

BEYOND TODAY

Help for Today, Hope for Tomorrow

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BEYOND TODAY

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Scott Ashley
Managing editor

The Center of the World

Heinrich Bünting (1545-1606) was a German pastor, theologian and maker of maps. He's best known for a book of maps of the Holy Land first published in 1581. It was a bestseller of his day, reprinted multiple times and translated into several languages.

Among the maps in the book was a highly stylized and curious one designed to make a theological point. We've reproduced it here. His point was that the Holy Land—and Jerusalem in particular—is the center of the world.

In his map Jerusalem sits where the three continents of Europe, Asia and Africa meet. While not literally true, it was figuratively true because the ancient trade routes—and *invasion* routes—between those three continents ran right through the Holy Land. With the Mediterranean Sea on one side and the great Arabian desert on the other, there was no other option.

This made the Holy Land the crossroads of the ancient world—which is a primary reason we see so many wars and battles mentioned in Scripture. But God didn't intend it to be this way. He placed His chosen nation Israel in this spot for a very different reason—not to show the way to war, *but the way to peace*.

After generations of slavery in Egypt, God brought Israel out and led them to the Promised Land. As they prepared to enter, God through Moses recounted the miracles He had performed and the laws He had given to help them create a new kind of society—a society built on the foundation of God's laws.

Notice what God intended for His people Israel, as revealed through Moses: "*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will*

show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:5-6, New International Version 1984 throughout).

God placed Israel in this spot, at the crossroads of the world, to be an example to the nations around it, as well as those who would pass through along those ancient trade routes through the area. Israel was to be a living example of how blessed a nation would be if it obeyed God's laws.

Sadly, this was not to be. Israel rebelled against its Creator and became instead an example of what happens to a nation that turns its back on God. The country was invaded and destroyed, with most of the survivors exiled from the land.

Fast forward 26 centuries to today. This land remains at the center of conflict for the world. And it's

building to a final crescendo with the return of Jesus Christ. Notice what God says: "I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it . . . Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations" (Zechariah 14:2-3).

An all-out war will follow between the armies of man and the invincible spiritual army of God. But it will be no contest. "On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem . . . [And] the LORD will be king over the whole earth" (Zechariah 14:4, 9).

And then, as Isaiah 2:3-4 tells us: "the law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem . . . They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more."

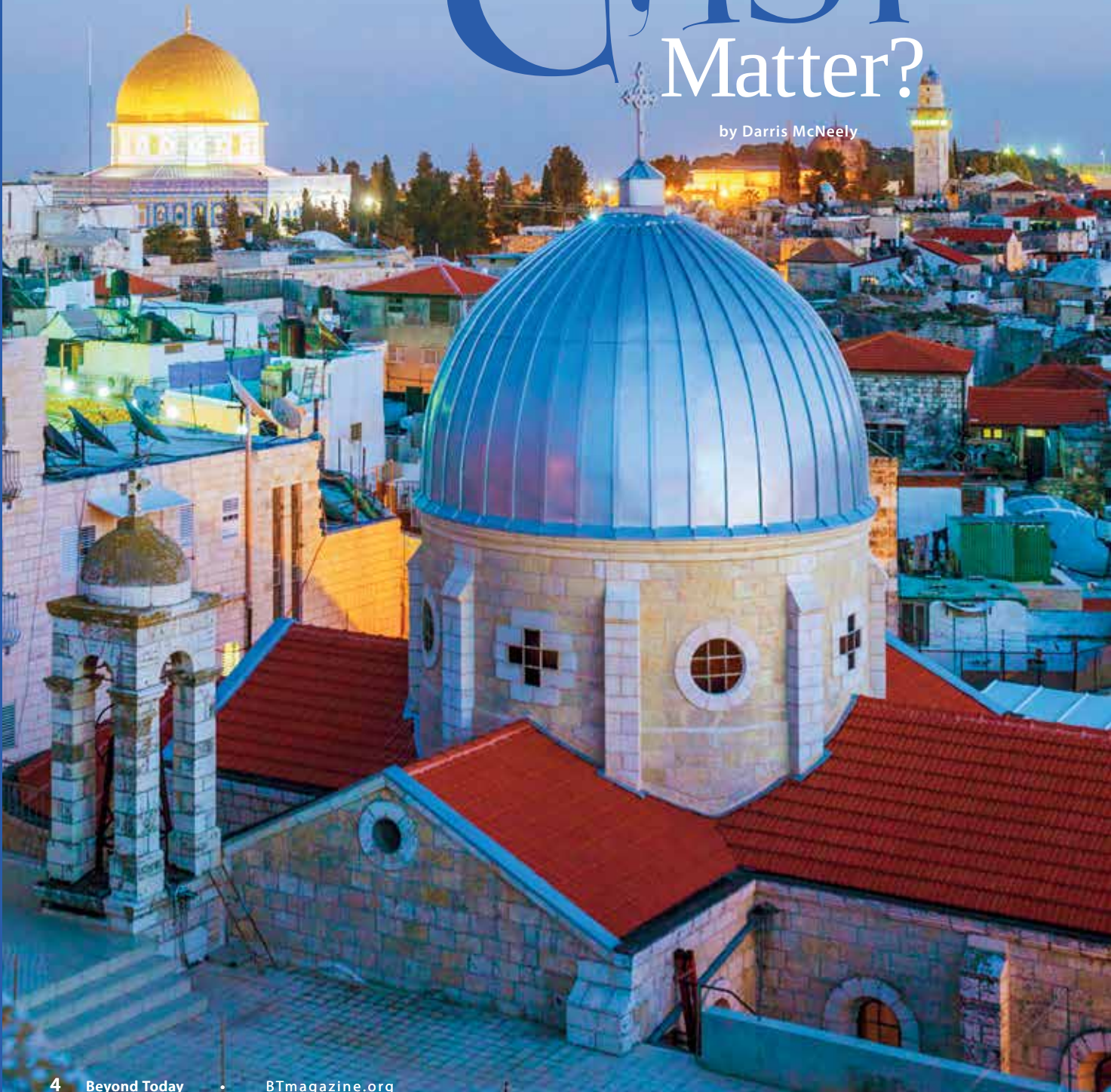
Jerusalem, the center of conflict, is destined to fulfill its destiny as the center of peace for the world! **BT**



Scott Ashley

Why Does the MIDDLE EAST Matter?

by Darris McNeely





Through the prophet Isaiah, God asks: “Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest?” (Isaiah 66:1). There is an obvious answer—in the Middle East. In a city called Jerusalem, God placed His house. It’s the only spot on earth where God has had a fixed home. To that place He will return. That is one of many reasons why the Middle East matters.

In 1971 I spent a summer in Jerusalem working on an archaeological project excavating around the Temple Mount. Hebrew University was working hard and fast to dig through 2,000 years of debris to expose the last period of Jewish dominance in Jerusalem. This was only four years after the Six-Day War, during which Israel regained control of this incredibly historic and incredibly significant piece of real estate.

During the course of our digging we uncovered a section of the southern wall that formed part of the foundation for the ancient Temple Mount. The distinctive large stone blocks dating back to the time of the biblical King Herod were exposed as we dug below the surface.

One day a director of the project walked by our team as we cleared one of these large stones. “Look at that 2,000-year-old Herodian stone,” he said. “That is the most valuable find you’ve made all summer!”

I did not understand what he meant until some years later. What he meant was we had uncovered evidence of the vast temple complex from the time of the Jewish state of Roman times. For the state of Israel it was important proof for their claim of a Jewish presence on that spot in ancient history. This was where the temple stood. It’s where Jews and others worshipped. And it is where Jesus Christ and His disciples walked and taught.

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is arguably the most contested and most important piece of real estate on earth. It is at the heart of the bull’s-eye of Bible prophecy—Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is at the crossroads of the volatile Middle East, where today we see the nations of Syria, Iraq and Iran in turmoil as revolution, ethnic conflict and terrorist activity push millions from their homes while threatening the existence of

nations and the peace of the entire region.

The stage is being set for the fulfillment of key Bible prophecies that will take place before the second coming of Jesus Christ. What is happening, and why is it important?

New nations drawn on a map

In the aftermath of “the Great War,” World War I, the victorious allied nations were faced with a dilemma in the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire, which for nearly 500 years had bound together the region from North Africa through Mesopotamia, had collapsed in defeat. Great Britain and France were eager to carve out separate states to serve their national interests. In addition there were promises to keep—promises made to some Arab tribes that supported them against the Ottomans during the war.

And one other promise had been made—one that would have significant impact on the politics of the region. In 1917, during World War I, the British government committed by policy to promote the creation of a Jewish homeland.

The Balfour Declaration, as it was called, committed the British government to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East. This was a response to the strong Zionist movement in Europe. Thousands of Jews had already relocated to the Holy Land, buying tens of thousands of acres of land from the Arab occupants. Many more acres of land lay vacant, formerly owned by the rulers of the now-nonexistent Ottoman Empire.

The Jewish presence was significant and growing. Official recognition by Great Britain accelerated Jewish immigration after the war. Pressure to accommodate the Jews was strong.

By 1922 the map of the Middle East had been completely redrawn. New states had

come into existence from the remains of the Ottoman Empire. Lebanon and Syria had been created and run by the French. Iraq and Jordan were created and given to the Arabian Hashemite family, descended from Muhammad. Saudi Arabia came into being. And a new creation called Palestine was run under a British mandate. Egypt also came under British rule.

The lines you see on a current map delineating these modern nations were drawn by men at a postwar conference in Paris. Not fully considered, understood or appreciated were the many religious and ethnic divisions among the many peoples of the region.

Whether it is the Maronite Christians and Muslim peoples trying to coexist in Lebanon, or Sunni and Shiite Muslims living side-by-side in Iraq, or the Kurds scattered among Muslims in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, there are major challenges to peace and cooperation.

In Jordan the transplanted Hashemite family has managed to hold the state together despite the differences between Bedouin and Palestinian refugees. The state of Israel, declared in 1948, has fought off various attacks and coalitions from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt along with persistent terrorist attacks from Hezbollah, Hamas and Fatah, among others.

Why so much turmoil in this region?

Most of us have difficulty keeping a legible score card of the players and events of the Middle East. We see the pictures of strife in Syria and the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe to escape the civil war that has been raging for more than five years—and we honestly do not understand the issues that divide the people into warring factions.

We hear of the divide between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, but we cannot understand or explain why these two largest divisions of Islam are so at odds and why they butcher each other in the thousands.

And yes, the turmoil within these countries impacts America and the Western nations. Terrorism spawned in these regions has spread its deadly tentacles to affect London, Madrid, New York, Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino, California. Fear and uncertainty is the bitter fruit of these conflicts. They *do*



matter, and they *do* impact our lives.

Powerful forces have been unleashed in today's Middle East. What the leaders of 1922 thought was resolved is today coming apart. Britain and France failed to ensure that the states and dynasties created in this period would endure.

More recently the United States failed to establish a stable government in Iraq after invading the nation in 2003 and upending the ruling order, corrupt and despicable as it was. America pulled its last troops out in 2011 and left the nation to fend for itself. The result was chaos and the Islamic State, and Sunni and Shiite Muslims again at each others' throats. A similar pattern has followed in Afghanistan.

The Arab Spring, which began in 2011, overturned governments in countries such as Libya, Egypt and Syria. Now the Islamic State boasts of its goal to erase all of these old national borders and unite Muslims in a single Islamic superstate.

The region's old order swept away

Author David Fromkin wrote in his 1989 book *A Peace to End All Peace* that during World War I and afterwards, "Britain and her Allies destroyed the old order in the region irrevocably; they smashed Turkish rule of the Arabic-speaking Middle East beyond repair . . . and introduced a state system of the sort that exists everywhere else; but they did not quell all significant local opposition to those decisions" (p. 563).

Near the end of his book Fromkin speaks of the fundamental problem in the Middle East. The "modern belief in secular civil government, is an alien creed in a region most of whose inhabitants, for more than a thousand years, have avowed a faith in a Holy Law that

governs all of life, including government and politics" (p. 564).

Western politicians and statesmen have long assumed that the peoples of the Middle East, seeing how advanced the modern Western nations are in comparison to themselves, would naturally want to copy Western models in government, education and other aspects of society. They've been proven sorely wrong again and again, as Western nation-building attempts have typically been spectacular (and spectacularly costly) failures.

Religion, whether Islam or Christianity or Judaism, continues to be a potent force in the daily affairs of the region. The disputes are deep—deeper than today's statesmen can understand. And the solutions lie in a source most deny—the Bible.

Ancient roots of modern conflicts

I said at the start of this article that the Middle East matters because it's where God had a home—the temple built in Jerusalem. It's where God placed His name. It's where He placed His nation to be a kingdom of priests, an example to the nations of how blessed a people could be if it lived according to His eternal law.

God owns the land, and those who live there today occupy it in tenancy only. God holds the title. In Genesis 17 we find the commitment God made to Abraham and his descendants regarding this land: "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (verse 8). Today descendants of Abraham, including those through his son Ishmael, are found

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is arguably the most contested and most important piece of real estate on earth. It is at the heart of the bull's-eye of Bible prophecy—**Jerusalem.**

in the Middle East, the boundaries of which are quite far-reaching.

At the heart of the Middle East's troubles is an ancient feud among the descendants of Abraham going back almost 4,000 years. The conflict is over who owns the land and who has the right to exist within the region. The Arab states, believing themselves to be the divinely chosen peoples, have never fully accepted the Jewish state of Israel. Arabs who were displaced when they lost or abandoned their land in the major Arab wars against Israel have not been fairly handled even by their own brother Arab states—their homeless status festering for almost 70 years.

Part of the hostility is the existence of a Jewish state within land the Muslim faith believes to be a part of the sacred Islamic entitlement. It's all a part of the long and complicated hostility between descendants of one man, Abraham. So here we see Jew and Arab contending over an inheritance, a relatively tiny sliver of land that in the end *ultimately belongs to God*.

This is a critically important matter. If you are to understand why the Middle East matters you must understand this important truth from the Bible. The present religious and political turmoil in the Middle East is at its heart a family feud among Abraham's descendants. It will take the return of another descendant of Abraham, Jesus Christ, to settle this dispute—a dispute prophesied to erupt into a larger conflict much sooner than we might think.

Center of a coming conflict

Jordan's King Abdullah recently said the current turmoil in the region is equivalent to a third world war. Europe, America and Asia have been drawn into the conflict by varying degrees. We are seeing major shifts in the balance of power in the region and in the world.

America has retreated from its preeminent position as the primary maintainer of order in the post-Cold War world.

The European Union is experiencing fundamental changes. We are seeing changes in the region on the order God described to the prophet Habbakuk: "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told" (Habakkuk 1:5, New International Version). God ultimately controls history and the course of world powers. They rise and fall according to His eternal plan.

The Islamic State has proved capable of extending its deadly terror into Europe and the United States. Recent terror strikes in Paris and Brussels are harbingers of a coming time when a larger power from the Middle East, the biblical "king of the South," "pushes" at (attacks) the "king of the North" (Daniel 11:40). These recent attacks are part of a longer historic effort by the armies of Islam to extend its reach into Europe. The book of Daniel holds the key to understanding that this is part of a larger spiritual conflict that drags the nations along in war and suffering.

