

BEYOND TODAY®

The background of the cover features a bronze statue of a man on a rearing horse, holding a sword aloft. The statue is set against a background of an old map with various geographical labels like 'Tropicus', 'M. Noire', and 'Medine'. The bottom half of the background is a bright, golden sunset or sunrise over a landscape.

A Magazine of Understanding

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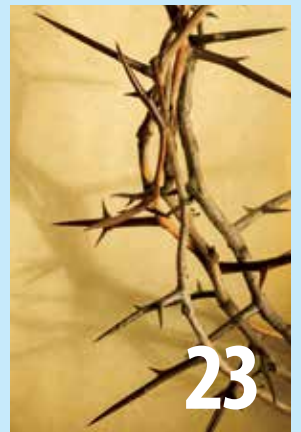
The thief on the cross came to vital understanding. In being "stuck" with Christ, we come to know Him.



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Scott Ashley
Managing editor

The Rise and Fall of Empires

The walls of Constantinople defended the capital of the Byzantine Empire for more than a thousand years—a virtual eternity from a human perspective.

The Byzantine Empire was itself a continuation of the Roman Empire, which had Rome as its capital for approximately a thousand years before Constantine the Great founded a new capital at the site of a relatively obscure Greek city named Byzantium in A.D. 324.

Constantine named his new capital New Rome, and it soon became known as *Constantinople*, meaning “city of Constantine.” One of his first acts was to build strong defensive walls for protection. The city’s walls were greatly expanded during the reign of Emperor Theodosius II (408-450).

Theodosius’ defenses were formidable, involving a wide moat and three progressively stronger stone-and-brick walls, the last one 15 feet thick and rising 35 to 40 feet high, fortified by 96 towers rising another 50 to 60 feet. From each wall the city’s defenders could rain down on invaders arrows, spears, stones and blows from swords and axes.

For more than a thousand years—except for a brief conquest during the Fourth Crusade in 1204—invaders tried to breach the walls but failed. The walls stood against floods, earthquakes and armies. They were thought impregnable.

Until they weren’t.

The Byzantine Empire, like Rome and many other empires that preceded it, largely rotted out from within. It grew weaker and weaker as the lands it controlled shrank at the hands of Arab Muslims, Serbians, Bulgarians and finally, after a devastating epidemic of bubonic plague, by invading Ottoman Muslims led by Sultan Mehmed II.

After a 53-day siege, and with the aid of cannons capable of hurling 600-pound stone balls that could shatter brick-and-stone walls, the Ottoman hordes overwhelmed Constantinople’s outnumbered defenders and captured the city in 1453. A few escaped by ship, thousands were killed, and tens of thousands were enslaved or forcibly deported.

Mehmed II, better known to history as Mehmed the Conqueror, renamed the city Istanbul and made it the capital of his Ottoman Empire. The empire that had stood for more than a thousand years was no more. No other

empire in human history has lasted so long.

A century ago World War I brought the end of the Russian, German and Ottoman Empires. In the aftermath of World War II, a financially devastated Britain found itself managing the decline of a greatly reduced British Empire. In more recent decades the world has witnessed the collapse of the Soviet empire. In recent years America’s decline in global influence has raised the question as to

whether we will soon see the end of an American empire.

We are living in a world of massive change. As American power and influence rapidly recedes, previous major powers such as Russia, China, Germany, and even the Islamic and Ottoman Empires seek to regain their former might and glory.

What does it all mean?


In Daniel 4:25 and 32, we’re told that a spiritual dimension is at work in world affairs that can’t be seen with the human eye: “*The Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses*” (emphasis added).

The Hebrew prophet Daniel knew whereof he spoke. He lived in the last days of the kingdom of Judah, which

met its end through invasion and exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian Empire. Daniel then served as an official in Babylon until it, too, met its end at the hands of a new empire, that of the Medes and Persians.

Daniel then served them into his old age—having witnessed in his lifetime the rise of Babylon, the fall of Judah, the rise of the Medo-Persian Empire, and the fall of Babylon. And through divine revelations he learned of empires yet to come—Greece, Rome, and ultimately the greatest Kingdom of all, the Kingdom of God that will rule on earth without end after the return of Jesus Christ (Daniel 2:44-45).

Where are these trends taking our world? God knows—literally—and He promises us that “He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding” (Daniel 2:21).

You too can share in that understanding in the pages of *Beyond Today*. Be sure to read this issue carefully to better grasp where our world is heading and why! 



The author examines ruins of the 1,600-year-old defensive walls of Constantinople in 2015.



Will China overtake America and become a world empire? Will Russia restore the former might of the Soviet Union? Will Iran's efforts to dominate the Middle East reclaim the ancient glory of the Persian Empire? And what about Europe—will it too see the return of an ancient power?

by Darris McNeely

EMPIRES ON THE RISE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

There's no doubt in my mind that the Bible is the most important and most reliable source to study if you want to understand today's world scene. In fact, it's the most accurate road map to understanding the geopolitics of history and current events. Today nations are realigning and events are racing faster than geopolitical experts can discern. The reason so many fail to properly analyze today's world is that they reject the Bible as a lens to understanding it.

This is shaping up to be a defining year for world affairs. Some major powers are making moves to ascend to greater strength while others are stumbling. We are in a moment like that described in the biblical book of Habakkuk, where God told the prophet: "Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you" (Habakkuk 1:5).

The world is moving through what historians call an "axial period" when old orders fade and new ones take their place. The way we can understand what is occurring in our world is through a firm understanding of God's view of history and His ability to guide the history of nations.

One way to look at the present world order is through the lens of empire—both old and new. We are 100 years from the end of World War I. The end of "the Great War" saw the collapse of the Russian, German, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. The cost of the war and the toll of death crippled the British Empire and put it on a path toward slow decline over the next several decades.

Ironically, the war saw the United States assume a role in

The news today does not consider what God says through the Bible. He is moving among the nations, and He controls developments to fit His purpose and plans.

the world that only grew throughout the remainder of the 20th century until by 1991 it was the sole world superpower. Today we see powers rising in the areas of these old empires and in Asia. If we are to properly discern our times with a right worldview, we have to adopt a *biblical* worldview. Only then will we begin to make sense of what we are seeing around us.

Let's get an overview of what is happening now.

China's competition with the West

Only the older generation remembers the time when "made in China" was a less-than-ringing endorsement of quality in manufactured goods. It's different now. China makes quality goods and produces much of what is consumed in America and other parts of the world. China's manufacturing base has fueled its growth into one of the leading nations in terms of gross national product and ranking in the world economy. China is the world's manufacturing hub and one of the fastest-growing economies at near 7 percent a year.

It used to be said that when America sneezes, the world gets a cold. Now that could be said of China. The capitalist-style growth in China, though standing in contrast to its socialist-communist form of government, is recognized as vital. Keeping unemployment at manageable levels is critical to China's social stability. Its large population requires continued levels of growth to maintain employment and incomes at satisfactory levels. The communist government's continued grip on China depends on that.

China's economic expansion has allowed it to build a formidable military, the most significant part being a navy that allows it to project power beyond its shores and rival America's long-standing dominance in Asia. The Chinese want to see American power recede from Asia and to replace it with their naval forces. This will allow China to control the major sea lanes of commerce and wield considerable influence—if not outright control—over other powers like Japan or Australia.

China's ambitions have been understood for a long time. It's a rising power seeking to dominate not only Asia but other parts of the world. Because China holds a great deal of America's debt, it poses a rising risk of being able to hinder American power. America's position as a massive debtor nation is its Achilles heel that one day could overturn its longstanding dominance in world affairs (see "U.S. national debt continues to worsen" on page 19).

China wishes to be the leading power not only in Asia, but on the world stage—and the one power standing in its way is America.

In a recent conference of China's Communist Party, President Xi Jinping consolidated his power and by all appearances came out in total control of the country. Xi desires to

lead China into a new era seeking to shape the global world. No one appears with him in any role to hint at a successor. For the foreseeable future Xi will be at the helm of China's march toward empire.

China's influence over North Korea could possibly play a factor in its relations with the West and

especially the United States. North Korea is a nuclear power and poses a threat to not only America but the Asian region, including China. It must not be forgotten that while South Korea and Japan may be proposed targets of any strike by North Korea, China is also right next door, sharing a border with it.

North Korea's leadership is unknown and erratic—the small country having perhaps several dozen nuclear weapons. Everyone in the region, including China, is a potential target. The exact relationship between China and North Korea is not clear. Some factor in this could inhibit China's expansionist plans.

For the short term, China is a growing power with obvious presence on the world scene. Rising in the east and north of the pivotal prophetic area of Jerusalem, China should be understood as part of the power bloc described in Daniel 11:44 that stirs up preemptive action by another power occupying key Middle East nations.

Revelation 9:13-17 and 16:12 describe large armies from the east, beyond the Euphrates River, that move toward



Jerusalem in the time of world crisis at the close of this age. China's growing military and naval power could be positioning it to play a role in this end-time movement of nations. Whatever China's present leadership plots will ultimately be overridden by other events described in Bible prophecy.

Russia's return to power

Now let's consider Russia. A recent issue of *The Economist* featured a cover story on President Vladimir Putin, labeling him a "Russian Tsar." The article goes on to describe how President Putin has adopted much of the imagery, mystique and style of Russia's tsars or czars—imperial monarchs of the pre-communist past—to return Russia to a measure of order and respectability. Since coming to power in 1999, Putin has held to a goal of restoring Russia's influence as a major power.

He invaded Ukraine and annexed the Crimea. He ruthlessly put down internal Chechen terrorists. More recently he has propped up the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad with Russian troops and aircraft. This Russian incursion into the Middle East conflict has added to the instability of the region by enabling growth of Iranian influence in the failed Syrian state. (See "Is Putin the new Mideast power-broker?" on page 18.)

Russia's presence on the edge of Europe is a geopolitical factor of historic consequence. Russia has looked at the West through a dual lens of fear and envy—envy as Western Europe developed at a technological level causing it to rocket past Russia in wealth and standard of living. From the days of the westernizing czar Peter the Great, Russia has recognized the need to adopt the technological and scientific advances of Europe to play a proper role among the nations. Despite its sizable land and population, Russia historically lagged behind its European neighbors.

Fear of invasion from outsiders has plagued Russia as well. Napoleon tried to conquer Russia and failed. During World War II, Germany broke a treaty and invaded, seeking the rich lands of the south for food production and oil. Again the sheer size of the land and populace coupled with its harsh winter repelled the invader. But the fear of invasion propels Russia in seeking to keep NATO off balance and the presence of buffer zones like Ukraine under its influence.

Vladimir Putin seeks to build and maintain a Russia capable of playing a role in both Asia and Europe commensurate with its size and resources. Realistically Russia is not about to return to the size and scope of the old Soviet Union. That empire collapsed in 1991 due to multiple system failures.

But Putin is playing a great game among the nations by a combination of internal policies that keep him at the top of the political heap. Russia's vast supplies of natural gas and oil are leveraged to keep relations with nations like Germany balanced in its favor. Germany and other Western European nations rely heavily on open pipelines supplying plenty of natural gas to their homes and industries.

Too much attention has been directed to the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election. Russian cyberattack on key U.S. institutions is a real threat, but to date no evidence has been produced to demonstrate Russian involvement in any form that influenced the outcome of that election. While the stories make for intriguing headlines, in the long view of geopolitics they are not what

will influence the course of a changing world order.

President Putin is playing a long game, intending to rebuild a Russian empire like the czars. He has outlasted two American presidents and likely will outlast a third. His ambitions will clash with other regional powers, especially to the south in the Middle East.

Turkey's desire for a new Ottoman Empire

Let's next consider the region of the old Ottoman Empire. Centered in Turkey, this power at its height ruled over a large portion of the modern Middle East and southeastern Europe. With its breakup after World War I came the formation of the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Israel.

The Ottoman Empire, an Islamic caliphate that ruled over a multiethnic grouping of people for more than 400 years, is long vanished. But its remains in the Middle East are the scene for much of the conflict dominating today's headlines.

Turkey, the most economically and technologically advanced Muslim nation of the region, has been a secular state for most of the last 100 years. However, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has dominated Turkish politics since 2003, Turkey is becoming more Islamic and more anti-Western by the day. He appears determined to recapture the power and prestige of the Ottoman Empire. With Turkey being a member of NATO, these developments have grave implications for the future of the alliance.

Meanwhile, American troop casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan are a legacy of the divisions of and decisions made for the former Ottoman realms. History teaches terrible lessons that can last for generations.

In the last century Great Britain and the United States tried to impose their standards of government, individual liberty and nationhood on a region whose people are formed by religion and ethnic customs that inherently resist such modern notions. At enormous financial and human cost, both learned the hard way the difficulty of such a challenge.

Iran seeks to resurrect Persia's glory

In addition to Turkey, another power, Iran, seeks to extend its influence over much of the region. The Islamic Republic has been able to project its disruptive influence in an arc stretching from Afghanistan westward to the Mediterranean Sea and southward into Lebanon and the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. The Shia Muslim government in Iraq needs Iran's support to hold power against the Sunni Muslims.

President Assad's failed Syrian state is propped up with Iranian backing. In Lebanon the terrorist group Hezbollah acts as Iran's proxy to wage a war of attrition against the state of Israel. In Yemen, Houthi rebels supported by Iran exert pressure on Saudi Arabia, the powerful Sunni state that counters Iranian ambitions.

Analysts with a sense of the sweep of history recognize this move to be a page out of ancient history. Not since the days of the Persian Empire of the sixth century B.C. has such a power move been made. Iran has dreams of reborn Persian glory. When Iran crosses the nuclear threshold a new dimension of tension and terror will come to the region, if not the entire world.

A nuclear-armed Islamic state is unknown territory for American and European leaders. This is why the Iranian

Of all these powers the one to watch is **the European Union**. The Bible indicates it will be twisted and transformed by significant crises into **a great political and religious power** that will astound the world!



EU flags outside the European Commission headquarters in Brussels.

nuclear deal reached during the Obama administration is so controversial. With a more realistic view and distrust of Iranian intentions, the Trump administration has threatened to withdraw from the treaty.

Iran's aggressive actions have already overturned the Middle East equation. Its threat to Saudi Arabia has even pushed that country into a temporary alignment of national security concerns with Israel. Both have common interest in countering Iran's ambitions. The new Saudi leadership has also begun to overhaul its internal government structures to aid the country in dealing with current regional realities.

Once again the map of the Middle East is being redrawn. One hundred years after diplomats in Europe redrew the boundaries of the collapsed Ottoman Empire—frankly done without fully understanding the historical and cultural realities of the area and peoples here—we see that events are again forcing new alignments.

The question is whether today's statesmen have any better grasp of the dynamics to be able to manage or influence any better outcome than that of their predecessors. Events in the Middle East have been changing since before the days of the Babylonian Empire of the prophet Daniel's time. Babylon fell to the Persians. Persia was overcome by Alexander the Great. The partitioned Greek empire that lasted for 300 years after his death was put under the iron fist of the Roman Empire, a European-based power prophesied to play a role in the region into the present day and beyond.

The last 2,000 years have seen a push-and-shove match between powers that arose—such as Islam and the reaction of European-based political and religious powers. In the seventh century A.D. the armies of Islam pushed out of the region, across North Africa and into Europe, disrupting an order of history laid down from ancient times.

To understand what this order is, we must first look at one more region, that of Europe, and take a brief examination of another rising empire. We can then return to the overview that God gives us in the Bible. Therein are the keys to understanding today's shifting world powers.

Europe's dream of unity

We have mentioned Europe several times. Today Europe is going through several challenges that are impacting its confidence and its integrity. In 2015 the massive influx of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa dramatically changed the way the different nations look at one another.

Germany let in more than a million refugees fleeing Syria, Iraq and North Africa. The action split the nation, weakening the governing authority of Angela Merkel. Hungary and Slovakia shut their borders to immigration. Austria stopped taking in new immigrants and last year elected a nationalist prime minister who has pledged to put Austria's interests first.

It is the justice of history that a hundred years after colonial Europe forced a new map on the Middle East, drawing lines to create new nations without understanding the underlying cultural and ethnic tensions, the splintering of that map has spilled into today's Europe—causing fragmentation, resistance and self-doubt. The sad legacy of this chapter is that it seems no one has a better understanding or strategy for the Middle East today than back in 1918.

