave the evil society of the time (Genesis 6:14-18). During Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, God directs Moses to leave the dwellings of the wicked (Numbers 16:26). Isaiah echoes Jeremiah in saying, “Go forth from Babylon!” (Isaiah 48:20).

As the Bible frequently shows, His instruction pertains especially to those living in the end time. In a New Testament prophecy that may most directly apply to Christians living today, God commands His people to flee from the world, echoing Jeremiah 51. The apostle John writes, “And I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues’” (Revelation 18:4).

Babylon, as an enemy of God, is used in several ways in the Bible. One is a literal city. A second is a worldwide system of government, trade, entertainment and so on. A third symbolizes a spiritual entity. All three have to be considered together to understand Babylon. In Revelation 18:4, it is a city representing the worldwide way of life at the end time.

God prophesies that a time will come when His people must literally flee from Babylon to save their lives! During the Day of the Lord, God will move to destroy Babylon completely from the face of the earth. Christians then will need to leave it bodily, physically.

During other times the people of God must flee spiritually from Babylon to save their lives—to escape spiritually to avoid the plagues that will descend upon her. So it is with Christians today: One must leave

Babylon spiritually. Because Christians have responsibilities such as providing for families and managing businesses, cloistering in a monastery is not the solution. God commands His people to fellowship and lead upstanding lives within their communities. One cannot be a light to the world hidden in a monastery.

Gathering into communities like the Mennonites and the Amish sounds appealing to true Christians. Many groups of people have tried to do this. It appears attractive because we want to get away from the things of the world, but it is not what God has in mind for His people. He wants us to be in the world, but not part of it (John 17:11-18). We have been called to go into all the world with a message, the gospel of the Kingdom of God. As long as His people live in the world, they always face the danger of getting caught up in it. Christians always have to be alert, on guard, so that the world does not reel them back in.

Though now is not the time to flee bodily from Babylon, it is definitely the time to come out spiritually. Coming out is an inner transformation, a change or conversion, from what Babylon represents to something that is far better and in agreement with God. It is replacing the way the world thinks, believes and acts with a better way.

The Harlot and the Head of Gold

Revelation 18:4 is God's exhortation to the churches to shun the treacherous beauty and charm of this theological and political prostitute, Babylon. God uses very specific wording in His description of her in Revelation 17, calling her a harlot or prostitute. A prostitute can have beauty and charm. Any number of a harlot's attributes can snare a man's attention and divert him from his purpose. Because the world had already ensnared him before conversion, a Christian must be spiritually watchful that he does not return to it. Unfortunately, the world too easily reclaims the unwary, so the apostle counsels God's people to flee from it—to avoid the edge of the cliff.

But what must we flee? In Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel 2, Babylon is the head of gold. Gold is attractive. People give their lives to its power and attractiveness. The head of gold has a beauty that stimulates the eyes, the feelings, the desire for the good things of life. In addition, gold represents quality. In the prophetic image, the quality of metal degenerates or declines as time moves toward the end. Babylon represents a tolerable system, but through the ages, the system degenerates from gold to silver to brass to iron to a final mixture of iron and miry clay.

“As long as His people live in the world, they always face the danger of getting caught up in it.”

At its beginning, the system, represented by the whole image, is attractive. As in Paul's analogy of the body in I Corinthians 12, the head guides and directs the other parts of the body. In effect, this means that Babylon, the head of gold, has impressed its system, its ideas, its style, its qualities on all of civilization. Though the system is not acceptable to God, it nevertheless has stamped its mark on the whole world.

Everyone has participated in it. American culture is an Israelite adaptation of the head of gold. All other nations have absorbed its qualities, putting their own particular twists on them. The Germans put a German twist on them; the French, a French twist; the Italians, an Italian twist. The same basic system pervades the world—and as it is practiced, it is anti-Christ. Because of its attractiveness, its magnetism, and because all are defenseless before conversion, it has impressed itself upon God's people. Babylon is the world Christians must flee.

The Hallmarks of Babylon

From a theological point of view, Revelation 18 identifies the hallmarks of Babylon. The signs are idolatry, theological prostitution or spiritual adultery, self-sufficiency, self-glorification, pride, complacency, reliance on luxury and wealth, avoidance of suffering and violence against life. Reading Revelation 17 and 18 carefully, we find each of those traits expressed in some way.

Interestingly, God emphasizes three in particular, presenting them in chapter 18:7:

In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow; for she says in her heart, “I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow.”

Personifying Babylon as a woman, God reveals her innermost, secret thoughts and thus her true character.

The first of the three characteristics emphasized here is *pride, self-glorification*: “she glorified herself . . . ‘I sit as queen. . . .’” The second is *reliance on wealth, satiety, overindulgence*: she “lived luxuriously [extravagantly, lustfully, without restraint].” The third is *avoidance of suffering*, for she says, “[I] will not see sorrow.” Because reliance on wealth can easily lead to proud self-sufficiency and avoiding all suffering, these three are interrelated. What bothers God is that her self-sufficiency is aimed against Him. Who needs God when one has everything? Avoidance of suffering produces compromise with both conscience and law. It can severely damage one's character, and to God that is a serious matter.

These characteristics have much in common with Laodiceanism. Because Laodiceanism originates in the world, it is necessary to look closely at it. How does that attitude get into the church? It comes from the world! Church members bring it with them and never sufficiently get rid of it.

“Do Not Love the World . . .”

A familiar series of verses in I John 2 begins to explore the connection between Babylon and Laodiceanism. “Do not love the world . . .” (verse 15). Theologically, this makes sense after understanding what God says in Revelation 18 about pride, self-sufficiency, avoidance of suffering and the like. The apostle John, aware of the nuances of the concept of love, did not use *agape* here, but *phileo*, which means “have affection for, to cherish, to feel a warm regard for.” *Agape* is a reasoned love, and there need not be any feeling or affection connected with it at all. It is a kind of love that can easily be done coldly, calculatedly, simply because it is right.

Here in I John 2:15, the apostle says, “Don’t have a feeling of warm regard or affection toward the world.” Why would he have to say anything like that unless the world was attractive? The world possesses a beauty that carnally we find difficult to resist. Because Laodiceanism springs from this attractiveness, it becomes critical to a Christian. Many members of God’s church find the world irresistible. For some reason, they cannot avoid it spiritually.

“If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (verses 15-16). John uses these three spiritual phrases to show that God is not concerned about attractive things, like automobiles or houses or clothing, but a spiritual power the world has that many find attractive. Something about the world is alluring, and most find it difficult to resist.

In the next verse John gives a major reason one should not love the world. “And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (verse 17). God is mostly concerned about the world’s ideals, its standards, its concepts of right and wrong. These influence the way we look at everything, and produce inclinations, attitudes, feelings and the purposes for which we live. In the final tally, the world’s standards are short-sighted and selfish, unlike God’s, which are eternal and outgoing.

Paul writes in Romans 12:2, “And do not be con-

formed to this world. . . .” The Phillips translation reads, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould,” a vivid picture and excellent interpretation of what Paul really meant. If one is not alert and resisting its temptations, the world has the power to form and shape a person. We must resist it!

In the previous verse Paul says we need to sacrifice ourselves, strongly implying that such sacrifice involves pain. Babylon avoids suffering at all costs! If we fail to sacrifice ourselves, the world will have free sway and squeeze us into its mold. The world has an influence on the mind (often called “the heart” in the Bible), on our emotions and on our attitudes, and this influence ultimately shows in our conduct. Conduct begins with our attitudes, our points of view, our values, standards and ideals. If these contradict the way of God, we cannot resist the world’s constant pressure to squeeze us into its mold.

Worldliness Defined

Here is John Ritenbaugh’s definition of worldliness: “the love of beauty—that which one finds attractive, appealing or desirable—without a corresponding love of righteousness.” The product of worldliness is that, rather than “tend and keep” as he was commanded by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15), man will “use and abuse.” Undoubtedly, Eden was gorgeous, the best and most magnificent environment in which anyone on earth has ever lived. What did Adam and Eve do? They used and abused it until God was forced to banish them from it, placing cherubim with flaming swords to guard against their return (Genesis 3:24).

The world is naturally attractive. Much of the earth is still strikingly picturesque. Despite all the abuse man has done to it, planet earth remains beautiful outside its cities. Man loves to gaze at the grandeur of snow-capped Alps or the warm ribbons of color in the Grand Canyon or the dazzling beaches of tropical islands. Mesmerized by the visual impact of vibrant jungles or stark deserts, he will travel thousands of miles to look at a beautiful landscape.

Now, what do we do when presented with something beautiful? Do we dress it and keep it? Or do we use and abuse it?

The general record of mankind is that wherever he has put his hand, man has not beautified but used and abused the earth. God is more concerned about man’s spiritual beautification than He is about the physical earth, but He warns in Revelation 11:18 that He will “destroy those who destroy the earth.” Man does not have the right concept of beauty. He has the wrong

**“Because
Laodiceanism
originates in the
world, it is
necessary to look
closely at it.”**

standards and ideals because Babylon has impressed itself upon him. He uses and abuses virtually everything, and the results show everywhere on earth. This approach to life manifests Babylon's way and illustrates why God commands His people to come out of it.

God is most concerned about how we act toward other people, how we work within our relationships with our mates, our neighbors, and above all, our God. Do we use and abuse our relationships with God and other people? Do we do everything in our power to dress and keep? Do we have a love of beauty along with a love of righteousness? Although righteousness is indeed the keeping of God's commandments, God requires more of us than this. Unless we love the beauty of holiness, we will never become holy as God is holy (I Peter 1:13-16). The love of beauty must be encased in a love of righteousness.

The way of the world is 180 degrees removed from the love of beauty and righteousness. In I John 2 the apostle addresses this way of the world within the subject of love. Though keeping the commandments defines love, it includes a great deal more. Jesus' example is instructive: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." (John 3:16). He did not avoid suffering because suffering is an act of love. He loved beauty and righteousness so much that He was willing to follow the commands of God right to the cross. Beauty sustained Him, the beauty of holiness, the beauty of helping multitudes of sons and daughters to be born into the Family of God.

Babylon would not do that. Those impressed by the way of Babylon will love beauty as much as we do, but they will not mix it with a love of righteousness. They will not "tend and keep" fellow man and God. The ever-repeating result is warfare on the field of battle, in the family, in the workplace, in society.