The Middle East is the central cauldron of conflict that will draw the nations into the final "battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Revelation 16:14). This is why the region matters and why you need to understand the issues and the biblical story behind the headlines. Because it is a spiritual story, there are spiritual lessons to learn—lessons that matter to your eternal life.

Because of unwillingness to have a change of heart, peace treaties have been made and broken through the genera-

tions. Envy, jealousy and infighting—the kind one sees in a family long divided and fighting over things—dominate much of the thinking in the region.


Why the Middle East matters to you

Now more than ever is the time to understand why the Middle East matters to *your* life. The events we are seeing should motivate us to seek the true and living God. He is in control of these events, and they are not occurring without His knowledge and consent.

Now is the time to consider your life, your conduct and the way you live your life. Does it match the biblical standard you are learning through the pages of *Beyond Today*? The Bible holds us to a higher standard. Biblical truth is the path to a sound mind and heart—the key to peace of mind in today's changing and often chaotic world.

Now is the time to live a holy and godly life. Consider your ways! The information we provide in *Beyond Today* about Bible prophecy and the Middle East is critical to your understanding the news and headlines of today and what they mean for *your* future.

Make a change in your life to obey God and to get in tune with His way. Do this now as a preparation for the time when the God of Abraham will begin to impose a peace throughout not just the Middle East, but the entire world at the return to the earth of His Son. Jesus is going to return as the Christ—or Messiah—a Messiah these faiths won't recognize then because they don't know Him now.

Get to know Jesus Christ—the Prince of Peace—now, and you'll be prepared to work with Him to bring peace to these long-warring families at His return. Do it today, and you can begin to bring peace and purpose into your own life and into your own family, both now and forever! 



LEARN MORE

What's behind the longstanding conflict in the Middle East? And where will it lead? Why is this long-suffering region so often in the headlines? The roots of its problems are so ancient that few of us today really understand them. To see what the Bible foretells about this crucial region, download or request our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*.

www.BTmagazine.org/booklets

The Global **POWER VACUUM**

What happens in a power vacuum? We currently see a major power vacuum developing in the world. What does it mean? What is its cause, and where is it leading? Does Bible prophecy give us an indication as to what lies ahead?

by Scott Ashley

Power vacuum is a term that not that long ago was rarely heard or seen. Lately, however, it's showing up regularly in headlines, news articles and geopolitical analyses.

Of course, we're not talking about a "power vacuum" as a household tool used to suck up dirt. We're talking about a condition when governments or leaders are absent or have lost control, and nothing or no one has stepped in to fill the void.

Throughout history, power vacuums have been dangerous. They lead to great uncertainty and apprehension as people wonder what will happen next. Within nations, they sometimes lead to social unrest or chaos, and at times outright civil war, as individuals step forward to grab power. Internationally, they can lead to regional or even world wars as nations see opportunities to gain more for themselves at the expense of their neighbors.

Nature abhors a vacuum

The Greek philosopher-scientist Aristotle (ca. 384-322 B.C.) is thought to be the first person to note that

"nature abhors a vacuum," recording his observation in a collection of discussions about philosophy and the natural world. He proposed that true vacuums don't exist because something will always fill any void.

Aristotle likely never contemplated that his observation about science would also hold true in the arena of geopolitics and international relations.

Why is this important to us? And how does it explain what we are seeing all around us on the world scene?

To use an analogy, imagine what would happen in an average town if local law enforcement officers hung up their badges and guns, walked off the job and went home, making it clear they had no intention of returning.

The result isn't hard to predict. We've seen it when budget cutbacks or political pressure have led some police forces to stop enforcing some laws—so violations of these grow, right along with more serious crimes.

We've also seen what happens when breakdown in government leads to crippling or disbanding of local law enforcement. Criminal gangs and warlords fill the void, and soon it's every person for himself. People



As the United States disengages and draws away, the absence of its leadership makes the world a much more dangerous place.

described how the world has become much more dangerous as a result of America's disengagement from its long-held position of world leadership.

"The world has never seemed as dangerous and leaderless as it does now," he wrote in a recent *Washington Post* editorial. "Only the extremists and bullies act boldly, and therefore they have seized the initiative . . . *There is more instability in the world today than at any time since the end of World War II.*

"The threats come from emboldened expansionist powers such as Iran, Russia and China, and also terrorist aggressors such as the Islamic State and al-Qaida. In short, *the enemies of freedom are on the march.*

"At the same time, *the United States . . . has chosen this moment to become more passive in the world.* The absence of American leadership has certainly not caused all the instability, *but it has encouraged and exacerbated it*" ("*The Absence of U.S. Leadership Makes the World More Dangerous Than Ever,*" Feb. 24, 2016, emphasis added throughout).

"Fundamentally transforming" the United States

In late 2008, shortly before Barack Obama was elected president of the United States, he described his goal of "fundamentally transforming" the country. And transform it he did—not just domestically, but also in the area of international relations.

He soon embarked on what some characterized as a worldwide "apology tour," traveling to a number of nations in which he criticized America's previous powerful role in international affairs. He promised to withdraw American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, where long and bloody wars against terror-sponsoring regimes had finally forced Islamic jihadists into retreat.

Most bewilderingly, he dramatically changed course with U.S. allies. As the "Arab Spring" unfolded across the Middle East, he refused to support longtime Egyptian ally President Hosni Mubarak, who was swept from power by

the terror-supporting Muslim Brotherhood and its candidate Mohamed Morsi. (Morsi was himself quickly driven from office and replaced by military general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, but Obama has remained distant from him as well.)

In nearby Israel, relations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu quickly changed from cool to frosty to hostile. The situation wasn't helped by revelations of U.S. spying on not only Israel, but other close allies Germany and France.

While punishing longtime allies, President Obama inexplicably began rewarding longtime enemies. He negotiated a deal with Iran—perhaps the world's leading sponsor of terrorism—that paves the way for Iran to possess nuclear weapons in a decade and rewards them with billions of dollars of funds frozen for earlier international misconduct.

While Obama was negotiating with Iran on its nuclear program, he was also working to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba, a communist dictatorship since the 1960s. Cuba gave up nothing in return, and in fact cracked down on pro-freedom protesters just before the president's March 2016 trip there.

On that trip, he allowed himself to be photographed in front of a huge mural of Che Guevara—a hero and icon of the left, but a man who in reality was an enthusiastic enforcer for Fidel Castro who oversaw or participated in the brutal executions of hundreds of regime opponents.

Later in his trip, on a visit to Argentina, Obama told Argentinian students that there's little difference between socialism, communism and capitalism—that they "should just decide what works" and choose that system. He followed up by praising Cuba for providing free access to education and health care.

American weakness and disengagement

The picture that has emerged is one of American weakness and disengagement. Time after time America's foes have sensed lack of resolve and pushed for

band together and arm themselves to the teeth for protection in a lawless society. It's a matter of self-interest and self-preservation.

And we are now seeing this on a global scale. In our analogy the whole world is the town, and the United States is the sheriff who's walked off the job—leaving the world to fend for itself. This has created a worldwide power vacuum, and the global gangsters and bad guys are filling the void.

"The world has never seemed as dangerous and leaderless as it does now."

How serious is today's world situation? Former U.S. senator Joseph Lieberman, onetime Democratic party vice-presidential candidate and author of the legislation that created the Department of Homeland Security, recently

Can anyone seriously argue that America's withdrawal from world leadership has led to a better, more sane and stable world?

greater power and influence. Time after time the U.S. response has been weak or nonexistent.

To cite a few examples from recent years: In Ukraine, Russia agitated for Crimea, a strategic Black Sea peninsula, to break away from Ukraine, after which it was annexed by Russia. Russia then supplied other separatist rebels with arms, resulting in a large portion of Eastern Ukraine falling under control of Moscow-allied forces.

In the South China Sea between the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam—through which 40 percent of the world's merchant ships pass over the course of a year—China has been building new islands out of formerly unoccupied reefs.

Dredging thousands of tons of sand and piling it onto the reefs, China has created space for aircraft landing strips and military fortifications on these new islands and claimed them as Chinese territory to project Chinese power and influence in the region—at the expense of Japan, the Philippines and the United States. U.S. response to date has been negligible.

North Korea has recently repeatedly threatened America with nuclear attack even as it tested a new nuclear device and new, longer-range missiles.

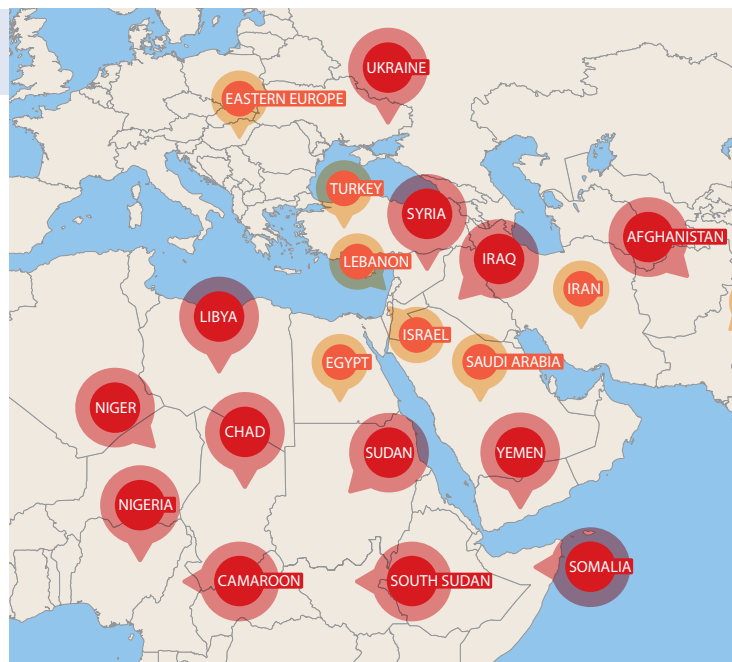
In Syria's civil war, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad crossed President Obama's declared "red line" against using chemical weapons against defenseless civilian populations. Again Obama did essentially nothing, other than open the door to Russia volunteering to remove the Syrian government's chemical weapons—thereby giving Russia a major role in the Syrian conflict on par with America's.

Russia soon took on a role far greater than America's, moving in men and heavy weaponry and beginning massive airstrikes that for now appear to have turned the tide and at least temporarily preserved Assad's grip on power.

This isn't the only Mideast area in which Russia has expanded its influence. In addition to this major foothold in Syria, where Russia has built up its presence on the western coast around a major Russian naval base to project power into the Mediterranean Sea, Russia has signed agreements with Iran to help Iran build more nuclear power plants and modernize its military with the latest Russian arms.

Meanwhile, the overall Middle East chaos continues following Obama's withdrawal of American forces. With the rise of the Islamic State or ISIS, Iraq and Syria may well become the latest failed states. And Turkey has been flooded with hundreds of thousands fleeing these countries, making it a pipeline of refugees to the offshore Greek islands and thence to European Union nations—refugees infiltrated with terrorists.

The EU, desperate to avoid the problems from the massive influx of immigrants, recently agreed to pay Turkey billions of euros to keep refugees there in exchange for giving millions of Turks the right to freely travel to EU countries—from which millions might choose never to return.



Winners and losers

Senator Lieberman, in the opinion piece cited earlier, described the net effect of American inaction, or in some cases the wrong actions, on the Middle East:

"The military and political disengagement of the United States from Iraq after the success of the surge and our failure to intervene to stop the slaughter in Syria have conspired to create a vacuum in the heart of the Middle East. This vacuum has been exploited by the region's most dangerous anti-American forces: totalitarian Sunni fanatics and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The result is the creation of a terrorist sanctuary of unprecedented scale and Iranian domination over multiple Arab capitals."

He went on to explain: "This fits a broader pattern. In too many places in recent years, the United States has treated its adversaries as essential partners to be courted, while dismissing or denigrating its historic allies and partners as inconveniences or obstacles to peace."

Who have been the big winners as a result of American inaction or wrong actions? In no particular order, Russia, China and Islamic fundamentalism—none of which bodes well for world peace and freedom.

Who have been the big losers? Most notably, the United States, Europe and Israel. Although the ultimate big losers may end up being several smaller nations along the periphery of these countries—weaker nations like Ukraine, the Baltic states, other former Soviet republics, the Philippines, and the long-suffering peoples of the Middle East.

As much or more than anything, what we're seeing is that we're suffering from a *leadership* vacuum. Where have strong leaders such as Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher gone? They've been replaced by men and women who think the world is a better place when they "lead from behind"—which in truth means not leading at all and squandering the opportunity and obligation to influence the world for the better.

America's leaders seem to have lost sense of proportion and of what danger truly is and isn't. While America seems to view its military more and more as a grand experiment in social experimentation (allowing homosexuals to openly serve, aggressively promoting minorities and women, integrating



WORLD TROUBLE SPOTS

women into frontline combat units, forcing men and women into close quarters aboard ships and submarines, etc.), its power is degraded further and further.

America has become a nation where a major presidential contender can claim that climate change is a greater threat than global terrorism (and even causes the latter!). A year ago political leaders and media reporters obsessed over gay rights, and then moved to the next supposed outrage, currently transgender rights. As one pundit wryly commented, “I’m sure we’ll be talking about transgendered bathrooms when the [Iranian] mullahs nuke us”!

Surveying today’s chaotic and depressing world scene, can anyone seriously argue that America’s withdrawal from world leadership has led to a better, more prosperous, more sane and stable world?

What is really going on—the untold story

But what is *really* going on with this major shift in global power? Believe it or not, what we are seeing was foretold in the pages of your Bible several thousand years ago.

Between a fourth and a third of the Bible is prophecy, much of it with an astounding record of precise fulfillment. Much of Bible prophecy concerns “the end time,” “the time of the end” or “the end of the age,” referring to the end of this period of man’s misrule over the earth leading to catastrophic conditions just before the return of Jesus Christ to save us from human extinction. (To learn more, download or request our free study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*)

Many of those prophecies also concern the modern-day descendants of the ancient kingdom of Israel, which was conquered and its people taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire in the 700s B.C., after which they largely disappeared from history. But long before that happened, God foretold that these same people would be a world-dominating power blessed with incredible material prosperity and military strength in the period leading up to the close of this age.

How is that possible? The remarkable story, revealed in our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*, is that those same people, exiled from their own land and adopting foreign cultures from those around them in their new land, lost the knowledge of their true identity.

Who’s Behind Beyond Today?



Who’s behind the *Beyond Today* magazine and television program? Many readers have wondered who we are and how we are able to provide *Beyond Today* free to all who request it. Simply put, *Beyond Today* is provided by people—people from all walks of life, from all over the world, as enabled by God.



And those people have a common goal—to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).



We are dedicated to proclaiming the same message Jesus Christ brought—the wonderful good news of the coming Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1). That message truly is good

news—the answer to all the problems that have long plagued humankind.

