The Day the World Ended: Lessons From Pompeii

Katrina: Will We Ask the Crucial Questions? • When God Doesn’t Make Sense
Is God Indifferent to Suffering? • Why Some Christians Don’t Keep Christmas
I n Matthew 24:7-8, Jesus Christ foretold signs that would mark the time leading up to His return:

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places...” (emphasis added throughout).

We have certainly seen devastating earthquakes in recent years. The December 2004 earthquake off Indonesia was the most powerful in decades, unleashing a massive tsunami that took some 300,000 lives.

In Matthew 24:7, the Greek word translated “earthquakes” is seismos, from which we derive such English words as “seismology,” referring to the study of earthquakes. Strong’s Lexicon defines it as “a commotion, i.e. (of the air) a gale, (of the ground) an earthquake—earthquake, tempest” (Strong’s No. 4578).

So seismos has a broader meaning than just the earth shaking. Matthew 8 records how a violent storm overtook Jesus and His disciples on the Sea of Galilee, threatening to capsize their boat and drown them—until Jesus miraculously calmed the winds and waves.

The word used in verse 24 for this powerful storm is seismos, here translated “tempest.” So we see that seismos can also refer to violent storms and isn’t limited strictly to earthquakes. When Jesus foretold “famines, pestilences and earthquakes in various places,” His words encompass natural disasters that include earthquakes, but can also apply to hurricanes, tornadoes and other such deadly storms.

As we saw with Katrina, hurricanes can be enormously destructive. Katrina took more than 1,200 lives and caused an estimated $200 billion in damage, not counting the economic hit from losses to shipping, oil and gas production, fishing and agriculture.

A hurricane like Katrina, which reached category 5 strength before weakening, can produce winds greater than 155 miles an hour and push ahead of it a wall of water 18 feet or higher, doing major damage to virtually anything in its path.

Are such natural disasters increasing as Jesus foretold?

The Sept. 16 issue of Science magazine reports on research by scientists at the Georgia Institute of Technology and the National Center for Atmospheric Research. They concluded that while the total number of hurricanes and cyclones had not increased, there has been “a sharp increase during the past 35 years in the number of category 4 and 5 tropical cyclones, the most intense storms that cause most of the damage on landfall” (Richard Kerr, “Is Katrina a Harbinger of Still More Powerful Hurricanes?” p. 1807).

Specifically, the frequency of the most dangerous and damaging storms—those rated category 4 and 5—increased by 80 percent from the 1970s to the last decade.

This should certainly make us sit up and take notice. Later in that same prophecy, as recorded in Luke 21:25-28, Jesus says:

“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, "And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars;" (Matthew 24:29-30, King James Version).

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”

—Scott Ashley, Managing editor
# Table of Contents

## Cover Feature

**The Day the World Ended: Lessons From Pompeii**

The haunting ruins of Pompeii tell a stark and heartrending story. One day Pompeii was a thriving, lively city; the next it was a steaming mound of smoldering volcanic ash, buried and forgotten for almost 17 centuries. Pompeii’s tragic tale holds a crucial lesson for us today. Will we pay attention, or will we make the same tragic mistake?  

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## Natural Disasters: Will We Ask the Crucial Questions?

A native of New Orleans looks back on the city and the devastation unleashed there by Hurricane Katrina. Is something big at work here, a pattern beginning to play out that we would do well to heed?  

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## Is God Indifferent to Human Suffering?

If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, He could easily prevent such terrible disasters as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, floods, droughts and volcanic eruptions. But He lets them happen. Why?  

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## Hurricane Katrina: Is God Removing His Protection?

The destruction from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was so great and far-reaching that many wonder if God is playing a hand in these events, either punishing the United States or removing His protection—or both.  

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## “When You See These Things, Know That It Is Near . . .”

Jesus Christ instructed His followers to watch for a sequence of trends and events that would culminate in His second coming at the end of the present age. Are you attentive to the signs of the times He gave?  

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## When God Doesn’t Make Sense

Why does God allow tragedies? Why doesn’t He always answer prayers? Why can it seem that God is ignoring us when we’re trapped in the pit of despair? What do we do when God just doesn’t seem to make sense?  

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## Why Some Christians Don’t Celebrate Christmas

Many feel that Christmas marks Christ’s birthday and that it honors Him. Yet some few Christians don’t observe Christmas, believing that He didn’t sanction it and that it dishonors Him. Who is right—and why?  

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## Regular Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World News and Trends</td>
<td>An overview of conditions around the world</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television and Radio Log</td>
<td>Station listings and times for Good News/Tomorrow TV and GN Radio</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God, Science and the Bible</td>
<td>News from the world of science about God and the Bible</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters From Our Readers</td>
<td>Readers of The Good News share their thoughts</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and Answers</td>
<td>Answers to readers’ questions</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just for Youth</td>
<td>Win-Win: Who Says There Has to Be a Loser?</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Warning signs had been building for some time. Streams and wells had suddenly dried up, particularly those near Mt. Vesuvius towering nearby.

Some of the farmers attributed the sudden disappearance of water to the hot late-August weather. They didn’t realize that not far beneath the earth’s surface the water was being vaporized by the steadily rising heat.

Out in the majestic Bay of Naples, the sea had mysteriously begun to boil in some places, the underground heat sending streams of bubbles gurgling to the surface. Fishermen puzzled at the curious sight and murmured among themselves.

Here and there even the ground had begun to rumble and quiver. Mt. Vesuvius itself appeared to moan and groan from time to time.

Ominously, many animals—dogs, cats, mice and rats—had begun abandoning the city of Pompeii. Something strange was happening. The people wondered what it could mean.

Unknown to them, a deadly monster was stirring.

A city built on rock

Centuries earlier, the settlers who first arrived in the area were glad to find such a pleasant site for a city.

The Bay of Naples, part of the Mediterranean Sea, provided an abundant harvest of fish. The soil of the area was rich and dark, promising plentiful crops, especially when coupled with the warm climate.

A river, the Sarno, provided plenty of fresh water for drinking. A harbor provided ready access for ships and the growing trade network in the area.

A large mountain, later to be named Vesuvius, loomed nearby. Its pine-covered slopes offered plenty of timber for homes, shops and villas. A large rock plateau stretching toward the sea offered a spacious, level site with lots of room for a city to grow and plenty of stone for building.

Those early settlers who laid out their settlement on the plateau didn’t realize they were building their city atop an ancient lava flow that stretched all the way to towering Vesuvius, six miles away.

Prosperity rooted in past catastrophes

Over the next few centuries the city
The city's wealth and favorable position drew visitors from all over the empire. Then, on Aug. 24—ironically, the date of the Vulcanalia, a festival honoring Vulcan, the Roman god of fire—the world ended for Pompeii.

The city supported large flocks of sheep and a thriving wool industry. Pompeii's inhabitants didn't realize that the fertile soil on which so much of their prosperity depended was the result of Vesuvius' past volcanic eruptions.

Enjoying the good life

For most, life was good in Pompeii. For many, it was quite luxurious. The great Roman orator Cicero had a villa in Pompeii; Julius Caesar's father-in-law owned one in nearby Herculanenum. Some villas were so large they took up an entire city block.

Most villas were built surrounding an open central courtyard, often highlighted by a pool and sometimes a fountain. There gladiators were among the major celebrities of the day: "Celadus is the heartthrob of all the girls." "Severus—55 fights—has just won again." "The unbeaten Hermiscus was here." "Crescens, the net fighter, holds the hearts of all the girls." Other graffiti urged citizens to vote for this or that candidate.

Pompeii lay secure behind its massive defensive walls, which stood 20 feet thick and more than 30 feet high in some places. The hard stone for the walls, also used to pave the city's streets, was basalt, quarried nearby. Pompeii's builders didn't know it, but the basalt was hardened lava from past volcanic eruptions that had engulfed the area.

Pompeii was so prosperous that, when many of its major buildings suffered considerable damage from an earthquake in A.D. 62, it refused Rome's offers of assistance. Its citizens preferred to go it alone, confident that they could handle this and any other setback.

Even when aftershocks rattled the city off and on for several years, Pompeians remained largely unconcerned. They certainly didn't connect them with Mt. Vesuvius, which, to their knowledge, had always been a peaceful mountain.

They failed to recognize the growing danger—that, six miles away, unimaginable pressures were building beneath Vesuvius as it began to awaken from its long sleep.

Hell comes to earth

In August of A.D. 79, the earthquake activity intensified. Then, on Aug. 24—ironically, the date of the Vulcanalia, a festival honoring Vulcan, the Roman god of fire—the world ended for Pompeii.

