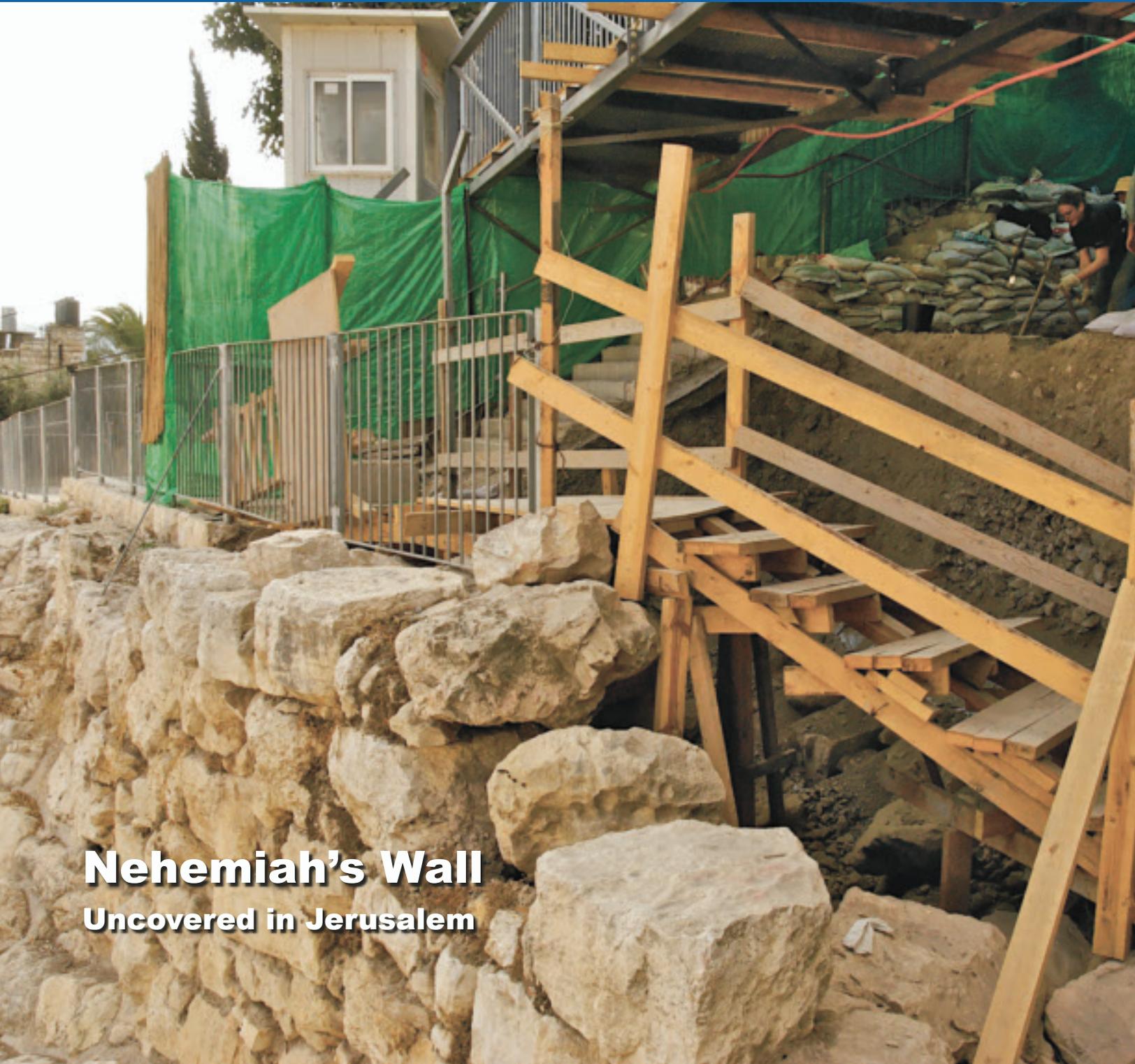


The Sabbath Sentinel

January–February 2011



Nehemiah's Wall Uncovered in Jerusalem

BSA — The Bible Sabbath Association
Jesus said, "the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath"

The Sabbath Sentinel

January–February 2011 Volume 63, No. 1 Issue 547

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Our Cover: *Nehemiah's Wall (center foreground and below wooden staircase) dated by Eilat Mazar to Nehemiah's time.*

(Photo: Associate Professor Todd Bolen of The Master's College in Israel 1996-2007; currently on study leave in the U.S.)

*See Professor Bolen's blog and Web sites at
blog.bibleplaces.com
www.BiblePlaces.com
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Nehemiah: Hero of the Faith

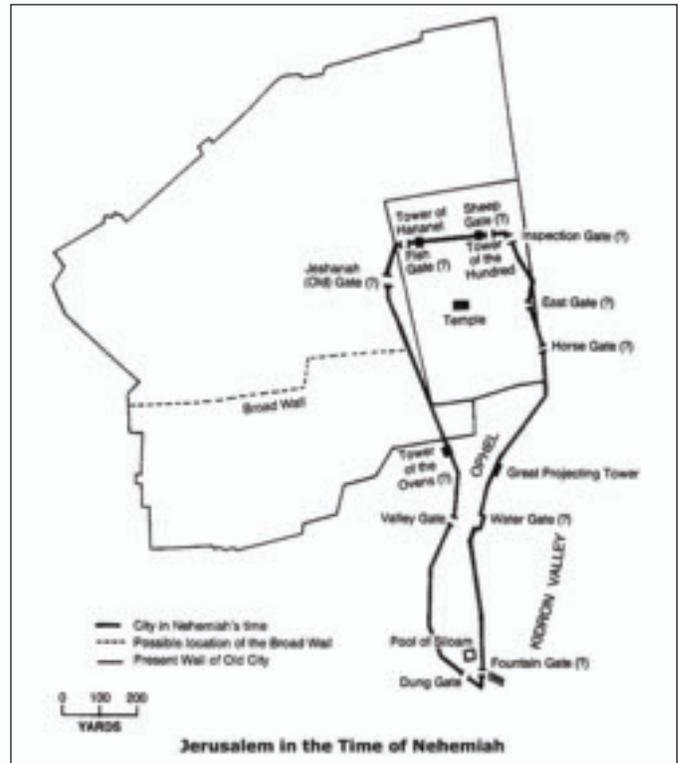
A wise man once said, "Weakness is the handmaid of wickedness." In the case of Nehemiah it can be said, "Courage in the face of opposition is the companion of righteousness." The most impressive thing about Nehemiah's life is that he had the courage to stand up to wicked men. As a result, those who were threatening the newly arrived Jews shrank back in fear realizing that Nehemiah's valor came from his zeal for God. He refused to be intimidated by the evil men of his day.

There are many useful lessons we can learn about God from the life of Nehemiah. This stalwart hero of the faith shows us how we should live before our Creator. He fought corruption, restored the faith of the people, the true worship of God, and stood toe-to-toe with Judah's enemies without flinching.

A recent Bible study centering on the return of the Jews to their home country after their exile to Babylon has opened my eyes to the extraordinary faith of this man of God. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, and both sought the same thing: the reestablishment of their exiled fellow countrymen in their homeland, but their zeal for the Jewish people extended far beyond the mere resettlement of their brethren in the land of Judah. It was directed toward putting in place once again the worship of the One True God, the God of Israel, with the Jewish people as the agents of that worship and as witnesses to the surrounding nations that these people were God's people and that He would again dwell among them. The great Yahweh would inhabit their land and His Temple in Jerusalem as He had done before the people's sins had driven them into exile.

From Cupbearer to Governor

Nehemiah was a cupbearer in the service of king Artaxerxes of Persia. Because of his position in the court, he became a trusted friend of the king and queen. The story of Nehemiah's service begins during the 20th year of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, together with several others, returned from the land of Judah to the Persian city of Susa. Curious about the welfare of his repatriated Jewish brothers, Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant. What they had to tell Nehemiah caused him great distress: "They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.' When I heard these things, I sat



down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven" (Nehemiah 1:3-4). The king noticed that Nehemiah was stressed and worried. When Nehemiah explained to the king the reason for his distress, the king gave him permission to return to Jerusalem as governor and rebuild the walls and repair the gates.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem Nehemiah inspected the walls of Jerusalem by night so that the purpose of his coming would not be revealed because the Jews had many powerful enemies surrounding Judah who were united against the rebuilding of Jerusalem. After Nehemiah inspected the walls, he called the Jews together and spoke to them about his mission: "Then said I to them, 'You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.' Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good on me; as also the king's words that he had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for this good work" (Nehemiah 2:17-18).

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The First Intercessory Prayer

by *Kenneth Westby*



Intercessory prayer is praying for someone else. What's the logic of this? Why would the heavenly Father hold back giving help and good gifts to his children until someone else asks him to do so? Do such prayers actually work? For them to work, if they do, pleas from humans must affect God's behavior—by doing something he wasn't planning to do, or not doing something else, or by intervening in human events in some specific way. Yet if God's will is perfectly set from the beginning and all things that happen are predestined to happen, then what is the point of praying if God cannot be moved? If God can't be moved by our requests, why pray?

The great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, spoke of God as an unmoved mover, which we will see contrasts sharply with the biblical Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The thought of mere mortals moving the divine into action was against the Greek concept of God, the ideal of God. The Hellenic (Greek) ideal of God is that he is an absolute, timeless and unchangeable being; a Being who is unconditioned, unchanging, impassible, and totally in control. In short, God is a Being that cannot be affected by anything outside of itself. Praying to such a God would be a waste of time. He is above such interaction with fleshly humans.

Unfortunately, current theology is a blend of pagan Greek theism (the system of thought about what the perfect God is like) with biblical theism forming a confusing and often contradictory picture of God. This double origin of classical theism needs to be carefully separated leaving the biblical ideal of God as our guide. Only by understanding the being to whom we pray can we have a healthy relationship with Him.

Here, we each need to be theologians of a sort, establishing for ourselves a true concept of God and what he is like. Searching and sorting is required. We must be honest with ourselves in identifying our presuppositions about God and finding precisely where we got them. The standard, conventional presuppositions about God picked up from the theological playground were likely left there by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin.