Through the pages of this magazine, on the airwaves of our TV show, and in dozens of helpful study guides (also free), we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution and threaten our very survival.

We are committed to taking that message to the entire world, sharing the truth of God’s purpose as taught by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

The United Church of God has congregations and ministers around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship. For locations and times of services in your area, contact us at the appropriate address on page 39. Visitors are always welcome.

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Migrating westward, they settled in northwestern Europe and the British Isles, from which they spread further to eventually form the nations of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

These nations were indeed blessed with abundant material resources, fertile agricultural lands, great mineral wealth, and inventive and resourceful people who contributed greatly to world culture and civilization in such areas as medicine, technology, education and the arts. They also contributed enormously to world freedom in the face of the Nazi menace of World War II and the communist threat during the Cold War and Korean conflict.

But now, as we see amply demonstrated around the globe, America and its major allies have largely gone into a posture of retreat—having lost their will to win and exert their power and influence in the right way.

The United States has not won a major war since World War II. Korea ended in a truce. Vietnam ended with an ugly withdrawal, followed soon by a communist takeover. The first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein's Iraq ended in quick victory, but the dictator was left in power. The war in Afghanistan and the second war in Iraq also ended in military victories, but America lacked the will to follow through—with the result that both descended into chaos and anarchy.

Why is this happening?

But why? *Why* is this happening? Why can't the world's most powerful and advanced military force defeat rebels armed with little more than AK-47s and improvised roadside bombs?

The answer, if we have the heart to understand it, is *sin*. The same God who so greatly blessed the descendants of Israel and promised them national greatness also warned of what would happen if they turned their backs on their Creator. Notice what He said in Leviticus 26:

"If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit . . . I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid . . . You will chase your enemies, and they shall fall by the sword before you . . . I will look on you favorably and make you fruitful, multiply you and confirm My covenant with you . . . I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (verses 3-12).

For the last few centuries the major English-speaking peoples that descended from ancient Israel received these great blessings. For the most part they understood where these blessings came from and gratefully acknowledged God as their source. The United States and Canada even established national holidays for this purpose.

But then astounding societal changes began taking place. In 1962 and 1963 the U.S. Supreme Court declared school-sponsored prayer and Bible readings in public schools to be unconstitutional. In 1973 the same court legalized abortion, which has led to the murder of tens of millions of unborn babies. In 2015 the court declared homosexual marriage legal.

All four decisions overturned long-held moral and societal standards enshrined in state laws for many decades. All four declared the judges—and society's—contempt for God and His Word.

With God banned from public life, and murder and



U.S. President Barack Obama stands in Havana's Revolution Square March 16, 2016, during his state visit to Cuba. Behind him is a large mural of leftist icon Che Guevara, who oversaw the executions of hundreds of opponents of the communist regime.

perversion legalized as the law of the land, it's no wonder that hostility toward God has grown by leaps and bounds. Now all too often those who stand up for biblical standards of morality are condemned as bigots, homophobes and "haters."

We reap what we sow

As these examples show, some want to will God away or pretend that He doesn't exist. But what is God's response? "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. *A man reaps what he sows*" (Galatians 6:7, New International Version 1984).

Yes, America is reaping what it has sown in denying God and willfully rejecting His laws. And yes, the consequences are growing more evident by the day.

We read above of the blessings God promised to pour out on His people for honoring and obeying Him. But He also promises that *curses* will follow denying and rejecting Him.

He warns in Leviticus 26: "*If you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant, I also will do this to you . . .*" (verses 14-16).

The list of curses that follows sounds remarkably like our headlines on any given day!

"I will even *appoint terror* over you, *wasting disease* and fever which shall consume the eyes and *cause sorrow of heart*. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it" (verse 16).

How often do we see the word "terror" in our headlines? God

foretold this nearly 3,500 years ago! What about strange diseases that consume us and bring heartbreak? The Zika virus is one of several frightening new maladies affecting us. Our hospitals are plagued with strange new infections that are impervious to most antibiotics. Long-vanquished diseases like tuberculosis are making a comeback—often due to our own government bringing or allowing in thousands of infected immigrants.

“I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you” (verses 14-16).

Why has the United States so suddenly lost so much of its respect and world standing? Why do our enemies not only no longer fear us, but mock us? Terrorists and terror states like North Korea and Iran openly threaten to attack America and its allies with weapons of mass destruction. Even Fidel Castro, Cuba’s former longtime dictator, mocked and ridiculed President Obama barely a few days after his visit to Havana!

God further says: *“And after all this, if you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will break the pride of your power . . . And your strength shall be spent in vain . . .”* (verses 18-20).

As noted earlier, America possesses the world’s most advanced and powerful military capabilities. *Yet it hasn’t won a major war in decades.* In the last decade it’s again been worn down by outgunned and outmanned guerilla fighters. America still has great power, but it simply no longer uses it—for reasons of fear, of guilt, of political correctness, or just because its leaders no longer believe in the rightness of its cause.


And the result is an incredibly dangerous power vacuum into which the forces of chaos and darkness are rushing headlong!

What will you do?

None of this makes any sense—until you realize that powerful spiritual forces are at work, including spiritual laws that, when broken, *break the lawbreakers.* We are indeed reaping what we have sown—and denying it doesn’t do away with the terrible consequences!

America is heading down a dark and dangerous path, and so is the rest of the world. Bible prophecy reveals where this path will lead—to a terrifying conclusion where, if not for God’s direct intervention, *human life would be exterminated from all the earth* (Matthew 24:21-22).

You don’t need to tread this same path. You’re offered a much different way, a far better way, revealed in the pages of this magazine and your Bible. Instead of a vacuum of purpose in your life, you can fill your life with the understanding and real power that comes only from God.

We hope and pray that you’ll choose wisely! 



AMERICA

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The *Beyond Today* television program is coming in live form to a city near you for a special event—*America: The Time Is Now!*

You’re invited to this eye-opening presentation!

Why do we see so many crises everywhere we look? The Middle East is in crisis. Europe is in upheaval. America, the world’s leading power and long-standing bastion of liberty and freedom, is losing share in global leadership. What’s behind these monumental changes?

This is a sobering time! But God has a message for you to help you understand, cope and survive. He is not absent from this world. He is the God of history. He directs great events that will culminate in His purpose and plan for humankind. And He has a purpose for your life—a great purpose you can come to know!

We invite you to come and hear from our three *Beyond Today* television presenters, Darris McNeely, Steve Myers and Gary Petty. As we do each week on *Beyond Today*, we will give you a message of understanding and hope from the Bible. You need to understand what God is saying in His Word as well as what He is doing. We’ll help you make sense of the often confusing and chaotic conditions of life!

- **Chicago West, Illinois**—Sunday, June 26 at 3 p.m.
- **Milwaukee, Wisconsin**—Monday, June 27 at 7:30 p.m.
- **Cleveland, Ohio**—Sunday, Aug. 14 at 3 p.m.
- **Dayton, Ohio**—Sunday, Aug. 21 at 3 p.m.
- **Raleigh, North Carolina**—Tuesday, Sept. 20 at 7:30 p.m.
- **Greensboro, North Carolina**—Thursday, Sept. 22 at 7:30 p.m.
- **Charlotte, North Carolina**—Sunday, Sept. 25 at 3 p.m.



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The Bible reveals much more about the amazing story of America’s rise to greatness, as well as the sobering reasons for its many growing troubles! You need to understand the full story and where it is leading. Download or request your free copy of *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* today!

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CHANGE to Really Believe In

The current U.S. presidential race offers starkly different visions for the future. Which vision more closely aligns with the Bible? And what is God's vision of the ultimate government the world so badly needs?

by Mike Kelley

Afascinated nation follows the 2016 U.S. presidential race with an intensity of interest virtually unprecedented in our lifetimes. Pundits and commentators have marveled at the level of emotion, anger and invective the race has produced, and which seems to intensify with each passing week. "The best reality show on TV" is an apt description.

Millions of Americans sense that this may be the most important presidential election in modern times. Despite looming threats from the Middle East and a resurgent Russia, economic and cultural issues take center stage, pushing foreign concerns to the sidelines.

Anger and frustration seem to be driving many voters, coloring perceptions of the issues and sending them into the arms of candidates like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, seen by many as political outsiders. Observers have noted the backlash against what is perceived as the "Washington establishment," with politicians concerned only with money and reelection.

More than seven years into the weakest economic recovery in decades, many voters think the economic cards are stacked against them. Rising national debt, student-loan debt and stagnant incomes fuel a growing frustration with a federal government many see as weak, ineffectual and controlled by special interests. Trump on the Republican side and Sanders on the Democratic have tapped into this discontent to the bewilderment of more traditional candidates like Jeb Bush (who dropped out of the race in early March) and Hillary Clinton.

With the backdrop of the still-recent housing slump of 2007-08, Sanders rails against Wall Street, pointing to "big business" and "big finance" as the culprits behind

the nation's economic woes. On the other end of the spectrum, Donald Trump points to large numbers of illegal immigrants and poor tax and trade policies of the Obama administration as the cause of millions of jobs being lost by hard-working Americans.

Both candidates have appealed to voter blocs seen as outside party establishments. Trump's appeal to largely blue-collar voters stands in sharp contrast to Sanders' overwhelming appeal to young, idealistic voters, many of them voting for the first time.

Polls show that Trump's criticisms of Muslims and illegal Hispanic immigrants have earned him the scorn of most minority voters. He raised the ire of many Hispanics when Jorge Ramos, a reporter for Spanish-language Univision, was forcibly removed from a Trump rally as Ramos repeatedly questioned him on his stand towards Hispanics. The mass media have declared war on Trump while hoping that, as the likely nominee, his colorful rhetoric and actions will continue to produce top TV ratings.

More and more, Americans have wondered aloud, "Are these the best candidates the nation can find?"

Ancient Israel's political problems

Israel, the central nation of the Bible, was ruled anciently by a series of judges who administered the laws God gave with varying degrees of success. But in a succession battle involving the sons of Samuel, the prophet whom God had established as His judge over Israel, the people let it be known they wanted change. Their "platform" called for a king like the nations around them, an army for protection, and greater interaction with the very nations God told them to avoid.

In response, Samuel told them what having a king would be like, what their political platform would bring:

“This is what the king who will rule over you will do. He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots . . . He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers” (1 Samuel 8:11-13, New International Version, 1984). Samuel went on to describe how a king would tax them heavily and confiscate private property to support an army and an administrative bureaucracy.

The comparison to modern America, where the government can easily tax up to 30 or more percent of income, is all too obvious. And yet American taxation is light compared to that of European and other nations.

Knowing the tendency of people to look at a candidate’s physical appearance and strength of personality, God allowed Israel to have a king who fit that bill. Through Samuel, God chose Saul, “an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites” to be their first king—and it didn’t hurt that he also stood “a head taller” than his countrymen (1 Samuel 9:1-2, NIV, 1984).

But it was not long before Saul, perhaps filled with his own ego, turned from following the God who chose him. After a series of missteps and outright rejection of God’s law, he fell on his own sword after being badly wounded in battle.

His successor, David, was able to bring about a brief period

motivated by corrupted human nature, can never achieve a completely just, balanced and fair human government. The reason? Man does not know the way to peace, prosperity and security.

Through the prophet Isaiah God says, “The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways” (Isaiah 59:8). The prophet Jeremiah had this to say: “I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23, English Standard Version).

The apostle James laid the cause of war and conflict at the feet of human passions and hatred: “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and . . . murder and covet and cannot obtain” (James 4:1-2).

The same can be said about economic policy. After experimenting with different economic systems for thousands of years of human history, have we finally gotten this right? Or are all human societies still marked by poverty, want and deprivation?

The answer should be obvious.

Yet your Bible speaks of a future time when all of these goals will finally be achieved—but *not by the governments of men*.

The good news of the future world, the world beyond today, is that the goals of peace, prosperity, good health—all of which politicians and governments of men have been striving for all

of human history to attain—*will happen!* But it will take *the government of God* to bring this about.

The government of God on earth will come with the return of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel or good news that few know about and even fewer believe. Space here does not permit a full discus-

sion of this amazing truth, but we invite you to download or request our free study guide *The Gospel of the Kingdom* to learn more.

What, then, will God’s government look like? What kind of “platform” will it have?

Not another exercise in failed ideology

From various Scriptures we can see that the Kingdom of God will eradicate poverty, crime, war, disease epidemics and the other ills that plague mankind.

Some might equate concern for the poor with modern liberal thought and social welfare programs. The political left, represented in the United States by the Democratic Party, seeks economic equality through the means of wealth redistribution—which is actually theft by government, breaking the Eighth and Tenth of God’s Ten Commandments.

Liberal or progressive ideology calls for compassion to those less well off, but the programs put in place to achieve this often do more harm to the poor than good by making them dependent on government handouts and perpetuating poverty from one generation to the next.

Some contend that the Bible advocates socialism or even communism, pointing to a time when the early New Testament Church practiced sharing of food and goods for a short time.

Anger and frustration seem to be driving many voters, and yet more and more, Americans have wondered aloud, “Are these the best candidates the nation can find?”

of greatness and stability, which continued and grew under his son Solomon. But that period of wealth and power was not to last. The kingdom was split in two. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles detail the sad history of Israel and Judah under a succession of mostly evil kings who ruled in evil, power-hungry ways that eventually brought both nations to financial ruin and captivity.

Hundreds of years after a portion of the captives of Judah, now called Jews, returned from Persian captivity, Rome arose to dominate the nation of Israel. Although official Roman policy was to allow the Jewish people to keep and practice their religion, Roman-appointed administrators such as Herod and Pilate tended to rule with an iron fist.

By the time Jesus Christ came into the world, the Jews were yearning for a Messiah who would overthrow the hated Romans and return Israel to the greatness it enjoyed under David and Solomon. Again, the Israelites sought a strong leader who would rally the people and, they thought, solve their problems.

Human politics can never bring about utopia—only God can

We should ask, Can human beings bring about the peace and prosperity so universally desired yet so seldom achieved?

Your Bible—and history—shows that human beings,

This is a reference to Acts 2:40-45, the very beginning of God’s Church. The apostle Peter had just delivered his powerful Pentecost sermon, which resulted in 3,000 new converts to the Church on the first day. This passage tells us, “Now all who believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

However, this was an unusual situation, with the Church under persecution and the many new converts from faraway lands wanting to stay in Jerusalem for a while to learn more about Jesus Christ and the truth. So to help provide for all of them through this circumstance, believers “had all things in common” for a time.

But lest we get the impression the Bible endorses the kind of socialist system advocated by Bernie Sanders, we must understand that this was a completely *voluntary* sharing of resources (see Acts 4:32; 5:4)—not to be confused with a socialist or communist system wherein shared ownership is *mandatory*, amounting to government redistribution of private property, which again is theft according to God.

Again, this was a *temporary* circumstance. Such sharing took care of an immediate need. The record in Acts shows that this did not last long. Soon the Church was scattered and the gospel message was spread to surrounding areas (Acts 8:1, 4). Thereafter we never see such a system practiced or referred to in the Bible.