Brexit's impact on European unification

Great Britain's decision to pull out of the EU triggered another crisis to test the ability of Europe to go forward. Before the Brexit vote, no nation in the union had elected to withdraw. This has thrust the continent into new territory.

One leader, France's president Emmanuel Macron, has called for a closer union—a more integrated European Union, with France and Germany taking the lead to create a power to address global issues such as climate change, China's surge to power and a potentially nuclear Iran. And this is despite his bombshell admission in January that if the French people were allowed a referendum on EU membership, they would choose to leave just as Britain did!

Macron sees Europe as gradually taking over more defense responsibilities because of diminishing U.S. influence. Speaking last year he said, "Only Europe can give us some capacity for action in today's world."

Yet it should be remembered that what Europe is today it will not be tomorrow. The EU lurches from one crisis to the next without effective solutions. A long-simmering economic crisis still pits the southern nations against the wealthier northern nations. Yet the EU continues to seek to eliminate borders and promote a grand image of an ever-closer superstate with all members bound together by economic policies.

A fundamental purpose for the EU since its early beginning as an industrial union between a few states, and later with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, was to bind together France and Germany so they would never go to war against each other again. But Europe never has nor ever will be just a group of nations bound together by a shared economic and political philosophy. Today's EU governance lacks the critical element that has always bound the disparate peoples of Europe together

into any lasting empire—be it the German, the Habsburg or the older Holy Roman Empire.

It's about religion

Not until Europe rediscovers and embraces its religious roots will there be the next step toward the kind of “empire” that realizes all the goals set by its leaders. While Christianity is intricately bound to the history of Europe, the modern, and in many cases secular, creators of the EU deliberately avoided reference to God, religion or Christianity. Pope John Paul II famously objected to the omission of Christianity from early drafts of what would after his death become the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, the “European Constitution” unifying member states.

Historians set the founding of Europe during the reign of the Frankish king Charlemagne. With his coronation by the pope in Rome on Christmas day 800 A.D., the authority and prestige of the Roman Empire was restored. Charlemagne was the defender of Christendom and king of a larger portion of Europe than any ruler since the Roman emperors. He combined in his office the power of church and state. When later kings created the Holy Roman Empire, it was understood they built on what had begun with Charlemagne.

In Europe the combined roles of church and state worked for more than a millennium to extend a rule of culture, politics and religion to every part of the world. Beginning with the age of maritime expansion from Portugal in the late 15th century, Europe burst upon the world and put in place a mercantile system that funneled wealth back to the continent in one great stream of commerce. Raw materials from the far reaches of Africa, the Americas and Asia were carried to Europe. Manufactured goods were exported to colonies created by France, Belgium, Spain and Portugal.

A vast economic web was created that for more than 500 years served to establish, enable and sustain the powerful families and dynasties of Europe. When you visit the capitals of Europe today and see the castles, palaces and cathedrals of the great cities, you are looking at the tangible evidence of that great period when the wealth of the world flowed into Europe.

A new empire to rise

Of all the powers we have surveyed in this article, the one to watch and seek to discern the most is the European Union. The EU is going through an existential crisis that will shake it to its core. It has deep internal problems and contradictions while at the same time having a size, power and voice in world affairs that cannot be dismissed.

The Europe we see today, sometimes derided as the “old world” and a failed idea, will not disappear. It will transform itself, likely through a significant crisis unlike any seen to date, and become a major power that will astound the world.

It will take the jolt of such a moment to galvanize Europe's leaders into creating a larger power with a mandate to maintain order within its boundaries and beyond. This power will have not only a political dimension but also a religious one. It is coming, and you need to understand why.

Understanding rooted in Bible prophecy

How do we know this? Why can we write about the present world scene—with the powers of China, Russia, the Middle

East and Europe—with understanding that is not drawn from a history text or a contemporary news source? The reason is our worldview is based on the Bible—specifically the prophetic portions that outline history from the time of the biblical prophets until our present age.

There are three key factors in this worldview.

First, when you accept the basic principle that God has set the boundaries of the nations and their appointed times of power and influence in the world (Acts 17:26), you then have the starting point.

Second, when you couple that to God's ability to foretell through His prophets key events, times and seasons (Isaiah 44:6-7), you then have the prophetic element of the Bible.

Third, you have a broad prophetic outline found in the book of Daniel that foretells key historical truths into our day and the time of Christ's return.

Daniel talks of empires past and present. Specifically he speaks of the clash between empires based in Europe and the Middle East. The broad outline of these powers can be found in Daniel's writings and the book of Revelation. At the time of the end a power from the Middle East will rise against a European-centered grouping of nations and provoke a rush of armies into the Middle East. Jerusalem will be the terminus for these clashes, and in between these points will occur a movement of arms and powers unlike any in history.

The fear of God is the beginning of understanding

This is why in the pages of *Beyond Today* we pay close attention to what happens in Europe and the Middle East. This article has been a brief overview of the powers on the rise in today's world, yet from a biblical point of view. The only way you can understand what will develop out of the current order is to understand what Scripture says about history and prophecy.

The news today, even the best and most thorough outlets you may read, do not take into consideration what God says through the Bible. Even outlets that have the Bible in one hand and a news source in another in most cases lack sufficient understanding and discernment of Scripture.

Beyond Today's analysis gets closer to truth because we not only believe the Bible's authority, but we let that authority shape and guide our lives. So should you. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments” (Psalm 111:10).

The world is rapidly changing. God is moving among the nations. He controls developments to fit His purpose and plans. Stay tuned to *Beyond Today* and stay close to God. He will give you understanding of the real meaning of the events that matter! **BT**



LEARN MORE

What's behind today's rapidly changing geopolitical shifts? What does it mean, and where are these trends heading? How will they impact your world? To understand, download or request our free study guide *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* today!

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Who's Who in the Empires of the Bible

The Bible mentions a number of kingdoms and empires. This overview will help you understand which played what roles in the history of the Bible—and in roles yet to come!

by Steven Britt

The Bible recounts the rise and fall of mighty kingdoms and vast empires, primarily through the lens of their relationship to biblical Israel and Judah. The story follows Israel's oppression, rise to prominence, destruction and subjugation. Ultimately, Bible prophecy tracks the progression of world empires even to modern times and beyond—to the Kingdom of God at the second coming of Jesus Christ.



Egypt

Egypt is one of the oldest empires recorded in history. It enslaved the people of Israel for more than two centuries before they became a nation.

God delivered the Israelites from slavery at the time of Moses through devastating plagues. This crippled Egypt, yet it would remain a key player in the region, its power waxing and waning. In its stronger periods it still exercised influence to the north, at times cooperating with and at times hostile to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Its power and wealth often brought it into conflict with other kingdoms and empires of the region.



Israel and Judah

After the family of Israel moved to Egypt, it soon grew into a nation of two to three million people. Being delivered from bondage in Egypt, God gave them the land of Canaan according to His promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:7). It

would take another 400 years after the Exodus before Israel would become a monarchy and major power in that part of the world.

Under the reign of King David and his son and successor, Solomon, the nation ascended to the apex of its power and influence. The land of Israel is situated ideally at the meeting point of three continents—Europe, Africa and Asia. Under Solomon's rule, this positioning along the world's most important trade routes made the country exceedingly rich.

The rise of Israel to this high position was the result of God's covenant blessing, but her prominence and wealth declined sharply after Solomon's reign because of disobedience to God's law. At Solomon's death the kingdom split into two, with the northern 10 tribes retaining the name "house of Israel" and the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin with a

large part of Levi under the name "house of Judah."

The kingdom of Israel quickly abandoned the worship of God, while the kingdom of Judah vacillated for decades at the whims of her kings. The two would war with each other as much as with the surrounding nations and eventually be punished by God by being invaded and exiled from their land by the empires of Assyria and Babylon.



Assyria

The Assyrian Empire, situated northeast of the land of Israel in what is largely modern-day Iraq, served as "the rod of [God's] anger" (Isaiah 10:5) against the kingdom of Israel. Assyria's destruction and deportation of Israel

came at the height of its reign as world superpower. By all historical accounts, the Assyrians were vicious and merciless conquerors.

Later the Assyrians invaded Judah, carrying many of its people away captive and putting Jerusalem under siege, though God devastated the Assyrian forces and delivered Jerusalem. Assyria went on to conquer Egypt, setting the trend for future empires invading from the north.

With Israel and Judah being diminished in power after Solomon's death, their lands were repeatedly invaded from both north and south as other powers followed the major trade and travel routes through Israel.

The Bible plainly states that God was the source of Assyria's meteoric rise in power to fulfill the purpose of punishing Israel. Yet God would also bring judgment on the Assyrians, their subjects rising up against them—particularly the Chaldeans of Babylon.



Babylon

Situated southeast of Assyria, Babylon emerged as the next instrument of God's punishment—against both Assyria and the kingdom of Judah.

After the Assyrian invasion was thwarted, Judah continued as a kingdom for more than a century with only intermittent worship of God. In the end, Judah's disobedience brought defeat and exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in about 587 B.C.

God used the prophet Daniel, one of the captives of Judah taken to Babylon, to unveil a roadmap for the next several thousand years of Bible prophecy regarding gentile kingdoms.

Daniel 2 and 7 prophesy, in remarkable detail and accuracy, the fall of Babylon to Persia, the fall of Persia to Greece, the fall of Greece to Rome, numerous revivals of the Roman Empire, and their eventual demise at the coming of the final superpower—the Kingdom of God, to be established on earth at Jesus Christ’s return.

Major elements of Babylonian religion and culture continued on in various respects through each of these kingdoms. Thus, the last end-time human superpower is also referred to as Babylon (Revelation 17:3-6). Sadly, many of ancient Babylon’s false religious practices still permeate Christianity today.

Babylon, like Assyria before it, was defeated and destroyed because of its pride against God. In a show of God’s judgment, the Medo-Persian Empire conquered Babylon in a single night (Daniel 5:30-31).



Persia

The Persian Empire, centered in what is today Iran, was distinctively tolerant of the religions of its subjects. Babylon was an instrument of punishment against God’s people, but Persia’s purpose was to provide relief and

allow for a degree of restoration of Jewish worship. The exiles of Judah, forcibly removed to Babylon, were permitted by special decrees from three different Persian kings to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.

God was looking far ahead in His use of the Persian Empire. To fulfill messianic prophecies through Jesus Christ, the people of Judah needed to be resettled in the land of Israel. The Persian Empire repositioned Judah for the coming of the Messiah, but the Greek and Roman empires paved the way for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ in other critical ways.



Greece

The Macedonian king Alexander the Great took over the rule of Greece and stormed through the world with unheard of speed and efficiency, overthrowing and engulfing Persia in a span of only 10 years. While Babylon

and Persia sought political control and wealth, neither imposed cultural domination as Alexander’s Hellenistic Empire did.

Greek became the common language of the known world, and continued as such well into the Roman period. The universality of Greek allowed for the rapid spread of the gospel both in spoken and written word. The New Testament was written and preserved in Greek.

When Alexander died, his empire was eventually split into four parts, with two of these most prominent. The Seleucid Dynasty ruled over Greater Syria, including the lands of Assyria, Babylon and Persia. And the Ptolemaic Dynasty—the Greek pharaohs—ruled over Egypt. These alternately dominated the resettled Jews in the Holy Land.

Syrian Greek rule would become characterized by cruelty and flagrant disrespect for the religious practices of the Jews at

the temple, particularly under Antiochus Epiphanes, leading to a Jewish revolt around 167 B.C. Jewish independence would be short-lived and far from the glorious vision promised in prophecy. Greek grasp on the rest of the empire continued to gradually slip until the Romans rose to power, conquering Jerusalem in 63 B.C.



Rome

Rome was the fourth and final beast of Daniel’s visions, which was “different from the others” (Daniel 7:7). True to the terrifying images Daniel saw, the Roman Empire dominated militarily unlike any empire before it. In addition

to their unique organizational and strategic warfare, the Romans also attracted soldiers from every conquered with the possibility of Roman citizenship, which carried substantial social and economic privileges.

Rome’s military supremacy helped with the spread of the gospel in two vital ways. The efficiency of its armies depended on an extensive system of roads, allowing them to travel quickly throughout the empire in response to threats—but also allowed safe and easy travel for the apostles’ preaching efforts. Secondly, the regional peace and stability enjoyed throughout the Roman world, known as the *Pax Romana* (“Peace of Rome”), made for a receptive environment for the early Church to grow.

The Roman Empire did not end with the fall of Rome in the West in A.D. 476, and neither did it end with the fall of the eastern capital of Constantinople nearly 1,000 years later—or with the end of the Holy Roman Empire a few centuries after that. According to Daniel, the Roman Empire would undergo 10 resurrections, the last seven of them in concert with a false religious power, right up until the time of Jesus Christ’s second coming—in other words, up through our day!

Most recently was Hitler’s Germany. Note that the German honorific title “Kaiser” comes directly from the Roman “Caesar.” At *Beyond Today* magazine, we recognize the current efforts to create a unified European superstate as significant steps in the process of forming the prophesied final revival of the Roman Empire. This underpins and informs our analysis of unfolding events in Europe.

The final superpower

The vision explained in Daniel 2 ends with a stone striking the statue representing the succession of four great gentile empires starting in Daniel’s day and continuing to the end time. The stone strikes the feet and toes of this image, its final stage, with Daniel revealing: “In the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (verse 44).

The grand climax of Daniel’s prophecy is the establishment of the Kingdom of God—the true final world superpower that will endure forever. The Rock that struck the statue is none other than Jesus Christ! As we see nations continue to war and conquer, we should remember Christ’s own words in Mark 1:15: “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” **BT**

A large, light blue silhouette of the Statue of Liberty is positioned on the left side of the page, extending from the top to the bottom. The word "AMERICA" is written in large, light blue, outlined capital letters across the top of the page, with the Statue of Liberty's crown partially overlapping the letters.

AMERICA

The Diminishing Empire

For nearly a decade the United States has been withdrawing from world leadership. What's actually happening? And what does the future hold for the country's role in the world?

by Tom Robinson

America's future as the world's leading nation is being called into question—and many believe a tipping point has been reached.

"A year into Donald Trump's presidency," CNN reported on Jan. 18, 2018, "global confidence in US leadership has fallen to a new low, according to an opinion survey conducted across 134 countries. The Gallup poll puts global approval of US leadership at just 30%, slightly behind China [at] 31% and only three points ahead of Russia. Germany is now the top-rated global power in the world, with an approval rating of 41% . . ."

Of course, this is a matter of international perception. But perception can reflect or affect reality.

Many analysts see this as part of a bigger story. A *Los Angeles Times* article was titled "Trump Claims He's Boosting U.S. Influence, but Many Foreign Leaders See America in Retreat" (Dec. 26). Ryan Cooper, national correspondent at *The Week*, followed up with "The American Empire Is Crumbling" (Dec. 29). Former National Security Agency analyst John Schindler wrote a piece for *Observer* with this title: "The Year American Hegemony Ended" (Dec. 31).

In an article in *The Atlantic* titled "America and the Great Abdication," Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, contends that while the United States is facing a rise of other world powers to contest its leadership, the greater problem is one of *relinquishing power and responsibility by choice*. He notes that President Trump is not isolationist, having engaged in military operations, sought international sanctions on others and mediated several Mideast disputes, but he argues that "the United States is no longer taking the lead in maintaining alliances, or in building regional and

global institutions that set the rules for how international relations are conducted" (Dec. 28).

Is that what's happening? There definitely are indications of U.S. decline on the world scene. What is actually going on? And what does this mean for the world's future? Does the Bible tell us anything in this regard?

Opinions of U.S. retreat in perspective

It's important to realize that the world at large represented in the Gallup poll results is of quite a different mind from that of the average American citizen—and certainly far out of step from most of you reading this publication. The same holds for most foreign affairs analysts, who are bogged down with liberal progressive and traditional statist mentality.

Much of the media and world animus toward Donald Trump is over his "America first" approach to foreign policy—meaning the U.S. government looking to the interests of its own citizens first. (Of course, Trump has also said that other nations are expected to promote and safeguard their own citizens' interests ahead of those of other countries. And he's also stated, "America first does not mean America alone.")

Putting U.S. national interest first has involved pulling back from some prior global agreements, such as Trump's announcement in June to take the United States out of the Paris climate accord. Most of those claiming that America has abandoned its world leadership role point to this as exhibit A.

