

BEYOND TODAY®

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Scott Ashley
Managing editor

What Would Jesus Do?

“**W**hat would Jesus do?” You’ve likely heard this catchphrase since this question has been popular in religious circles in recent decades. It’s shown up on countless signs, shirts, bracelets, posters, jewelry and books—often in the abbreviated form of “WWJD?”

It’s a great question and one we should always consider.

A friend of mine offers a variation on that question that is perhaps even more incisive: “What *did* Jesus do?”

I like this question better, because while any of us can speculate as to what Jesus might or might not do in a given situation, it’s a little harder to rationalize our answers when we have a solid factual account of *what Jesus actually did* as recorded in the Gospels and other parts of the Bible.

So again, I like this question better. Speculation is outweighed by solid facts.

Every year around this time I think about these two questions because the Bible clearly records Jesus giving His followers a specific “Do this,” and then He showed them by example what it was He wanted them to do.

Yet in spite of this example and instruction, many who claim to be following Him *don’t* do what He said to do, or do it differently, or do something completely unrecognizable from what He clearly said to do. Why is that?

Luke 22 describes what Jesus Christ did on His last night on earth with His apostles: “When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, ‘With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God’” (verses 14-16).

Notice what Jesus called this observance. It was *the Passover*, the annual observance God had revealed to the Israelites some 15 centuries earlier. Although Christ would now add a new significance and dimension, it wasn’t a wholly new institution. And it was not to be observed whenever or however anyone wanted; it would be kept on one specific night a year following the instructions He laid down for His followers.

Continuing with Luke’s account of that evening: “And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; *do this* in remembrance of Me.’ Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you’” (verses 19-20).

Unleavened bread and wine had long been a customary part of the Passover celebration, but now Jesus gave them

new meaning and significance as symbols of His sacrifice and suffering.

More than 20 years later the apostle Paul echoed these words when he wrote to the church in Corinth (a group that, by the way, seems to have had far more gentiles than Jews):

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; *do this* in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. *This do*, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

So Jesus instructed His apostles on what to do regarding this one evening a year, and some two decades later the apostle Paul repeated these instructions to a mostly gentile congregation. Both accounts are explicit that Jesus said to “*Do this*,” and that Christians are to do this as a commemoration of His astounding sacrifice.


So why don’t people do this in observance of Passover today? Why do they change Jesus’ instructions? Why do they substitute other practices and customs nowhere commanded in the Bible—such as sunrise services, Easter egg hunts and fluffy bunnies

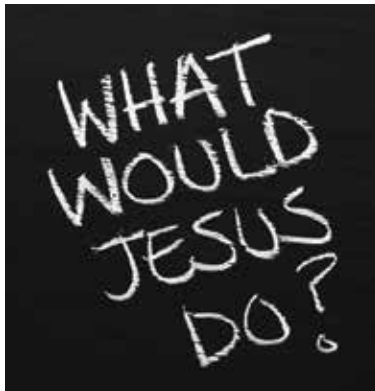
with colorful baskets—in place of what He commanded His followers to do?

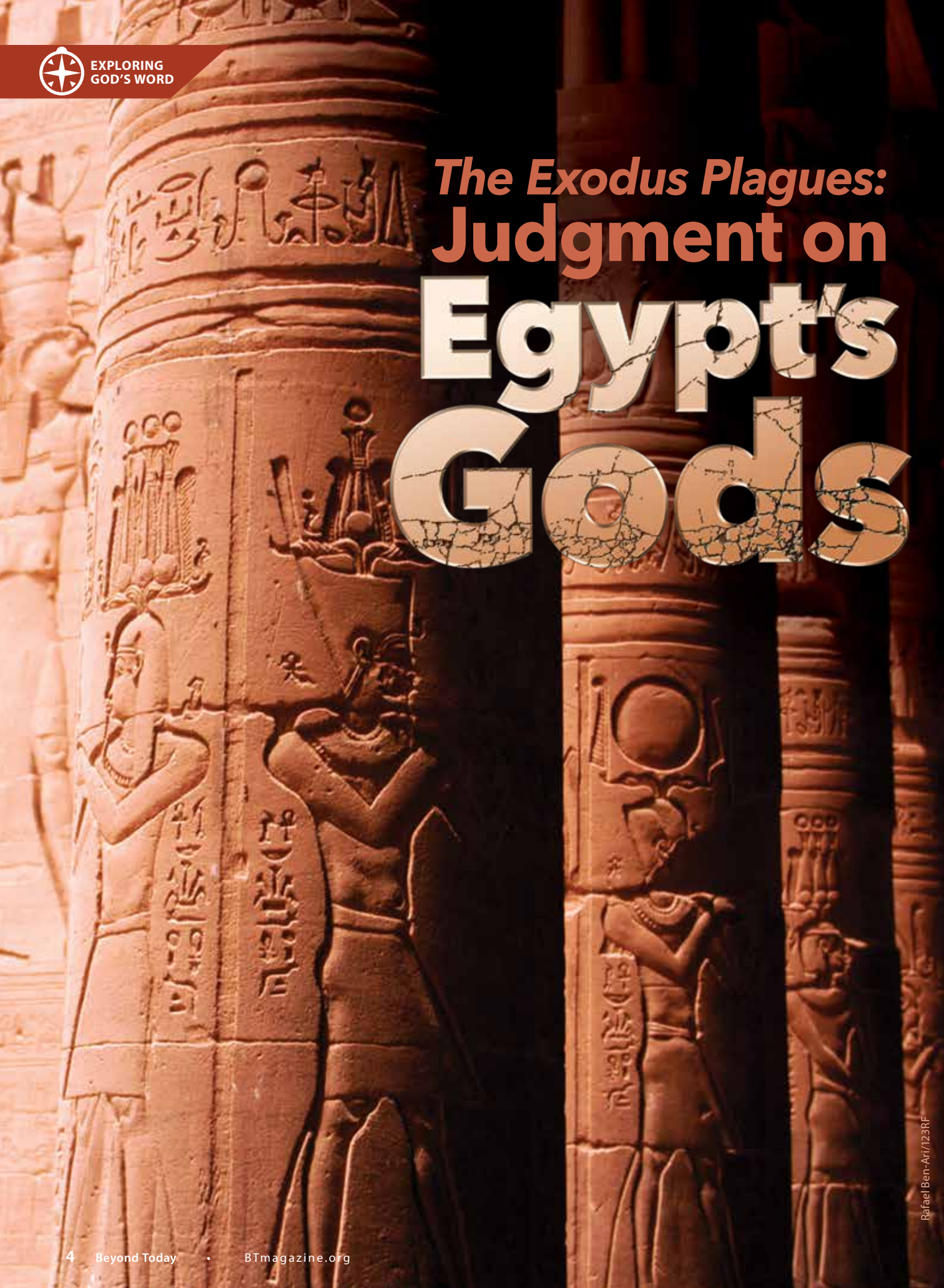
Jesus never commanded such things, nor did the early Church. The one time “Easter” appears in the Bible in some translations (Acts 12:4), it’s a blatant mistranslation of the Greek word *pascha*, which always means *Passover*. He never told His followers to have a special celebration of His resurrection. But He clearly commanded them to annually commemorate His sacrificial death in the Passover bread and wine.

This year I’d encourage you to ask yourself these two all-important questions—What *would* Jesus do, and what *did* Jesus do?

The articles in this issue will help you understand the answers to these questions. And then there’s another important question: *What will you do about it?*

We’re here to help you understand what Jesus did, and how He expects us to follow His instructions and example! Contact us or one of our ministers at the office nearest you (details are on page 39 of this issue). We hope to hear from you! 





The Exodus Plagues:
**Judgment on
Egypt's
Gods**

Many of us are probably familiar with the basics of the story of ancient Israel's Exodus from enslavement in Egypt. To briefly recap, the Israelites migrated to Egypt in the time of Joseph, 17 years before the death of the patriarch Jacob, whom God had renamed Israel. Initially they enjoyed the favor of the Egyptians because of all that Joseph had done as the pharaoh's vizier or prime minister. But as the years passed, that relationship changed. The Egyptians came to view the Israelites as a threat.

In time a new pharaoh came to power who enslaved the Israelites. Conditions grew so bad that the Egyptians began killing Hebrew male babies to prevent the Israelites from outnumbering the Egyptians.

During this time God raised up a deliverer named Moses. He was saved at birth and grew up as a member of the Egyptian royal family. But after killing an Egyptian, he fled from Egypt to the land of Midian, where, 40 years later, God spoke to him at the burning bush and sent him back to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from slavery.

In Exodus 7:1-5 God told Moses that He would do three things:

1. He would bring the Israelites out of Egypt,
2. He would do it "by great judgments," and
3. He would do it in a way that "the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD"—the true God.

Each plague was a direct challenge to one or more Egyptian gods. The true God would use these events to unmask the false gods of Egypt!

In Exodus 12:12 God adds that He was doing something else very important: "Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment." So the judgments God would carry out would be, on a certain level, against the Egyptian gods. In doing this He would teach a lesson to both the Egyptians and the Israelites, who by now had been in Egypt for a number of generations and had drifted far from the religion of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They had become thoroughly immersed in a corrupt Egyptian culture and religion.

Egyptian culture was very idolatrous, with a multitude of gods and goddesses. Many of these were assumed to take the form of animals, so the Egyptians considered bulls, cows, rams, cats, crocodiles, cobras, frogs and various insects and birds sacred. Note some of these creatures in the depictions of Egyptian deities accompanying this article.

Each of the plagues God sent was a direct challenge to one or more of the gods and goddesses of Egypt. And while the Egyptians would've seen such things as locusts and biting insects before, what made these plagues unique is that God *divinely intensified* these plagues and brought them on the Egyptians *at a time of His choosing*. So the plagues were much worse than they normally would've been, and they came exactly when God through Moses said they would happen to show that God was the one behind them.

So let's notice each plague and then see some of the gods or goddesses the true God was executing judgment against. We'll see what the true God did to teach a lesson to both the Egyptians and the Israelites.

The first plague—waters turn to blood

The first plague was directed against the Nile River, the life and heart of Egypt. Egypt was a desert country, and its economy and livelihood depended on the Nile. Its crops were irrigated by the Nile, and its fields depended on fertile soil washed in by the river. The Nile was also the primary "highway" for the country—much of its trade and commerce depended on it.

So what happened to this lifeblood of the nation? Let's read about it in Exodus 7:19-20: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, 'Say to Aaron [Moses' brother who accompanied him], 'Take your rod and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their streams, over their rivers, over their ponds, and over all their pools of water, *that they may become blood*. And there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in buckets of wood and pitchers of stone.'"

"And Moses and Aaron did so, just as the LORD commanded. So he lifted up the rod and struck the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants. *And all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood*" (emphasis added throughout).

While this plague was primarily directed against the Nile River, it went beyond that. All other water sources were affected, including irrigation streams and pools and even water stored in pitchers and buckets in people's houses.

This was a terrible disaster for the Egyptians. The whole lifeblood of the country was poisoned and undrinkable. And if that weren't bad enough, *"the fish that were in the river died*, the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink the water of the river. So there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt" (verse 21).

In the story of Israel's Exodus from slavery in Egypt, God sent devastating plagues on the Egyptians. And there's much more to these plagues than you probably realize!

by Scott Ashley and Mario Seiglie

This was a complete catastrophe. The Egyptians' supply of water for drinking, bathing and washing was now a toxic mess. The fish, one of their major food sources, were wiped out. This was *utterly devastating* to the country.

So how was this a judgment against the Egyptian gods? Because the Nile was so important to the Egyptians, they worshipped several gods who were responsible for watching over it. The great god Khnum, usually represented as a human male with a ram's head, was viewed as the giver and guardian of the Nile River.

Another god, Hapi, spirit of the Nile, was credited with the annual Nile flood that brought in thousands of tons of fresh topsoil to refertilize the land every year. He was also honored as god of fishes, birds and marshes, which is why he was often depicted with marsh plants on his head. Also linked to the Nile floodwaters were the gods Sodpet and Satet.

One of Egypt's trinity of greatest gods was Osiris, god of the underworld. The Egyptians viewed the Nile River as his bloodstream—and now it was literally like blood! You can imagine the horror and feelings of abandonment of the Egyptians as they looked on the formerly beautiful, powerful and life-sustaining river that was now a giant stinking cesspool with tons of dead and rotting fish lining the shores. This struck also at Hatmehit, guardian goddess of fish and fishermen.

These great gods of Egypt proved powerless to prevent this great plague on the Nile. They were shown to be nothing compared to the God of Israel!

A God of judgment

Why did God start with a plague on the Nile? And why did He choose a

plague of blood? It's because *He is a God of judgment and justice.*

The Egyptians took thousands of tiny helpless Israelite babies and tossed them into the Nile to drown or to feed the crocodiles and fish (Exodus 1:22). The Egyptians had sought the blood of the Hebrews, and God essentially responded, "If you want blood, I'll give you blood to drink."

That's why God chose the Nile, and that's why He chose to turn it to blood—*because He's a God of judgment and justice.* We see an important lesson in this. God may delay His judgment, but there comes a time when He delays no more. And when He decides it's time to exact justice, *vengeance is His.*

Because the Egyptians had shown no mercy in brutally enslaving and oppressing the Israelites, and attempting genocide against them, God brought severe judgment on Egypt and its false gods.

The second plague—frogs

The next plague was that of frogs, described in the first part of Exodus 8. Large numbers of frogs would not have been unusual, because the Nile had plenty of marshes that were a natural breeding ground for frogs. But this plague was different.

"And the LORD spoke to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Let My people go, that they may serve Me. But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all your territory with frogs. So the river shall bring forth

frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into your house, into your bedroom, on your bed, into the houses of your servants, on your people, into your ovens, and into your kneading bowls" (verses 1-3).

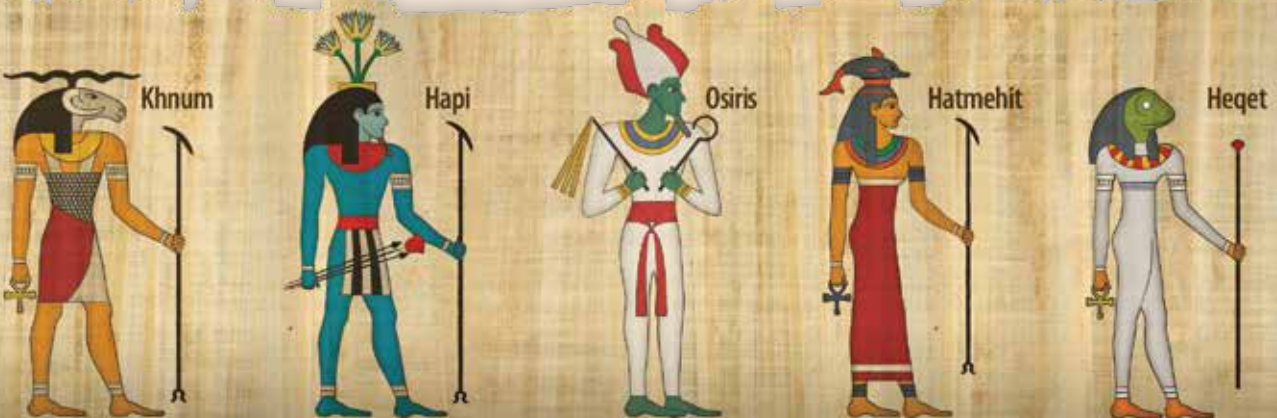
Frogs were considered a manifes-



tation of the goddess Heqet, goddess of birth and wife of the creator of the world. Heqet was depicted with the head of a frog and the body of a woman. Also, the court of Hapi, mentioned above, included crocodile gods and frog goddesses. And the primordial gods Nun, Kek and Heh were each depicted as a man with a frog's head.

Frogs were viewed as sacred in Egypt because they lived in two worlds—in water and on land. They were considered so sacred that even accidentally stepping on one could be punished by death.

Notice two great ironies here. Heqet was supposed to be the goddess who controls birth, but in this plague literally millions and millions of frogs were overflowing the land—the frog birth rate was obviously out of control! And accidentally killing one by stepping on it was punishable by death, yet how could



that be avoided when the ground was everywhere covered with a slimy, croaking mass of frogs? There were frogs on the ground, frogs in the houses, frogs in their beds, frogs in their cooking ovens and frogs in their bowls.

The Egyptians literally *could not walk* without stepping on frogs and squashing them. But in so doing they were violating their own laws and sentencing themselves to death for offending the goddess Heqet and these other frog deities! Finally the people had to go out to gather them into great mounds of decaying, stinking frogs—so much for their

and fruit and vegetables, it brought forth itching, biting *lice*. And their god Geb was shown to be powerless to prevent it!

This infestation can also be seen as a slap at the Egyptian gods in general, as they were unable to withstand it. Egyptians invoked Har-pa-khered (Horus in child form) to ward off dangerous creatures and Imhotep as god of medicinal healing as well as other healing gods, but there was no relief. Pharaoh too was considered a god, as we will consider more later, yet he was personally afflicted with the lice.

It's interesting too how this affected the

Because of the lice, Egyptian priests could no longer serve their gods. They *couldn't even go into the temples*. God was again showing them exactly who is in charge!

sacred animal! Here God showed that He was far more powerful than all these so-called gods!