God’s solution for the poverty problem

Will the eradication of poverty, a condition as old as mankind, ever be achieved? Yes, it will—when the entire world is living according to the revealed laws of God, which are based on loving God and loving one’s neighbor (Matthew 22:35-39). Certainly Jesus Christ showed compassion for the needy when on two recorded occasions He fed thousands who flocked to hear His message. Matthew 14:13-21 and 15:32-39 detail these occasions.

But poverty won’t be eliminated by forcibly taking income and property from those who have worked hard and produced and giving it to those who choose not to. It will be eliminated by teaching people how to live in ways that make them productive citizens, and also teaching them the laws of God that will bring abundant physical blessings.

In ancient Israel, God did not forget the poor of the land and in His laws made provision for them. For example, God provided a food supply for the poor to gather, telling landowners: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them to the poor” (Leviticus 19:9).

But this command for caring for the poor was a personal duty before God—not one that was policed by human government (though community censure would face those failing to do as they ought to). And it’s worth noting that the landowners weren’t taxed to have their income and property redistributed to the poor. Furthermore, the poor had to put forth the effort to gather the food for themselves. They couldn’t just go to a warehouse and claim it or have it delivered to them.

It was also widely understood that family members took

care of other family members. And if a woman lost her husband, her children were responsible for taking her in and caring for her. We see this private responsibility stated in the New Testament as well (1 Timothy 5:8).

Also, each family owned land, and even if land was sold it reverted back to the original families every 50th year. This prevented not only the perpetual cycle of generations of poverty among the poor, but also prevented the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few super-rich families.

From these examples we would have to conclude that equality of economic opportunity and compassion for the poor will be major planks in God’s platform for a perfect world. And this will be in a right way, not the wrong approach of the modern political left.

God doesn’t oppose wealth

Helping those in poverty is often viewed as a hallmark of liberalism. But genuine concern for the poor seeks to alleviate their plight permanently through different means—by encouraging private charity and reducing wasteful human government programs and regulations to allow economic freedom leading to wealth creation and greater prosperity for all, including the poor.

As we read earlier, when ancient Israel wanted a king to be like the nations around them, God warned where this tendency toward looking to human leadership for solutions would lead—to ever-expanding government administrations, unnecessary and costly bureaucracies, loss of personal freedom and ever-growing expense (1 Samuel 8:4-18). How much this sounds like exactly what we see today in a country mired in trillions of dollars of debt from exploding government spending!

You may be surprised to learn that the Bible does not condemn wealth. In ancient times, Abraham, “the father of the faithful” (see Romans 4:11), became one of the wealthiest men of his time and place. Genesis 13:1 tells us Abraham “was very rich in livestock, silver and gold,” three measures of wealth still important in our modern world. The rest of Genesis chronicles how his son Isaac and grandson Jacob inherited and increased this wealth. Later in Israel’s history, God made Solomon one of the wealthiest men who ever lived.

Shortly before His death, Jesus Christ gave some final teachings to His disciples. In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, He compares Himself to a wealthy man who takes a trip to a distant country. Before he leaves, he apportions his goods to his workers (who in this parable represent His true followers), with the understanding that they will try to increase what they are given.

Those who received five talents and two talents (a talent was about 20 years’ average wages at the time) went out and through various business dealings managed to double their money. A third servant, who received only one talent, dug a hole in the ground and hid it.

What did the wealthy man do on his return? He praised the actions of the two servants who had doubled their money. But his reaction to the lack of return of the third servant was far different: “You wicked and lazy servant . . . You ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my return I would have received back my own with interest” (Matthew 25:26-27).

Jesus obviously did not condemn wealth or the legal acquisi-

tion of it. He did teach on several occasions, however, that wealth and the pursuit of wealth can be a snare that distracts us from the pursuit of righteousness. What this parable teaches is that we should exercise and build on our spiritual talents, skills and abilities, which to God is infinitely more important than our material wealth.

Still, those who are materially wealthy are in a better position to help others in need—through private charity, employing people and buying goods and services from those needing to sell them. And an attitude of thankfulness and sharing one's material blessings ultimately serves everyone in society.

The Bible does make a case for a liberty-oriented economy—what we would today call true capitalism or, perhaps better put, private property and free exchange.

A plan for national greatness

What about national greatness? Is it wrong for a nation to want to be a leader among other nations?

God set up ancient Israel as His model nation. He intended Israel to be the shining example for other nations to emulate. Notice: “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6-8, emphasis added throughout).

Since the end of World War II, the United States has played

God's platform calls for universal peace and prosperity. Your Bible makes hundreds of references to that coming time of peace and prosperity unparalleled in human history.

a leadership role in the world. By no means has it played this role perfectly. America's numerous foreign policy blunders and missteps are plain for all the world to see. But no nation has done more to preserve peace and stability in modern times than the United States.

God's perfect government platform will again establish Israel as His model nation, a nation to demonstrate the benefits of His government and faithful obedience to His laws to all the nations.

God's platform calls for universal peace and prosperity. Your Bible makes hundreds of references to that coming time of peace and prosperity unparalleled in human history, and gives us hints about this coming economy. It will value and preserve private property rights while providing peace of mind and true security: “Everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:4).

Those privately owned farms will produce abundant harvests: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

The platform of God's perfect government will preserve the rights of those who work and profit to enjoy the fruits of their labors. But just as importantly, it will level the playing field so that everyone, not just the wealthy or those with the right

connections, will have the opportunity to prosper.

Get involved in God's platform!

Fundamentally, the platform of God's perfect government is that of His perfect character of outflowing love for others (1 John 1:8, 16). This is expressed among human beings by obedience to God's commandments (1 John 5:3), following true biblical morality.

Liberal ideology advocates that people follow their own private morality—provided that is in line with overall liberal ideology. This has resulted in an expulsion of God and His laws from governance. Thus liberal groups have long promoted gay marriage, abortion on demand and other sins against God. Such evils will not be allowed in God's coming government.

Conservative liberty-oriented thought has historically promoted traditional Judeo-Christian morality, recognizing that it is in the long-term best interests of everyone. In fact, the official Republican platform expressly opposes the evils just mentioned. Yet many Republicans give only lip service to biblical morality, and a significant number of others have abandoned it altogether.

Furthermore, those who do espouse biblical morality are often quite removed in their thinking from many of the laws God requires in His Word. And even if some understood the truth of God, they would be quite incapable of turning the tide of this corrupt world and leading the populace into needed change.

As of now the Democratic and Republican fields have greatly narrowed. Both parties will hold their national conventions in late summer, which will produce each party's nominees. Millions of Americans find themselves caught up in the frenzy of

campaigning for their favorite candidates.

But seeing that neither party will bring the changes that are truly needed, should you not rather get involved with the campaign for the perfect government? You'll find this campaign to be refreshingly different, with no need for its supporters to knock on doors, make phone calls, cheer at political rallies or make donations to political parties.

What it does call for is for you to *get your life in line with its principles*, as expressed in the law of God. It calls for you to reorient your life to living by the law that will govern the world of the future! And it involves standing with others doing the same.

Here is change to believe in! Be assured, no political campaign of man can be more fulfilling and rewarding! **BT**

LEARN MORE



The coming government of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus Christ will establish throughout the world at His return, will be startlingly different from our failed human governments! What will it be like? Request or download your free copy of *The Gospel of the Kingdom* to learn about this very different world!

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Are Islamic beliefs compatible with Western culture?

As migrants continue to seek asylum in the relative peace of Europe's borders, many questions must be asked, chief among them being whether two very different cultural systems can coexist peacefully.

Many are hopeful that Middle Eastern Muslims can find their niche in heavily secular Europe and that Europeans can find a way to successfully integrate migrants into their society. Others are less optimistic. Case in point, Frauke Petry, a prominent German conservative populist, who argues that "the immigration of so many Muslims will change [Germany's] culture" (interview with *Der Spiegel's* Susanne Beyer and Jan Fleischhauer, March 30, 2016).

That elements of Islamic belief are incompatible with secular Western values is an opinion shared by Nabeel Qureshi, a Christian convert who grew up Muslim. In a column for *USA Today*, Qureshi points out that many Muslims are discovering the fact that the Quran itself, along with the hadith (traditional sayings and stories of Muhammad), commands conflict with non-Islamic cultures and religions:

"When everyday Muslims investigate the Quran and hadith for themselves, bypassing centuries of tradition and their imams' interpretations, they are confronted with the reality of violent jihad in the very

foundations of their faith" ("The Quran's Deadly Role in Inspiring Belgian Slaughter," March 22, 2016).

Qureshi points out that while most Muslims are non-violent and do not take Islamic literature encouraging violence literally, the theological underpinnings of extremism are found within the Quran itself.

One way or another, certain Bible prophecies indi-



cate that this conflict will eventually come to a head, with disastrous consequences. The biblical figures of the king of the North and king of the South represent the history and prophetic reality of this ongoing conflict. We encourage you to read more about it in our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*. (Sources: *Der Spiegel*; *USA Today*.)

Demographic shifts changing the face of America

"At its core, demography is the act of counting people," begins a new report from the Pew Research Center about U.S. population changes. "But it's also important to study the forces that are driving population change, and measure how these changes have an impact on people's lives."

The report went on to summarize 10 demographic changes that are reshaping the United States in significant ways. Among them are:

- *Immigration is making the country more racially and ethnically diverse.* Almost 60 million immigrants have come into the country over the last 50 years, largely from Mexico and Asia ("Asia" in this case being primarily the Middle East, Pakistan and India rather than China and Japan). The percentage of America's foreign-born population has nearly tripled over the same time to 14 percent, meaning one out of every seven were born outside the United States.

- *The numbers of Asian and African immigrants are rising,* while the number of net immigrants from Mexico has leveled off and is slowly decreasing.

- *Millennials, those born after 1980, likely now outnumber the "Baby Boomer" generation (born 1946-1964)—and differ from them significantly.* They are racially diverse (43 percent are non-white), politically more liberal, and more highly educated—with the result that many struggle with student debt and still live at home.

- *Mothers are now the sole or primary wage earner in 40 percent of all households with children.* This means that large numbers of children spend little time with either parent. More than a quarter of all children under 18 live with a single parent; 5 percent live with no parent at all.

- *American families are changing in other ways.* The percentage of Americans over 25 who have never been married is the highest ever at 20 percent. This is more than double the 9 percent of never-married adults in 1960. About one in four young adults aged 25 to 34—the prime childbearing years—are not married but living with a partner.

- *The middle class is shrinking.* In 2015, after four decades in which middle-class families were the majority, only half of U.S. adults lived in middle-income households. As the middle class has shrunk, the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" has grown.

- *The percentage of Americans identifying as Christian is shrinking while the number of those religiously unaffiliated is growing.* From 2007 to 2014, the percentage claiming Christianity dropped from 78 to 71 percent while the religiously unaffiliated climbed from 16 to 23 percent.

These trends have sobering implications for the nation. The changes due to immigration show that America's leaders are repeating the mistake that is currently bringing so much chaos to Europe—opening

The world of the past 20 years can be viewed in the context of successive major terror attacks on the West, starting with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2005 attacks on the London transportation system, the Paris attacks in 2015 and most recently the deadly attack on Brussels, Belgium.

Make no mistake: Islamic extremists are waging a war on the West, with Europe in particular under fire most recently. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that they only target Western nations.

Margaret Wente of the Canadian *Globe and Mail* well described the threat to the Middle East's Christian population: "Apologists for extremism like to argue that Islamists hate us for good reason. They attack the West because of the awful things the West has done to them, and because Europe has miserably failed to integrate its Muslim population. But they also kill the infidels next door. It is clarifying to keep in mind that Islamist hatred is not confined to us. Its real motive is the logic of fanaticism" ("Islamic Extremists Don't Just Hate the West," March 29, 2016).

Further proof that Islamic extremism is not borne out of a struggle against foreign threats or mere political fervor is the fact that terrorists frequently leave scores of their fellow countrymen and fellow Muslims dead in their brutal attacks. This is because the roots of Islamic extremism don't lie in politics or geopolitical tension. They lie instead in biblical history and what Scripture foretold would come. You can read about and understand the astonishing story in our free study guide *The Middle East in Bible Prophecy*. (Source: *The Globe and Mail*.)

doors to millions of immigrants from other cultures and religions who will never fully assimilate into American culture.

The changes in family life show that the nation is drifting farther from the God-designed family model (of a husband and wife bound in a loving marriage and bringing up children who are taught godly principles and values). Veering from God's design brings only greater personal and societal costs.

And rejection of biblical Christianity to embrace other religions (or none at all) leads to only further moral, cultural and societal breakdown as people look to human government or themselves to find solutions for their problems. As Proverbs 14:12 said some 3,000 years ago, "There is a way that seems right to man, but its end is the way of death."

To learn more about where these trends are leading and why, download or request our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. (Source: Pew Research Center.)

The resurgence of the “great leader”

The mid-20th century was defined by the presence and leadership of what many would call “great men” or “great leaders,” with “great” implying power and success and not necessarily virtue.

Leaders like Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini led their nations by what seemed at times to be sheer force of will and personality. Normal, everyday people were moved to support genocide and war by following their “great leaders.” Notable exceptions such as Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt aside, the “great leaders” of the 20th century left behind little but death and ruin.

More than 70 years later we must ask ourselves: Has much really changed in how human beings view the men and women who lead them? Have the tragedies of the 20th century taught us anything about choosing wise and just leaders?

A quick survey of many of the world’s most influential nations and leaders—Russia’s Vladimir Putin, China’s Xi Jinping and Turkey’s Recep Erdogan, among others—will show us that we are as susceptible as ever to charismatic “great leaders” who do not understand the way of peace. While the West has been largely an exception to this phenomenon, how long can we expect that to hold true?

Jesus Christ described this hard truth of corrupted human nature well. Instructing His disciples, He told them: “In this world the kings and great men lord it over their people, yet they are called “friends of the people” (Luke 22:25, New Living Translation 2015). He knew all too well that human nature seeks to have dominion over others and that the nations, in their blindness, would appoint harsh rulers to their own hurt.

None of the world’s forms of government can change this. Only the return of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom of God will save us from ourselves. Read about the hope we all share in our free study guide *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.

ISIS forces birth control on female slaves

There’s an Islamic law stating that a man must ensure that a woman who is enslaved to him cannot be pregnant in order to have intercourse with her. Islamic State (or ISIS) fighters use modern medicine and technology to ensure that the women they capture are free from child by using birth control. Some captors will even have blood and urine tests conducted to make sure they are within the law.

The New York Times recently reported on this: “In its official publications, the Islamic State has stated that it is legal for a man to rape the women he enslaves under just about any circumstance. Even sex with a child is permissible, according to a pamphlet published by the

group. The injunction against raping a pregnant slave is functionally the only protection for the captured women” (Rukmini Callimachi, “To Maintain Supply of Sex Slaves, ISIS Pushes Birth Control,” March 12, 2016).

Historically, this seems to be what Islamic fighters have done to their captives since the days of Muhammad: “Islamic State leaders have made sexual slavery as they believe it was practiced during the Prophet Muhammad’s time integral to the group’s operations, preying on the women and girls the group captured from the Yazidi religious minority almost two years ago” (ibid.).