The reason for the state of this evil world is the lack of the love of beauty *and* the love of righteousness. It is simply a lack of the love of God. The love of God is a choice that is open to all Christians. If one does not choose to love, the only alternative is selfishness—self-concern. A selfish person *will* abuse. That is the worldly system. Worldliness is nothing more than self-centeredness. An individual chooses to be self-centered or show outgoing love—to be worldly or godly.

Laodiceanism is the most subtle form of self-centeredness or worldliness. It is so subtle that it escapes the detection of those who should be most able to see it.

The Perilous Time of the End

But know this, that in the last days perilous [menacing, violent, terrible, dangerous] times will come" (II Timothy 3:1). Why? "For men will be lovers of themselves . . ." (verse 2). Self-centeredness will produce the crisis at the close of this age. Its evils will reach a climax that can be compared to the time just before the Flood or to Sodom and Gomorrah. Self-centeredness, everyone having his own perception of beauty and pursuing it to the n^{th} degree, is the driving force behind the perilous time of the end. It will be a time that fits the description in Judges 21:25 when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." During the period of the judges, no one could provide central leadership because people said, "This is what I believe; this is what I'm going to pursue."

So it will be at the end. People will abuse one another to possess the things they hold to be beautiful, like money or power.

[Men will be] . . . lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good. (II Timothy 3:2-3)

The concept of "men will be lovers of themselves" (verse 2) continues in verse 5: "[H]aving a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" Verse 7 identifies them further: These people are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Within God's warning of what it will be like at the end, He lists the traits that Christians must fight against when self-centeredness reaches its peak.

But the Laodicean does not resist as he should, and that is his problem! Though converted, he has an attitude of self-centeredness, strong enough that his mind is diverted from more important spiritual concerns!

From such a world we have been drawn, and it *has* affected us to some extent. America reflects this attitude nationally as its people return to isolationism, which is nothing more than national self-concern. Increasing numbers of

Americans, including major political figures, want the United States to withdraw from its worldwide commitments to solve the problems at home. The same process happened before World War II, when the U.S. became isolationist. Now many Americans want to move in that direction again. They see part of the problem, but their solution is to turn inward.

"The Laodicean does not resist as he should, and that is his problem!"

Catholics do similarly in their monasteries. They think the solution is isolation from the rest of the world and all its ugliness. God has better answers to the world's problems.

Take Heed!

What does this have to do with Christians today? Luke's version of the Olivet Prophecy gives the background of the terrifying events leading to the return of Jesus Christ. In it Christ sternly warns us! He specifically addresses His disciples, but we should think of it personally, living in the end time, surrounded by extremes of self-centeredness. These extremes should be enough to alert and sober us all by themselves! Yet Jesus felt that we needed to be warned: "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34).

Of itself, having a party is not wrong. But what happens when Babylon reaches the apex of its influence on men's lives? People fall into dissipation, into neglect of their God-given responsibilities. Christ worries that, although we intellectually say the world is full of self-centeredness and excess, we will still find it attractive. Thus, He warns us to be careful because, if we are not, the Day will come on us unexpectedly. This is sobering:

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. (verses 35-36)

He is not saying we should always pray, "Father, save me!" That would be self-centered. He says, "Develop this beautiful relationship with God that I've made possible for you. Remain in contact with Him."

Our prayers need to take on the quality of communication that is the ideal when a man and a woman date toward marriage. On the first date, they may not

know much about each another, but with further contact their knowledge of each other grows. In conversing, the relationship develops. They discover common interests. They find each other attractive and fascinating. As events progress, they work to improve their relationship so that they can eventually marry, continuing the relationship with greater intimacy, pleasure and productivity. God desires this kind of relationship with His people.

"A Laodicean is lulled into a spiritual complacency and apathy by the attractiveness of the world."

Jesus Christ warns that the same factor that ruins a marriage—if one or the other begins to find another more attractive—can ruin this relationship with God. In these perilous times, divorce claims roughly 50 percent of marriages. An institution that God intends to be very beautiful is destroyed because a love of a beautiful relationship is not paired

with a love of righteousness. The world has successfully squeezed the couple into its mold. Though it may have begun beautifully, the relationship has a horrible ending.

God intends prayer to be communication with Him to develop a beautiful relationship begun through the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice. As a product of keeping the relationship alive, we show our commitment by keeping our appointments with Him, upholding the vow we made at baptism, keeping His commandments, showing we are trustworthy by overcoming our sins.

While we work on this relationship, we are watching! We are on guard, alert, like a soldier on guard duty, making sure that what we hold to be beautiful is not destroyed. Imagine what would happen if a guard, while pacing at his post, was attracted by something to one side. If he goes over to inspect it, the enemy attacks! Babylon employs exactly the same strategy. And sadly, the duped guard exactly depicts a Laodicean, who gets distracted by desirable things. The rudiments of the cause of this distraction are illustrated in Luke 21. A Laodicean is lulled into a spiritual complacency and apathy by the attractiveness of the world. That is Christ's warning—stay alert, be on guard and pray!

THE MESSAGE TO THE LAODICEANS

And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 3:14-22)

The seventh and last of the attitudes within the church, Laodiceanism is the one that dominates the era of the end time. It seems more natural to think that this attitude would be the least likely to dominate in such terrible times—that it ought to be obvious that the return of Christ is near. Though it seems contradictory for the church to become lukewarm during such a stimulating period, Christ

prophesies that it will occur. It indicates the power of Babylon! Spiritually, she is so very alluring. To our eyes, the world may look ugly, but its spiritual charm distracts us from more important things. Why does Babylon dominate the church in the end time? It dominates the world, and the Christian *permits* it to dominate him!

Recall the quotation that opened the previous chapter: “You would be surprised how often the Work internally mirrors the world externally.” Why? Church members bring the world’s ways into the body. Laodiceanism is so subtle that those who seemingly are best-equipped to detect it are blind to it! This is Christ’s major concern for these people. It is not only that they are Laodicean, but also that they are blind to their own state!

Ancient Laodicea

First-century Laodicea sat astride two major trade routes. The first road ran from Rome eastward into Asia Minor, then beyond to Cilicia where Paul was born. At Derbe it split: One leg turned to the south through Damascus and on into Egypt; the other leg struck across the east to Mesopotamia, the ancient home of Babylon. Connecting the city to southern Europe through Byzantium, the second route entered Laodicea from the north and continued to the Mediterranean.

The founders built the city in the Lycus valley where these routes crossed. This provided Laodicea with unlimited opportunities for trade, but caused other significant problems. Ideally, prosperous cities are built close to abundant natural resources, especially water. Great cities are usually founded on deep natural harbors or on the banks of navigable rivers where water is abundant. Unfortunately,

Laodicea was not established near an adequate water supply. More driven by trade, its builders located it where the roads crossed.

However, the city had much in its favor, and of special note were its three main industries. The Laodiceans produced a glossy, black wool prized by the wealthy all over the world. No one knows whether its rich color came from a particular strain of sheep that they bred in the area or if they dyed it, but the quality of the wool is indisputable. In fact, they cornered the market in this commodity, producing tremendous wealth.

Their second business was medicine. Laodicea boasted of one of the most renowned medical schools in the world, and with it came all of its associated industries like pharmaceuticals. They produced a world-famous salve, reputed to cure certain kinds of eye diseases. Another salve supposedly healed ear problems. People came from all over the Roman world in search of remedies for their ailments.

These two industries produced a third that multiplied their already vast wealth—banking. Laodicea became a center of currency exchange and money lending. Cicero, it is said, cashed huge bank drafts there. So huge were its assets that, when it was demolished by a first-century earthquake, the city refused Rome's offer of help, rebuilding with its own funds.

Laodicea, then, had a monopoly in textiles, a world-renowned medical industry, and a prosperous financial center. Writers of the ancient world speak openly of their envy of Laodicean wealth. Record after record attests to their status.

Their one weakness was their water supply. Water had to be piped in to Laodicea. Cold water could come from the abundant supply at Colossae, but by the time it traveled the ten or so miles from the cold springs, it was lukewarm. About six miles away in Hierapolis were hot springs, but that water, too, was lukewarm when it reached Laodicea. Whether they piped in the cold or the hot water, it arrived at Laodicea lukewarm.

What does Christ mean by this metaphor? Cold water stimulates and invigorates. Nothing refreshes more than drinking a glass of cold water on a hot day. And hot water? It is useful for health. Not only do we mix it with teas, herbs, broths and the like, but it also works as a solvent, good for cleaning just about anything.

What does lukewarm water do? Christ's complaint against the Laodiceans is revealed here: It is good for nothing! The Laodicean is useless to Him. Lukewarm water is an emetic; it makes one vomit.

In terms of God's work, a lukewarm Christian is useless. The other traits of Laodiceanism spring from this characteristic of uselessness. As Head of the church, Christ cannot use them in the spiritual state in which He finds them. We should think of this in terms of biblical symbolism: Water represents God's Holy Spirit.

“The Faithful and True Witness . . .”

In verse 14 Jesus Christ calls Himself “the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness. . . .” We say, “Amen,” at the end of a prayer. What is “amen”? It affirms that the prayer is true and one agrees with it. Here Jesus is the Amen. Descriptive terms follow it to help us understand—He is a “Faithful and True Witness.” Christ is the faithful and true witness of God—His example is an exact representation of what God would be like if He were a man. Already, He is contrasting Himself with the Laodicean and what He finds so distasteful. They are faithless in carrying out their responsibilities to Christ. They are lukewarm—good for nothing but vomiting.

We have been called to be witnesses. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “[Y]ou are My witnesses . . . that I am God” (Isaiah 43:12). He has made witnessing our responsibility. We witness with our lives, but the Laodicean fails miserably as a witness because he is so worldly. The only witness Christ gets out of him is that he is worldly, which is spiritually useless.

The illustration described here is as if the Laodiceans were on trial, and Christ, the Faithful and True

Witness, is testifying against them. As the Source of all creation, He is not fooled by their diplomacy and compromise; He sees their witness is unfaithful and untrue. In fact, the word “Laodicea” means “judgment of the people,” and the entire letter is a study in contrasting judgments, the Laodicean's and God's. The physical man looks at his material and social circumstances and evaluates himself as spiritually sound. On the other hand, the spiritual God looks at the same person and sees spiritual poverty.

Next, Christ, as the Amen, admits the truth about them. “I know your works [obedience and service], that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot” (Revelation 3:15). Why does He wish this? Because if they were either cold or hot, they would be useful to Him. Lukewarm Christians send confusing messages. In this state, being useless to Him, He spews them out of His mouth. All the messages to these seven churches highlight works because they are evidence of how Christians

“Laodiceans are faithless in carrying out their responsibilities to Christ.”

conduct their relationships with God. Works reveal the heart. They are a gauge of one's witness and spiritual state.