The third plague—lice

The third plague, lice, is found in Exodus 8:16-17: "So the LORD said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, "Stretch out your rod, and strike the dust of the land, so that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.'" And they did so. For Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod and struck the dust of the earth, and it became lice on man and beast. All the dust of the land became lice throughout all the land of Egypt."

Which god of Egypt was now being judged? This plague was perhaps directed in some measure at Geb, the god of the earth. Egyptians gave offerings to Geb for the bounty of the land—but in this case, rather than the land bringing forth crops

priests of the gods of Egypt. The Greek historian Herodotus, who traveled to ancient Egypt, tells us that the Egyptian priests had to perform many cleanliness rituals to serve in their role as priests. Some of these were specifically to avoid being infected with lice, which would prevent them from carrying out their religious duties in service to their gods.

But now the presence of these lice meant that the Egyptian priests could no longer serve their gods. They *couldn't even go into the temples* to lead the worship of the Egyptian gods because they were now considered unsuitable to perform their rituals! So this was a blow not only against Geb and the other Egyptian gods, but also against all the pagan priests of Egypt. Again, God was showing them exactly who is really in charge!

Again we see irony in this plague. The land was infected with lice, making

every person and animal miserable, but the priests of Egypt could not even enter their temples to pray to their gods due to them now being unsuited to serve because of lice!

The fourth plague—swarms

On the surface, the next plague sounds a lot like the plague of lice. But it was probably quite a bit different, as we will see.

Exodus 8:20-23 states: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Rise early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh as he comes out to the water. Then say to him, "Thus says the LORD: 'Let My people go, that they may serve Me. Or else, if you will not let My people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants, on your people and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand.

"And in that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there, in order that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the land. I will make a difference between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall be.'""

The phrase "of flies" here was added by translators and isn't in the original Hebrew, which simply uses the word "swarms" in reference to buzzing, flying insects.

A most likely scenario, based on the way we've seen God operate so far in this story, is that the "swarms" in this passage were swarms of *another* flying and crawling insect that the Egyptians considered holy—the scarab beetle. These were actually dung beetles—insects that feed on manure! Scarab beetles could also be very destructive, because they



had mandibles that could saw through wood.

If this is the case, was this plague directed at a particular god of Egypt? Yes it was. The Egyptian god Kheper was depicted as a man with a dung beetle in place of his head. Kheper was viewed as the god who pushed the sun across the sky. He was associated with the dung beetle because dung beetles would roll manure into spherical balls and push these around on the ground, similar to how the Egyptians thought Kheper pushed the sun across the sky.

The Egyptians also considered the scarab beetles as divine since they emerged from dead animals or manure and thus were viewed as being created from dead matter. Because of this they came to be associated with rebirth and resurrection.

The Egyptians apparently didn't realize that the beetles simply laid their eggs in dead animals or manure, and they hatched out later. It certainly had nothing to do with being divine!

So when this swarm of creatures invaded the land and got into everything like the earlier plagues of lice and frogs, this was a direct affront to the god Kheper. Kheper was shown to be incapable of controlling the highly destructive insects that were now chewing their way through the Egyptian houses and buildings. We might also note the supreme god Amun, god of the wind, who should have been able to blow the swarms away. The true God here showed yet more Egyptian gods to be utterly powerless.

Note also that this is the first plague in which God made a distinction between His people and the Egyptians. The Israelites suffered the previous plagues alongside the Egyptians. But now God kept this and the remaining plagues away

from Goshen, where His people lived.

The fifth plague—disease on livestock

The fifth plague, beginning in Exodus 9:1, was directed against domestic animals: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go in to Pharaoh and tell him, "Thus says the LORD God of the Hebrews: 'Let My people go, that they may serve Me.

"For if you refuse to let them go, and still hold them, behold, the hand of the LORD will be on your cattle in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the oxen, and on the sheep—a very severe pestilence. And the LORD will make a difference between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt. So nothing shall die of all that belongs to the children of Israel'" (verses 1-4).

This plague created an enormous economic disaster for the Egyptians. It affected their food, transportation, military capability, farming capacity and economic goods that were produced by these livestock. But still Pharaoh's heart remained hardened.

Cattle in Egypt were not just highly valued, they were also considered sacred. The Egyptians worshipped many animals, and among them were bulls and heifers. The creation god Ptah was represented by a living bull known as the Apis bull. The Apis bull was very sacred, and when it died the Egyptians mourned as though they had lost a pharaoh. After death, the Apis bull was embalmed and placed in a tomb like a pharaoh.

The creator sun gods Atum and Re, blended as the same deity, were represented by the black bull Mer-wer or Nem-wer (called by the Greeks Mnevis). Sky and creation goddesses Nut and Neith were depicted as a celestial cow giving birth to the universe and other gods.

One of Egypt's greatest mother goddesses was Hathor, depicted as a cow-headed goddess or a female with cow-like features. Hathor was normally depicted with a pair of horns with the solar disk between them. She was viewed as the symbolic mother of Pharaoh.

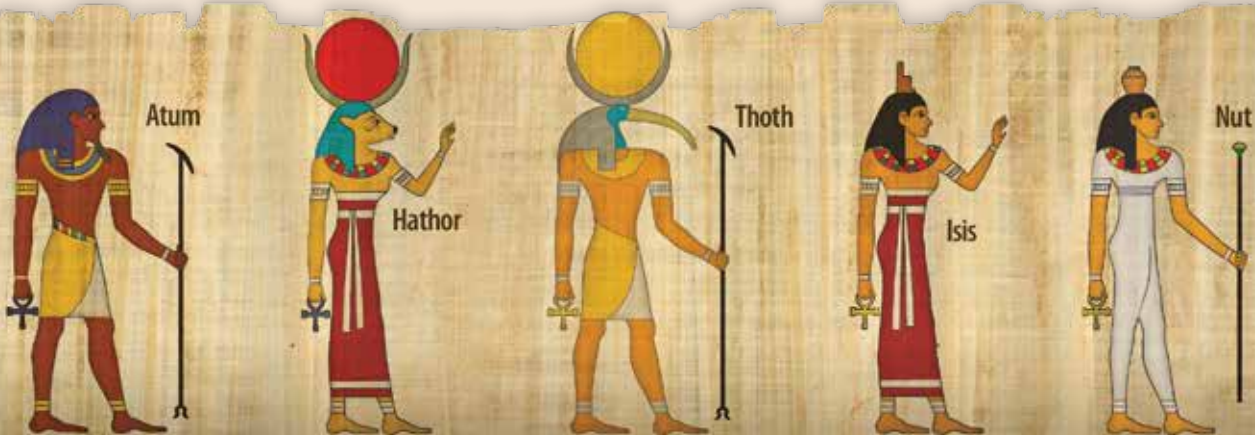
In this plague these various gods of Egypt were powerless to protect the cattle and livestock of the Egyptians. Keep in mind that as each plague was sent, the Egyptians probably desperately prayed to their gods to stop the plagues. But in every case their gods were powerless and silent.

The sixth plague—boils

We next come to the plague of boils: "So the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Take for yourselves handfuls of ashes from a furnace, and let Moses scatter it toward the heavens in the sight of Pharaoh. And it will become fine dust in all the land of Egypt, and it will cause boils that break out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.

"Then they took ashes from the furnace and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses scattered them toward heaven. And they caused boils that break out in sores on man and beast. And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians" (Exodus 9:8-11).

The Egyptians worshipped several healing deities, on occasion even sacrificing human beings to them. The victims were burned on an altar, and their ashes were cast into the air, where the wind would blow the ashes over the people. This was viewed as a blessing for them. Moses took ashes from the furnace and threw them into the air. The ashes were scattered by the wind and fell on all



the priests, people and the animals that were left. But rather than a blessing, this turned into painful boils—large sores on the people.

This plague would have been an



major role as war goddess, were the doctors of ancient Egypt. However, the magicians suffered so horribly from the boils that they could barely stand, let alone use the power of their apparently powerless gods to heal others.

The seventh plague—hail

Next came the plague of hail. This would have been very unusual, as the region where this took place receives only about two inches of rain per year.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt—on man, on beast, and on every herb of the field, throughout the land of Egypt.’ And Moses stretched out his rod toward heaven; and the LORD sent thunder and hail . . . and the hail struck every

what of Seth, god of storms and protector of crops? Or Neper, god of grain crops? Or again Osiris, who was ruler of life and vegetation?

This plague was another devastating attack on the country. The Egyptians had already lost fish from their diet when the Nile turned to blood. The plague on the livestock killed off much of it, and animals still in the field at the time of this hailstorm were killed by the hail, so the Egyptians have now lost much of their sources of meat and milk. And still, the various cow deities mentioned earlier could do nothing.

The flax that’s mentioned here was the Egyptians’ major source of fiber for linen clothing. So they lost not only much of their ability to feed themselves, but also their primary material for

During all the plagues, the Egyptians’ false gods were silent, absent and powerless in the face of the one true God of Israel.

affront to a number of Egyptian gods of healing. One, earlier mentioned, was Imhotep, god of medicine. Another was Thoth, the ibis-headed god of intelligence and medical learning. Another was Nefertem, god of healing. Still another was Isis, another figure in the Egyptian trinity and wife of Osiris. She was supposedly able to bring Osiris back to life after his death, but she was powerless to protect or help the Egyptians from the painful boils that had broken out all over.

Verse 11 pointedly mentions that the magicians suffered from the boils. Priests with their magical powers, especially those in the cult of Sekhmet, yet another goddess of healing besides her

herb of the field and broke every tree of the field” (Exodus 9:22-25).

Which Egyptian gods and goddesses did this plague expose as powerless and worthless? Since this plague originated with the sky, the most prominent deity discredited by this plague was Nut, the sky goddess mentioned earlier. She is often depicted in Egyptian art as arching over the earth, her body painted with stars.

But Nut wasn’t the only Egyptian god discredited by this plague. Where was Shu, the god of air and bearer of heaven? Why didn’t he stop this devastating storm? Where was Horus, the hawk-headed third member of the Egyptian trinity and sky god of Upper Egypt? And

clothing themselves as well!

The eighth plague—locusts

The plague of hail was followed by a plague of locusts. The plague of hail had wiped out the crops and most plants, but the little that had survived would now be devoured by locusts.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come . . . and eat every herb of the land—all that the hail has left.’ So Moses stretched out his rod over the land of Egypt . . . And the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt . . . They covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they ate every herb



of the land and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left” (Exodus 10:12-15).

History has documented how swarms of locusts have destroyed villages’ food supplies in a matter of minutes. They simply devoured everything that was green—every single leaf and blade of grass.

Again, as with the preceding plagues, the gods of Egypt were silent. You have to wonder what their worshippers thought as they saw the devastation. Where was the jackal-headed guardian of the fields, Anubis? Again, what about the chief agricultural god Osiris? Once more he, Isis, Seth and Neper are all defied—as are Shu, god of the air, and Amun, god of the wind.

The devastated fields battered by hail and burned by fire, now stripped bare by locusts, testified of the impotence of the Egyptian gods.

The ninth plague—darkness

In Exodus 10:21-23 we read about the terrifying plague of darkness: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, *darkness which may even be felt.*’ So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another; nor did anyone rise from his place for three days. But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.”

Imagine the entire world as you know it suddenly going so dark that you can’t see anything. You can’t see other members of your family. You can’t see anything in your house—the table, stools, your bed, your food, the doorway, the windows, your fields, anything. The entire world has gone black. And this darkness is palpable—you can somehow feel it pressing in on you from all around. This goes on for a day and a night. Then *another* day and a night. Then a *third* day and night. For people used to bright sunshine 365 days a year, this had to be terrifying!

This plague of darkness was a judgment on Egypt’s religion and entire culture. Of all the gods of Egypt, none were worshipped as much as the sun. The sun god variously known as Re, Ra, Atum or Aten (and sometimes Horus) had become identified with the supreme god Amun, Amon or Amen. Amon-Ra was thus considered the greatest of the gods of Egypt. He was viewed as the creator, the giver of life, who flooded the land with his energizing rays. Many of the pharaohs incorporated his name into their names—names like RAmesses (“drawn forth of Ra”), AMENhotep (“Amen—Amon or Amun—is pleased”) and TutankHAMUN (“living image of Amun”).

But in this darkness Amon-Ra was silent. He was nowhere to be seen, literally. Nothing was visible in the smothering darkness that covered the land. Not only were all of Egypt’s other gods and goddesses powerless, but their greatest and most important god, Amon-Ra, was just as powerless and useless to help them. Again the Egyptians’ gods had failed them.

The tenth plague—death of the firstborn

The 10th plague was very selective. It destroyed the Egyptian firstborn, both human and animal. “Then Moses said, “Thus says the LORD: “About midnight I will go out into the midst of

Egypt; and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the female servant who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the animals. Then there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as was not like it before, nor shall be like it again” (Exodus 11:4-6).

Why the firstborn? God considered Israel His own firstborn among the nations and warned of this retribution on Egypt (Exodus 4:22-23). Also, in that time and culture, the firstborn received the greater share of a father’s inheritance. The firstborn generally became the country’s ruling elite—the generals and military officers, the chief administrators and usually the pharaohs themselves. This particular pharaoh apparently wasn’t a firstborn, since he didn’t die in the plague. Perhaps his older brother had died at a younger age and this pharaoh was next in line. But *his son was in line* to be the next pharaoh, and he perished in this plague.

Again, the gods of Egypt were silent. Serket, the goddess of protection, was proven powerless. Meshkenet, the goddess who presided at the birth of children, failed to save the first-

The death of the firstborn was the last plague, but one more major god had to be judged and proven to be no god at all.

born. Sobek, god of protection and fertility who epitomized the might of the pharaohs, couldn’t protect anyone. Renenutet, the god who appeared as a vulture, the special protector god of the pharaoh, could not protect the pharaoh’s son who would be the next pharaoh. And where again was Osiris, the giver and ruler of life?

With this plague, the Egyptian pharaoh finally relented and let the Israelites go. This forcing of Pharaoh to act against his will would demonstrate God’s overthrow of his sovereignty and of the gods who represented it: Hu, the god personifying royal authority; Wadjet, the goddess of royal authority; Maat, goddess of cosmic order under whose aegis the rulers of Egypt governed; and the war goddess Sekhmet, who would supposedly breathe fire against the enemies of the pharaoh.

All these false gods were judged and proven powerless and worthless.

Judgment against Pharaoh

The death of the firstborn was *the last plague*, but it was *not the final judgment* on the gods of Egypt. *One more major god* remained to be further judged and proven to be no god at all.

To continue the story, after the Israelites at last left Egypt, Pharaoh once again changed his mind. He set out with 600 of the best chariots, plus all the other chariots of Egypt—possibly several thousand in all—to return the Israelites to slavery. The Egyptians cornered the Israelites at the sea, but God delayed them by a pillar of fire and cloud while the Israelites crossed through on dry land to the other side.

After the Israelites were across, God lifted the pillar of fire and cloud, and then He brought judgment on the last of Egypt’s major gods. That god was none other than *Pharaoh himself*.

The pharaohs were considered literal sons of Ra or the divine incarnation of Horus, which meant that they, too, were considered to be gods here on earth. In a way, they were thought to embody all of the gods of Egypt and to be their representative to the Egyptian people. That's how they wielded



so much power over the people—the power of life and death and to enslave. And that's why they built such great monuments to themselves and such fabulous tombs filled with riches and treasure. These were to honor gods, it was thought, not mere men.

A pharaoh's greatest responsibility was to keep everything in order—a manifestation of Maat, mentioned earlier—to

ensure that the dozens of Egyptian gods and goddesses performed their responsibilities well so the kingdom of Egypt would remain prosperous and strong. But this pharaoh failed spectacularly. He could not withstand the plagues that devastated his kingdom and plunged it into chaos. He couldn't prevent the death of his own son. And he couldn't prevent his forces from drowning in the sea. He and his mighty kingdom were left utterly broken and shamed. The last of the great gods of Egypt was tried in the balance, judged and found wanting!

All this considered, we see that the plagues on Egypt were not random. God is a God of logic and order. He sent each of the plagues to specifically show the Egyptians and Israelites that He was greater than all the gods of Egypt.

Taken together, the 10 plagues provided a comprehensive defeat of the pharaoh and of the entire Egyptian pantheon, just as God had promised. This was truly an epic war between the one true God and the demonic forces of darkness. The true God won; Egypt's gods lost. But why? Such false gods do not really exist, and the false gods deceiving people into believing they do exist are no match for the God of the Bible!

Important lessons for us

So what are some of the lessons we should learn from these events that apply to our lives today?

1. We must realize that God takes sin very seriously. The severity of the plagues on Egypt shows how seriously God took their sins. Yet it is not just the sin of the Egyptians that God abhors. He hates *any* sin. We must never minimize the sin in our lives. Any sin is serious, and if we don't repent of it, it brings eternal death.

2. God is patient, giving us time to repent, but His patience has limits. And He gives warnings, as He did repeatedly to the

Egyptians. But His patience will eventually run out. What follows then is God's fearsome judgment. May we turn and repent before that happens!