This law in their own religious writing has spawned

a sex slave market that has led to more than 700 rapes of young Yazidi women. These captives are held against their will in locked rooms, waiting for their captors to come in and abuse them.

In the previously mentioned article, a few of the women who managed to escape and were willing to tell their story were interviewed. They explained that they were given various types of birth control and, in some cases, were forced to have abortions so they could continue as sexual slaves to their captors.

God created men and women in His image. Degrading and using and abusing women are heinous sins. This world is slowly drifting towards a perilous period like the “days of Noah” (Matthew 24:37). (Source: *The New York Times*.)

North Korea close to deliverable nuclear weapons?

In March 2016, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un boasted about the advances in his nation’s nuclear program, saying, “Now is the time for us to convert our mode of military counteraction toward the enemies into a pre-emptive attack one in every aspect” (quoted by Jack Kim, “N. Korea Leader Tells Military to Be Ready to Use Nuclear Weapons,” Reuters, March 7, 2016).

North Korea wants to be on the offensive rather than the defensive, and it believes its nuclear progress will position itself closer to its goals.

The East Asian nation has been working on its nuclear program for some time. Top analysts still believe that the country is a good way off from creating a weapon that will have considerable reach. The United Nations has ordered heavy sanctions against North Korea to stall its progress in producing weaponry, but UN watchdogs haven’t seen a slowdown in development.

“Johns Hopkins University’s 38 North project, which monitors North Korea, said recent commercial satellite imagery showed new activity in the isolated country, including a convoy of trucks at its satellite launch station that could be preparations for a rocket-engine test” (ibid.).

Despite where North Korea is in the project, its goal is to become a nuclear

power. There are only a handful of nations with this type of firepower. Iran is also actively seeking nuclear capabilities. If these countries succeed, that will have a profound effect on the world order. A rogue nation like North Korea having this kind of weaponry will lead to an unsettled environment in the surrounding nations and the rest of the world.

That type of fear always produces conflict. It seems like we are getting closer to the final days of this age, as described by Jesus: “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22).

Thankfully, Jesus will intervene in the world before the human race destroys itself. We continue to look to that time and have hope in the peace and security He will ultimately bring. (Source: Reuters.)



North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un shows off what is claimed to be a spherical nuclear bomb in early 2016.

How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. *So are we*. That’s one reason we produce the *Beyond Today* daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at ucg.org/beyond-today/daily!



God's Great Love for Us

by Janet Treadway

Recently I was at my daughter Michelle's house to help her with her new baby. He seemed really fussy that day, so I made the comment that he was a little grumpy. My daughter looked at me and said in defense of her newborn (while having a gleam in her eye), "Mom, he is *not* grumpy!"

Michelle is totally smitten with this bundle of joy. She looks at this little boy as if he can do no wrong.

Zayn was a long-awaited gift. Michelle and her husband Ken had been trying for eight years for this little one. My daughter waited patiently as she prayed and trusted God that in His time it would happen (though if it didn't, she was okay with that, accepting God's will).

Watching my daughter interact with her newborn reminds me of the old saying, "There is no greater love than that of a mother's love." But wait—yes there is! Our Heavenly Father's love for us is even greater! God looks at us with great hope, love and with a tremendous amount of compassion.

Many times we can view God as harsh, unforgiving and ready to wipe us off the face of the earth when we sin—and, yes, when we have a grumpy day. But the fact is, He loved us so deeply that He gave His Son for us! In Romans 5:8 we read, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (New International Version 1984 throughout). Could any of us give up our only child for someone else? I don't think any of us could. But our Father in Heaven did!

Someone bought our Zayn a beautiful little blanket that my daughter loves wrapping him in. Printed on it is the passage from Jeremiah 29:11 that reads, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

That is how Michelle feels about her little Zayn—the same way God feels about us!

In Psalm 103:13-14 He tells us, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust."

What a great Father we have! If God loves us so much, how does He show it? Here are three of the many ways God shows His love for us.



Michelle and Zayn

1. He gave His Son for us! John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And Jesus Christ willingly gave His life for us. As He said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

2. He will never leave us! I can never imagine my daughter rejecting her little Zayn. When he cries, she picks him up to comfort him. That is how God is with us. But if you have felt rejection or abandonment, it might be hard for you to trust God. "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deuteronomy 31:8). Nothing is so bad that He will abandon you—nothing!

3. He comforts us! As a mother comforts her child, so does God comfort us. In 2 Corinthians 1:4 we read that He "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." We should always go to God for encouragement. When you are down, ask God to encourage you. Psalm 46:1 reminds us, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Romans 8:38-39 states, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Even when we mess up, or have a grumpy day, God is still there ready to help us, show us love and even defend us, as long as we repent and keep trying! **BT**

Decision-Making

One of the benefits of studying the Bible is helping us make godly choices—particularly when it comes to our spiritual lives. But the wise principles given in the Bible can help us in making good decisions in every area of life. Some decisions have a clear right and wrong choice, but for those decisions with an array of options, understanding biblical principles can help us identify and choose the best ones.

We hope this study will give you practical and helpful information you

animals for the available pastureland. So an argument broke out between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. At that time Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land.

“Then Abram talked it over with Lot. ‘This arguing between our herdsmen has got to stop,’ he said. ‘After all, we are close relatives! I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Take your choice of any section of the land you want, and we will separate. If you want that area over there, then I’ll stay here. If you want to stay in this area, then I’ll move on to another place.’

“Lot took a long look at the fertile

There’s more to this story, of course. But it is interesting to note that God blessed Abram’s generous decision for peace. Lot, on the other hand, chose the fertile land around Sodom—apparently thinking he wouldn’t be influenced by the corrupt and sinful Sodom. But he was wrong.

What does the Bible say about decision-making?

The Bible is especially designed to help us make the *most* important decision—the decision to repent, change and follow Jesus Christ for the rest of our lives (Acts 2:38; 1 John 2:6). God tells us to put Him first, to obey Him and thus choose eternal life and blessings (Matthew 6:33; Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

All other decisions in life should contribute toward that ultimate decision and goal. We must avoid decisions that will detract from putting God and His righteousness first in our life.

But not every decision is a choice of good versus evil. Many of our daily decisions have multiple acceptable options. Some of our biggest decisions also have a variety of possible choices, like what career to pursue, whom to marry and where to live. But the Bible also gives us principles that can help us identify and choose the best options. Let’s explore biblical wisdom to find some of those keys.

► What is the starting point in finding wisdom?

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

“So that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to under-

The Bible gives us the principles that can help us identify and choose the best options when making decisions.

can use every day. We wish you the best in all your decision-making!

We face constant decisions

We face decisions every day. How can we determine the best choices to make—especially in the big decisions and those that seemingly have no clear answer?

It’s interesting to consider the decisions Abram (later called Abraham) and Lot made in a conflict situation and the outcomes of those decisions. The story is told in Genesis 13:5-15 (New Living Translation, 1996):

“Now Lot, who was traveling with Abram, was also very wealthy with sheep, cattle, and many tents. But the land could not support both Abram and Lot with all their flocks and herds living so close together. There were too many

plains of the Jordan Valley in the direction of Zoar. The whole area was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the LORD or the beautiful land of Egypt. (This was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)

“Lot chose that land for himself—the Jordan Valley to the east of them. He went there with his flocks and servants and parted company with his uncle Abram. So while Abram stayed in the land of Canaan, Lot moved his tents to a place near Sodom, among the cities of the plain. The people of this area were unusually wicked and sinned greatly against the LORD.

“After Lot was gone, the LORD said to Abram, ‘Look as far as you can see in every direction. I am going to give all this land to you and your offspring as a permanent possession.’”

Indecision and inaction can sometimes be worse than a less-than-perfect solution—as long as it does not violate biblical principles.

standing; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:2-6).

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

When we understand how great God is and see how small we are, we will grow in a proper reverence and fear of God. That leads us to ask for His guidance and to study His Bible to grow not just in knowledge but in understanding of underlying principles. Meditating on and applying that biblical knowledge and understanding with God’s Spirit leads to godly wisdom.

So we seek wisdom when we fear God, pray for His help and study His Bible to find principles that apply to the decisions we face.

► How else does the Bible tell us to seek wisdom?

“Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).

Trusted experts and wise individuals, especially those who are older and more experienced than us, can be a good source of advice. Other people may see our problem from a different angle than we would, allowing them to provide possible solutions

we might not see.

► How should we approach defining and understanding the problem—the decision we face?

“A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished” (Proverbs 22:3).

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13).

“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24).

A wise person carefully looks ahead to the end, trying to foresee the likely long-term consequences, before making a decision on which course to follow.

For an important decision, we must invest the time to get the facts, to examine the situation more than superficially to clearly define the problem, and to consider the ramifications. When we are able to accurately state the problem or opportunity, we will be able to see the shape of the ideal solution more clearly.

But determining how to get to that ideal solution can still be challenging. Brainstorm for possible options and include the advice of the counselors you are consulting.

So we end this phase of decision-making with a clearly stated problem and a list of possible solutions to choose from.

► How should we make our decision?

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing;

therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).


“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’” (Luke 14:28-30).

If a possible solution requires disobeying a biblical instruction or principle, delete that option from your list. Then compare the remaining options with positive biblical principles and instructions, wise advice from others, the likelihood of success and the effects your decision will have on others. Carefully weigh the pros and cons and “count the cost.”

If the decision is still not clear, you may need to repeat some of the fact-finding, brainstorming and wisdom-seeking steps. In the end, if there are two or more options that seem equally good, you may have to—again asking God to guide you—just decide and then act on your decision. Indecision and inaction can sometimes be worse than a less-than-perfect solution (as long as it does not violate biblical principles).

When we strive to seek God’s wisdom and follow biblical principles, we can entrust our decisions and the worries that may accompany them to Him (Proverbs 3:5-6; Matthew 6:33-34).

Apply now

Apply these steps to a decision you are facing now. Writing things out on paper can be helpful in clarifying issues when you face a complex or challenging problem. Put these steps into practice with every significant decision, and enjoy the peace of mind that follows! 

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The Benefits of THE SABBATH

Discover the amazing benefits of observing God's seventh-day Sabbath. You might be surprised at just how much it could change your life for the better!

by Steve Myers

Everybody likes a benefit—something just a little extra. We want jobs with good employee benefits. Most of us would love to work for generous compensation and benefits—and for many, the benefits are even more important than the wages.

But some people don't always take advantage of those benefits. I have a friend who doesn't participate in his company's health savings account program. Another friend doesn't contribute to her retirement account and doesn't receive her company's matching funds. These friends don't really care much about company benefits.

There's another kind of benefit program that everyone should want to be part of. It's way more valuable than any benefit your company can provide! What is it? Let's call it the *Sabbath benefit program*.

The problem is, though, that like my friends who gave up their benefits, most people in the world don't participate in this spiritual benefit program. They opt out.

But God has given us, as His workers, His Sabbath—Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—as a day of rest, reflection, worship and fellowship. And that is a great benefit plan!

There are *real, tangible* benefits to keeping the Sabbath. I know that I have been greatly blessed by observing the Sabbath.

When Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27), He was telling all of us that the Sabbath was made

to help us and be a *blessing* for us. It's part of God's benefit program for everyone. He wants us to "opt in" to God's special day, fully participating to receive full benefits!

A time set aside by our Creator to connect with Him

You'd probably agree that our modern world is too rushed. The hustle and bustle of everyday life can make it difficult to stop and appreciate the blessings we have.

But on the Sabbath, God wants us to take time away from work and distractions to enjoy time with Him, with family, good food, music and other simple yet inspiring things.

The Sabbath is a precious place in time that God has set aside for us to get to know Him better!

The Sabbath is a reprieve from the chaotic pace of the week. Human beings aren't meant to work seven days a week. Our Creator intended for us to rest and spend time learning about Him. That's why God set aside this time where we can put aside our daily concerns—our jobs, the grocery shopping that needs to be done, the errands, the household chores.

Think about it: When was the last time you stopped and

looked up at the stars and really enjoyed the beauty of a starlit night? That extra time for reflection that God gives us on the Sabbath helps us appreciate what we might otherwise overlook. It's a wonderful opportunity to draw closer to our Creator who made all these beautiful things.

The Sabbath day is a place in time that God has set aside so that we can get to know *Him* better and He can get to know *us* better.

When you understand that the Sabbath is the amazing blessing God designed it to be for us, why would you not keep it every week? There's no better time to focus on connecting with Him!

A time to rest

Imagine having one day every week to avoid work, a day to get out of household chores, a day of not worrying about to-do lists—and all of this without any guilt! Picture a day to spend with your family and friends, a day in nature, a day of doing something nice for someone else. It's not a dream. It's a reality, all because God designed the Sabbath this way.

and His direction for our lives. It means *trusting* God with your time, your feelings, your character, your finances, your perspective, your attitude, your relationships, your whole existence.

God is essentially telling you: "This is the day that I want you to observe. I want to set you apart, I want you to be different, and I want you to see that this is the way to live." Stepping out and doing something that God wants, even when it seems different and maybe strange, builds faith in Him.

In fact, you could say that observing the Sabbath rest is *an act of faith*. It's a reminder that *no matter what we do, God is in control*. He says, "I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy" (Ezekiel 20:12, New International Version).

When we stop chasing material goals and our usual work for one day every week, we effectively say: "God, you're in control. I'm honoring You. I'm focusing on You—on Your Sabbath. Even though I'm working on only six days, I trust You to provide for me through all seven days. It doesn't matter how much money I would make today, or how many things I could check off my to-do list. It's Your Sabbath and I want to opt in to your time. I want to enjoy this time to rest, reset my thinking, reset my body and worship and honor You."

Obedying the Fourth Commandment is a faith-builder because observing the Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset can seem to go against the expectations of the world around us. Building living faith in God means being more concerned with His opinion than anyone else's.

God doesn't expect us to keep a 24-hour period of rest Friday sunset to Saturday sunset just because it seems like a good idea to you or me. He wants us to do it out of a desire to obey His command that we keep it. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" is the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-10).

The Sabbath is a day of freedom and worship

God gave the Sabbath command to a people He had just rescued from the bondage of slavery. They were a people who rarely, maybe never, got a day off. The fact that the Sabbath was a gift is made clear in this connection: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:13-15, NIV).

Sometimes we can be slaves to work, slaves to stress, slaves to the hustle and bustle of life. God wants us to have a day off from work and have a day to reset and focus on spiritual matters. The Sabbath is not only intended to be a day of physical rest, but also a day of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation—a day to set us free. God wants to free you from settling into a comfortable yet aimless seven-day routine.

The Sabbath is a spiritual compass in the week that orients us toward God and reminds us of His divine purpose for our lives.

God set the example for us when He rested on the seventh day of creation. He showed us by example that He designed it to be a holy day on which to rest for the whole day. The Sabbath is a time to stop normal activity at sunset on Friday evening and enjoy a 24-hour day to rejuvenate physically, emotionally and, most importantly, *spiritually*.

