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Is Your Life “Good Enough” for God?

Considering the chaos we see in the world around us, it’s understandable that many people see a need to “get right with God.” But what exactly does that mean?

Many think that all God expects or requires is found in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

But is it biblical that belief in God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ is all that’s required to be saved? Clearly not! As Jesus’ own half-brother wrote in James 2:19: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (emphasis added throughout). They likewise know that Jesus is the Messiah (see Mark 1:24).

Yes, the demons believe—but clearly they are not saved!

So what does God expect of us? What does it mean to “get right” with Him? What does it look like in a person’s life? Let’s notice Jesus Christ’s own statements that give us the answer!

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” Merely acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Master—calling Him “Lord, Lord”—is not sufficient. To inherit salvation in God’s Kingdom, we must do God’s will, as Jesus clearly stated.

Getting right with God and receiving His gift of eternal life involve much more than just belief. Our conviction that Jesus is our Savior who died for us must be more than just a comforting feeling or intellectual idea. It means actively doing God’s will in our lives, which starts with surrendering our lives to Him, studying His Word and praying regularly so we can understand how He wants and expects us to live.

Matthew 19:16 records how a wealthy young man asked Jesus a crucial question: “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” Christ’s reply might shock those who think Jesus came to do away with the law or that He taught that obedience to God’s law is unnecessary. Jesus responded, “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (verse 17).

Jesus didn’t tell the young man that all he needed to do was believe. Jesus told him he must obey the commandments of God. How plain! And then, to clarify which commandments He meant, Jesus listed as examples several of the Ten Commandments plus another summary commandment God had given through Moses. Jesus then told the young man to reorder his priorities in life to become a committed follower of Christ (verses 18-22).

In Mark 16:16, Jesus revealed another condition we must meet to receive God’s gift of eternal life: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Baptism—being fully immersed in water—is a symbolic act representing the death and burial of the person we formerly were, with our rising from the water signifying a resurrection to begin a new life committed to serving God and striving to avoid sin (Romans 6:1-23).

Scripture shows that baptism is to be followed by the laying on of hands by a true minister of Jesus Christ, through which we receive God’s Holy Spirit and truly become His (Acts 8:17; Romans 8:9). Unless we surrender our lives to God through baptism and the laying on of hands to receive His Spirit as shown in Scripture, we fail to meet this requirement for receiving His gift of salvation.

To those who ignore these and other clear biblical instructions—and there are more—Jesus replies, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

So returning to the question at the beginning, is your way of life “good enough” for God? In these passages you have seen the beginnings of His answer. And as Jesus states in Luke 14:33, “No one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me” (New Living Translation 1996).

Read the articles in this issue to learn more about what God expects from your life! 

Scott Ashley
Managing editor

Is Your Life “Good Enough” for God?
One afternoon, a number of years ago, I went to pick up our sons from school. It was a bright sunny day, and their dispositions appeared to match the weather as they came bouncing out to meet me with smiles and exuberance. They chattered incessantly all the way home. Then, as we pulled into our garage, an unexpected small, sad voice from the backseat said to me, “Mom, I might be smiling on the outside, but I’m not smiling on the inside.”

Wow. Raise your hand if you’ve ever been guilty of pasting on a smile to hide the depths of emotion churning below the surface!

And, turned around, have you ever been in the position of missing all the cues others may have given that all is not well, assuming that behind every smile is a heart that is whole? Have you been clued in to someone’s difficulties but later realized you had failed to grasp the depth of the situation? Or have you sensed the weary and tired spirit in another person but simply felt inadequately equipped to assist?

Chances are that your answers to these questions are yes, yes and yes.

With perspective from both sides of this, including needing nurturing myself for many years, I’d like to share...
a few basic principles on helping those among us who are weary. My hope is that we’ll be better equipped as a collective body to strengthen one another with understanding and love.

Consider how the apostle Paul described his approach toward other members of God’s Church: “But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, English Standard Version, emphasis added throughout).

Nurture with physical assistance and gentleness

Shortly after being involved in one of the most fiery, dramatic events of the Bible (1 Kings 18:39-40), which resulted in a very visible moral victory, the prophet Elijah ran in fear for his life for roughly 100 miles. In utter despair, he then went in solitude another day’s journey into the desert before plopping himself down under a tree. Elijah then asked God to put him out of his misery: “It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life” (1 Kings 19:1-4).

Sometimes very good people can feel inadequate to handle the challenges facing them and are unable to cope with the drain of dealing with nonstop difficulties.

What was God’s response? He nurtured His prophet by nourishing him. Not once but twice, as Elijah slept, God sent an angel with food and drink to encourage and restore him physically. Then Elijah went on to meet the Lord at Mount Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai. This place was well-known in Israelite history. It was where the nation entered into covenant with God and where Moses had been in God’s immediate presence.

There was a reminder here of God’s special relationship with His people and their responsibility toward Him. Perhaps God understood the connection Elijah would feel with Him in this place and that it would assist in bringing emotional restoration to his spirit. Whatever the case, once there, the Lord ministered to Elijah in a very personal and gentle manner—with “a still small voice” (verse 12). After this encounter, Elijah emerged ready to continue in his service to God.

What lessons can we glean from this? Judging a weary person for where he or she is emotionally is not helpful (the story of Job comes to mind!), and sometimes it isn’t words that are needed. But identifying the most basic of needs—which a weary person can often overlook—and offering them up on a plate of gentleness and care is the very support that’s needed most. Weary people simply need to know they are not alone and that they are not as isolated as they may feel—that others are indeed looking out for them!

Practical ways to help

After conferring with numerous individuals who are in the midst of ongoing and life-altering difficulties, a short list of practical ways to assist others with physical restoration includes things like:

• Helping to transport their children to school or assisting with other transportation needs.
• Sending a care package or a restaurant gift card.
• Mailing a card with a personally written message inside.
• Bringing over a home-cooked meal to share together if they are unable make it to your home.
• Dropping off some encouraging reading material.
• Giving them a call.
• Mowing their lawn and pruning their rosebushes or other plants.
• Thoughtfully offering to save them a seat in the back row at church services if you know that crowds feel overwhelming to them.
• Spending a Sabbath morning with them over a cup of coffee or tea.
• Delivering a planter of flowers for their patio.
• Arranging with several mutual friends to pray regularly and specifically for them.

Nurture with prayer

When people are weary and struggling, it’s easy for them to lose perspective and feel abandoned, making it difficult for them to remember God’s promises. Helen Keller, a remarkable woman who happens to be one of my favorite inspirational historical figures, said, “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.”

In low moments our enemy often strikes, preying on a weary person’s weakness of spirit and body—and it’s easy...
to lose proper perspective. Many of us are familiar with Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:10-18 about putting on the spiritual armor of God in our Christian struggle to live God’s way. It’s interesting that he finishes the passage with this: “Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (ESV).

Have you ever considered that, in addition to arming ourselves, we can in prayer ask God to arm others too? There may be days when our brothers and sisters in Christ need our specific prayers and encouraging help, such as:

• Your assistance in buckling their belt of truth. Why? Because sometimes their own thoughts take them captive and lie to them. Our own thoughts all too often lead us astray. But Jesus Christ promised that God’s Holy Spirit “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

• Your hands to properly center their breastplate of righteousness. Why? Because they need His protection during their time of vulnerability, and faith that His righteousness will fill their emptiness. As Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6).

• Your encouragement in having their feet shod with the gospel of peace. They need this to stand firm. Helen Keller put it this way: “I do not want the peace which passeth understanding, I want the understanding which bringeth peace.” The latter leads to the former. As Paul wrote, “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13, New International Version).

• Your help in lifting up their shield of faith. The darts the enemy hurls can pierce their heart with despair. We need the kind of faith expressed in Psalm 27:13: “I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.”

• Your gentle words reminding them to put on their helmet of salvation. Why? Because our mind and thoughts can be worn down with sadness. We see this expressed in Psalm 42:11: “Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again—my Savior and my God!” (New Living Translation).

• Your strength and support, which picks up the sword of truth and places it into their hands. With this help they can move past the strongholds holding them back: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5, NIV).

Also notice Romans 15:1: “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”

Nurture with patience

Here are some further thoughts to keep in balance.

• On one hand sufferers want to feel cared for; on the other hand they don’t want to be known and labeled by their trial.

• On one hand sufferers desperately need the support of their friends and family; on the other hand they tire of discussing their situation over and over again.

• On one hand the silence sufferers feel from others can be absolutely numbing; on the other hand there are times when fellowship can be completely overwhelming and unmanageable.

• On one hand sufferers sometimes need a friend to laugh with; on the other hand they often need a friend to cry with.

• Does this sound like a conflicted, juxtaposed mess that leaves you unsure how to respond? Well, don’t worry. Those who are weary understand the conundrum because they live it on a daily, if not hourly, or sometimes even minute-by-minute basis. We have hope in eternity but also wrestle with despair; we live in faith but also struggle with depression; we believe in the hope of God’s promises but battle discouragement.

Paul spoke of the paradox of the Christian experience. In 2 Corinthians 6:10 he mentions being “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,” and in Romans 7:15 He tells us: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (NIV). In 1 Thessalonians 5:14 he reminds us to “encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (NIV).

Nurture without assumptions

Never assume that someone will present on the outside what is really going on in the inside, or that someone who needs help and care will always reach out and tell you so. Discerning where a person is emotionally is crucial to being an effective community of caring brothers and sisters. How do we do that?

God’s Word can be a helpful, guiding map as we navigate
through the layers and facades in each individual’s personal terrain. For example, if we are involved with and engaged in the life of others, observing and actively loving one another (John 13:34), being compassionate and kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32), and encouraging one another (Hebrews 3:13), it will become evident who in our midst needs our specific care, watchful eye and encouragement.

I especially love Hebrews 3:13, because the Greek word translated “exhort” or “encourage” here is parakaleo. This beautifully descriptive verb, which we are told here to do for each other daily, means to be called to another’s side to give support and comfort. This meaning is also conveyed when the noun form of this word is translated as “comforter” in John 14:16, 15:26 and 16:7.

As we strive to fulfill this directive, let us be sensitive to what those struggling through challenges would like for us to understand, what they need from us and would appreciate. Here is some of what they might want to convey.