3. Many people “turn to God” in a time of calamity, but when things get better they almost immediately turn away again. Their hearts are hardened again. We may wonder how Pharaoh could have been so blind and stupid as to harden his heart so many times. But the fact is, Pharaoh wasn't all that unusual. When the pressure was on, he relented and said he would let the Israelites go. But as soon as the pressure was off, his heart was hardened again.

4. God is trying to get our attention—are we listening? Remember that the Israelites were victims of the first three plagues along with the Egyptians. God had to shake them up and get their attention so He could begin separating them from the world to make them His chosen nation. The news happening around us now should serve to wake us up. The major trends and events this magazine and its predecessors have foretold for years as revealed in Bible prophecy are beginning to shape up before our eyes.

5. God requires obedience, not just belief. How were the Israelites spared from the death of the firstborn? Yes they had to trust. And then *they had to act*. They had to *do something*. They had to put the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts. They had to act and obey in faith, or they would've lost their firstborn as the Egyptians did. Likewise, we today have to faithfully act and obey and break away from the Egypt that represents this world so that we might be saved.

6. What are your gods? The Egyptians had dozens of gods that they worshipped and devoted their lives to. What about you? What do you devote your life to? A false god is anything that comes between you and the one true God. What are the idols that stand between you and God? What consumes your time and energy? Your job or career? Hobbies? Sports? Entertainment? Only you can answer that. Just remember that at some point all these things will vanish away and come to nothing, as happened to the Egyptians, and it will be just you standing there answerable to your Creator for what you devoted your life to.

7. Our all-powerful God is in complete control. We see this throughout the plagues. God controlled every aspect of it to bring about His purpose of delivering His people from slavery and sin to make a new nation of them. We can take great comfort and hope in that. Nothing is out of His control. He has begun a good work in us and will continue that work in us so long as we are receptive and open to Him and allow Him to continue that work (see Philippians 1:6). Don't allow anything to come between you and the true God and His will for your life! **BT**



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"Christ, Our Passover"



Passover is mentioned regularly in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. Why did the apostle Paul refer to Jesus Christ as "our Passover"? What does it mean to you?

by Gary Petty

What does Passover mean to you? Maybe you think of a Jewish ceremonial meal or the remarkable events of the ancient Passover recorded in the biblical book of Exodus. Rituals passed down for thousands of years commemorate the time when God supernaturally freed Israel from Egyptian slavery. Thousands of Israelites painted lambs' blood on their doorposts to escape death. That night, God killed the firstborn of Egypt but "passed over" the houses marked by the blood. Israelites then gathered their belongings and departed from Egypt—for the first time in their lives free from oppressive slavery. The anniversary of these events has been celebrated ever since.

Modern Christians might view the biblical account of the Passover at the time of the Exodus as an encouraging story of how God intervened in history to take care of His people. But these events are more than a story of encouragement. Passover is a vital element of the Christian gospel! Understanding the Passover message unlocks answers to important questions about forgiveness and God's mercy.

Nearly 1,500 years after the first Passover in Egypt, John the Baptist preached to the Jewish people that they needed to repent and be baptized (Matthew 3:1-2). He told them of the coming Messiah. And when Jesus, the prophesied Messiah, came to begin His ministry, John told people: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Two critical points are found in John's proclamation. First, Jesus is the Lamb of God. Later, the apostle Paul calls Jesus "our Passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The earliest Christians understood the Passover was not only a deeply meaningful ceremony but also a *Person*—the Person of Jesus Christ.

The second point made by John the Baptist was that Jesus "takes away the sin of the world." Ancient Israelites could only be saved from God's judgment by the blood of a lamb painted

on their doorposts. The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is the quintessential Passover Lamb. It is only through His blood, shed as the substitute for what human beings actually deserve, that we can be saved from slavery and death caused by sin.

All Christian denominations teach that we can receive forgiveness from God because Jesus sacrificed His life for our sins. So why do so many struggle with the questions "Why don't I feel forgiven by God?" and "Why can't I seem to overcome my weaknesses and sins?" They are missing answers found in understanding key aspects of the Christian Passover.

We must forsake sin

One reason some do not feel forgiven is because they have not really forsaken sin. It's one thing to declare yourself a sinner and accept Jesus as your Savior. But is that all God requires?

Jesus said many things to help us answer this question. Let's note some instances.

One time Jesus was so busy teaching people about God that His mother, Mary, and His own brothers couldn't get through the crowd to talk with Him (Luke 8:19-20). When it was brought to His attention, He replied, "My mother and My brothers are those who hear the word of God *and do it*" (verse 21, emphasis added throughout).

On another occasion, a woman came to Jesus and loudly declared, "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts which nursed you" (Luke 11:27).

How do you think Jesus would reply to such wonderful praise of His mother? His response? "More than that," He said, "blessed are those who hear the word of God *and keep it*" (Luke 11:28).

Jesus taught that His genuine followers *are obedient to the Word of God* and blessed as a result.

Now let's return to John the Baptist's declaration that Jesus

is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Sin is anything that goes against what God instructs or commands in His Word. Jesus said that those who *do* and *keep* the Word of God are blessed. Acknowledging you’re a sinner and asking for forgiveness are not all that God requires. *Admitting you are a sinner is not the same as forsaking sin.* A thief may know that robbing the convenience store is a sin and may even declare that he’s a sinner. But in continuing to rob, he stays a sinner. To forsake sin we must abandon it, denounce it and replace it with—according to Jesus—*doing* the Word of God.

Recall how God saved the Israelites and led them through the sea. He gave them food and water, and yet they murmured and complained, some at a certain point actually trying to revolt and return to Egypt. They found freedom, and taking responsibility for their freedom, too difficult. They preferred the security of slavery. They really wanted God’s deliverance, but they were not truly willing to forsake their old life. It was

To really accept Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God requires a radical change in your relationship with God and with sin.

easier for God to get the slaves out of Egypt than it was to get Egypt out of the slaves!

The same can be true today. The reason we do not want to forsake sin is because it is rooted in our desires and emotions. God offers us forgiveness, but sometimes we remain emotionally enslaved to our own desires. We want God’s blessing. We even cry out with guilt when we commit sin. But if we have not truly forsaken sin, it is because we still *desire* sin.

Forsaking sin must touch the core of our being. A Christian should not think, “I won’t cheat my brother, but I can cheat in business—after all, business is business.” Those striving to follow Christ’s example must forsake *all* cheating. They must not reason, “I won’t commit adultery, but I look at porn because it doesn’t hurt anyone.” Christ instructed His servants to forsake *all* lust.

Forsaking sin involves a decision to humbly—and with a broken spirit—submit to the power of God. Only then will God heal unstable and wrong emotions and desires. With God’s power, there can come a time in your life when you will look back at the person you were prior to His entering your life and you will be able to honestly say, “*I’m not that person anymore.*” That can happen only if you forsake sin and the desires for sin.

Forsaking sin involves *forsaking yourself* (see Luke 9:23-24). Paul tells Christians to “present your bodies a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). What a seeming oxymoron. What did the ancients do with a sacrifice? They killed it! Here Paul says that the followers of Christ are to be living by dying!

He goes on to explain this by saying we are to be “holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable [or rational] service,” and to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (verses 1-2).

To really accept Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God requires a radical change in your relationship with God and a dramatic

change in your relationship to sin. It involves more than simply admitting a few bad behaviors. The real power of Christianity only happens in the lives of people who are humble and broken before the great God. You must forsake your own desires and replace them with what Paul calls “*the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*” (Romans 12:2).

We must truly accept God’s forgiveness

Another reason many Christians ask, “Why don’t I feel forgiven?” or “Why can’t I overcome sin?” is that *they have not really accepted God’s forgiveness.* This is a difficult concept. You might be thinking, “But I read the sinner’s prayer,” or “I answered an altar call, and I accepted God’s forgiveness.” Think about it. How many times do you still say, “I don’t seem to have the power to conquer sin in my life”?

To better understand God’s forgiveness, let’s look at what happened the night before Jesus was crucified. As the disciples sat down to eat the Passover meal with Him, He said to them,

“With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). He then broke bread and passed it to them saying, “This is My body, which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). After they partook of the bread, Jesus gave them a cup of wine, telling the disciples, “This

cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:20). And Christ’s blood was not just shed for those few people gathered with Him on that Passover night. He died for all humanity, including you and me.

If Jesus, the Son of God, died for us and was resurrected to sit at the right hand of the Father, why do we not have more power from God to, in faith, experience His forgiveness and overcome sin?

Some believe God has forgiven them, but they cannot forgive themselves and thus don’t really feel forgiven. If you have felt this way, think more deeply about the first part of that statement. The Creator of the universe sent His Son to willingly sacrifice Himself for our sins and was powerfully resurrected. God is big enough to deal with our sins. Do you believe that enough to let go of your sins and accept God’s promised mercy?

Christians must strive to let the past go and live in grateful submission to the God who freed us from death and bondage. Notice what Paul wrote: “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended [that is, to have already taken hold of what God ultimately has in store for us]; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

These factors, then, can be missing ingredients in a lot of people’s repentance. Some want God’s forgiveness, even confess that they are a sinner, but they cannot find the strength to give up their sin and the faith to accept God’s forgiveness!

Passover still relevant

While many Jews observe the Passover, far more people today celebrate Easter. Why do most Christians not observe the Passover at the same time and in the same manner as instructed by Jesus? Jesus observed the Passover with His

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disciples. Jesus *is* the Passover—the Lamb of God. Christians are to be following His example.

Instead of keeping Passover, Christianity substitutes an unbiblical celebration involving colored eggs and chocolate bunnies. (Be sure to read “Christians Who Don’t Celebrate Easter: What Do They Know?” beginning on page 27.)


What a poor substitute for following the Savior’s example of foot-washing, eating bread that symbolized Christ’s broken body and drinking wine that symbolized His shed blood—and on the same night when He did it. It was on that Passover night that He commanded His disciples to do this “in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). Of course, most churches do partake of bread and wine regularly throughout the year, but this observance has been removed from the proper context of the annual observance of Passover.

Years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about keeping the Passover on the night in which Jesus did. Christ even said He would keep it after His second coming in His Kingdom when He would sit down with His disciples (Luke 22:16, 18; Matthew 26:29).

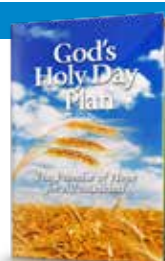
The Passover observance is also important because it ties together the Old and New Testaments in a unique way. So many aspects of the Exodus story fit perfectly into the meaning of Passover and were symbolic of Jesus Christ—the Lamb, the concept of a sacrifice and Christ’s blood. Both sections of the Bible are needed to understand the complete picture. The Old Testament is incomplete without the New Testament. And the New Testament cannot be fully understood without the Old Testament story. That’s especially so in terms of the Passover and how Christ fulfilled the role of the sacrificial lamb. These connections bring a deeper knowledge of Christ’s dying for us, including how much God loves us and His great purpose.

By heeding the true Passover Lamb and doing what He said to do at the time and in the manner He said to do it, Christians today can experience God’s power and grace in releasing the shackles of sin and conquering wrong desires. If you desire a greater understanding of God’s forgiveness and want God to break your bondage to sin, then I urge you to read about the Passover in the last chapters of all four Gospels.

Interested readers should also request our free study guide *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. This easy-to-read guide will take you chronologically through God’s annual festivals, which are clearly described throughout the Bible. You may not realize the Christian and prophetic significance of these days, and how God designed them to reveal Himself and His plan for all of us.

The time is now to break the bonds of human tradition and seek Jesus Christ as the Passover and observe His sacrifice in the way He has told us to! 

LEARN MORE



Passover is one of several biblical festivals that teach us about God’s plan for offering salvation to all. Download or request your free copy of *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* to learn more, including what it means for you!

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Lessons of the Passover Bread



On the night before His death, Jesus Christ shared unleavened bread with His disciples, telling them to repeat this every year in remembrance. What did this bread symbolize? What lessons are Christians to learn from it?

by Victor Kubik

For more than 50 years, I have annually observed the New Testament Passover as instructed by Jesus Christ. Each time I have marveled at the significance of what Christ taught His followers and how meaningful each of the elements and symbols are for my life today.

In a way, Jesus Christ's entire ministry for mankind is condensed into what happened on that evening! Let's take a closer look. The Gospel writer Luke shares this account of what happened that evening:

"When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, 'With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'

"Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me'" (Luke 22:14-19).

The apostle Paul later explains what he had been personally taught by Jesus Christ:

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after sup-

per, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes'" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Key symbols of Christianity

The very heart and core of Christianity is wrapped up in the symbols of the bread and the wine that Jesus shared at the Passover the night before His death. Christ established a practice for Christians to follow and carefully examine today.

The Passover evening began with Jesus washing each of the disciple's feet, as recorded in John 13:1-17. This showed His humility and service to humanity and the need for Him to cleanse us while also setting an example for us to follow. He followed up with the symbols of the bread and wine. Drinking the Passover wine represented accepting Jesus' shed blood as payment for our sins that we may be forgiven as part of the New Covenant He offered.

The prophet Isaiah eloquently described this meaning: "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4-6).

When we take part in the Passover service today we

reenact the solemnity, the intimacy of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, with one another and with ourselves. We leave the past behind as we reach out towards immortality and the Kingdom of God.

As Christians, we are admonished to examine ourselves prior to the service: “Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

So, what is it about the Lord’s body that we are to discern or understand? This brings us to a closer look at the symbol of the bread representing the body of Christ.

The living bread that makes eternal life possible

Before the Passover and addressing a large crowd near Capernaum, Jesus boldly proclaimed: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51).

We want to live forever, but most are not sure this will happen or how it’s possible. This uncertainty worsens the grief and heartache for many when a loved one or someone close dies. People try to stretch out physical existence and grasp for the elusive essence called life but only find themselves staring at a mirage in a desert of desperation and wishful dreaming.

What is it about the bread of which Jesus spoke that we should focus on?

And what can we learn that will grant certainty in answer to the question of man’s mortality and immortality?

Humanity seeks assurance to a question that Job asked thousands of years ago: “If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). Job answered his question in the same verse: “All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come” (King James Version). He was looking to a time beyond this life when a change would bring eternal life.

Again, a careful reading of John 6:51 is where Jesus Christ reveals an important secret of living forever. The secret is in the meaning of bread.

The biblical observance of Passover is followed immediately by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast, including the two Holy Days that bookend it, is about bread! What is the point of this emphasis? Is there something more about eating the bread and God’s command to eat unleavened bread during this feast (see Leviticus 23:6) that we might be missing? Certainly God’s placement of the Feast of Unleavened Bread right on the heels of the Passover must have special significance.

Jesus Christ is the Source of life

When you come to understand all that the bread represents, you will understand the deepest, loving intentions of God toward humankind. It is here that we experience God’s graciousness towards us. It is coupled with our responsibility

as His children who will then embark on an eternal fulfilling relationship.

So let us examine some of the lessons of bread as it equates to *life*—for eternity and for the here and now.

Jesus Christ is the source of eternal life, as we read in John 6:51. And as He said, if you want eternal life you must “feed” on Him. Furthermore, He stated in the Sermon on the Mount that there is only one path to eternity: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). We must pay careful attention as to what that pathway is!

Life does not originate from spontaneous chemical reactions. Neither does it spring into existence from nothing. The world’s great philosophers and thinkers, outside of God’s revelation, cannot explain what life is. Scientists have failed to create life from lifeless matter. All life comes only from pre-existing life, and that is not ultimately of this physical realm. Man can prolong, pass on and reproduce himself, but he cannot create the very essence of life.

Bread represents sustenance of life—nurture and feeding. Even today, a “breadwinner” in a family is whoever earns a living and provides for the family. Bread is also referred to as the “staff of life.” One of the petitions in Jesus Christ’s model prayer is to regularly ask, “Give us this day our daily bread”

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

(Matthew 6:11). He meant food and nourishment in general, along with all it represents for us.

Multiplying bread to feed thousands

Again in John 6:51 Jesus taught a profound lesson about bread and life. Thousands came to hear Him (verse 10; Matthew 14:21). The time was just before the Passover (verse 4).

Jesus started a discussion about bread and eating at this large outdoor gathering of people who came together to hear Him speak. After He finished His teaching, and aware of people wanting to eat, Jesus asked Philip about what they could do to feed the large crowd. Philip responded by saying that they had too little money to buy enough food. Then the disciple Andrew interjected that there was a boy with five barley loaves and two small fish. But this obviously was not a solution for a gathering of that size.

Jesus knew this and, as He already intended to, turned this event into a lesson. He instructed that the people sit orderly in the grass. He then gave thanks and instructed that the disciples distribute the boy’s fish and bread to the crowd. Miraculously, there was plenty—even enough for leftovers!

A more important lesson about the Bread of Life

The weightier lesson of this experience came the next day when the people followed Jesus by boats to see Him again. This time He spoke to their self-seeking motive, which was to get

another free meal. He said: “Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life” (verses 26-27).

Jesus further commented about the value of bread when the people brought up the manna that God provided for the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness (see Exodus 16).

“Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but *My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.*’ Then they said to Him, ‘Lord, give us this bread always.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘*I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst*’” (John 6:31-35).