About noon that day, as thousands of Pompeians went about their daily activities of farming, fishing, buying, selling, eating and drinking, they were startled and shaken by a deafening roar.

The top of towering and vast Mt. Vesuvius vanished in a nuclear-scale explosion. Dust, red-hot pumice, ash and flames were blasted more than a dozen miles into the sky. Men, women and children gasped and screamed as bright midday suddenly turned black, illuminated only by flashes of lightning and fiery trails of burning rocks as they crashed to the ground among the teeming, terrified people.

A blanket of choking, gritty ash—a suffocating snowfall from hell—quickly began to cover the city. Panicked Pompeians hurried to find family members and flee, seeking safety outside the city. Others, terrified by the rain of burning ash and pumice, hurried inside, bolting doors and shutters behind them.

Eventually dusk fell, though few in the doomed city would have recognized the difference. By that time several feet of ash covered everything. A few stragglers lit torches and struggled through the ash,
homing to find safety at the port or via the roads leading out of the city—if they could find them.

As night came, roofs began to creak and collapse from the weight of the ash. Some, realizing they would suffocate or be buried alive by the growing ashfall, clambered out second-floor windows, gasping for breath in the ash-choked air. Others in their desperation chopped holes through the roofs and walls of their houses to escape. A few remained behind seeking shelter wherever they could.

At one residence, a dog chained in the yard climbed higher and higher as the level of ash continued to rise. Finally, as his chain ran out and he could climb no higher, the dog suffocated as the ash covered his nose and mouth.

By now the city contained only the dead and those who would die.

Throughout the night the rain of ash continued to fall. Three times during the night, avalanches of rocks, hot ash and poisonous gas surged down the mountain but fell short of enveloping Pompeii. Even so, by the time the sky lightened somewhat, poisonous gas surged down the mountain—finally grew quiet, survivors remained behind seeking shelter wherever they could.

The final blows

Early that morning Vesuvius delivered its final blows to the mortally wounded city. In less than an hour, three more superheated avalanches, accompanied by a rain of tons of very fine ash, swallowed the city. The first two choked Pompeii with another two feet of volcanic ash and debris; the third struck with such force that most of what still stood above the accumulated volcanic deposits was sheered off and carried away.

These scorching blasts, with their poisonous gases and fumes, killed everyone and everything that remained. A few Pompeians—husbands and wives, parents and children, longtime friends—comforted each other as they died, frozen in time in embraces that would last forever.

Over that day and the next, at least two more avalanches swept over the city, burying it even more deeply. When Vesuvius—now a shattered stump of a mountain—finally grew quiet, survivors in the surrounding towns and countryside stared out over a gray, ashen landscape that looked like the surface of the moon.

Gone were the lush fields and meadows, the trees, even the river. A few scattered trees poking up through the smoldering ash. The thriving city of Pompeii was no more; it had been transformed into a graveyard.

Some survivors went back to the large mound of ash and debris that had been their city. Here and there a rooftop or broken wall or column helped guide people to their buried homes. As the ash cooled, a few burrowed tunnels to retrieve valuables.

One person, likely a Jew or Christian, couldn’t escape the parallel with a biblical story. Tunneling in the ruins, he scribbled “Sodom and Gomorrah” on a wall.

Most of the survivors, however, simply abandoned the city for good. It wasn’t long before all who knew a city once lay there had died out. As the centuries passed, Vesuvius erupted time and time again, covering the buried city with more layers of ash, further sealing Pompeii within its cold gray tomb.

There it would lay, 20 feet underground—of so many things—of the fragility and fleetingness of our existence, of how entire cities and civilizations can vanish, of how there, but for the grace of God, we all of us.

Perhaps most of all, it’s a reminder of the folly of human beings in refusing to face up to unpleasant realities, of ignoring or misunderstanding the danger signs until it’s too late.

Rich and poor, free citizen and slave, young and old—all met the same fate in Pompeii. The only ones who escaped were those who recognized the growing danger. For those who lingered too long, denying the seriousness of their plight or hoping that conditions would somehow change, the city became their tomb.

The lesson of Sodom

One citizen of ancient Pompeii got one lesson right—the man who scribbled “Sodom and Gomorrah” on one of the city’s buried walls. His simple, three-word judgment says more about the city than many books that have been written about it.

A modern visitor to Pompeii doesn’t have to look very hard to see evidence of the moral climate of the city. Up to several dozen buildings have been identified as likely houses of prostitution. Some, due to the explicit wall paintings and graffiti found in them, leave no doubt as to their purpose.

Even in private homes, wall paintings and mosaics depict all kinds of sexual activity, and many common household objects such as lamps, dishes, vases and fountains have been found with sexual motifs. Recent excavations at one of Pompeii’s public baths indicate that one floor of the structure may have been a brothel.

Oversized representations of sex organs can be found built into the walls facing some streets, and in at least one case carved right in the street itself.

The Bible tells us that sexual perversion was rampant in the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-13), which God destroyed by fire (verse 24). Their depravity was so great that they have become

Most haunting of all the sights in Pompeii are the casts of those who didn’t make it out of the doomed city. These ghostly images capture the citizens of Pompeii at the moment of their deaths.
Will we ignore the lesson?

Does the catastrophe that befell Pompeii hold lessons for us today?

It certainly should. The story of Pompeii haunts our collective memory and fills us with a vague sense of unease. After all, it could happen to them, an entire city . . .

In many ways our era is much like the time of Pompeii. Many of us surround ourselves with luxuries and conveniences. Life is good; we live in the wealthiest and most prosperous time in human history. Technology has given us so much, made life so comfortable.

Could it ever end? Your Bible says that it can—and that it will.

We live in a world as awash in sin as it is in material pleasures. “But know this,” said the apostle Paul, “that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-4, emphasis added throughout).

While Paul was describing our day, he could just as well have been describing Pompeii. And like Pompeii, there will be a day of reckoning.

Prophecy after prophecy of the Bible foretells a time of global trouble that will be unlike anything human beings have ever experienced (Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:1). Jesus Christ says of this time: “For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (Matthew 24:21, New International Version).

Can we even begin to comprehend that? What does it mean to have a time of terror and turmoil, chaos and catastrophe unlike anything witnessed in human history? Many of us sat glued to the TV as we watched coverage of last December’s tsunami and of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Were we seeing a glimpse of mankind’s future, not just for those areas but for the entire world?

As this year draws to a close, think back on the news that has dominated the headlines in recent months and years—terrible natural disasters, war, terrorism, wildfires, suicide bombings, corruption, bloody civil wars, terrorists trying to acquire nuclear weapons, drought, famines, disease outbreaks, failed peace efforts, hostility toward God and His truth. Read Matthew 24 and make your own checklist of Jesus Christ’s words.

As a thief in the night

Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6, wrote a warning that is far more applicable to our day than his own: “But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.

“But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.”

Whenever I read this passage I think not only of our day, but of ancient Pompeii. One day Pompeii was a thriving, vibrant city, and the next it was a giant tomb.

“Sudden destruction” takes on a whole new meaning as you stroll Pompeii’s long-dead streets and consider that you’re walking through a 2,000-year-old time capsule.

The eruption of Mt. Vesuvius happened at lunchtime, so life stopped before many Pompeians could finish their meal. Their food lay untouched for almost 2,000 years. Cooking pots still contained the bones of stews. One oven contained the remains of a pig that had been left roasting at the time the disaster struck. Bread, eggs, fish, nuts and dates lay undisturbed on tables until stunned excavators uncovered them.

Most haunting of all the sights in Pompeii are the casts of those who didn’t make it out of the doomed city. Their bodies, sealed in the hardening ash, eventually decayed to dust, leaving voids into which Pompeii’s excavators poured plaster and concrete almost 2,000 years later. The resulting ghostly images captured the citizens of Pompeii at the moment of their deaths.

We see plenty of warning signs around us. Do we understand them? Or do we willingly choose to misunderstand them, writing them off as passing inconveniences or temporary interruptions in the constantly improving flow of human progress?

Will we, like the doomed citizens of Pompeii, ignore the rumblings and tremors until it’s too late? Or will we heed the words of Jesus Christ’s warning in Luke 21:36: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Recommended Reading

What is the meaning of all the turmoil we see in the world around us? Does it hold any special significance? Does Bible prophecy shed any light on these troubling happenings? You need to understand what the Bible reveals about the end time. Request our free booklets Are We Living in the Time of the End? and You Can Understand Bible Prophecy to see how it all fits together. Both booklets are yours free for the asking.

Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download them from our Web site at www.gnmagazine.org/booklets

November/December 2005 7
Natural Disasters: Will We Ask the Crucial Questions?

A native of New Orleans assesses what happened there with Hurricane Katrina—and why.

by Bill Bradford

I grew up in and around New Orleans. My mother and father were both New Orleanians, as were their parents and their parents before them.

I knew the city well. I spent many a day traversing its streets looking for my first job and then working my first jobs as a teenager out of high school before leaving for college.

I never returned to live there, only to visit.

I still have pleasant memories of Canal Street when the streetcars were still there, before the Superdome and the International Trade Mart.

I remember well the French Quarter, the first part of New Orleans to be built when the first ships came up the Mississippi. I do not have fond memories of Bourbon Street and all it came to be known for.

It is the neighborhoods that I miss more than anything else. Everyone knew each other, so kids playing in the streets were looked after by all the grownups. It was a safe place, a happy place.

It’s hard to imagine a city so alive, so teeming, now so lifeless, so devastated, all in a matter of a few hours.

A city below sea level

New Orleans for the most part is below sea level, reclaimed from swampland. This is the most amazing thing about the place. Levees built around Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, the system of canals through the city, and its pumping stations kept the water out.

My father would tell me that the pumping system in New Orleans was the eighth engineering wonder of the world (undoubtedly, the Dutch would contest that claim). I remember passing the huge Broad Street pumps, built at the turn of the last century, still on the job, still operating, until Katrina. They weren’t designed for Katrina.

Americans are optimistic that the city will be rebuilt and come to life again, maybe better than before. The port of New Orleans is crucial to the U.S. economy, and it will require people living there to support this and other important enterprises.

The towns destroyed by the Indian Ocean tsunami last December are being rebuilt, the survivors have returned and life goes on.

The nations of the world gave a lot of money and supplies to ensure a comeback in that part of Asia. Even so, the United States is now marshalling its financial resources to rebuild one of its major cities.

Is it different this time?

Is something unprecedented going on here? Maybe it’s my sense of foreboding, but this storm was very big. This was the most costly natural disaster America has ever experienced, and it occurred only eight months after the Indian Ocean tsunami, one of the most deadly natural disasters the world has ever seen in terms of the loss of human life. That disaster was preceded a year earlier by an earthquake in Bam, Iran, that killed more than 30,000. Then, only weeks after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, another deadly earthquake battered southern Asia, killing tens of thousands more.

Some say that the earth has always experienced the same magnitude of storms and earthquakes. True or not, the effect is often worse now than it would have been 500 years ago because so many more people will be affected. And isn’t this how we should measure it—in terms of human life and suffering?

That’s how the Bible measures it. When Jesus Christ spoke of “great tribulation” before His return to earth, “such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21), He meant people—real people who suffer loss, who lose loved ones, lose their homes and livelihoods and experience inconsolable grief.

Right now the tribulation in Africa is immense. The richest nations have recently agreed to help yet again. If the AIDS epidemic and the famines weren’t enough, human beings have a way of making it worse with civil wars and genocide.

Can we erase poverty? The human spirit is certainly resilient and we can do great things for ourselves when our spirit and attitude is right. But why do we have the poverty, pestilence and violence in Africa in the first place? And can humanity really
solve it? These are the big questions.

Something much bigger is going on here, bigger than everyone imagines. Is it the beginning of the disintegration of our civilization, when we experience a series of superdisasters and events with which we will not be able to cope?

Will we run out of resources?

Let’s look at the bigger picture. America emerged from 9/11 just over four years ago and moved quickly into a full-scale war on terror. After the initial military offensives in Afghanistan and Iraq, America is now funding costly nation-building projects as well as sending some of its finest people there with a mission whose outcome is far from assured.

The United States, along with many other nations, poured billions into the nations devastated by the Indian Ocean tsunami and has also made a huge commitment in the hope of eradicating poverty and AIDS in Africa.

Yet a 21st-century city within America itself, the wealthiest nation on earth, is now rendered temporarily uninhabitable—with much of the population having nothing to return to. And we hear estimates of a decade for rebuilding.

At this rate, how many more disaster-relief efforts can the United States fund? How many distressed countries can America save?

Let me say what a lot of people are thinking, but most don’t want to say out loud, especially after Rita stormed ashore a few weeks after Katrina. What about the next one? Will we have the resources to save, sustain and rebuild? One suspects that sometime, somewhere, a time will come when Americans won’t have the ability to cope with any more major disasters.

At some point, not everyone who needs assistance can be helped. Homes won’t be rebuilt, lives won’t be restored, disease won’t be arrested and the food won’t arrivé.

A chaotic period of unprecedented world troubles will come, just as Jesus foretold in His last major prophecy before His crucifixion (Matthew 24:21-22).

Something has to change!

So is this it? Reporters, trying to tap into the feelings of survivors of Katrina, were told more than once that what happened to them is described in the Bible. They told the reporters unashamedly that we live in the end time and more trouble is yet to come. How do they know this?

Anyone who has a cursory knowledge of the Bible knows that a time is coming that will mark the end of our civilization as we know it. Jesus listed the signs of the end of the age that would lead to an unprecedented time of world troubles the Bible calls the Great Tribulation. The events of that time will culminate in the glorious return of Christ to reign over the Kingdom of God on earth, which He spoke about so often.

Is this what we are staring at? The beginning of the death throes of the end of this age and the commencement of a new age that will replace the kingdoms of this world?

The good news is that when we come to the place where we can’t rescue ourselves anymore, there is a mightier Hand than ours that will intervene! That’s when the greatest project of rebuilding the world will begin to happen. That’s really good news!

Are we now entering that uneasy, chaotic period of transition between this age of man and a future utopian time when Jesus Christ will reign on earth?

If there are no additional catastrophes this year, the American football, hockey and basketball seasons will go on. The latest movies will come out each weekend and Americans will continue to be entertained. Our lifestyles around the world will continue without missing a beat—many of which fall very short of the biblical standards God has set for the inhabitants of the earth.

We will hold our moments of silence for the victims of Katrina, just as we did for the victims of 9/11. We will donate some money, pay higher fuel prices and sacrifice just a little. The brave men and women of America, Britain and other countries will continue to put their lives on the line to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan. Leaders of nations will meet, the United Nations will talk, but will anything really change?

That’s the idea!

Something has to change—something fundamental, massive and permanent.

Is there a purpose?

Is God beginning to withhold His protective hand? Our attention is on us, our plans, our purposes. Human beings have a vision of the way we think things ought to be. It’s all about us. But is Someone trying to get our attention?

God is the God of the whole universe—what about Him? He made everything. He put us here on this good green earth. Does He have a purpose for us that we have ignored all these millennia? Is it now time for God to make Himself known to mankind and produce the results He wants?

The apostle Paul sums up the essence of what God is accomplishing here on earth, step by step: “He has made known to us His secret purpose, in accordance with the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ, to be put into effect when the time was ripe; namely, that the universe, everything in heaven and earth, must be brought into unity in Christ. In Christ indeed we have been given our share in this heritage, as was decreed in his design whose purpose is everywhere at work” (Ephesians 1:9-11, Revised English Bible, emphasis added throughout).

Once again, within a period of eight months, we find ourselves explaining more natural disasters of apocalyptic proportions in light of our belief in a loving and caring Creator God. Were these just random acts of the forces of nature out of control? Or could they be expressions of God’s patience with His wayward creatures wearing thin?

Or are these only early steps in a series of such events as a part of a grand scheme to accomplish a great purpose? It’s important to understand this concept because if you can see a pattern according to the way it is described in the Bible, then you’ll begin to really grasp not only your future, but also the future of all of mankind.

In the vernacular, let’s cut to the chase. Either God exists or He doesn’t. Either He is a personal God who cares about His creation, or He isn’t. We don’t have a lot of alternatives. Right now, we’re talking about our lives and the lives of millions of people and the future of the world. Personally, I have to come to a conclusion about such matters and I believe you have to also. We can’t let too many more disasters of this magnitude go by without arriving at some kind of conclusion about the plan and purpose of life itself. Why are we here on earth in the first place?

Either God has a great purpose and He is working everything out to accomplish that purpose, or He is capricious, uncaring, uninvolved, maybe even emotional and humanlike in His dealings with us. Or, as some reason, maybe He doesn’t exist at all.

Our choices are limited because awesome future events aren’t going to allow us to indefinitely assign recurring superdisasters to randomness and natural causes.