**Things your weary friends may want you to know**

- **Thank you** for your forgiveness, because sometimes a weary person’s responses to others may not always represent the best version of themselves. This is not meant to excuse inadequacies that need to be overcome, but to explain that people who are in the middle of something very difficult and are hurting don’t always get it right. We are to be, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2, ESV).

- **Thank you** for listening, because sincerely wanting to fully comprehend a situation through the eyes of one in need, rather than your own, conveys heartfelt love and empathy. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

And if a sufferer does share his or her struggle with you, realize that responses such as asking prying or probing questions, attempting to present all the solutions to the problems, or turning the conversation around to be about you are conversation busters. They are not especially helpful and succeed mostly in adding to the weariness being suffered. “To everything there is a season . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7).

- **Thank you** for remembering us, because silence can be crushing. The path that led to weariness and its accompanying emotional strain is just plain hard. If ever the weary need their community of people to hold their arms up in support, it is now. “Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening” (2 Corinthians 12:19, NIV). And, “Be devoted to one another in love” (Romans 12:10, NIV).

- **Thank you** for respecting our differences. Each of us is uniquely individual. And so is the way we each deal with trials. Not one of us will respond in exactly the same way. We appreciate your understanding that we are coping as best we can, and that it’s probably not the way you would cope—which is okay.

We are also each uniquely wired, which means we each share with others differently. For example, those who live more publicly will most likely handle their situation more publicly, while those who live more privately will most likely handle their situation more privately. Pausing to think about these differences will help us to be respectful and not offend.

And finally, consider that if someone shares a personal burden with you, first ask yourself if it is your story to tell before you share that conversation with others. If you’re unsure, it is always better to err on the side of discretion. Colossians 4:6 tells us, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (NIV). And Romans 14:19 says, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (NIV).

In the words of Helen Keller, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”
How to Cope
SPIRITUALLY
in Times of Darkness

What must we do to stay encouraged in times of growing darkness? Christ’s first followers show us the way to keep hope alive!

by Robin Webber

It’s often said, “What you hold in your hand is what you hold in your heart.” Allow me to share a story to help you think about what’s in your heart that anchors you beyond the moment.

Two little girls were counting their pennies. One said, “I have five pennies.” The other one said, “I have ten.”

“No,” said the first little girl, “you just have five pennies, the same as me.” “But,” the second girl replied, “my father said when I come home tonight he’ll give me five pennies, and so I have ten.”

The child’s faith, the trust she had in her father, gave her proof of what she didn’t yet see. She counted it because she believed the promise of her father.

What might we take away from this story? The first girl counted up what she saw, while the other girl had the heart of an investor in something greater than the moment. She chose to invest in her father’s love and word, and that made all the difference!

Her response echoed two basic underlying articles of faith that lie deep within the hearts of those heeding Jesus’ invitation of “Follow Me” (Matthew 4:19; John 21:19).

One is expressed in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” And the other is based on what Jesus Christ told His followers in in Luke 12:32: “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

How do we count our “heaven-sent pennies” and invest them towards something promised that’s yet to be fulfilled? How do we maintain our hope and trust in the coming Kingdom of God in darkening times?

Time for a reality check

Allow me to be frank: Society is rapidly sliding away from any concept of a sovereign and loving Heavenly Father guiding our lives. The light of Christ and His teachings is being suppressed daily via the impact of social media, academia, the entertainment industry and the passivity of those who claim to be followers of Christ.

After 60 years of this tidal wave of ungodliness, the United States and the rest of the Western world are becoming less anchored to their traditional Judeo-Christian moorings. Religious affiliation is decreasing among younger generations. The number of American adults who describe themselves as Christian has fallen to 65 percent, a drop of 12 percentage points over the past decade. What we see around us can be disturbing and discouraging. But like the little girl in the opening story, we have hope because of whom we know and what we believe.

Are times getting tougher for people of faith? Yes! But as the saying goes, “We’ve seen this movie before.” We need go no further than those initial followers of Jesus who accepted His invitation of “Follow Me” and who believed in His and our Heavenly Father’s promises.

What enabled our spiritual forebearers to become a new kind of community to “proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”? (1 Peter 2:9). Let’s focus on three observations that will not only help us to cope with the darkness of this age, but brighten our witness of our Master.

We must have undivided commitment

Consider first that Jesus’ earliest followers gave undivided commitment to our Master. Every individual from that time forward has had to personally confront who Jesus Christ is by personally answering the same question He posed to Peter: “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16, emphasis added throughout). Jesus’ question would be shared person by person as this encounter spread across the world of that day. And each hearer had to respond and claim Peter’s answer as his or her own. Each would not only claim who Jesus was but would claim His name as the only name by which men must be saved (Acts 4:12).

This total allegiance caused them to break from many
The light of Christ is being suppressed daily via the impact of the modern world, making it tough for people of faith.

of the cultural norms and expectations of that day, at times alienating them from family members, neighbors, coworkers and governing authorities. Jesus had clearly warned those heeding His invitation of “Follow Me” regarding such trouble, stating, “If the world hates you, know that it hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

Why all this animosity? Becoming a “Jesus follower” was a totally foreign concept in that day. In the pagan world, embracing a new faith typically did not mean doing away with long-established gods, but rather adding any new divine entity to a rolodex of household deities, perhaps giving them name changes and reprioritized placement on their household altar while mixing new beliefs with old practices. Yet being “in Christ” meant worshipping God the Father and Jesus Christ exclusively—having no other gods at all before the true God (Exodus 20:3).

The statement “Jesus Christ is Lord” is triple-loaded with meaning, declaring that He alone is the Savior sent by the Father, that He alone is the prophesied Messiah and that He alone is “Lord”—Master or King—of our lives. This put those who followed Jesus into direct confrontation with Rome and its emperor. Since the time of Julius Caesar, an aura of divinity had increasingly developed among Rome’s rulers to the point that the emperors came to be worshipped as gods. At times edicts were issued that incense had to be offered to the emperor as divine. To not do so could cost one’s life. And many Christians were martyred.

Such individuals were plainly focused on something beyond the challenges set before them. They believed in a Heavenly Father who had intervened in their existence and granted them a vision of life to come, assuring them that beyond human imagination are “the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

You may never be led into an arena full of hungry lions as some of them were, but are you willing to embrace that which lies before you by “dying daily” (see 1 Corinthians 15:31), not only to the kingdoms and things of this world more broadly, but especially to the kingdom of self—you and what you desire? Are you holding onto five pennies, or do you carry ten of them that no one can take from you?

We must remember we are not alone

Understand, secondly, that Jesus’ first followers never believed they were truly alone. Why did they feel this way? And what does it mean for us?

On the last night of Jesus’ human life on earth, He offered this promise to His followers: “I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). He defined the nature of His promise just before: “I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper [Greek parakletos, meaning “comforter” or “one called alongside for help”], that He may abide with you forever” (verse 16).

Jesus went on to say: “A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also” (verse 19). But where and how? “At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I you” (verse 20).

Did the original disciples fully grasp Jesus’ statement then? No. They would grow in understanding and experience over time. But here are two things they did know and came to understand more about in the days ahead:

The Spirit of God had descended onto Jesus (Matthew 3:16). It remained with Him, as evidenced by His miracles, wonders and teachings.

Jesus made a promise that something was coming. When it arrived weeks later, they recognized it as a promise fulfilled. The apostle Peter described it as a “gift” granted to those who previously rejected Christ but would now surrender in undivided allegiance to His name (Acts 2:36-38). In the moment of utter personal darkness in coming to grips with what they all had done, God promised to make a “home” in them and remain with them. They would not be alone!

The apostle Paul further defined the presence of this “Comforter” in Romans 8, telling Christians: “You are not in the flesh [that is, controlled by one’s fleshly mindset] but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of Christ dwells in you. Now if any does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His” (verse 9).

He further states: “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit [which] dwells in you” (verse 11). Through Paul here, God puts the exclamation point on
We must make prayer a way of life

Recognize, thirdly, that Jesus’ first followers made prayer a way of life. If the Holy Spirit is the dynamic needle that runs through the book of Acts, then prayer is the thread that binds the fabric of the early Church together with God and before man. The book begins with the disciples and other followers praying with one another in the upper room at Jerusalem. The rest is history.

When Peter and John were later apprehended and then released, the Church met together and praised God for their deliverance. Those gathered prayed regarding the opposition they met with: “Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30). When they finished, “the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (verse 31).

Let’s also consider the account of two men from completely different backgrounds in two different locations praying before the same heavenly throne, with both used mightily by God in expanding His family on earth among Jews and gentiles.

Here we discover Cornelius, the Roman centurion whose manner was “to pray to God always” (Acts 10:2). A few verses later we find the apostle Peter praying on a rooftop porch (verse 9). Their priority of prayer helped prepare them to be used by God to expand the Body of Christ to include gentile believers. Prayer was the doorbell!

Prayer does not always spare us from the troubles of this world, but it does position us before our Father’s heavenly throne. The final words of the deacon Stephen are found in Acts 7:59-60: “And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, He fell asleep [in death].”

Stephen echoed the words Jesus spoke at Golgotha in forgiving those who killed Him before He committed His spirit to God (Luke 23:34, 46).

Just before Stephen’s final words above, He moved beyond coping to loudly witnessing that He was not alone. Verses 54-56 paint the picture of union of the throne room of God and ourselves in times of darkness: “But [Stephen], being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’”

Not just coping, but copying Christ

As I noted in a recent column, a startling statement is made regarding the early followers of Christ in Acts 4. Peter and John had been brought before a court to have their witness of Jesus Christ being the foretold Messiah extinguished. The authorities, viewing the proceedings through human eyes, thought they could bully them into submission.

But let’s read the court proceedings in verse 13: “Now when the saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.”

These were individuals whose complete allegiance was to the Son of God. They believed in the promises of God. And just like Him, they saw things as if they already are. They not only walked before God, but walked with and talked with Him—and He was pleased.

These things allowed them, as they have many others since, to not merely cope with life, but to copy the life of Christ in them. Let us all follow the example of Christ’s first disciples in likewise following Him, allowing Him to truly lead us from within in full assurance of faith. That makes all the difference between five pennies and ten!
Where Does Evil Come From? How Will It End?