The point of Jesus’ teaching should be clear to us as well. He compares the sustenance of physical food, which gives us limited physical life, to the far greater sustenance from Himself, our life-giver, to grant us eternal life! Do we feed only on physical food, or do we seek what will give us life eternal?

In His discourse, Jesus clearly made His point about the superiority of immortal life and the unprofitability of mere physical existence: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. *I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world*” (verses 47-51).

Abiding in Christ

This brings us to another very important aspect of the Passover Bread.

Jesus continued His pointed teaching about what kind of relationship matters with Him and leads to eternal rewards.

Notice what He further said in the same context: “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him*” (verses 54-56).

We now move to an active full-time relationship with Him that results in a changed mindset and results in bearing fruit. Jesus described the kind of relationship He desires to share with us in His final teaching that last night with His disciples after their Passover together, telling them:

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me *that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.* You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. *As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.*

“I am the vine, you are the branches. *He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.* If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the

fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. *By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples*” (John 15:1-8).

The Passover bread represents this conscious, close relationship between Jesus Christ and us. Note how Paul expressed it in this passage in Galatians 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (KJV).

Writing to the church at Rome (and to us today), Paul gives this exhortation: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you *present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*” (Romans 12:1-2).

Ask God to *transform* your life, not just reform it! Ask Him to make you fruitful by developing a different, unselfish mindset. Ask God to help you *say* the right things, *think* the right things and *do* the right things. Be intent on wrapping your life around Jesus Christ: “If then you were raised with Christ, *seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God*” (Colossian 3:1-3).

Bread and suffering

Suffering is not easy. It’s difficult to face and endure pain and hurt. The symbolism of breaking the bread at the Passover represented Jesus Christ’s sufferings. He suffered humiliation, mocking, beating, torture and an excruciating execution—which were represented by the breaking of bread at the Passover with His disciples. “Take, eat; *this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me,*” He told them (1 Corinthians 11:24).

We are admonished to take this into account whenever we suffer. As 1 Peter 4 states: “Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind” (verse 1).

And we read later in the same chapter: “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but *rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy*” (verses 12-13).

Jesus said to the multitudes following Him, “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:27). Following Him involves sacrifice and sometimes enduring great trial.

But the Bible also says: “The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure” (1 Corinthians 10:13, New Living Translation).

We may be disheartened in the face of all the tests, trials and suffering we may have to endure, but consider the troubled lives of those who are *not* Christians. Yes, maybe we may have much to endure as a Christian, but it’s harder in the long run to endure *not* being a Christian!

Christ said that “he who *endures* to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). Endurance is not gliding through constant enjoyment but means making it through difficult times. And that is what God requires of us.

Of the many questions we receive from our readers, by far the most prevalent have to do with why we must suffer. Why can't Christians be exempt from pain?

To become a disciple of Christ we must be prepared for the suffering that will come with that, including some suffering common to man. We live in a world of horrendous injustice, evil and pain. People around us are suffering from health problems, betrayals, addictions and relationship issues with children, parents and partners. And many of these things don't resolve themselves very easily. How can a Christian deal with that? We have to learn to “suffer with Christ”—to learn from the suffering aspect of being a Christian.

The bread: Christ's suffering for us

The answer to why we experience suffering lies in the suffering of Jesus Christ pictured by the broken bread. He gave Himself to us seeking closeness, presence, togetherness and a relationship. And to accomplish that, *He came to experience our pain*.

He came *into our suffering now*. In His last instructions to His disciples on that final Passover night with them, Christ encouraged them with these words: “These things I have spoken to you, *that in Me you may have peace*. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, *I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).

Through God's compassion on us through Christ, we have compassion toward others: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

The lesson of unity

Paul in describing the Passover service made a thought-provoking comment about another meaning of the bread: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17, English Standard Version).

In taking of the same bread, says Paul, the members of the Church are one through that bread. We become part of Him and, through Him, of each other.

Jesus' final prayer before being arrested concerned His disciples then as well as His followers throughout all time. He prayed for their unity: “Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are” (John 17:11)

He specifically prayed that His followers of all ages would be one, unified as He and His Father are one: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; *that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us*, that the world

may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20-21).

While Christians have not done well in being united, it was still Christ's recorded prayer and His desire. So we must ask ourselves: How we can bring about unity and peace? Certainly we know that after Christ's return, mankind will be united, and there will be a different mindset and spirit. However, the question remains: What is *our* role in being peacemakers and bringing about unity today?

The Days of Unleavened Bread

As mentioned earlier, the Days of Unleavened Bread follow the Passover. It is indeed interesting that there is such an emphasis on bread over the course of these days.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul was writing during the Days of Unleavened Bread. Notice what he stated about the meaning of leaven and being spiritually unleavened: “Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

Leavening, an agent such as yeast that causes bread dough to rise in baking, is a representation of being puffed up and proud. But being spiritually *unleavened* means we are seeking sincerity and truth. This is yet another significant meaning of the unleavened bread eaten at Passover.

Finale: The bread

The story of Christ's purpose is found in the symbols of the bread and wine He instituted at that final Passover with His disciples. His death for us is depicted by the wine. His life is pictured by the bread, for He calls Himself “the Bread of Life.”

Jesus Christ is the Source of life, and He desires for us to follow Him to eternity. There is no other way. He is the Bread of Life, and His desire is that we partake of Him—so that He becomes part of us and we of Him. Our duty once we understand this is to abide in Him, to live our lives with Him in us. We are to imitate Him, to be like Him in every way.

Also, as we live out our reality in the world today we are to understand and appreciate Christ's suffering for our benefit. He offered up His life so that we can have life—*life everlasting*. He has compassion on us, and in the same way we should have compassion on others. We have encouragement in a world that, without the gospel message, is without hope—a hope that we live by through the revelation of God's Word that we are so blessed to have received.

May we have our part in the unity of the Bread of Christ, and may God open our eyes to this great revelation and pathway to eternity! **BT**



LEARN MORE

Passover is but one of God's festivals that teach us about God's plan to offer salvation to all mankind. What are the other biblical festivals, and what do they teach us? Download or request your free copy of *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* to learn more!

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“The Firstborn From the Dead”

What Does It Mean?

The apostle Paul referred to Jesus Christ as “the firstborn from the dead.” If He is “first,” what does that mean? The obvious answer is that others will follow. You need to understand what the Bible says about this crucial subject!

by Peter Eddington

God is creating a divine, *spirit* family—and you can be in it! The moment Jesus Christ walked out of the tomb, a momentous opportunity began for you and me. With His resurrection and ascension to the very throne of God, Jesus was the first of many who would become spirit beings dwelling in the presence of God.

The God family, from the beginning, comprised two divine Beings—God and the Word (John 1:1-2). The Word became flesh some 2,000 years ago as the Son of God, Jesus Christ (verse 14). After Jesus’ human life and death, He was resurrected to divine spirit existence as “the *firstborn* from the dead” and “*firstborn among many brethren*” (Colossians 1:18; Romans 8:29, emphasis added throughout).

Who are the “many brethren”? It’s all God’s faithful people, those who will join Jesus Christ as His brothers and sisters as part of that divine family of God when they are resurrected to immortal spirit life. And so, this physical life is not all there is. But, please note, we are *not talking about going to live in heaven* when we die—as you will see!

Let’s explore this more as we see what Scripture has to say on this important topic.

The offspring of God, in His image

Jesus was spiritually born in the resurrection as the *first* of many brethren or children to follow later. As pointed out in Acts 17:28-29, we are God’s offspring: “For we are also His offspring.” Therefore, *since we are the offspring of God*, we ought

not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising.”

The Greek word for offspring here, *genos*, means “kindred,” “race,” “kind,” “stock” or “family.” We are of *God’s family* type.

In the ancient Hebrew, Psalm 82 sheds more light on this fact. In verse 6, God refers to human beings as “*gods*,” this being equated here with “*children of the Most High*.” That makes perfect sense. When any entity bears offspring, its offspring are *the same kind* of entity. The offspring of human beings are human beings. The offspring of God are “*gods*,” as Jesus confirmed in quoting this passage in John 10:34-36.

Of course, when human beings are referred to as *gods* in Psalm 82, they are still declared imperfect and subject to corruption and death. So they are of the divine family in only a restricted sense to begin with.

One aspect of this is that man has been created in God’s image and likeness on a *physical, mortal level* with limited dominion, resembling God but *without His divine character and glory*—yet. So, the other aspect of this is that man has the *ultimate potential* of becoming the *same kind of beings God the Father and Jesus Christ now are*. Jesus was “the *firstborn among many brethren*”—obviously meaning that *others will follow*.

As noted earlier, the apostle Paul explained that Jesus conquered death and is “the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18). In other words, Christ paved the way into the Kingdom of God, so that those who are truly devoted to Him can have assurance and expectation of the resurrection. “This *hope*

we have as an anchor of the soul, both *sure and steadfast*, and which enters the presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus” (Hebrews 6:19-20).

Jesus overcame death and is the forerunner, the first to be resurrected from the dead, making eternal life possible for many others to follow. As we noted earlier in Romans 8:29, He was “the firstborn among many brethren.”

So what does that tell you and me? The Bible leaves no doubt—there *will be others to follow in time*. As Paul tells us, “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly *we also* shall be in the likeness of His resurrection” (Romans 6:5).

The Bible is speaking here of a resurrection to *permanent*, everlasting life as a spirit being—not simply a *temporary* restoration to life in a physical body. And again, as we will see, this is *not* talking about going to live in heaven when we die.

The resurrection of the *firstfruits*

In several places in the Bible we see that individuals (such as Lazarus) were restored to physical life prior to the resurrection of Jesus. But *they all died* again.

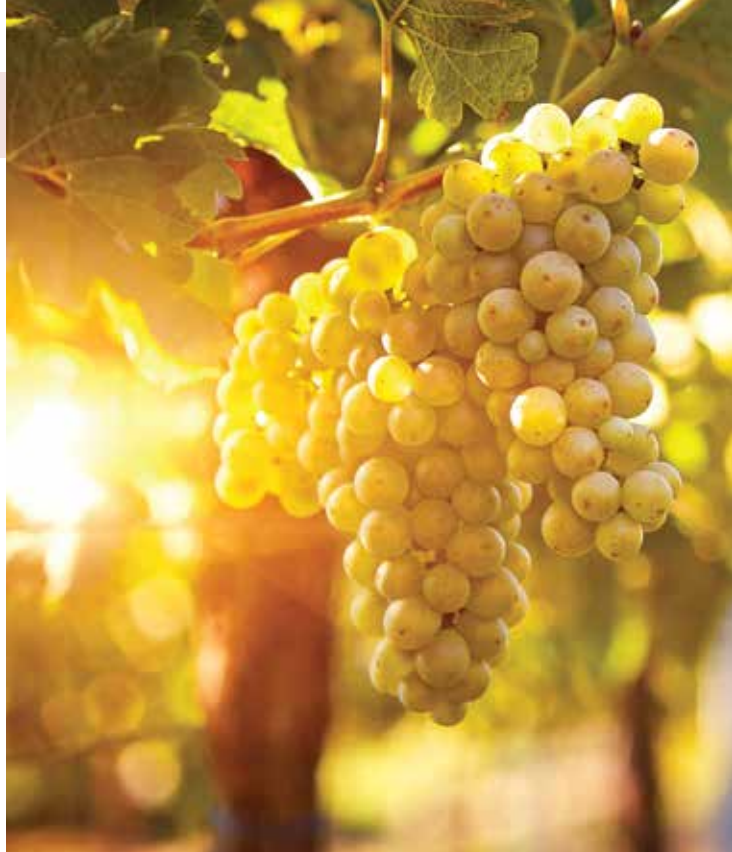
Paul makes an important *distinction* between those who lived, died, were resurrected and then died again and the *future resurrection of God's firstfruits*: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly [physical, material] body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21; compare 2 Corinthians 5:1-5).

Paul is talking about a future, glorious, *spirit* existence. And notice here that Jesus Christ will come *from* heaven to “transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.” An entire chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15, discusses this resurrection. It begins by affirming Jesus' own restoration to life, followed by a description of the similar restoration to life of His disciples and true followers of this age—God's firstfruits (see James 1:18). Jesus Himself is the first and foremost of the firstfruits (compare 1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Paul describes the nature of this resurrection of the firstfruits: “It is sown a natural [physical] body, it is raised a spiritual body . . . ‘The first man Adam became a living being.’ The last Adam [Jesus Christ] became a life-giving spirit . . . And as we have borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man [Christ]. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (verses 44, 49-50). Thus we will have bodies composed of spirit, as Jesus does.

We also see here that even true Christians *cannot* enter the Kingdom until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth (pictured in God's plan by the Feast of Trumpets, one of His annual Holy Days observed in September or October). On the fulfillment of this day, when the last *trumpet* sounds, the dead in Christ will be resurrected, and God will complete the harvest of His firstfruits.

Notice 1 Corinthians 15:51-52: “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (see also 1 Thessalonians 4:16). At that epochal time, Christ's disciples and true followers



will experience what the Bible calls the “better resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35).

In Colossians 1:15 the Greek word *prototokos*, translated “firstborn,” is a title based on birth order. The *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* explains that it speaks “of Christ, as the firstborn of a new humanity which is to be glorified, as its exalted Lord is glorified.”

This further explains the meaning of *firstborn* in the context of Colossians 1:18, where Christ is described as “the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have preeminence.” He is firstborn from the dead, the first to arise in a spiritual resurrection.

Those who are called into God's Church in this age before Christ's return, the firstfruits, are also called the “church of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23). As Jesus is the first of the firstfruits of salvation, so He is also the first of the firstborn. And all these together precede others to follow later. Thus, others will be born into God's spiritual family in the ages yet to come, when salvation is at last offered to the world at large. (Be sure to read “The Second Resurrection: Humanity's Opportunity for Salvation!” beginning on page 34 of this issue and “How Eternal Life Will Ultimately Be Offered to All” in our free study guide *What Happens After Death?*)

Will you go to live in heaven when you die?

Most people assume we will go to live in heaven when we die, but that isn't what is taught in Scripture. To the contrary, we are told, “*No one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:13). The apostle John wrote these words near the end of the first century, long after most or all of the other apostles—not to mention the great heroes of faith of the Old Testament period—had died. He knew that only Jesus Christ had been resurrected and gone to heaven. No one else had in all of human history!

To clarify this, we are reminded in the book of Acts, in the apostle Peter's inspired message on the Feast of Pentecost when the Church was founded: "The patriarch David . . . is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day . . . For David did not ascend into the heavens" (Acts 2:29, 34). This tells us that even a man "after [God's] own heart" (Acts 13:22) still rests in the grave, awaiting the resurrection at Jesus' return. No one, other than Jesus Christ, has ascended to heaven or been resurrected to immortal, spirit life.

So when Jesus does eventually return to earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, will He gather the saints, His followers from this age, and take them to live in heaven? The surprising answer from the Bible is *no*. He will have the saints rule with Him *on earth* for at least the first 1,000 years—not in heaven!

In the very last chapter of the Bible, Jesus directly says of

Jesus is the first of the firstfruits of salvation, so He is also the first of the firstborn. Thus, others will be born into God's spiritual family in the ages yet to come.

His return to set up His Father's Kingdom, "And behold, *I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work*" (Revelation 22:12).

Our reward is being brought *with Jesus* when He returns to the earth. Jesus' throne will be *here on earth*, and the saints will serve with Him *here*—not in heaven.

To further prove that we will not be living in heaven, Revelation 5:10 directly states that the resurrected saints "shall reign *on the earth*" with Christ. Revelation 20:6 adds: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years." Jesus will reign *on the earth* (Revelation 11:15; Daniel 7:14, 27)—and that is where the resurrected saints will reign with Him!

Yes, the resurrected saints will then serve Christ for 1,000 years, reigning on the earth as immortal spirit beings over whom death no longer has any power. This is the amazing future in store for the saints of God!

No big secret!

One major religious falsehood embraced by millions of Christians today is the theory of the "secret rapture" to supposedly precede the time of tribulation before Christ's return. The truth is that the resurrection of the saints will occur when Christ returns in power and glory, which will be visible to all of humanity. It will not be done in secret.

When Jesus returns at the sound of the seventh trumpet, "all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and *they will see the Son of Man coming* on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds . . ." (Matthew 24:30-31).

Everyone—all tribes, peoples and nations—will see Jesus return! And the saints, the elect, will be resurrected and gathered at the very same time as Jesus' return. It will not be done in secret. The popular "rapture" theory is a complete

falsehood, based on misunderstanding many biblical verses about the resurrection.

For a more in-depth explanation of this vital truth, please read our free study aid *The Rapture vs. the Bible* (available at ucg.org/booklets).

God's great purpose for you

This is God's purpose for man—to give us eternal life in His family through the resurrection, to be His divine offspring, His sons and daughters. This is why Paul described Jesus as "the *firstborn among many brethren*."