The entire rest of the world can't be wrong, can they? Well, yes they can. And it can well be a sign of true global leadership to stand alone in such a matter, rejecting a deal on the grounds that it's bad for America and the world. Consider also that American compliance with international agreements has been

a way for other nations to restrain U.S. power and influence.

President Trump has also been opposed by most of the world, including America's allies, in his decision to comply with U.S. law (passed overwhelmingly by the U.S. Congress 23 years ago) in recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocating the U.S. embassy there. Is it relinquishing world leadership to take a stand so unpopular abroad? That being said, it's definitely more of a challenge to lead the world in such a circumstance.

Many are wary of Trump's temperament as they see it—strident, irascible, reactionary and belligerent. We should recall that George W. Bush was similarly disliked by the world community for his positions and direct manner, saying America would go it alone if no one came along. He repeatedly called out the "axis of evil" of North Korea, Iran and Iraq—with subsequent events showing his warnings to be spot on. And of course, his low global approval numbers nearly matched Trump's.

On the other hand, the world and the global and media elites adored Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, even as they did major damage to America's position in the world. As liked as Obama was, he increasingly diminished America's global standing as he went about apology tours, "leading from behind," bowing to foreign monarchs, retreating from Iraq and Afghanistan, and pursuing destructive economic policies.

As Schindler stated in his *Observer* piece: "It should be noted that President Trump inherited a hegemon in decline. His predecessors did plenty of damage before the current Oval Office occupant decided to inflict more." Yet what more has Trump actually inflicted in this regard?

A Jan. 17, 2018 *New York Post* article titled "The Myth of Trump's 'Global Retreat'" by John Glaser of the Cato Institute flies in the face of much of the contention thus far raised. He points out that "Trump's foreign policy . . . hasn't backed away from any theater in which the US military was committed or engaged at the time of his inauguration. In some respects, Trump is more interventionist than his predecessors . . . NATO has expanded . . . In the Middle East, Trump has increased the number of boots on the ground. . . In Asia, Trump hasn't reduced America's postwar role . . .

"So why do people have it so wrong? . . . [Trump's] occasional rhetoric suggesting a reduced global role for the United States is contradicted by his actions . . . Trump hasn't forfeited America's global leadership . . . America is still playing the futile role of global cop, still reigns as the only superpower with a globe-straddling military presence and is still picking fights in distant regions remote to US national-security interests."

In fact, the president is actually taking some steps for the security of the world, such as telling Iranian revolutionaries that America will support them if they rise up to depose the mullahs, which would save the globe from nuclear weapons in the hands of Islamic extremists. This is unlike his predecessor, who chose to agree to a horrible nuclear deal with Iranian leaders and enabled this dire threat to emerge.

Dealing with a weakened position and rivals

It should also be recognized that U.S. military capability has been seriously diminished since the Obama administration. There is a major need for restructuring and modernization lest, says a new study by the Rand Corp., "U.S. forces could, under plausible assumptions, lose the next war they are called upon

to fight"—with China and Russia identified as major threats (see "U.S. military in growing jeopardy" on page 18).

This is made worse by the economic burden of national debt that doubled during the eight years of the Obama administration. Sadly, the debt is being allowed to continue to grow, which will eventually lead to a reckoning (see "U.S. national debt continues to worsen" on page 19).

Analysts are concerned over China and Russia filling the power vacuum left by the decline in U.S. power in recent years. Germany and the rest of the European Union draw less attention, but a more powerful European power bloc could emerge. President Trump has stated that NATO countries must start doing more for their own security instead of relying on America to protect them. This, as part of the increasing wedge between America and its European partners, is sparking more calls for a politically integrated United States of Europe in control of a European army.

American withdrawal from global leadership is pushing Germany to consider stepping up its role. This, writes Christiane Hoffman in *Der Spiegel*, "will also mean a departure from the good Germany. When principles collide with pragmatism . . . Berlin will be forced to make difficult decisions. But how far should we go?" ("The American Void: It's Time for Germany to Learn to Lead," Jan. 5, 2018). At some point American military arms and equipment stockpiled in Europe could be left in the hands of Europeans and, shocking for the world, we could see an armed unified Europe in conflict with America.

Identity and geopolitical role found in the Bible

This is all to be expected from what the Bible tells us will happen to Israel and other nations in the end time. Yet we must understand that Israel in this context refers to more than the small Jewish state in the Middle East.

The ancient nation of Israel sprang from the patriarch Abraham's grandson Jacob, to whom God gave the name Israel. The descendants of Jacob were eventually established in the land of Canaan as a kingdom. But this kingdom was split into *two* kingdoms—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The Jewish people are the descendants of the people of the southern kingdom.

The people of the northern kingdom were eventually conquered and carried away captive to Assyria—a precursor of a captivity that is yet to come. But that was not the end of their story. God had promised to sift them through the nations yet preserve them intact (Amos 9:9). After the fall of ancient Assyria, the northern Israelite tribes migrated far to the northwest, their descendants eventually forming the peoples of northwestern Europe.

While many today would reject this out of hand, it is the most reasonable conclusion based on the available facts. God had said that Israel would eventually become a multitude of nations, with the specific prophecy of "a nation and a company of nations" (Genesis 35:9-11).

The foremost promises of national greatness were specifically bestowed on the two sons of Jacob's son Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, with Ephraim to become a plurality of nations and Manasseh to become the great single nation (Genesis 48:17-19). They would become great colonizing people—the strongest and richest nations on earth in the last days (Genesis



Micah 5 describes America’s military might among the nations of the world as like that of “a lion among the beasts of the forest.” But it then immediately warns of destruction to follow for disobedience.

49:1, 22-26). This is evident through many prophecies.

Putting prophecy together with history, we can see that Ephraim became the largest empire in history, the British Empire, and the nations that sprang from it, including Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Manasseh became the greatest single nation in history—the United States of America. There is not space to cover this here in detail, but you can read the remarkable story in our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.

Micah 5 describes the military might that these peoples attained in these terms: “And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the Gentiles [or nations], in the midst of many peoples, like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among flocks of sheep, who, if he passes through, both treads down and tears in pieces, and none can deliver. Your hand shall be lifted against your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off” (verses 8-9).

But remaining at this height of world power would require the Israelite peoples in the last days to be humble and obedient before God. And if they instead persisted in flagrant disobedience of God’s laws, they would come under terrible national curses, as described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

Decline leading to destruction

For decades Britain has experienced national decline. Following World War II, it fell rapidly from being a major empire to what some have labeled a fourth-rate world power. America is set to follow the same path of diminishing dominance and influence.

Note one key way the decline would come. God told Israel, “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 . . .*” (Leviticus 26:18-19, emphasis added throughout). God foretold an actual erosion of power, to be sure. Yet

there also would be an increasing *unwillingness to use* the power at hand.

An article by Fareed Zakaria in *The Washington Post* was headlined “The Decline of U.S. Influence Is the Great Global Story of Our Age” (Dec. 28, 2017). In words that strikingly reflect this ancient prophecy, he observed that “the largest trend today is *the decline of American influence*. Not the decline of American power—the country remains economically and militarily in a league of its own—but *a decline of its desire and capacity to use that power* to shape the world.”

For a long while, the United States has been referred to as a “paper tiger” with no real bite. And when the nation has used its power, it has often severely hampered itself under an absurd level of restrictions.

None of the wars America has fought since World War II has been a decisive victory. U.S. forces were withdrawn before the job was truly done. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were long slogs that became increasingly despised by the American public. Worse still has been the national self-loathing among some for America’s having taking strong stands in the world and the previously mentioned apologizing for past interventions.

Along with weakening military resolve and power would come the loss of economic strength. God warned of the growth of foreign economic power at Israel’s expense: “[He] shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He shall lend to you, but you shall not lend to him; he shall be the head, and you shall be the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:43-44). In recent decades America has reversed its role from being the world’s greatest lender to becoming the most indebted nation in world history.

Continuing disobedience, God warned, would eventually lead to total calamity. In Micah 5, right after foretelling Israel’s powerful position among the nations (again, verses 8-9), the very next verses show it plummeting into destruction.

Note what God says as worded in the Living Bible translation: “I will destroy all the weapons you depend on, tear down your walls, and demolish the defenses of your cities. I will put an end to all witchcraft [occult practices]—there will be no more fortune-tellers to consult—and destroy all your idols. Never again will you worship what you have made, for I will abolish the heathen shrines from among you, and destroy the cities where your idol temples stand. I will pour out my vengeance on the nations who refuse to obey me” (verses 10-15).

As many prophecies reveal, the end-time nations of Israel will collapse through war, famine, plague, destruction of cities, and peoples again deported into captivity and slavery, as befell Israel in ancient times. The Bible calls this “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7) and the “great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 7:14). This unparalleled disaster is what lies ahead for America, Britain and the other nations of British descent without heartfelt repentance on a national scale (for more on this, see the prophecy lesson on “The Great Tribulation” beginning on page 32).

This terrible fall will not come at the hands of a resurgent China or Russia, as many might expect—though these ultimately will play important roles on the world stage. Rather, the principal agent of destruction against the English-speaking nations will be a European-centered superpower, a prophesied final revival of the Roman Empire (see *The Final Superpower* at BTmagazine.org/booklets).

And thus we see the divide in the Western world between America and the nations of Europe pursuing a more integrated power bloc, with calls for Germany to assume world leadership. Europe will eventually gain ascendancy, and the world’s lone superpower of today will be no more.

We must recognize and overcome our own worst enemy

Of course, Europe or any other foreign power could not accomplish this of itself. This destruction is really coming by our people’s own hand—through refusal to repent of rejecting and disobeying God. The real and foremost enemy is *we ourselves* if we will not turn to God in repentance.

Abraham Lincoln was quite right when he said well before America’s Civil War that the nation would fall largely by its own doing: “At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant to step the ocean and crush us at a blow? Never! . . .

“At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer. If it ever reach us it *must spring up amongst us*; it cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot *we must ourselves be its author and finisher*. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time *or die by suicide*” (Lyceum Address, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” Jan. 27, 1839).

Sadly, the country will not turn from its path to national suicide. Ultimately it will face “the time of Jacob’s trouble,” with horrific devastation, suffering and enslavement of those who don’t perish swiftly.

Thankfully, as we announce repeatedly in this magazine, there will come a better world *beyond today*—the time of the return of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God, when



The world is changing. Britain’s vast empire is long gone. America is teetering dangerously. New empires are emerging.

all human powers will be vanquished and the Israelite peoples, at last humbled, repentant and obedient to God, will be restored to their leading role among the nations. But dark days, the worst ever, will come before that time.

It may be premature to know whether America will continue its retreat from global leadership under President Trump. That was certainly happening under the previous administration in various ways. And it may be happening in different ways now. Regardless, though, it seems clear that U.S. power and influence is waning, and that other powers are extending their reach.

Look around—and *within*. The world is changing. Britain’s vast empire is long gone. America is dangerously teetering, its direction unsure and unclear. New empires are emerging.

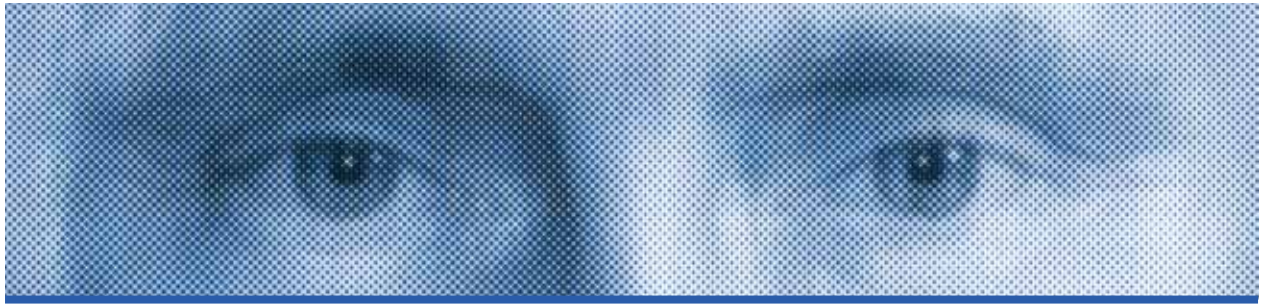
Even though the surrounding culture hurtles toward oblivion, you can and must personally take a stand—against the corrupt nature you share with everyone else. “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). God will see you through to the end—if you choose Him and His way rather than following the crowd in its plunge over the edge. Surrender to Him and you will stand secure when the world around you falls! **BT**



LEARN MORE

What’s behind the major changes that are reshaping America and our world? Where are these trends heading, and how will they affect you? To understand, download or request our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* today!

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VLADIMIR PUTIN: RISE OF A STRONGMAN

An emerging end-time age of emperors is upon us. Empires dismantled in the two world wars are coming back with a vengeance, their kings stirred by vivid memories and visions of former history. One who fits this description is Vladimir Putin.

by Victor Kubik

Vladimir Putin, whose name is becoming synonymous with Russia itself, was a complete unknown not too many years ago. In fact, he was a most unlikely figure to rise to the leadership of one of the world's most powerful countries, the largest by territory.

Putin's life is a disquieting story of someone who fortuitously happened to be in all the right places at the right time to do all the wrong things for his country and the world.

Vladimir Putin was born in 1952 in a poor section of St. Petersburg, Russia (then called Leningrad when Russia headed the communist Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or USSR). He was the only surviving child of parents who lived in a one-room apartment. World War II ended a few years previously. The forces of Hitler's Nazi Germany besieged this city, causing 632,000 people to starve to death, including his older brother Viktor, whom he had never known.

Yet today, in his "public service," he has amassed, by various reports, the equivalent of 40 to 200 billion dollars, more than the gross national product of many nations. He is one of the richest men, if not *the* richest man, in the world. Putin is head of a kleptocracy, a thieving regime of corrupt leaders who exploit their own country's citizens and material resources to expand their personal wealth and political power. How did this happen? Much of the story is spelled out in the 2014 book *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* by Karen Dawisha and the 2015 PBS *Frontline* documentary *Putin's Way*.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of the world was relieved to enter a new era of a changed, civilly behaving Russia. The world was hoping for integrity, friendship, peace. But that's not the way it's turning out.

What is the story behind Vladimir Putin? His story gives us a glimpse into the kind of leadership we can expect to see rising up in the world in the years ahead.

From espionage to corruption in the mayor's office

At a young age, Vladimir was already ambitious. At 16 he walked into the Leningrad office of the KGB (the Soviet secret police and intelligence agency) and asked to join up. He was told he was too young and to come back later. He did just that seven years after he got a law degree, and he was given a job. One of his law professors happened to be Anatoly Sobchak, later mayor of St. Petersburg from 1991 to 1996, whom he would then work for.

In the KGB, Putin monitored foreigners and consular officials in Leningrad. In 1985 the KGB assigned him to East Germany to work in counterintelligence. But in 1990, as the Soviet Union was coming apart, he moved back to Leningrad and took a job as assistant to the university rector while still, with the rector's knowledge, working for the KGB in recruiting or spying on students.

Putin quit the KGB to work at Leningrad's city hall where his former law professor Sobchak was mayor. With his foreign experience, he was appointed an advisor on international affairs. He was also responsible for promoting international relations and foreign investments and registering business ventures as chairman of the Committee for External Relations (or Foreign Liaison).

Russia was going through hard times economically in this period just after the collapse of the USSR. People needed food, but there was little foreign currency to import it for



St. Petersburg's five million inhabitants. A plan was hatched in which Russian suppliers would export raw materials and then buy food with the proceeds. The issuing of licenses and contracts for this came under Putin's committee, which took in vast commissions.

But most of the promised food never arrived, and further corruption became evident as the scheme went on. The contracts were riddled with problems to the point of being illegitimate and not subject to suing for breach of contract. The raw materials had been exported at discount prices, and the food prices were inflated. Some companies involved were later shown to be tied to Putin. Some were start-up fronts that disappeared after moving many millions of dollars in profits to foreign bank accounts.

Despite the scandal, with investigators stating that there was 100 percent proof that Putin was directly involved in all this and recommending that he be fired, Putin remained head of the Committee for External Relations until 1996. He was made first deputy mayor in 1994, fueling speculation that Mayor Sobchak was involved in Putin's criminal enterprise—or perhaps the other way around. Sobchak, Putin's mentor, was himself accused of corruption and misappropriation of funds.