Metaphorically, what does lukewarmness signify here? To define it to this point, a rough definition might be "that which gives no refreshment, or that which has neither the cleansing properties of hot water nor the refreshing properties of cold."

Modern synonyms of the word "lukewarm" give illuminating insights into its use in this letter: lacking ardor, enthusiasm or conviction; moderate; mild; unemotional; halfhearted; hesitant; indecisive; irresolute; uncertain; uncommitted; unresponsive; indifferent; impassive; languid; phlegmatic; apathetic; nonchalant; lackadaisical.

Recall the hallmarks of Babylon: pride, self-glorification, reliance on wealth, satiety, complacency, avoidance of suffering. Although he has the abilities and resources to be a great witness, the Laodicean is complacent, self-satisfied, bored with or indifferent to the real issues of life. For a Christian, the real issues are faith in Christ and our Christian responsibility. And to do the work Christ has called us to, our loyalty and devotion must be to Him, first and foremost!

A Spiritual Condition

A problem arises, however, in "spotting" a Laodicean—these qualities do not necessarily show on the outside. Why? Remember Christ describes a spiritual condition; this is a matter of the heart. What does He want to see in him? He wants the Laodicean to get off the fence—to be one way or the other, cold or hot. Conversely, the Laodicean judges that he is balanced, right in the middle; but his concept of balance is skewed. Why will he not move off the middle? He feels he has it good there! If he moves left or right, he fears that he will suffer! Thus, he has no desire to move.

Then what happens? The Laodicean must compromise. This is interesting in light of what the history books record. Ancient Laodicea's main line of defence was conciliation and compromise! Why? Again, the answer lies in the city's inadequate water supply, making it very susceptible to the siege of an invading army. By having its tenuous water supply cut off, the city was at the mercy of its attacker. With no water, it could hold out for only a short while. The Laodicean solution? They became masters of appeasement, accommodation, conciliation and diplomacy. Peace at any cost! How did they appease? They bought their enemies off! Laodicea used its wealth to conciliate and compromise.

"Although he has the abilities and resources to be a great witness, the Laodicean is complacent, self-satisfied, bored or indifferent to the real issues of life."

Christ uses the attitude of the surrounding environment to illustrate that those in the church of Laodicea are affected by the attitudes of the world. Without even realizing it, they behave exactly like their unconverted neighbors. They are worldly. Though they are not out on the streets robbing banks, raping, looting, murdering, mugging grandmothers or abus-

ing children, in their hearts they have the same general approach to life as Babylon has. Theologically, spiritually, they hold the same values as Babylon, proved by their works. Spiritually, they become adept in avoiding the sacrifices that might be necessary to overcome and grow in character, wisdom, and understanding. In other words, they are skilled in appeasing Satan and their own consciences.

Christ says He will spew, or vomit, the Laodicean from His mouth! That is how He views this attitude of compromise with principles, ideals, standards and truth!

Lazy Laodiceans?

Some may expect Laodiceans to be lazy, but on the contrary they are often workaholics. Satan has foisted this false concept of Laodiceanism onto the church. One cannot become "rich and increased with goods" by being lazy! Their problem is a faulty setting of priorities. They are very vigorous people, but they are vigorous in areas that fail miserably to impress their Judge, Christ. Vigorous in conducting business and other carnal affairs, they are lackadaisical in pursuing the beauty of holiness, which is their calling. They are not vigorous or zealous in maintaining their prayer life with God or in studying. They are not energetic in making the sacrifices necessary to love their brethren or in developing their relationships with others. Nor are they enthusiastic about guarding the standards and principles of God. By erring in the setting of priorities, they victimize themselves.

Over the last fifteen years of his life, Herbert Armstrong expressed deep concern about the church becoming Laodicean. Because of the many activities this world offers, he saw that ultimately they distract us, cause us to set wrong priorities and keep us from putting our time, energy, and vigor into godly things. He often cited Daniel 12:4 as a telltale sign of the last days: "... seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." Are we busy in this age? Satan is a slick strategist, and he really deceives anyone who allows himself to believe that busyness and prosperity are signs of righteousness.

Christ's Judgment

Notice the difference between the Laodicean's judgment and Christ's:

Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. . . . (Revelation 3:17)

The Laodicean may not necessarily say these things consciously, but he shouts it for all to see by his works and way of life! He thinks he lives in his "golden years." Being blind to his own spiritual poverty, however, is the real tragedy of his situation. He thinks he is in good standing with God. Christ judges differently, very concerned that he cannot see his spiritual condition. He is spiritually bereft.

Christ describes the Laodicean as "poor." Biblically, "poor" does not mean the same as our normal English usage of the word. It indicates someone who is weak, with no consideration of how wealthy he may be. To God, the Laodicean is spiritually weak, when he thinks he is strong.

Next, he is "blind." Of course, this is not physical blindness, but a lack of spiritual comprehension or judgment. Just as a blind person cannot use his eyes to judge a circumstance, the Laodicean is unaware, unknowing, unobservant, uncomprehending and heedless.

Christ also judges him as "naked." Clothing, or its lack, illustrates a person's state of righteousness, and here it shows converted people who are still carnal, as Paul called the Corinthians (I Corinthians 3:3). The Laodicean is dominated by his fleshly attitudes. Physically oriented, he is governed by human nature, rather than by God.

"Wretched and miserable" together provide further descriptions of "poor, blind, and naked." Because they are poor, blind and naked, they are wretched and miserable, although they have not realized it. "Miserable" has been translated elsewhere as "pitiful" or "pitiable." "Wretched" is especially interesting. In other places in the New Testament, it indicates destitution because of war. God means that while they may be wealthy, they are losing the spiritual war against Satan and their carnal nature.

"Buy From Me . . ."

Christ then gives the Laodicean His advice:
I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white

garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. (Revelation 3:18)

Gold, clothing and eye salve represent the three major industries of Laodicea: banking, textiles and medicines.

Gold, spiritual riches (I Peter 1:7), contrasts with the word "poor," and fire symbolizes trial. God advises them to obtain spiritual riches produced through trials, which the self-sufficient Laodicean avoids by compromising.

"White garments" contrast with their nakedness. Clothing helps us to distinguish people and groups. Because of the differences between men and women's clothing, sexual distinctions can be made. Clothes reveal status: A man in a well-tailored suit falls into a different category than a beggar in rags. Clothing provides a measure of comfort and protection from the elements. It hides shame and deformity. Biblically, God uses it to symbolize righteousness. He instructs the Laodicean to dress himself in the holiness of God to cover his spiritual nakedness, self-righteousness.

Their need of eye salve contrasts with their blindness. Commentators understand it to represent God's Spirit coupled with obedience. The combination of the two gives a Christian the ability to see—to understand spiritual things:

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. (I Corinthians 2:10-11)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. (Psalm 111:10)

"Being blind to his own spiritual poverty, however, is the real tragedy of a Laodicean's situation."

"Zealous" means "earnest, enthusiastic, to seek or desire earnestly, to have an ardent love," in contrast to their spiritual indifference. God desires them to have a burning desire for Him and His way of life. Instead, Revelation 3:14-21 paints a clear picture of

people who are successful by the world's standards, yet spiritually deficient. They are devoid of spiritual judgment while rich with material substance. Their problem is an internal attitude: The mechanism that drives them is neither godly nor ardent.

The Laodicean is not indifferent to making money or making his way in the world. He is not indifferent to

improving himself through education or experience. Spending huge amounts of his time and energy pursuing his own interests, his problem is that he chooses the wrong priorities in life. He spends most of his time and energy achieving the wrong goals.

This pursuit of wrong goals restates the actual sin the Laodicean commits: idolatry, placing something above God in one's life. How? He serves himself within the church as if he did it for God. Perhaps he is involved in the work, but only half-heartedly. Though probably attending Sabbath services faithfully, he is not personally involved with God on a day-to-day basis. He may serve within the church to be recognized, respected, maybe even ordained, forgetting that God called him to be a faithful and true witness of Him. Because he pays attention to the wrong things, his witness suffers terribly. Expending so much energy and enthusiasm in pursuing his own interests, he shows little or no interest in God or His goals. He is indifferent and lukewarm toward his relationship with God.

Because he has had such great success in amassing wealth, the Laodicean judges himself to be self-sufficient, revealing that his faith is in what he can see, whether his own abilities or his wealth. He is not living by faith, but by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). To put more money in his pocket, he can become energetic, hard-working and fervent, but he cannot seem to arouse himself about the things of God, which he cannot see. Such an attitude will incur the wrath of God every time!

A Warning From God

In this indictment of the Laodiceans, God, in His inimitable way, is warning us of what happens to a people's heart and mind just prior to a nation's collapse. Since we live so close to the time of the end, we need to take His warning and admonition to heart.

History documents the wild debauchery of Rome before its inglorious fall. The depths of its perversions and excesses make fascinating and disgusting reading, yet we need to consider it in terms of the present condition of modern Israelite nations. We may not allow our sporting events to become as violent as gladiatorial contests, but our emphasis on sports and entertainment is reminiscent of Rome's. The condition of America's heart and mind is displayed in our raunchy and violent movies and music. The United States is being set up to collapse!

Much in the world remains attractive and appealing. If there is not a corresponding love of righteousness,

however, those beautiful things can draw a Christian into Babylon's seductive trap, where the spiritual intellect becomes dulled and Laodiceans are produced. Only a love of righteousness will prevent a Christian from allowing his heart and mind to fall into Laodiceanism. If a Christian in ancient Rome did not have his heart anchored in a love of righteousness, Rome's debauchery, presented in an alluring package, would have gradually become acceptable in his own life. Without it, the Roman Christian would have had no protection from the deceptive charm of the world or the resistance to it that he would need to avoid its Laodicean results.

The Power of Wealth

A Laodicean deals with wealth on a scale few people have seen in the history of the world. Wealth has a power that produces an intriguing result. In a section of scripture Moses wrote in the last month before Israel crossed into the Promised Land, God warns us of it: "When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deuteronomy 8:10). God is definitely not against His people prospering or even getting rich. Many of his servants, like Abraham and David, were wealthy beyond imagination (Genesis 13:2; I Chronicles 29:1-5).