If God is calling you at this time, how can you ensure you are counted among Christ's brethren who will inherit eternal life in God's Kingdom? We read of an amazing prophetic scenario in the book of Revelation that outlines who will be counted among these saints, those who will receive that *reward and resurrection*

upon Jesus' return: "And the dragon [Satan the devil] went to make war with . . . [those] *who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ*" (Revelation

12:17). And two chapters later the saints of God are described as "those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

Notice these descriptions of God's faithful servants: They keep the commandments of God and are filled with the faith of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who "*obey Him*" (Acts 5:32). You see, it's more than *just accepting Jesus as your Savior*. You then have to *do something* in how you live your life. You have to keep God's commandments and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. It takes work and effort!

Prepare now

We can thank God that there is a resurrection when truly faithful Christians will be caught up into the air at the glorious second coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is the great hope for all who trust in God and believe in Him and His purpose for their lives. There is no time to waste in developing your relationship with God the Father and His Son.

The time is *now*. Start today by approaching God in prayer and asking for His help in submitting to His will in your life. Stay close to God the Father and Jesus Christ and leave the fear of the future behind. Trust in the hope of the resurrection, assured of Jesus being "the *firstborn from the dead*" and the "*firstborn among many brethren*!" **BT**



LEARN MORE

This important subject is crucial to your life and your future! You can study more about this important aspect of salvation in our free study guides *The Road to Eternal Life* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. Download or request your copies today!

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Abortion divides America, plagues world

Jan. 22, 2019, marked the 46th anniversary of the controversial U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, *Roe v. Wade*. Abortion, the killing of unborn children, is a grievous sin that continues to gain acceptance in the United States and abroad. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), just over 638,000 abortions were performed in the United States alone in 2015, but the number of abortions worldwide is a staggering 50–60 million each year.

Abortion is an intensely divisive social issue in American politics. Just four days before the recent anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the annual March for Life in Washington, D.C., a pro-life, anti-abortion rally, this year drew crowds estimated between 200,000 and 300,000. Similar rallies around the country drew hundreds of thousands more in opposition to the continued, heinous sanctioning of the murder of so many unborn children in our country.

Meanwhile, on the date of the anniversary itself, the New York state legislature passed a measure, signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo, which allows abortions at any point in the pregnancy—“within 24 weeks from the commencement of pregnancy, or there is an absence of fetal viability, or at any time when necessary to protect a patient’s life or health” (New York State Senate, Senate Bill S2796, 2017–2018 Legislative Session).

The broad language of this bill is alarming for two reasons. First, it permits abortions “at any time”—meaning right up until birth. Second, the vaguely



inclusive language of “to protect a patient’s life or health” could be construed to allow abortions in any circumstances because a woman’s “health” is always at some risk in giving birth. Some have argued this bill could even be used to sanction killing a child as it is being born.

Despite attempts to justify this practice, even by some who claim to follow the Bible, abortion is murder, in flagrant violation of the ultimate Supreme Court of Almighty God in heaven. It is sometimes resorted to in dealing with pregnancy resulting from sexual relations outside of marriage in disobedience to other laws of God. Yet often it is sought as a matter of personal convenience even

if the child is conceived within marriage. Abortion stands in utter defiance of the ultimate Father of all of us and these precious children—God having made human beings to be part of His family.

The death of innocents brings a curse on the land that demands justice (Numbers 35:33–34). New York, all America and the world at large need to take heed. Thankfully, God stands ready to forgive when a person or a people sincerely repents (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The good news is that God will bring an end to the horrifying practice of abortion when Jesus Christ returns. In His great power and mercy, as insurmountable as it may seem, God will ultimately bring healing and restoration. (Sources: CDC.gov, NYSenate.gov.)

Puzzling mass disappearance of insects

A disturbing new development in the natural world has recently been uncovered. Insect populations are plummeting. In a *New York Times Magazine* article titled “The Insect Apocalypse Is Here,” contributing writer Brooke Jarvis points out:

“In the United States, scientists recently found the population of monarch butterflies fell by 90 percent in the last 20 years, a loss of 900 million individuals; the rusty-patched bumblebee, which once lived in 28 states, dropped by 87 percent over the same period. With other, less-studied insect species, one butterfly researcher told me, ‘all we can do is wave our arms and say, ‘It’s not here anymore!’”

“Still, the most disquieting thing wasn’t the disappearance of certain species of insects; it was the deeper worry . . . that a whole insect world might be quietly going missing, a loss of abundance that could alter the planet in unknowable ways. ‘We notice the losses,’ says David Wagner, an entomologist at the University of Connecticut. ‘It’s the diminishment that we don’t see’” (Dec. 1, 2018).

While it is difficult for scientists to discern the cause of these dwindling insect populations, the lengthy piece quoted experts explaining some of the theories behind the problem, including the much-talked-about colony collapse disorder affecting bees:

“Like other species, insects are responding to what

Chris Thomas, an insect ecologist at the University of York, has called ‘the transformation of the world’: not just a changing climate but also the widespread conversion, via urbanization, agricultural intensification and so on, of natural spaces into human ones, with fewer and fewer resources ‘left over’ for nonhuman creatures to live on. What resources remain are often contaminated [by environmental pollutants and other harmful factors].

“Hans de Kroon [an ecologist at Radboud University in the Netherlands] characterizes the life of many modern insects as trying to survive from one dwindling oasis to the next but with ‘a desert in between, and at worst it’s a poisonous desert.’ Of particular concern are neonicotinoids, neurotoxins that were thought to affect only treated crops but turned out to accumulate in the landscape and to be consumed by all kinds of nontargeted bugs.

“People talk about the ‘loss’ of bees to colony collapse disorder, and that appears to be the right word: Affected hives aren’t full of dead bees, but simply mysteriously empty. A leading theory is that exposure to neurotoxins leaves bees unable to find their way home. Even hives exposed to low levels of neonicotinoids have been shown to collect less pollen and produce fewer eggs and far fewer queens. Some recent studies found bees doing better in cities than



in the supposed countryside” (ibid.).

A surprising verse in the little-understood book of Revelation shows that the Creator of all things, including insects and the vital role they play, will eventually intervene in mankind’s affairs to put an end to its destructive paths. Revelation 11:18 warns that God will “destroy those who destroy the earth.” And other passages of Scripture reveal that under the coming reign of Christ a clean and healthful environment will be restored. While current trends can be discouraging, those who take God at His Word can be comforted that He will ultimately bring healing to His entire creation. (Source: *The New York Times Magazine*.)

U.S. House of Representatives lurches left

As *Beyond Today* has often noted, Bible prophecy tells us a day is coming when America will no longer be a powerful player on the world scene. And we sometimes discuss governmental policies and actions that may hasten the crippling of the nation and its collapse. In some of the proposals of the new majority party in the House of Representatives we could be seeing seeds of the country's eventual downfall.

Through November elections control of the U.S. House of Representatives passed from the Republican to the Democratic Party—thus moving from a more conservative position to a more liberal-progressive one. It is the first time Democrats have had control of the House in nearly a decade, and they are seeking change.

First and foremost, they plan to launch further investigations into President Donald Trump. It was reported in January that House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel was “planning to dissolve the panel’s terrorism subcommittee and instead create a panel to focus on investigating matters related to President Trump” (“New York Dem Shutting Down Terrorism Committee to Create Trump Investigation Panel,” Fox News, Jan. 11, 2019).

Removing a committee focused on terrorism to go after the president is politically self-serving and short-

sighted. Government infighting will result in a lack of focus on the safety and well-being of the nation.

In another story, “new House majority leader Nancy Pelosi reportedly spent the holidays at the Fairmont Orchid on Kona [in Hawaii], contemplating future climate-change legislation and still adamant in opposing the supposed vanity border wall” (Victor



U.S. House Democrat leader Nancy Pelosi.

Davis Hanson, “The Immorality of Illegal Immigration,” *National Review*, Dec. 31, 2018).

Other liberal lawmakers have proposed a “Green New Deal” that would transform American society, in the process essentially banning air travel and fossil fuels. Aggressive climate change policies like this will be enormously expensive for businesses and for indi-

viduals—especially if carbon taxes are implemented, which would serve to redistribute wealth within the nation and from America to other countries. At any rate, a new initiative like this will have huge negative repercussions and would weaken the U.S. economy.

Another concerning agenda item is that of seeking to take away the voice of more conservative middle America. “Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Tenn., introduced legislation to create a constitutional amendment that would eliminate the electoral college system and replace it with a model based entirely on the outcome of the national popular vote . . . The electoral college enhances the power of voters in smaller states. Without the electoral college, voters in a handful of highly populated states would have significantly more power to determine the outcome of every presidential election, which is exactly what Democrats want” (Justin Haskins, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Other Dems Want You to Embrace a Socialist Agenda,” Fox News, Jan. 12).

Other proposed legislation would increase corporate taxes (ultimately passed along to consumers), raise taxes on wealthier Americans and restore voting rights to convicted felons. This is just the start of some of the policies on deck. Consider what kind of impact such legislation will have on citizens, as well as how it will position the United States on the world scene. (Sources: Fox News, *National Review*.)

ISIS still deadly in the Philippines

The Islamic State terror group (ISIS) claimed responsibility for a bombing in late January at a Roman Catholic cathedral in the city of Jolo in Sulu province in the southern Philippines.

As reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, twin explosions there “killed at least 20 people in a bloody demonstration of remaining extremist threats in a Muslim-majority region where voters [had just] . . . overwhelmingly backed self-rule and ratified a peace deal between the government and mainstream separatists” (Jake Watts, “Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Philippine Attack That Killed at Least 20,” Jan. 27, 2019).

While the nation of the Philippines is predominantly Catholic, this region that voted for autonomy is majority Muslim, though Sulu province itself voted against it. The area has for a while been a hotbed of Islamist extremists, particularly the terror group Abu Sayyaf. Its fighters were among hundreds who swore allegiance to ISIS in 2017 and held out against the Philippine military for five months.

Regarding the latest incident, “the manner and timing of the bombing suggests

that it was meant to sow terror in order to affect the course of peace efforts,’ said Rep. Ruffy Biazon, senior vice chairman of a House of Representatives committee on national security. The attack ‘is a direct challenge to the efforts that the government is pushing for to achieve peace in the southern Philippines’” (ibid.).

What does this mean for negotiations concerning the region?

“Analysts said the bombing is unlikely to derail the path to autonomy, which will result in a regional parliament that will be elected in 2022, but could upset fragile relations, especially with Christians who are already uneasy about being included in a self-governing Muslim-majority region.”

ISIS is of course not looking for peace treaties and talks to work. It still seeks power on

the world scene and remains intent on instilling fear in any way possible. The cowardly action of planting bombs in a place of worship deliberately sends the message that no one is safe. God speed His coming Kingdom in which Jesus Christ will rule in righteousness, showing the world the way to peace. (Source: *The Wall Street Journal*.)

Recent ISIS attacks in the Philippines show by their manner and timing that they are meant to cause fear and terror in order to affect the course of peace efforts in the region.

How can you make sense of the news?

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Today's Arms Race: How Will It End?

America, Russia and China are locked in a new arms race involving unprecedented weapons technology. Will this growing arms race end the human race?

by Justin Palm

What if you discovered your neighbor—one with a violent past and prone to other disturbing behavior—was quietly shopping for an assault rifle? You knew he already had a pistol and a few hunting rifles, but now he is stockpiling large amounts of ammunition and pursuing heavier arms.

Next you learn he is secretly modifying other weapons in his basement to make them more lethal. As the months pass, you are shocked to see he now has weapons pointed out his side window at your house. Then you start seeing surveillance drones hovering over your backyard. You and your family are confused, scared.

Then imagine that there was no police force to call, no sheriff or federal agency.

You can either confront him about his intentions, do nothing and allow him to potentially harm your family, or arm yourself to prepare for an engagement.

What would you do?

Change “neighbor” to “country” in this scenario, and this is

the conundrum world leaders face—arm or face destruction. In a world with a history of broken trust, most leading nations have chosen to build up their militaries—some for mere defense and others for conquest.

“Mistrust and arm”

One of U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s diplomatic philosophies was “trust but verify.” He first used this phrase during talks with Soviet Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The result was a December 1987 treaty to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear forces and shorter-range missiles (the INF treaty).

If Reagan’s approach embodied a hopeful but skeptical belief in the goodness of man, the apparent view of leaders today is “mistrust and arm.” It’s no coincidence that the INF treaty is now falling apart, with the United States announcing its withdrawal amid claims of Russian cheating, and Russia reciprocating with its own withdrawal.

One of Reagan’s predecessors, Theodore Roosevelt, popularized the catchy saying, “Walk softly and carry a big stick.” The

implication was that the big stick be bigger than anyone else's. The goal of the arms race is not just to defend the homeland but to develop bigger, better, deadlier, and more effective and sophisticated weaponry.

Rapidly advancing technology has brought countries once separated by vast miles of ocean and land together as neighbors. By air, land and sea, countries like Russia, China, the United States and North Korea are able to attack one another with the push of a button. Thousands of miles can be bridged in a short time with hypersonic missiles carrying nuclear payloads. With these—including Russia's Khinzal, Avangard and Kalibr-M, China's Starry-Sky 2 and America's Arrow and Hacksaw—lies the power to wipe out mankind many times over.

History tells us that weapons, once developed, *are* used. Dramatic accelerations in military build-up *eventually leads to war.*

Can humanity survive a rapidly accelerating military competition? Many people, including Christians, would be surprised to learn that Jesus Christ addressed today's military ramp-up. He also foretold how it would end—with horrific total war culminating in near human annihilation before the setting up of the Kingdom of God on earth. But first, a look at today's war climate.

New technology, new threats

Hypersonic missiles can now travel at Mach 5 (*five times the speed of sound*) or faster, making them incredibly hard to shoot down. They are also difficult to defend against because of their altitude and ability to shift course in midair.

Russian technology has advanced dramatically in recent years. As *Popular Mechanics* recently reported: "Russia tested a new hypersonic weapons program on Wednesday, December 26th, designed to sneak under U.S. ballistic missile defenses. Avangard is a winged glider weapon boosted high into the atmosphere by a ballistic missile, which then descends on its target at speeds in excess of 15,000 miles an hour. Avangard will reportedly enter Russian service in 2019. Avangard is one of several new nuclear weapons programs announced in 2018 in a grim speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin" (Kyle Mizokami, "Russia Tests Yet Another Hypersonic Weapon," Dec. 27, 2018).

In early January, Russian news agency TASS reported that Moscow is developing a new cruise missile named Kalibr-M, which will be able to hit targets 2,800 miles away with conventional and nuclear payloads. A quoted source explained that "the new missile will differ from the existing Kalibr missiles in service both in terms of its longer range and dimensions. 'It will be much larger, the weight of its warhead will approach 1 tonne' . . . According to the source, large surface ships will be equipped with it, starting with frigates, as well as nuclear submarines. 'Kalibr-M is designed to destroy land facilities and will be able to carry both conventional and nuclear warheads'" ("New Kalibr-M Cruise Missile With Range of Over 4,500 Km in Development in Russia," Jan. 8, 2019).

Not to be outdone, China is also well underway in its testing

of such deadly hypersonic missiles.

Nuclear torpedoes, anthrax bombs and EMPs

At sea, Russia now possesses a nuclear tsunami-causing torpedo called Poseidon: "Vladimir Putin has unveiled a massive underwater drone that could cause 300 ft tsunamis with its two megatons of nuclear power. The Poseidon nuclear drone will travel underwater in a specialised submarine—it has been designed to wipe out enemy naval bases . . . If deployed the weapon could produce tsunamis capable of causing mass destruction equal to that of the natural disaster in Fukushima, Japan in 2011" (Peggy Jones, "Putin Unveils Underwater Poseidon Nuclear Drone That Can Trigger 300ft Tsunamis to Wipe Out Russia's Enemy Naval Bases," *The Sun*, May 18, 2018).

North Korea is reportedly creating a sophisticated biological weapons program that experts say is more of a threat than their nuclear plans. A recent article in *The New York Times* opened with: "Pound for pound, the deadliest arms of all time are not nuclear but biological. A single gallon of anthrax, if suitably distributed, could end human life on Earth" (Emily Baumgaertner and William Broad, "North Korea's Less-Known Military Threat: Biological Weapons," Jan. 15, 2019).

The report continued: "According to an analysis issued by the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey last month, North Korea is collaborating with foreign researchers to learn biotechnology skills and build machinery. As a result, the country's capabilities are increasing rapidly. 'North Korea is far more likely to use biological weapons than nuclear ones,' said Andrew C. Weber, a Pentagon official in charge of nuclear, chemical and biological defense programs under President Obama. 'The program is advanced, underestimated and highly lethal.'"

Beyond these threats, *The Washington Free Beacon* reported that a number of nations are working on nuclear weapons that could wipe out the electrical grid for hundreds of miles:

"Several nations, including China and Russia, are building powerful nuclear bombs designed to produce super-electromagnetic pulse (EMP) waves capable of devastating all electronics—from computers to electric grids—for hundreds of miles, according to a newly-released congressional study. A report by the now-defunct Commission to Assess the Threat to the United States from EMP Attack, for the first time reveals details on how nuclear EMP weapons are integrated into the military doctrines of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran" (Bill Gertz, "China, Russia Building Super-EMP Bombs for 'Blackout Warfare,'" Jan. 24, 2019).