The beauty and wonder of the world assure us there is a loving God. Yet the picture is marred by evil and misery. Where does evil come from? Is God powerless to stop it? Or will it cease to be?

by Victor Kubik

Why does our world see such horrors as genocide, terrorism, mass murder, torture and serial killing? Why are senseless wars always in progress somewhere, worsening or taking the lives of already impoverished and desperate people?

In the past 100 years there has been a marked increase in such atrocities, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of millions, with billions more left impoverished and enslaved politically and economically.

No matter how much the evil committed in wars, riots, misgovernment and societal decline is decried, nothing really changes to improve it. On the contrary, with more powerful means to cause global devastation, the probability of human annihilation looms ever larger.

Behavioral norms are sliding. What was once considered sinful, appalling and immoral is now increasingly acceptable. A recent Facebook meme attributed to author and broadcaster Dwight Longenecker describes it this way: “First, we overlook evil. Then we permit evil. Then we legalize evil. Then we promote evil. Then we celebrate evil. Then we persecute those who still call it evil.”

Clearly, we have come to the point described by Isaiah the prophet: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!” (Isaiah 5:20-21).

One obvious example is abortion. In the 1950s and 60s, abortion was illegal. Killing a newly conceived child in the womb was unthinkable—it was murder! Public awareness and community conscience respected life in the womb as sacred and maintained that we must practice moral responsibility when it comes to that life. But that has changed! A child in the womb with a beating heart has now been downgraded to “human tissue” that can be destroyed and unceremoniously discarded as waste.

It’s even claimed as a right and done with no shame. Challenges to this heinous practice are met with strident statements like “Keep your laws off my body!” What was once illegal and immoral has become legal and approved, resulting in more than 60 million abortions in America since 1973. And new legislation allows for almost full-term pregnancies to be terminated.

The apostle Paul foretold a marked increase in wicked, upside-down thinking that would put society in grave danger: “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:1-5, emphasis added throughout).

We live in these prophesied days of unrestrained anger, hatred, revenge, selfishness and the psychological trauma of evil! This is what we see reported daily in the news. And things will yet get worse.

Just where did all of this evil come from, why does God permit it and how will evil ultimately be dealt with?

If God is good and all-powerful, how can evil exist?

Many atheists claim that a major reason for their not believing in God is that they cannot reconcile how there can be an all-powerful and loving God who is not able to stop war, suffering and injustice. How can a loving God who created us in His image and likeness not put an end to all the evil? How could He be so callous and blind?

Key biblical figures asked these same questions. Note this prayer from the prophet Jeremiah: “Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?” (Jeremiah 12:1).

Job likewise complains: “Why do the wicked prosper, growing old and powerful? They live to see their children grow up and settle down, and they enjoy their grandchildren. Their homes are safe from every fear, and God does not punish them” (Job 21:7-9, New Living Translation).

The question is similarly asked in the Psalms: “LORD,
how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?” (Psalm 94:3).

We may be vexed as well. It’s contrary to our sense of justice when evil continues unabated. With all the philosophers, religions and pundits who have spoken out on evil, is there a reputable place we can turn to get some straight answers? What will be the end of evil? Will evil be overcome, or will evil overcome us?

Various cultures and religions have tried to understand the perceived dichotomy between opposing aspects of good and evil in human nature. They have tried to explain this in various ways with terms such as dualism or negative and positive forces. Eastern religion presents the principles or energies of Yin and Yang as shaping this dynamic. There are numerous theories among secular and religious thinkers that try to explain the dark side of human nature.

But what are the actual answers?

The Bible gives credible, clear and truthful explanations to these questions. Those who take the Bible at its word and learn what it actually teaches will find an explanation and timeline for the origin, development and ultimate end of evil. Just as human beings have a history starting with man’s creation and ending with destiny beyond this life, so evil has its own story.

The origin and future of evil revealed

In the King James Version of the Bible, the word “evil” appears 613 times in 569 verses in 343 chapters. It shows up in 60 out of the Bible’s 66 books. In addition to that are many synonymous terms, such as “wicked” and “iniquity” and “sin.” Safe to say, the subject is covered extensively in Scripture.

So what can we learn?

The Bible reveals that the origin of evil was long before the creation of the first human beings. The story begins with the dysfunction of a mighty angelic being referred to in Latin translation as Lucifer. The prophet Isaiah relates how this being’s pride led to an ill-fated attack against God and what was to come of that:

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’

“Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit. Those who see you will gaze at you, and consider you, saying: ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world as a wilderness and destroyed its cities, who did not open the house of his prisoners?’” (Isaiah 14:12-17).

A century after Isaiah, the prophet Ezekiel wrote in parallel of the final outcome of the same corrupted rogue angel, who had been one of the covering cherubim at God’s throne, as portrayed in sculpture over the Ark of the Covenant:

“You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: the sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created.

“You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you.

“By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones.

“Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, that they might gaze at you.

“You defiled your sanctuaries by the multitude of your iniquities, by the iniquity of your trading; therefore I brought fire from your midst; it devoured you, and I turned you to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; you have become a horror, and shall be no more forever” (Ezekiel 28:12-19).

The ruler of this world and God of this age

This is where evil—thinking or acting contrary to God and His way—started. It began with Lucifer’s distorted self-aggrandizement and pride. This led to discontent, criticism, bitterness, rebellion and a failed attack on God.

God had allowed Lucifer and the other angels moral freedom—whether to choose God’s way of love, of out-flowing concern toward others, or to pursue selfishness. Lucifer and his angelic accomplices, now demons, chose the latter. And Lucifer became known as Satan or the devil, meaning an adversary or accusatory liar.

The rebellion of Satan and his demons—one third of the angels—was beaten back, and they were thrown down to the earth: “And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads [symbolic of worldly powers springing from him]. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven [symbolic of the angelic hosts] and threw them to the earth” (Revelation 12:3-4; compare Luke 10:18).

We’re further told of a future war in heaven (Revelation
12:7-8), wherein Satan and his minions will again be thrown down: “So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (verse 9).

Since his initial rebellion, Satan has been filled with hatred against God and man, corrupting the world to which he was remanded. He is actively preoccupied with destroying God’s creation and plans.

This wicked being is also referred to as “the ruler of this world,” “the prince of the power of the air,” “Beelzebub,” “Belial,” “the father of lies” and “the tempter.”

The world we live in is Satan’s domain—at least for now. Paul tells us what Satan is actively doing today among the world’s people, “whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Paul reminds Christians that they had previously been under this great deception and control by Satan—“in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (Ephesians 2:2-3).

When Jesus Christ was tempted by the devil in Luke 4, we learn that Satan bore rule over “all the kingdoms of the world” and offered to turn them over to Jesus if only Jesus would worship him. He was still reliving his dream of overthrowing God: “Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours’” (Luke 4:5-7).

Yet Christ rebuffed him, and the devil slunk away.

Evil enters the human experience

Returning to man’s origin story, we find that human beings were made with divine characteristics and features: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). Man was singled out with a higher significance and purpose than any other created form of life. He was made to have a special relationship with God as God’s family. God placed the first human beings in an ideal environment called the Garden of Eden, allowing them direct and personal access to their Creator. As Genesis 2 shows, also put within the garden were two trees. Both were purposefully placed within man’s grasp. God gave explicit, straightforward instruction about these trees.

Here is where the word “evil” first occurs in Scripture. One of the trees was called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” while the other was “the tree of life.” Adam and Eve were told they could eat of the tree of life freely. They were also warned that eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would end in death. It was their choice. They could not have both.

The tree of life, as is obvious from its name, represented perpetuation of life. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolized determining or finding out for oneself what is good and evil. It’s a tree of probing for understanding through trial and error with uncertain and dubious outcomes.

After God gave His instructions to Adam and Eve, He stepped away and observed what the pair would do. At this point, a serpent, which Revelation 12:9 tells
us was Satan the devil, crept through the garden and accosted the first human couple. Satan's domain was still this world. He quickly seized onto what God had said to Adam and Eve and dismissed God's instruction and warning.

He also accused God of hiding from Adam and Eve what he himself coveted—to be as God and have it all: “For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Satan could not restrain his preoccupation and lust for power.

Eve, followed by Adam, did exactly what God told them not to do. They ate the forbidden fruit, and the result was catastrophic. They were expelled from the Garden of Eden and cut off from access to the tree of life. They were thrust into the world of the evil being they had followed into sin: “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

We, too, have inherited death and those things that bring on death.

The world Adam and Eve chose and were exiled to was not the paradise they had been in. It would soon be corrupted with more sin and violence. Adam and Eve’s first son Cain murdered his brother Abel. The world carried on for some 1,600 years until the Flood of Noah’s time. God’s assessment of that period is: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Genesis 6:5-6).

God dealt with the evil of that day in divine judgment. The Flood He sent reduced the human race to eight people. However, He did not intend to remove all evil from the world at that time. Noah’s family grew and soon began to repopulate the world, which was still heavily influenced by Satan’s evil spirit! The history of the world from biblical and secular sources is a torturously painful chronicle of endless disputes, war and every imaginable and unimaginable evil.

**Does God care?**

God is indeed all-powerful and could eliminate evil at any time. But that would negate the reason He allows it to exist and to continue for the time being. God’s purpose in creating people with free will necessitates letting them make evil choices. Further, by allowing consequences to follow these choices, powerful lessons are learned. And while Satan’s temptations sway the world to evil, they also result, for those who resist with God’s help, in building godly character.

God will only allow evil to persist for a finite time—until His purposes in allowing it are complete.

God certainly cares about what you and I see in the world that is our home. Jesus Christ came in the flesh to bear in himself the penalty of death and suffering that evil has caused—for those willing to repent. And Jesus will return to set the world right.

The rule of Satan is bent on destroying what God is doing. But, rest assured, he is not thwarting God’s purposes. And Satan’s evil reign will soon come to an end!

Jesus is returning to earth to set up and restore God’s Kingdom. In the model prayer that Christ gave His disciples in Matthew 6:9-13, He tells us to pray regularly for the coming of that Kingdom. That Kingdom is coming and will remove Satan from his power over the world. In that same prayer outline Jesus tells us we are to pray that God “deliver us from the evil one.” We are to pray for protection in this dangerous environment and from the hostile ruler of it.