I actually shook hands and spoke with Anatoly Sobchak when he came to Los Angeles to speak at a town hall meeting in Beverly Hills in the early 1990s. Los Angeles and Leningrad were sister cities. At that time, I headed an Ambassador Foundation project in Leningrad for young adults working for Radio and TV Leningrad. Anatoly Sobchak gave an entreating speech to those gathered to invest in St. Petersburg. The climate "was right," he said. In reality it wasn't; it was fraught with corruption.

Allegations of Putin's corruption were brought forward in a lawsuit, but nothing ever came of it. And when he later rose to the Russian presidency, it was considered "unseemly" to bring a lawsuit against a president.

On to Moscow and national prominence

When Sobchak left office, Putin moved on—from St. Petersburg to Moscow, where he continued his political climb in President Boris Yeltsin's administration, which was filled with allegations of misappropriation of funds. Putin had watched Sobchak's back, and now he was helping Yeltsin. There is one thing for certain about corrupt public officials: You must stay in power, because once you step down it is unknown what will happen to you. Leaving office in a coffin may be more preferable than going to jail.

Putin continued his rise. Among other appointments, he

became the head of the FSB, the agency that replaced the KGB. In August 1999 President Yeltsin appointed Putin as acting prime minister of the Russian Federation. But a few months later at the end of 1999, Yeltsin resigned unexpectedly because of health. Vladimir Putin suddenly became acting president. The world was asking: Who is this man standing at five feet six inches? He looked inauspicious, and most on the outside looked on him as interim at best.

But within Russia, Putin was becoming popular because of his tough and harsh stance against Chechen terrorists in the late 1990s. His bravado resonated with the people.

Putin won his first four-year election in May 2000 with 53 percent of the vote. He was returned to a second term in 2004 by a whopping 71 percent vote. There was hope that this newer, younger ruler would be more like the West—democratic, forward-looking and capitalist. However, Putin was not interested in democracy.

His first act as president was to grant former president Boris Yeltsin and his family immunity from certain prosecution for corruption. Then he dismantled Yukos Oil, owned by the richest man in Russia, and sent him to prison in Siberia for 10 years over tax issues. He took away his multibillion-dollar company and divided it up among his loyalists.

Looking to revive former greatness, tensions build

At first Putin charmed Western leaders. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair and U.S. President George W. Bush were all smiles and hugs in the presence of Vladimir. They naively saw him as an ally and friend.

But that changed. Putin had another agenda. He felt that things that belonged to Russia had been taken away (such as the seceding republics in the USSR breakup), and he wanted them back. Resource-rich and strategically placed Ukraine was number one on the list. Putin staged a takeover of Crimea. He churned up a civil war in eastern Ukraine that for now has settled down, but the Russians are still sniping and killing Ukrainian soldiers every day during this "cease-fire."

Putin wants Estonia and the rest of the Baltic real estate back. Estonia has a very high Russian population because many Russians settled here when there were open borders among the various Soviet republics. And many military personnel from Russia had been stationed here at that time.

When Estonia became independent, the Russians living here didn't want to return to Russia because life was better in Estonia. Russia expresses desire to "protect" ethnic brothers left outside its borders. Estonia does not make it easy, though,

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Current strongmen Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Strongmen beget other strongmen. We are entering a time of the rise of other Putin-like leaders. Will someone rise in Europe as well?

as it has required that ethnic Russians learn the difficult Estonian language to become Estonian citizens.

Western antipathy against Putin escalated with the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) on July 17, 2014, as it was crossing over Ukrainian airspace. The West was getting fed up with his hostile, rogue behavior and applied sanctions against Russia. In addition, oil prices dropped sharply. The Russian economy heavily relied on oil revenue for operation, and this really hurt. The ruble was devalued 60 percent against the dollar. But this did not deter Putin. He continues on his course of belligerence towards the West.

He has become actively embroiled in the Middle East by establishing a military base in Syria to prop up the evil Bashar al-Assad, another strongman who has killed his own people and allowed his country to virtually explode. (See “Is Putin the New Mideast Power-Broker?” on page 18.)

In the March 2018 Russian election for president, Putin is certain to win again by a landslide. The people are behind him and give him high approval ratings for standing up to the world and seeking to return Russia to its former glory. Ironically, one of his opponents was disqualified from the election because of “corruption.”

While Russia has experienced some surface economic improvement, it is still a poor country with the world’s widest gap between the rich and poor. Just 110 people own 35 percent of the nation’s wealth.

A biography released about Putin when he became president tells a story of his early scares—a rat he had cornered in his family’s apartment building had nowhere to go and jumped out at him. Playing off this childhood nightmare, he wants it known that he will not cow to pressure and give up. His message to all: *Don’t corner me.*

Other national leaders strive for dominion

Strongmen like Putin beget other strongmen who, to stay in

power, must both stand up to opposing strongmen and copy their behavior.

We are entering a time of the rise of other Putin-like leaders in countries like Turkey which, similarly to Russia, wants to regain the glory of the Ottoman Empire. Current Turkish strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan would like to make Turkey great again. Turkey today has only a fraction of the territory it had before World War I and has memories of the vast ruling caliphate. China has also brought forth a strongman in Xi Jinping.

Will other strongmen appear to counter the current ones? Will someone rise in Europe as well?

There is a move to the right to combat the ineffectiveness of parliamentary democracies that are not nimble enough to react quickly to the actions of others. One person to watch is a young man in Austria, 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, who is rising meteorically as a leader.

He has single-handedly “solved” the refugee problem in his country and is called the “Danube Messiah.”

Another savior from Austria? Germany turned to a previous Austrian savior in the years leading up to World War II, and it brought disaster to the world. Will

provocation from the Middle East and Russia breed another European nightmare?

The world is going to become more dangerous with more Putin-like behavior. Once-powerful nations will be stirred up by nationalist fervor to seek their former imperial glory in Europe, Russia and Asia through economic expansion and military ambitions.


Where the real geopolitical power lies

As we see leaders come to power in the most baffling ways, we can reflect on the story of the prophet Daniel and the strongman Nebuchadnezzar, who acted like similar rulers of our time. Daniel, who worked in Nebuchadnezzar’s court, revealed the following to the king about the politics of his time and God’s involvement: “He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings” (Daniel 2:21).

The developments of geopolitics and the setting up of rulers are only according to what God directs or allows. Daniel then relates what God reveals about the future of mankind through a succession of strongmen through history, leading up to the time of Christ’s return.

Daniel later explains what everyone needs to know: “that the Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world. He gives them to anyone he chooses—even to the lowliest of people” (Daniel 4:17, New Living Translation). All rulers should take warning.

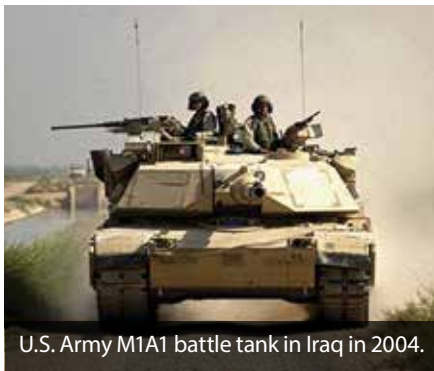
The corruption in the governments of this world will be redressed by a righteous kingdom headed by Jesus Christ: “And in the days of these kings [a final revival of the Roman Empire] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44).

Yet there will be dark days before that, as corrupt strongmen vie to revive former national glory. Thankfully, though, their days are numbered! 

U.S. military in growing jeopardy

Without restructuring and new equipment, America's military forces may suffer defeat in upcoming conflicts. As reported in *The Washington Times*, a new Rand Corp. study titled "U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World" shows "that U.S. forces could, under plausible assumptions, lose the next war they are called upon to fight" (quoted by Bill Gertz, Dec. 13, 2017).

"The Rand study recommended that instead of redefining military forces to fight two regional wars in overlapping time frames, the military needs to shift the focus toward battling the five main adversaries



U.S. Army M1A1 battle tank in Iraq in 2004.

today: China, Russia, North Korea, Iran and Islamic terrorist groups"—with each conflict needing distinct equipment and methods of engagement (ibid.).

Regarding military needs more broadly, the following is excerpted from a *Forbes* article by Loren Thompson titled "5 Reasons the U.S. Army Must Modernize Faster to Avoid Catastrophe" (Jan. 3, 2018):

"The U.S. Army . . . has been severely underfunded since 2011 . . . As a result, the Army's combat systems have become increasingly antiquated . . . Army Secretary Mark Esper and Under Secretary Ryan McCarthy . . . are stepping up efforts to explain the looming danger . . . Here, in simplified form, are the five key themes at the core of the Army's plea for more modernization money while there is still time to adequately equip America's soldiers.

"1. Army equipment budgets were starved during the Obama years . . . The Army's active-duty ranks were reduced by about 100,000 soldiers . . .

"2. Likely enemies are catching up with U.S. war-fighting technology. Russia and China have begun matching or surpassing the combat capabilities available to America's soldiers. For instance, U.S. tanks lack the active protection technology appearing on Russian tanks; Russian and Chinese tactical missiles often have greater reach than their American equivalents; and several countries have fielded targeting sensors with superior range. The Army's vice chief told Congress last year that Army equipment is 'outranged, outgunned and outdated.'

"3. New technology allows foes to leapfrog Army capabilities. Several potential adversaries are using unmanned aircraft—drones—to spy on U.S. ground forces or attack them . . . Other enemies are using cheap jamming systems to disrupt U.S. navigation, sensing and communications signals. Cyber attacks against U.S. tactical networks are increasingly common . . .

"4. Enemies have figured out that soldiers are vulnerable . . . Wars are mainly about the control of territory, population and resources . . . [which typically] requires 'boots on the ground.' But with the advent of improvised explosive devices, shaped charges and more high-tech options, additional modernization funding is needed for force protection so U.S. soldiers do not become easy targets.

"5. The Army has a limited window of time to get moving on modernization . . . Weapons spending rises when Republicans control the government, and falls when Democrats do . . . Army leaders need to convince Congress to speed up development of new rotorcraft, combat vehicles, networks and the like to assure durable political support as electoral fortunes shift.

"The Army already has identified what its top modernization priorities are . . . If that technology does not reach the force expeditiously, then the risk of mass casualties and catastrophic defeat in America's next ground campaign will inevitably rise."

In a Dec. 31, 2017, article at *Observer* titled "The Year American Hegemony Ended," former National Security Agency analyst John Schindler described some of the serious challenges facing the U.S. military:

"Our Air Force . . . is shedding pilots at an alarming rate, while it has far too few F-22 fighters to maintain air dominance worldwide . . . Our Navy is in even worse shape . . . Considering the U.S. Navy has been the guarantor of freedom of navigation on the world's seas since 1945 . . . its sad decline has far-reaching consequences . . .

"Our Army is equally unready for battle against a peer. In its shadow war in eastern Ukraine, Russia's ground forces have demonstrated killing capabilities far beyond what America and NATO can do . . . The U.S. Army is frantically playing catch-up so it can take on the Russians as equals if it comes to a fight . . .

"Some empires decline slowly, others fall fast after a major defeat; history is filled with both outcomes. Since 1945, Washington has presumed that it can deploy our military anywhere, at the time and place of our choosing, thanks to our dominance of the world's skies and oceans . . . This should no longer be assumed. The world has changed, American hegemony has collapsed, and if it's not careful Washington may find out the hard way." (Sources: *The Washington Times*, *Forbes*, *Observer*.)

Is Putin the new Mideast power broker?

In a recent article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Trudy Rubin describes some of the fallout of America's withdrawal from global leadership, particularly in the Middle East. "And as the United States pulls back," she says, "Russia and Iran rush in (along with Turkey and even China)," with the new lead player being Russian President Vladimir Putin ("In 2017, U.S. Abandoned Role as Global Leader, Mideast Power-Broker," Dec. 29, 2017).

Rubin illustrates the swing to Russian influence with recent optics, as follows: "Nothing symbolizes this ongoing power shift better than Vladimir Putin's triumphant visit to Syria on Dec. 11, followed by whirlwind visits to Cairo and Ankara. Putin's victory lap stands in sharp contrast to the negative international fallout from Trump's recognition of Jerusalem the previous week.

"The stunning video of Putin's arrival at Russia's Khmeimim air base in Syria rocketed around Arab social media. 'Visiting Syria, Egypt and Turkey in one day, Putin establishes himself as the only world leader with real influence in the Middle East,' read the headline in the Israeli paper *Haaretz*.

"As the Russian president stepped onto the tarmac, he was greeted not by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but by a Russian officer. Putin finally shook Assad's hand but quickly walked ahead of the Syrian president. Another Russian officer held Assad back when he tried to walk alongside Putin.

"The message was clear: The new master of Syria, whose air force (along with Iranian ground forces) saved Assad, was demonstrating who was now in charge. The spoils include large and long-term Russian air and naval bases near the Mediterranean Sea . . .

"Now the feeling is that Putin is the king of Syria and the United States is in retreat,' I was told by former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon.'" Rubin concludes that "Putin is on his way to becoming the major power broker in the region, the man whom leaders from Riyadh, Cairo, Libya, Ankara, Ramallah, and Jerusalem—and even Tehran—must consult to work out new geopolitical arrangements."

We certainly need to keep our eyes on the Middle East as a major focus of powerful empires, just as the Bible foretells of the end time. (Source: *Philadelphia Inquirer*.)

Doomsday Clock edges closer to midnight

Last year, 2017, opened with the big news that the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* updated its “Doomsday Clock,” which reflects the scientists’ estimation of how imminent the threat of a global nuclear catastrophe is. The clock’s hands were at that time moved forward to read “two and a half minutes to midnight.”

The beginning of 2018 brought another announcement from the *Bulletin*, which pushed the clock forward to two minutes to midnight, the closest it’s been to midnight since the introduction of hydrogen bombs in the early 1950s.

The *Bulletin’s* president, Dr. Rachel Bronson, explains the reasoning for the adjustment: “The nuclear landscape takes center stage in this year’s Clock statement. Major nuclear actors are on the cusp of a new arms race, one that will be very expensive and will increase the likelihood of accidents and misperceptions.

“Across the globe, nuclear weapons are poised to become more rather than less usable because of nations’ investments in their nuclear arsenals. This is a concern that the *Bulletin* has been highlighting for some time, but momentum toward this new reality is increasing” (Jan. 25, 2018).

Whether or not the *Bulletin’s* estimations are based in reality, they do reflect a climate of pessimism for the future. Potential nuclear war is only one stressor in today’s world. Economic uncertainty, political upheaval and threats from hostile nations stalk the citizens of many countries.

The Doomsday Clock then, more than a measure of geopolitical realities, serves as a look into the global psyche. That may, though, provide a better look into what’s to come than mere statistics. Of course, only God can tell us the future, as He does through Bible prophecy. And prophecy does reveal the coming use of terrible weapons of mass destruction, apparently including nuclear weapons. (Source: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.)

U.S. national debt continues to worsen

After the previous presidential administration and Congress gave us the largest national debt increase in history, it is disturbing to see increases in the debt ceiling continuing. America’s debt currently sits at an unimaginable \$20.5 trillion and is rising—a bit larger than the entire U.S. economy at 106 percent of GDP. This, writes American Free Enterprise fellow Desmond Lachman, “is a level that is widely considered by economists to be in the danger zone” (“Point: Increase the Public Debt at Your Peril,” *InsideSources*, Jan. 7, 2018).

An article in *The Week* points out: “Overall, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) expects the national debt to surpass \$30 trillion by 2028, as Medicare and Social Security costs soar to cover aging baby boomers. Outgoing Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen has warned that the country’s growing debt load could eventually become unsustainable. ‘It’s the type of thing that should keep people awake at night,’ she told Congress in November” (“The National Debt, Explained,” Jan. 13, 2018).

Historically low interest rates have helped the government to continue to pay interest on the debt. But interest rates are expected to rise in the coming years. Some maintain that this is no big deal, as government can keep printing money forever, but that would lead to massive inflation.

Most of the debt is owed to American investors holding Treasury securities—companies, local governments or individuals—and back to government trust funds like Social Security and Medicare, with investors benefiting from interest paid. About 30 percent is owned by foreign investors. “America’s biggest foreign creditor is China, which holds about 5 percent of total debt, followed closely by Japan. This could become a problem if the U.S. ever damaged its credit rating, but for now American debt is still considered one of the world’s safest assets” (ibid). That could change, of course.