American response

America has also been creating hypersonic missiles, dubbed Arrow and Hacksaw. U.S. President Donald Trump spoke at the Pentagon at the Jan. 17 release of the 2019 *Missile Defense Review* (MDR), a Defense Dept. summary then noting:

"When it comes to defending America against the threat of a missile attack from any nation, President Donald J. Trump said today that 'the goal is simple. It is to ensure we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States, anytime, anywhere and any place' . . .

“Missile defense is so important in a time of rapidly evolving threats from around the world, he said. Adversaries are acquiring bigger and stronger arsenals. They’re increasing their lethal strike capabilities and they’re focused on building long-range missiles that can reach targets within the United States.

“As president, my first duty is the defense of our country,” he said” (David Vergun, “Trump Pledges to Protect America From Any Enemy Missile,” dod.defense.gov).

A key aspect of the released review was about developing “an effective missile defense against emerging advanced cruise and hypersonic weapons” (*ibid.*).

The MDR itself points out: “In the past several years, for example, North Korea rapidly advanced and expanded its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program. Iran extended the range of its ballistic missile systems and may seek to field an operational ICBM. While Russia and China pose separate challenges and are distinct in many ways, both are enhancing their existing offensive missile systems and developing advanced sea- and air-launched cruise missiles as well as hypersonic capabilities” (*Missile Defense Review*, 2019, p. 2).

The Dept. of Defense’s press release explained why these new missiles are so dangerous: “According to the MDR, one impetus for the new missile defense strategy is that hypersonic glide vehicles are being developed by Russia and China that can fly at Mach 5 plus . . . In particular, hypersonic weapons have been a concern because they can fly low, fast and can quickly change course. Therefore that makes them hard to target.”

Tit for tat

In response to America’s new missile defense plan, Russia’s Foreign Ministry released a statement that “condemned the strategy as irresponsible and an act of confrontation” (Audrey Kuzmin and Christian Lowe, “Russia Says New U.S. Missile Strategy Will Unleash Arms Race in Space,” Reuters, Jan. 18, 2019).

It also warned: “The implementation of these ideas . . . will have the most negative consequences for international security and stability . . . We would like to call on the U.S. administration to think again and walk away from this irresponsible attempt to re-launch, on a new and more high-tech basis, the still-remembered Reagan-era “Star Wars” program” (*ibid.*).

This back-and-forth process, fueled by hardline political stances, is how arms races can lead to all-out war.

And make no mistake. While some might speculate that these weapons will not be used, this is naïve. History tells us that weapons, once developed, ultimately *are* used. Dramatic accelerations in military build-up *eventually lead to war*.

In a paper titled “The War Profiteers: WWI,” historian Douglas Newton passed on a critical observation: “When the war ended, Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary in 1914, looked back in his memoirs at the whole sorry record of vast armaments that failed to achieve security or deter war. He concluded: “The moral is obvious: it is that great armaments lead inevitably to war.”

“Beginning of sorrows”

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ’s disciples looked at the world around them and wondered what would take place before His second coming. Jesus answered, His words shedding light on today’s arms race: “You will hear of *wars* and

rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For *nation will rise against nation*, and *kingdom against kingdom*. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Matthew 24:6-8, emphasis added throughout).

First note the gradual ramp-up, called “the *beginning* of sorrows.” A number of other Bible translations have “beginning of *birth pains*”—which come with increasing frequency and intensity. Besides a rise in actual wars, there would be an increase in “rumors of wars.” We are living in dangerous times, but large-scale war has not broken out in our day—*yet*. Rumors abound. Saber rattling is everywhere. Military spending is on the rise. Wild new military technologies stretch the imagination.

But we are not to be troubled.

Bad news before the good

What comes after the early phase of end-time world trials? The Bible foretells a cataclysmic World War III culminating at Jerusalem!

In Zechariah 14:1-4, God reveals: “Behold, the day of the LORD is coming . . . I will gather *all the nations* to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity . . . Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle.” Many other prophecies, including some in the book of Revelation, also outline this global catastrophe.

Jesus also spoke of this time in Matthew 24:21-22: “For that will be a time of greater horror than anything the world has ever seen or will ever see again. In fact, unless that time of calamity is shortened [cut short from what it would lead to], the entire human race will be destroyed. But it will be shortened for the sake of God’s chosen ones” (verses 21-22, New Living Translation).

The Bible reveals God will intervene to save humankind from self-extinction. Without this divine intervention, mankind would face annihilation. Only in recent decades has it been easy to see how this could happen through modern military technology!

Finally, Zechariah 14 shows this global war culminating with Jesus returning to earth to establish His Kingdom: “And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east” (verse 4).

While political and military analysts debate where world events are heading, Christians can have the “sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:19, King James Version) and be “not troubled.” Take heart as you read today’s shocking headlines. Those who are close to God can understand the overall framework of what lies ahead! **BT**



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Christians Who Don't Celebrate Easter: What Do They Know?

Easter is the most important holiday for hundreds of millions of believers around the world. Yet thousands of Christians don't observe it. Do they know something that others don't?

by Jerold Aust

Every spring, the anticipation and excitement of Easter is electrifying for many people. Churches prepare elaborate Easter programs that illustrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Parents take time to color Easter eggs and hide them so their children can hunt for them.

It's typical for TV movies this time of year to depict Easter as an enjoyable occasion of renewed happiness. Television advertisements and commercial businesses also get very involved with Easter as they offer colorful Easter baskets, Easter costumes and chocolate rabbits to celebrate this major religious event.

Many churches advertise outdoor Easter sunrise services, with any and all invited. Weather permitting, the Easter celebration is visually reinforced by watching the sun rise in the east.

But what do bunnies and colored eggs have to do with Jesus' resurrection?

And if this celebration is so important, why didn't Jesus teach His apostles and the early Church to observe it? The books of the New Testament were written over a span of decades after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, yet nowhere do we see so much as a hint of any kind of Easter celebration!

So where exactly did Easter and its customs come from? Why do hundreds of millions of people celebrate the holiday today?

Can we find the popular Christian Easter in the Bible?

Easter Sunday is considered the most important religious festival in today's Christianity. "The Easter feast has been and still is regarded as the greatest in the Christian church, since it commemorates the most important event in the life of its Founder" (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*,

1986, Vol. 2, "Easter"). Given its popularity, one would think that surely this observance is found in God's Word.

Some cite Acts 12:4 as authority for celebrating Easter. But there's a problem in that Easter isn't really mentioned there at all. The King James Bible translators substituted "Easter" for the Greek word *Pascha*, which means "Passover." "The word [Easter] does not properly occur in Scripture, although [the King James Version] has it in Acts 12:4 where it stands for Passover, as it is rightly rendered in RV [Revised Version]" (*ibid.*).

Part of the confusion resulted from early apostate Christians referring to the contrived Sunday resurrection festival as *Pascha* or *Passover* on the basis of the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread following Passover being referred to as Passover also. In Greek and Romance languages, the annual Sunday festival is still erroneously called Passover, while in Germanic languages it was given a name from pre-Christian tradition, which has come into English as *Easter*.

The vast majority of Bible translations recognize the error in the King James Version and rightly translate the word as "Passover" in Acts 12:4. The truth is, "there is no trace of Easter celebration in the [New Testament]" (*ibid.*).

Where did Easter come from?

If Easter isn't found in the Bible, where exactly did it come from? And just exactly what does the name *Easter* mean?

It's important to review credible historical sources to understand the celebration's true history. For example, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us: "At Easter, popular customs reflect many ancient pagan survivals—in this instance, connected with spring fertility rites, such as the symbols of

the Easter egg and the Easter hare or rabbit” (15th edition, *Macropaedia*, Vol. 4, p. 605, “Church Year”).

In the ancient world of the Middle East, people were far more connected to the land and cycles of nature than we are today. They depended on the land’s fertility and crops to survive. Spring, when fertility returned to the land after the long desolation of winter, was a much-anticipated and welcomed time for them.

Many peoples marked the coming of spring with celebrations and worship of their gods and goddesses, particularly those associated with fertility. Among such deities were Baal and Astarte or Ashtoreth, mentioned and condemned frequently in the Bible, whose worship typically included ritual sex to promote fertility throughout the land.

It was only natural to the peoples of the ancient Middle East to incorporate symbols of fertility—such as eggs and rabbits, which reproduce in great numbers—into those pagan celebrations for their gods. As *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes above, Easter eggs and the Easter rabbit are simply a continuation of these ancient spring fertility rites.

The 19th-century Scottish Protestant clergyman Alexander Hislop’s work *The Two Babylons* is still considered a definitive work on pagan customs that survive in today’s religious practices.

Regarding Easter, he wrote: “What means the term Easter itself? It is not a Christian name. It bears its Chaldean origin on its very forehead. Easter is nothing else than Astarte, one of the titles of Beltis, the queen of heaven, whose name, as pronounced by the people of Nineveh, was evidently identical with that now in common use in this country. That name, as found by [early archaeologist Sir Austen Henry] Layard on the Assyrian monuments, is Ishtar” (1959, p. 103).

The name *Easter*, then, comes not from the Bible. Instead its roots go far back to the ancient pre-Christian Mesopotamian goddess *Ishtar*, known in the Bible as Astarte or Ashtoreth.

Ancient resurrection celebrations

What did worship of this goddess Ishtar involve? “Temples

to Ishtar had many priestesses, or sacred prostitutes, who symbolically acted out the fertility rites of the cycle of nature. Ishtar has been identified with the Phoenician Astarte, the Semitic Ashtoreth, and the Sumerian Inanna. Strong similarities also exist between Ishtar and the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus.

“Associated with Ishtar was the young god Tammuz [mentioned in Ezekiel 8:14], considered both divine and mortal . . . In Babylonian mythology Tammuz died annually and was reborn year after year, representing the yearly cycle of the seasons and the crops. This pagan belief later was identified with the pagan gods Baal and Anat in Canaan” (*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1995, “Gods, Pagan,” p. 509).

Alan Watts, an expert in comparative religion, wrote: “It would be tedious to describe in detail all that has been handed down to us about the various rites of Tammuz . . . and many others . . . But their universal theme—the drama of death and resurrection—makes them the forerunners of the Christian Easter, and thus the first ‘Easter services.’ As we go on to describe the Christian observance of Easter we shall see how many of its customs and ceremonies resemble these former rites” (*Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, 1950, p. 58).

He goes on to explain how such practices as fasting during Lent, erecting an image of the deity in the temple sanctuary, singing hymns of mourning, lighting candles and nighttime services before Easter morning originated with ancient idolatrous practices (pp. 59-62).

Another author, Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), knighted for his contributions to our understanding of ancient religions, describes the culmination of the ancient idolatrous worship this way: “The sorrow of the worshippers was turned to joy . . . The tomb was opened: the god had risen from the dead; and as the priest touched the lips of the weeping mourners with balm, he softly whispered in their ears the glad tidings of salvation.

“The resurrection of the god was hailed by his disciples as a promise that they too would issue triumphant from the corruption of the grave. On the morrow . . . the divine resurrection

What Some Christians Know—and Why They Don’t Observe Easter

Remarkably, there are thousands of Christians who don’t celebrate Easter, yet they firmly believe in Jesus Christ, His sacrifice, and His resurrection. Why have they made this choice? Here they explain in their own words:

An office manager wrote: “I don’t observe Easter because it has nothing to do with Christ, His sacrifice or the Bible. It derives its origins from pagan celebrations and rituals God tells us not to learn: ‘Learn not the way of the heathen’ (Jeremiah 10:2, KJV).

“God does not want us to learn the way of the heathen lest we start to do as the heathen do. What do the Easter bunny and colored eggs have to do with Christ and His dying for the sins of the world and being resurrected on the third day? They don’t have anything to do with it at all. Christianity has adopted pagan festivals and called them Christian and, in doing so, has disobeyed God.”

—A.H., *Australia*

A high school principal shared the reasons he doesn’t celebrate Easter: “My wife and I, many years ago,

discovered that Easter is a pagan custom and has nothing to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Easter was never observed by the early New Testament Church. Once we found out about its pagan origin, we stopped observing it.

“The Easter bunny, Easter eggs, Easter parade and all the customs of this holiday are not in the Bible and should not be observed. We do believe, however, in the New Testament Passover, as observed by the New Testament Church, and directed by the apostle Paul in 1

Corinthians 11, and we also believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

—D.S., *California*

An editor gave her feelings about Easter: “As a wife and mother, I don’t observe Easter because I realize that dressing up for Easter Sunday service in the latest fashion, sometimes including a hat, for myself and children has absolutely nothing to do with the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In fact, it appears to make a mockery of it.

“And to allow and teach youngsters to hide and hunt colored

was celebrated with a wild outburst of glee. At Rome, and probably elsewhere, the celebration took the form of a carnival” (*The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 350).

A new celebration with ancient idolatrous roots

In various forms, worship of this god under the names Tam-muz, Adonis and Attis, among others, spread from the outer reaches of the Roman Empire to Rome itself. There a truly remarkable development took place: Early Catholic Church leaders merged customs and practices associated with this

festival [of Easter] to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ” (p. 359).

Surprisingly, the celebration of Easter didn’t finally win out until A.D. 325, nearly 300 years after Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection!

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains in the section titled “The Liturgical Year,” “At the Council of Nicaea in 325, all the Churches agreed that Easter . . . should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first full moon . . . after the vernal equinox” (1995, p. 332).

Up until this time, many believers had continued to commemorate Jesus’ death through the biblical Passover as Jesus and the apostles had instructed (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Now, however, with the power of

the Roman Empire behind it, the Catholic Church enforced its preference for Easter Sunday. Those who wished to continue to observe the biblical Passover had to go underground to avoid persecution.

Would Jesus Christ celebrate Easter?

The record of the New Testament is clear: The faithful members of the early Church continued to observe all that the apostles taught them, as they were taught by Jesus Christ. The record of history is equally clear: In later centuries new customs, practices and doctrines were introduced that were quite foreign to the original Christians, forming a new “Christianity” they would scarcely recognize.

So a key question is, should a Christian follow what Jesus taught or what later religious teachers taught?

It’s always a good idea to ask the question, *what would Jesus do?*

If Jesus were in the flesh today, would He celebrate Easter? The simple answer is *No*. He does not change. “Jesus Christ is *the same, yesterday, today, and forever*,” as Hebrews 13:8 tells us (emphasis added throughout). Jesus never observed Easter, never sanctioned it and never taught His disciples to celebrate

Jesus never observed Easter, never sanctioned it and never taught His disciples to celebrate it. Nor did the apostles teach the Church to do so.

earlier “resurrected” god and spring fertility celebrations and applied them to the resurrected Son of God.

The customs of the ancient fertility and resurrection celebrations weren’t the only ones morphed into a new “Christian” celebration, but they are among the most obvious. After all, many historians readily admit the origin of the name *Easter* and the ancient fertility symbolism of rabbits and decorated eggs (which you can verify yourself in almost any encyclopedia).

Frazer observes, “When we reflect how often the Church has skillfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis” (p. 345).

He goes on to note that the desire to bring pagans into the Catholic Church without forcing them to surrender their idolatrous celebrations “may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic [Middle Eastern] god which fell at the same season . . . The Church may have consciously adapted the new

eggs and have stuffed rabbits or bunnies is not instructing them in the right principles God expects them to live by. There are so many marvelous godly principles that do that. I do not desire to mislead or deceive them.”

—M.A., Texas

A university professor gave several reasons that Easter shouldn’t be celebrated: “The only time the term *Easter* is mentioned in the Bible, it is a mistranslation of the godly ordained Passover (Acts 12:4). The term *Easter* is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. Its observance is not commanded elsewhere in the Bible, and yet many other days are commanded

and described as being kept.

“The events surrounding the resurrection of Christ do not indicate that He rose at sunrise or even close to it. For example, John indicates that by the time Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb it was still dark—Christ had already risen. The etymology of the term *Easter* is traceable back to a false god of fertility and not the Bible.”

—P.A., Georgia

A businessman offered his reasons as to why he doesn’t participate in the Easter celebration: “First of all, the holiday or celebration of Easter by the world’s Christian community is not an event, a

celebration, or a worship service that can be found anywhere in the Bible. In fact, the name *Easter* is really the name of an ancient pagan goddess that has roots in ancient Babylonian times before the birth of Christ.

“Secondly, there is no teaching in the New Testament by either Christ or His apostles about Easter or any related specifics. The practice and observance of Easter came into the Church of Rome well after all the apostles were dead and the Church that Christ established had been scattered.

“Thirdly, if Christ wanted us to observe and honor His resurrection through Easter, why didn’t

He give specific instructions to His disciples and Church leaders? You can’t find any teaching anywhere in the New Testament to observe His resurrection. There’s no festival or ceremonies given or outlined.

“However, there are plenty of instructions and examples of Christ teaching us to honor, remember and observe His death by what we call the Passover. The Bible clearly gives such evidence of Christ being the Passover and the symbolism of this event. Then, following His death, the New Testament apostles and Church continued with the observance of the Passover, not Easter.”

—J.B., North Carolina

Jesus' Time in the Tomb Proves **He Was the Messiah**

Jesus Christ gave one sign that would be proof of His resurrection as our Savior—the amount of time He would spend in the tomb.

Jesus stated, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40).

“And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17). The duration then of Jonah’s experience is the same amount of time Jesus would be in the grave. Jesus said this length of time would be proof that He is our living Savior.