Instead, He describes a general principle, a natural trend, which happens to most when they begin to accumulate wealth. Most people cannot handle prosperity, and though God wants us to have good things, He desires us to have them in a way that will not damage us spiritually. His concern for the Laodicean is that, as the world reaches a pinnacle of luxury and wealth, he will be distracted by the magnetic appeal of all those beautiful things. He says in effect, "Don't forget your first priority!"

"The pursuit of wrong goals restates the actual sin the Laodicean commits: idolatry, placing something above God."

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out

of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, “My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.”

And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 8:11-20)

Every Christian needs to be aware of this principle. God does not condemn wealth. He wants us to prosper, but He also wants us to be aware that wealth can powerfully distract us from Him. In one sense, it is dangerous for Him to give His people wealth because it can turn us away from Him without our being aware of it happening. The Laodicean looks at his wealth and thinks, maybe in all sincerity, “God has blessed me with this, and therefore, God is pleased with the way I am.” But God is not pleased in the least! He is incensed by his self-satisfaction, not the fact that he has wealth.

When God says that Israel’s “heart is lifted up,” its sense is the same as the Laodicean saying, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” (Revelation 3:17). He could just as well have said, “I don’t need you, God!” When he looks at his wealth, he judges that God loves him. Does not his prosperity prove that God is with him? Christ judges just the opposite!

But Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked [rebelled]; you grew fat, you grew thick, you are covered with fat; then he forsook God who

made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation. (Deuteronomy 32:15)

This prophecy regarding Israel confirms the power and influence of wealth. For a Christian today, living in a society whose wealth far exceeds the wildest dreams of most people on earth, this power

of wealth cannot be ignored. We need to thank God for the opportunity to live in a nation receiving the blessings of Abraham, but we cannot allow its influence to change our attitudes toward God.

Does wealth or poverty have any intrinsic spiritual value? Physically, it is better to be wealthy, but riches can turn one’s head spiritually. Incidentally, poverty has that same power because a poor person can become so busy with the cares of his daily existence,

that he forgets God. That is why Solomon beseeches God in Proverbs 30:8-9:

[G]ive me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food You prescribe for me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God.

The wealth of the Laodicean is not the problem. His problem derives from allowing his wealth to lead him into self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency and complacency. His heart is lifted up. These attitudes lead him to avoid self-sacrifice by which he could grow spiritually. People normally use wealth to avoid the hardships of life, and although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, a person not spiritually astute will allow the comforts of wealth to erode his relationship with God. In his physical wealth, the Laodicean is poor in the things that really count and blind to his need. He no longer overcomes and grows. His witness is no good—and useless to Christ.

God reveals His love for the Laodicean when, rather than giving up on him, He gives him a punishing trial. He allows him to go through the fire, the Great Tribulation, to chasten him for his idolatry, to remind him of his true priorities and to give him the opportunity to repent.

“God reveals His love for the Laodicean when, rather than giving up on him, He gives Him a punishing trial.”

SOCIETY BEFORE A NATION'S FALL

Just before Israel and Judah fell to the Assyrians and Babylonians, God called several prophets to warn His people and urge them to repent. In recording the events of their times, these prophets paid particular attention to the prevailing attitudes within their societies, no doubt inspired by God for the benefit of His church. If we compare their societies and attitudes with our own, we can gain insight into the problems we face in the collapse of this nation.

What was the dominant attitude of the people in Israel and Judah just before their fall? In virtually every book by these prophets, warnings against attitudes of self-sufficiency, spiritual indifference, complacency and self-satisfaction—Laodiceanism—are a major part of God's message!

Amos and Israel

One of these prophets, Amos, prophesied about 40 years before the Assyrians, tired of Israel's constant rebellion, finally overran the nation and took its people into captivity. Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 BC), the king during Amos' preaching, had made Israel powerful and very wealthy. By the end of his reign, the nation's might had increased to its greatest extent since Solomon's day, and its economic clout had grown in proportion. Amos illustrates both the nation's wealth and its attitudes in his prophecy.

The conduct of the average Israelite becomes glaringly apparent. In ancient Israel the social conditions during the reign of Jeroboam II had reached the proportions of what is extant in the United States today. A tremendous disparity between the rich and the poor existed just as in modern America, where most of the wealth is concentrated in only about 2 percent of the population. Soon, if the elimination of

the middle class continues on course, only two classes of people will live in the U.S., the rich and the poor. A similar situation was developing in Israel during Amos' day:

Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble. A man and his father go in to the same girl, to defile My holy name. They lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge, and drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god." (Amos 2:6-8)

Amos shows that those who had the money and power treated the weak, called "the poor," very harshly. Though they were not destitute, the poor had no strength in society. They had no power to change their situation for the better, while the rich and powerful manipulated the government and the courts to their advantage. The rich squeezed every penny out of the poor, even requiring them to relinquish overnight their outer garments, often used as a cover when sleeping. To top off the list, they were also guilty of sexual perversions and idolatry.

The prophet adds charge upon charge throughout his book. He says more about their wealth in chapter 3: "I will destroy the winter house along with the summer house; the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end," says the LORD" (Amos 3:15). Some of these people owned two or more houses, at least one for the summer and one for the winter. These homes must have been

luxurious! Certainly, they were not completely made of ivory, but the woodwork must have been inlaid with ivory, a symbol of costly items affordable only by the wealthy.

Directed primarily at the rich women of Israel, chapter 4 begins with Amos calling them an uncomplimentary name, then indicting them on the same charges as the men. “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring wine, let us drink!’” (Amos 4:1). He describes these women as sleek, well-fed creatures, who, for the satisfaction of their own appetites, constantly make demands on their husbands. Willing to crush anyone who gets in the way of their greed for luxury and personal adornment, they tyrannize the already powerless poor.

The people of Israel, even in their wealth, were still interested in religion:

“Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three [years]. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, proclaim and announce the freewill offerings; for this you love, you children of Israel!” says the Lord GOD. (Amos 4:4-5)

Three cities of Israel had become religious centers and places of pilgrimage: Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba. What is intriguing is that, even in their spiritual indifference, the Israelites loved to go to church! Since Amos indicates that their social lives may have revolved around the church, their purely social, not religious, motives may have been the problem.

This is intriguing in light of Laodiceanism. God says, “You may be coming to church regularly and enjoying it, but while you are there, you are sinning!” The Scriptures are unclear about what the exact sins were. They may have been breaking the Sabbath somehow, or they may have been indifferent to the messages they heard. What their sins were makes no difference because God’s judgment of their show of religion is that their hearts were not in it.

Justice Turned to Wormwood!

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: “Seek Me and live; but do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek the LORD and live, lest He break out like fire in the

house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel—you who turn justice to wormwood, and lay righteousness to rest in the earth!” (Amos 5:4-7)

The word “justice” used in verse 7 is associated with end-time circumstances in nearly every prophecy where social conditions are described in a nation on the verge of collapse. The Hebrew word is *mishpat*, translated justice, judgment or ordinance. Because he is spiritually blind, the Laodicean, too, has lost his ability to judge between right and wrong. He can no longer discern, as the Bible phrases it, “between the clean and the unclean.”

God speaks of this lack of judgment in terms of their courtship, their relationship, with Him. Similar to the situation today in the church, Christians need discernment, the ability to distinguish right from wrong, to make true judgments. The Laodicean lacks this ability, and it shows in the decisions he makes.

Amos illustrates this principle when it is applied to society, particularly the courts. “For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins. You afflict the just and take bribes; you divert the poor from justice at the gate. Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time” (Amos 5:12-13). The common man on the street, the poor, finds it is useless to take his case to court because he will not get a fair hearing—there is no justice. The judges have poor judgment:

“Because he is spiritually blind, the Laodicean has lost the ability to judge between right and wrong.”

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:14-15)

Here is another incident showing poor judgment and the Laodicean attitude linked. God has to return to the most basic instruction—what is good and evil—since the people have lost the ability to discern it.

“I Hate . . . Your Feast Days”

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

To be on the safe side, we will assume that Israel kept God's holy days, or thought they were. These verses contain three essential elements of worship: festivals, sacrifice and praise. And God in disgust cries, "I don't want any of them!" Their worship, though it was done in His honor and in His name, repulsed Him. It was repugnant to Him.

As chapter 6 begins, He strikes very close to home. "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes!" (Amos 6:1). Zion is often used as a symbol of God's church. Is the Laodicean at ease within the church? He is surely not at ease when he has an opportunity to make money! He will work all day and all night to fatten his purse. He loves to pursue his distracting hobbies and interests. But God spits him out in disgust! He is distasteful to God like lukewarm water, unable to be used for any real, spiritual, eternal purpose! The Laodicean, according to Amos, puts his trust in his own wealth and power, his nation and its leaders. Where is his trust in God?

The prophet then pronounces God's judgment. Notice the many parallels to Babylon and Laodicea. "Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near" (Amos 6:3). Now notice what Jesus says in a parable concerning the time just before His return:

But if that evil servant says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming," and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards. . . . (Matthew 24:48-49)

Amos and Christ speak about the same sequence of events. The attitude of putting off the day of Christ's return promotes violence and injustice toward one's fellow man. Appeasement, a "strength" of the Laodicean, virtually guarantees violence and war, as happened in the years leading to World War II.

[W]ho lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. (Amos 6:4-6)

What a picture of excess and uselessness! Like Babylon, these people live in indolent luxury, surrounding themselves with the latest creature comforts,

overindulging in rich and expensive food and drink. A glass or a cup is not enough for them—they must drink wine from bowls to satisfy their addictions! They sing songs that mean nothing, but in their hearts they think their songs and music equal to David's! Life is a party! And all they have to show for their lives is a lack of judgment: "Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives, and those who recline at banquets shall be removed" (Amos 6:7).