Lachman comments: “Those who are unconcerned by our increased reliance on foreign financing seem to turn a blind eye to how heavily indebted our country’s government already is to countries like China, which are not particularly well disposed to us. One would have thought that such considerations would have dictated that, far from further increasing our reliance on

such foreign sources of finance, we should have been making every effort to reduce our external economic vulnerability by paying down our debt.”

Scripture warns that “the borrower is servant to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7). And God told the Israelites



that they would be cursed for disobedience by foreigners rising higher to lend to them while Israelite lending to foreigners effectively ceased (Deuteronomy 28:43-44). It’s a very serious matter.

Conservative columnist Cal Thomas recently wrote: “Before he ran up the debt more than any other president, Barack Obama criticized George W. Bush for increasing America’s debt. While a senator from Illinois and during a debate about whether to raise the debt ceiling, Obama said, ‘The fact that we are here today to debate raising America’s debt limit is a sign of leadership failure.’ Debt rose by \$3.5 trillion in Bush’s first five years in office, partially the result of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. During Obama’s two terms, the debt increased by \$8.9 trillion . . .

“One of the reasons empires and great nations have collapsed throughout history is burdensome debt. No individual can keep spending as if there is no tomorrow, so why would anyone think that a nation can continue deficit spending and still expect a tomorrow? Companies that consistently spend more than they take in usually go bankrupt. Nations that consistently spend more than they take in and continue borrowing to keep the illusion of prosperity going usually just collapse. There is always a day of reckoning for such irresponsible behavior. It is not a matter of if, but a matter of when” (“China’s Big Favor,” *The Washington Times*, Jan. 15, 2018). (Sources: *InsideSources*, *The Week*, *The Washington Times*.)

How can you make sense of the news?

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What Easter Doesn't Tell You



Do Easter traditions leave something missing in the story of Jesus Christ? What is it that Easter doesn't tell you about Christ's life, death and resurrection?

by Darris McNeely

This may sound shocking to you, but did you know that Easter as a celebration has nothing to do with Jesus Christ?

The name itself does not mean “resurrection of Christ” like you may believe. The word *Easter* actually comes from the name of a goddess of fertility, spring and the dawn worshipped in ancient times. You can go online and quickly learn the origins of Easter bunnies, colored eggs, hot cross buns and the sunrise service. You'll find these modern parts of the Easter celebration come from ancient pre-Christian religions. They were around a long time before the time of Christ, and they have nothing to do with biblical practice or the Church!

Maybe that doesn't matter to you. Maybe you believe it's okay to incorporate these things as part of the worship of Christ. But let me show you from God's Word why you should rethink the observance of Easter.

Warnings in the early Church

The Church Jesus founded had a very clear understanding of who He was and how to worship Him. But over many decades things changed. Increasing numbers of Christians became confused during this period and lost many aspects of earlier teachings.

How could people possibly let that happen? It's a sad fact that we have a natural tendency to forget the things we learn. Early Christians learned their true faith by the teachings of Christ and the apostles. But very early, as we can tell from the writings of the apostles to the early Church, heresy reared its ugly head. False teachings began to creep into the Church.

Paul warned the Church members in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) that they were flirting with a *false gospel* (Galatians 1:6). The apostle Peter warned that false teachers among the Christians would “*secretly bring in destructive heresies,*

even denying the Lord who bought them” (2 Peter 2:1, emphasis added throughout).

Gradually, through the years after the death of the original apostles, other teachings began creeping into the Church. Among these false teachings was a distortion and corruption of the truth about the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

Again, Peter warned Church members that there was a danger of “denying the Lord who bought them.” He warned against replacing the clear truth of Jesus Christ with pagan myth and false teaching. Yet in spite of Peter's clear warning, people bought into the denial.

Peter warned the Church against replacing the clear truth of Jesus Christ with pagan myth and false teaching!

So, what does all this have to do with Easter?

Easter evolved from a story based on an ancient Babylonian god named Tammuz. The story of Tammuz is at the heart of the pagan world—and at the heart of Easter. It's a story of a never-ending circle of life without meaning, direction or purpose. The ancient Babylonians believed that Tammuz died every year and that spring showed his “resurrection” by a goddess named *Ishtar*.

The word *Easter* ultimately derives from the name of this ancient false goddess. Her worship was very popular, and spread far and wide from Babylon to other regions of the ancient world. A lot of modern Easter customs come directly from the way ancient people worshiped Ishtar.

Why and how did this happen?

People had been believing the Ishtar myth and other stories for centuries. In the decades following Jesus and the apostles,

as Christianity spread out from the Holy Land, local people started blending these myths into the true gospel story of Christ. Eventually, the *fake* stories replaced the true one.

The Church began to be corrupted by such false teachings. It wasn't long before leadership at that time found it convenient to blend pagan myths into biblical truth to attract more people to the church, a practice known as syncretism, so they could hold power over them. It is a recurring story told often in the Bible.

The myths of Tammuz and Ishtar and of other pagan gods are meaningless when it comes to salvation and what God is really doing with human life. Only God coming to live in the flesh could open the door of salvation for the human creation. Borrowing from false pagan myths to create a Christian story does not work. It is empty, futile tradition.

Yet every year people celebrate with parades and Easter sunrise services. In America the observance is so popular that Easter egg rolling takes place annually on the White House lawn.

People dress in their finest, and for many this is one of perhaps two or three times a year they actually go into a church for a formal service. Easter services around the world are major events. Coupled with Good Friday, it becomes a long weekend of leisure, church attendance and festivity.

What's missing in Easter

You may think, "All this background really doesn't matter because I do it to honor God."

But it does matter. Something is missing in this story. What's missing is *truth!* What's missing is understanding the way to eternal life through Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

Christ came in the flesh and showed us how we may enter the Kingdom of God—through His death and His resurrection. He made possible the most awesome reality—the potential to become God's own children in the family of God, entering eternity crowned with infinite glory and honor.

This is the heart of the Bible's message to mankind. Jesus Christ tasted death for every man so that God might give eternal life to those who call on His name. Christ said those who worship Him will do so in spirit and *in truth* (John 4:24).

Do you want to do what Jesus said? Then you need to learn what's missing in the Easter holiday.

You may be surprised to learn that Easter is not even found in the New Testament story of Jesus and His followers. (The word occurs in the King James translation of Acts 12:4, but other versions correctly translate this as Passover.) The book of Acts, which tells the story of the apostles and the Church in its first decades, has no account at all of Easter. The apostles constantly preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ—but they put it *in the context of the biblical festivals they already knew and observed.*

These festivals were central to the life of the Church of God in the first century. As recorded in Acts 2:1, the Church was founded when? When Christ's disciples were gathered on the day of Pentecost, also known as the biblical Feast of Weeks. Later in Acts, Luke referenced key events taking place during the Days of Unleavened Bread (Acts 20:6). Another festival, the Day of Atonement, is also mentioned in Acts (Acts 27:9). The weekly Sabbath is also featured several times, with the apostle Paul going into synagogues to preach to Jews and gentile (non-Israelite) converts (Acts 17:2).

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On one occasion, Paul told the church in the Greek city of Corinth, a heavily gentile congregation, to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (1 Corinthians 5:8). He said to keep these days with “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” God had revealed all of these feasts to His people centuries earlier—repeatedly emphasizing that these were *His* feasts (see Leviticus 23).

In contrast, Easter celebrations were nowhere in the picture during the early days of the Church—except in prototype among the repugnant practices of the surrounding pagan world.

However, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as found in the Bible certainly was in the picture. Christ’s death and resurrection is clearly connected with the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. Jesus was killed as “our Passover” (1 Corinthians 5:7). He was buried just as the Days of Unleavened Bread began in that year and remained buried for the first three days and three nights of the seven-day festival to then be resurrected in the midst of it. He then appeared to the disciples the morning after

His resurrection, and it was on that day, of a special firstfruits offering during the feast, that He was accepted by the Father as the firstfruits of salvation.

All this was clearly understood by the Church. It was part of the apostles’ doctrine or teaching in the early days. Celebrating Easter was *not* part of the story.

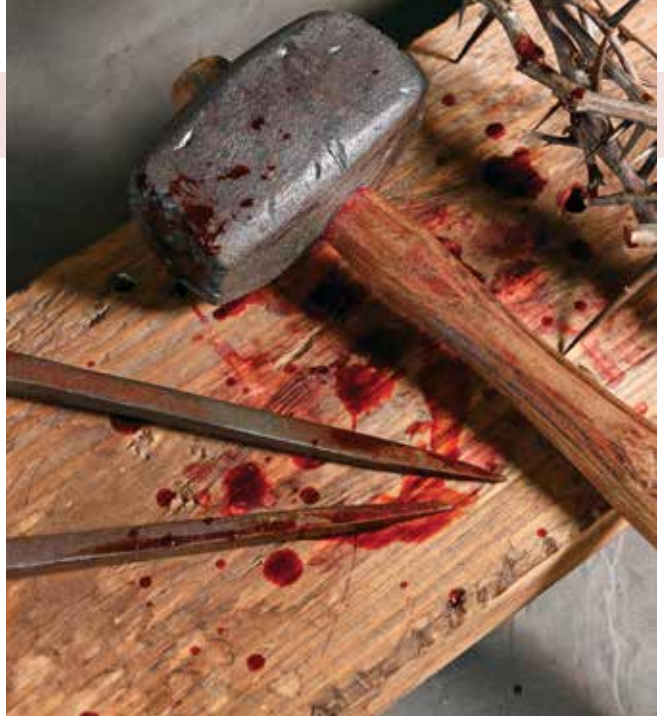
What Easter doesn’t tell you is that by celebrating a substitute holiday that originated in pagan myths, you are missing out on the wonderful meaning of Passover and the death and reconciliation of Jesus Christ. Jesus suffered, died and was resurrected once for all time so that men might have opportunity to enter into eternal life. Easter obscures the truth about that.

What do you need to know?

You need to know that Christ died according to the Scripture as our Passover Lamb, in fulfillment of the many biblical prophecies that foretold His coming, His suffering, His death and His resurrection.

You need to know that the Passover observance and symbols, instituted by Christ the night before He died, teach us about the need for a Savior who gave His life for us and, having been resurrected, lives again in us that we might have eternal life.

You need to know that the Days of Unleavened Bread show our old sinful self buried with Christ as well as our being risen to new life with Him—the life of the resurrected Christ and His power in us today (see Romans 6). It is this festival that Paul taught the gentile world to observe. This Festival of Unleavened Bread is what you can observe today to realize the



Christ died as our Passover Lamb, in fulfillment of the biblical prophecies that foretold His coming, His suffering, His death and His resurrection.

full meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

You need to know that Easter *misses* all of this vitally important truth about Jesus Christ!

The hope of life through Christ

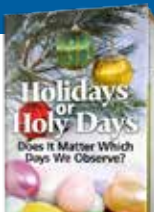
Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:19 that without Christ’s resurrection we are of all people most miserable. The resurrection must be presented truthfully, according to what the Bible reveals. There is no room for error and myth in this most important event. Look at what you know, or what you think you know, about the resurrection. The truth about the resurrection is a key to opening a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Father based on reality.

Paul said, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (verse 20). Because Christ was resurrected from the dead and lives today, you have assurance that you too can enter eternal life. No humanly devised holiday can tell you what God says through His Holy Days. You need to educate yourself with the full story.

What does Easter not tell you? It fails to tell you the true path to eternal life through Jesus Christ the Son of God. Easter is based on a false myth of a deity who died and rose year after year with no connection to a hope of immortality for mankind. Blending the truth of Christ’s resurrection with such a myth turns the truth of God into a lie. Easter, with its traditions rooted in pagan myths, is a lie.

We challenge you to look into your Bible to see what God tells us about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead of celebrating a holiday rooted in myth, why not keep the festival God gives us—a festival that explains the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in its entirety and how that applies to us—a festival that explains the victory of life over death! **BT**

LEARN MORE



What do fluffy bunnies and brightly colored eggs have to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God? Nothing! To learn more, download or request our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*

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From Glory to Glory, to Bring Glory to Man

Who came and died for the sins of the world?
Who was He? How did He come? And why does it matter?

by John Miller

“**F**or God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

This central passage of Scripture speaks about both the One who came to die for the sins of the world and the One who sent Him, as well as the underlying purpose—God’s plan to give everlasting life to mortal man. God so loved the world of mankind, the pinnacle of His creation, that He gave His Son to die to pay the penalty for mankind’s sins. It is a statement about a grand purpose as well as the huge price paid to achieve it.

So who was this Son who came, and who is the God who sent Him? How is it possible? Why would God intervene so personally for the world, and why does it matter for you and me?

To understand, we must rely on the authoritative words of Scripture. “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life,” Jesus Christ told His followers (John 6:63). “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth,” He prayed to God the Father on the night before His crucifixion (John 17:17). “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus told Thomas when he asked Him where He was going (John 14:6).

When we explore the question of the nature of the One who came and of the One who sent Him, we need look no further than the authoritative words and work of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Beginning at the beginning

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” declares the apostle John in the opening sentence of his Gospel (John 1:1). He states for

the record the truth revealed to him by Jesus Christ so that others can believe with confidence and clarity.

John’s inspired clarity must be the foundation for our understanding of the nature of God, rather than convoluted human reasoning.

The apostle Paul succinctly tells us why: “The world *through wisdom* did not know God” (1 Corinthians 1:21, emphasis added throughout). He highlights the inadequacy of philosophical wisdom with a series of questions: “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer [debater] of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (verses 20-21).

How was this philosophical wisdom made foolish? One principal way was through what John’s Gospel records. John deconstructs humanly devised ideas about what God can do, or be, with one pivotal claim: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (John 1:14).

God becoming flesh

“God becoming flesh” is the central thesis of the book of John—the rest of the book supporting and illustrating this truth.

The claim is audacious, but understanding it is not difficult: “In the beginning,” John states, two divine Beings existed—one referred to as “God” and the other as “the Word” who also “was God.” One of these, John reveals, “became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Understanding what John said is not difficult. *Believing* the audacity of the claim was the challenge then, as it is now. God

becoming flesh as the only begotten of the Father flies in the face of everything people of the time believed. To the Jews it was a blasphemous “stumbling block” (1 Corinthians 1:23), being inconsistent with their incomplete view of God. And to the Greeks it was “foolishness,” because for centuries their philosophers had denied the possibility of a god actually becoming human.

The Word becoming flesh wiped away centuries of “wisdom” and brought “to nothing” philosophical constructs about God that limited His interaction with His own creation—constructs that declared the physical creation evil and the spiritual realm mystical and unknowable.

It all comes down to one word—“became,” which by definition means “came to be.” John is clear here. The Word who from the beginning was with God and was God “came to be” flesh. This does not mean He was no longer God, as His identity did not change. It means that, having become flesh, He was no longer a spirit being as He was before.

When the Word became flesh on earth, the Word no longer existed in heaven. The Word becoming flesh does not *subtract* from the deity of Christ, it *confirms* the deity of Christ.

The “Word becoming flesh” is pivotal because it clarifies in one concise statement what theologians have failed to explain with volumes of convoluted human reasoning. Still it is only one step in a process that took the Word *from* glory and then *back* to glory.

The Word’s transition from glory to flesh and back to glory can be summarized this way: When “the Word became flesh” *He ceased being spirit* and “dwelt among us” as “the only begotten of the Father” until His death by crucifixion. When God the Father raised Him from the dead and “seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,” *He ceased being flesh* and “became a life-giving spirit,” endowed once again with the glory He had with God before the world was (John 1:14; 3:6; Ephesians 1:20; 1 Corinthians 15:45; John 17:5).

The journey from glory to glory to bring glory

Let’s go back to the beginning described by John and follow the Word’s journey from glory to flesh and back to glory for the purpose of, as is later stated, bringing many sons and daughters to glory (see Hebrews 2:10).

As we’ve already seen, John opens His Gospel with these words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Again, two divine Beings existed, whom John calls “God” and “the Word.” The Word was both *with* God and *was* God—these two eternal Beings existing together as God prior to the creation in Genesis 1.

John 1 goes on to say of the Word that “all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (verse 3; see also Ephesians 3:9).

“All things” are further defined by the apostle Paul as things that “are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers” (Colossians 1:16). Paul often uses the terms “dominions,” “principalities” and “powers” in referring to different categories or ranks of beings and authority in the invisible spirit world (see Romans 8:38; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 2:10, 15).