If you want proof as to whether Easter represents Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, all you have to do is count correctly. Following the traditional reckoning of a late-afternoon Good Friday crucifixion to an Easter Sunday morning resurrection, at best one can only come up with one full day, two small parts of daytime and two nights. Yet Jesus said the proof that He was the Messiah was that He would be in the grave or tomb *three days and three nights*.

Something is obviously wrong with the traditional Good Friday–Easter Sunday timing. Where is the third night? It simply doesn’t work, no matter how you try.

A key to counting this time correctly is

found in a proper translation of Matthew 28:1. The Ferrar Fenton translation correctly renders this verse: “After the Sabbaths [plural], towards the dawn of the day following the Sabbaths [plural], Mary, the Magdalene, and the other Mary, came to examine the tomb.”

There were, in fact, *two* Sabbaths that particular week. Putting all the information together, Jesus died in the middle of the week, on a Wednesday afternoon, and was laid in the tomb close to sunset (John 19:31-42). He had to be laid in the tomb by sunset because the night and day that followed were holy (verse 31), the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:4-7), a Holy Day Sabbath that could fall on any day of the week.

Then came Friday, a regular work day, followed by Friday night and Saturday daytime as God’s weekly seventh-day Sabbath. Ferrar Fenton gets it right, translating the plural Greek word *sabbaton* in Matthew 28:1 as *sabbaths*.

Once we understand that *two different Sabbaths* were involved, it becomes clear that Jesus was indeed three days and three nights in the tomb, fulfilling the only sign He gave confirming He was the Messiah. From sunset Wednesday to sunset Thursday was the first night and day; from sunset

Thursday to sunset Friday was the second night and day; and from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday ending the weekly Sabbath was the third night and day—three days and three nights, just as He said.

The prophesied three days and three nights is also the all-important key to recognizing the fact that Jesus was resurrected at the end of the weekly Sabbath and not on Sunday morning.

John 20:1 tells us: “Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, *while it was still dark*, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.” She found the tomb *already empty*, and the angel told Mary that Jesus had *already risen* (Matthew 28:5).

This means He was resurrected before the sunlight of dawn, which puts us back to the actual time of resurrection as being the end of the weekly Sabbath at the time of sunset on Saturday. Comparing and correctly understanding the Gospel accounts makes it clear that Easter sunrise cannot be the time of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ time in the grave—the same amount of time that Jonah was in the belly of a great fish—indeed proves that Jesus was the Messiah. (For greater detail, search for “three days and three nights” on our website at BTmagazine.org.)

it. Nor did the apostles teach the Church to do so.

Today, Jesus would observe the biblical Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread as Scripture teaches and as He practiced and taught (John 13:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). In fact, He specifically said that He anticipated observing the Passover with His true followers “in My Father’s kingdom” after His return (Matthew 26:26-29).

The feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread have deep meaning to Christ’s true disciples. These festivals reveal aspects of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity—commemorating the fact that Jesus died for us and lives in us and for us (1 Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3-4).

Should you observe Easter?

If you want to be a true disciple of

Christ Jesus, you need to carefully examine whether your beliefs agree with the Bible. It is not acceptable to God for us to merely assume that He approves of or accepts non-biblical celebrations regardless of whether they are done for proper motives.

The fact is that God says, “Learn not the way of the heathen”—those who don’t know God’s truth (Jeremiah 10:2, King James Version).

His Word gives us explicit instructions regarding worshipping Him with practices adopted from pagan idolatry: “Do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ *You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods . . . Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to*

it nor take away from it” (Deuteronomy 12:30-32).

Jesus Christ now commands everyone to repent of following traditions that come from false religion: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30; compare Matthew 15:3).

Will you honor Christ’s lifesaving instructions so that God can bless you? He said: “If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor” (John 12:26).

God wants you and me to obey His life-giving Word. When we do, we can serve Christ as His ambassadors on earth. There is no greater calling on earth and throughout time. For your ongoing happiness and security, turn to God now and seek His complete and perfect way! **BT**

Ring Found Bearing Name of Roman Governor Pilate

Pontius Pilate was an obscure Roman governor ruling in an obscure Roman province in the first century. Yet he's the most widely known Roman governor ever, with a name more familiar than most emperors. He's not known for any accomplishments, but rather for ordering the most infamous execution in human history—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Was Pontius Pilate a fabricated individual in fabricated stories about Jesus, as some critics of the Bible would have us believe? That argument lost much of its credibility when a stone bearing his name, part of an inscription dedicating a temple to the Roman Emperor Tiberius, was found in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima, administrative capital and military headquarters for the Roman province of Judea.

Now additional evidence of Pilate's existence has been announced—a copper alloy ring discovered at Herod the Great's mountain fortress of Herodion (also called the Herodium) a few miles from Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

The ring was originally excavated in 1969, but only

after a recent thorough cleaning and photographic examination was it found to bear the Greek inscription



When thoroughly cleaned for the first time, this ring was found to bear a Greek translation of the Latin name "Pilate" on either side of a large wine vessel known as a *krater*.

tion *PILATO*—a Greek translation of a form of the Latin name *Pilate*.

An analysis of the ring by several scholars was published in the prestigious *Israel Exploration Journal* in

late 2018 under the headline, "Ring of Roman Governor Pontius Pilate Who Crucified Jesus Found in Herodion Site in West Bank."

One puzzling aspect of the find is why a wealthy and powerful political figure such as Pilate would own a ring that is relatively cheap and crude?

One of the archaeologists who contributed to the article theorized that perhaps Pilate wore an expensive gold ring for ceremonial and official duties, but a more simple ring like this for everyday wear.

Other suggestions were that it belonged to a family member, a person under his command, or one of his freed slaves. Another hypothesis is that it belonged to a regional administrator in Pilate's government who used the ring to stamp document seals and other items that were being sent to the Roman governor.

Regardless, this ring supports exactly what we read in the Gospels—that at the time of Jesus Christ there really was a Roman governor in Judea named Pilate. He is one of dozens of figures mentioned in the Bible whose existence has been proven by archaeology.

Evidence of Roman Crucifixion Practices Matches Gospel Accounts

Although many historical writings attest to the Roman practice of crucifixion, tangible archaeological proof of the practice has been hard to come by for several reasons. By definition, crucifixion victims were condemned criminals whose remains typically didn't see an honorable burial by which those remains might be preserved. Also, the practice was banned by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the A.D. 300s, so any skeletal remains of crucifixion victims would be considerably decayed due to the passage of so many centuries of time.

However, that doesn't mean no evidence has been found. The April 2018 edition of the journal *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* reported on a new analysis of the skeleton of a man originally found in northern Italy in 2007. "... Despite the poorly preserved conditions, we could demonstrate the presence of signs on the skeleton that indicate a violence similar to crucifixion," co-author Emanuela Gualdi told the Italian-language newspaper *Estense*.

"The importance of the discovery lies in the fact that it is the second case documented in the world," co-author Ursula Thun Hohenstein told *Estense*. "Although this brutal type of execution has been perfected and practiced for a long time by the Romans, the difficulties in preserving damaged bones and, subsequently, in interpreting traumas, hinder the recognition of crucifixion victims, making this testimony even more precious."

Researchers concluded that the remains were of a 30- to 34-year-old man who had died and been buried during the Roman era. A hole about a third of an inch (9mm) in diameter passed entirely through the right heel bone. While not entirely conclusive, piercing of the heel bone by a crucifixion nail seemed to be the most logical explanation for the unusual wound.

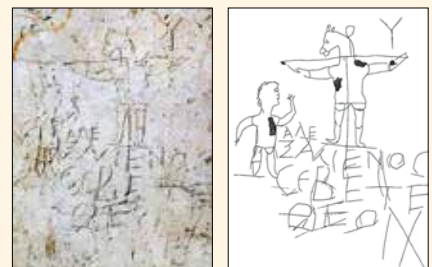
This corresponds to the prophetic description of Jesus Christ's crucifixion wherein His hands and feet would be pierced (Psalm 22:16). In the case of these skeletal remains from Italy, the other heel bone was missing and the hands and arm bones were too degraded to provide any further evidence of crucifixion.

This latest find corresponds closely with remains found of a crucified man in Jerusalem in 1968. In that case archaeologists excavated a tomb from the first century where they found the remains of a young man 20 to 24 years old. One of his heel bones was still pierced by a seven-inch iron nail to which was still attached a small fragment of olive wood.

While the Romans normally retrieved and reused such nails, in this case the nail had apparently hit a knot in the wood and bent, preventing it from being retrieved—so it was left in the man's heel bone when his body was entombed 2,000 years ago.

Another intriguing piece of evidence regarding crucifixion is a bit of graffiti dating from the late

first to early third century scratched into a piece of plaster found in Rome. It depicts a person standing before a crucified, donkey-headed figure and bears the inscription "Alexamenos worships his god"—apparently intended as an insult to an early Christian named Alexamenos and his religion of Christianity.



Now located in Rome's Palatine Museum, this graffiti scratched in plaster was found in Rome and dates from the late first to early third century. It depicts a man standing before a crucified, donkey-headed figure. The wording accompanying the crude illustration translates as "Alexamenos worships his god"—apparently an insult to this individual and the Christian religion.

Many such discoveries from the field of archaeology confirm details we read about in the Bible as well as shed light on what we read there. If you'd like to learn more, download our free e-booklet *The Bible and Archaeology* parts 1 and 2 by searching for "e-booklet" at ucg.org.

Framed Forever by a Tear

The picture found in the Bible's shortest verse, "Jesus wept," speaks volumes about God's love and compassion for those He has made.

by Robin Webber

The Bible is communicated to us in written words, but often with enough description that in reading it, powerful mental images are formed in our minds that stay with us. There are many such pictures that come to mind when we freeze-frame various snapshots of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, this One who alongside God the Father was also God and was made flesh as a human being (John 1:1-3, 14).

I picture a snapshot of a 12-year-old Jesus standing as a boy among aged teachers in the Jerusalem temple courtyard with their mouths wide open in amazement at His scriptural understanding.

One of my favorite pictures is Jesus laughing and smiling along with family members as they celebrate a wedding in Cana. I envision an expansive picture of Jesus lifting His hands skyward in blessing the fish and loaves brought before Him as thousands of people eagerly surround Him.

I picture a zealous Jesus in righteous anger overturning the merchants' tables in the temple area not once but twice. I linger and smile at my mental snapshot of Jesus looking down at a water-soaked Peter after the disciple's brief moment of walking on water and lifting Him up and taking him back to the boat with a knowing glance—that there will be another walk of faith in the man's future when He won't sink.

Just two words says it all!

But the picture I want to consider with you is not merely embedded in my mind's eye, but firmly lodged in my heart's fabric. What's encapsulated here enables us to continue on the journey in faithful response to the greatest personal invitation ever offered to humanity by our Master—"Follow Me." This picture is discovered in the shortest verse in Scripture in John 11:35. The power does not come in the number of words, but in what the words say—the moment captured! Just two words: "*Jesus wept.*"

Like U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's two-minute Gettysburg Address, which captures the expansive essence of birth, death and rebirth of a nation torn asunder, in this two-word freeze-frame we are invited to contemplate and embrace that the essence of God's heart is revealed in His Son's emotion forever framed by a tear. Just two words says it all! A living tear never to dry up that streams down through time to be absorbed by every generation of those who heed the great invitation of the One who wept.

The context of this endearing moment is the story of the death of Jesus' dear friend Lazarus of Bethany in Judea and His dramatic encounter with Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, on the way to Lazarus' grave. But first, let's step back

into the story before the moment of encounter on that dusty path to Lazarus' tomb.

Days earlier, Mary and Martha had sent a messenger to Jesus to tell Him regarding their brother, "He whom You love is sick" (John 11:3). He plainly stated: "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (verse 4, New International Version).

The following verses clearly state Jesus' love for Martha and Mary. But the same verses also tell us that He waits two more days to go to Bethany. Why? Christ tells His disciples: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up" (verse 11, NIV)—by which He meant Lazarus died (verse 14). So He purposely waited for that. It was not because of His own security issues that would come from being in the environs of Jerusalem. Rather, as the Son of God, He was empowered to see things to come as if they already were—that His dear friend would be raised from the dead when He arrived to call Him forth from the grave.

When the time was ripe

When the time was ripe—in God's timing—Jesus announced, "Let us go to him" (verse 15). He was vehemently warned not to go. It seemed suicidal, as adversaries were lying in wait. Jesus knew this and that His own time to die was very soon, but not quite yet. He also knew that as He was going to raise one man to life, His own death soon after would be for all and that He likewise would be raised from the dead that all might have life. A foreshadowing of the power Jesus was given over death would be revealed through the raising of Lazarus, the fatal illness occurring, as we earlier saw, "that the Son of God might be glorified through it" (verse 4).

Timing would be everything, and the master of timing was at work. He would finally arrive, approaching the outskirts of Bethany, but now four days after the death of His friend. In the Jewish culture of that day, the timing of four days roared "*utter finality.*"

The separation was seemingly at a place of no return. Christ was walking into the midst of utter despair and even resentment. But man's extremities are the beginning of God's opportunity to turn the page. He knowingly moves towards the first matter at hand to face the sisters who had put out the call that seemed ignored, especially when the family needed Him most.

Martha, ever dutiful, goes out to greet Him and in pain and upset states, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (verse 21). Yet she still trusts that He can call on God to do something (verse 22). Jesus responds, "Your brother will rise again" (verse 23). He further proclaims: "I am

the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (verse 25). Martha responds, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (verse 27).

This was a segue into dealing with Mary who, deep in grief, was still sitting at home. Even within families we all respond differently in grief. Martha notifies Mary that their friend and teacher has come. Mary goes out to meet Jesus, and a crowd follows her, assuming she is going to mourn at her brother's tomb (verses 28-31). It's here the story builds toward the tears that will be shed.

Falling at Christ's feet, Mary's statement to Him echoes Martha's (verse 32). Coming down to us today, the same thought can rattle around in our hearts at times when matters don't go according to our plans. Allow me to paraphrase: "God, where were you? If only, if only, if only!"

In their expanding dialogue of faith the sisters are coming to understand that their friend and teacher is not simply a local "Johnny-on-the-Spot" holy man, but the Son of God who transcends time and space to make the will of God known to us. And that at times He will allow even His friends to die in the here and now to magnify what our Heavenly Father purposes for all eternity. But again, Jesus the Son of God is here also the Son of Man—and His divine care and humanity are about to be triggered by those He loves.

"See how He loved him"

Jesus looks down on Mary who is weeping, as are those who are with her (verse 33). Not simply crying but *weeping*, which is an agonizing experience to behold, though humanly needed. Remember, Jesus is taking this in—not only up close

A living tear streams down through time to be absorbed by every generation of those who heed the great invitation of the One who wept.

but personally. Seeing this, "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled" (same verse).

Then He inquires, "Where have you laid Him?" to validate Lazarus' death (verse 34). John's account next states in the briefest of terms, "Jesus wept" (verse 35).

Before going any further allow me to share that countless sermons and pages of commentary have been written about the implication of these two words. Some express overarching theological explanations that move from Adam and Eve to beyond the events spoken here. And this can be reasonable to explore, but if one looks carefully the obvious answer as to why Jesus wept lies in the context.

Here is a woman, a dear friend, sobbing at His feet as she has collapsed on the dusty road and looking up at Him. Martha was likewise upset. The others gathered were weeping, all sad at the horrible tragedy of Lazarus dying and over the terrible sense of loss and confusion the family was going through.

The crowd surrounding Him is struck as He wept, the people commenting, "See how He loved Him."

But they didn't really get it. Jesus was not sorrowful here

over His friend Lazarus, for He had delayed and was now come for the specific purpose of calling him back to life. Jesus wept for those who were hurting and troubled. He knew what it was like to lose a close loved one. His adoptive father Joseph had died sometime previously and Jesus would have understood and felt the loss that others were now going through.

Yet Jesus always had hope and certainty in the future. It's likely that He also grieved here over the lack of understanding about death and God's plan and His own mission among those mourning. If they only knew, they would not be in such dismay. It was painful for Him to see this. The people would have better concluded, "See how He loves His friends—and all of us."

In Christ's weeping it's revealed that we worship a God who intimately cares about His creation. John's Gospel is in large measure written to a Hellenistic audience in simple eloquence contrasting the God of the universe with the pantheon of false gods who never showed empathy and emotion, for to do so would have meant they were not divine.

It's here that our Heavenly Father is revealed through His Son, whom the Father sent among us that man might be literally touched by God and God in turn through Christ might be touched by man. After all, Jesus' prophesied name is *Immanuel*, meaning "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Here on that dusty road in Bethany, heaven and earth come together for a moment in time to display the compassion of this One who was God and Man—One who can be overwhelmed by His love for His friends and others who are suffering. And this also represented the love of the Father.

Here the tear tells all. It doesn't make Jesus less infallible, but this moment forever framed by a tear makes Him incredible and indispensable. Here God's love for us is caught in flesh.

Today at the right hand of God we have a Savior and High Priest who can "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15) and, may I add, our humanity—our hurts, our longings, and even our despair

over separation from loved ones. It's in the same spirit that the apostle Paul, perhaps recalling Christ's example, encouraged us to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). That too is a part of the invitation of "Follow Me."