The first to go into captivity are the ones who live in excess, who seem unaware of the times. What happens to the Laodicean? He is thrown into the fire, a severe trial, which could very well be captivity (Revelation 3:18-19; 12:17). For a more complete treatment of Amos' prophecy, please see our booklet, *Prepare to Meet Your God!*

Hosea and Israel's Drunkenness

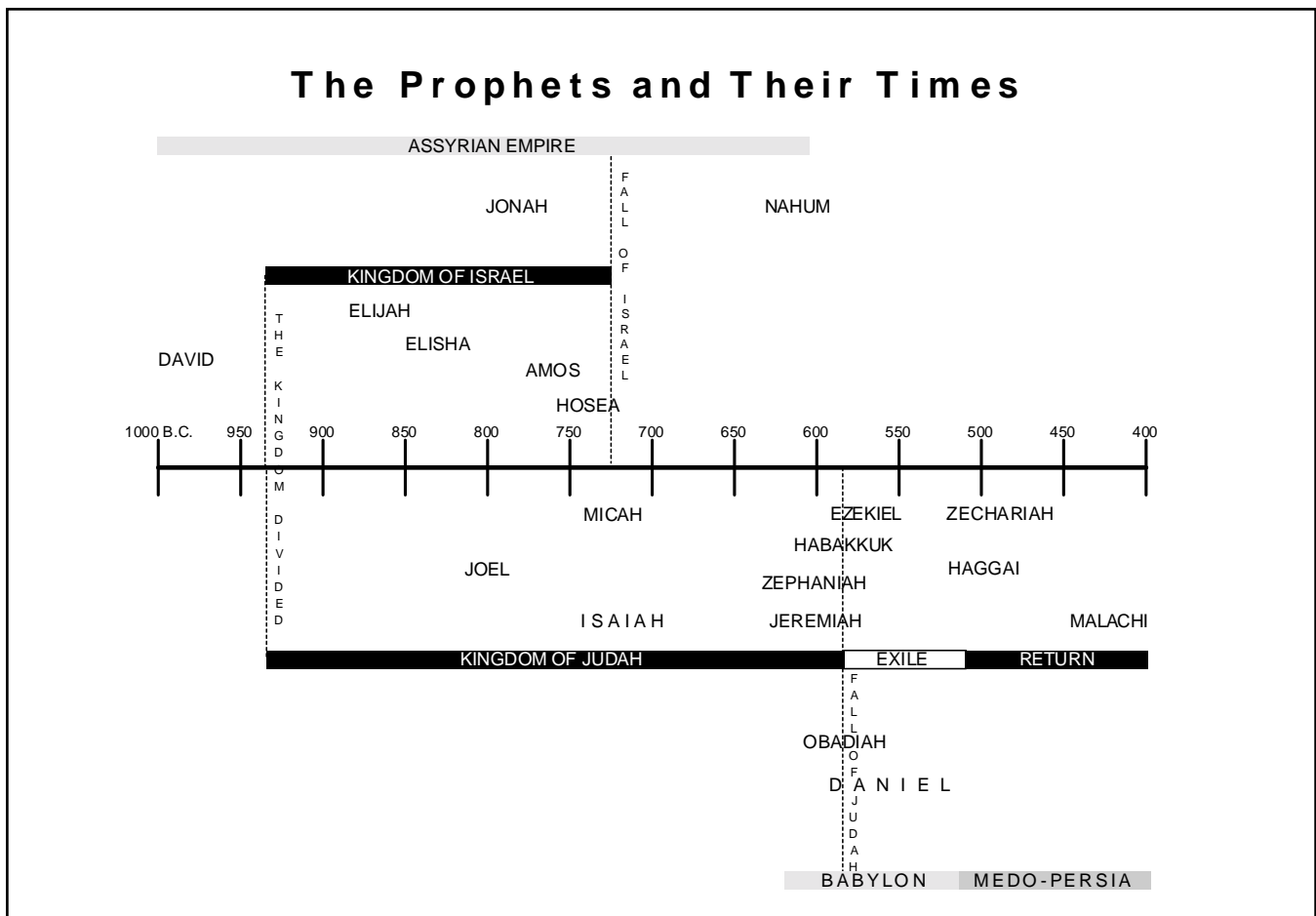
The prophet Hosea, a younger contemporary of Amos, prophesied to the same generation, only a few years later. Because Israel had not repented at the preaching of Amos, God sent Hosea to warn them again as they sank further into their attitudes and sins. The younger prophet approached the situation differently from Amos, giving us deeper insight into a nation as it falls:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. . . Harlotry, wine, and new wine enslave the heart. My people ask counsel from their wooden idols, and their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they have played the harlot against their God. (Hosea 4:6, 11-12)

Undoubtedly, the Israelites of Hosea's day were literally getting drunk and involved in harlotry, but for us today the application is spiritual. At the end time, God predicts, His people will be deceived by a force near demoniacal in its deceptive power. Because of their closeness to the world, they will share the great harlot's attitude, "drunk with the wine of her fornication" (Revelation 17:2).

Hosea's word-picture illustrates the effect a drug like alcohol has on a person's mind. Under the influence of alcohol, one's reactions slow, even though the person thinks he has better control. Most fatal accidents in the United States involve automobiles and roughly half of them occur with at least one driver under the influence. In driving while intoxicated, one's ability to make right decisions is severely hampered. Alcohol obscures judgment. When one cannot think clearly, a sound judgment is nearly impossible.

"The Laodicean puts his trust in his own wealth and power, his nation and its leaders."



Linked to this inability to make sound judgments is the destruction of inhibitions, modesty and restraint. In addition, alcohol produces a false sense of security and confidence, so people do silly and senseless things while drunk and regret them along with their hangovers.

The same process occurs to a person drunk with the wine of the wrath of this spiritual prostitute. The attitude of this world deprives people of their spiritual judgment and removes their spiritual inhibitions. Their resistance to evil weakens, and they will begin to do things that they vowed they would never do. Like a drunken man's fidelity to his wife is destroyed by wine, so is a Christian's loyalty to God when he imbibes of this world's attitudes. His judgment is shattered.

Zephaniah and Judah

Zephaniah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and Habakkuk, preached during the reign of King Josiah (c. 640-609 BC) within about 40 years of Judah's destruction by Babylon. He, too, saw his society crumble morally and spiritually, and records it in his prophecy:

I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. . . . [T]hose who

worship and swear oaths by the LORD, but who also swear by Milcom. . . . (Zephaniah 1:4-5)

Milcom is the national deity of the Ammonites, also known as Molech. The prophet describes a people straddling the fence in their worship. Giving lip service to the true God, they conduct their lives, however, by the standards and values of Milcom. The Laodicean does much the same thing, except he worships himself and his interests instead of an idol:

And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, "The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil." (Zephaniah 1:12)

Pictured as holding aloft a lamp as He walks, God searches through the city—Jerusalem, Zion—shining a light to reveal everyone to His judgment. No one escapes the judgment of God. Who is He looking for in particular? He looks for complacent men, like the Laodicean. Just as Hosea uses wine to illustrate the principle, Zephaniah also mentions wine though it is obscured in the translation: The words "settled in complacency" are literally "settled on their lees" like the dregs of wine (cf. the footnote on this verse, NKJV)!

Again, the prophet speaks of a prosperous people who had deluded themselves into believing that their physical wealth meant that they were equally rich spiritually. As the years passed, their relationship with God had diminished into lip service and complacency. When God describes them saying things “in their heart,” He means a reasoning process that happens internally. A person could not see it with his eyes, but the attitude cannot be hidden from the Judge walking the city with the lamp of truth.

In today’s parlance we call their problem “sins of omission.” Like the Laodicean, the religious Jew of that day was not on the streets committing horrible crimes like murder or rape or armed robbery. These verses speak about the thousands and thousands of ordinary people who were stagnant and indifferent toward their relationship with God. Their problem was not necessarily what they did, but what they did not do.

Nor does God accuse the Laodicean of the more apparent sins in Revelation 3. He is angry with him because of what he is *not* doing! He is not a true and faithful witness, and indeed cannot be, because of his poor judgment in prioritizing his life. In focusing on his selfish pursuits and self-centeredness, he leaves God almost completely out of his life. Still, he bears the name of God, attends Sabbath services and at least in a superficial way, worships God on the Sabbath. Yet the relationship is growing cold as he fails to seek Him earnestly as in courtship:

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, before the day passes like chaff, before the LORD’s fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD’s anger comes upon you! Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’s anger. (Zephaniah 2:1-3)

But the Laodicean will not be hidden if he does not repent, if he does not seek the Lord. God offers His protection as time progresses toward the end, and if the Laodicean repents in time, God will extend His protection to him as well.

He needs to add the love of righteousness in the same or greater proportion to his love of beauty, the things to which he gives most of his time and energy. What he seeks is what he will find. He has already found material wealth, so he must turn his attention to seeking the spiritual riches that he lacks.

Haggai and the Temple

Maybe the most obvious illustration of the Laodicean attitude in the Old Testament occurs in the book of Haggai:

Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying: “This people says, ‘The time has not come, the time that the LORD’s house should be built.’” Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?” (Haggai 1:2-4)

For those who are actively seeking God, now is always the time for the Lord’s house to be built. The people of Haggai’s day were saying—maybe not verbally, but their inaction spoke volumes—“Let’s wait until a more favorable time to build the Temple.” What made this particular time unfavorable? They wanted to take care of their own projects! They placed their own material

comforts higher in priority than their spiritual obligation—the work of God of their day—to rebuild the Temple. They spared no expense in doing well for themselves (*e.g.*, their “paneled houses”—verse 4), but to them the economy was not favorable for building the Temple.

“Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Consider your ways!’” (Haggai 1:5). God reminds them to take careful thought about what they were doing. One’s spiritual obligation is no small matter.

God goes on to describe the things they had been doing (verse 6). The people were hard workers and had tried to make a good living, but every time they thought they would prosper, their hopes were dashed. Apparently, they never made the connection between their neglect of God and their constant frustration. God must repeat His advice: “Consider your ways!” (verse 7). Then He gives them the answer:

“Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,” says the LORD. “You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?” says the LORD of hosts. “Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house.” (verses 8-9)

God arranged this section of Scripture to help His people understand, in a very easy and logical way, the correlation between our setting of priorities and God’s judgment.

“The Laodicean will not be hidden if he does not repent, if he does not seek the Lord.”

Clean and Unclean

A similar logical series of questions and answers occurs in chapter 2:

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." (Haggai 2:11-14)

To both questions the priests give a correct answer. Using the laws of clean and unclean, God points out a principle that applies to Christians today. Very simply, God says that it is impossible for God's holiness, in us because of our relationship with Him and the indwelling of His Spirit, to pass from us to the world. In other words, if a holy thing touches a profane thing, the profane item does not become holy.

On the other hand, the attitude of the world, if it comes in contact with His people, can pass from the world into us. Using the above wording, if a profane thing touches a holy thing, the holy item is contaminated. The spiritual principle for today's Christian is obvious: The world will contaminate our holiness, if we are not on guard against it.

Reading these verses from the *Living Bible* makes God's meaning very clear. Though it is not an exact translation, but a thought-for-thought paraphrase, the point is correct.