Thus, God created all things, whether spirit or physical, through the Word—the Word doing the actual work of creation

as the agent of the One who would later be referred to as God the Father.

The book of Hebrews confirms this truth: “God . . . has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, *through whom also He made the worlds*” (Hebrew 1:1-2).

This is consistent with the record of physical creation we see in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God [*Elohim*] created the heavens and the earth.” The Hebrew word *Elohim*, here translated “God,” is a *plural* word—meaning that *more than one divine spirit Being*, sharing enormous divine power, participated in creating the physical universe out of nothing. This culminated in the capstone of creation: “Then God said, ‘Let *Us* [plural] make man in *Our* image according to *Our* likeness’” (Genesis 1:26; see also Hebrews 11:3).

The entirety of this physical creation God declared to be good (Genesis 1:31). Then “the LORD God,” here the One creating on behalf of the other, as stated in John, planted a garden eastward in Eden” and commanded man to “tend and keep it” (Genesis 2:8, 15).

At this time the LORD God actually *walked and talked* in it, even after Adam and Eve sinned: “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day . . . Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:8-9). Not only did He walk and talk in the midst of creation, but the Being who would later become Jesus Christ sought out fallen man, for whom He would later sacrifice Himself. (See also “Who and What Was Jesus Christ Before His Human Birth?” beginning on page 26.)

The LORD God here is directly, personally and tangibly involved in His creation. He planted a garden in Eden. He created man from the dust of the ground. He partnered with Noah to perpetuate life through the Flood. He called the patriarchs to build a nation. He defeated Pharaoh and delivered Israel. He spoke to the prophets of old.

Finally, God the Father sent the Word to become flesh: “When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4).

Born of a woman! “Immanuel,” or “God with us”! (Matthew 1:22-23). “God . . . manifested in the flesh”! (1 Timothy 3:16). The impact of this can hardly be overestimated. The angel Gabriel delivered the news flash to Mary: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest” (Luke 1:31-32).

Mary asked the obvious question, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” (verse 34). How can a virgin conceive and bring forth the Son of God—God in the flesh?

Gabriel’s answer describes the process that made what philosophers said was impossible possible and the unthinkable true: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

God becomes flesh in Mary’s womb

Not only had God united with the race of mortals, He had done so in a most intimate way with the conception of Jesus Christ in the womb of Mary. Note that this did not *create* the One who became Christ. The impregnation of Mary by a

miracle from the Father through the Holy Spirit is the act that caused the preexistent Word to be made flesh. The Word had eternally existed with the Father before this event. Now the Word would no longer be spirit, but “became flesh and dwelt among us” as Jesus Christ (John 1:14).

Did He empty Himself of the glory He had with the Father before the world was? Yes, to take on the “glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Philippians 2:7; John 1:14; 17:5). Did the immortal Word become mortal man? Yes! (John 1:14). Did spirit become flesh? Yes! Did God become Man? Yes! (Matthew 1:22-23).

Did He cease to be God the Word? No, because the Word had become flesh, retaining the identity He had before.

When the Word became flesh, the unknowable God became knowable. The invisible God became visible. The high and lofty God became personal.

The Word left glory to bring glory to the sons of man. He left His glorious, all-powerful, eternal spirit state of existence so that human beings might ultimately be glorified as eternal spirit children of God.

Jesus did not work according to this purpose independently of God the Father. He epitomized humility and submission. The Bible records that He submitted to the will of His earthly adoptive father Joseph (Luke 2:51) and that He submitted Himself to His Heavenly Father till the day He died (Matthew 26:39). Other statements from Jesus show His complete submission to God the Father:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner” (John 5:19).

The Word left His glorious, all-powerful, eternal spirit state of existence so that human beings might ultimately be glorified as eternal **spirit children of God**.

“I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me” (John 5:30).

Jesus further said, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God, nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me” (John 8:42).

Did God the Son actually die?

Some theologians argue that the “God part” of Jesus Christ did not die when He was crucified, only the man part. This is an argument with consequences. If only Jesus the man died, then the payment for sin through his death could only cover the sins of one other man. The notion that the divine Word continued to inhabit eternity in the spirit realm while somehow linked to or possessing the human being Jesus ignores the clear message of John’s pivotal claim: “The Word *became* flesh.” The Word changed from spirit into flesh. So there was no divine spirit part remaining alive when Jesus died.

This is precisely what the apostle John is combating in his Gospel and later letters. Notice his quote from Jesus revealing the Father and Himself as the Son as two distinct and separate Beings: “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted

the Son to have life in Himself” (John 5:26).

When the Word became flesh, the Father, as a distinct and separate Being, continued to exist in heaven. And when the Word who became flesh died, the Father still reigned supreme in heaven and was able to act independently and apart from God the Son while He was dead.

This stands in opposition to the Trinity doctrine, which presents the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit as three persons in one being. It further teaches that all three participate fully in the being and actions of one another. This creates the obvious problem that if God the Son died, then the Father and the Holy Spirit would die as well. The reality is that the doctrine is just not true. (We don’t have space to cover these and other similar issues in this article. Interested readers can learn much more in our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?*)

Much more than a mere man died

When the apostle Peter addressed the crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost when the New Testament Church began, he proclaimed that Someone much more than a man had been crucified at their hands: “You denied the *Holy One* and the *Just*, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and *killed the Prince of life*, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses” (Acts 3:13-15).

Moreover, Paul makes the matter even plainer. Notice what he said in Philippians 2:5-8 in the New Living Translation: “Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges [or emptied himself]; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared

in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.”

Who died? Not just a man who was joined to God, but the very One who had

been God on the same level of existence as the Father—again, the Word who became flesh.

Finally, a clear, emphatic confirmation that God *did* die on the cross comes from the glorified Christ Himself: “Do not be afraid,” Christ said as the apostle John lay prostrate at His feet, “I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, *and was dead*, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen” (Revelation 1:17-18).

Jesus Christ in His glorified state lays claim to His divinity by saying He is the First and the Last (compare Isaiah 44:6), and categorically states that He Himself “was dead”—adding the word “Amen” for emphasis. To deny that Christ as God died is to deny His own clear statement.

When Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—was crucified, God the Son by Christ’s own testimony “was dead.” He no longer lived. He was *dead*. For three days and three nights, only God the Father was alive as God.

The resurrection back to glory

Then came another pivotal part of the journey planned from the foundation of the world (see 1 Peter 1:19-20; Revelation 13:8). God the Father, reigning supreme from heaven, did what

He had said He would do for the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world—*He raised Him from the dead.*

That God the Father was the One who raised Jesus Christ the Son from the dead is the overwhelming testimony of Scripture repeated many times (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 33, 34, 37; Romans 4:24; 6:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:15; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:17-20; Colossians 2:12).

Through this resurrection Jesus became a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45, 50) and sat down at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 10:12). This is the most magnificent event in the journey from glory to glory. The Word returned to the glory He had shared with the Father before the universe came into existence (John 17:5). He returned as the fully realized Lamb of God who was foreordained to be slain from the foundation of the world.

This return to glory leads the way for the glorification of all the children of God and the expansion of the family of God. John describes it this way: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

And what is Jesus Christ like now in His glorified state, having been resurrected by the Father back to the state of His previous existence?

Read the description of Jesus as John saw Him in vision in Revelation 1:12-18 (NLT): “When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were bright like flames of fire.


“His feet were as bright as bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth [this part of the vision evidently figurative of His speaking the Word of God—Hebrews 4:12]. And his face was as bright as the sun in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, ‘Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever!’”

The glory we can share in

This is the same kind of glorified immortal spirit existence God promises to His children in the resurrection of the dead at Jesus Christ’s return! (1 Corinthians 15:50-54). Christ’s journey began in glory and ends in glory for the ultimate purpose of the glorification of human beings—so Jesus can be “the firstborn among *many brethren*,” these to be raised to glory (Romans 8:29; Hebrews 2:10).

We go back to the question we asked at the beginning: Does it matter who came to die for our sins and who sent Him? The answer is an emphatic *yes!* If God the Son did not die for us while another divine Being, God the Father, remained alive with the power to resurrect Him, then, as Paul said, we of all men are most pitiable and have no hope of eternal life (1 Corinthians 15:14-19).

Thankfully, God *did* so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son, and the Son willingly gave up His glory and became a man to die for us, so that we might have everlasting life and share in God’s glory forever.

The truth is not too difficult to understand. God became man so that man could become immortal members of the family of God—a journey that began and ends in glory! 

Who and What

As the accompanying article shows, the One who became Jesus Christ was clearly God, along with God the Father, before His human birth. But a careful study of Scripture shows that He was more than just another divine being who was previously unknown.

Scripture repeatedly tells us that no one has seen God the Father at any time. For example, the apostle John makes this quite clear in John 1:18: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

John had just explained in this chapter that he was a personal eyewitness of “the Word” who became flesh as Jesus Christ, so this cannot refer to Him. The “God” whom no one has ever seen at any time thus has to be referring to the Father.

John repeats this exact same statement in 1 John 4:12: “No one has seen God at any time.”

We also see two such explicit statements from Jesus Christ Himself. Notice John 5:37: “And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. *You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form*” (emphasis added throughout).

And just to be clear, Jesus again says that no one has ever seen the Father in John 6:46: “*No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father*” (New International Version).

Here Jesus plainly says that no one has seen the Father except the One who is from God—this referring to Himself. He alone has seen the Father. No human being has ever seen the Father.

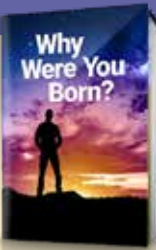
Yet in the books of the Old Testament period we’re told that a number of people *did* see God. They include Abraham (Genesis 12:7; 15:1; 18:1), Isaac (Genesis 26:2, 24), Jacob (Genesis 28:13; 32:30; 35:9-10), Moses (Exodus 3:6; 33:11, 21-23), Aaron and the 70 elders of Israel (Exodus 24:9-11), Joshua (Joshua 6:2) and Gideon (Judges 6:14).

Nearly all of these are described as face-to-face encounters. Two involved eating a meal with God, and Jacob literally wrestled with God.

LEARN MORE

What is our ultimate destiny? Why were we created? What does God have in store for us in His magnificent plan that is so great that it required the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Is there a way for us to know? Yes, there is—God has spelled it out in the pages of the Bible! Discover the answers in our eye-opening study guide *Why Were You Born?* A free copy is waiting for you!

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Was Jesus Christ Before His Human Birth?



The God who appeared to Moses at the burning bush gave His name as “I AM.” Fifteen centuries later Jesus Christ identified Himself as that same “I AM” in John 8.

So whom did these individuals see when they saw God? The only way we can make sense of this is to understand that *no man had seen God the Father at any time.*

What they saw as recorded in these many passages, and at other times when God appeared to individuals, was *the Word who was God* (John 1:1), the One who was born in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. With this understanding there is no contradiction. The Bible doesn’t contradict itself, as “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

What Scripture reveals is that Jesus was the One who interacted with the patriarchs and prophets and the people of Israel as the LORD or God on behalf of the Father. They never saw the Father, but only the Word or Spokesman of God, who came to reveal the Father (John 1:18).

The One who appeared and spoke to people as God was the One who became Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself clearly said this, and the people who heard Him knew that was exactly what He meant. Notice this in John 8:57-58, where Jesus was in a heated debate with some of the Jews who opposed Him, and He said that Abraham rejoiced to see His day.

“Then the Jews said to Him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, *before Abraham was, I AM.*’”

Here Jesus specifically told them of His

divine identity—that He existed before Abraham, and then that He was the God who had interacted with people during the Old Testament period. Whom did He specifically claim to be?

We find the answer in Exodus 3:13-14, where God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and told Moses that He would deliver the Israelites from

disobedient, [He is] . . . ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.’” He is quoting Isaiah 8:13-14, which foretold that “the LORD of hosts” would be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

The apostle Paul applies several Old Testament passages about the LORD to Jesus Christ. For example, Joel 2:32 says, “And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” In Romans 10:9-13 Paul applies this prophecy to Jesus Christ.

And in a prophecy that is so obvious that we tend to read right over it, Isaiah 40:3 foretold the coming of “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

This is a prophecy of John the Baptist. But for whom was he to prepare the way? It tells us plainly that John was to prepare the way for “the LORD.” How was this prophecy fulfilled? Read Matthew 3:3: “For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD . . .”’” (see also Mark 1:2-3 and Luke 3:3-4).

John was to prepare the way for the coming of whom? The coming of the LORD. And who was the LORD John prepared the way for? *Jesus Christ.*

Although there are a number of such examples, we’ll note one more that specifically identifies Jesus Christ as “the Rock” who accompanied Israel at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. Notice 1 Corinthians 10:1-4: “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed [or accompanied] them, and *that Rock was Christ*” (see also verse 9).

These are not all the scriptures pertinent to this subject, but they are enough to clearly demonstrate that the One who interacted with human beings in the Old Testament period as God on behalf of the Father was the One we know today as Jesus Christ.

—Scott Ashley



How to Live in Babylon

How are Christians to live in the Babylon of modern society and not be corrupted by it—to be in the world and not of it? The example of Daniel and his friends in ancient Babylon shows us the way.

by Peter Eddington

Should you, as a Christian, be relevant to the culture around you? Is the gospel message of the Bible relevant to society? Should you be relevant? *Are you relevant?* Culture changes, and it changes quite fast. What we are able to do in our modern, connected, Internet age would astound even recent generations—not to mention how foreign it would be to characters of the Bible. But, while the *methods* of communication have changed, *the message* to be communicated never changes.

The message of God, His Word, is always relevant—if only people would truly understand what it is. In our world today the god of this age, Satan the devil, has blinded humanity to the relevance of the gospel message (2 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9).

One example of the importance of cultural relevance when it comes to the Bible is the YouVersion Bible app for smartphones and tablets. This app was created by Life.Church with one purpose—leveraging technology to engage people in God’s Word. YouVersion’s Bible App features 1,492 Bible versions, in 1,074 languages, with audio Bibles of popular versions. This is a form of being culturally relevant in engaging people with the biblical message “where they are,” which is on their mobile devices.

So Life.Church created something very culturally relevant that leveraged the biblical text and put it into the hands of the populace. What are you doing to be relevant?

Daniel—in Babylon but not of it

Someone who became very relevant with his faith amid his society was the biblical prophet Daniel. The way he lived his life and showed the way to God was groundbreaking in his time. He was *a godly citizen of Babylon*. Are you a *godly citizen*

in today’s Babylon? Daniel confronted the culture of his day and showed God’s way to be relevant.

Besides being a prophet, with his book containing the most comprehensive and sweeping prophecies in the Old Testament, Daniel also worked as a government official and scholar. As one of the most learned men of Old Testament times, he was thoroughly trained for his important role in government, history, wisdom and literature.

We might wonder: What must it have been like for him to live in Babylon back then? What kind of cultural challenges did the people of God face then? Perhaps we should consider: What’s it like for God’s people today to live in America or, really, *any country* in a sinful, fallen world?

Babylon or Babel, site of the famous tower and starting place of the first empire after the Flood (Genesis 10:8-10; 11:1-9), is an archetype of civilization in opposition to God. In many ways our country, along with every country, is a continuation of the ancient Babylonian way! What good did Daniel bring to his society? What good can we bring to ours? How can we ensure the biblical message is relevant to those we interact with on a daily basis?

After all, while we must live *in* the Babylon of this world, we are not to be *of* it. The requirement to come *out* of Babylon means to come out of its ways (see John 17:14-18; Revelation 18:4-5).

Living in Babylon without assimilating

The opening verses of Daniel give the historical setting, which includes the first siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 605 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon demanded tribute from this new part of his empire, along with certain Jewish men to be trained to serve in his court.

Among these were Daniel and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, who were all renamed with Babylonian names—Daniel as Belteshazzar and his three friends as Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego (Daniel 1:1-7).

This takeover of Judah and initial deportation of Jews to Babylon was part of the fulfillment of many warnings from the biblical prophets about Israel and Judah's coming disaster because of their sins against God. The nation had repeatedly forsaken the law and ignored God's covenant—including the Sabbath day—and gone into idolatry (Ezekiel 20:12-13, 16-24).

The people of Israel (to the north of Judah) had been overrun and deported by the Assyrians more than a century earlier, and now the southern kingdom of Judah was to be captured by the Babylonians. Sin resulted in the people of Judah being likewise carried off captive—now and in greater numbers in two more invasions over the next 18 years—to Babylon, itself a center of idolatry and one of the most wicked cities in the ancient world.