Let’s look at it this way. If God is now forcing humanity to consider its ways, beliefs and practices, what will He have to do to really get our attention? After all, why should human beings change their ways if they still have everything they need?

As long as we can fund emergency aid, as long as we can rebuild the devastation, feed the hungry out of our stores of food, and otherwise solve our problems—why should we consider the fact that God might have something to say about the

Continued on page 27
Is God Indifferent to Human Suffering?

If God is all-powerful, He could easily prevent disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornados, floods, droughts and volcanic eruptions. But He lets them happen. Why?

by Roger Foster

Christianity portrays God as an intelligent, all-powerful being. And the Christian Bible teaches that “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God” (1 John 4:16).

Yet natural catastrophes such as hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes are often labeled “acts of God.” This carries with it the implication that mankind’s Creator is personally responsible and accountable for the loss of life, material devastation and suffering that natural catastrophes leave in their wake. The anguish they cause leaves a lot of people very perplexed about God’s attitude toward human suffering.

One woman standing in the midst of the New Orleans devastation told a reporter, “God doesn’t live here anymore.” When asked why God allows such a disaster, a priest’s reply can be summed up: There is no answer.

Is that true? Is there really no answer? Must we remain completely in the dark concerning God’s reasons for not preventing catastrophic destruction, loss of life and incalculable misery? Or could it be that God has already revealed His reasons for not always intervening and that we simply haven’t paid close enough attention to them?

Shared responsibility

A realistic assessment of responsibility for the death and suffering caused by natural disasters—especially those that are predictable—should always include a review of our personal and collective responsibility to prepare for the unexpected.

By labeling all natural calamities as “acts of God,” we are in danger of denying our own collective and personal responsibility. Such a view implies that God, by allowing natural disasters, is guilty of indifference. It suggests He is responsible and accountable for all human suffering.

Responsibility, however, is a two-way street. It’s hardly fair to blame God for not doing all that He could if we have closed our eyes to the preventive measures we could and should have taken. Such an approach in essence blames God for our own negligence. It completely ignores the principle of shared responsibility.

Consider the damage done in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. For years emergency-response personnel have warned that a massive and intense hurricane could devastate the Gulf Coast of the United States. A good example of this type of warning was the 2004 study on the vulnerability of New Orleans and the whole Gulf Coast to hurricanes packing the destructive power of Katrina and Rita.

The predictions of that study were so accurate they almost seem prophetic. Explains government watcher Robert Longley: “During the summer of 2004, FEMA ran a disaster simulation exercise in which a fictional hurricane named Pam hit the New Orleans area. The purpose of the Pam simulation was to help FEMA and local authorities in hurricane-prone areas to prepare for future disasters.

“In the FEMA simulation, Pam hit New Orleans with sustained winds of 120 mph, dumping up to 20 inches of rain in parts of southeast Louisiana and creating a storm surge that topped levees in the New Orleans area. More than one million residents evacuated and Hurricane Pam destroyed 500,000-600,000 buildings.

“Emergency officials from 50 parish, state, federal and volunteer organizations participated in the five-day exercise held at the Louisiana State Emergency Operations Center in Baton Rouge” (http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/defenseandsecurity/a/femapam.htm).

Much was learned from that fictional simulation. Still more was learned when category-4 Hurricane Ivan was predicted to make a direct hit on New Orleans in September 2004. Ivan was virtually a dress rehearsal for Hurricane Katrina—hundreds of thousands of people evacuated the area before the storm veered away from New Orleans and pounded the Florida panhandle.

Even after many problems were identified through the simulation and Hurricane Ivan, only a few of the necessary changes and preparations were put in place. When Katrina finally did arrive on the scene, it was too late.

The early reaction by many government officials following Katrina was to blame others—with those at each level of responsibility pointing the finger at those above or below them.

As time passed, however, it became clear that all levels of those responsible for emergency readiness shared culpability for
leadership that He had been offering them recognized who He was and the level of added throughout).


For 3½ years Jesus had crisscrossed the land of Judea with a message of repentance and renewal. Before Him, John the Baptist had called for the same changes. Both were

He makes very plain in the Scriptures.

Jesus Christ's instructive example

Just before He was crucified, Jesus looked down on the city in which He would be put to death, understanding clearly what lay ahead for Him. He also knew that in the not-too-distant future Roman armies would attack and devastate the city of Jerusalem. His love and concern for the people of that city affected His emotions so powerfully that He was moved to tears.

“As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.

“They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God’” (Luke 19:41-44, New Revised Standard Version, emphasis added throughout).

Jesus deeply desired for them to have recognized who He was and the level of leadership that He had been offering them ignored by the great majority of those who heard them. In the end, both were killed for preaching a message designed to repair the strained relationship between God and the people to whom they preached.

At that time Rome ruled much of the world with a heavy hand. The Jewish people resented its oppressive authority and were obsessed with gaining their independence. They wanted Jesus to lead them in an uprising to expel the Roman army. But they refused to accept His criticisms of their personal and national behavior.

Under those conditions Jesus, as His heavenly Father’s messenger, warned them of the disaster they were about to bring on themselves.

The Jewish nation and its capital city of Jerusalem rejected His message that called for them to repent and submit to God. They wanted to hear a message about expelling the Roman army. In the end, war with that army is what they got. In A.D. 70 Jerusalem was completely destroyed and the majority of Jews not killed in the battle were carried away as slaves or had to flee for their lives.

Did God allow that disaster to happen? Certainly! He even foretold it. Yet who was at fault?

The blame fell on both the Jews and the Romans! Each acted out of misguided self-interest in defiance of the teachings and will of God. The consequences of the conflict produced by those choices were precisely what Jesus had said they would be.

Understanding God's perspective

God could easily give warning or prevent any natural disaster. And He is willing to do that, under certain conditions—that those receiving such protection will collectively pay close attention to His teachings by making them their personal standard of thinking and behavior.

From the creation of Adam to Noah’s Flood—a span of more than 1,600 years—God observed human behavior intensely. His observations are not flattering. “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain” (Genesis 6:5-6, New International Version).

Even God often finds it emotionally painful to watch how insensitive and callous human beings can be in their relationships with one another and with Him—though suffering often has the effect of making us aware of how much we need each other. By the time the Flood began, only the family of Noah was found sufficiently obedient to God’s will to be spared its devastation.

It’s important to recognize that God is never unfeeling—but He is realistic. When the majority of people in a nation ignore His instructions—or worse, actively rebel against them—the nation forfeits any protection and personal intervention that God would so much like to give.

This loving concern is well documented in an excellent historical example. God gave the people of ancient Israel the opportunity to represent—by their example—the right type of relationship that He wants all nations to have with Him (Deuteronomy 4:5-10). He made a pact with them that He would shield them from all types of disasters, predictable and unpredictable alike.

But He also set conditions. They were responsible for their part. They had to do all that God would teach them. Notice the essence of both what God expected and promised:

“If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the...
vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.

“And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land. You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you.

“You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new. I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:3-12, NRSV).

Did you notice here how often God promised to act directly to ensure they would be both blessed and secure? “I will grant peace in the land . . . I will look with favor upon you . . . I will maintain my covenant with you . . . I will walk among you, and will be your God”!

God’s favor included excellent weather that would bring blessings instead of disasters. His favor included peace and security with assurance of victory over enemies. It also included abundant agricultural blessings.

His requirements were easy to comprehend. The people were to follow all of God’s instructions with attentive ears and hearts.

How simple and direct! But God also extended or withheld blessings according to this principle: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Proverbs 14:34, New International Version). It is not a flattering picture even though it is true.

Christ. Like the time before Noah’s Flood, disasters are shipped from one seaport to another. Great varieties of merchandise are bought and sold . . . It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:26-30, NIV).

God’s response to harmful behavior

God allows or sometimes even causes suffering for another reason. He uses it as a means of correcting wrong behavior. Notice the scriptural advice to those who begin to stray from the ways taught in God’s Word:

“And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.’

“Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? . . . Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness” (Hebrews 12:5-10, NRSV).

God is very focused on the ultimate

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outcome of our lives. Therefore He sets choices before us. He even allows us to make bad choices (Deuteronomy 30:15-19).

But He wants us to learn from their consequences, to see and distinguish the harmful effects of foolish decisions. If we still fail to get the point, He may even take a more direct approach and bring bad consequences upon us. But His goal is always to bring us back to His ways, His teachings.

George Barna, America’s leading pollster of behavioral patterns among professing Christians, once observed that even though the practice of Christianity in the United States may be represented accurately as “a mile wide,” it also may be described just as accurately as only “an inch deep.”