As serious searchers of truth, we proceed wisely if we are led by the actual evidence of how God dealt with real people recorded in Scripture. Let the so called "church fathers" philosophize away with their metaphysical abstractions, and let the Greeks have their pagan idea of their unmoved mover, their static God.

We seek to know the God of Scripture, the true God of history. For the Yahweh of Abraham and Moses is not an unmovable cold stone, but he is a most moved mover bound in dynamic relationship with his sons and

daughters made in his image. He is a God who invites our intercession on behalf of others. He loves to engage his people in genuine give-and-take relationships and share the decision making process. This world is both ours and His and he wants us to learn to deal with it and its inhabitants with His love and wisdom.

The First Intercessor

It is fitting that the first intercessor we come across in Scripture is Abraham, father of the faithful. He was no perfect guy, as the record shows, but he had a heart for God and he both knew and was known by Yahweh, the Creator. When called by God, he forsook his polytheism and moved to where ever God directed him, he became God's "friend" (Isa 41:8). When God had a matter to tend to in Abraham's neighborhood he stopped by to talk it over with his friend. This is our starting point toward understanding the amazing dynamic of intercessory prayer. Read the story in the 18th and 19th chapters of Genesis.

"Yahweh appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre."¹ With the Lord² were two other "men" who we later learn were two mighty warrior angels and members of the Divine Council. Abraham warmly welcomed these three special guests and quickly set about with the help of Sarah and his staff to roll out lavish hospitality including a huge feast. The banquet consumed most of the day.

After dinner God introduced the matter of Sarah having a child. It was a shock. Maybe Sarah, now old, had given up the hope of having a child. She privately laughed at the idea, and God took note. At this point the Lord plainly identifies himself saying, "Is anything too hard for Yahweh?" Consider how amazing this scene is, how touchingly kind: God personally delivering an answer to a prayer this childless couple had been faithfully repeating for decades. Their requests for a son was not intercessory prayer (asking for someone

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Varieties of Christian Faith

by Brian Knowles

Let's get one thing straight up front: this is an *opinion* column designed to provoke thought, and nothing more. I don't write as an official mouthpiece for the ACD or the BSA. I'm just one of a gaggle of wordsmiths who's allowed to vent his literary spleen on this website. I may or may not agree with things other writers write in this forum. The same is true of them regarding my rantings. I do, however, agree with the idea that the purpose of this website is to help us all move in a godly direction.

I don't know about you, but I think a lot about God and my relationship with him. I want above all to live as a godly man in what seems to be a largely ungodly world. I have found, however, that if I rely on preachers to show me the way, I may end up in confusion. It's analogous to food and diet "experts" - they all tend to cancel each other out. One says potatoes are good for you, loaded with nutrients. Another says they're anathema. Some say food combining is a misguided notion; others swear by it. Good luck finding the ideal diet!

Finding the ideal church is no easier — in fact it's far harder. After more than fifty years of Bible study, I'm

still trying to bring certain issues to resolution, and I am enormously unsatisfied with my relationship with God (my end of it, not his). I'm still trying to figure him out. Perhaps I've set myself an impossible task. After all, Paul wrote of God, "...how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33b). I agree with Paul.

Relationship with God is one thing, religion is another. I have little concern with the latter, much with the former. Religion, all too often is about denominational, pastoral or congregational politics, relentless fundraising, required tithing, building programs, and doctrinal squabbles that are seldom resolved. Then there's personal empire building. Within the churches of God pod (Armstrongian) we are currently witnessing yet another crisis of leadership, especially within the disunited United group.

Ideally, relationship with God is portable and custom-tailored to the individual believer. It's who we really are in Christ. We take it wherever we go and act accordingly. The challenge then, is to build within

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Would You Like to Have your own Ministry?

The BSA is looking for a person or couple to assume the duties of Office Manager on a voluntary basis.

Some of the duties involved in being Office Manager for the BSA are as follows:

Must be a dedicated Sabbath keeper and have good people skills.

Volunteer will need to spend 15 to 20 hours a week processing orders and taking them to post office, making bank deposits, imputing data, talking to people, answering emails, and taking and processing credit card orders.

Volunteer must be able to work with our website as well as PayPal.

Skills needed are Microsoft Excel and Word.

Volunteer will also need to order books and literature to maintain a good inventory, keep an updated order form, keep a precise list of members, maintain files, as well as prepare a monthly financial statement.

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We would like someone who is willing to commit to at least 3 or 4 years, and volunteer will need a room to keep inventory.

If this is something that interests you, and you would like to learn more, please contact BSA President, John Paul Howell by e-mail at howelljp@gmail.com.

Divine Sovereignty and Human Free Will, Reconciling Christian Controversy



By Terril D. Littrell, Ph.D.

The sovereignty of God is mentioned over 300 times in the Old Testament alone. It is the divine right of Almighty God, the Creator, and is a fact of his possession of all that is created (Isaiah 14:24). His sovereignty is all-pervasive and efficient and is exercised with omnipotent and undefeatable control.

Our God reigns as the loving heavenly Father and the great and mighty King. It is clear that he reigns over all despite the fact that of his rulership is not recognized by all his subjects. God governs his creatures as a loving Father, working all things for the good of his children (Genesis 45:5; Deuteronomy 8:18; Romans 8:28). As a great and mighty king, he does according to his divine will, and no one can restrain his hand (Daniel 4:35). He controls the hearts of earthly kings and mighty men (Proverbs 21:1).

Divine Providence

Divine providence is the means by which Yahweh governs and protects his entire creation (Psalm 103). Part of divine providence is called "predestination." Our sovereign God has determined all things beforehand. In his omniscience he knows the beginning and the end (Isaiah 46:10). God is selective in determining the future and is absolute and universal in his application of providential care.

Divine providence stands in direct opposition to the idea that the universe is governed by chance or fate as the Greco-Roman culture believed. Judaism says that nothing occurs by accident without intention. All things depend on God.

The first of God's sovereign decrees was to create (Genesis 1:1).

The second decree was to permit our first parents to fall (Genesis 3:6-7). The third decree was to provide a means of grace for redemption (Genesis 3:15). God knew that Adam and Eve would sin. Free choice is required by God's justice for Adam and Eve; otherwise, neither they nor we would be given or denied good for actions over which they or we have any control.

One of the great tenets of the Hebraic faith is the concept of free choice, axiomatically based on the Torah: "I am the Lord [Yahweh] ... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose

life, that both you and your seed may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 1:16-20).

In Hebraic thought, there is no contradiction between the sovereignty of God and the free will of humankind. The thrust of the Hebrew texts is exclusive. God desires all his creation to experience redemption from sin through the promised "seed of the woman." There is balance in the Judaic model, a synergism which ascribes salvation both to God and to humankind.

God's Plan of Salvation

The Edenic Covenant promised humankind a deliverer. Down through the ages, God would fulfill his promise through continuing covenants to certain chosen (predestined) people to fulfill Bible prophecy. Those prophecies always came true because God has both the power and the wisdom to fulfill them in every detail. The "seed" line came through Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Levites, the tribe of Judah, David, Solomon, and the blessed Virgin Mary (to name only a few), yet each of those chosen vessels made choices to live in full obedience to God's will that led to God's predestined outcome for deliverance from the law of sin and death.

God predestines general histories of humanity in fulfillment of Bible prophecy and redemption history specifically concerning the birth, life, and death of the Messiah (Luke 4:43; John 12:27; Acts 2:23; Ephesians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 2:7-8; 1 Peter 1:19-20). The Bible teaches that God's role in redemptive history extends even beyond the Messiah to the redemption of the nation of Israel (Isaiah 46:13; Jeremiah 51:10).

God's plan has not failed because the world has not yet been converted. There is a messianic age of peace, righteousness, and justice that will come to the earth during the reign of Yeshua as King of kings and Sovereign of sovereigns (Revelation 17: 14). While God predestines nations, he does not do so with individual Gentiles who can be grafted into the olive tree (Israel) or individual Jews who can be sustained in it or be pruned from it (Romans 9:11; 11:17-18).

The Early Church

It was commonly accepted by believers in the early church that Jesus chose his twelve apostles for special

kingdom work and that one of them would betray him (John 6:70; 15:16). Jesus chose Paul for a specific assignment and role in the development of that early community of faith (1 Timothy 2:7-8).

The Patristic Fathers were unanimous in their understanding of the sovereignty of God and his divine providence, but specific areas of predestination were largely in obscurity. By 370 AD., heresy arose in the church over the issue of free will.

Pelagius (354-440 A.D.), an ascetic British monk denied the doctrine of original sin and taught that every person has freedom of choice and that God wills the salvation of all people.

He denied that God has a plan or that human will must be aided by God's prevenient grace before they are drawn to faith to salvation. He maintained that by our own natural strength we can through good works be justified before God.

Pelagianism spread quickly in Rome, Britain, Palestine, and North Africa. Aurelius Augustine (354-430 AD.), bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa, a contemporary of Pelagius first embraced free will but was forced by this heresy to take the opposite view. Augustine was influenced by Hellenistic patterns of speculative philosophy which caused him to accept the Greco-Roman concepts that all events are determined by divine will. His theological thesis went beyond any Christian theologian before him in developing a distinctive doctrine of predestination. The further the church drifted away from the Judaic pattern, the more confused it became.

According to Augustine, God in his own great mercy and grace and by his free choice predestined some individuals to salvation and others to damnation and the number of the "elect" were determined and certain and could not be changed. God's grace toward the "elect" was thought to be irresistible. Augustine also believed that humankind in its natural state is incapable of any positive cooperation with divine grace in conversion and that the enkindling of faith depends solely upon the grace of God so that no human cooperation was needed or possible. Once a person was predestined, they could never be lost. This is unconditional "eternal security."

Semi-Pelagianism arose after the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) and later during the Reformation period (1700s). It was a softer sort of Pelagianism advocating that humankind is not free to choose good or evil, to make the first move toward God, to turn to God in faith, and be given power to choose good by God's grace. Human beings are only partially destitute spiritually. This position was also condemned as heresy by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Orange in 529 A.D.