Your busy week most likely wears you out. The activity and challenge of your job can be a good thing, but after a week's worth of work, you're ready for something different. God designed us to feel that way. The Bible shares His perspective: "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:11).

The word *Sabbath* literally means "to cease" or "to stop." Just as God rested from His creation work, we are to rest from our day-to-day occupations and activities and focus on what's most important. On the last day of every week, we should stop what we're doing to think and study more about God, go to Sabbath worship services, and learn more about how to live God's way.

God gave us the Sabbath as a way to push the reset button. If you're like me, you're easily distracted from the people and things that matter the most. God's Sabbath helps get me back on task and gets my priorities straight! Every week you can have that same opportunity to reset and "opt in" to His purpose for our lives!

A time to build faith

The Sabbath redirects us so we can focus on God's time

The Sabbath is a spiritual compass in the week that orients us toward God and reminds us of our divine purpose.

This spiritual purpose is why God set the Sabbath apart as holy and a day to assemble together for worship.

We're told to have a holy convocation—a special assembly—on the Sabbath (Leviticus 23:2-3). Think of it this way: Every Sabbath you have a divine appointment with God! Now that's too good of a benefit to opt out of!

Friday sunset to Saturday sunset is the biblical Sabbath, and during that time period Christians come together to worship God collectively as His people. We all have the choice to follow Jesus' example and opt in to connecting with our great God in a special way on His day.

His Word tells us: "Praise God in his holy house of worship . . . praise him for his acts of power, praise him for his magnificent greatness . . . Let every living, breathing creature praise God! Hallelujah!" (Psalms 150:1-2, 6, The Message).

If you want to truly follow God, don't forget that you have a very special appointment with Him: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

Are you ready to follow God and enjoy His Sabbath benefits?

Opting in to God's Sabbath benefit plan is something you'll want to fully participate in! It reminds us that God makes a way for us to be full-time, full-fledged members of His divine family. He gives us a weekly reminder of His plan and purpose through the seventh-day Sabbath—a very special day to learn about and draw closer to God. It's a day of joy, a day of freedom, and a day of fellowship with others who want to worship God as He commands.

God wants you to *make the choice*—to do what He would have you do—to do what's best. It might seem a little difficult at first to do something different, but He wants to give you the best of spiritual blessings. He wants you to opt in to His spiritual benefit plan!

Will you take God at His Word? Will you take that first step this week to fully participate in God's special day of benefits? The time is now to commit all areas of your life to God and to choose to worship Him on His Sabbath day!

The New Testament Church was instructed to keep the Fourth Commandment, the day made for mankind: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9, NIV).

You can fully participate too. Make God's Sabbath—Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—your Sabbath. Honor God through the day He set apart for us, and expect a spiritual benefit! **BT**

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What does the Bible say about the Sabbath day? Can you know for sure which day is the Sabbath? Why did God give this command anyway? You need to know the answers! Download or request your free copy of our study guide *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest* today!

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“The Biblical Alternative to Easter”

Your article about Passover vs. Easter is awesome. I had no idea about the origins of Easter being pagan, or that there are Christian groups who do not celebrate it. Thank you for the new views on this holiday and the comparison to Passover as well.

From the Internet

Thankful for *Beyond Today* magazine

I always read your magazine from cover to cover! This may be the most truthful Christian magazine published today. I thank you for not being afraid to publish the simple truth. If everyone would read your publications the world would be a different place. God bless.

Subscriber in North Carolina

I write to let you know of my appreciation for your magazine, and especially the unbiased world news that it brings. Even though I am not a Christian, I realize how much I and this world are spiritually asleep.

Reader in California

I am very grateful for the magazine you have sent me every two months. It helps me grow in understanding of God, and to see a biblical perspective on world events.

Subscriber in Eritrea

Beyond Today program

“Unforgiveable: The Michaela Diemer Story”

I saw your program “Unforgiveable: The Michaela Diemer Story.” My husband’s granddaughter was murdered in June 2014 when she was 27. This program hit home with me because some of the events in the program are similar to what happened to her. I wish to thank you for this excellent program.

From the Internet

Grateful for free literature

I am very grateful and happy to receive your free *Bible Study Course* lessons. I am learning quite a lot. I was a Roman Catholic nun in the Vatican in the 1960s, so to discover the truth now has sometimes been a struggle. But with the love of God I am doing well in study and prayer. Keep up the good work, which the world needs so badly. Thank you. My life has truly changed. You are all in my prayers.

Reader in Wisconsin

I have to tell you how much I have enjoyed Lesson 7 of your *Bible Study Course*. It has inspired me with the Word of God to the point of my sharing this with many people at work and at church. This lesson demonstrates God’s love for His children, and I just have to share it. Thank you.

From the Internet

I have just read lesson 1 of your *Bible Study Course*, “Why the Bible is the Word of God,” and I was overwhelmed by the content so much that I am requesting that all the lessons be sent to me if possible. I am a religious education instructor and find them informative, educational and enlightening. Thank you.

Reader in the Turks and Caicos Islands

Thank you for your messages. For any who are interested in our 12-lesson Bible Study Course, you can download or request it at ucg.org/bsc.

A heartfelt “thank you” for your booklets! I use them during devotion time and they really help me to understand part of Scripture. All do not have computers, and still enjoy something to hold and read. They’re like friends to me, and I can’t wait to receive new ones in the mail! Again, thank you, and know all your hard work and beautiful booklets are making a true difference. The Lord really knows us and how we learn and understand! How amazing!

Reader in Iowa

Thank you for clarifying a question I had. I could never find in the Bible where the seventh-day Sabbath was changed from Saturday to the first day of the week. Your booklets have helped solve a lot of puzzles. I am learning you need to study the Old and New Testaments together to fit things together. You have to understand the words in the context of the day they were used in and not in today’s meaning.

Reader in Texas

Do you have any recommended references, links or books that specifically reveal the principles or parameters of “which Church really belongs to Christ?”

From the Internet

Our free study guide [The Church Jesus Built](#) covers this subject in detail. Feel free to download or request a copy at BTmagazine.org/booklets.

Sending a donation in appreciation

First, I want to say how much your magazine and booklets have changed my life for the better. I now study the Bible daily and have come to learn so much in the last couple of years. Thank you for the truth. Here is a small donation to help in the wonderful work you all do. Thank you!

Reader in Pennsylvania

Thank you for the magazines and booklets you have sent me. I am sending my offerings to help you with the work of God’s commission of teaching the good news to the world. I believe what God says, and I have peace like never before—I feel like I am insured! Even though what I have belongs to Him, He gave it to me, and I believe that by giving God the tenth, He blesses the 90 percent and gives me stewardship of it. I am managing God’s finances His way! I have learned that the tithe, the Sabbath, and the Ten Commandments are from the heart of God, and we can draw close to him by observing and living a godly life.

Subscriber in California

Readers interested in learning more about tithing may wish to read “Tithing: Where Is Your Treasure?” beginning on page 33.

I’ve enclosed a small donation for your wonderful work. I’m 73 and was raised a strict Catholic—I had eight years of Catholic school where everything was taught in Latin. In all the years since, I have seen no use in repeating the same words week after week at Sunday Mass. I am learning so much from your publications and wish I had found you 50 years ago! God bless all of you and thank you so much!

Reader in Minnesota

Looking for a congregation of like-minded believers

I don’t believe in celebrating the pagan holidays and want to find a church my granddaughter and I can become members of that believes

Q: By denying the Holy Spirit as a third entity in the Trinity, are you in danger of committing an unforgivable sin? Jesus said in Matthew 12:32 and other places that whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven.

From the Internet

A: The Trinity teaching that the Holy Spirit is a separate person is a false and erroneous teaching. As demonstrated in our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?* this belief is not found in the Bible, but is based in ancient religions that long predate Christianity. So rejecting this false teaching could not be an act of blasphemy.

The words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 12:32 are: “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.” A similar statement is found in Mark 3:28-29.

Someone with insufficient knowledge of Jesus who may have been adversely influenced by biases, false accusations and the claims of jealous leaders may have looked on Him as a mere man. They might have stated things about Him that were untrue and disrespectful. Some without understanding of God the Father and Jesus Christ might even have made vile statements against them. Jesus says these sins would be forgiven on repentance.

But in the context of Matthew 12, the Pharisees were confronted with a miracle clearly demonstrating the power of God. Jesus had banished a demon from a man. They dismissed it as Christ having done this miracle by the power of Satan. But Jesus explained clearly that only by the power of a greater Spirit—that of God—could a demon be cast out.

They remained unmoved and hardened in their hearts. For them to see a clear demonstration of God’s power through His Spirit, yet still reject it, shows their attitude of willfully resisting the Holy Spirit, and this is why Jesus rebuked them with this grave warning. The Holy Spirit is the means through which God acts on and within our hearts and minds to change us into the kind of people He wants us to be. Blasphemy against the Spirit involves a

refusal of that power that allows us to change.

The book of Hebrews addresses how the attitude of rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit can manifest itself among believers through spiritual neglect and persistence in sin: “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:4-6; see also Hebrews 10:26-27).

The faithful and true believer will acknowledge, confess and repent of his or her sins, and ask for forgiveness. When we do this, we can take comfort in knowing that these sins do not lead to the second death because we are taking part in the conversion and overcoming process. John brings this out near the beginning of his letter in 1 John 1:8-9. The apostle Paul acknowledged that he committed blasphemy and was guilty of opposing and rejecting Christ and persecuting His followers. But he repented of this and through God’s grace was forgiven (1 Timothy 1:13-14).

In contrast, those who come to the point of finally rejecting God will not seek to overcome sin through the power of His Spirit. In choosing not to change or repent of their sins, they are ultimately choosing death. That is the “unforgivable” sin—sin that someone refuses to repent of.

But we can take heart, because so long as we desire to repent and get our life back in order spiritually, God will always forgive. At any time, God can and will forgive the sin of departing from Him, if the sinner wants forgiveness and genuinely repents as we read in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Clearly, God will extend mercy to all who sincerely repent and change—regardless of their sin. Christ’s words, coupled with the warnings in Hebrews, are sobering. Nonetheless, we should hold fast to the hope that God will grant us repentance when we turn to Him.

To learn more about how God’s Spirit works in our lives, be sure to read “The Holy Spirit: God’s Power at Work” beginning on page 30 and download or request our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.

in the truth and abides by God’s laws. Is there a United Church of God in my area?

Reader in Kentucky

I would like to know if you have a church in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada? It’s not easy finding a church with a Saturday service that meets on the Sabbath.

From the Internet

I searched for a United Church of God congregation in my area and there are two, but they are too far away. Will there be a congregation coming to my area in the future? Even though we have many churches here, a UCG congregation would be a real blessing for people who have already looked around for a church to attend with your teaching. I’m looking forward to your response. I am already

receiving your magazine and Bible studies. Thank you.

Reader in Florida

We appreciate your enthusiasm for having a local congregation. There is always the possibility of a future congregation in your area if there are enough people to merit establishing a congregation. It’s also possible that other people living near you share your convictions. We recommend that you contact our pastor who serves your region to discuss these possibilities. His contact information can be located at www.ucg.org/congregations. You may also wish to arrange for him to come to your area to meet with you.

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to Beyond Today, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or e-mail **BTinfo@ucg.org** (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).

The Father, the Son *and the Feast of* Pentecost

Great miracles took place on the Feast of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2.
What miraculous roles did God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, perform?

by Vince Szymkowiak

How did the 12 apostles change from men who ran for their lives when their Master was arrested (Mark 14:50) to giants of the faith, willing to die if need be for their Lord and Savior? How did Peter and the rest of the apostles get to the point where they could proclaim they were willing “to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29) even if it meant imprisonment and possibly death?

The biblical Feast of Pentecost gives us the answer. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told them, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

These 12 men had no idea of the magnitude of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit that they were about to receive!

This power came upon them 10 days later. In Acts 2:1-2 we read: “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.”

Just as Jesus had promised, His disciples received this mighty power! The apostles went from men who hid behind closed doors in fear to men who were willing to be beaten for the name of Jesus (John 20:19; Acts 5:40). They went from self-centered individuals to men of godly love and deep faith and conviction in something far greater than themselves.

The cause of this transformation was the power of God—what the Bible calls the Holy Spirit!

The promise of the Father

Among Jesus’ final words to the apostles were the instructions that they were to wait in Jerusalem until they would receive the “power from on high,” the “Promise of My Father” (Luke 24:49).

Even before His crucifixion, Jesus promised them that they would receive this amazing transformative power. He said in John 14:16, “And I will ask the Father, and he

will give you another Advocate, [which] will never leave you” (New Living Translation 2015).

Jesus further explained that both God the Father and He would dwell in the hearts of believers: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23).

This miracle—the fact that both the Father and the Son make Their dwelling within Christians—is made possible because the Father sent His Holy Spirit to us. We read of this in John 14:26: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, [which] the Father will send in My name . . . will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.”

And of course, Jesus also had a key role in sending the Holy Spirit: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send [it] to you” (John 16:7).

Both the Father and the Son were to send the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Both Father and Son would dwell in the hearts and the minds of Christians by this invisible power called the Holy Spirit.

This was profound instruction, and the disciples could not fully grasp it at that time. So Jesus made things easier to understand. “I will not leave you orphans,” He said. “I will come to you” (John 14:18). That is why Paul could later write in Colossians 1:27 that Christ lives in us as the hope of our future glory.

Conditions to receiving the Holy Spirit

God sets forth in His Word certain conditions to receiving the Holy Spirit. Just to be clear, in speaking of “conditions,” we do not mean that there is any way that we can *earn* God’s precious gift.

The plainest condition set forth in the Bible regarding how we can receive the Holy Spirit is the matter of baptism. In Peter’s sermon on that Pentecost, God inspired him to say, “Repent, and let every one of you *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [or forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the

Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38, emphasis added throughout).

To *repent* means to stop sinning and to in faith give our lives in full surrender to God’s will and purpose for us. It means obeying Him in everything He tells us to do. It means a total and complete change of life and priorities.

Peter’s sermon, given on this special Holy Day, was so powerful that 3,000 people were baptized! (verse 41). The power of God’s Spirit cannot be measured.

The Scriptures themselves are clear that God’s Spirit is only given on the condition that we start *obeying* God—an important part of true repentance. Acts 5:32 explicitly tells us that God gives His Holy Spirit “to those *who obey Him*.”

Notice at least two key verbs in this verse: God *gives* the Holy Spirit—it is a free gift. And He gives it to those who *obey* Him—so this is a clear condition. Obedience cannot earn the gift. But the gift is not given unless the condition is met. Obviously God will not give this precious gift to a rebellious, carnally minded individual. When Simon the sorcerer, who had managed to get baptized, offered to buy the Holy Spirit



(his devious heart was set on power rather than on obeying God), Peter strongly rebuked him (Acts 8:19-22).

The specified requirement of *baptism* is a sacred ceremony, but there is also another ceremony that must take place for us to receive the Holy Spirit. It is the laying on of hands by true ministers of God. In Acts 8:17 we read, “Then they [Peter and John] *laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit*.” (This was the power Simon coveted.)