Ask the priests this question about the law: "If one of you is carrying a holy sacrifice in his robes, and happens to brush against some bread or wine or meat, will it too become holy?" "No," the priests replied. "Holiness does not pass to other things that way." Then Haggai asked, "But if someone touches a dead person, and so becomes ceremonially impure, and then brushes against something, does it become contaminated?" And the priests answered, "Yes." Haggai then made his meaning clear. "You people," he said (speaking for the Lord), "were contaminating your sacrifices by living with selfish attitudes and evil hearts—and not only your sacrifices, but

everything else that you did as a 'service' to me." (Haggai 2:11-14)

The people, having absorbed the prevalent attitude of the world, became infected by it. As we have seen repeatedly, their relationship with God quickly deteriorated into estrangement—just as the Laodicean's does.

The Best of Both Worlds

As the people of God today, we want to avoid the course ancient Israel and Judah took. A summary statement of their ongoing problem parallels a similar problem of the Samaritans: "They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away" (II Kings 17:33).

From the beginning to the end of its history, Israel's great sin was trying to get the best of both worlds. They professed that God was their deity, but they proved their insincerity by not honoring Him with their attention, their time, their energy. He was low on their list of priorities. God was always on the back burner, so to speak. This is idolatry.

In regard to Laodiceanism, we have to be concerned about the same sin. Laodiceanism is the most subtle form of idolatry. A Laodicean is a Christian who has turned inward. Though he is a part of the church of God, his worship is self-centered. He worships himself and his interests in God's name, while going through the motions of worshipping God. Such is idolatry. What sin is the most distasteful to God? Undoubtedly, it is idolatry! And seeing that sin so skillfully embedded in the Laodicean, He spews them out of His mouth!

Laodiceanism is also the most refined form of worldliness. That worries God. Beginning with an attraction to the world, and building through self-concern that overpowers spiritual concerns, the Laodicean unwittingly worships himself in the place of God. The Laodicean has misjudged what is important in life, and therefore he prioritizes wrongly. He gives his attention to pursuits that are not intrinsically evil, things God desires to bless His people with, but because his priorities are wrong, he merits God's scathing condemnation.

Probably all of us have slumped into Laodiceanism somewhat. Because it is so prevalent in the world, it is almost impossible to avoid. But it can be resisted! We still have time for repentance. Each of us can make a greater effort to study, pray, fast, grow in love for each other, unselfishly help our neighbors and follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit while we have the time and opportunity. We must not allow this opportunity to slip away.

"The attitude of the world, if it comes in contact with His people, can pass from the world into us."

Parables for the End Time

Prophecies from many parts of the Bible show time and again that the Laodicean condition, brought into the body of Christ from the world, is a dominant attitude in the end-time church. Repeatedly, God warns His people to be aware of it and on guard against its menace. It would be the height of arrogance to think that we are somehow exempt from contracting this attitude of spiritual indifference. But what should His people do to avoid it? Does Jesus leave His church any instruction about what to do as this attitude and the second coming converge?

Yes, He does.

Following the sermon known as the Olivet Prophecy, which outlines the events leading to His return (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21), Christ gives a series of parables with a heavy prophetic character. These parables flow smoothly from the prophecies of the last days to our Savior's instruction about what we should or should not be doing upon His return. If we are to avoid Laodiceanism, and be prepared for His coming, we will listen to His Word and do what He says.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near, at the very doors. Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled. (Matthew 24:32-34)

The fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 fulfilled this prophecy in type. History proves that the generation he was speaking to—that of His disciples—had not died out before Jerusalem fell to the Roman armies under Titus.

However, the larger picture includes the whole prophecy of Matthew 24, culminating in His second coming. When people begin to understand these prophecies leading to Christ's return to establish God's Kingdom, that generation will not die out before He again stands on the earth.

But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. 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. (Matthew 24:36-39)

In verses 38-39, Jesus describes people involved in normal activities of life: eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. None of these activities are evil—in fact, they are necessary. He implies, however, that in focusing upon the everyday activities of their lives, they miss the signs, the evidence, which prove the imminence of Christ's return. The sad result is that they do not become aware until it is too late.

As discussed earlier, Laodiceanism is not a matter of laziness, but of spiritual indifference caused by giving attention to the wrong things. A Laodicean commits a subtle form of idolatry, paying undue attention to self-centered interests rather than the interests of our Lord. Setting aside those responsibilities to which he has been called, he favors activities and interests that Jesus simply describes as eating and drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. He has chosen carnal priorities over spiritual ones.

The loss of judgment is both a cause of Laodiceanism and a major fruit. Without good judgment, he cannot discern that he is living so close to the time of the end. A Laodicean cannot discern the signs of the times (Matthew 16:3). And, of course, he loses the ability to judge between right and wrong.

The biblical instruction is to be in a constant state of readiness. Not necessarily a gun-lap mentality, but certainly a sense of urgency should be present in our lives regarding our calling and relationship with God.

“Concerning the Times”

About twenty years after Jesus uttered the Olivet Prophecy, the apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians on the same theme: not to be caught unaware when the evidence of Christ’s coming is undeniable. In contrast to Matthew 24, Paul says that the Thessalonians do not need to be reminded of the times they live in. Do we? If we do not know the times we live in, we are likely to be dragged into Laodiceanism. Knowing the times is essential to understanding how to avoid the world’s attitude. A Laodicean is characterized as blind, so being unaware, the attitude creeps up and takes him over before he knows it!

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. (I Thessalonians 5:1-3)

The apostle speaks of those who are unaware (“they”), who are not paying attention to the signs of the times. A pregnant woman clearly shows that she is ready to give birth to her child. However, though her status is known, no one can pinpoint the exact time that the contractions will begin. A woman’s labor pains parallel the signs of the times. *No one will be able to pinpoint the exact time of Christ’s arrival, but we can know that it is near and be prepared.*

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at

night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Thessalonians 5:4-9)

A tremendous contrast exists between what the Bible reveals about the time of the end and the reaction of most of the people alive on the earth today. Although surrounded by intense human agony from natural disasters, wars, disease and violence on an unprecedented scale, most possess a smug sense of false security. Why? Their minds are focused on other things! Their attention is distracted from the important issues!

Here is the key to the Laodicean condition: What gets our attention? What we focus on determines how we set our priorities.

Looking at the newspaper and the television news proves every day that we are living in the very days that Jesus described in the Olivet Prophecy and that

He inspired in the many Old Testament prophecies of the end time. Never in man’s history has there been a time like this except in the days of Noah, yet most people are unaware of its severity.

Like the people of this world, the Laodicean is just as unaware. His own judgment of his condition shows he is blind to his spiritual state. “[Y]ou say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’” (Revelation 3:17). In effect, he is saying, “I don’t lack

for anything. Everything is perfectly fine!” His judgment is completely different compared to God’s. The Laodicean has lost true judgment.

Knocking on the Door

The illustration at the end of the letter to Laodicea is striking. Our Lord stands at the door knocking (Revelation 3:20). Christ then says, “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” But what does the passage indicate about the Laodicean at this point? Since he cannot hear His Savior’s voice, his mind must be focused on something else!

This is a common occurrence in our lives today. Concentrating deeply on a job or a project, our minds can block out sounds and movement around us. Some people never seem to hear someone calling them when their noses are stuck between the pages of a book!

Just describing this ability another way, Jesus judges the Laodicean to be blind. Paul uses a different metaphor in I Thessalonians 5, saying that he is in the dark. Spiritually, blindness and living in darkness are

“A Laodicean commits a subtle form of idolatry, paying undue attention to self-centered interests, rather than the interests of our Lord.”

much the same. How good is one's judgment when he cannot see? Living in darkness is the equivalent of being morally insensitive or unstable, that is, not knowing right from wrong.

The advice given to the Christian is to watch: "Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober" (I Thessalonians 5:6). While asleep, one cannot watch. The Greek word for "watch" can be better translated "alert," and the word for "sober" is more correctly "self-controlled." So Paul advises, "Let us be alert and self-controlled." In other words, while all of the distractions of this world spin dizzyingly around us, we have to be alert to their appeal and controlled enough to discipline ourselves to prioritize in the right way.

Though such a task is not easy, we must forcibly set our wills to pay attention to those eternal things that are more important. If we fail in this task, we may begin conducting our lives in darkness, and living in darkness leads eventually to spiritual blindness. It is vital to our spiritual health to remain alert and self-controlled!

Paul employs a military metaphor of a sentry on duty (verse 8). He writes of "the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation"—soldiering gear. The alert and self-controlled sentry, vigilant for signs of the enemy, is entrusted with the safety of those within his camp. Normally, he is neither lackadaisical nor wildly excitable. His armor and weapons grant him a measure of control and ability when the need arises.

Similarly, a Christian should become neither lackadaisical nor wildly excited about the time of the end without the controlling factors of faith, hope and love. There is nothing wrong with speculating about the time of Christ's return. Speculating is a natural result of watching and evaluating the times. However, since even Christ did not know the time of His return, we would be very arrogant to think that we might have had it revealed to us. In reality, if someone claims to know when Christ is coming, it is nothing short of blasphemy! That person is calling God a liar! Jesus Christ says nobody knows, not even the Son (Mark 13:32), and the implication is that the Father will not tell the Son until it is just about time for Him to return.

If we did know the time of His return, it would almost surely destroy our faith, having much the same effect as Laodiceanism. Actually, we need to be thankful to God for the constant anticipation of Christ's return, which subtly pressures us to stay close to Him. God knows best. He always does everything for His children's good.

As important as the second coming is to God's

overall plan, more important to our personal growth and development are the principles Christ covers in the parables following the Olivet Prophecy. Within the illustrations used in the parables, Christ gives timely instruction for His end-time church.

A Thief in the Night

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him. (Matthew 24:42-44)

In essence, these verses are Christ's opening salvo on how to be prepared and how to use our time and energy when the evidence of His return begins to appear.

Although we definitely know that we are living in the time of the end, we do not know exactly when Christ is going to return. So we have to live in readiness every day. The theme of this brief parable is expectation. Knowing the general signs of His coming, we live expecting the unexpected.

He illustrates this by comparing His coming to that of a thief. We normally do not look for thieves. Understandably, thieves do not advertise their coming, but by taking precautions, we prepare against their coming. All of us lock our houses and hide our valuables in safe places. Some of us have installed security alarms and exterior lighting to discourage burglary.

In the same vein, Jesus urges His people to be vigilant, alert, wakeful and constantly watchful because a thief's principal weapon is surprise. Even to those who are aware, Christ's coming will occur with jarring suddenness—and more so to those who are distracted by ordinary occupations, "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." The teaching in this parable is that to live without vigilance is to invite disaster.