Satan and his demons will be imprisoned for 1,000 years during Christ’s righteous rule over the earth, to then be released for a brief period (Revelation 20:1-3)—again, to ultimately fulfill God’s purposes in helping people to learn lessons and grow in resisting temptation.

Satan’s day will come to an end as he and his demons are thrown into a burning lake of fire (verses 7-10; Matthew 25:41). And finally all people who ultimately choose the devil’s way in continuing to reject God and refusing to repent will be cast into the lake of fire as well and will be annihilated (Revelation 20:13-15; 21:8). Evil will then be no more.

Of the time beyond the final end of evil we are told this: “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” (Revelation 21:4).

Yes, God cares! All the evil and resultant pain will be abolished. Access to the tree of life will be open (Revelation 2:7; 22:1-3, 14).

What’s more, all the misery resulting from the evils of this age will come into perfect perspective. As bad as they are, Paul nevertheless says, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). In the end, all that people have endured in this life will all have been worth it.

Evil will be gone at last and forever. God speed that wonderful time!
On Sept. 26, 2020, tens of thousands of Americans gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in answer to a call to prayer and repentance issued by different evangelical ministries. I was there with other Beyond Today staff covering this remarkable moment in our nation's history, a moving occasion of people from various religious backgrounds—all knowing something is desperately wrong with America's spiritual state—coming together to pray in what was called “The Return.”

The Return consisted of two separate events organized by two ministries, one led by messianic pastor and writer Jonathan Cahn and the other by Franklin Graham, son of famed American evangelist Billy Graham. Both issued calls for people to come to Washington on that day to pray for the spiritual and moral condition of America. Various leaders exhorted, prayed and sang, and people listened, cried and prayed in both large and small groups across the vast expanse of the Mall from the Lincoln Memorial eastward to the Washington Memorial.

Beyond Today staff were not here as participants of either event. We attended as observers to hear what was said and take stock of the focus of the gathering—to consider what it meant and what might come of it.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God says, “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Have we reached a tipping point where it is too late to turn to God in heartfelt repentance? If so, what should you do?

by Darris McNeely

On the brink of divine judgment

We have written and broadcast extensively on the theme of America and other English-speaking countries facing a time of crisis and the need to turn to God in national repentance.

We present matters from a biblical perspective, seeing our peoples like the ancient nation of Israel, a people blessed by God according to promises made to the national forefather Abraham. Ancient Israel and Judah, Abraham’s heirs who inherited only a portion of the full promises, were consumed by moral and spiritual decay very similar to what we see today.

We have repeatedly shown the scriptural connections of America to the consequences that befell the Israelites, explaining that just as God punished Israel for its sins, so will America suffer the same fate unless its people return to God—looking to God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ and humbling themselves in repentance based on God’s law.

At the Washington event we heard sincere acknowledgement of problems along with calls to repentance.
Several speakers acknowledged that America has grievously sinned and deserves God’s judgment. Many cited the more than 60 million abortions in America since the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Ironically, the event was held the same day President Donald Trump announced in the White House Rose Garden his nomination of strongly pro-life Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court to replace the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Some see Justice Barrett’s pro-life position as offering hope that a future court decision will overturn the controversial 1973 ruling.

Several speakers at the rally also noted the urgency of the moment. Racial strife has been spilling into the streets of major cities, leading to further division and suffering. And this is on top of the economic and health impact of the continuing Covid-19 pandemic.

All this was addressed within the context of judgment and calls to recognize God’s hand on the nation. Jonathan Cahn gave a passionate and provocative warning of judgment modeled after the prophet Jeremiah. God instructed the prophet to take an earthen potter’s flask, gather the elders of Jerusalem at the Valley of Hinnom on the south side and there proclaim a fiery message of judgment against the city. Jeremiah was to throw down the flask and shatter it, symbolizing God’s intent to break the city with its inhabitants into so many pieces it could not be reassembled whole (Jeremiah 19). It was a dramatic moment when Cahn, in a powerful reenactment, smashed a large earthen flask before the thousands of onlookers.

**A deep sense of national waywardness**

I heard many blunt and true statements from sincere speakers. “The churches of the land are filled with golden calves,” proclaimed one of the leading organizers. “God has left the building,” he said, referring to Ezekiel’s vision of God’s presence leaving the Jerusalem temple. Another acknowledged in prayer to God, “We deserve your judgment,” yet pleaded, “Give us more time”—seeking more time and mercy for people to change, repent and return to God.

There was the sounding of a shofar, a ram’s horn, used in biblical times as a cry of warning of impending danger and for calling people to a solemn assembly, which indeed this occasion was. The event fell on the Sabbath between the biblical Feast of Trumpets and Day of Atonement, a period revered in Jewish tradition as the Days of Awe, with this particular day known as Shabbat Shuvah, the “Sabbath of Return,” coming near the end of a 40-day period called Teshuvah or “Return.” In Jewish thinking, this is a time of judgment and restoration to God through deep introspection and repentance. It was a dramatic day of prayer.

I stood on a small hill in the shadow of the Washington Monument watching thousands of sincerely devout people stream by. Some were pushing strollers with children. Others were in wheelchairs. Many joined with other participants in forming small circles and praying for the nation and its leaders. All were peaceful. We saw no sign of violent protesting. We felt completely safe among these masses. Here were people who sense something is terribly wrong with America today coming together to call out to God and seek Him in prayer.

**Will we heed God’s case against His people?**

But again I ask, what is the result of this great day of prayer? Were hearts changed? Did the calls for repentance point to what God says must be done to bring about lasting reform and change?

I had opportunity to talk with Jonathan Cahn for a few minutes. I wanted to discuss with him from a biblical perspective how God looks on America and what God points out as systemic problems in her people. A key issue I brought up is what God said through the prophet Ezekiel concerning two principal reasons for the captivity of Israel and Judah at the hand of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

In Ezekiel 20 God says the problems and captivity of the Israelites stemmed from their violation of His Sabbaths and the deep-seated idolatry that continually entrapped the nation.

By way of background, the elders among the Jewish people had come to Ezekiel to hear what God would tell them about their circumstances. Through the prophet, God rehearsed His deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and giving them laws and statutes to live by. “But,” God said, “they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me. They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said, ‘I will pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt’” (verse 8).

God further said: “Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they
did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them in the wilderness, to consume them” (verses 12-13).

Leaving no room for misunderstanding the reasons for their punishment, God repeated Himself: “Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; but they profaned My Sabbaths . . . Also I raised My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles [the other nations] and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers’ idols” (verses 21-24).

Israel repeatedly violated God’s commands to observe His Sabbaths and chose their own gods—idols of wood and stone. In their worst moments they engaged in child sacrifice, offering their infant children to the fires of the pagan god Molech.

With this background, my question to Cahn was whether there was a need for him and the ministers gathered with him to heed and share a message of warning from this prophecy. His answer indicated there was. Churches, he said, must look at their connection to the early Church and realize where Christianity began.

Regrettably, time did not allow us to further discuss this point. However, since God does not change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8), His warning remains true. Any professing Christian and denomination should realize that the Church Jesus began kept the Sabbath and taught God’s commandments. Subsequent Christianity strayed from the faith delivered by Christ to His Church (to learn more, download or request our free study guide The Church Jesus Built). There cannot be a full “return” to God without acknowledging these facts.

Worship in vain

The stench of abortion in America is a living witness to the result of our sins of idolatry and Sabbath breaking, both causing us to miss the knowledge of the true God and His Son Jesus Christ. Since 1973 more than 60 million children—all made in God’s divine image—have been aborted. A generation of children has been offered up on the altar of personal convenience and self-will just in America alone.

The issue of abortion rights has become the litmus test for Supreme Court justices, as we have plainly seen in recent confirmation hearings. Liberal progressives fear a conservative court will reverse the Roe v. Wade decision and again allow states to declare abortion illegal, as was the case during the first 200 years of the nation’s history.

Furthermore, while Jesus Christ’s name is regularly invoked in the churches of America, these churches for the most part meet in accordance with longtime tradition on the first day of the week, Sunday—a direct repudiation of the Fourth of the Ten Commandments, which tells us to observe the seventh day, Saturday, as God’s holy Sabbath.

And like the seventh-day Sabbath, God’s other holy festivals (listed in Leviticus 23) are shunned, being replaced by pagan holidays like Easter and Christmas. God is thus not worshipped in spirit and truth—from a changed heart and according to God’s Word (see John 4:24). People can be sincere yet worship God in vain. There can be no effective return or repentance till this core truth of the Bible is recognized.

Turning part way is not enough

On the stage of this noble effort to stir worshippers to faith and create a revival of spirit in the nation and a “return,” many men and women decried abortion, homosexuality and the growing moral and spiritual confusion in America. They honestly assessed the corruption devouring the heart of the country.

They rightly said the nation’s “churches are filled with golden calves,” but they do not know how to take the critical steps to throw out the idols of self, pride and religious tradition from their own worship. How effective
would be a call to humbly assemble every week on the true biblical Sabbath—Saturday—and worship God as He directs?

How effective would be a call to replace the pagan trappings of Easter Sunday and Christmas with a call for worshipping God on the annual festivals He actually gave in the Bible to His people? It is time for Christians to return to their biblical roots, as taught and practiced by the Church in the book of Acts.

Indeed, is God really found in the nation’s great cathedrals and ornate, lavish megachurches in the posh suburbs of America? It is an uncomfortable question. The answer would turn long-established religious worlds upside down.

In spite of clear sincerity, in our view ‘The Return’ was a miry mixture of Messianic Jewish teaching—the blowing of the shofar, used in the temple, with its priests and rituals, to coexisting with an evangelical Christianity that is deeply rooted in pagan worship days, festivals, practices and beliefs. (Search for these subjects at our website UCG.org to see what the Bible really says about them.)

I was reminded of the metaphors God uses to describe His people in Hosea chapters 7-9. They are hot, like an oven, sincerely seeking understanding and restoration, but none calls on the true God. They have mixed themselves among each other and are like a cake unturned, half-baked and not complete. Their strength is gone, and they don’t know it. Gray hairs are on their head, and they don’t see it.

This is very strong language, but the times call for it.