In Hebrews 6:1-2 the laying on of hands is listed as one of the foundational doctrines of the Church, along with repentance, faith and baptism. This ceremony, which must take place for the receiving of the Holy Spirit, shows that God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit through His true and faithful ministry.

We show our love to God by our obedience

Godly love involves much more than just thinking about God. It involves more than attendance at church services. In Jesus’ final instructions before He was crucified, He said this to His followers: “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

He followed this with: “He who *has My commandments and keeps them*, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and

manifest Myself to him” (verse 21).

He then continued with the same theme, stating, “If anyone loves Me, *he will keep My word*; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (verse 23).

Indeed, the Bible is consistent. We show our love for God by our obedience to Him!

And of course, Jesus was not requiring of us anything He did not Himself do. As He said: “But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do” (verse 31). Just as Jesus showed His love for the Father by obeying the Father’s commands, so too do we strive to follow Jesus’ example.

So, then, why do we strive to live by God’s commandments? We obey God not to earn our salvation, which of course is impossible, but rather as part of genuine love for God the Father and Jesus Christ. Obedience is not saying, “I’m earning my salvation by my works.” Rather, it is saying, “I love God, and my obedience is the proof!” Godly love is more than an emotion. It involves active obedience.

There is another ceremony that must take place after baptism for us to receive the Holy Spirit—***the laying on of hands.***

It was God’s gift to the New Testament Church on Pentecost that made it possible for all Christians to show our loving obedience to Him. (See “The Holy Spirit: God’s Power at Work” beginning on page 30.)

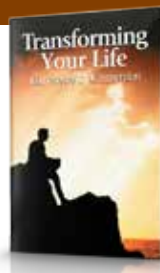
The miracles of Pentecost

What happened on Pentecost opened the door for many miracles. People from various lands were able to hear the apostles’ words in their own native languages (Acts 2:8). God gave to Peter the gift of inspired preaching (verses 14-40). Three thousand people were baptized.

Miracles continued in the days following. A man lame for over 40 years was healed (Acts 4:22). The early chapters of Acts show inspired preaching, conversions of more thousands (Acts 4:4) and even more dramatic miracles (Acts 5:14-16). And for us today, the greatest of miracles from the Holy Spirit is to be led to true faith and willing obedience, being changed from the inside out into the kind of people God wants us to be.

The loving Father and His dear Son offer this same gift to you today. Are you willing to take Them up on Their offer? **BT**

LEARN MORE



God wants to offer you an incredible gift—the gift of His Holy Spirit. What is that Spirit and what does it do? How can you receive it? What does the Bible really say? Be sure to download or request your free copy of our study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* today!

www.BTmagazine.org/booklets

The Holy Spirit: God's Power at Work

Most people don't understand the working of the Holy Spirit. As a result, they don't recognize its power to transform their lives.

by Scott Ashley

At this time of year almost 2,000 years ago, a miraculous, momentous event occurred—the New Testament Church was founded on the Feast of Pentecost. What made this occurrence so astounding—and Acts 2 records that the circumstances of that day were truly dramatic—was the giving of God's Spirit to the followers of Jesus Christ as He had promised (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-14; Acts 1:4-5, 8).

What is this Holy Spirit that came on Christ's followers that day? Why did these things happen? What should we learn from those strange occurrences?

To understand the events, we must first understand what the Holy Spirit is and what it is not. To grasp that, we must understand what the Holy Spirit *does*.

Concepts of "spirit"

We must first consider the word *spirit* as it is used in the Bible. Just what is spirit, and what does that word mean?

Four words—two Hebrew and two Greek—are translated "spirit" in the Bible. Of these four, two are used only twice: the Hebrew word *neshamah*, which means "breath," and the Greek word *phantasma*, which means "phantom" or "apparition." The other two words are the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma*, each used several hundred times. Understanding these words is crucial to understanding the Holy Spirit.

Ruach means "breath, air; strength; wind; breeze; spirit; courage; temper; Spirit" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, p. 240). Of the 378 times it is used in the King James Version, it is translated "Spirit" or "spirit" 272 times, "wind" 92 times, "breath" 27 times and in other ways 27 times. *Ruach* is used similarly in most other Bible versions.

The concepts of "wind," "breath" and "spirit" were all related in biblical thought and language.

What is the meaning of the Greek word *pneuma*? This word "primarily denotes 'the wind' (akin to *pneo*, 'to breathe, blow'); also 'breath'; then, especially 'the spirit,'

which, like the wind, is invisible, immaterial and powerful" (*ibid.*, p. 593). It is used 385 times in the King James Version and is usually translated "Spirit" or "spirit."

We can see the Greek root of this word in modern English words such as *pneumonia*, which is an acute infection of the human respiratory system; *pneumatic*, referring to something powered by air pressure; and the science of *pneumatics*, which studies the properties of air and other gases. All of these have to do with air, breathing, wind or being powered by air. When you breathe, what is your body doing? It is creating wind going into and out of the body; breathing is simply creating wind on a small scale.

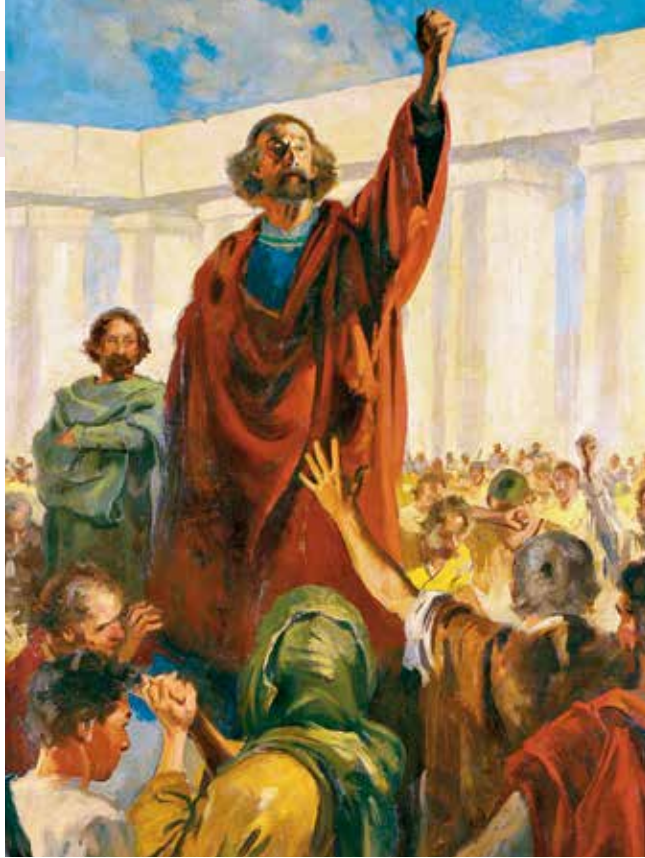
Pneuma is the equivalent of the Hebrew *ruach*. In Luke 4:18, where Christ read from Isaiah 61:1, Luke substitutes *pneuma* for the Hebrew *ruach* in referring to "the Spirit [*ruach/pneuma*] of the Lord." The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, prepared in the third and second century B.C. and used in the time of the early Church, translated *ruach* as *pneuma* (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1992, p. 1185).

Connected concepts

We see the same connection between spirit, breath and wind continued in the New Testament. Although the Greek language (unlike the Hebrew) has a different word for wind (*anemos*), *pneuma* and its related verb *pneo* are translated "breath" (2 Thessalonians 2:8; Revelation 11:11), "wind" (John 3:8; Acts 27:40) and "blow" (Luke 12:55).

Jesus Christ made this connection Himself. After Jesus showed His disciples the wounds in His hands and side, verifying that He had indeed been raised from the dead, "He *breathed on them*, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*]' (John 20:21-22, emphasis added throughout).

Earlier He had told them He would send them another "Helper" or "Comforter," the Holy Spirit. Here He repeats that promise. He also demonstrates *the nature of the Spirit* that He would send: It would be *like a breath, like a wind,*



The apostle Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit on that Feast of Pentecost, powerfully proclaimed God’s message to the crowd.

the gift of God [His Spirit] which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a *spirit of fear*, but of *power [dunamis] and of love and of a sound mind*” (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

God’s Spirit is not a spirit of fear or wanting to hide, to pull back, to cower in terror and shame. It is the opposite: a spirit of *power*—of activity, energy, dynamism—and a spirit of deep, godly love and a sound, rational, self-controlled mind.

The Spirit of power at work

That Spirit enables Jesus’ followers to be like Him, to have the same power available to us that Jesus had in Him. Luke 4:14-15 describes that power at work in His ministry: “Then Jesus returned *in the power [dunamis] of the Spirit* to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.”

In Acts 10:38 Peter sums up Christ’s ministry, showing that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth *with the Holy Spirit and with power*, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for *God was with Him*.”

We see here that the Holy Spirit and power are effectively synonymous. That holy power enabled Christ to perform His mighty miracles of doing good and healing during His earthly, physical ministry. The Holy Spirit is the very presence of God’s power actively working in His servants.

The power of the Spirit wasn’t exclusive to Jesus Christ and the apostles. This power was available to *all* members of the Church, and they were to use it. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope *by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 15:13).

He went on to describe what this power of the Holy Spirit would enable them to do and become: “Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are *full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another*” (verse 14).

Paul said that this same power enabled him to preach the gospel. And he further wrote of the things Christ had accomplished in him “in mighty signs and wonders, *by the power of the Spirit of God*, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (verse 19).

Other verses, such as Luke 1:17, 35, Romans 1:4, 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 and 1 Thessalonians 1:5, discuss the connection between the spirit and power.

The Spirit of revelation

God’s Spirit provides another kind of power as well: “But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.’ But God has revealed them to us

something they couldn’t see, but they would be influenced by its power.

And this is indeed what happened.

Dramatic evidence of God’s Spirit

In Acts 2 we read of the fulfillment of the promise that the Holy Spirit would come to Jesus’ followers: “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place . . . *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit . . .*” (verses 1-4).

What did Jesus Christ say about this Spirit? What would it do or give to those who received it?

In Acts 1 we read of another of Christ’s appearances to His followers after His resurrection. A vital question burned in their minds: “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (verse 6).

Jesus then refocused their thinking from when He would return to the mission He had in store for them: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But *you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (verses 7-8).

Jesus said His followers would “*receive power*” when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and *directly connected with that power* would be their work of being witnesses of Him, starting in Jerusalem, then spreading throughout Judea and Samaria and ultimately to the end of the earth.

Christ made it clear that the Holy Spirit is connected with *power*. The Greek word translated “power” is *dunamis*. It is translated “power,” “mighty work,” “strength,” “miracle,” “might,” “virtue” and “mighty.” It is the same Greek root from which we get modern English words like *dynamic*, *dynamo* and *dynamite*. These all refer to power, just as the root term.

Writing to his fellow minister Timothy, Paul describes the Spirit given to the Church: “Therefore I remind you to stir up

“But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit [which] dwells in you.”

through His Spirit . . . No one knows the things of God except [by] the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit [which] is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:9-12).

Paul tells us here that God’s Spirit is the source of divine revelation, the power by which human beings can understand and grasp spiritual concepts and principles mentioned in God’s Word.

Not only does God’s Spirit help us to understand His Word, but it inspired the original writers of the Bible. Referring to the many prophecies recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, the apostle Peter wrote that “prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Peter 1:21).

Continued understanding through the Spirit

Before His death Jesus told His disciples that this process would continue, that God’s Spirit would help them understand things they had never grasped before. He told them that He would leave, “but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, [which] the Father will send in My name, [it] will *teach you all things*, and *bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you*” (John 14:26).

God’s Spirit did exactly what Christ said it would. The disciples grew in spiritual understanding, and with that understanding the four Gospels were written. God’s Spirit “brought to remembrance” the things Jesus Christ had said and done, guiding the disciples to later understand their significance and record these things for us.

It’s evident from the Gospel accounts that the disciples lacked spiritual understanding *while these events were taking place*. It wasn’t until many years later, after they had received God’s Spirit and been converted, that they came to understand the significance of Christ’s teachings and wrote down that understanding. Just as God inspired the writers of the “Holy Scriptures” (2 Timothy 3:15-17), so He inspired the apostles, through His Spirit, in their writings.

“Bring to remembrance” also has to do with the work of God’s Spirit in our lives today. We still need its work in our minds. We are exhorted to read and study the Scriptures for knowledge of God’s truths and way of life. Then, as we go about our lives, God’s Spirit in us leads and guides us, bringing to remembrance the principles and laws from God’s Word we need so we can make right choices.

Growth in understanding over time

Jesus Christ said that the Holy Spirit would “teach [His disciples] all things.” That process wasn’t instantaneous; it took place over years. They learned as they went, gradually coming to see and understand things they had never seen before.

God’s Spirit gave them understanding that they had never had—understanding that would be revealed to them supernaturally from God through the power of the Spirit.

That process continues with us. At conversion, when we receive the Holy Spirit, God doesn’t teach us everything at

once. We start out on the “milk” of the word. When we can handle that, we move on to stronger and stronger “meat” (Hebrews 5:12-14, King James Version), with progressively more understanding possible through God’s Spirit.

God’s Spirit leads to change

God’s Spirit leads to transformation. Added spiritual understanding, revelation and power lead to something crucial in the lives of those given God’s Spirit—*change*.

Paul graphically describes the lives of those who live apart from God’s Spirit: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21, New International Version).

Then Paul contrasts this with another way of life: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (verses 22-23).

God’s Spirit indeed plays a vital role in our lives. It dwells within Christians, allowing a miraculous transformation to take place.

A great transformation

Paul talks about this transformation in Romans 8, again emphasizing the two ways to live: “For those who live according to the flesh [that is, corrupted human nature] set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, [set their minds on] the things of the Spirit.

“For to be carnally [or fleshly] minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace . . . But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His . . . But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit [which] dwells in you” (verses 5-6, 9, 11).

God’s Spirit enables the *ultimate change* to take place—for carnal, selfish human beings to become transformed in their minds and thinking in this life into God’s very children, then to ultimately be transformed into immortal glory in His family at Jesus Christ’s return! **BT**



LEARN MORE

Many are confused about what the Holy Spirit is and how it works, so they fail to understand its crucial role in the lives of Christians. This article has covered key points, but there’s much more to learn. Download or request our free study guides *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *Tools for Spiritual Growth*.

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TITHING

Where Is Your Treasure?

Discover how tithing is an act of worship from which God learns much about our hearts and our treasure.

by Darris McNeely

When my wife and I most recently moved, we had to go through the process of applying for a new mortgage. I had to turn over every last detail about my financial situation. They wanted to know deposits, where the money came from, where my money was going. I had to turn over details of all of my bank accounts. They learned a lot about me—and so did I.

Looking at someone's finances tells you a great deal about their values. Jesus Christ said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

What does God know about your heart, about your values and what you hold dear? How dear is your money to you?

Let's consider a biblical practice that tells us something about the most important relationship that we have in life. We're going to look at *tithing*—and what it tells us about how we view our relationship with God.