A few verses earlier, Christ refers to the days of Noah (verse 37). God told Noah that He would destroy the earth by a flood, and He gave him instructions on how to be prepared so he and his family could survive. God told him what He would do but not when. What did Noah do? He prepared, though nobody else did. Noah believed God and acted according to his belief. When the Flood came, he was ready, even though he did not know when it would come (Genesis 6:5-7:23).

The parallel to today is astounding. Noah's actions define a Christian's responsibilities. Putting

"It is vital to our spiritual health to remain alert and self-controlled!"

the lesson into our lives, we can also “[b]y faith . . . being divinely warned of things not yet seen, [move] with godly fear . . . and [become] heir[s] of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7). Not putting this lesson to work is the attitude that leads to spiritual disaster, saying by our conduct that there is plenty of time.

A fanciful vignette illustrates this. Satan summons three demons before him and gives them a project. “You are to go throughout the earth,” he commands, “and I want you to deceive as many people as you possibly can, causing them to be lost. But before you go, I want to hear how you plan to deceive them.”

The first demon steps forward and says, “I am going to tell all these people that there is no God.” Satan shakes his head, saying, “That would work on a few people, but most wouldn’t buy it. There is too much evidence that a Creator God exists. I reject your plan because it wouldn’t deceive many people.”

The second demon comes before him and says confidently, “I will teach everybody that there is no hell.” Satan just laughs. “People know better than that! They know there is a place where unrepentant sinners will burn, never to live again. Your plan would never work either. It may deceive a few people, but eventually they would catch on to you.”

The third demon rises and says, “I will tell them that there is no need to hurry.” Satan says, “Go! You’ll deceive everybody!”

A thief’s strategy is to strike when a person is absent from his house, asleep and unprotected or so absorbed that he is caught off guard. In the same way, con men succeed because their victims are so focused on making a killing themselves that they are easily duped. That is the lesson of this parable: *Lock the barn door before the horse is stolen. Be ready.*

Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.

But if that evil servant says in his heart, “My master is delaying his coming,” and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him

in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:45-51)

Though this parable’s general theme is also preparedness, the lesson differs from the preceding one. The Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants admonishes us to be faithful and wise in carrying out responsibilities and relationships with our fellow servants, our brothers in the body of Christ.

Synonyms of “faithful” include loyal, constant, staunch, steadfast, resolute, conscientious, reliable, steady in performance of duty, unswerving, adhering to covenants and promises, firmly resisting desertion or betrayal, unwavering in love, allegiance and conviction. A faithful person is trustworthy, scrupulous, honest, upright and truthful. Without specifically stating it, Christ is saying that we have to be keeping the first of the two great commandments: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

In this context “wise” means judicious, prudent, sensible, showing sound judgment. It suggests an understanding of people and situations, showing unusual discernment and judgment in dealing with them. Just as Paul writes in I Thessalonians 5:6 about being self-controlled, Christ’s use of “wise” indicates an exercising of restraint, using sound, practical wisdom and discretion, and acting in good sense and godly rationality. In short, Christ means exercising love. He tells us that we should be faithful in keeping the second of the two great commandments: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

Primarily addressed to leaders, this parable’s main thrust is at the ministry. To leave it without applying it more broadly would mean missing vital instruction. Approaching the scriptures with the assumption that the lessons are personal, we can more fully live by every word of God. And in this case, we definitely should, because at some point in our lives, we all lead. As parents or managers or ushers and the like, we all provide examples for others to follow.

Since this parable applies to everyone, Christ admonishes us to lead in a way that unites and inspires others to be faithful. We do this by giving them the truth, a good example and encouragement. In this way, we become wise and faithful stewards of the trust God has given us.

In these verses, Christ strongly links belief with behavior in both examples. If we believe in His return, we will not live as carnally as we would like. It is as simple as that. If we really believe He will return soon,

“Even to those who are aware, His coming is going to occur with jarring suddenness.”

this parable shows that our belief will regulate our lives, keeping us from extremes of conduct.

This faithful attitude is opposed to that of the scornful servant, who says his master delays His coming and beats his fellows. His conduct turns for the worse, as he eats and drinks with the drunkards. From the description Christ provides, the evil servant's attitude is arrogant, violent, self-indulgent, gluttonous and hypocritical. Because he believes he has plenty of time to square his relationship with God, his conduct becomes evil.

In summary, *whoever is entrusted with duties must perform them faithfully, prepared at all times to account for what he has done.* The key words in this parable are *faithful, wise and ready.*

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!" Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise answered, saying, "No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves."

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" But he answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you." Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:1-13)

The last verse continues a theme that runs through all these parables. Christ ties every one of them to living in urgent expectation of His return, and if we are, it will motivate us to use the lessons contained within them. The Parable of the Ten Virgins pictures the church waiting for the Bridegroom's return. Because of an unexpectedly long delay, He finds half the virgins unprepared when He finally arrives.

In weddings of that time, the bridegroom traditionally led a procession of bridesmaids from where they waited to his home. Since the procession almost invariably took place at night, each bridesmaid was expected to supply her own torch or lamp. If the bridegroom came later than expected, the bridesmaid needed to be prepared with extra torches or oil for her lamp.

The difference between the wise and the foolish virgins in the parable is not that one group did not have oil, but that one group did not have *enough* for the unexpectedly long delay. When the cry went out, their lamps were still burning, but they were sputtering and going out. Oil, of course, represents God's Holy Spirit. The wise virgins, like the faithful and wise servant, are prepared. They make sure that they remain in contact with the dispenser of oil, as is implied when they say to the foolish virgins, "No, . . . go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves" (verse 9). The wise had been in recent contact with the dispenser of oil, whereas the others apparently had dallied around. Going frequently to the dispenser, the wise, when the bridegroom arrived, had an adequate supply to trim their lamps and go into the marriage supper. The lesson is *preparedness through vision and foresight.*

Because it is an internal state, preparedness cannot be transferred. This is evident in the reaction of the virgins. It is a matter of the heart, an intangible that accrues by spending long periods of time under many circumstances with the Dispenser of the Holy Spirit. What cannot be transferred to those who are unprepared are matters of attitude, character, skill, knowledge, understanding and wisdom. They are personal attributes that are built and honed over months and years.

When one needs a skill immediately, how much time does it take to learn it? If a man suddenly needs the skill

to repair an automobile, and he has never done any work on one, he may as well have no hands at all! It works the same way with spiritual attributes. Preparing for eventualities is the gist of this parable. The wise virgins prepared for the eventuality that it might take longer for the bridegroom to come—they showed foresight and vision, and they entered the wedding feast. The others did not.

The oil cannot be borrowed either. In no way can it be passed

from one person to another. We cannot borrow character or a relationship with God. The parable teaches us that opportunity comes, opportunity knocks and then opportunity leaves. The foolish fail to face the possibility that the bridegroom would come later than expected, and when they awaken, they have no time to fetch any oil and fill their lamps.

"Because it is an internal state, preparedness for Christ's return cannot be transferred."

No one can deliver his brother. Each person determines his own destiny. No matter how close we are, even if we are one in flesh as in marriage, a husband cannot deliver his wife, and a wife cannot deliver her husband. Nor can we deliver our children. Everyone stands on his own in his relationship with God. God makes this clear in Ezekiel 14:14: “Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness,” says the Lord God.”

Though it is a hard lesson, it should motivate us to discipline ourselves, to exercise self-control, to be alert and to give our attention to our spiritual priorities.

Equating the foolish virgins with their modern counterparts, their faith is perfunctory. Their church membership is routine, merely going through the motions. They have enough faith that they at least show up for church services. They have beliefs and character and motivation—but not enough!

The Bridegroom’s refusal to admit the five foolish virgins when He says, “Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you” (verse 12), must not be construed as a callous rejection of their lifelong desire to enter the Kingdom. Almost everybody has the desire to enter it. Who in his right mind would not? What an offer we have from God! Far from callous, Christ’s rejection is entirely justified because these people never make preparations for their marriage to Him. In the analogy, though they realize they have met their future mate and admire Him, they never develop the relationship. In a sense, they have already rejected Him. Thus, an additional lesson in this parable is that *our relationship with God must be worked on continually.*

The Parable of the Talents

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money.

After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had

received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, “Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.” His lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

He also who had received two talents came and said, “Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.” His lord said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

Then he who had received the one talent came and said, “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.”

But his lord answered and said to him, “You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. Therefore you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 25:14-30)

Thematically, the Parable of the Talents goes beyond the earlier ones. Not only does Christ expect faithfulness in duty and preparedness even through a long delay, but He also expects an improvement upon what He initially bestowed. More than that, He expects improvement from bestowal to the day of reckoning.

A logical sequence of lessons develops through these parables. The middle parable is the Parable of the Ten Virgins, illustrating the disciple’s inner state. The parables before and after it show the disciple working, an external activity. The preceding parable indicates faithfulness, the following one indicates improvement. He may be telling us that the basis of a

“No one can deliver his brother. Each person determines his own destiny.”

profitable external activity is diligent internal, spiritual maintenance. Out of the heart comes what a person is (Matthew 15:18-19; Luke 6:45).

What is a Talent?

In the ancient Middle East, a talent was a unit of weight and later of money. Jesus probably means to convey nothing more than quantity, a measurable amount, from which we could draw a lesson. We thus need to improve or grow in areas that can be measured. Talents, therefore, are best equated with spiritual gifts.

Jesus also illustrates the varying levels of responsibility and the differing amounts of gifts. In the parable, the gifts are given according to natural ability, but all who increase equally are rewarded equally. Their trading of the talents signifies the faithful use that we should make of gifts and opportunities of service to God.

In the natural world, talents differ. One man may design a church building, a cathedral. Another has the talent to craft the woodwork or cut and lay the stone. Another person has the talent to speak from its pulpit. Still another has the talent to write music that is played on its organ or piano. Each has talents which differ from his fellows', yet they are dependent on each other for the building and right use of that cathedral.

Thus, no one person is better or more important than the other, though one may have greater natural ability. God clearly shows that the greater the capacity, the greater the responsibility. But we also find that though there is equality in opportunity, there are differences in talent.

With God's gifts it is the same. It is not how much talent one has, but how one uses it that is important to God. It is not how many gifts God gives to a person, it is what one does with them. This is why Christ shows equality between the person with five talents and the one with two. Both increase an equal amount, 100%, and they are rewarded, as it were, equally. This is an important point in this parable.