The Medieval Church

By the sixteenth century, the subject of predestination had become quite confused. Some Catholic theologians leaned toward Pelagian views, but most accepted Augustinian thought. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) took an official position that Augustine's theology on predestination was fatalistic because it defeats the purpose of preaching the gospel, weakens the moral energy, and leads to despair. The Council stated clearly that God does not predestine anyone to damnation and that God's grace can certainly be resisted: a person could become a Christian, later deny conversion, and be lost.

The Eastern Orthodox Church seems to have escaped this controversy because it kept closer to the Jewish model of balance and harmony between sovereignty and free will.

Regardless of the decision of the Council of Trent, Augustine's views still persisted in the Catholic Church and were promoted by Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), Peter Lombard (1100-1160), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), John Wycliffe (1330-1384), John Huss (1372-1415), Martin Luther (1483-1546), Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), John Calvin (1509-1564), John Knox (1510-1572), Cornelius Jansen (1585-1638).

The Renaissance Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) had taken the whole Augustinian view to task during the time of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. He opposed Martin Luther on his position on predestination. He also opposed Pelagianism. Erasmus defined free will as "a power of human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation." He contended that God would never damn people who are morally responsible and responsibility presupposes free will. Erasmus' treatise, *Freedom of the Will* (1524), was criticized by scholars in both Catholic and Protestant circles so that his influence on the subject of predestination was greatly diminished in both camps.

The Reformers

The first Protestant reformers for the most part thought that original sin had radically perverted humankind with the tendency to evil which was insurmountable. They also taught Augustinian views on predestination. As the Protestant Reformation developed, they sided with John Calvin on his interpretation of unconditional predestination.

When the Church of England broke with Rome in 1534, the Reformation leaders were all strict predestinarians. Bishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) led the reformed church in that "direction with little or no opposition for over 25 years. He developed liturgies,

wrote the "Book of Common Prayer" (1549) and the "Forty-Two Articles of Faith" (1552).

John Calvin was perhaps the most influential of all the reformed leaders. He was a French priest, theologian, and scholar. He was reared as a staunch Roman Catholic, and in his early life was a devout practitioner of that faith. He received a humanistic education in Paris which gradually led him to become a Reformed Protestant. He left the priesthood and practiced law in France, finally breaking with Rome in 1536.

Continuing the thesis of Augustine, Calvin emphasized the human inability in and of itself to choose to repent and believe the gospel. He defined predestination as God foreordaining all things which shall come to pass, including the final salvation of humankind. With Augustine, he believed the predestined could never be lost.

This brilliant logical thinker seemingly reduced the sovereignty of God to a form of deterministic logic which required unconditional election and predestination. Those who have been chosen by God to be saved are irresistibly enabled to answer the call, while the rest of humankind is condemned to eternal damnation in hell. Calvin's views find their fullest expression in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) and in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* compiled by the English Puritan divines (1646). Calvin's thesis rested upon five theological pillars identified with the acronym "TULIP":

Total Depravity; Unconditional Election; Limited Atonement; Irresistible Grace, and Final Perseverance.

Calvin's impact on the modern world is simply beyond comprehension. His view that God reigns everywhere and over all things led him to develop the biblical idea that humanity can serve God in every area of life: church, civil government, education, art, music, business, law, and journalism, to name a few. Calvin's teaching led directly to what has become known as the "Protestant work ethic." He created "free enterprise" and the "capitalistic" way that led to unprecedented economic prosperity around the world.

James (Jacobus) Arminius (1560-1609) was a Dutch theologian and Calvinist who studied and taught theology at the University of Leiden. After deeper study of the Scriptures, Arminius eventually broke with Calvinism and opposed unconditional predestination publicly. He wrote many books and treatises on theology known as *The Works of James Arminius*. In these writings he dealt fully with predestination. His thesis was the antithesis of Calvinism. Arminianism revived the concept of the biblical teaching rooted in Judaism, "synergism," that sovereignty and free will work together by the grace of God and are necessary to enable the sinner to return to God and live. Yet

humankind must desire and attempt to choose to obey God. The human role in salvation is saying "Yes" or "No" to God's love.

Arminianism found perhaps its strongest proponent in John Wesley (1703-1791), a Reformed Anglican priest. The Anglican Church celebrated its 200th year of separation from Rome when John Wesley was a student at Oxford University. For the most part, Anglican theologians held that as sovereign and king, God is to be absolutely obeyed. His will does not allow for human will. If God allowed human will, that would somewhat threaten this sovereignty which takes precedence above all else.

John Wesley wrote twenty-two essays dealing with Calvinism, which was the most he wrote on any one subject. Perhaps the most critical of all Wesley's anti-Calvinistic writings was *Predestination Calmly Considered* (1775), which is a part of *The Works of John Wesley*. Wesley said, "We think it our duty to oppose predestination with our whole strength, not as an opinion but as a dangerous mistake which appears to be subversive of the very foundation of Christian experience, and which has in fact given occasion to the most grievous offences."

Wesley believed that Calvinism was far from being on the periphery; rather it went to the core and heart of classical Orthodox-Catholic Christianity. Wesley appealed to the authority of the older tradition of the Bible and the Patristic Fathers who had roots in Judaism and taught that God bestowed his prevenient grace upon all people. He opposed the prevailing predestination views of Anglicanism and made a radical departure from traditional Reformed Theology.

Wesley agreed with only one of the five pillars of Calvinism: Total Depravity. The deprivation of God's Spirit in the Garden of Eden produced the absolute depravity of all humankind. All goodness and holiness are derived from God; therefore, the departure of God's Holy Spirit from the hearts of Adam and Eve and their posterity afterward left humanity in a sinful state.

There was much agreement in other areas of theology which emerged from these two major theologies that grew out of the Protestant Reformation, Calvinism and Arminianism. Both believed in salvation by grace and not by good works, through faith in Christ alone. Salvation cannot be rooted in human merit, but in divine grace. Salvation begins with God's grace. God takes the initiative to save us.

God's Call, our Response

We are all called by God to choose to become a part of his divine plan for the ages. All human beings have

sinned and deserve nothing but condemnation. Sinful humanity can do nothing of itself whereby it could be considered worthy of salvation. Thus, any offer of eternal life must be by God's grace, and no one is void of God's grace.

God's plan is predestined according to his purpose (Ephesians 1:11; Romans 8:28). The purpose of our creation in the image and likeness of God is that we should glorify God by serving him in obedience, love, and enjoyment, deriving pleasure from his royal splendor. He has made provision to save all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

Our sovereign God has predestined us to be conformed into the image of his dear Son, to be adopted as his children, and to obtain eternal life; however, God does not arbitrarily "elect" some people to salvation and others to damnation, irrespective to their own free will. God does not exclude anyone in his plan of salvation which amounts to "arbitrary prelimitation."

God's sovereignty is a comfort to us who believe. When we live our lives making wise decisions according to God's will, we are blessed by God (2 Timothy 3:16-17; James 1:5). Being aware of God's sovereign grace causes us always to confess that our decisions and actions are predicated on "if God wills" (Romans 15:32; James 4:15).

God knows those who will finally persevere and be saved in the end. We can know that our sins are forgiven. We have been placed on probation. When our probation period ends, we will be judged according to our works (Revelation 20:12-13). We die in hope of salvation. It is certain that our sovereign God is all powerful, all wise, all loving, and we can trust him in the midst of life's many difficulties to bring us out victoriously.

It is possible for someone who has been justified by God's grace through faith later to depart from the faith, reject the plan of salvation, and eventually be lost (Hebrews 6:4-6; Galatians 5:4; 1 Corinthians 9:27). Christian assurance, however, can be experienced in this life, but only in the context of an ongoing relationship with our loving heavenly Father, through the power of divine grace, pledged by our Savior and Redeemer for our support.

Yes, God has a definite plan and purpose for your life (Job 23:14; Ephesians 1:8-12). How will you respond to God's call?

Reprinted from Restore Magazine, March 2010 issue. Dr. Terril Littrell, Ph. D., is a retired pastor with over 40 years of experience in teaching, writing, and ministry. He and his wife Chloe live in Cleveland, Tennessee.

New Hearts

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

On December 4, 1967, the world was startled by the announcement that the day before, a team of South African heart surgeons, headed by Dr. Christiaan N. Barnard, had performed the world's first heart transplant and that the patient had survived; for how long nobody could tell.

The operation was performed on Louis Washkansky, a 55-year-old businessman who was dying of irreparable heart damage. The transplantation completed, electrodes were placed against the walls of the new heart, a jolt of current was administered, and the heart began beating.

The chief danger that now faced the doctors, and above all Washkansky, was that his body would reject his new heart. According to Dr. Jacobus G. Burger, medical supervisor of the hospital, the first two or three days following the operation were the most critical. Said Burger, "The longer Washkansky goes on, the better, although that does not mean the heart will not be rejected later. The body could decide in 5 or 10 years" time that it doesn't want this heart."

In spite of all that medical science could do, symptoms of immunological rejection and other complications began to appear on December 8, and 13 days later, on December 21, Washkansky died.

Although this was the first time that doctors had given a person a new physical heart, God has been giving human beings new spiritual hearts ever since humanity became afflicted with that fatal heart disease called sin. As in the case of transplanted physical hearts, so with transplanted spiritual hearts; so long as life lasts there is always danger that the new heart will be rejected. Yet, as in Washkansky's case, the longer we keep the new heart, the less danger there is that we will reject it.

Washkansky, of course, could not help it that his body rejected his new heart, but this is not true of new spiritual hearts. By frequently renewing our decision to keep the new heart God gives, we can prevent our sinful natures from rejecting it.

On the other hand, it is not necessary that we willfully repudiate our spiritual relationship with Christ in order to reject our new heart. All that is really necessary is that we neglect to renew our decision to keep our new heart. It is for this reason that we do well to heed Solomon's counsel:

Keep thy heart with all diligence" (Prov. 4:23).

If God has given you a new heart, what better time is there for renewing your choice to keep it than right now?