"God will wipe away every tear"

The ultimate snapshot offering the great hope of eternity is discovered in Revelation 21:4: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Again, the words express incredible intimacy in describing God's personal touch of wiping away tears. Christ has already had practice with His own tears in Bethany, and now our Heavenly Father tenderly engages. This is ultimately where the greatest invitation ever offered to humanity of "Follow Me" leads as we pause for now and view the love of God forever framed by a tear.

As we journey forward on the great pilgrimage yet before us, always remember and hold on to the reality that God wants you present in that ultimate family picture! **BT**

THE Second RESURRECTION

Humanity's Opportunity for Salvation!

The subject of this lesson is a fundamental truth of the Bible, but the sad fact is that most people haven't heard of it—greatly affecting their conception of the nature and character of God.

What is this great truth? It is the fact that *everyone who has ever lived since the creation of Adam and Eve will eventually understand the Bible and have the opportunity to repent, change and accept God's gift of eternal life!* That includes people who have died without this badly needed understanding.

How can knowing this truth transform our view of God and His plan for mankind? A minister tells this story:

"I grew up attending a Protestant church so, as a young adult, I assumed I had heard every major Bible subject at least mentioned. I understood about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of God's grace. I knew the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. I had heard of the second coming of Christ, the Great Tribulation, the Day of the Lord and 'the' resurrection.

"But at age 21, I learned that some things I had been taught about the Bible were *not true*. Yet even more to my amazement, I heard about 'the *second* resurrection'! At first, I thought it couldn't be true or I would've heard of it. But I soon saw the clear proof in the Scriptures. And then I realized that not only is a plan that includes the second resurrection logical, but that any conceivable plan without it is extremely *illogical!*

"When I think of all my family members and friends who have died without really understanding the Bible, my greatest comfort comes from understanding the reality of the second resurrection!

"For decades now I've been in the ministry, regularly teaching the Bible. But the one Bible subject that is still the most exciting to me is the subject of *the second resurrection!*"

God is all-loving and all-powerful

The Bible says "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). He has "perfect love" (1 John 4:18). "By this we know love, because He [Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became human] laid down His life for us" (1 John 3:16).

God is also "Almighty God" (Genesis 17:1; Revelation 19:15). He is "the Lord God Omnipotent" (Revelation 19:6). For the Creator of the universe "there is nothing too hard" (Jeremiah 32:17), as "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

These scriptures are clear. But consider an apparent dilemma. Most people die without ever learning about the true God and the way to eternal life. If God loves everyone and is trying to save everyone now, does He lack power since certainly not everyone is being reached with the gospel—His revelation to man? If God has the power to do anything He chooses to do, why does He allow some people to die without giving them lifesaving understanding?

Once you understand the second resurrection, you'll see how God is both all-loving *and* all-powerful—and that He has



God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

“But *the rest of the dead* did not live again until the thousand years were finished.

“This is *the first resurrection*. Blessed and holy is he who has part in *the first resurrection*. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4-6, emphasis added throughout).

“The first resurrection” is specifically mentioned in verses 5 and 6. In previous lessons in this “Bible Prophecy and You” series, we learned that the first resurrection is the resurrection of the saints (the true followers of Christ) that will take place at Christ’s second coming. The fact that “the second death has no power” over them means there is no possibility of them dying again—they are then made *immortal*. They will live for the 1,000 years and beyond into eternity.

The word “second” is not used in these verses, but the word “first” implies there will be at least one more resurrection—at least a *second one*. As *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* brings out: “Why does John call this the ‘first’ resurrection? The term *prote* clearly implies the first in a series of two or more” (Alan Johnson, 1981, notes on Revelation 20:6).

Verse 5 speaks of “the *rest of the dead*.” That means *everyone else* who has lived and died since Adam and Eve! This tells us they will “live again,” and it tells us when—after “the thousand years were finished.”

The “rest of the dead” will be resurrected to physical human life so they can learn God’s truth and have the opportunity to live by it, as will be explained later.

The two sentences in verse 5 seem at first to be out of order. But notice that the main subject of verses 4 through 6 is the “first resurrection.” The first sentence in verse 5 is inserted as a parenthetical clarification about those *not* in the first resurrection. It becomes

clear if you put parentheses around that first sentence, as some Bible versions do. For example, the New English Translation says, “(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.) This [what came before the parentheses and what follows this sentence] is the first resurrection.”

► How does the Bible describe the time of judgment when most people who have ever lived will be judged?

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.

“And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Revelation 20:11-12).

The purpose of resurrecting “the rest of the dead” (verse 5) is so they can experience *their* time of judgment. Many are aware of a second resurrection, sometimes called the general resurrection, but they typically view it as an immediate sentencing of all non-Christians to final condemnation.

If God has the power to do anything, why does He allow so many people to die without ever learning the way to eternal life?

an amazing plan to offer salvation to all!

► Does God want *everyone* who has ever lived to learn, repent and receive eternal life?

“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

“For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

God fully desires *all* people to come to the knowledge of the truth, to come to repentance and to be saved! And His desire is realistic—He has a plan to accomplish this. (See also John 3:16-17; Matthew 18:14; Ezekiel 18:30-32.)

► What Bible passage speaks of both a *first* and *second* resurrection?

“And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of

In the Bible, however, *judgment* does not just mean a final sentencing, and it does not always mean condemnation. It can include an *evaluation* period—a time to demonstrate whether, on learning God’s truth, a person is willing to act on that truth, turn to God and persist in God’s ways. This takes a period of time.

Consider how Peter said, “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God [the Church]” (1 Peter 4:17). Members of God’s Church are being evaluated—judged—*now* in this lifetime. And in the second resurrection, people who have not yet had such an opportunity will have theirs—their time to learn spiritual knowledge and then be judged over a period of time for how they apply and obey that knowledge.

Because of the wording of verse 11, the time of judgment for those who are raised in the second resurrection is sometimes referred to as the Great White Throne Judgment.

► How will God judge those who rise in the second resurrection?

Reread Revelation 20:11-12—quoted in response to the previous question.

God will judge people in the second resurrection by the same standards He has judged people at any other time. Those who are raised in the second resurrection will be “judged according to their *works*, by the things which were written in *the books* [the books of the Bible that will then be open]” (verse 12; see also Daniel 7:10; Romans 2:12-13). If people at that time believe, repent, obey and receive God’s forgiveness and grace, their names will be written in “the Book of Life”—which means God will give them His gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23; Philippians 4:3).

► Is the second resurrection a *second chance* to be saved?

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

“And Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.’

“Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, ‘Are we blind also?’

“Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, “We see.” Therefore your sin remains’” (John 9:39-41).

In “times of ignorance,” people’s sins still earn them the death penalty. But Paul said that in some sense God overlooks those sins—He knows these people haven’t yet had an opportunity to know the truth and repent and change. But when a person “knows to do good and does not do it,” God considers him or her fully accountable for the sin (James 4:17).

Some prophecies of the healing of blindness are dual—they include not only healing *physical* blindness, but also healing *spiritual* blindness. Therefore, a person’s opportunity for salvation comes when God calls and chooses someone, at which time He opens his or her mind to spiritual understanding. (See also Romans 3:20; 7:7.)

It seems most people, including most who have been a part of mainstream Christian churches, have not truly had God’s calling and therefore do not understand enough to be held fully accountable. The second resurrection period will thus be their *first* opportunity to be saved. It is not a second chance.

(In another way of looking at opportunities for salvation, God gives us *many* opportunities by forgiving us of our sins every time we repent—though this is all part of one lifetime opportunity. Of course, we must not take lightly or abuse God’s mercy. A person who continues sinning has a harder and harder time being able to sincerely and deeply repent. If he ever gets to the point where he cannot repent, he has no more opportunity for salvation.)

► Where is biblical proof of a *future opportunity* for those who have died?

“Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!” (Matthew 10:15).

“Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

“And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades [the grave]; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:20-24).

“The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the

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preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:41-42).

Jesus spoke of a future “day of judgment” for humanity. His main point was that ancient Sodom, Gomorrah, Nineveh and Tyre (pagan cities that God caused to be destroyed) were not as guilty as the people who heard Jesus and saw His miracles



A person’s opportunity for salvation comes when God calls and chooses someone, at which time He opens his or her mind to spiritual understanding.

but still rejected Him. It will be “more tolerable” for the people of Sodom, etc., because they will not have rejected the mighty works and preaching of Jesus Christ Himself.

But consider some secondary lessons from what Jesus said. Those who have died will need to be raised to life so they can be judged in the “day of judgment.” The day of judgment is not synonymous with a time of immediate condemnation for everyone, as that would not be “tolerable” at all for anyone.

► Where does the Bible give us a description of the second resurrection?

“The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones . . . [“]Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: ‘Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.’”

“So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.

“Also He said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Come

from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army” (Ezekiel 37:1, 5-10).

This vision of the valley of dry bones shows people resurrected through their physical bodies being reformed and given new life. Verse 11 says “these bones are the whole house of Israel,” but as we saw in Matthew, the second resurrection will include all nations. Ezekiel 37 has dual meaning. It partly is describing the restoration of the nation of Israel under God and the reuniting of the divided kingdom into a single nation of Israel (verses 16-22). But it also shows that someday there will be a literal resurrection of people—to once again be living, breathing human beings.

► Will people in this second resurrection have the opportunity to be converted and receive God’s Holy Spirit?

“I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,’ says the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:14).

The Holy Spirit is only given to those who repent, are baptized and obey God (Acts 2:38; 5:32).

Again, God is both all-loving and all-powerful

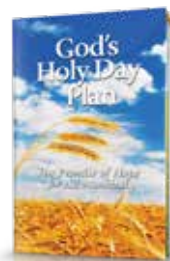
After completing this lesson, we hope you can clearly see how God is both all-loving and all-powerful. God loves all people and longs to see everyone choose to live His way so He can give them eternal life. And He has the unlimited power to make sure every person who has ever lived will be taught the truth and have the

opportunity for eternal life. Death does not defeat God. God can raise the dead. Everyone who has not had an opportunity for salvation will receive that opportunity when they rise to physical life in the second resurrection.

Christians who celebrate God’s biblically commanded festivals gain a deeper and fuller understanding of His great plan of salvation. Those who observe the Eighth Day festival just after the Feast of Tabernacles are thrilled to rehearse the wonderful significance of the second resurrection each year (Leviticus 23:36). And God’s anticipation of the enormous expansion of His family surely must be what pleases Him more than anything else!

Apply Now

Think about a loved one or friend who has died without having full knowledge of God’s truth. What would you most like to say to him or her? If you were given the opportunity to teach him or her in the second resurrection, what would be the first scriptures and biblical truths you would explain? Write down three.



For further explanation, read “The Last Great Day: Eternal Life Offered to All” in our free study guide *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. BT



“What’s Behind the Growing Culture War?”

I think the cover story on the culture war is such an important topic for today. I appreciate every issue of your magazine, and have been reading them for years. Thank you for bringing the much-needed truth of God’s work into the public eye.

From the Internet

I just received your January-February issue of *Beyond Today*. Outstanding! The article “Thinking of Getting an Abortion? Don’t Do It!” is a great article and I want to make some copies for some people I know.

From the Internet

In your article on the culture war you failed to state how the Church has failed and is still failing to do its job. It has lost its backbone. I believe the Church needs to look inwardly and ask God to reveal where we have failed Him—where have we been a part of the problem and not the solution.

From the Internet

We fully agree that many churches have failed to teach what the Bible says about so many of the important issues that are dramatically reshaping Western culture. This is why we devoted almost the entire issue to explaining a true biblical perspective on these matters.

Thanks for the *Beyond Today* television program

I love the explanation and preaching of your three pastors on *Beyond Today* TV. I have been alone since my husband passed away, so I keep searching for something that will help me to move on from my grief. I’m happy reading the Word of God, but I want to understand it very well, and I’m glad that I found your program.

From the Internet

How can I find a congregation near me?

I am looking for a church in my area that does not celebrate Christmas and Easter, since they are pagan and against the Bible’s teaching. Any help would be appreciated.

From the Internet

I’m looking forward to attending your church this coming Sabbath. I’m new to this type of church, although I’ve been a Christian for years. The Lord Jesus has led me to believe I should go to a

Sabbath-keeping church. This makes me happy to find a home congregation to worship with like-minded Christians.

Reader in Washington

My brother has encouraged me to watch your videos on many different topics concerning Scripture. These past few weeks I have discovered the answers to many things that had confused me in the Bible for years. I feel confident that I am ready, and understand that the Sabbath is to be observed on the seventh day as instructed in Scripture! I am excited about joining a local church and excited about relearning everything from the beginning!

From the Internet

We welcome people who desire to worship God in like mind with us on His Sabbath day. You can find our congregation closest to you at UCG.org/congregations.

Concerns about suicide

My aunt recently killed herself. I want to know if she’ll still go to heaven and not to hell. I loved her so much. I just don’t want her to suffer anymore and I don’t want to torture myself over the thought she may be in hell. She had three kids and was married—they all needed her. I do not want to feel this way every time I look at her kids.

From the Internet

My fiancé committed suicide. He was not in his right mind—he was under the influence of drugs. He knew the Word and as a child accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior, but he did not live a righteous life. He had a moment of weakness—I do not even think he was aware of what he was doing. I am torn and worried about his eternal life and where his soul is.

From the Internet

My mother committed suicide in 2011. What does this mean for her soul, and did she go to heaven? She was severely depressed. I have so many questions, and I don’t think I have come to terms with this.

From the Internet

Suicide is a raw, heart-rending experience for everyone affected. We receive many messages from people in despair over loved ones who committed suicide, or from people contemplating it themselves. To those contemplating it: Don’t—seek help now! Your life is precious in God’s sight, and there are undoubtedly others who care for you. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, or another support network in your local area to start the process of getting help.

*For those whose loved ones have committed suicide, we offer a free Bible study guide that examines the biblical point of view on the subject—including the hope of God’s plan for their eternal life. It’s called *Suicide: Understanding and Preventing It*. You can find it at UCG.org by searching for the title, or contacting the office in your nation listed on page 39 to request a copy.*

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I really enjoy Beyond Today magazine. It gives a good understanding of the Bible and highlights information not given in mainstream Christian faiths. I highly recommend this magazine to all.

—K.T., Facebook fan



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United States: United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: BTmagazine.org email: info@ucg.org
Canada: United Church of God—Canada, Box 144, Station D, Etobicoke, ON M9A 4X1, Canada
Phone: (905) 614-1234, (800) 338-7779 Fax: (905) 614-1749 Website: ucg.ca
Caribbean islands: United Church of God, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795 Website: BTmagazine.org email: info@ucg.org
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EUROPE

Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg): P.O. Box 93, 2800 AB Gouda, Netherlands
British Isles: United Church of God, P.O. Box 705, Watford, Herts, WD19 6FZ, England
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Italy: La Buona Notizia, Chiesa di Dio Unita, Casella Postale 187, 24121 Bergamo Centro, Italy
Phone and Fax: (+39) 035 4523573 Website: labuonanotizia.org email: info@labuonanotizia.org
Scandinavia: Guds Enade Kyrka, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
E-mail: norden@ucg.org

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Cameroon: United Church of God Cameroon, BP 10322 Béssengue, Douala, Cameroon
East Africa, Madagascar and Mauritius: United Church of God—East Africa
P.O. Box 75261, Nairobi 00200, Kenya email: kenya@ucg.org Website: uceastafrica.org
Ghana: P.O. Box AF 75, Adenta, Accra, Ghana email: ghana@ucg.org
Malawi: P.O. Box 32257, Chichiri, Blantyre 3, Malawi Phone: +265 (0) 999 823 523
email: malawi@ucg.org
Nigeria: United Church of God—Nigeria, P.O. Box 2265 Somolu, Lagos, Nigeria
Phone: 8033233193 Website: ucgnigeria.org email: nigeria@ucg.org
South Africa: United Church of God—Southern Africa, P.O. Box 1181, Tzaneen 0850, South Africa
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email: UnitedChurchofGod.SA@gmail.com
Zambia: P.O. Box 23076, Kitwe, Zambia Phone: (0026)0966925840 E-mail: zambia@ucg.org
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Philippines: P.O. Box 4774, MCPO, 1287 Makati City, Philippines Cell/text: +63 918-904-4444
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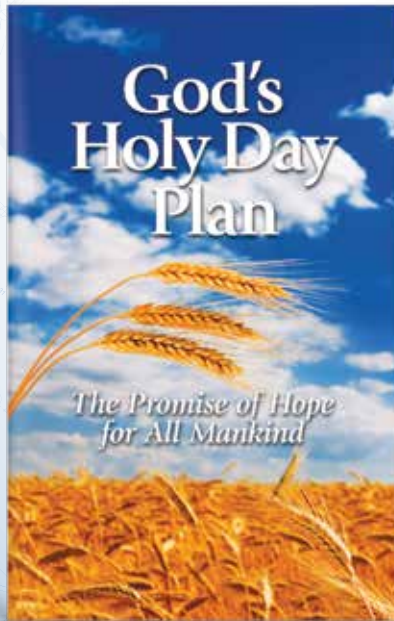
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