I stood in the center of the National Mall in Washington, America’s secular cathedral to its might, pride and power. I heard the name of God invoked, and I saw the people come seeking spiritual understanding and healing. They know something is deeply wrong in America. But at the same time they did not hear, nor likely desired to hear, the full solution to the national sickness. You, however, have opportunity to hear and respond to God’s word of truth—to truly return to God.

Misplaced trust in religious ritual and institution

I was reminded of when God sent Jeremiah to the temple in Jerusalem, the center of the city’s religious life. God’s presence came down into this holy place. But the hearts of the people were far from God in truth. Idolatry was still practiced in the land. God’s commandments were not fully observed.

The temple was seen as a sort of “good luck charm.” Its presence, the people thought, would preserve them from harm. They believed that they were a special people and that God would always keep them in the land. No matter what happened, there would always be Jerusalem and a descendant of David sitting on the throne.

God told Jeremiah to stand in the temple and give a very different message: “Stand in the gate of the LORD’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, “Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD!”” Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Do not trust in these lying words, saying, “The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these”’ (Jeremiah 7:1-4).

The people of Judah were trusting in the temple structure and its rituals and services to protect them. They had an outward form of religion symbolized by the temple, with its priests and rituals, but their hearts were far from the pure religion of faith and trust in God as defined by the basic tenets of the law. “For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings,” God told them, “if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever” (verses 5-7).

The people of Judah had a form of religion that failed to translate into true justice toward the poor and possessed. They worshipped their own gods of pride, wealth and conceit. And eventually it caught up with them.

Claiming to follow God while denying Him

In Washington, D.C., many prominent buildings and monuments bear the name of God and quotations from the Bible. Moses and the tablets of the Ten Commandments are carved on the Supreme Court building. Yet that same court sanctions abortion and the trampling of sexual
identity and bans the Bible and God from public life.

The Christian religion of America bears the name of God and His Son Jesus Christ, but lacks the full revelation of biblical truth and is compromised with beliefs and practices incorporated from ancient paganism.

God speaks to us today through these ancient words of Jeremiah’s prophecy: “Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, “We are delivered to do all these abominations”? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” says the LORD” (Jeremiah 7:8-11).

Washington’s National Mall is like a secular temple for the nation. It’s like the forum of ancient Rome and the acropolis of Athens, where the seat of power resides and national history is enshrined. On this day in September 2020 called “The Return,” a group of religious leaders addressed masses of assembled people and led them in prayer. They said good words. They called out the sins of the nation. They blew a horn of warning and smashed a vessel as a reminder of what Jeremiah once did in Jerusalem. Did God hear?

A point of no return?

I don’t doubt the sincerity of the thousands of people who came out for this event. They know to the depth of their being that something is terribly wrong, and they seek to preserve a good life for themselves and their children and grandchildren. But what does God see, and how does He view all of this at this moment? Again, we need to go to the Bible.

Notice how God looked at religious leaders in the day of Jeremiah: “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?” (Jeremiah 5:30-31, English Standard Version).

The religious leaders leading throngs of people in a day of prayer are held accountable by God for what they teach from their pulpits. God says a minister can rule (teach or preach) at his own direction, on his own, and be teaching falsely. We noted earlier that Ezekiel said Israel’s punishment of exile and captivity came because of breaking His Sabbath and idolatry. These sins still plague our people today.

Are we at a point of no return for America? The “return” that will please God must include His eternal spiritual law in its fullness. By that I mean God’s law written on your heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10), not just professed in the mouth. The time has come for you to decide for yourself whether you will follow God as He shows from His Word. It is time you seek God and search the Scriptures to understand what God wants you to do. (Be sure to read “Have You Really Turned Your Life Over to God?” beginning on page 27.)

It is time to declare for the Kingdom of God over any kingdoms of this world. The Return, while a start, did not go far enough. It is left to you to decide whether you will repent and acknowledge the message God has given through His prophets. Your time is now!
Sweeping changes to the world order are gaining momentum. Breitbart News reported this past summer: “As the world continues to grapple with the deadly consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said only one thing is certain in its wake: ‘a new model of global governance’ is coming and the globalist body is doing all it can to hurry its arrival . . .”

“The 71-year-old professional bureaucrat claimed a worldwide consultation process around the 75th anniversary of the United Nations (which began Oct. 24, 1945) has made clear that people want a global governance system that delivers for them.’ He also maintained that the time has come for the ‘developing world’ to have a far stronger voice in global decision-making,” with financial relief provided for struggling countries. “This is not the first time Guterres . . . has spoken fondly of his desire to see the world recast along socialist principles” (Simon Kent, “U.N.’s Guterres Warns: ‘New Model for Global Governance’ Is Coming to Redistribute ‘Power and Wealth,’” July 21, 2020, emphasis added throughout).

Earlier the same month “he demanded ‘more robust global governance,’ adding the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), regional authorities such as the African Union and the European Union (E.U.) to a list of organizations he says can bring ‘order’ to a future world disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic” (ibid.).

The previous month Guterres and the chief economist of the IMF participated in a virtual World Economic Forum meeting in which “some of the planet’s most powerful business leaders, government officials and activists announced a proposal to ‘reset’ the global economy. Instead of traditional capitalism, the high-profile group said the world should adopt more socialist policies, such as wealth taxes, additional regulations and massive Green New Deal-like government programs . . .”

“Although many details about the Great Reset won’t be rolled out until the World Economic Forum meets in Davos in January 2021, the general principles of the plan are clear . . . a form of socialism—a word the World Economic Forum has deliberately avoided using, all the while calling for countless socialist and progressive plans” (Justin Haskins, “Introducing the ‘Great Reset,'” World Leaders’ Radical Plan to Transform the Economy,” The Hill, June 25, 2020).

One of the main themes of the June virtual meeting was that of the coronavirus enabling this “opportunity” for radical transformation. As Britain’s Prince Charles, one of the primary proponents of the Great Reset in the meeting, said: “We have a golden opportunity to seize something good from this crisis—its unprecedented shockwaves may well make people more receptive to visions of big change . . . It is an opportunity we have never had before and may never have again” (ibid.).

This was later echoed by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Taking up a new popular catchphrase of “building back better,” he declared, “This pandemic has provided an opportunity for a reset. This is our chance to accelerate our pre-pandemic efforts to reimagine economic systems that actually address global challenges like extreme poverty, inequality, and climate change” (Global News, Sept. 29, 2020).

In regard to the latter, Covid-19 is not expected to have the needed longevity to drive this great shift through, so focus has been placed on the larger “crisis” supposedly requiring expansive government intervention—climate change. To this end, the 2021 meeting will include the mobilization of thousands of youth activists making up the Global Shapers Community, which was involved in widespread climate strikes in 2019.

And there are many other facets to this. Some analysts predict that we will see as part of the reset a shift to digital currencies, with private savings held in central banks instead of commercial institutions, thus expanding government power over citizens through more direct and intrusive currency manipulation. Again, the push for massive change is afoot. Globalists and central planners promoting supra-national entities as a pathway to utopian dreams of world governance are sorely misled. Bible prophecy shows this will not end well. (To learn more, download or request our free study guide You Can Understand Bible Prophecy.)

Surprising Mideast peace deals

Oct. 15, 2020, marked a historical first, as Israeli officials escorted a delegation of Arabs from Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates onto the Temple Mount to pray in the Dome of the Rock. This came a month after U.S. President Donald Trump presided over the signing ceremony of the “Abraham Accords,” a peace agreement between these Arab states and Israel secured after months of diplomatic work by the Trump administration.

The administration brokered yet another deal between Israel and Sudan in October, and more deals were expected to follow, with Trump telling reporters, “We have probably 9 or 10,” referring to countries ready to normalize ties with Israel (Fox News, Oct. 27, 2020). For his accomplishments the president received several nominations for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize.

A major factor in bringing the various Arab states to the table has been the Trump administration’s hard stance against Iran—and the direct help Israel is able to be in that. The Sunni Arab countries do not want to see a powerful Shiite Iran armed with nuclear weapons and able to dominate the region. In running against President Trump, Joe Biden expressed his desire to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal, which would be against the interest of the Arab states and Israel and America—and indeed against world peace.

It remains to be seen where things will go from here. We know that the Middle East will eventually descend into terrible war (see our free study guide The Middle East in Bible Prophecy). And many pronouncements of peace are to no avail (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:3). Yet it is still a noble goal to try to bring peace while it may last, provided it is not acquiescing to a ruse or ultimately harmful terms.
I n the recent U.S. election, Americans were faced with the choice of whether to plunge further into liberal progressivism, with traditional values and economic freedom being abandoned and the nation veering farther away from God and a biblical worldview.

Yet the sad fact is that no matter who would’ve won, the years ahead for the nation appear quite bleak in this regard.

According to a survey in late 2019, a high number of Millennials, those born between 1980 and 1994 (currently 26-40 years old) are fine with socialism and even outright communism.

The Daily Caller reports: “The survey, conducted by the Victims of Communism and polled by the research and data firm YouGov, found that 70% of Millennials are likely to vote socialist and that one in three Millennials perceive communism as ‘favorable.’ The survey is part of the Victims of Communism’s report ‘U.S. Attitudes Toward Socialism, Communism, and Collectivism,’ which polled 2,100 people in the United States who were 16 and older with a margin of error of +/- 2.4%.

‘A little over half of Millennials polled said the Declaration of Independence ‘guarantees freedom and equality’ better than the Communist Manifesto.’ The historical amnesia about the dangers of communism and socialism is on full display in this year’s report’ said Marion Smith, executive director of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation” (Mary Olohan, Oct. 28, 2019).

Some suggest that maybe the problem is that many of these people don’t actually know what socialism and communism are. While that would be a relief on one level, it still means they would invite what they mistakenly perceive to be benign or beneficial systems to take charge—voting these disastrous ideas into power.

A major factor in the acceptance of these ideologies, whether through radical embrace or terrible misunderstanding, is the takeover of education by the progressive left, particularly in colleges and universities, which also translates down to primary and secondary schools, as their teachers have been indoctrinated in such ideology. University of California Santa Cruz professor emeritus John Ellis, author of the book The Breakdown of Higher Education, told radio and TV host Mark Levin in an interview June 21, 2020:

“If you go back 50 years—studied on by a Carnegie commission 1969—there were 3 left-of-center professors to 2 right-of-center professors . . . which is very mild (. . . consistent with a very healthy debate between the left and the right on campus). But by the end of the century, 1999, a study shows 5 to 1. So you’ve got a very great concentration building up. By another five, six years later it’s gone to 8 to 1. And the current studies being done, coming out now, show something like 13 to 1.