In the first place, all of the talents belong to God. They are His to bestow on whomever He wills. These talents, gifts, are not things we possess by nature but are Christ's assets, abilities, which He lends to us to use. Talents can be truly understood as things like God's Word, the gospel of the Kingdom of God, the forgiveness of sin, His Holy Spirit, etc.

The apostle Paul mentions quite a few of them in I Corinthians 12: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing,

miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. They are not natural endowments. Some receive more than others, and the vast majority of us are most likely among those who receive one or two. But despite whether we have one, two or five, everyone is responsible for using these gifts which belong to Christ, lent to us to serve Him. And we have to grow:

And in this I give my advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. (II Corinthians 8:10-12)

God judges according to what we have. Since He is a perfect judge, He is the only one qualified to measure whether we are using and increasing our gifts, or whether we are hiding and squandering what He made available to us.

Is God Fair with His Gifts?

Since these gifts are not ours to begin with, we must adjust our thinking. We have to accept our limitations as part of God's divine purpose and not struggle against them. He wants us simply to use what we have been given, and the proper use of them will cause them to increase. Paul declares, "But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased" (I Corinthians 12:18).

He examines the question of God's fairness in Romans 9:14-21. Is there any unfairness with God, to love one, as it were, and not the other? Recall the analogy of building a cathedral. God is building a great Temple (*cf.* I Peter 2:4-10; I Corinthians 3:5-17). His Temple is His Family, and He knows whether a person, using his natural abilities plus His gifts, will be a woodcarver, a stonemason, a preacher, a musician or whatever in it. God knows. He wants us to fill the role He has given us wherever we are.

We should not forget that God will reward us equal to our growth. He holds us responsible only for what we have been given, and this fact inclines us to approach our gifts with the "doorkeeper attitude." "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10). If God gave us one gift, whatever it is, we should strive

"God is the only one qualified to measure whether we are using and increasing our gifts."

to double it. Doing that, we will succeed just as the person who was given five and doubles them. He has more to answer for, but the burden on him is actually just as great as it is on the person who has one. There is no difference in God's judgment.

What does God commend? What does He say pleases Him? Is it genius? No, He says knowledge puffs up (I Corinthians 8:1). Is it speaking ability? No, God made a dumb ass speak (Numbers 22:28-30). Is it singing ability? Or writing ability? It is none of those things. He is looking for someone who is faithful. A person can be faithful with one talent, two, five or ten. It does not matter because God gives gifts according to natural ability. And it is very likely that if God gives more or greater gifts to those who have less natural ability, they will fail because they cannot maintain them. So God in His mercy judges what a person can handle.

Getting Down to Business

The translators of the New King James Version misplace the word "immediately" in Matthew 25:15. The way they translate it gives the impression that the master of the house left immediately, but the word does not apply to the master. "Immediately" applies to the person who had five talents (*cf.* Matthew 25:15-16 in the Revised Standard Version, New International Version or Revised English Bible). Not indulging in any daydreams or fears, he immediately goes out and works. Believing that work is good for him, he gets right down to business.

The tragedy of the story and the focus of the parable is the man who hides his talent. From him we probably learn the most. First, the talent is not his to begin with; it is a loan. Second, Christ shows that people bury their gifts primarily out of fear. Third, the whole parable illustrates that, regarding spiritual gifts, one never loses what he uses. What a powerful lesson: If we use the gifts that God gives us, we cannot lose! The one who is punished never even tries, so God calls him wicked and lazy. His passivity regarding spiritual things dooms him.

Comparing this parable to the Parable of the Ten Virgins, we see a few interesting contrasts. The five foolish virgins suffer because they let what they have run out. This servant with one talent apparently never even uses what he has. The virgins fail because they think their job is too easy, while this servant fails because he thinks it is too hard. On many fronts they seem to be opposites.

The servant's true character comes out in his defense before the master and in the master's con-

demnation. In verse 24 he claims, "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed." That is a lie! Not having this belief, the other two servants immediately go to work, never suggesting that they think their master is harsh and greedy. The wicked servant justifies his lack of growth by blaming

it on God: "It is too hard, Lord." He accuses God of an insensitive and demanding evaluation. That is why Christ calls him wicked. He calls God a liar and accuses the master of exploitation and avarice. If he worked, he says, he would see little or none of the profit, and if he failed, he would get nothing but the master's wrath. The master then asks, "Why didn't you at least invest my money so that I could receive interest?" The servant, in his justification and fear, overlooks

his responsibility to discharge his duty in even the smallest areas.

Blaming his master and excusing himself, this servant with one talent falls to the temptations of resentment and fear. Together, the two are a deadly combination. The church needs people with one talent as much as the person who has many talents. To illustrate this, William Shakespeare was immensely talented with words, considered by most to be the greatest writer of the English language. Very few people have had Shakespeare's gifts. But where would Shakespeare be without the printers, the bookbinders, the teachers, the actors, and the like who bring his works to the public? From this we see the interdependence of gifts. Even those who may appear to have few talents are just as needed in the body as those who have many (I Corinthians 12:22).

This parable insists that *watchfulness must not lead to passivity, but to doing one's God-given duties. We must be learning, growing, carrying out our responsibilities and developing the resources that God entrusts to us until He returns and settles accounts.* As in the other parables, we see a progression in the theme of being prepared for Christ's return, with each parable having a different nuance in its lesson.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

"The church needs people with one talent as much as the person who has many talents."

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.”

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.”

Then they also will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Understanding the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats lies in their surprised responses. Both the sheep and the goats respond, “When did we see you in need and help you?” (verses 37-39, 44). This parable contains two lessons.

The first lesson is that neither the sheep nor the goats are surprised at the place Christ assigns them. A careful reading of the parable shows that clearly. They do not respond to the place that Christ assigns them, but they express surprise at the *reasons* He gives for His judgment. A vital question to Christians is, “On what does He base His judgment?” *The basis of His judgment is how they treated Christ!* Of course, their treatment of Christ manifests itself in how they treated those in whom Christ lived, those who had His Spirit.

The second lesson is no less important than the

PARABLES OF THE OLIVET PROPHECY

Parable	Verses	Lesson
Fig Tree	Matthew 24:32-35	Though only God knows the exact time, one can know the signs of Christ's return.
Thief	Matthew 24:36-44	Always be prepared for His coming.
Faithful and True Servants	Matthew 24:45-51	God's servants must be faithful and wise in carrying out their responsibilities and relationships in the Body of Christ.
Ten Virgins	Matthew 25:1-13	Christians must have constant contact with God to deepen their relationship with Him.
Talents	Matthew 25:14-30	Christians must constantly work with and improve upon the gifts God has given.
Sheep and Goats	Matthew 25:31-46	By serving fellow Christians, one serves his Savior.

first. Jesus, our Judge, eliminates the possibility of hypocrisy obscuring His judgment of the sheep and the goats. If the goats had thought that treating their brothers in the faith would have gotten them into the Kingdom, they would have done it. What is the lesson? *Jesus is interested in love from the heart, not a false love.*

The true love of God is seen in the sheep. As the sheep respond to their brother's need, they are united in their distress and at the same time unwittingly, unconsciously, without hypocrisy, align themselves with Christ. Apparently, they are not even aware of what they were doing. This is a kind of love that cannot be faked or put on. "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

The reaction of the goats is quite different. They have little sympathy for God's way and remain indifferent, Laodicean, to their brethren. In so doing they reject their Messiah, their King, since He lives in the people they would not serve. The goats are condemned because of their sins of omission.

Because they had developed their relationship with Christ through prayer, Bible study, fasting and obedience, the sheep have love through a regular infusion of the Spirit of God. "[T]he love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us" (Romans 5:5). A godly life always comes down to the basic things. The sheep are simply unconsciously and unaffectedly good, kind, sympathetic and concerned, attributes of character that cannot be feigned.

Summary

The six parables can be summarized in the following six principles:

1. Though not knowing the day or hour of Christ's return, we can know the signs.
2. God requires us to live in expectation with vigilance and constant watchfulness.

3. God requires faithfulness to duty and wisdom in dealing with our fellow man.

4. God requires preparedness through spiritual development, working on our relationship with Him, and increasing the Holy Spirit.

5. God requires us to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18).

6. Christ will judge us by how we treat Him and our brethren. We cannot fool the King—He can discern true love from false love. Nobody will pass under the rod through hypocrisy.

**"A godly life
always comes
down to the
basic things."**

Jesus, understanding what the end time would be like, gives commensurate instruction on how to overcome it and how not to be drawn into this world's distractions. A Christian cannot afford to succumb to these enervating, pressure-packed and distracting times that we live in. These God-given principles apply to a multitude of specific circumstances: how we conduct our marriages and careers, how we rear our children, how we run our homes, how we drive a car, how we dress, how we talk, how we entertain ourselves. In every case—always—the Kingdom of God covers all parts of our lives. It covers everything all the time for those who are called in this age.

We look to the future, but we live in the present. Are we living by what we believe? Are we truly living by faith? We look for a city whose builder is God, and as His representatives we witness for Him in the way we live our lives. The Laodicean is distracted—he is living by what he sees—and is useless to Christ because he is not a faithful and true witness. The righteous live by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7), and so we must live and grow as the return of Christ nears day by day.

Elijah, sent to the people of Israel in the ninth century BC, challenged, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him" (I Kings 18:21).

The time for us to respond to that question is upon us. The time is now!

Judgment. Discernment.

One of the most important things for us to evaluate is our relationship with God. Where do we stand? Could He have sent warnings to correct us—and we failed to listen? As the end draws ever closer,

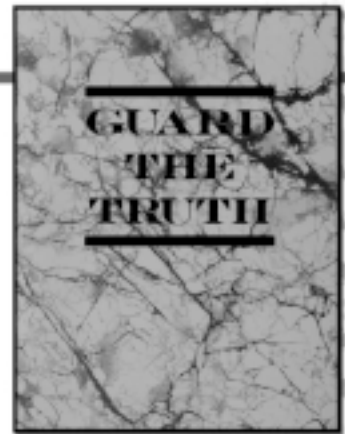


PREPARE TO MEET YOUR GOD!

CHURCH OF THE GREAT GOD
P.O. Box 471846
CHARLOTTE, NC 28247-1846
(800) 878-8220 / (803) 802-7811 FAX
<http://www.cgg.org>

Truth.

Today's postmodern society belittles the idea that absolute truth exists. Even in the church the truth has come under severe attack. Few now hold to "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."



In this time of apostasy, it is paramount for us to

GUARD THE TRUTH

because God has commanded us to keep His Word.