Understanding and applying biblical principles seems to be at an all-time low not just in America today, but in most Western countries. The shallowness of devotion to God’s ways today is very similar to that of ancient Israel’s people and priests.

Addressing directly the priests responsible for giving the people of that era the knowledge of His ways, God exclaimed: “... My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I will also ignore your children.”

“...the more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be: Like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds” (Hosea 4:6-9, NIV).

Today, clear biblical instruction is mostly out of vogue even among professing Christians, having been replaced by feel-good messages and emotionalism. Though the United States is one of the last Western nations engaged in a political struggle between secular and religious values—with secularism having won nearly everywhere else—only a small portion of the religious factions in that struggle are actively committed to living expressly as the Bible teaches.

But that segment could profoundly affect the effectiveness of God’s discipline on those nations where the teachings of God’s Word are available.

The “watchman” assignment

In ancient times a watchman in a tower or on a defensive wall was assigned the responsibility of warning his countrymen of any approaching threat. Throughout history God has charged His faithful servants with a similar responsibility. Here is an example of that charge given to Ezekiel:

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

“But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself” (Ezekiel 3:17-19, NIV).

The Good News magazine is committed to providing sound biblical teachings and warnings appropriate for our time. As disasters and suffering increase, our goal is to help readers understand that God has not hidden His face from what is happening.

We also suggest other material and resources devoted to the same goals. It’s our fervent hope that you will take full advantage of these informative resources—and not just read, watch or listen to them, but act on them.

We now live at a time when disasters are called “acts of God,” yet with few people understanding why He allows them. He is neither negligent nor indifferent. He wants us to recognize our need for His care so that we will take His word seriously and apply it.

Those who turn to Him and make the Bible the foundation of their lives can take great comfort in these words: “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5).

If you want God to include you in that category, you must make sure, as in James 1:23-25, that you have become a “doer,” not just a “hearer,” of His Word. GN

Recommended Reading

Why does God allow such disasters as hurricanes and earthquakes to cause so much destruction and suffering? Is a greater purpose at work that we fail to understand—an important message we may be missing? We’ve put together an eye-opening booklet, Why Does God Allow Suffering?, that addresses these questions head-on. You need this vital information! Contact us today for your free copy.

Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download it from our Web site at www.gnmagazine.org/booklets

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www.gnmagazine.org
World News and Trends
An Overview of Conditions Around the World
by John Ross Schroeder and Jerold Aust

The Gaza withdrawal: Signal for lasting peace or future conflict?

Some high-ranking authorities in Israel see the withdrawal from Gaza as a conciliatory, voluntary step towards peace with the Palestinians. But a spokesman for Hamas (a notorious terrorist group) in Beirut, Khaled Mashall, sees it very differently. He said: “The resistance and the steadfastness of our people forced the Zionists to withdraw” (The Daily Telegraph).

Almost every Palestinian in Gaza who was interviewed believes the withdrawal was forced by the suicide bombers who have killed more than 1,000 Israeli citizens and maimed another 6,000 during the intifada of the last five years. A Palestinian poem has become a virtual battle cry for the future. It reads: “0 brigades be prepared, Gaza has been restored. Start preparing to liberate the rest of the land. Drive the Zionist out, O Hamas, let’s liberate Jerusalem with the help of your soldiers and glorious rockets” (emphasis added throughout).

Two prominent Israeli cabinet members have resigned over the government’s Gaza policy, first Natan Sharansky in May followed by Benjamin Netanyahu in August. In an interview with Time magazine, Mr. Sharansky said that withdrawal should have been “connected to changes by the Palestinians . . . It means zero pressure to reform.” He regards the apparent lull in open conflict as “more and more time for the terrorist groups to strengthen themselves.” A senior Israeli security official said, “We feel that this is the lull before the storm.” Some observers clearly expect an outbreak of serious conflict sooner or later, perhaps even another prolonged intifada. (Sources: The Daily Telegraph [London], Time.)

Gaza’s uncertain future

Currently Gaza is viewed as an economic and political wreck. Many blame the 38-year Israeli occupation after Israel captured Gaza from Egypt in the 1967 Six-Day War. But do certain unpleasant facts reveal another side to the story? Smuggling weapons (more recently even short-range missiles) through an intricate network of tunnels has been commonplace for at least 10 years—ever since the Oslo Accords of 1994-1995 apparently granted the Palestinian Authority (PA) control over most of the Gaza strip. Terrorists have used Palestinian civilians to do the dirty work. Recent border control breakdowns have not helped the situation.

To help Palestinians build their economy in Gaza after the Israeli pullout, American Jewish donors purchased some 3,000 greenhouses from Israeli settlers on the Gaza strip, leaving them in place as a gift for the Palestinians.

One former World Bank president personally contributed half a million dollars. Yet gangs of Palestinian thugs looted dozens of these greenhouses in Neve Dekalim, rendering them useless. “The International Herald Tribune, in a feature article, assessed the strength of the Palestinian security, saying they are “divided, weak, overstaffed, badly motivated and underarmed.” In reality, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is rather powerless to exert effective control over Hamas and other armed factions.

What do all these factors say about the practice of conceding to repeated demands that Israelis give up even more land in exchange for peace? In the minds of some Israelis, Gaza once represented the dream of a “Greater Israel,” part of the Promised Land of the Bible and the very area where the ancient judge Samson pulled down the pagan temple onto the Philistines.

Where are such recent events ultimately going to take the nations of the Middle East? To understand more, request or download our free booklet The Middle East in Bible Prophecy. (Sources: International Herald Tribune, Newsweek, MSNBC, WorldNetDaily.)

The disturbing implications of a Russo-German agreement

Veteran newspaper columnist William Rees-Mogg, a past editor of the London Times, sees and reports on important but largely unrecognized events that others overlook. One that most major news sources missed the relevance of is an agreement that, according to Mr. Rees-Mogg, “significantly alters the balance of power inside the European Union.” (The Mail on Sunday).

This agreement “significantly alters the balance of power inside the European Union.”

This agreement brings to mind the Nazi-Soviet agreement in 1939, just before World War II. It destroyed the sovereignty of Poland and three Baltic countries. More than once Poland had been partitioned between Russia and Germany.

This agreement involves laying a pipeline to transport gas from Russia to Germany bypassing Eastern Europe. Mr. Rees-Mogg’s conclusions about a mere pipeline are very intriguing: “This is, however, a bilateral arrangement which will benefit Germany rather than Europe. It is described by President Putin as ‘avoiding geopolitical risks,’ by

Mobs raze synagogues

Longtime British correspondent Eric Silver reported from Jerusalem that “Israeli political and religious leaders condemned the destruction of 26 abandoned settlement synagogues by Palestinian mobs after the army finished evacuating the Gaza Strip.” (Jewish Chronicle). No matter how distasteful, some Israeli government officials thought that the synagogues should have been demolished before the departure from Gaza to prevent just such an occurrence.

In his column in The Mail on Sunday, Peter Hitchens expressed great disappointment that “there was no great global shock or outrage” at this destruction. Personally he found “the sight of burning synagogues both terrifying and disgusting.” He also reminded his readers that “history tells us what happens when the synagogues burn.” (Sources: Jewish Chronicle, The Mail on Sunday [both London].)

German entente into Poland and Eastern Europe.

This agreement brings to mind the Nazi-Soviet agreement in 1939, just before World War II. It destroyed the sovereignty of Poland and three Baltic countries. More than once Poland had been partitioned between Russia and Germany.

which he means avoiding Poland.” Not incidentally, Poland is very friendly with America.

This noted journalist says that the recent agreement “makes Eastern Europe more dependent on Germany, makes Germany more dominant in the Franco-German alliance and makes Germany more the master of the European Union.”

Perhaps this recent Russo-German agreement is only one more step in a long chain of events, but it is one that we would do well to consider in anticipating the nature of others that will follow. (Source: The Mail on Sunday [London].)
Earthquake country in the central United States?

The New Madrid zone of American earthquake faults runs from southern Illinois to northeastern Arkansas and includes the St. Louis and Memphis areas. Recent geological activity in this zone is causing considerable concern.

Major quakes occurred in that area during the early 1800s, at one point even causing the Mississippi River to flow backwards for a time. Officials stated that “sweeping today, one of the earthquakes of 1811-1812 would cause widespread loss of life and billions of dollars in property damage” (USA Today).