Why should Christians tithe?

I learned about tithing when I was a young man. I've tithed virtually all my adult life. At times, particularly when teaching tithing principles to others, I've had to ask myself all over again: Why do I tithe?

Why is it that I go through this regimen, this process, this part of my relationship with God regarding tithing? Every time I come back to the question, the answer comes down to several reasons that I'd like to share with you. It has to do with much more than just money.

Let's first define what we mean by tithing. The word *tithe* comes from an old English word that means 10 percent or a tenth. A tithe is 10 percent of one's income, and when the Bible talks about tithing, it refers to setting one tenth of your increase aside for God.

Let me share the question I've had to ask myself again: Why do I tithe? Why do I set aside 10 percent of my

God's Word calls Abraham the father of the faithful. He gave a tithe—10 percent of his gain—as an act of worship.

income to give to God?

I tithe because that is what the Bible shows we are to do. We first see it in the example of a man named Abraham, a man called the father of the faithful and “the friend of God” (Romans 4:11, 16; James 2:23). I believe that his example sets the tone for a fundamental approach that Christians should have toward this aspect of God's law and God's work in our lives in bringing us into a relationship with Him.

An ancient example of faith

The story of tithing begins near the beginning of Scripture, in the book of Genesis. At one point in his life, we read of Abraham saddling up his troops and going off to rescue and bring home his nephew Lot, who had been taken prisoner by regional warlords. In addition to rescuing Lot, Abraham also won much treasure as the spoils of battle. At this point in the story another figure enters the scene:

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18). This mysterious individual then pronounced a blessing on Abraham. And Abraham then did this: “He gave him a tithe of all” (verse 20).

This is a very compacted version of an interesting story, but these facts point to several lessons for us to learn in regard to tithing as it is introduced into the flow of the Bible through the example of Abraham giving a tithe to Melchizedek. Right here we begin to see the character of Abraham—a man later called the father of the faithful.

This is really the story of Abraham's character and obedience. In Melchizedek, Abraham saw the God whom he had left all to follow. When you understand the whole story, this priest-king was a manifestation of Jesus Christ before His human conception and birth. Melchizedek means “King of Righteousness.” And He's presented here as the King of Salem (or King of Peace) and as the priest of the Most High God (see Hebrews 7:1-3).

Tithing supports the work of God on earth

Abraham gave a tithe—10 percent of his gain—as an act of worship. It can be hard for a modern mind to think about giving 10 percent of income as an act of worship, but that's exactly what it is.

In this act of worship, God learns something about us. When we order our financial affairs and our heart around the treasure of our lives and get God in the right perspective and priority, God truly learns where our heart is.

Another purpose God has for tithing is to support the work He is doing here on earth. God has a practical side. He has not left the most important work on earth, the



preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God, without a means to be financed.

This is also something I learned very early in life. My mother taught me about tithing, and she taught me to put aside a small portion, 10 percent out of the allowance that I would get. And when I began getting a small check for the jobs and chores that I would do, I put a tithe of that money aside as well. I learned where that tithe was to go, in terms of supporting the work of God. It's a very practical lesson with great spiritual consequences.

Tithing represents a Christian way of giving to God what is rightfully already His. It is to be used for the support of the most important work on the face of the earth.

Tithing has always been part of God's plan for people. We see it within the various laws given in the Bible. Leviticus 27:30 says: “All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD's. It is holy to the LORD.”

God says that the first 10 percent of increase is holy to Him. When you think of what you earn in those terms, it begins to redefine how you look at physical things.

Tithing helps us remember to put God first

In Numbers 18:21 we learn that God apportioned the tithe to the Levites because they had the responsibility of doing the work of God within the temple. Today, God's command to tithe is really a means by which Jesus Christ does His work through the spiritual body of the Church. The Church has a divine commission to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 28:18-20).

I've learned that it is folly to abandon this true way of God and to try to substitute another way. Tithing helps us to develop good habits of stewardship and selflessness. Tithing helps us understand God's blessings in our lives and become better stewards of what He's given us by developing patience and wisdom in how we use our money. Tithing helps us prioritize properly by the fact that we automatically put God first. Tithing is an

essential part of developing a godly ethic towards money and our physical blessings. I've come to understand that this ethic of faithfulness and good stewardship is really the most important lesson of God's law of tithing.

As we watch what is taking place in our world today, with one crisis after another, the value of faithfulness and stewardship should be obvious. In the United States we see an economic crisis that began in 2008 partly due to a lack of these two virtues in society. A lack of these is also responsible for similar problems in other parts of the world.

We live in a world of various economies within various nations under various forms of governance. The truth is that none of them are founded upon the most basic spiritual principles of economic theory that we find in God's Word. Tithing is the chief of those principles. And failing to tithe is actually to "rob God," which brings a curse (Malachi 3:8-9).

When the foundation of tithing is not in place, so many other matters are layered on top of it that create problems. The result is economic ups and downs and the cycles that we see in our national economies and our personal finances. God's

Experience a deeper relationship with God through tithing

Tithing is one key to a very deep faith and reverence toward God. That's what we are seeing when we look at the story of Abraham who tithed to Melchizedek and set the example as the father of the faithful.

There's a larger lesson to draw from all of this. I've sat and talked with people many times over the years and taught them these principles out of the Scriptures and helped them gain a measure of basic financial stability based upon God's Word.

I'm not a financial analyst. I'm not an expert in budgeting or finance in that way. But I do know a little bit about what God reveals as a fundamental principle within His Word, the Bible.

I know what works because it has worked in my life, and I see that it works within the lives of individuals who step out and put God to the test in this matter as He says to do, resulting in great blessing (Malachi 3:10-12).

Tithing is not a means of getting something from God. Tithing is not a bargain that we make with God. It's not an



financial system—built on His law of tithing—produces a balance and an evenness in life that gives us a firm footing. And when we understand that tithing teaches us to put God first, we won't get caught up in a way of life built on greed and materialism.

When we develop a relationship with God that has as one of its fundamental principles the law of tithing, we're then prepared to look toward God as the Creator, the giver of all. It's the same way that Abraham viewed God.

Tithing is really a means of walking in the steps of our faithful spiritual father Abraham. We're told in the Scriptures that, through Jesus Christ, we are the spiritual children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). His heart was fully with God, and he showed it by giving a tenth of his treasure. The question for us is: Is our heart in the same place as Abraham's?

Tithing is a Christian way of giving to God what is His. It is to be used for the support of the most important work on the face of the earth.

insurance policy. We have analysts, stockbrokers and financial planners to advise us on what we do with our money in that particular way.

Tithing is something that defines a deep, personal relationship with God—and it works. When we get our priorities right, we are on the way toward greater financial stability in life, particularly as we apply other fundamental principles and laws that define stability.

Then we're on our way toward a better life—and, most importantly, we're on our way toward a deeply personal life of worship toward God. Tithing represents submitting to God's total claim on our lives.

I tithe because it is both a law and a blessing. It is a barometer, a guide, that points toward the fact that I need to put God first in all I do. I tithe because it finances God's work on earth today. I tithe because Abraham, the father of the faithful, tithed, and I want to follow in his footsteps.

Why should you tithe? Ask yourself that question, and begin to follow the important principles of tithing in your life. **BT**

LEARN MORE



We hope this article has piqued your curiosity to learn more about what the Bible says about tithing—and it says quite a lot! To learn more about God's instruction regarding tithing, download or request our study guide *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing?* A free copy is waiting for you!

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The Valuable Benefits and Purposes of **BIBLE PROPHECY**

HOLY
BIBLE

Welcome to the third study in the “Bible Prophecy and You” series. You may have wondered: *Why prophecy? What is its purpose? What are the benefits?* That’s what this study is about.

We’re all curious about the future and what’s in store for us personally. And our loving Creator doesn’t want His people to be in the dark and worried with fear of the unknown. So He inspired the Bible to be a guidebook and map for our life’s journeys.

Bible prophecy does indeed satisfy much of our curiosity about the future, but God has greater purposes for it than just that. These are wonderful *spiritual* purposes!

In this study, you’ll learn God’s purposes for giving us prophetic revelations about both the *future of the world* and *your future* personally!

Why is Bible prophecy important? Why did God reveal so much about the future through His prophets? What are God’s reasons for wanting us to understand the prophecies?



God sent prophets in a dual role—to **predict** the future and to **preach** repentance from sin and turning back to God!

A reader in Texas says this of her experiences learning about prophecy:

“When I began to understand the Bible and Bible prophecy, I thought *wow*—so many of my big questions are being answered!

“It was so *comforting and inspiring* to learn God’s long-range plan for mankind. What a blessing that God lets us know in advance what to expect and how we can be prepared. What I had been taught in another church left me somewhat confused and fearful. Now the more I understand what the

Bible teaches about the past, present and future, *the more peace I feel.*

“More and more I could see that *God is in control*, He can protect us from anything, He has a time for everything, and He knows what’s best for each of us. Now that I know the great examples of faith in Bible history and God’s promises and plan for the future, I have courage, peace and confidence that God is working out His will in my life.”

God’s prophets did much more than pass along predictions

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). Therefore all Bible prophecies came from God. God’s prophets were merely the *messengers* who spoke and wrote down the revelations from God. Some prophecies apply to nations, some to individuals and some to both. Many prophecies are *conditional*, especially those that apply to individuals, as we will see.

People mistakenly assume that the prophets were only *predicting*. No, they had a *dual* role. God sent them to *predict* or foretell the future and to *preach* (see, for example, Jonah 3:2-4). And what did they preach? They preached that people should repent of their sins and turn to God—“to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life” (Ezekiel 3:18).

God will bless and save all who repent of their sinful ways and turn to a life of obeying and serving Him. You see, God’s prophets were sent to *motivate* people with a “carrot and stick” message. Prophecies included both *warnings* about punishments and *promises* of rewards.

In Deuteronomy 11:26-28, we read a concise summary of the kind of message God’s prophets were to preach: “Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God . . . and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God.”

Let’s now examine some of God’s main purposes for giving us His prophecies.

► Is fulfilled prophecy a proof of God?

“Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure [that is, whatever I please],’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it” (Isaiah 46:9-11).

Notice again, God said: “I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning . . . Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass.” As we’ll see in studies 5 and 6 in this series, we have plenty of proof of the supreme power of God. His many, many prophecies always come to pass *exactly* as He foretold *because He makes them happen!*

► Is fulfilled prophecy a proof of the Bible?

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21).

At times, God's prophets just wrote down what they heard God say to them. At other times, they "spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Every single biblical prophecy of a past event has been fulfilled perfectly, and we will examine some of them in future lessons. As future prophesied events happen, we will have even more proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible.

► Does knowledge of prophecy help us to interpret world news and events?

"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 these things happening, know that it is near—at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch.

"Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!" (Mark 13:28-37).

Yes, prophecy enables us to intelligently "watch" with understanding. Because Bible prophecy is accurate and reliable, it gives us a foundational worldview and framework by which we can analyze the news. By it, we are able to sort out what has long-range significance from the flood of news that does not. Jesus told His disciples, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see" (Luke 10:23-24).

► Does advance knowledge prepare us so we will be calm and courageous when hardships come?

"These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble . . . These things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you at the beginning,

because I was with you" (John 16:1, 4).

"When the time [of trials] comes," Christ does not want us to "stumble"—to be shocked, to panic or to fall away. This is a major reason our loving God "reveals His secret to His servants" (Amos 3:7). When God's prophecies come to pass exactly as He foretold, that strengthens our faith to trust Him for care and protection.

► Does God give people understanding and warnings before holding them accountable?

"And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:47-48).

God is completely fair and merciful. He holds people accountable for what they know, being willing to overlook their "times of ignorance" (Acts 17:30). God will not finally judge anyone without first teaching and warning about the dire consequences of sin as well as revealing the wonderful results of living His way (see also James 4:17 and John 9:41).

► What primary commission did Jesus give to His disciples—to His Church from that time forward?

"He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation'" (Mark 16:15, New International Version).

The "gospel" means *good news* because it is primarily about Jesus Christ's return to establish the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14). But the message also includes a "witness" or warning about the end-time trials leading up to Christ's return (see Matthew 24:14). As John the Baptist prepared the way for Christ's first coming (see Matthew 3:1-3; Luke 3:2-6), this preaching of the gospel prepares the way for Christ's second coming.

► Christ's commission to His Church can be compared to the duty given a "watchman." What does that mean?

"Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: "When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take

a man from their territory and make him their watchman, when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people, then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, but did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But he who takes warning will save his life.

"But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand."

"So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me . . . Say to them: "As I live," says the Lord GOD, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?"'" (Ezekiel 33:1-7, 11).

A watchman was to sound a warning whenever he saw danger approaching. Today, God's Church serves in the role of spiritual "watchman." This partly explains why prophecy is so important and why God wants His Church to teach and preach His prophecies. God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Apply now

Read Jonah chapters 3 and 4 and see what spiritual lessons you can learn. Because the basic facts of a story like this are turned into a children's story, people often neglect to read it seriously. This is a good example of a conditional prophecy (see Jeremiah 18:7-10). Jonah told the people of Nineveh that if they didn't repent of their sins within 40 days, God would destroy the city.

This is a story with a happy ending. The Ninevites *did repent*, and God spared the city for many years to come. In the same story, you'll see how Jonah had to learn some lessons the hard way.

Write down the main lesson God was teaching the people of Nineveh and the main lesson He was teaching Jonah. What are the main lessons He is teaching *you* through this prophecy? **BT**

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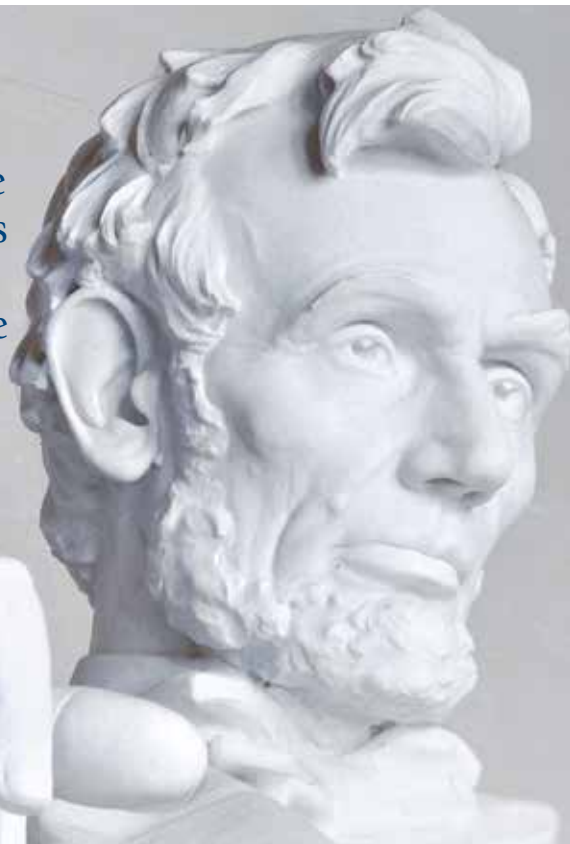
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