“Now there’s every reason to believe that that’s getting more extreme all the time, because one of these studies looked at the junior ranks . . . —the assistant professors, associate professors—and found that the ratio there of left to right is 48 to 1. So in other words, the hiring being done now is about 50 to 1 . . . So you’re going to wind up with a complete monoculture within a short period of time.” And of course this extends to much of journalism and the wider media.

What these facts mean is that the vast majority of the “up-and-comers” who will soon be occupying the positions of power in the country are far left. As they gain control and the older generations pass away, no longer will the country be nearly evenly divided between conservative and liberal views. Instead the nation will become extremely progressive—in numbers there is no coming back from baring a miracle.

Socialism and communism directly violate God’s commandments against theft and have brutalized and killed more people than any other political system by far. But sadly they are increasingly embraced. And not long from now socialism will rule the day in U.S. politics. This will be devastating for the country and the world at large.

American support for same-sex marriage highest ever

A 2020 study from the Public Religion Research Institute has found that 70 percent of Americans now support allowing gay couples to marry legally, the highest ever, with 28 percent opposed.

The number is up in both major political parties and across the ethnic and religious spectrum. “The majority of Democrats (80%) and 50% of Republicans support same-sex marriage. [And support includes] 79% of white mainline Protestants, 78% of Hispanic Catholics, 72% of members of non-Christian religious groups, 68% of Hispanic Protestants, 67% of white Catholics, 57% of Black Protestants, and 56% of members of other Christian religious groups. The strongest opposition . . . comes from white evangelical Protestants, the study finds, with 63% opposing” (Russell Falcon, “American Support for Same-Sex Marriage Is Higher Than Ever, Study Finds,” KXAN Fox 8 News, Oct. 25, 2020).

Such acceptance of sin says a great deal about religion today. No doubt the rise in acceptance has been sped along by the legalization of same-sex marriage by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015—along with ignorance of biblical understanding and a general increase in societal immorality.

There will yet be a terrible reckoning for rejection of God’s laws and His institution of marriage between man and woman all the way back in the Garden of Eden. To understand God’s great purpose in this, download or request our free study guide Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension.

How can you make sense of the news?

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

If God were giving a State of the Union Address to the American people today, what would He say? How does He view the state of the nation?

by Scott Ashley

Every year the president of the United States gives what is known as the “State of the Union” address. Usually the State of the Union address spells out the president’s agenda and the budget priorities that flow from that—how the president thinks trillions of dollars of taxpayer money should be spent. It spells out what the president plans to accomplish and the legislation he wants to see enacted. It describes his vision of what the nation ought to be, what it ought to look like and how its citizens should act.

The recent presidential campaign highlighted two very different visions for America’s future, with half the nation supporting one and half supporting the opposite. As a result, a very divided nation will watch the next State of the Union address, half with joy and half with a mixture of anxiety and anger, if they tune in at all.

**The State of the Union is strong?**

For most of the last 40 years, the president has traditionally started the State of the Union address with the words, “The State of the Union is strong.” But the State of the Union is clearly not strong, and anyone with a sense of historical perspective clearly realizes this.

In the pages of Beyond Today we write a lot about current news and events in the light of Bible prophecy. We see our mission as one of making the news make sense to our readers. We can do this because of our understanding of the prophetic identity of the major English-speaking nations—the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. The amazing prophesied story of these nations and what will come of them in the end times is explained in our free study guide The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy.

Because so few understand these nations’ prophetic identity, most people are in the dark when it comes to comprehending where these nations are heading—and indeed, where they already are.

**Understanding America’s identity in Bible prophecy**

At Beyond Today we understand prophetically who the descendants of ancient Israel are. We know that the modern State of Israel in the Middle East is made up of people descended mainly from only two of the ancient 12 tribes of Israel—Judah and Benjamin. They are called “Jews” because they are mostly from the tribe of Judah. But the other 10 tribes of Israel were carried away into exile by the Assyrians in the 700s B.C. and disappeared from history, becoming known as “the lost 10 tribes.”

Yet a careful study of history and Bible prophecy shows what happened to those lost 10 tribes. After many centuries, their descendants migrated to northwestern Europe, with the most prominent tribes among them populating the British Isles and America and fulfilling the physical promises of tremendous material blessings and greatness that God had spoken to Abraham—promises that were not completely fulfilled in ancient times. (To learn more, search for “America in Prophecy” at our website, ucg.org.)

We also know that much of Bible prophecy is dual—that it had application for the time in which it was given, known as the initial or early fulfillment, but that it also often has a primary later fulfillment. (To learn more, download or request our free study guide You Can Understand Bible Prophecy.)

This is especially true of many of the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In fact, when God prophesied through Ezekiel, that prophet was already in captivity along with other exiles from Judah—long after the northern tribes of Israel had been taken captive. He wasn’t prophesying backward of what had already happened to Israel; he was prophesying forward of what would happen to the end-time descendants of Israel before the final coming of the Messiah.

**God’s State of the Union message for America today**

With this in mind, consider that God is the ultimate head of state (Daniel 4:17). If He were to address the nation today, what would He say?

Rather than starting with “The State of the Union is strong,” God would convey quite a different message, perhaps in such terms as “The State of the Union is one of great danger.”
Why would I say that? Because God has already given a State of the Union address to His people—to a people whom He had greatly blessed, to whom He had given His Word and told them to live by it to enjoy His continued blessings, and to a people whom He had warned repeatedly to obey Him or suffer the consequences of their sins.

**Children who’ve rebelled against their Creator**

God chose a prophet, Isaiah, to deliver His message to the nation. And beginning in Isaiah 1, God gives a blunt assessment that certainly fits our nation today:

“This is what the Lord says: "The children I raised and cared for have turned against me” (Isaiah 1:2, New Living Translation 2015 throughout, emphasis added throughout). Just as ancient Israel’s existence came about miraculously through God’s divine favor and intervention, so did America’s. The nation began with a few poor colonies on the Atlantic coast, and through the promises made to Abraham, it grew into the greatest and most powerful single nation the world has ever seen.

But have we appreciated that? For many years the nation did. For most of the first 200 years of the nation’s history, prayer and reading and studying the Bible were a common part of everyday schooling at all levels.

In all 12 years of my primary education we started each school day with a prayer and Bible reading. Several times during my school years every student was given a small pocket-sized Bible. And even though the Supreme Court banned prayer and Bible reading in public schools in the 1960s, thousands of schools ignored those rulings.

The nation was vastly different then. Americans truly believed their nation was greatly blessed by God. But attitudes have changed dramatically, and not for the good. Like Britain and other nations before it, America is well on its way to becoming a secular, post-Christian society where God is no longer welcome. Indeed, as God says,

“God asks: “Why do you continue to invite punishment? Must you rebel forever? Your head is injured, and your heart is sick.”

"The children I raised and cared for have turned against me.”

Speaking through Isaiah, God then draws on an example to illustrate our rejection of Him: “Even the animals—the donkey and the ox—know their owner and appreciate his care, but not my people Israel. No matter what I do for them, they still do not understand” (verse 3).

His point is that even animals like cows and donkeys appreciate the care of their owners who provide shelter, food and water, but Americans today are not even as smart as cows or donkeys! The evidence of God’s blessing is all around, but the American people are willfully blind to that evidence staring us in the face.

**America’s spiritual state**

Regardless of their views on God, most Americans would like to think they are basically good people. But what does God think? He tells us in verse 4: “What a sinful nation they are! They are loaded down with a burden of guilt. They are evil and corrupt children who have turned away from the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel, cutting themselves off from his help.”

This is a sad commentary on the state of much of America today. In the Bible God shows us the answers to severe national problems. But because we have chosen to despise Him and His Word, we cut ourselves off from those solutions, and our problems grow worse and worse. It's no wonder we have so many enormous challenges! We are sinful, evil and corrupt children who have despised God and in so doing have cut ourselves off from His help.

(To learn more, be sure to read “Have You Really Turned Your Life Over to God?” beginning on page 27.)

God continues in verse 5: “Why do you continue to invite punishment? Must you rebel forever? Your head is injured, and your heart is sick.”

The first part of this verse reminds me of the oft-repeated definition of insanity—doing the same thing over and over
again but expecting different results! Politicians continue to do what has brought only more problems, but then double down and do more of the same, thinking it somehow will be better this time.

Consider, for example, how many adults now favor socialist redistribution of wealth, which amounts to massive thievery—forcibly taking income from some people and giving it to others. But politicians know that promises of “free stuff” will get them more votes, so they overlook the damage government giveaways and wealth redistribution have wrought in places like formerly prosperous Venezuela, where people scavenge for food in gutters and have literally killed and eaten zoo animals to keep from starving.

As Isaiah puts it, it’s inviting punishment. Punishment comes because we rebel against God and His Word. We defy common sense and logic. We do what is innately self-destructive and then wonder why we can’t solve our problems.

When God says to us, “Your head is injured, and your heart is sick,” He is essentially saying, “What are you thinking?” Our actions make no sense. God also says our heart is sick—it’s corrupt because of sin and spiritual blindness.

Sick from head to toe

Is the state of the nation strong? Notice in verse 6 how God views it: “You are sick from head to foot—covered with bruises, welts, and infected wounds—without any ointments or bandages.”

God says it’s not just a few things that are wrong with the nation. He says America is sick from head to toe—beat up, bruised, injured, filled with infection and putrefying sores, but with nothing to help the nation heal. We are a sick and dying nation, and we have no idea why. How sobering and shockingly sad!

And it’s sad to God also. He doesn’t want to see this happen to any nation. As noted earlier, Ezekiel wrote after Israel had already gone into national captivity at the hand of the Assyrians. So what he wrote couldn’t apply then, but has to apply to a different time—our time.

Notice what God says in Ezekiel 33:11: “As surely as I live, says the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?”