Meanwhile in California, more traditional earthquake country, "U.S. Geological Survey seismologists Lucy Jones remembers attending an emergency training session in August 2001 with the Federal Emergency Management Agency that discussed the three most likely catastrophes to strike the United States" (Los Angeles Times).

First was a terrorist attack on New York, second a powerful hurricane flooding New Orleans, and third a major earthquake in California along the San Andreas fault. Now, in the wake of the first two actually happening with 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, Lucy Jones and others are reassessing how the Golden State would cope with a major quake.

Jesus Christ foretold that major earthquakes in different places would be one of the signs that would trouble our planet before the end of this age (Matthew 24:21, Revised English Bible).

What about those gasoline prices?

The cost of gasoline has skyrocketed over the past year in the United States, leaving most American consumers feeling like they’re being mugged every time they visit the gas pumps.

Some state governments are setting their sights on gas stations, asking them to cough up the data that show how much they pay for gas and what they charge the public. "Attorney General Jane Brady [Delaware] has announced she’s sending letters to the state’s 400 retail gas stations to report what they’ve been paying wholesale and how much they charge customers. That in itself might bring down some prices at those stations that continue to charge unreasonable prices” (www.delawareonline.com, Sept. 18).

One sure factor is greed. Oil-producing nations charge whatever they think the world market can bear. Speculators drive up prices by speculating in futures markets. Sellers at various levels take advantage of situations like shortages due to the recent Gulf Coast hurricanes to squeeze consumers. Automobile companies push bigger, more expensive vehicles on which they can make higher profits. And car buyers’ decisions are often driven more by vanity than actual need. All in all, it creates a vicious—and expensive—cycle.

Why bad news in The Good News?

Speaking of conditions before His return, Jesus Christ said our planet will experience “a time of great distress, such as there has never been before since the beginning of the world, and will never be again” (Matthew 24:21, Revised English Bible).

The United Church of God, whose members and supporters provide the financial backing for The Good News and other publications, proclaims the good news of the imminent return of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet we often report on the negative consequences of human behavior leading to the very conditions Jesus described.

Following Jesus’ example, part of our purpose is to highlight the lessons mankind is writing in its self-centered way of living and to warn of where this way is leading. But more than that, our intention is to illustrate the need for an alternative way of life—the godly way of life Jesus revealed and personified. Beyond the bad news, we present this way of living that would eliminate all of man’s problems. We also explain from Scripture that under the coming rule of Christ, God’s way will become universal—and humanity will at last know true and lasting peace.

The world of today is indeed filled with bad news. Yet the future holds incredible promise—Christ’s return to establish the Kingdom of God (Daniel 7:13-14; Revelation 11:15), ushering in a wonderful world of peace, prosperity and plenty during which all people will at last learn to live God’s way of life. This truly is good news!

Iran adds fuel to Middle East fire

In September Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that “Iran is willing to provide nuclear technology to other Muslim states.” Within hours, “European nations renewed an offer of economic incentives if the Middle east nation would halt its uranium enrichment” (Associated Press report, Sept. 15, emphasis added).

Does history show that appeasement of despots brings peace? British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s 1938 “peace in our time” fiasco helped pave the way for the greatest holocaust in history.

U.S. intelligence sources believe that Iran is five to 10 years from producing nuclear weapons. Few doubt they will be willing to use them. Iran already has missiles capable of reaching most of Europe. A nuclear-armed Iran willing to share its technology with other Muslim nations will dramatically alter the balance of power in that long-troubled region.

Could this be a significant contribution to the beginning of “the end,” when “the king of the South”—apparently a leader of a Muslim confederation—pushes against the “king of the North,” the leader of a European super-power as prophesied in Daniel 11:40 and other passages? To learn more, request your free copy of The Middle East in Bible Prophecy.

(Source: Associated Press.)

India threatened by AIDS crisis

Great economic progress has generally been predicted for India, provided that the country can bring the current AIDS blight under control. Even now India has the 10th largest economy in the world and is predicted to grow. Yet according to Time magazine, “The government says India has 5.13 million HIV/AIDS sufferers, while the UN’s estimate is up to 8.5 million. In any event, 500,000 new cases are reported each year.”

Apparently part of the problem is that the government is in at least partial denial, preventing effective countermeasures from being implemented. Former American President Bill Clinton indicated that “a rampant epidemic will sap an economic revival that has lifted living standards to unprecedented levels.”

(Source: Financial Times Magazine, Time.)

How Can You Make Sense of the News?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. So are we. That’s why we’ve created the World News & Prophecy Web site—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. This eye-opening site offers you a perspective you won’t find anywhere else—the perspective of God’s Word, the Bible. Visit us at www.unponline.org today!

November/December 2005
Hurricane Katrina: Is God Removing His Protection From America?

Hurricane Katrina’s destruction was so great and far-reaching that many wonder if God is playing a hand in these events, either punishing the United States or removing His protection—or both.

by Melvin Rhodes

Although officials had long known disaster could happen, they took no action. They ignored warnings from environmentalists, engineers, and analysts. Somber reports foreshadowing the possible calamity were quietly filed away. In public, officials maintained that everything was fine—until disaster struck and it became obvious to all that everything was not fine, and might never be so again.”


The article concludes: “It may take a surprisingly short time for the Gulf region to rebound. The lasting economic damage from Katrina may be felt most keenly by the U.S. auto industry. And, just like the officials who did nothing about the levees, Detroit was repeatedly warned.”

It’s been more than 30 years since the United States first experienced widespread fuel shortages. Long lines of cars sat outside stations waiting for gas. The price was high. Warnings were given about the need to switch to more fuel-efficient cars. But little was done, and America is even more dependent on cheap gasoline today than it was then.

Similarly, little was done to prepare for the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. Four years after 9/11 and the spending of billions of dollars on homeland security, Hurricane Katrina showed the world that America is no more prepared for coping with some kinds of disasters than it was in 2001. The fear of many is that this could embolden America’s enemies to stage another crippling terrorist attack.

Meanwhile, America faces warnings of an increasing number of severe hurricanes in the near future.

What is happening?

The United States has experienced hurricanes before. Some in past decades were horrendous, with massive loss of life. The worst, which hit Galveston, Texas, in 1900, killed between 8,000 and 12,000 people.

But the frequency of such severe storms seems to be much greater. As James Lee Witt, a former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), pointed out in the Financial Times: “The ten most costly catastrophes in US history occurred within the past 15 years. There is little doubt that more are on the way” (“America Can Prepare for What It Cannot Control,” Sept. 12).

One fact seems clear after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—the era of cheap gas is over! The impact that this will have on the world economy remains to be seen, but recession has often followed earlier energy price increases.

One reason for this is that people have less disposable income when they have to pay more to drive and to heat their homes. Another is that transporting goods costs more, so prices of everything increase.

A third factor is that petroleum products are used in the production of many items, which will all inevitably increase in price. Plastics, for example, are made from petroleum products. An increase in the cost of producing plastics will inevitably affect many supermarket prices. Many chemicals used by various industries also depend heavily on petroleum products.

Also affecting the price and availability of gas is a shortage of refining capacity in the United States, where no new refineries have been built in several decades.

A storm of trouble on many fronts

Cities affected by Katrina and Rita are...
expected to recover with massive aid from the federal government. But few realize the potential negative consequences of that very aid, estimated at some $200 billion for Katrina alone, roughly the same amount of money spent so far on the war in Iraq.

Neither Katrina nor Rita were budgeted for; both are being paid for by further over-spending. Without either, the federal budget deficit was already going to be a record high. Now it will be even higher.

The United States increasingly depends on other nations to foot the bill through the purchase of U.S. treasury bonds. China, Japan and Germany remain the big three lenders—all, in the past, enemies of the United States (and current or potential rivals). It’s certainly risky to borrow from others under such circumstances. These debts must also be paid back by future generations of Americans, with interest.

In the midst of a hurricane, the cost of fuel and availability of transportation are only two of the major concerns residents in the path of the hurricane face.

Their greatest and most immediate worries are for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The next concern is for their property, the homes in which they may have spent their entire lives. With Katrina the order to evacuate came too late for many, resulting in a higher loss of life than would otherwise be the case.

After the hurricane, there was confusion as to who was responsible for dealing with the mess. Federal and state governments are going to have to come together quickly to work out a more rapid disaster-response system. They may not have much time—terrorists were no doubt emboldened by the slow response to Hurricane Katrina and grid-lock on freeways as Texas residents tried to evacuate in the face of Hurricane Rita.

One headline in a British newspaper was typical of international comment in the wake of Katrina—“Third World America!”