Donald Mansell, New Every Morning, page 13. Review & Herald Publishing Association. 1981.

Biblical Literacy in America, Past and Present

Dr. Daniel Botkin



"Atheists, Agnostics, Mormons and Jews Score Best on Religious Knowledge Survey." These are the results of a nationwide poll conducted by The Pew Forum this past summer. According to previous surveys, 60% of American adults say that religion is "very important" to them. But this latest survey reveals "that large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions — including their own."

Here are just two examples that demonstrate Americans' ignorance of the Bible. Only 63% of Americans know that Genesis is the first book of the Bible. Only 71% know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem — in spite of the popular Christmas song "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The poll of 3,412 adults consisted of 32 questions. The following shows how many of the 32 questions each group of respondents, on average, answered correctly:

- Atheist/Agnostic 20.9
- Jewish 20.5
- Mormon 20.3
- White evangelical Protestant...17.6
- White Catholic 16.0
- White mainline Protestant. 15.8
- Nothing in particular 15.2
- Black Protestant... 13.4
- Hispanic Catholic 11.6

One person posted this comment on a Christian Web site: "No big surprise. Believers think with their hearts; nonbelievers think with their heads." To which another person responded: "Actually, everyone thinks with their heads. Believers just think less."

Lamar Vest, president of the American Bible Society, expressed "deep dismay at Christians' lukewarm Bible knowledge."

Vest's dismay was expressed in this statement: "Today's research report from The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life exposes a deficit in religious knowledge among a majority of Americans. Particularly disturbing was the lack of knowledge among self-professed Christians about the Christian faith. Jewish adherents actually had a better awareness of the Bible and Christianity than did Christians. The Bible — the most-translated and best-selling book of all time — has informed centuries of literature, government, philosophy and social behavior. Beyond the hope and encouragement it offers, a basic

knowledge of the Bible is essential for understanding and appreciating much of Western culture" (Sources: pewforum.org and everydaychristian.com).

Lamar Vest's comment about needing a basic knowledge of the Bible to understand and appreciate Western culture is painstakingly demonstrated in a recently-published book that I read. The title of the book is *Pen of Iron*:

American Prose and the King James Bible (Princeton University Press, 2010). In *Pen of Iron* Robert Alter, a Bible translator, literary critic, and teacher of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, since 1967, writes about the profound influence the KJV Bible had on American literature in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, most Americans were Biblically literate. Educated people were expected to be familiar with the general content of the Bible, whether they believed it or not. Alter states that the KJV was regarded as "the national book of the American people," and that "novelists drew on the resources of the King James Version to fashion different versions of a distinctive American style for prose fiction."

In his book Alter shows the influence of the KJV Bible on the writings of various American authors: Melville, Faulkner, Bellow, Hemingway, even Abraham Lincoln. Alter points out that American writers of the 19th and 20th centuries did more than just write about Biblical themes; they also wrote in biblical writing styles. Though each author developed his own distinctive style, every author made use of various Hebraic literary devices that are retained in the KJV: antithetical parallelism, synonymous parallelism, synthetic parallelism, alliteration, repetition, cadence, parataxis.

Alter mentions the KJV translators' "peculiar and productive decision to follow the contours of the Hebrew in idiom and often in syntax." This too influenced the writing styles of 19th and 20th century authors and created what Alter calls "Biblical echoes" in American prose."

Alter, himself a Bible translator, says, "The King James Version is also faithful to the Hebrew in creating an English equivalent for the homespun simplicity and phonetic compactness of the original." Alter considers all modern translations "to be stylistically inferior in virtually all respects" compared to the KJV.

Alter obviously prefers the original Hebrew Bible over any translation, but he says this of the KJV: "Though I can attest that reading Genesis or Job in the 1611 [KJV] translation is by no means the same as reading it in the Hebrew, much from the themes and imagery and characterization of the Hebrew is nevertheless preserved, and has deeply affected untold numbers of English readers, among them major writers.

Some of these major writers were driven by an "ambition to turn the language of the novel into prose-poetry," similar to the prose-poetry that appears in much of the Bible. Alter says this ambition is "a distinctively American project."

"English-speaking culture has been marked with a certain difference from other Western cultures," Alter writes, "because it has inherited a strongly eloquent canonical translation of the Bible that has to a palpable degree reshaped the language."

Alter seems to be disappointed that "current ignorance of the fundamental biblical texts is notoriously widespread." He writes: "The plain fact is that we no longer have a culture pervaded by Scripture, where Bible reading is a daily practice in parlor and in pulpit, where the active memories of ordinary people are stocked with many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of phrases and verses from the canonical texts."

Like Robert Alter, I am disappointed by the loss of biblical literacy in America. Alter seems to be disappointed primarily (perhaps solely) for literary and academic reasons. While I certainly value the literary and academic aspects, I am disappointed primarily out of concern for the spiritual wellbeing of God's people. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge," God said (Hosea 4:6). Ignorance of the Scriptures will eventually destroy a nation. Alter's book reaffirms my belief that our nation's only hope is to return to the God of the Scriptures and to the Scriptures of God.

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Correction:

Sept-Oct 2010, First full paragraph on page 10.

God has the power to cut short our lives at any moment. In 2006, some 2.4 million Americans died. Their life spans were over. At one point in history, God, in his wrath, wiped out two cities: Sodom and Gomorrah. Later, God eradicated the entire human race, except for eight souls, in a flood. Some time after that episode, He threatened to do it again with Israel and start afresh with Moses. Moses appealed to God not to do it and He relented.

Should read: "Earlier, God eradicated the entire human race,"

Just the Facts

In the year 131 A.D., the Roman Emperor Hadrian established Aelia Capitolina, a pagan city built upon the ruins of Jerusalem. The name Aelia Capitolina is derived from Hadrian's family name and the name of the Roman god Jupiter Capitolinus. A temple of Jupiter was built on the temple mount where Solomon's temple once stood and those who appeared to have anything to do with the God of the Bible were forbidden to enter the city. The actions of Hadrian, which some scholars believe to have included the prohibition of circumcision, led to what is known as the Bar Kokhba revolt which would result in the final disruption of Judaism as it had been practiced for over 1500 years.

Hadrian was instrumental in bringing the worship of Serapis to Rome. Serapis was the Greek equivalent of the Egyptian sun gods, Osiris and Horus. In Egypt the pagan trinity consisted of Osiris, Isis, and Horus: The sun god, the mother goddess, and the reborn sun god.

A letter ascribed to Hadrian has caused many scholars to attempt to associate Jesus with Serapis, who is depicted as a long haired bearded man. In his letter Hadrian stated that in the land of Egypt "those who worship Serapis are, in fact, Christians, and those who call themselves bishops of Christ are, in fact, devotees of Serapis." He goes on to say that "there is no chief of the Jewish synagogue, no Samaritan, and no Christian presbyter, who is not an astrologer, a soothsayer, or an anointer." As we can see, by 135 A.D. only a hundred years after the time of Christ, attributes of paganism had already been associated with Jesus to the extent that the ruler of the Roman Empire had no idea what true Christianity was really like.

It happened over time in only 100 years.

Today, two thousand years later, there are those who can be described in no better way than anti-christs who would lead us to believe that Hadrian was correct — that Christianity is just one more version of pagan sun worship. They base their contentions on the fact that pagan precepts, identical to those that can be traced directly to the sun gods of Egypt, are found in many of our churches. Theologians know that. They also know that those precepts never had anything to do with Jesus, yet in order to hold on to what they want to believe they refuse to speak the truth, allowing themselves to be defeated by the enemies of the gospel.

Will we defend only what we have been taught and want to believe, or will we honestly search for the truth and proclaim it? I recommend the truth.

Richard Rives is the author a weekly e-mail newsletter called "Just the Facts." Richard is also author of the DVD series "Time is the Ally of Deceit," which is available through the BSA. Richard's Web site is toolong.com.

He is Coming

by Terrell Perkins



Very soon a powerful being will make his appearance on earth. He will come in great majesty and glory. His appearance will be marked by wondrous signs. The leaders of many of earth's religions will acknowledge that this is the one the world has been waiting for. He will unite peoples and nations. He will bring peace to a war-torn, traumatized humanity. Peace, peace, finally, or so it will seem because this man will not be the returning Jesus Christ, but a counterfeit that fits the way the world has been deceived to see the Christ.

The problem with a counterfeit is that once you have the fake, you don't see the need for the real thing. If someone owes you money and pays you in counterfeit bills, you think you've been paid! This man will be a forgery of the Christ. His coming is prophesied as often in the scriptures as the coming of the Real Christ, but he will begin by speaking soft words. He will tell the world of his day what they want to hear. He will tell them that they are already all right with no need of redemption. That's a far cry from the message of the Real Christ.

This man, this anti-Christ, will fulfill the prophecies of many faiths. He will smooth over the differences between them and bring them all into one fold. He will move against the King of the South that has united the nations and lands of Islam. The religion that has been a thorn in the side of Christendom will be utterly destroyed. He will take upon himself the power to change the laws and times of the Most High God. He will seat himself in the Temple as God's equal.

A great false prophet, the leader of the biggest church on earth that uses the name Jesus Christ, will point to the anti-Christ and tell the world that this is *the* Christ. That false prophet will make an idol of the man and demand the world worship it. Many miracles will follow. Thinking that he is the Real Christ, the world will obey him and yield their hearts, minds, and hands to carry out his diabolical work, thus taking his mark in their foreheads and on their right hands. All who refuse his mark, all who deny that he is the real Christ, will be persecuted, many being put to death. Those that persecute them will think they are serving the will of God.

The world will have been expecting another Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or Alexander the Great as the

anti-Christ. They won't be expecting a peace-maker. That's what this man will seem to be at first. He will be wounded almost to death and then be miraculously healed to the amazement of the world. This man may be an Israelite, possibly a Jew. Since the Real Christ at His first coming remained celibate, it is possible that he will show no interest in women. This will fit the image of many religious people who believe celibacy is somehow more "spiritual." He will come to rule the united nations that have revived the old Roman Empire for three and a half years, the same amount of time the Real Christ preached the Gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. This anti-Christ will do the will of *his* father. He will be the embodiment of evil. He will appear to be a bright and shining savior to the world, but his gospel will be a corruption of everything holy. When he has drawn in those that will follow him, they will suffer his fate by following him into the lake of fire. There will be a kind of symmetry between his life and that of the Real Christ. He will deceive all but the elect, and he will almost deceive them.