God is essentially pleading here: “It doesn’t have to be like this! You don’t have to suffer and die this way! Turn from your wicked ways so you can live!”

Consequences for disobeying God

What are the specific consequences for a nation turning its back on God? Deuteronomy 28 is a fascinating chapter in which God first lists all the great blessings that will come on a nation for obeying Him—wonderful blessings of peace and plenty, wonderful blessings that America enjoyed for roughly its first 200 years.

But then, in verses 15-18, God begins to explain what would happen when nations rejected God. He spells out the consequences: “If you refuse to listen to the Lord your God and do not obey all the commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you: Your towns and your fields will be cursed. Your fruit baskets and breadboards will be cursed. Your children and your crops will be cursed. The offspring of your herds and flocks will be cursed.”

Does this curse describe America today? For decades the United States was a net exporter of food. But that changed as recently as 2005. Now it is a net importer of food, meaning America consumes more food than it produces and exports. The nation no longer produces enough food to feed itself. It should be able to—it did for well over two centuries—but it is not doing so any longer (a major factor in this is government driving the use of farmland to produce biofuels instead of food).

The nation’s “fields”—its agricultural productivity—is being cursed.

In verses 19-20 God warns of further curses on the nation: “Wherever you go and whatever you do, you will be cursed. The Lord himself will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in everything you do, until at last you are completely destroyed for doing evil and abandoning me.”

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It is with your support that we are able to reach so many people with the life-changing truth of God’s Word!
Are we seeing any curses, confusion and frustration in America today? In recent months we’ve seen cities burning and destroyed, unprecedented levels of attacks on police and chants like those recently shouted in my city, “No borders, no walls, no USA at all!”

America is being cursed with a spirit of confusion, chaos and destructive anarchy.

Consider these sobering facts. The last war America truly won was World War II, and that was 75 years ago. Over the 75 years since, it has had to keep soldiers stationed around the world to keep the peace.

Korea followed next—a war America didn't win, but which was settled by an armistice, forcing the nation to keep tens of thousands of troops there for more than 65 years to uphold the peace.

Then came Vietnam, a costly quagmire that America finally turned over to the imperiled South Vietnamese when U.S. forces went home, after which Vietnam and Cambodia became communist killing fields in which 1.5 million people were murdered.

This was followed by the first Iraq war after Iraq invaded Kuwait, but Saddam Hussein was left in power, leading to the second Iraq war, which led to U.S. troops fighting there for nearly a decade, with thousands of troops still stationed there and facing attacks for years afterward.

America has now been in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years and hasn't won, so we're preparing to bring our troops home—after suffering more than 7,000 dead and 50,000 wounded here and in Iraq. The policy of nation-building in the Middle East has been an abysmal failure.

All these wars, which brought no conclusive victories in the last 75 years, cost trillions of dollars and more than 100,000 American lives.

God prophesied in Leviticus 26:19, “I will break the pride of your power”—this too because of our sins. America has had the world’s most powerful military for the last 75 years, but far lesser powers have slowly sapped its will and strength in wars of attrition until the nation has given up and gone home.

**Health curses fulfilled**

In verse 21 God pronounces curses on people’s health, that He “will afflict you with diseases . . .”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website lists these shocking statistics on the state of Americans’ health:

- Six in ten U.S. adults have a chronic disease.
- Four in ten U.S. adults have *two or more* chronic diseases.
- U.S. annual health care costs total $3.5 trillion—approximately $10,000 *per person per year*!
- Many of these plagues are self-inflicted, due to smoking, poor nutrition, lack of exercise and excessive alcohol use.

Such curses on the nation’s health are clearly *not* normal!

**Drought and weather curses**

Next, in verses 22-24, God declares weather-related curses: “The LORD will strike you with . . . scorching heat and drought, and with blight and mildew . . . The skies above will be as unyielding as bronze, and the earth beneath will be as hard as iron . . . The LORD will change the rain that falls on your land into powder, and dust will pour down from the sky until you are destroyed.”

This is obviously talking about severe drought. Try as we might, we can’t control the weather. But God can and does, and when He reaches the end of His patience and withdraws the blessings of rain in due season and good weather, this *will* be the result.

Remember the devastating and unprecedented wildfires this last summer and fall in California, Oregon, Washington and Colorado and a freak storm in August that destroyed *$7.5 billion* worth of crops in the Midwest? These may be a taste of far worse to come.

**Military defeat and disaster**

In verse 25 God pronounces another kind of curse: “The LORD will cause you to be defeated by your enemies. You will attack your enemies from one direction, but you will scatter from them in seven!”

Consider these sobering facts. The last war America
an extraordinary situation. And these figures don’t take into consideration the unsound thinking of millions who embrace and advocate causes (such as drug legalization) that ultimately lead to the ruin of the nation and themselves.

**Financial curses and debt**

In verses 43-44 God describes another curse afflicting America today: “The foreigners living among you will become stronger and stronger, while you become weaker and weaker. They will lend money to you, but you will not lend to them. They will be the head, and you will be the tail!”

During the Obama presidential administration, America added as much national debt in those eight years as it had in the entirety of the nation’s history since 1776—more than 200 years. During the Trump administration the nation added considerably more, largely as a result of the Covid-19 epidemic. It is currently over $27 trillion—roughly $80,000 for every man, woman and child in the United States.

For years America was the world’s leading lending nation, sending money to other nations. No longer. For years now America has been the world’s leading debtor nation. The last time the United States had a trade surplus was 1975—almost half a century ago! Since then America has imported more goods and services than it has exported. Sooner or later that enormous debt catches up, and unpaid bills become due. Financial collapse will be the inevitable result.

**A time of reckoning**

The blessings and curses chapter, Deuteronomy 28, has much more to say. It’s much like reading today’s headlines, as in the examples above. But much of it is sobering and gruesome reading—and it’s meant to be. It’s designed to get our attention, to shake us out of our spiritual stupor and wake us up.

Why are these curses coming on the nation? The descendants of Israel—primarily the United States and other major English-speaking nations today—have been blessed unlike any other nations in all of history. They’ve been blessed with great miracles time and time again. They’ve been given unparalleled wide access to God’s Word, the Bible, and even spread that Word throughout much of the world.

They were told they should have been “holy” nations and an example of God’s way of life to the rest of the world. But as we’re seeing before our eyes, we’re actually sinking lower in our corruption and rebellion against God than other nations.

America has made collective choices in recent years. It banned the Bible from schools and public life and told God we don’t want to listen to Him. It banned prayer from schools and public life and told God we don’t see a need to talk to Him.

It legalized abortion and told God that America views human life as worthless, then wonders why we see so much murder and mayhem, gang violence and teenage boys who pick up arms to gun down their classmates.

The nation trashed God’s instruction about marriage being between a man and a woman and legalized what God calls an abomination. Then it defied scientific fact and the biblical truth that God created us male or female in declaring to the contrary that some men are actually women and vice versa.

And over much of the last year governments shut down churches and told people they can’t meet to worship God, but stood by while thousands protested, rioted, looted and burned businesses while glorifying criminals—at times encouraged by political leaders who praised and even marched alongside them.

The fact is, God doesn’t have to curse the nation. Americans are cursing themselves by their own choices and sins. We’re seeing it happen before our very eyes. Today we are witnessing a once-great nation die by suicide.

**Hope for those who choose to follow God**

We began with God’s State of the Union address in Isaiah 1. So it seems appropriate that we end in the same chapter. Skipping down to verses 16-18, we see God’s plea to His people:

“Wash yourselves and be clean! Let me no longer see your evil deeds. Give up your wicked ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Fight for the rights of widows. ‘Come now, let us argue this out,’ says the Lord. ‘No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool.’”

God has not changed, as Malachi 3:6 tells us. He does not want to see people suffer and die from continuing in their sinful ways and rejection of Him. He doesn’t want our minds and values to be polluted with the corrupt values of this world and what is politically correct or “normal” in this society. He urges each of us to choose life rather than paths that lead to death and destruction.

May God give you eyes to see and ears to hear, and may you wake up to the reality of what is going on so you will not be caught asleep and unaware. Choose rightly—choose life!
When I grew up attending a long-established church, it never occurred to me to question its teachings. That is, until I was challenged to compare my beliefs to what the Bible actually said. As I began studying the Scriptures I was astonished to learn that much of what I had had been taught previously was incorrect.

I also discovered that the way I was living was displeasing to God since I was not fully obeying His commandments. After learning all of this I came to realize that I needed a complete change in the spiritual direction of my life—from following what I thought were God’s ways to actively pursuing His priorities as given in Scripture. In other words, I needed to yield control of my life to my Creator.

If you consider yourself a Christian, have you ever asked yourself if you could unknowingly be going in an incorrect spiritual direction? Maybe you feel you have turned your life over to God. But have you really? These are difficult but highly relevant questions we’ll consider.

But let’s first briefly examine biblical examples that show similar questions can apply to entire nations.

**Examples of national repentance**

Beginning with the story of the prophet Jonah, you may know that he initially balked at God’s command that he go to the great capital city of ancient Assyria to warn them of their need to repent of their wicked conduct (Jonah 1:1-2). When Jonah finally did carry out God’s instruction, he walked through the streets of Nineveh proclaiming God’s critical message (Jonah 3:4).

What happened as a result? Led by Nineveh’s king, the people fasted and “turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them” (verse 10, emphasis added throughout). Although the citizens of Nineveh may have thought they were living correctly, God’s prophet told them otherwise, and they responded in a positive manner.

In another example, King Solomon of ancient Israel offered a lengthy and earnest prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. In it he acknowledged that the Israelite nation likely would fall into sin and be punished. However, he also asked God to forgive the people if they acknowledged their sinful conduct and turned their lives around (2 Chronicles 6:26-31).

Let’s examine another biblical illustration of national repentance. Prior to Hezekiah becoming king in Judah, the nation had descended into idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. In response, when Hezekiah became king, he launched reforms including the worship of the true God, the renewal of sacrificial offerings and the observance of God’s annual festivals, including Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (2 Chronicles 30:1-27).

The result was that many people—who likely had not realized how far they had fallen from God—turned back to Him. As a revival spread throughout the nation, God was pleased and blessed the nation (verse 20; 31:21).