The perception of the United States has been further tarnished by the aftermath of the hurricane.

**Spiritual lessons from Katrina**

The disaster of Hurricane Katrina and the deadly affect it had on so many reminded me of a passage of scripture in Matthew 24. Asked by the disciples what would be the sign of His second coming “and of the end of the age” (verse 3), Jesus Christ compared that coming time to an event recorded in the book of Genesis.

“But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be,” said Jesus. “For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (verses 38-39).

This is how it was for both the victims and the survivors of Katrina.

As with Hurricane Katrina, the people at the time of Noah were warned of impending disaster. They were given the opportunity to escape but didn’t take the warnings seriously. Only Noah, his wife and their three sons and their wives survived the great flood that drowned the earth (Genesis 7:7).

There’s a spiritual lesson here.

The Bible warns us of impending end-time events, including natural disasters, that are going to come on mankind between now and Christ’s second coming.

“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places,” said Jesus (Matthew 24:7).

As these things have always taken place, the implication is that their numbers will increase as we near the end of this age. As the article by James Lee Witt showed, the severity of disasters impacting the United States has increased in recent years. Other areas of the world have suffered similarly—less than a year has passed since the Indian Ocean tsunami drowned hundreds of thousands of people, and the Oct. 8 Asian earthquake killed tens of thousands more.

**Consequences of defying God**

Natural disasters are often the consequence of man’s breaking of the laws of God. The rejection of these laws leads to negative consequences.

The biblical book of Deuteronomy contains an interesting chapter which, whether we accept it or not, applies to the United States and other nations today. Along with a parallel passage in Leviticus, it’s often called the “blessings-and-cursings chapter” because it shows clearly how a nation will be blessed for its obedience to God’s laws but suffer negative consequences (curses) for disobedience.

The chapter, Deuteronomy 28, begins with the promise of greatness for a nation whose laws and behavior are based on the Ten Commandments. “Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth,” it begins (verse 1).

“. . . Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks,” it continues (verses 3-4).

America’s initial wealth, both in colonial times and after independence, was based on agriculture. Following the Louisiana Purchase two centuries ago, America’s growing prosperity relied greatly on its waterways and the port of New Orleans. Rivers took the agricultural produce to the Mississippi River and then on down to New Orleans, from where it was exported to Europe.

This has continued to the present day. The closure of the port of New Orleans could impact many American farmers who rely on cheap transportation of their crops down the Mississippi River. It’s hard to export crops you can’t ship.

The same chapter of Deuteronomy warned of the economic consequences of turning away from God. “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

“Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks,” it continues.

**Recommended Reading**

Why are man-made disasters such as 9/11 and natural ones such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita creating such chaos and devastation in the United States? Why are so many other nations turning against America? Where are these trends leading, and why? To understand the biblical perspective, and where the United States and other English-speaking nations such as Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are mentioned in the Bible, request your free copy of The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy.

**Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download it from our Web site at:** www.gnmagazine.org/booklets

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**Continued on page 27**
Jesus Christ instructed His followers to watch for a sequence of trends and events that would culminate in His second coming at the end of the present age. Are you attentive to the signs of the times?

by Tom Robinson

In the final days before His crucifixion, Jesus sat with His disciples atop the Mount of Olives (also called Mount Olivet) on the east side of Jerusalem. Gazing down across the Kidron Valley to the magnificent temple complex King Herod had built, Jesus declared that it would be utterly demolished, with not one stone left on another. His disciples were no doubt shocked and asked Him when this would happen. And, associating this event with the time Jesus would come to reign in power in fulfillment of many biblical prophecies of the last days, they expanded the question, asking, “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

In reply Jesus told His followers to be on the lookout for a succession of developments that would lead to His glorious return in the end time. This response, known as the Olivet Discourse or Olivet Prophecy, is found in three parallel chapters of the Gospels—Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Just what did Jesus say we should be watching for?

Beginning of birth pains

Jesus’ prophecy commences with a series of trends referred to as the “beginning of sorrows” (Matthew 24:8). These began in New Testament times—indeed most had already been happening throughout human history—but they would continue far into the future.

The New International Version better renders the phrase here as the “beginning of birth pains.” As a woman’s labor contractions become more intense and closer together as she nears delivery, so the trends Christ mentioned would appear on the world scene with greater force and frequency as the end of the age draws near.

The first of these initial indicators is widespread religious deception in the name of Jesus—false Christian ministers (verses 4-5)—a matter covered in a previous article in this series (see “Many False Prophets Will Arise and Deceive Many,” The Good News, January-February 2004, pp. 26-27).

“The second is wars (verse 6). Christ makes it clear here that many wars would come and go yet would not mark the end (same verse). Why, then, did He even mention them here?

Again, we should understand that they would increase, occurring more often and on a more intensive scale in the end time. Wars and the other factors Jesus gave at the beginning of the Olivet Prophecy are not to be viewed as indicators of His return by themselves. Rather, a great increase in these conditions is what He was telling His followers to look for.

The next indicator Jesus mentioned was famine followed by pestilence or disease epidemics (verse 7). We should note that the various items Jesus listed here are typically linked. False religion has often instigated wars. Wars consume or foul food supplies, leading to famine and malnutrition. And famine and malnutrition make entire regions ripe for the rampant spread of illness and disease.

The prophesied cycle of war, famine and disease was already known from the Old Testament (see Jeremiah 14:12; 21:9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17-18; Ezekiel 6:11-12; 7:15; 12:16; 14:21), and Jesus’ words should be viewed not in isolation but within the whole framework of Bible prophecy. His words here also provide the key to understanding the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” in Revelation 6:1-8 (see our free article series The Horsemen of Revelation).

Jesus also mentioned natural disasters in this context. Note that Matthew’s Gospel places “earthquakes”—the Greek word here meaning shakings of both ground and air (i.e., storms)—at the end of this series (24:7) but that Mark’s and Luke’s list them prior to famine and pestilence (Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11). Besides being destructive in their own right, natural disasters, like wars, can lead to famines and pestilences.

According to Luke, Jesus further adds, as part of these initial birth pangs, “terrors and great signs from heaven” (21:11, Revised Standard Version). As we will see, Jesus later mentions great natural disasters and heavenly signs immediately preceding the time of His return—demonstrating the escalating nature of these events.

Persecution and proclamation

In the next section of His prophecy, Jesus describes persecution and severe trials that would come on His followers—even martyrdom for some (Matthew 24:9). In Luke 21:12, He explains that this would commence even before the birth pains previously addressed. Indeed, persecution and martyrdom of Christ’s disciples came soon after in the New Testament period. Yet like the birth pains above, this persecution was to increase over time—until Jesus’ followers would be “hated by all nations” (Matthew 24:9).

The persecution would be led by civil and religious authorities (Mark 13:9; Luke 21:12). And sadly, many family members and friends would betray God’s people, joining the persecution and even turning them over to the authorities, sometimes for capital punishment (Matthew 24:10; Mark 13:12; Luke 21:16).

Jesus mentions the preaching of the gospel message in conjunction with the increasing persecution. Indeed, there is a connection between persecution and the preaching of the gospel.

Of course, the public proclamation of the truth of God is what initially provokes the persecution. This persecution, in turn, creates an opportunity for further proclamation. As Jesus said in this context: “You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony” (Luke 21:12-13).

He further explained that God would directly inspire His people with the words to speak at that time (verses 14-15; Mark
13:11). This would fuel further persecution, then greater witness, then even more persecution, then still greater witness—and so on.

Then at last, in the face of the worst opposition to God’s truth in the closing period of this age, Jesus says that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

**The final crisis**

Jesus at this point turns to local events that will lead to worldwide upheaval. He says, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near” (Luke 21:20). This He declares in conjunction with “the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (Matthew 24:15; compare Mark 13:14).

Daniel had foretold a foreign invasion of the Holy Land and the placement of the abomination of desolation within the temple complex (Daniel 11:31). If we follow the historical fulfillment of the Daniel 11 prophecy, it becomes apparent that this was accomplished under the Syrian invader Antiochus Epiphanes, who caused a pagan defilement of the temple around 168 B.C.

Yet this was long before Jesus spoke. So Jesus must have been declaring that this past fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy was not a complete fulfillment—that the past event was a prototype or forerunner of something still to come.

Things would become horrific for the Jewish people in the Holy Land at that time: “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written [i.e., in Old Testament prophecies regarding this] may be fulfilled . . . For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people” (Luke 21:22-23).

“Great distress” here is found as “great tribulation” in Matthew 24:21. Jerusalem would be conquered and occupied by enemies, its people taken captive to other nations (Luke 21:24).