History shows us that even those who know the Scriptures can be mistaken. When Christ came the first time, the people who had made the study of the Scriptures a profession expected a conquering king.

When the Real Christ returns, the world will rise up to fight against Him thinking they are doing the will of God. They will be doing the will of *their* god, but not the will of the Most High.

Two men are coming: the Beast and the false prophet. Two witnesses are coming to proclaim the true gospel. The world will put them to death. The anti-Christ is coming, and the world will accept him as Christ. The Real Christ is coming, and the world will fight against Him and seek to kill those who follow Him. The True Lord is coming. Will you know Him? Be not deceived by signs and wonders. Only God can say what righteousness is. Are you listening?

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Westby: "First Intercessory Prayer" cont. from page 4.

else), but supplication, asking for oneself...to have a child. God invites both kinds of prayer. In this case, he even delivered the answer personally. "Too late," Sarah thought, but was she in for a surprise a year later.

As dusk approached and the three prepare to leave, Yahweh asks his two companions, members of His Council, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" After offering the logic of inviting Abraham to participate in the matter of what to do about Sodom, he turns and lays out the problem to Abraham. Previously, Abraham has been told by Yahweh that he was destined to be a blessing to the world and shoulder a related obligation to the faithful exercise of authority. Now, Abraham is invited to take some responsibility for managing a most important undertaking.

Yahweh said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." At that point the two angels begin the long walk down to the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But then something strange happens. "The Lord stood yet before Abraham" (18:22, *Masoretic Text*). God has revealed to Abraham his intention, calamity is likely, but does not set about putting the intention into effect. He is standing eye to eye with his friend Abraham as if waiting for his thoughts on the matter, waiting to see his reaction. He wants to share with his servant the process by which decisions are taken and implemented in the world. We might expect Abraham to enthusiastically welcome Sodom finally getting what it deserved: "Good, it's about time, burn them all!" Not so.

Without pause Abraham aggressively begins to intercede on behalf of the righteous and challenges God: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" He presses the point further saying, "Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

These are bold powerful appeals to the very character of God and to his sense of justice and fairness and mercy. Apparently he believed God would listen to his pleas and change plans. He gets God to agree that if there are fifty righteous in the city, the entire city will be spared God's judgment. He continues to get agreement on lesser numbers until he ends up with God agreeing to spare the place for but ten righteous souls. It wasn't that Abraham was sympathetic to the perverse practices that characterized these cities, but held the hope that as long as there were righteous people perhaps the unrighteous might repent and be

spared. No doubt this was the hope that taxed God's patience for a long time until the deterioration into sin appeared complete.

Abraham dropped the bargaining at ten as his racing mind couldn't come up with an awareness of even ten righteous people in that miserable city. There was one person, his nephew Lot, and maybe his wife and two daughters—only four! Abraham knew the king of Sodom and the leadership in the other cities of the plain having done business with them and on one occasion, years earlier, going to war to rescue them from defeat at the hands of an invading force of four kings led by Kedorlaomer. He knew names, knew families, knew children. Abraham was also well aware of the moral depravity that had spread among these valley cities and agreed with the need for God's judgment, but was conflicted. They were neighbors, people he knew.

Still, God was going to be true to Abraham's challenge and not kill the righteous with the wicked. The solution was to whisk the righteous out of town before the fire and brimstone rained down. The angels ended up actually grabbing the hands of a reluctant Mrs. Lot and daughters pulling them out of town. Abraham's intercessory prayer got the stipulated result—the righteous did not die in Sodom's judgment.

Lot and his daughters were saved, but while fleeing his wife exercised her free will to disobey the angel's command (always a bad idea) to not stop or look back, but to keep running for their lives. She stopped and looked back, perhaps entertaining a return trip as she didn't see any fire, just the warm lights of her home town. It was her final thought in life.

Joining God in Saving the World

God must have been gratified that Abraham immediately stepped forward on behalf of his neighbors. I think he wanted Abraham to assume responsibility for decisions involving his world and his fellow humans. He wanted Abraham to exercise some of the God-given power he had to bless and to also understand the power to curse.

Where does that power come from? Theologically it mirrors the basic commission given by God at the beginning: Speaking to the Divine Council God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule ..." (Genesis 1:26). Man was given dominion over everything and herein lies the power to bless and curse, help or harm, do good or do evil. It is human power to bless and human power to curse, which Noah employed (Genesis 9:25) and which to some degree we all have (see Leviticus 20:9 and New Testament guidance by Jesus and Paul, Luke 6:28; Romans 12:14; Galatians 1:8-9).

Intercessory prayer is exercising power to bless another by the participation of God. Abraham is the first prophet in the Bible and he is called such explicitly for his intercessory work on behalf of others (Genesis 20:7, 17—Abimelech in this case). God does not like to act alone, but collaboratively.³ He created us with God-like qualities and commissioned us to share in the righteous management of life on earth. Intercession is one of the key ways human beings can involve themselves in doing God's work.

Moses, and all the prophets, functioned as lead intercessors on behalf of God's people. Yahweh declares he is going to annihilate the people for perfectly just reasons. They had broken every covenant they made and forsook the true God for an Egyptian cow god and were celebrating their return to paganism in a drunken orgy.⁴ Moses intercedes with reasons why Yahweh should not do so—good reasons which could support a case for mercy. Yahweh is convinced and has a change of mind. Yahweh was moved by Moses' intercessory prayer—a direct appeal toward his God on behalf of others.

Intercessory prayer is integral to prophecy as Samuel found out. Like the Aaronic priesthood which interceded for the people in presenting their offerings, Samuel interceded when the people were facing judgment for their sins. "The people all said to Samuel, 'Pray to Yahweh your God for your servants so that we will not die....' "⁵ He did and they didn't.

True prophets and ministers continually urge God to seriously consider mercy as they also urge people to take God's wrath seriously. In addition to the troubles of the human condition—enemies, illness, disaster, discouragement, and spiritual weakness, there are other forces we fight including a heavenly accuser, called in Hebrew, *hassatan*, "the adversary."

Jesus offered an intercessory prayer on behalf of his friend Simon Peter: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."⁶ Jesus asked his heavenly Father to give Peter the spiritual strength to endure the terrible ordeal. God did. A part of the Lord's Prayer includes a petition to not be overcome by the evils of temptation or by the evil one. Can you think of a struggling someone that could use your intercession with God?

Remember that heart ache of a story when God could find no one motivated to intervene to save Israel. "I sought for someone from among them as a repairer of the wall and one who would stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land [an intercessor], so that I would not destroy it; but I did not find anyone" (Ezekiel 22:30; see Isaiah 62:6-7 for a similar occasion). We are to be as watchmen praying to God on behalf of

our nation that God would be merciful and lead it away from sin.

Shortly after the birth of Jesus, God honored two very special, faithful intercessors, Simon and Anna. They were the first named saints to recognize the Holy Child, the Son of God, Israel's Anointed Savior. Read the story in the second chapter of Luke. Simon was praying that God would send a savior and a light to the Gentiles and on that dedication day God directed him to Mary and Joseph. He took the baby Jesus in his arms and gave a powerful prophecy about how Israel would be forever changed. Then God brought Anna to see the baby, that dear eighty-four-year-old saint, praying daily in the Temple for the redemption of her people. Her years of prayer for Israel were now to be answered and she with her own eyes beheld the Lord's Anointed.

It is in this sense that Paul writes,

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus... (1 Timothy 2:1-5).

In that one paragraph, with some serious meditation, can be found dozens of important needs, things, situations, and people to pray about. If God is seen as real and involved in our world we can be passionately involved in bringing people to know Him, and his glorious Son.

Standing in the Place of People

The writer of Hebrews pleads for Christians to remember people who are in prison or who are being tortured. This very moment thousands of Christians are in that stressful state in dozens of countries simply because they are Christians. Thousands have been killed in just the past few years in Nigeria, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Morocco, Iran, Egypt, China, India, and many other countries. Persecuted and killed mainly by Muslims but also by radical Hindus and others who resent their Christian confession.

Remember them "as though you were in prison with them...as though you yourselves were being tortured" (Hebrews 13:3). The "as though" puts us in the place of the people suffering; we stand with them, and for them, and plead their case before our God that he would provide them with strength to endure and mercy to escape.

Jeremiah's lamentations were meant to be prayed not merely by the afflicted but by those who were standing with them. Intercessory prayers are offered for the hurting and oppressed by people who identify

with them. We must learn to stand in another's shoes and so feel that person's loneliness and needs that we are moved to intervene with God on his or her behalf. Many in serious need may not know how to pray for themselves or be ignorant of the fact that they have a loving heavenly Father than can repair what is injured and forgive their sins. They need someone. Someone like you or me. Will we stand in their place and talk to God about what needs to be done?

You Can Influence God

We want God to influence us so that we can become more like him in mind, character, and loving action. God also wants us to influence him since he has invited us to share in the decision making process here below. There is an amazing approachableness in God's character, an instinctive self-humbling that draws us to him and frees us to open up with our most private needs, desires, and sins. It is the "goodness of God that leads us to repentance," Paul notes⁷. Jesus personified this aspect of God's nature and declared:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 12:28-29).

Jesus is our prime example of an intercessor on our behalf. He urges us to love others as he loves us, which means asking help on the behalf of somebody else.

The Bible tends not to use special religious words for religious activities and we can take a cue from that. "Prayer" has the patina of a religious word, but it simply means "to ask," "to request." The Bible doesn't layer itself in religious jargon but speaks plainly without the churchy talk so common among the religious. Apparently churchy people think sprinkling a lot of religious salt and pepper talk is what God wants to hear or what will impress their fellow church people.