And later, when the Assyrian king Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem in an attempt to conquer the entire Judean nation, Hezekiah sought God’s intervention in deep, humble prayer (2 Kings 19:14-19). Responding swiftly to the king’s heartfelt appeal, God sent an angel to destroy 185,000 Assyrian troops in a single night (verses 35-36).

These examples show that a nation can indeed repent of its sins, resulting in God’s forgiveness and favor. He confirms this by promising, “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

While the Bible reveals that national forgiveness took place in the past, can it occur in the sinful countries of our world today if they repent of their wrongdoings? Yes. As God further tells us, “The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it” (Jeremiah 18:7-8).

So national forgiveness certainly can still happen, and we hope and pray that it will!

**Our personal obligation to our Creator**

However, even if nations do not turn from their evil ways, each individual—including you and me—has the personal obligation to do so.
In this regard, let’s now return to the question posed earlier: Is it possible you could be headed in an incorrect spiritual direction and not really know it?

Perhaps you love God, read the Bible and pray and are trying to be a good person. But have you really turned your life over to God in sincere repentance? Are you worshipping Him in the manner He commands in Scripture?

What does Jesus Christ require of His followers? He made many definitive statements about what He expects. For example, He stated, “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10).

Christ also said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Merely claiming Christ as Lord or Master is not enough. We must live as God commands us to!

When a young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to obtain eternal life, Jesus told him, “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). He then listed a number of the Ten Commandments to make clear what He was referring to (see verses 18-19).

If keeping the commandments was necessary in Jesus’ time, it is certainly required today since God says, “I am the Lord, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6). Hebrews 13:8 states “For the commandment was intended for us”—leads spiritually nowhere.

When God begins working with us, we start to see that our natural way of life—which appears well and good to us—leads spiritually nowhere.

The devil’s influence in today’s society

From these passages it’s clear that obedience to God is essential for a Christian in today’s lawless world, which is heavily manipulated by Satan the devil. Many don’t realize that Satan’s influence is so pervasive that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19). Ephesians 2:2 further explains that Satan influences people’s minds as the unseen “prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.”

Perhaps as you read this you might think: “At least I’m safe from the devil because I’m a Christian. Since I believe in and love Jesus, I’m certainly not deceived by Satan.” Before engaging in biblical study, I felt nearly the same way. However, I learned that the Bible plainly reveals that because the entirety of human society has been influenced by the devil, that included traditional Christian churches and their believers. It included me.

Actually, most people who profess Christianity today have no idea just how incompatible many of the doctrines and practices of long-established churches are with true biblical teachings. Religious ideas, beliefs and observances of human invention and even demonic origin are falsely considered “Christian.”

What does the Bible actually say about changing God’s laws or the manner of worship He prescribes? Many people tend to think they can individually choose how to worship God, as long as their intent is to give Him honor.

But God has a different view! He simply doesn’t accept worship that He has not initiated and sanctioned. He told ancient Israel, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deuteronomy 12:32). But that didn’t stop the people of that time or since from contravening God’s instructions. Jesus said, “In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9).

Yet how was it possible that authentic biblical instruc-

When God begins working with us, we start to see that our natural way of life—which appears well and good to us—leads spiritually nowhere.

Examining your religious beliefs and assumptions

The apostle Paul said that even though these frauds would appear virtuous, they would actually be “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Jesus said that large numbers of people would assume they are Christ’s true followers, yet would not be due to disobedience: “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Merely claiming Christ as Lord or Master is not enough. We must live as God commands us to!

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If keeping the commandments was necessary in Jesus’ time, it is certainly required today since God says, “I am the Lord, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6). Hebrews 13:8 tells us that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” So if you consider yourself one of Jesus’ followers, are you keeping all of the Ten Commandments as Jesus instructed—including the Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20:8 “to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”?

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Let what Jesus and His apostles warned about in the above passages motivate you personally to seriously examine your own religious beliefs and assumptions!

What can you do to ensure you are not being led astray spiritually? Crucial to this end is personally studying the Bible and carefully obeying all of its instructions (Psalm 119:172; Luke 4:4; Hebrews 4:12). That includes accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Savior while diligently seeking God’s Kingdom and His righteousness (Galatians 2:20; Matthew 6:33). It also means living your life in the
same manner Jesus did—keeping all of His Father’s commandments (John 15:10).

All of this has a great deal to do with what the Bible refers to as repentance (Acts 11:18; 17:30; 2 Timothy 2:25-26). Did you know that the first recorded statement Jesus made in beginning His public ministry was “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”? (See Matthew 4:17.) In saying this, He was calling on all people to reject sinful conduct, which the Bible defines as lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

Genuine repentance means submitting to God in every area of our lives. This includes abandoning false religious teachings and traditions and instead following God’s Word in practicing the worship He commands (Isaiah 55:7-9; John 4:23-24), such as observing the seventh-day Sabbath and God’s annual Holy Days.

It also involves fellowship with other obedient Christians and engaging in regular Bible study and prayer. And critically important, repentance means changing the way we are living by forsaking our own selfish ways and thoughts (Philippians 2:3).

**Repentance: turning your life over to God**

In essence then, to repent means that we completely surrender and turn our lives over to God. In doing so we acknowledge that He is perfect in knowledge, wisdom and authority, and as our very Creator, sets forth the way of life we are to live.

When God the Father opens our minds to scriptural truth and grants us repentance, He shows us our real inner nature. The apostle Paul explained it this way: “The mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God’s law. Indeed, it is unable to do so” (Romans 8:7, Christian Standard Bible).

Paul also stated that “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14, English Standard Version).

When God begins working with us, we start to see that our normal, natural way of life—which appears well and good to us—leads spiritually nowhere. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” God wants us to understand that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

As mentioned earlier, Satan deviously influences the minds of all human beings (1 John 5:19). However, a person whom God calls to repentance has the magnificent opportunity of having Satan’s yoke of bondage cast off (see Galatians 5:1) and replaced with the easy or agreeable yoke of Jesus Christ. As He said, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). Through repentance we place ourselves in our Creator’s capable hands, which is the only way to obtain lasting joy and genuine peace of mind (James 4:6; Philippians 4:7).

Our yielding to God doesn’t mean He is somehow creating androids devoid of independent thinking. He desires rather that we use our minds, our reasoning capacity, to with His help through His Word come to understand and prove in our own lives that His way is right and good (Hebrews 4:12; Ecclesiastes 7:25; Romans 16:19). “Solid food [true biblical knowledge] is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong” (Hebrews 5:14, New Living Translation).

**A new life filled with God’s divine nature**

When a person responds to the Father’s calling, repents and is baptized, he or she receives the gift of God’s divine essence and power that is the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). That person then begins a new life of spiritual growth as the old, selfish human nature is gradually replaced with God’s selfless, loving, divine nature (2 Timothy 1:6; 2 Peter 1:4). This is a life of total transformation.

Considering that and all you’ve read, are you willing to honestly examine your ways and beliefs in light of what you discover in the Scriptures? Are you prepared to make changes in your life to reflect what the Bible really says? It takes genuine faith and courage from God not to follow the ideas and beliefs of the world around us (Matthew 7:13). And beyond that, it is through God’s calling and intervention in our lives that we come to recognize our true inner sinful nature and receive the power to change and truly please Him.

I know personally that without God’s calling to help me comprehend spiritual truth and my need for repentance, I would have remained ensnared in a self-centered way of life. Yet God graciously showed me a new and better way to live and how to prepare for an amazing future as one of His immortal children in His coming Kingdom (Romans 2:4; James 1:25; Revelation 21:7).

And, just as He has for me, God is prepared to do the same for you. He wants to help you understand your nature and grant you the divine grace and opportunity to repent of your sins and fully turn your life over to Him in humility and obedience.

Will you answer His call and follow His lead? He awaits your answer!
America at a Crossroads

Excellent overview. I respect and appreciate all the biblical references, and especially thank you for clarification of racism vs. rejection of God and His ways. We should hate the actions of those that do things that God hates (Psalm 139:21).

From the Internet

Comments on the November-December issue

I wanted to let you know that your November/December issue of Beyond Today was so good and so needed. I believe no other publication that claims to be “religious” has been as blunt, honest and insightful. The commentary on this country and what is going on was right on the mark. It needed to be said!

I read in one article where many people take issue with your observations on the current state of this country, but if they do, they haven’t been reading their Bibles. Please, continue to be the witness and the warning to this country that is in a free fall decline.

From the Internet

Gratitude for your teachings

All the material that you share is of great importance, and it has helped me a lot for a long time. I would like to ask you to renew the sending of your magazines as in past years.

Subscriber in Colorado

Your magazines empower my spiritual life. They reveal a truth based on Scripture. I pray for all Jesus’ disciples to strengthen each other by faith and encouragement.

Subscriber in Mexico

I just wanted to say that I enjoy reading your magazine. The articles within help to clarify world events in the light of Bible prophecy, greatly enhancing my understanding of the Scriptures. Thank you.

From the Internet

Please continue my free subscription to Beyond Today magazine. I find your magazines and booklets interesting, inspiring and enjoyable to read. Those people that write in to cancel their subscription must not understand that even though your points of view might not always agree with theirs, the articles in the magazines and booklets are still very helpful. So please continue my subscription. Thank you.

From the Internet

Looking to attend church services with United Church of God

I am in Nova Scotia, Canada, and have been looking to worship in a congregation that totally observes all God’s holy commandments. Out of curiosity and loneliness I went on Google and typed in: Are there any Christians that observe the Sabbath? I scrolled down through many disappointing responses until your website came up. God bless you!

Reader in Canada

I have been interested in finding a local congregation that believes in the Sabbath and celebration of the Bible’s annual Holy Days. Do you know of any in my area? Is there an online community that I could observe the festivals and the Sabbath with? Any info is appreciated.

From the Internet

We have congregations in many places around the world. You can find a list, including contact information for the pastor of the church nearest you at ucg.org/congregations. Many of our congregations also webcast services online. You can find these at ucg.org/webcast. We hope to see you soon!

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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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the world’s most powerful nation—the United States of America—overlooked in Bible prophecy? Why are relatively small powers like Egypt, Syria and Lebanon mentioned, while no nation recognizable as the United States is found? What about other major English-speaking nations such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia?

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