How did Daniel and his friends live in that society? Consider too: How do we live in Babylon today? Just as the Babylonians? Or maintaining godly distinctiveness?

Imagine if you were dragged out of your home to serve a foreign dictator. Maybe you're given a new name to show his power over you, as it was for Daniel and his friends. Maybe you're put in compromising situations that challenge your faith. What example would you set? What would identify you? Would you partake of the "king's delicacies," as we find in the next verse in Daniel 1?

Notice: "But Daniel purposed in his heart that he *would*

Babylon is an archetype of civilization in opposition to God. In many ways every country is a continuation of the ancient Babylonian way.

not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself" (verse 8, emphasis added throughout). With God's help, Daniel and his three friends made it through this situation and worse difficulties to follow without giving in.

Daniel later foretold a more severe testing that would come to the Jewish people more than 400 years later under Greek Syrian rule (see Daniel 11:28-32). Some historical details of what happened can be found in apocryphal books, one of which states: "But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; *and they did die*" (1 Maccabees 1:62-63).

Not compromising on God's law in Babylon or successor kingdoms was serious business! You could be *put to death*. Daniel's strong devotion to biblical law came from a deep devotion to the God who gave it. Daniel's identity came from his God, not from Babylon. Does your identity come from your relationship with God, or from the world in which you live?

Contribute to society; be a good citizen

There are some elemental points we can glean from the life

of Daniel and his companions in Babylon. Note, for instance: "As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all *literature* and *wisdom*; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams" (Daniel 1:17).

Daniel and his three friends had an intelligent understanding of the language and literature of the Chaldeans (Daniel 1:4) and were able to judge wisely between what was true and what was false. And they did all this while living as part of the Babylonian society!

This shows that education outside of the Bible can be good—provided it does not *replace* biblical truth. Daniel had skill in Babylonian culture and literature. We see that God does not expect us to close ourselves off from the world and live in a commune or monastery (compare 1 Corinthians 5:9-12). Again, we are to live *in* the world, while not being *of* the world. We live *in* Babylon, while not conforming to it.

And here's more to this point. Jeremiah 29 instructs the Jews in Babylonian exile to live and work for the *good* of the pagan society in which they were immersed—yet without compromising on God's way. The Babylonian bureaucracy was hostile to the God of Daniel and his countrymen. But if they worked hard and set a godly example, they could have positive interaction and communication with the highest leaders in the empire.

The prophet Jeremiah lived at the same time as Daniel, although Jeremiah was around 20 years older. Here is what Jeremiah wrote from Jerusalem to Daniel and the other captives in Babylon:

"Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive—to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon . . .

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished."

"And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace . . . Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you" (Jeremiah 29:1, 4-8).

How do we live in Babylon? Jeremiah says to be a good citizen! Have families. Grow fruit trees and vegetables. Build homes. Don't break the law. Contribute to its peace. Don't follow false prophets who lead you away from God's instructions.

So, do we live out godly principles that are a blessing to the city in which we work, in which we go to school? Do you live like Daniel and his friends?

The Bible gives us solid, moral examples and instruction of how to live in Babylon—showing what it looks like to live faithfully in a religiously hostile world. Be a peaceful

contributor to society. Grow gardens, raise families, work hard!

Irrelevant Christians?

Today some claim to follow God but, in reality, live a life of cultural accommodation. In trying to become relevant they become *irrelevant* in representing God. We must instead stand for and live according to the truth even when doing so is hard.

We need to follow Daniel's courageous example. Instead of letting our friends, the media and the latest crisis determine our outlook, we need to let Scripture and God's Spirit determine it.

Furthermore, Daniel genuinely desired the best interests of his captors. He endeared himself to them with humble service and a heartfelt concern for their well-being. Yet he never joined in their wrong behavior and beliefs, going along to get along, which actually would have proven ultimately harmful to them and himself.

Here is a warning to you and me: When a church stops being a light in Babylon it becomes a fading church—it becomes irrelevant. It is no longer a witness as Jesus Christ said His disciples should be. Can you imagine how different the story of Daniel would have been if he decided it was not worth being a light in the king's court?

What is the solution? We must live like Daniel. Live a disciplined life. Daniel was a faithful witness of God's way—whether he was ruling in the king's court, or later stuck in the king's prison. Godly ethics are the solution.

We cannot afford to try to deconstruct biblical truth. We must be unwavering and uncompromising when it comes to God's commandments, including Sabbath-keeping. We must be a light. Daniel's faith was not a secret. It is not a life of secrecy. We talk about what we love.

Social scientists have shown that the moment a church abandons its orthodoxy, the moment it goes liberal, the moment it becomes morally ambivalent, is when it signs its death warrant.

Major battles we face in Babylon today

Look at some of the major battles we face in Babylon today.

Self is at the center of everything. There is a disproportionate sense of self-awareness and "me": *I am of the utmost importance. I can do anything I put my mind to. I have the most social media followers. "Like" me!*

One of the biggest goals of people today is to become famous.

We live in a time when everything comes to us immediately, quickly. *I want it now!* We get impatient at the microwave, at the elevator, on the freeway!

But what is the remedy? *God* should be at the center of your life, not yourself, not the wish for fame.

Another notion to resist is the idea that there is no absolute truth. Our culture today is amoral, leading to immorality. There is no right or wrong, so let's decide it for ourselves. It's that tree from the Garden of Eden again!

What is the solution? The ethics of God are not the ethics of Babylon. Don't be morally ambiguous. We need a godly, moral firmness.

Today's Babylon has an obsession with spectacle and noise. We've given ourselves to the great gods of entertainment and media, of fantasy, of Hollywood, of spectacle. We escape the chaos and pressure of life through entertainment and imagineering. Babylonians live a life that favors stadium-filled concerts, images, moving pictures and visuals rather than things of substance. The world, modern Babylon, is on a different trajectory than each of us should be.

It is better to have conflict with society around us than to have conflict with God and diminished faithfulness to Him. "In this world you will have tribulation," we are told (John 16:33). We cannot be neutral about our faith, but that is what many people prefer to be. People want to be part of the system, to become Babylonians.

Could the following be said of you, like the queen mother said to the new ruler in Babylon about Daniel?

Today some claim to follow God but in reality live a life of cultural accommodation. We must instead stand for and live according to the truth of God.

"There is a man in your kingdom *in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God*. And in the days of your [grand]father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your [grand]father—your [grand]father the king—made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers" (Daniel 5:11).

Daniel did not go with the Babylonian flow. No, he had the Spirit of the Holy God, and it was recognized by others. Is that Spirit recognized in you and me?

Daniel's God was seen as very different from the gods of the Babylonians. Daniel's God was from outside of creation—from the spirit realm. But Babylonian gods came from everything around them, from inside creation—from the river, from the trees, from nature. They worshipped the creation rather than the Creator! The Spirit of the Holy God was very different from the gods of Babylon.

We will not all face a den of lions, as Daniel did late in life under Persian rule. For us it may be more subtle. Perhaps it will be a gradual decline of faith and obedience. But we are reminded that even in the smallest of matters we must not be godless Babylonians.

Faithfulness and time with God

We must not partake of the "king's delicacies," as noted earlier, if they are in opposition to God's way. To put it in modern language, we cannot partake of the king's (our boss's) Christmas party, Halloween celebration or New Year's Eve revelry.

We must live *in* Babylon but not become ungodly Babylonians. What is the solution? How do we do it?

Do everything to the best of your ability. Be faithful even in the little things (Luke 16:10-11). Put your best into all you do.

As recorded in Luke 16, dishonesty, even in the smallest amount, leads to dishonesty in even greater portions. Dishonesty is directly opposed to godly truth.

Who's Behind Beyond Today?

Our character must line up with our God-given calling. Daniel's respect for God far outweighed his fear of what man could do to him.

If you don't make time for God, don't be surprised if your faith fails—or if it seems that God is distant.

Whether our relationship with God will fall apart depends on the time we give to Him—just like in a marriage. Do we read our Bible? Do we pray? If not, then of course God is not going to be fully real to us.

If we don't spend time with God, we will end up spending our time on something else—devoting our time to other aspects of life.

God was real to Daniel. He did pray—every day—even three times a day, as was his custom (Daniel 6:10).

What's the solution for us, then? We have to learn to discern God's voice among the multitude of voices constantly vying for our attention in Babylon. We are whatever we give ourselves to, whether to movies, music, gaming, imagineering, media, fantasy—or to truth. Whether to *the Word of God* or to *Babylon*.

Prayer is an antidote to drifting astray. The apostle Paul said, "Pray without ceasing, for this is the will of God" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). And successful prayer often comes from quality time reading, studying and meditating on Scripture. Scripture, a great teacher, is readily available. Don't blame God if you don't do your homework!


Uncompromising moral character

The narrative of Daniel is lasting testimony to the power of God in a dark hour of Judah's history. The faithfulness of Daniel and his friends shone bright in Babylon. Yet in every age, not just back then, God is looking for those whom He can use. We have to live God's way in everything.

The testimony of Daniel and these three young men is a source of strength to every one of us—we who are now living in *end-time Babylon*. Like Daniel, we too must be men and women of prayer and uncompromising moral character, whom God will soon honor with eternal life in His Kingdom.

Daniel and his companions represented the testimony of God, serving as His true witnesses, even in dark hours of Jewish apostasy and divine judgment. The noble example of these young men serves to encourage all of us in our great trials in the time of the end.

And of course, the Bible gives us so many more men and women of faith to emulate. Look, finally, at this example of two of Christ's apostles: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Is it obvious that you have been with Jesus? Is it obvious that you are a man or a woman of God? If not, make it so! 



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.

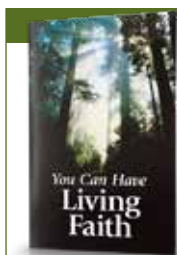
Through the pages of this magazine, on the airwaves of our TV show, and in dozens of helpful study guides (also free), we show the biblical answers to the dilemmas that have defied human solution and threaten our very survival.

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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THE GREAT TRIBULATION

Welcome to the 10th lesson in the “Bible Prophecy and You” series! Many people have heard of the biblical Great Tribulation. But much of what one hears these days is misinformation and wrong ideas. It’s important to learn exactly what the Bible teaches. There are many Bible prophecies of the end-time Great Tribulation, and this lesson can only serve as an introduction to the subject.

The prophesied suffering is heartbreaking to contemplate, but God will allow it for mankind’s long-range good. God as a loving Father disciplines His disobedient children. God’s desire is for all mankind to eventually repent and become part of His family and Kingdom!

Those who are already God’s obedient children need not fear. They know that God can protect them, and that even if He allows them to die, they will soon be resurrected to be in His Kingdom!

What a blessing that we need not be in the dark about the future! God tells us what to expect and how to be prepared.

So, just what is the Great Tribulation? What nations and people are prophesied to suffer through that time? What is God’s purpose for it? We shall see this and much more!

What will the Great Tribulation be like?

During World War II, the Japanese took more than 130,000 prisoners, and the death rate was 27 percent! In an article titled “To Hell and Back” in the May 23, 2009, issue of *World* magazine, author Edward Pitts describes some of the horrific experiences related by his grandfather, U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Edward Treski:

“For two years, three months, and 15 days he survived as a prisoner in three Japanese internment camps spread around the Philippines—places where the punished found themselves hanging by their arms at the camp gate or beaten with electric cattle prods while standing in water . . . Places where prisoners would hide the dead to get extra food rations until the smell

became too great and where the decomposing bodies would rise out of their graves every rainy season demanding to be reburied.

“Then, in the late summer of 1944 . . . [he] found his neck tethered by ropes to hundreds of other emaciated prisoners . . . [with guards ordering] these conjoined barefooted men to march.” Many exhausted men died along the way.

On reaching the port of Davao, “750 POWs were crammed into the hull of what survivors later called a ‘hell ship.’” Treski said they were “packed like sardines . . . It was like a furnace down there, no water, no facilities at all, nothing.”

Lee continues: “Guards used a rope to lower a five-gallon can of water and peelings of rotten tropical vegetables to the starving prisoners . . . ‘They’d send a tin can down there for waste [Treski added], and I believe it was the same can they put the food and water in . . .’ The prisoners of war managed to spend 14 days in that foul and steamy hold.” Most thought they would either starve to death or suffocate from lack of air.

The article goes on to tell about Treski’s amazing escape, which he believed to be miraculous.

Sadly, the suffering of POWs in WWII—the starvation, diseases, torture, injuries and executions—gives us an idea of the kinds of misery that many will suffer during what the Bible calls the Great Tribulation.

Know this: God can and will protect His people

Before we focus on the frightening events of the end time, let’s be assured of God’s desire and power to protect His followers! Countless times, God has miraculously protected people from all kinds of dangers.

Even when God allows His children to die, He often has protected them from other trials, such as captivity, torture or prolonged suffering.

Sometimes the way that God protects is to warn His people to “flee” from imminent danger to a place where He will keep them safe (Matthew 10:23). God told Lot to get out of Sodom before He destroyed it. God told Mary’s husband Joseph in

a dream to take her and the infant Jesus and “flee to Egypt” (Matthew 2:13).

The term *Great Tribulation* is found in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse—the prophecy He gave on the Mount of Olives. Jesus told His disciples (including *future* disciples): “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place [explained in a future lesson] . . . then let those who are in Judea *flee* to the mountains . . . For then there will be *great tribulation*” (Matthew 24:15-16, 21, emphasis added throughout). The term is also used in Revelation 7:14.

We find a prophecy about God protecting a large part of His Church during the Great Tribulation in Revelation 12:14: “But the woman [symbolic here of God’s Church] was given two wings of a great eagle [divine help—Exodus 19:4], that she might fly [flee] into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time [3½ years], from the presence of the serpent [Satan—Revelation 12:9].” However, God will allow some members of His Church to be persecuted and even martyred (verse 17).

Note that the theory of a secret “rapture” of saints to heaven before the Tribulation *is not biblical!* The saints will be protected in a “place” in “the wilderness”—on the earth, not in heaven. For a thorough analysis of the rapture theory, type in “rapture” at ucg.org/learnmore.

Christ was evidently referring to the time of the Great Tribulation when He promised certain members of His Church,

The Great Tribulation is how Jesus described the worst time of global suffering—ever. It will drag humanity to the very brink of extinction.

“Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from *the hour of trial* which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10).

There definitely is a positive side to all the end-time calamities that will come on the earth. Not only will they bring many people to repentance, but they let us know that Christ will soon return, resurrect the saints, His faithful followers from this age, and establish the Kingdom of God on earth!

► What is the Great Tribulation?

“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake . . .

“For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be . . .

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matthew 24:9, 21, 29).

Many people have suffered “tribulation,” meaning great affliction, trial or distress. But in speaking of the end time, Jesus said, “For then there will be *great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be*” (Matthew 24:21; see a parallel account in Mark 13:19).

Therefore, the Great Tribulation is how Jesus described

history’s *worst-ever* time of widespread tribulation. Other prophecies that refer to this time of *unprecedented* suffering are Jeremiah 30:7, Ezekiel 5:9 and Daniel 12:1.

Jesus also said that by the time it ends, “If those days had not been cut short [by God from running their course], *no one would survive*, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:22, New International Version). This verse not only shows that the Great Tribulation will be terrible, but it points to the time we are living in now as the end time. Only since the invention of today’s nuclear, chemical and biological weapons has it been possible *for mankind to utterly destroy itself*.

The Great Tribulation is also described in many other Old and New Testament prophecies.

► Is the Great Tribulation directed toward Israel (this name, as we saw in the previous lesson, often referring in prophecy to the modern American and British-descended peoples) as well as Judah (the Jewish people, particularly the modern Jewish nation called Israel)?

“Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s trouble, but he shall be saved out of it” (Jeremiah 30:7).

The answer is *yes*. We see here that it is “the time of Jacob’s [Israel’s] trouble.” These people will be “saved out of it”—that is, after going through it.

In our previous lesson, we learned that the prophetic descendants of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, are the peoples who settled most prominently in Great Britain and later the United States of America and other nations of British descent—Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of other

countries, such as South Africa.

In Luke’s account of the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus said, “For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written [by the prophets]” (Luke 21:22, NIV). In verse 23, who is “this people”? Jesus probably meant descendants of both Israel and Judah.