What God wants is that we "bear one another's burdens" and so love our neighbor as ourselves. A practical expression of that is struggling in prayer to move God to act on behalf of someone else. This is a ministry, plain and simple. It is also a gift to be used in God's service. It is also a responsibility to be taken. To see a need and ignore it is not what the Good Samaritan did.

Helping others doesn't always mean reaching for your wallet, but it always means praying on their behalf that God would also help. Yahweh says, "You will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you."⁸

End Notes:

1. Throughout his career Abraham build altars and offered sacrifices (Genesis 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18) and the places sacred to him were often marked by trees, a token of his intention to stay in the land (13:18).

2. Or perhaps his agent, The Angel of the Lord. The Bible frequently uses the principle of agency where the agent speaks for God and must be obeyed just as if God were there speaking.

3. See John Goldingay's fine book, *Key Questions about Christian Faith—Old Testament Answers*, Baker Academic, 2010, 345 pages. See his section, "How Does Prayer Work?" pp. 182-189.

4. Exodus, the 32nd chapter

5. 1 Samuel 12:18

6. Luke 22:31

7. Romans 2:4

8. Jeremiah 29:12-14

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Court Orders Removal of Crosses on Memorials

(*Washington Times*—Dec. 23, 2010) A federal appeals court said it will not reconsider its previous decision to order the removal of roadside memorial crosses for fallen Utah Highway Patrol officers.

The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver said Monday it will let stand an August ruling by a panel of three of its judges that the crosses violate the Constitution's prohibition against government establishment of religion.

Lee Perry, a lieutenant in the highway patrol who along with another trooper came up with the idea for the cross memorials, told *The Washington Times* he would like to see an appeal.

"Hopefully our Supreme Court will take a look at this case," Lt. Perry said, adding that he hopes it "turns out favorable there."

American Atheists, a Texas-based organization, had asked the court to order the removal of the crosses on the grounds they violated the Constitution. The three-judge panel agreed, concluding that "the cross memorials would convey to a reasonable observer that the state of Utah is endorsing Christianity."

Judge Paul J. Kelly wrote in a dissenting opinion that the court should rehear the case and that the three-judge panel incorrectly focused on the religious symbol of the crosses instead of the message they meant to convey. He wrote that the panel reached the "odd conclusion that the [Utah Highway Patrol] is a sort of 'Christian police' that favors Christians over non-Christians—a conclusion that has no support in the facts."

Knowles: "Varieties of Faith" cont. from page 5.

oneself the kind of faith relationship with God that isn't dependent upon one's relationship with a denomination, ministerial or priestly hierarchy, or congregation. Such a relationship is not tied to a set of cemented dogmas and non-negotiable doctrines. Upon the discovery of new and better understanding, any teaching should be revisable. Bible study should be an adventure in growth, new insights and deeper comprehension of the way of God. We are called upon to grow in knowledge and to "get understanding" (2 Peter 3:18 and Proverbs 4:7). For those who diligently study, understanding deepens and changes over time. This is followed by wisdom.

When I was a "baby" Christian, I had a small amount of knowledge and virtually no spiritual understanding or wisdom. Consequently, I accepted doctrines and practices that upon later learning turned out to be false. I don't think that those who taught them were intentional about it. They sincerely believed they were conveying truth. Yet, as I grew in knowledge and understanding, that put me at odds with those who had set in concrete what they believed to be correct. They had no intention of questioning the status quo for they believed it to be inspired and therefore inerrant. They had become locked in to what philosopher Eric Hoffer called "the true believer" mentality. There is no arguing with that mindset.

It's also easy to become a "ditchist" - plunging from one ditch to another. We are naturally creatures of extremes. We can swing between "ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7) and intellectual constipation.

It's in the Book

Ultimately, it all comes down to the Biblical texts. What do they say and mean in their original setting? No matter what some ignorant folks say, it takes scholarship to find out. Most of us didn't grow up speaking and reading Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. Most of us rely on those scholars who translate the ancient languages into the languages we speak and read. All translation involves interpretation. Interpretations can vary, depending upon what assumptions the translator brings to the table.

Once a translation is made, and is in print, further interpretation takes place. Translations have to be "exposited" or explained. This is often done in the light of, and in support of, existing doctrines and dogmas. Have you ever heard a sermon given using *The Living Bible*? It's not really a translation; it's a paraphrase. It can be wildly inaccurate, that is, unfaithful to the meaning and intent of the text. Preachers will use it to the degree it seems to support their spin on the message.

The prejudices a preacher brings to his subject matter can determine the conclusions he draws from the text. A Catholic priest, a Baptist preacher, and a Pentecostal evangelist may read the same text, or translation, three different ways. A teacher who believes in Trinitarian doctrine will approach all passages under the assumption that the Holy Spirit is a third "Person" in the Trinity. Unitarians see the same passages quite differently, as do Armstrongites. God is explained as a Trinity, a Binity, or a singularity—all based on different ways of understanding the same texts.

Christians of all stripes tend to grow up believing whatever their family's chosen denomination believes. Mormon children are raised with Mormon teaching. Those who attend churches that teach some version of Liberation Theology may see the Christian faith through a Marxist lens.

Ideally, all doctrines (teachings) should be measured against the biblical text. Sadly, most of us Christians don't have the ability to do this. So we rely on our preachers and teachers to tell us the truth. Think about this: If our teachers are all teaching us different things using the same texts or translations, someone has to be wrong somewhere along the line.

The result is hundreds of disparate doctrines all cancelling each other out. This means we see a variety of "Christian" faiths—a plethora of denominations. All of which, no matter how remotely, or far removed, derive their characteristics from interpretations of the Biblical texts. Apart from those texts, we have no way of knowing what authentic Christian faith really was in its original form. Does that mean we should despair of finding the truth? Not at all. Rather, we must relentlessly seek it out. Truth has not disappeared from the earth. It is there for all to find. The journey Godward involves better understanding the Biblical texts.

The Meaning of "Disciple"

It takes effort to find the truth about anything. Jesus told his apostles to preach the Gospel and *to make disciples* (Matthew 28:19). He told them to *teach* those disciples. A disciple is not a passive hearer but an active participant. Let's focus for a moment on the meaning of the word "disciple."

Jesus the Jewish rabbi spoke Hebrew (not Aramaic) to his followers. A rabbi's followers were known as *talmidim*. The singular is *talmid*. It means "student" or "disciple." The relationship between rabbis and their students was very close. "...not only did the *talmid* learn facts, reasoning processes and how to perform religious practices from his rabbi, but he regarded him as an example to be imitated in conduct and character (see Matthew 10:24-25; Luke 6:40; John 13:13-15 & 1 Corinthians 11:1)," from the glossary in the *Jewish New Testament*, p. 374.

The Pharisaic rabbi Paul was willing to hold himself up as an example to his disciples, as was Peter (2 Thesalonians 3:7, 9; Phil. 3:17; 1 Peter 5:3). This is perhaps the greatest demand on a Jewish or Christian leader — being an example to his disciples (students).

A teacher's authority does not come from wielding structural power over a congregation, but rather from the fact that he knows what he is talking about. Nor does it derive from his podium theatrics, loud, raspy voice, or melodramatic presentation. The best teachers understand and correctly explain the Biblical text itself — and they do it from a Hebraic perspective.

Many have presumed to teach, and to wield authority, over congregations without the benefit of understanding. One historic example is the famous Reformer, John Calvin. His understanding of Scripture was a "mixed bag." He understood some things and misunderstood others. His misunderstandings cost some people their lives.

Calvin in Geneva

For five agonizing years, John Calvin ruled the Swiss city of Geneva with an iron fist. He turned the city of 16,000 into a theocracy, based on the poorly grasped ideal of ancient Israel. In his reforms, he "discarded everything that savored of Catholicism, including pictures, images, vestments, bells, candles, and the like; but unlike Zwingli (another reformer), he introduced congregational singing. Preaching took the most important place in the service. The Lord's Supper was administered four times a year. All church festivals, including Christmas and Easter, were abolished" (*A History of the Christian Church* by Lars P. Qualben. P. 270).

You can see from the above that Calvin understood some things but not others. Calvin's understanding of church government, like that of all too many denominations, was a disaster. In Geneva under Calvin a group called the "Consistory" or "Presbytery" was given responsibility for church discipline. "Severe discipline was exercised upon high and low...Crimes and sins were severely punished. In five years, 1542-46, Geneva, with 16,000 inhabitants, had fifty-seven executions and seventy-six banishments. All these sentences were sanctioned by Calvin. Innocent merit was sternly checked. Attendance at public worship was enforced. Watchmen reported all breaches of discipline. There was no thought of religious toleration. Michael Servetus (Miguel Serveto), a famous Spanish physician, was condemned and burned on October 27, 1553, because of his anti-Trinitarian doctrine. This is the darkest blot in the history of Protestantism," (*ibid.* p. 272).

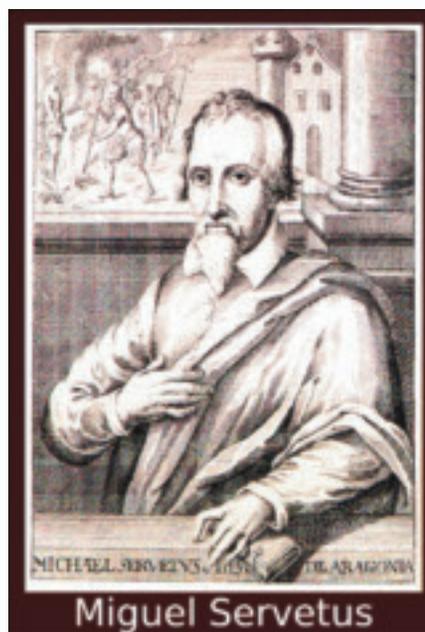
I believe that every Christian should read at least one history of the Christian Church. The one mentioned

above is as good as any. We need to understand how we came to be where we are today. The story is at once inspiring and horrifying. Christians have not always been Christ-like. They have not always understood and followed the teachings of the Master. It behooves all of us to study the texts of Scripture in their original languages, and if we can't do that, adhere to teachers who can. Here follows a list of recommended study materials.

Recommended Study Sources & Materials

- *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* by Dr. Brad Young
- *Paul the Jewish Theologian* by Dr. Brad Young
- *Our Father Abraham* by Prof. Marvin Wilson
- *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* by David Bivin and Roy Blizzard, Jr.
- www.jcstudies.com
- www.jerusalemerspective.com
- www.BibleScholars.com

Freedom of Conscience



In recent years Michael Servetus has also been credited with being one of the modern forerunners of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience in the Western world. A renowned Spanish scholar on Servetus' work, Ángel Alcalá, identified the radical search for truth and the right for freedom of conscience as Servetus' main legacies, rather than his theology. The Polish-American scholar, Marian Hillar, has studied the evolution of freedom of conscience, from Servetus and the Polish Socinians, to John Locke and to Thomas Jefferson and the American Declaration of Independence. According to Hillar: "Historically speaking, Servetus died so that freedom of conscience could become a civil right in modern society." (*Source: Wikipedia*)

Notice the reaction of Judah's enemies and Nehemiah's response to them: "But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, 'What is this thing that you do? will you rebel against the king?' Then answered I them, and said to them, 'The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but you have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem' " (Nehemiah 2:19-20).

This is where we begin to see the true character and leadership qualities of Nehemiah. Even though Nehemiah had a commission from the king of Persia, he did not appeal to that authority in his response to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. Rather, he appealed to the authority that God had given him to carry out this mission. "The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore, we his servants will arise and build." Nehemiah understood that king Artaxerxes was only an instrument in God's hands for the rebuilding of Jerusalem; he was not the reason for it. Further, Nehemiah was adamant with our three malefactors that they would have no part in rebuilding Jerusalem: "but you have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem" because they were standing in the way of God's purpose. To oppose God's purpose was to oppose God—to make oneself God's enemy, and God's enemies were Nehemiah's enemies.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were not weak. Each was powerful in his own right, and had authority over his own territory equal to Nehemiah's authority in Judah.

Sanballat: Governor of Samaria, which bordered Judah on the North. Even though his name was Babylonian, it is likely that Sanballat was a Jew. His two sons, Delaiah and Shelemiah, were both given common Hebrew names, and his daughter was married to the grandson of the high priest, Eliashib. Sanballat had close ties within the Jewish community among the wealthy and the nobles. Sanballat also had his own army and was prepared to use it to stop the Jews from rebuilding the wall. Some believe that Sanballat was a Levite. However, Ezra 2:59–60 states that Delaiah, Sanballat's son, and Tobiah were unable to produce any written records showing that they were Israelites and were therefore excluded from any right to the Levitical priesthood in Jerusalem.

Tobiah: Governor of Ammon, which lay on Judah's eastern border. Tobiah is often referred to as "Tobiah the servant" (slave) because he had at one time been a slave. However, being a resourceful man, once the Jews were allowed to return to the western side of the Euphrates, he was made governor of Ammon in the Transjordan region. Tobiah was a Jew (see Ezra 2:60) and like Sanballat had considerable influence inside Judah and Jerusalem, especially among the wealthy

and influential. His name in Hebrew (*Toviyyah*) means "Yahweh is good." From archeological finds in the area of his governance, it has been discovered that Tobiah was one of the wealthiest men in the region.

Geshem: Also known as "Geshem the Arabian." Geshem ruled over several Arab tribes that controlled much of the Sinai Peninsula and the lands that lay across the southern border of Judah all the way to Northern Egypt along the Nile delta. He was sometimes referred to as the "king of Kedar [Qedar]," a confederation of Arab tribes named after one of the sons of Ishmael. From what archeology tells us, Geshem may have been the wealthiest of Nehemiah's enemies. The remnants of his palaces display a level of opulence that was uncommon at that time in history. Geshem did not exercise the same level of influence inside the region of Judah, but when allied with Sanballat and Tobiah, he could have presented to the people of Judah a formidable enemy on their southern border.

So now the picture is clear. Upon Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, Judah was surrounded on all her borders by powerful enemies that were determined to keep the Jewish settlers weak and fearful. The idea of a revitalized Jewish nation with a rebuilt Jerusalem as her capital posed a threat to their control of the region.

It is interesting to see how Nehemiah dealt with the fears of the Jews and the intimidations of their enemies.

Fear of God, Fearless toward Men

This is probably the single most important characteristic of Nehemiah, the leader and governor. Even though Sanballat and his comrades tried hard to intimidate Nehemiah and the Jews, Nehemiah refused to give in to fear or to allow the people to be discouraged by fear. He kept his eyes fixed on God's goals for the people of Judah and always stressed to them that they were engaged in God's work and that God would not allow them to fail if they kept their eyes fixed on Him. As a result, the people, with chisel in one hand and sword in the other, completed the reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15).

Integrity

During the time of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem the common folk were suffering greatly because the nobles and wealthy were lending money to them at interest. In addition, there was a famine in the land and the king's tribute had to be paid by every citizen. The lending practices among the wealthy Jews toward the poor were so egregious that people were losing their ancestral lands and selling their children into slavery just to buy food and to pay

the king's tribute. Here is how Nehemiah dealt with this problem.

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil." "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say" (Nehemiah 5:6-12, NIV).

Nehemiah as governor of Judah took decisive, concrete steps to put a stop to the abuses of the wealthy against the common people and to bring the newly formed Jewish territory into compliance with God's law. Moses made it very clear that no Israelite should ever lend money at interest to another Israelite—let alone force the people to mortgage their ancestral property and sell their children into slavery to another Israelite. God designed the sabbatical and jubilee years for the express purpose of eliminating such abuses among His people. God's law was an antidote to the temptations of greed. God's purpose is always to free people from burdens, not lay additional burdens on their backs.

"Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess" (Deuteronomy 23:19-20, NIV).

"At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD's release. Of a foreigner you may require it; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother..." (Deuteronomy 15:1-3, NKJV).

These principles that God gave to Moses are exactly the same as those Jesus reiterated in His ministry: "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most

High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Luke 6:30, 35, NIV).

The Joy of the Lord

Above all Nehemiah strove to make God's way the way of the people. On the first day of the seventh month after Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt, all the people of Judah gathered at the water gate. They assembled to hear Ezra the priest read God's law. When the people heard and understood what was read, they began to weep. In spite of their tears of repentance they were told by Nehemiah, Ezra, and the priests who were gathered there, " 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength' " (Nehemiah 8:9-10).

The words spoken by Nehemiah that day still echo in a song of praise sung in churches around the world today. They are as precious and true today as they were when Nehemiah spoke them to the people of Judah. Some may wonder what it means to say: "The joy of the LORD is your strength." Just meditate on those words. The people had been racked by fear of their enemies and overwhelmed by grief at their own shortcomings. "Why should God have brought us back to this land?" many may have thought when they realized that their own fears and failings made them unworthy in God's sight. Yet He loved them and restored them in spite of themselves. That is God's nature; that is God's grace. He always provides for his people and leads them to a better place.

There can be no joy where there is fear and lack of faith, which brings anxiety. The fullness of the joy of the LORD means that we fully trust Him to deal with our enemies and to take away our sins. That's what the people of Judah experienced that day, and it can be the same for us today. All we have to do is obey His will and leave the rest to Him. The words of Nehemiah evoke a picture of God that is very much like Jesus' description of God in the Sermon of the Mount: "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). When we put God first, we can lead a life free of worries and cares. King David portrays a similar view of God when he states in the 23rd Psalm: "You have prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

The End of the Matter?

There really is no end of the matter. After arduous work to restore the people to their rightful place in Judah and Jerusalem, the people still corrupted themselves. After Nehemiah's initial twelve-year term as Judah's governor, he returned to the king's service in

Babylon. Some time later Nehemiah asked the king's permission to travel back to Jerusalem. Upon his return he learned how easily the people had fallen back into a corrupt, ungodly way of life, especially when their leaders were the ones leading them into ungodliness. Chapter 13 details how quickly Judah had lapsed back into sin and what Nehemiah did about it.

Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests (Nehemiah 13:4-5).

Nehemiah quickly threw out all of Tobiah's belongings, cleansed that part of the Temple (no Moabite was ever permitted to enter the assembly of God's people—Deuteronomy 23:3), and put other, more trustworthy men in charge of the storeroom so that there would always be offerings for the Temple's altar.

Nehemiah also learned that the Levites and singers were not being given their portion of the tithes. As a result they had all left their work in God's House to make their living in the fields growing crops. Nehemiah called the rulers of the people together and contended bitterly with them and made them guarantee that the Levites and singers would from that time forward be given their portion of the tithes.

The people were also blatantly breaking the Sabbath. Some were treading the winepress on the Sabbath. Others were conducting business as usual within the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Nehemiah ordered the gates to the city to be shut on the Sabbath to prevent vendors from entering the city. When some continued to show up at the city's gates each Sabbath hoping to be let in, Nehemiah went out to confront them and threatened to have them beaten if they continued camping outside the city on the Sabbath.

Much had been said to the people in the past about intermarrying with the pagan people of the land. At one point prior to Nehemiah's return, the people had been forced to give up their pagan wives and send the children of these marriages away with their mothers, yet Nehemiah was confronted with the same circumstances when he returned from Babylon. The situation was so bad that half of the children were unable to speak Hebrew. How could they possibly learn and obey the words of God if they could not understand the language in which the Scriptures were written? "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: 'You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves' " (Nehemiah 13:25).

The root of the problem was that the religious leaders and other powerful citizens in the community were some of the worst offenders. One of the grandsons of the high priest, Eliashib, had married the daughter of Sanballat, one of God's enemies. When Nehemiah found out about the high priest's grandson, he drove the young man and his family completely out of the land of Judah. It is believed that this grandson of the high priest became the high priest in Samaria. It is ironic that this man could have become the high priest in Jerusalem if he had been faithful to God's law.