He went on to say, “They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles [non-Israelites] until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (verse 24, NIV). The reference to Jerusalem shows that the punishment will include the land of Judah, the modern Jewish state of Israel.

► Why will God punish the Israelite people?

“Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess.

“Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’

“For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which

I set before you this day? . . .

“Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

“When you beget children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land, and act corruptly and make a carved image in the form of anything, and do evil in the sight of the LORD your God to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed.

“And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you . . . When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter

days, when you turn to the LORD your God and obey His voice (for the LORD your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8, 23-27, 30-31).

God chose Israel to be His model nation to demonstrate to the rest of the world the goodness and wisdom of God’s laws. But with this understanding and other blessings comes a *stricter accountability*. The British and American people have been failing terribly in God’s mission as they increasingly ignore the Bible and reject God’s laws and moral standards. Therefore, as God promised, He will punish them. That punishment will be the Great Tribulation.

Prophecy indicates that the Tribulation will motivate many people to repent of their sins and turn to God. If you end up in captivity “in the latter days,” you can turn to God for mercy. “From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 4:29-30).

God will begin punishing the rest of the world beginning about one year before the return of Christ. That period will be the first part of “the day of the Lord” (Acts 2:20), which will be explained in a future lesson.

► Is the Great Tribulation also a time of persecution of true Christians?

“But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake” (Luke 21:12).

“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake” (Matthew 24:9).



It’s never too late to repent and surrender your life to God. No matter what your sins, or what kind of situation you may find yourself in.

“And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Mark 13:13).

In the Olivet Prophecy (recorded in these three chapters, Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21), Jesus was speaking to His disciples (and *future* disciples) about the persecution to come.

It is the time when a world religious power will “persecute the saints of the Most High” (Daniel 7:25). In league with the religious leader will be the “Beast” of Revelation 13:7 who will “make war with the saints and . . . overcome them” (see also Revelation 17:6). That religious leader and “the beast” will be explained in a future lesson.

As was explained above, God will miraculously protect a great number of His people—especially among those who are *spiritually close to God*. Remember that it is never too late to repent and surrender your life to God. No matter what kind of suffering you may find yourself in, God says: “Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:12-13).

► Does God use enemy nations as instruments of judgment?

“Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation” (Isaiah 10:5).

God used Assyria as “the rod of [His] anger” to conquer and deport the rebellious house of Israel. Later, God used Babylon as His agent to conquer the increasingly sinful people of Judah and take them captive (Jeremiah 20:4). These punishments serve as types or models of the end-time punishments.

Britain and America and their allies suffered greatly through two world wars against Germany and her allies. It seems that God was giving Britain and America a strong

warning about their sins while at the same time mercifully and miraculously intervening to give them victory. According to Bible prophecy, the time is coming when the American and British peoples will be defeated in warfare, with the survivors going into captivity.

The consequences for continued disobedience to God will be severe. “The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies . . . You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours; for they shall go into captivity . . . The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand, a nation of fierce countenance, which does not respect the elderly nor show favor to the young” (Deuteronomy 28:25, 41, 49-50).

► Does Satan instigate the beginning of the Great Tribulation?

“Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time. Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child” (Revelation 12:12-13).

Satan not only hates Christ’s followers, but he also has a special hatred for the descendants of Israel ever since God chose them to be His “holy people” to “keep all His commandments” as a role model for all other nations. The “woman” Satan persecutes can symbolize both God’s Church and physical Israel.

► How long before Christ’s return does the Great Tribulation begin?

“But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is

God can easily be crowded out of our lives, not only by sinful things but also by just too many other things taking up our time.

nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent” (Revelation 12:14).

We took note of this verse earlier. The prophetic phrase “a time [one year] and times [two years] and half a time [½ year]” refers to 3½ years. We are told in Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 that the “saints” (“the holy people”) will be persecuted for 3½ years. A large part of the Church (“the woman”) will be divinely protected and “nourished” during that same time.

Apparently simultaneously, the gentiles, led by “the Beast,” will “tread the holy city [Jerusalem] underfoot for forty-two months” (Revelation 11:2; 13:4-5). At the same time, God’s “two witnesses . . . will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days” (Revelation 11:3).

All these phrases mean the same length of time—3½ years.

► Does the Bible prophesy a “second Exodus” for the survivors of captivity?

“It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His

people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, from Pathros and Cush, from Elam and Shinar, from Hamath and the islands of the sea.

“He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. Also the envy of Ephraim shall depart, and the adversaries of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.

“But they shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines toward the west; together they shall plunder the people of the East; they shall lay their hand on Edom and Moab; and the people of Ammon shall obey them.

“The LORD will utterly destroy the tongue of the Sea of Egypt; with His mighty wind He will shake His fist over the River [the Euphrates to the north], and strike it in the seven streams, and make men cross over dryshod. There will be a highway for the remnant of His people who will be left from Assyria, as it was for Israel in the day that he came up from the land of Egypt” (Isaiah 11:11-16).

Not everyone who is taken into captivity will die. Evidently, millions who turn to God and survive will be invited by Jesus Christ, shortly after His return, to His holy city of Jerusalem (see also Isaiah 27:12-13 and 51:10-11). These scriptures portray a massive relocation of survivors. This “second exodus” will far exceed and overshadow the famous Exodus from Egypt (Jeremiah 16:14-15; 23:7-8). And the Bible has many other scriptures about this joyous future march out of captivity to the Promised Land!

Apply Now


Jesus warned: “But ever be on your guard, so that your hearts may not be loaded down with self-indulgence, drunkenness, and worldly worries, and that day, like a trap, catch you unawares” (Luke 21:34, Williams New Testament).

God can easily be crowded out of our lives, not only by sinful things but also by just too many *other* things—even good things—taking up our time. In the parable of the sower, Jesus warned

about too many “cares of this world” and “desires for other things” and “pleasures of life” (Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14). When someone has too many irons in the fire, it’s time to *simplify!*

How about you? While this is on your mind, this will be a good time to reexamine your priorities. Make Matthew 6:33 (“seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness”) the overall goal of your life, and then make all your subgoals compatible with that.

To reorder your life, start right now by writing down several changes you want to make to your priorities and activities. Review your plan at least once a day during the coming week. You’ll be encouraged as you see the evidence of real spiritual growth!

And to learn more about the earth-shattering events that will shake this world to its core in the coming years, be sure to read our free study guide *Are We Living in the Time of the End?* 



Stuck With Christ on Golgotha

The thief on the cross came to vital understanding. In being “stuck” with Christ, we come to know Him.

by Robin Webber

Have you ever been stuck in traffic during rush hour? You have places to go and people to meet and you find yourself going nowhere! You know the feeling. Life slows to a crawl. Minutes seem like hours.

Have you ever been stuck in an elevator that’s not moving for just a short time? A lot begins to go through your mind. Have you ever been stuck with a dinner bill that you were going to pay for invited guests only to find that when you reach for your wallet it’s not there?

We’ve all been stuck at times. We survive these momentary inconveniences and move on. But there’s a far more serious matter of being stuck that has the power to dramatically change one’s life forever.

The word “stuck,” the past or past participle of “stick,” is an interesting term. It can mean to be stabbed or pierced—physically or emotionally. It can also mean to be affixed or restrained somewhere or in some situation, unable to proceed or move freely.

Keep this in mind as we proceed to what is essential to grasp if we are to heed Christ’s call of “Follow Me.”

The great question demanding an answer

The great question asked by Jesus of every disciple is a simple yet demanding inquiry: “Who do you say that I am?” (Mathew 16:15). Humanity in general has either ignored or been stuck on that question ever since.

Even so, He seeks *your* answer and not someone else’s—*your* answer alone! For His disciples, it’s a question that begs our answer not once but repeatedly in life, as we grow in faith and understanding of the Son of God and His vital, personal role in each and all of our lives. And we begin to become *unstuck* by comprehending what was stuck on a knoll outside Jerusalem on the day of Passover almost 2,000 years ago.

It’s here at this spot called Golgotha (or “Place of a Skull”—John 19:17) that our eyes open wide to the horrific sight of three crucified men. Crucifixion was intended to bring not immediate death, but an agonizingly slow and gruesome demise to any who dared challenge Rome.

Stuck in the fellowship of death

It’s here, then, we are stuck in view of three men stuck by nails to wooden beams and stuck together suspended above the ground. They are stuck together in this unique fellowship of death—up close and personal.

We zero in on the man in the middle, the target of the taunting insults of the religious authorities in the gathered crowd. It’s Jesus of Nazareth, crucified between two criminals (Luke 23:33).

Even here in His last human moments, through bloodied sweat and tears of pain, Jesus allows us to overhear a conversation among these unlikely comrades stuck in this fellowship of death. Why? It will reveal something special about Him central to our ability to heed His invitation of “Follow Me.” Let’s listen in.

“Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him saying, ‘If you are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today [that is, ‘Be sure of what I’m telling you today’] you will be with Me in Paradise” (verses 39-43).

Here Christ was stuck between two contrasting messages. In one ear came a message of self-preservation tinged with mocking skepticism. It followed the jeering condemnation of the crowd. In the other ear came clear-headed words of truth and understanding. What contrast! And from such an unlikely source.

This man was honest about his own life and what he and his companion in crime deserved as punishment. He was stuck with realization of His own crime and its consequences. Moreover, he understood that this Man next to him had done nothing worthy of death, even recognizing that, somehow, Jesus would yet reign as King. Perhaps he had overheard Jesus say under labored breath, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (verse 34).

The righteous King of Israel didn’t deserve this fate. Yet here He was stuck between them. Why such innocence between such bookends of guilt? The Spirit of God had guided the prophet Isaiah 700 years before to write, “He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors [or lawbreakers]” (Isaiah 53:12).

The great awakening

Something was happening here! An awakening was occurring even as this man’s life was ebbing. He was stuck on a singular truth, that Christ didn’t belong there while he himself did and that there was something beyond this moment Christ might beckon him towards—His Kingdom!

His sincere gut instinct about this Man wearing a crown of thorns is given illustration in the words of Dorothy Sayers in *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged* (1938): “He had ‘a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly’ . . .” Many found this unbearable, Sayers continuing, “. . . and officialdom felt that the established



Even as this man's life was ebbing, he was stuck on a singular truth—*Christ* didn't belong there but *he* did!

order of things would be more secure without Him. *So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.*"

Just imagine the encouragement this man with a checkered past brought to Jesus at this juncture. We often center on Simon of Cyrene being a fellow cross-bearer to lift the weighty burden from Christ's gruesome march to death (Luke 23:26). But here in this moment we are stuck with one more human note of encouragement from an unlikely vessel to the dying Son of Man—reassurance that someone "gets it"!

What did that mean to Christ? I would suggest *everything!* Here was a person succinctly communicating to Jesus, who as a human being would desire vindication, that He didn't deserve to be there. These short remarks expressed the truth of Isaiah 53:8 about the Messiah suffering injustice in being sentenced to death.

The thief declared a great truth—that Jesus was innocent and that He would yet reign! And in turn, Jesus saw something special below the bloody grime and sins of one man. He saw a heart that could be worked with in His timing and way on the other side of death. At the lowest ebb of life, He gave assurance of the opportunity extended in His call of "Follow Me." Essentially, *Follow Me into death and I will meet you in life—a new, resurrected life in a future paradise.*

To know Him!

Having shared this account, why should you consider spending time stuck with Christ on Golgotha? Why is this so vital to accepting Jesus' invitation of "Follow Me"?

The apostle Paul puts it this way in sharing his sincerest hopes to "be found in Him [Christ] . . . *that I may know Him* and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death . . ." (Philippians 3:9-10).

To know Him, as stated here, is to know that He was not dragged into Jerusalem to be crucified, but that *He willingly*

walked into Jerusalem for you and me (Matthew 16:21; John 10:17-18).

To know Him is to know that religiosity alone is no sure cure leading to salvation! (see Matthew 7:21-23; 23:28). Just think of so many religious people of that day belittling Him as He hung there dying. No! It begins with a personal relationship with our Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ in responding to the calling from above (John 6:44).

To know Him is to know that "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26) and that it's never too late in one's life to acknowledge His presence and ask for His strength to see us through. It's never too late to start that conversation. Just ask Samson. Just ask this criminal.

To know Him is to know that Christ enters at our low points in life's chapters more so than the mountain peaks. After all, He plainly stated, "The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

To know Him in being stuck with Him on Golgotha is to grasp the proper verdict regarding oneself and essentially admit like the nameless criminal: "I'm guilty—and He is not! I deserve all that has been thrown at me that I've tried to duck all my life."

To know Him is to echo King David's confession: "Against You, You only, have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4). And sin I did! (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8-10).

To know Him in the greatest sense is to be stuck with Christ on Golgotha and know deep down in our heart that God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

To know Him is to know that He didn't come to make good men better, but to make dying men live for the first time. Even the apostle Peter had to come to see this about himself, as must we all. Remember that Peter also looked eyes with Christ and came to fully grasp what he had done just as the cock crowed the third time (Luke 22:61).

To know Him is to know there is not enough money in the whole world to pay for His sacrifice or purchase His blood. That's why God says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

To know Him is to know God always knows where you are and knows your name even if no one else knows you exist. Just ask the nameless man who shared time and heart as he was stuck on Golgotha with Christ.

To know Him is to know that our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ see things as if they already are (see Romans 4:17). Before Jesus died that afternoon, He made a promise to a man stuck on Golgotha with Him. He is the same One who declares the end from the beginning and emphatically states, "I will do all My pleasure" (Isaiah 46:10).

Perhaps it's time to get unstuck from this restless world around us and the restless life inside you and get stuck on a basic principle found in Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

It is in such stillness in which we have nowhere to go and no one to turn to that we can contemplate what it means to be stuck with Christ on Golgotha! **BT**



When Respect Is Gone, Rebellion Prevails

Thanks for the reminder to pray for our leaders! Sometimes we just have to remember to pull back from this world and take a deep breath. Great article!

From the Internet

100 Years of Communism: The Failed Revolution

Thank you for the superb article on communism and the Soviet Union. Yours is a magazine full of information and its connection to the Bible.

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Subscriber in Arizona

Prisoner appreciates *Beyond Today*

I want to thank all of you at *Beyond Today*, especially the wonderful staff you have. Thanks for making sure I receive every one of my issues right on time. You are sure making a big difference here at the McConnell unit. I know for a fact because when I first started getting this wonderful magazine I was one of the few guys who was getting the magazine. Now that's all I see—just about everyone is reading it. So thank God for your wonderful magazine. Thanks for the hard work, and let's not forget the folks who are responsible in donating to make sure us guys in prison can have our subscriptions in here. Thank you all and God bless.

Subscriber in prison in Texas

Searching for church congregation

I attended the Catholic Church for many years before falling into the belief that it doesn't matter if I attend church. I see now that I am commanded to join with other believers for worship. Is there a United Church of God near me? I am truly interested in finding out more of what God wants from me, and how I can better please Him.

From the Internet

I am in Nairobi, Kenya. Do you have a local congregation in Kenya? After studying your website, I believe the seventh-day Sabbath is the true day of worship according to God's Word. Blessings to you.

Reader in Kenya

Thanks so much for the contact. We do have congregations in Kenya, and indeed in many places in the world. Interested readers can find a complete list at ucg.org/congregations.

Sending donations in thanks

Thank you so much for your wonderful magazine. I do enjoy the magazine and appreciate all you are doing to spread the gospel. Please find enclosed my small donation towards the good work you do. Thank you most sincerely.

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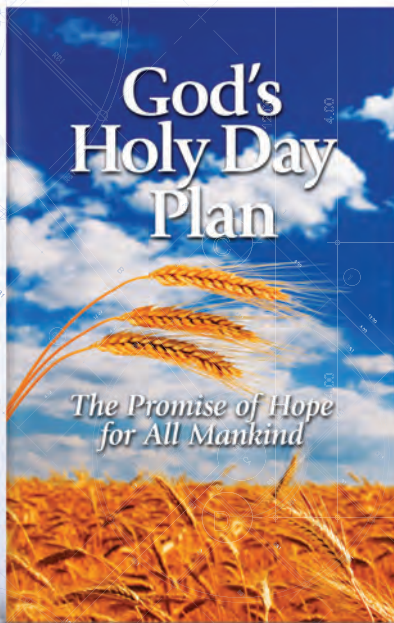
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