Lessons Worth Remembering

The first thing to be noted is that Nehemiah was a man with convictions of steel. I wonder how many of us today believe that Nehemiah would have been a delightful person to be around, or would we believe that he takes thing "too literally?" In our modern Christian world he would have been looked upon as someone who was just plain intolerant. He was not in favor of "cultural diversity" when it came to the things of God. His eyes never wavered from God and His purpose. His determination to carry out God's will was reminiscent of Jesus when He made a whip and drove the moneychangers from the Temple. Commentaries say that the purpose of Jesus' whip was to drive out the animals, but I wonder whether the Lord's zeal for His Father's "House of Prayer," led Him to aim some of His strokes at the backs of the moneychangers and merchants in the Temple.

What do you do when the highest religious official in the land is corrupt? In Nehemiah's case he refused to let up in his determination to purge corruption from the worship of Almighty God. Nehemiah did not have the authority to replace the high priest, but he did have the authority to change the environment in which the high priest worked, and he acted on the authority he had. Most impressive to me is that Nehemiah compelled the high priest, the Levites, and the people to follow the law of God. That was the authority he relied on to enforce the changes in the worship and in the lives of the people.

One of the most important lessons to learn from Nehemiah is that corruption is always possible in our lives. It slips in through a compromise here or there, and before long we see our lives careening off course. The apostle Paul said that each of us should examine ourselves to make sure we are "in the faith" (2 Corinthians 13:5). The standard by which we examine ourselves is God's Word.

If you have never taken the time to study the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is definitely worthwhile, and while you are studying those books, add the book of Haggai to your list. Haggai explains from a prophet's point of view why the people were experiencing the problems they were having. The Word of God is alive and truly a powerful teacher.

—Kenneth Ryland

How Well Do You Reflect God's Kingdom?

By Dave Havir

BIG SANDY, Texas—Recently I was preparing a sermon with the goal of helping people to see a glimpse of God's Kingdom in our lives.

There are some professing believers (including some inside the Church of God movement) who claim to have more knowledge and insights than the rest of us. While I acknowledge and appreciate any and all truth that God has given to us, I agree with the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12.

1. We see through a glass darkly.
2. We know only in part.

If we (who claim to be believers) have a fuzzy picture of God, how unclear does an unbeliever see?

And, if an unbeliever has only a fuzzy picture of the Kingdom, what are we doing to reflect the Kingdom of God while we walk this earth?

Helpful book

I found material in a book titled *Kingdom Principles* by Myles Munroe to be helpful in my preparation. I thought I would share some of the information with you.

Dr. Munroe is founder, president and senior pastor of Bahamas Faith Ministries International, based in Nassau, Bahamas. He is an international motivational speaker and business consultant and has earned degrees from Oral Roberts University and the University of Tulsa.

Beginning premise

On page 11 Dr. Munroe begins the introduction with the following quote: "The greatest threat to civil society is mankind." He shows examples of why he believes that statement to be true.

Dr. Munroe quickly begins to explain his point that many people use religion as a replacement for an understanding and a commitment to the Kingdom.

On page 12 Dr. Munroe writes: "All of this is compounded by our establishment of sophisticated religions into which we retreat to escape the social chaos we have created."

On page 16 Dr. Munroe writes: "A careful and honest look at the biblical Script will reveal that the fundamental message of this greatly misunderstood Book [the Bible] is about a King and a Kingdom."

On page 18 he writes: "Jesus' first announcement was the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. His solution to the malnourished and bankrupt human spirit was not a religion but the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, if you are spiritually poor, only the Kingdom will satisfy and fulfill your hunger. The Kingdom is God's priority and must become our priority if we are to overcome the confusion of religions and the threat of self-destruction.

"The power of religion lies in its ability to serve as a substitute for the Kingdom and thus hinder mankind from pursuing the genuine answer to the dilemma."

Then he lists the following conclusions:

- Religion preoccupies man until he finds the Kingdom.
- Religion is what man does until he finds the Kingdom.
- Religion prepares man to leave earth; the Kingdom empowers man to dominate earth.
- Religion focuses on heaven; the Kingdom focuses on earth.
- Religion is reaching up to God; the Kingdom of God is about God coming down to man.
- Religion wants to escape earth; the Kingdom impacts, influences, and changes earth.
- Religion seeks to take earth to heaven; the Kingdom seeks to bring heaven to earth.

Nine helpful principles

Dr. Munroe proceeds to give nine principles about the Kingdom, hence the title of the book.

Here are the nine Kingdom principles:

- The Kingdom concept of kings.
- The Kingdom concept of Lord.
- The Kingdom concept of territory.
- The Kingdom concept of constitution.
- The Kingdom concept of law.
- The Kingdom concept of keys.
- The Kingdom concept of citizenship.
- The Kingdom concept of culture.
- The Kingdom concept of giving to the king.

Begins with us

Jesus Christ gave His disciples many parables about the Kingdom during His life. They are edifying and inspiring.

Notice one of His shorter Kingdom parables. In Matthew 13:31-32 Jesus told about the Kingdom being like a grain of mustard seed. He called it the least of all seeds. Yet He described how that seed would grow into a huge tree to accommodate the birds.

The Kingdom of God begins with the least of all people: me and you. Of and by ourselves we are not special. Yet God has chosen to establish His Kingdom through us.

Is our religion getting in the way of our living the principles of the Kingdom? Or do we as little ones reflect the glorious Kingdom of God?

Dave Havir is the pastor of the Church of God, Big Sandy, Texas. This article is from the "Among Friends" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Sept. 11-12, 2010.

The Church in the World

Full Story of Youcef Nadarkhani

Here is a brief history of Youcef Nadarkhani, leading up to his current situation.

Youcef is 33 years old and is from Rasht, in the Gilan province of Iran. For the past ten years he has been a pastor in a network of house churches. He was previously imprisoned in December of 2006, the charges being apostasy (leaving Islam for Christianity) and evangelism (spreading the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ), but was released two weeks later.

He is married and has two sons, ages 8 and 6. They were attending a local school when the government decided that all children should be taught about Islam, including those from Christian families. Youcef went to the school and protested this based on the Iranian constitution, which allows for freedom to practice religion. As a result, the secret police called him before the political tribunal in Rasht, Iran on October 12, 2009. At that time he was arrested, charged for protesting, and has been in prison in Lakan (which is seven miles south of Rasht) ever since. Later the charges changed to apostasy and evangelism to Muslims.



Condemned Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani with his two sons.

Through this time he has had access to an attorney, and has been allowed visits from his wife, children, and friends. However, for the first month in prison and two weeks before his trial up until now the visits and meetings with his attorney have been limited. They have used various methods to try to convert him back to Islam, including giving him pills, apparently in an attempt to claim that he was insane.

Because Youcef's faith remained strong, they decided to arrest his wife in order to place more pressure on him. On June 18th, Fatemah Pasindedih was arrested and placed in prison in Lakan. During this time their boys went to live with a relative. Both Youcef and his wife Fatemah were threatened by authorities that their children would be taken away and given to a Muslim family. Youcef was not swayed to turn back to Islam, so his wife was put on trial without an attorney, and sentenced to life in prison. An attorney was later hired and the sentence appealed. The sentence and conviction were overturned and she was released.

On September 21 and 22, 2010, Youcef was put on trial, and verbally given the sentence of death. A written verdict was delayed and then delivered, on November 13, 2010, by the 1st Court of the Revolutionary Tribunal. He is to be executed by hanging for the crime of apostasy. Twenty days are allowed to appeal the sentence with the Supreme Court of Iran.

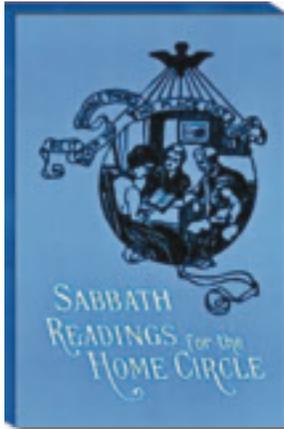
Youcef is now in the secret police security prison in Lakan. He has been held in solitary confinement. Recently he has been allowed visits from his attorney and wife once a week.

The verdict is in the process of being appealed. We should have a date for the hearing before the Supreme Court shortly.

It is critical that we continue to pray for pastor Youcef and make our voices heard. Please reach out to your elected officials and to the international news media so that Youcef's case will come to light.

(Source: Present Truth Ministries — presenttruthmn.com)

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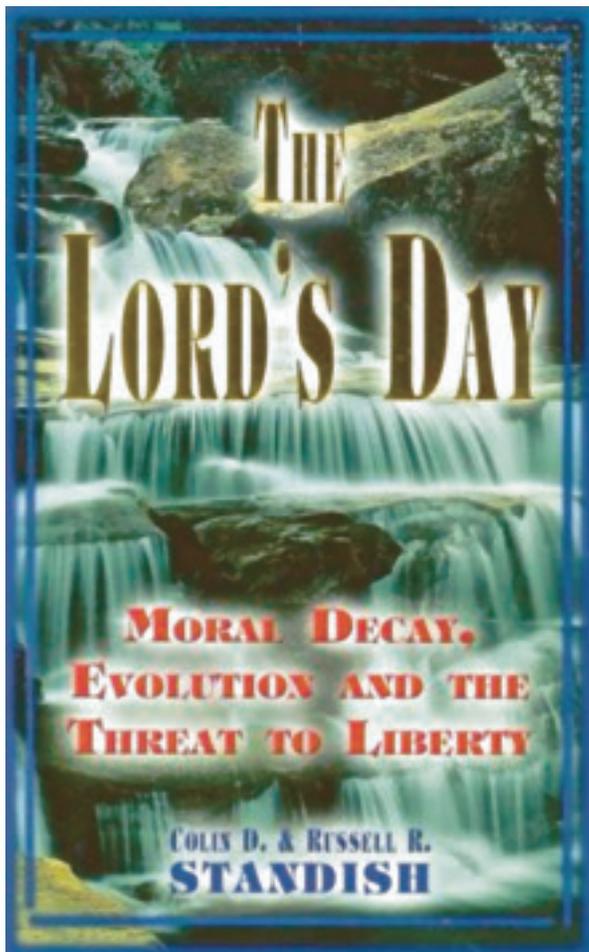
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One prominent Roman Catholic spokesman affirmed that the observance of Sunday as the Sabbath was a mark of the authority of the Roman Church.

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