The time frame and scope of these events has been a matter of debate. In A.D. 69-70, nearly 40 years after Jesus spoke, it seemed to many that the Romans fulfilled this prophecy. They invaded Jerusalem, they destroyed the temple and later erected a pagan temple in its place, and they led many of the Jewish people away captive to other parts of the empire.

Recall also that Jesus’ disciples had asked Him at the outset when His statement about the demolition of the Herodian temple complex would be realized—and it is generally believed that this was accomplished in the Roman invasion. However, some sections of the temple platform retaining wall were not thrown down and remain to this day—the Western or “Wailing” Wall being but one example.

There are, in fact, clear indications that the invasion of Judea and Great Tribulation are end-time events. Besides their position in the prophecy, consider that Jesus declares the scale of the Tribulation as unparalleled in human history—never to be surpassed (Matthew 24:21). His language recalls the unequalled period of trouble preceding the end-time resurrection spoken of in Daniel 12:1-3. There can’t be more than one worst time ever.

Jesus further said that if the Great Tribulation were allowed to run its course, “no flesh would be saved [alive]” (Matthew 24:22). This concerns all humanity, not just the people of Judea.

Christ later refers to this dire period as “the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world” (Revelation 3:10). Mankind’s self-annihilation was not a possibility in A.D. 70. It has only become feasible in modern times with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Evidently, the first-century Roman invasion of Judea was, like Antiochus’ invasion before it, a forerunner of the final and ultimate fulfillment at the end of the age.

Jesus next warns against those who would claim He has already returned by this point in contradiction to the obvious signs He is laying out (see Matthew 24:23-28). He then describes cosmic events that will usher in His coming: signs in the sun and moon, both being darkened; falling stars, likely referring to meteors; the shaking of the powers of heaven; “and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring” (Luke 21:25; compare Matthew 24:29).

Thus we have here the culmination of the early indicators Jesus gave of increasing heavenly signs and natural disasters. Revelation 6:12-17 shows a marked increase in such signs as introducing the day of God’s wrath—the most cataclysmic and signs-laden period ever, called the “Day of the Lord” in many prophecies.

It is at the conclusion of this period that Jesus will at last return—when, as He declares, all peoples “will see the son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30).

**Discerning the signs of the times**

Is it possible to discern if we are in the end time?

Jesus said it is, giving the example from nature of the branches of a fig tree becoming tender and putting forth leaves as an indicator that summer is near (verse 32). “‘So you also, when you see all these things [leading to His return], know that it is near—at the doors!’” (verse 33). Jesus chided the religious authorities of His day for failing to “discern the signs of the times” concerning His first coming (Matthew 16:1-3). He could do the same today with regard to the signs for His second coming.

Obviously we have not entered the Great Tribulation yet. Rather we appear to be in the escalation of initial birth pains. Indeed, for ages wars, famines, pestilences and natural disasters were somewhat static with occasional spikes in activity. But in the past century, mankind has seen a huge increase in all these indicators.

Jesus further made clear that once the marked rise began, it would not continue indefinitely. Rather, He stated, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation [i.e., all the people alive at the indicated time] will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34).

The generation to which He referred could not have been the people of His day—as they died without seeing all the events leading to His return. Rather, He could only have meant the generation of the last days. That time appears to be here. Jesus further explained in His Olivet Discourse that all of us have a responsibility to be mindful of world events and trends as well as our own spiritual condition as we approach the difficult times ahead. “Watch therefore,” He said in Luke 21:36, “and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

To learn more about the indicators of the last days, how to know whether they are here and what that means for you personally, be sure to request our free booklet Are We Living in the Time of the End? GN

November/December 2005 19
Television Log

For additional information and the most current air times, or to download or view programs online, visit www.gntv.org and www.GNTVOnline.org.

Arizona
Phoenix ch. 24, 98, Sundays 4 p.m.; Mondays 5:30 p.m.
Prescott ch. 13, Tuesdays 1 p.m.; Wednesdays 6 p.m.
Prescott Valley ch. 13, Sundays 9 a.m. & 6 p.m.; Mondays 9 a.m. & Saturdays 9 a.m. & 6 p.m.
Tucson ch. 73, 74, Sundays 8 a.m.; Saturdays 8 a.m.

Arkansas
Fayetteville ch. 18, Sundays 12 noon; Fridays 12:30 p.m.; Saturdays 11 a.m.
Mena ch. 19, Sundays 2 & 2:30 p.m.

California
Alhambra ch. 26, 2nd and 4th Thursdays, 7:30 & 9:30 p.m.
Berkeley ch. 26, Mondays 10 p.m.; Tuesdays 7 p.m.
Chatsworth ch. 34, Sundays 2:30 p.m.
El Monte ch. 26, Mondays 10 p.m.; Tuesdays 7 p.m.
Eureka ch. 10, Fridays 7 & 7:30 p.m.
Fontana ch. 6, Mondays 11:30 a.m.
Hayward ch. 28, Tuesdays 10 p.m.
Hemet ch. 3, Fridays 1 p.m.
Heracles ch. 26, Mondays 10 p.m.; Tuesdays 7 p.m.
Lafayette ch. 26, 2nd and 4th Thursdays, 7:30 & 9:30 p.m.
Livermore ch. 26, Fridays 4 p.m.
Marin County ch. 26, Tuesdays 10:30 p.m.
Martinez ch. 26, 2nd and 4th Thursdays, 7:30 & 9:30 p.m.
Menlo Park ch. 77, Mondays 6 p.m.
Mobile ch. 26, Mondays 1:30 p.m.; Thursday 8:30 p.m.
Monrovia ch. 98, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays 4:30 p.m.
Montclair ch. 26, 2nd and 4th Thursdays 7:30 & 9:30 p.m.
Newark ch. 6, Mondays 11:30 a.m.
Novato ch. 71, Tuesdays 7:30 p.m.
Orange County ch. 3A, 6, Sundays 11 a.m. & 7:30 p.m.

Oklahoma
Fairborn ch. 23, Sundays 5:30 p.m.
Defiance ch. 5, Sundays 12 noon.

Ohio
Canton ch. 26, Thursdays 12 noon; Fridays 12 noon.
Cleveland ch. 12, Sundays 2 p.m.; Mondays 12 noon.
Cincinnati ch. 15, Sundays 3 p.m.; Mondays 3 p.m.
Lima ch. 20, Sundays 7 a.m.; Mondays 6:30 a.m.

Oregon
Candy ch. 5, Mondays 9 a.m.; Tuesdays 5 p.m.
Eugene ch. 11, Mondays 6 p.m.; Tuesdays 6 a.m.; Thursdays 12 midnight; Fridays 12 noon.
McMinvile ch. 35, Monday 6:30 a.m.
Oregon City ch. 21, Mondays 8 p.m.
Portland ch. 21, Sundays 9 p.m.; Fridays 9 p.m.

Pennsylvania
Allentown ch. 17, Sundays 10 a.m.; Mondays 12 noon.
Bloomington ch. 21, Tuesdays 7:30 & 9:30 p.m.
Camp Hill ch. 36, Sundays 6 a.m.; Mondays 6:30 a.m.

Washington
Bellingham ch. 13, Sundays 3:30 p.m.
Everett ch. 11, Sundays 10 a.m.; Monday 6:30 a.m.
Kirkland ch. 47, Thursdays 4 p.m.

West Virginia
Matthias ch. 18, Saturdays 5:30 p.m.
Weston ch. 6, Sundays 6:30 a.m.
Wheeling ch. 19, Sundays 6:30 a.m.

Wisconsin
Morganstern ch. 17, Wednesdays 10 p.m.
Washington ch. 22, 29, Sundays 9:30 a.m.; Mondays 12 noon.

Radio Log

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Nationwide
XM Satellite Radio

Internet Radio

live365.com, Sundays 9 a.m. & 1 p.m. (PDT)

Alabama
Birmingham 1070 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Arizona
Phoenix 910 AM, Sundays 10 a.m.
Globe 1240 AM, Sundays 10:30 a.m.
Sierra Vista 1470 AM, Sundays 10:30 a.m.
Tucson 940 AM, Sundays 10:30 a.m.

California
San Diego 760 AM, Sundays 6 a.m.

Florida
Orlando 540 AM, Sundays 6:30 a.m.

Indiana
Indianapolis 1070 AM, Sundays 7 a.m.

Louisiana
New Orleans 870 AM, Saturdays 9:30 a.m.

New York
New York 910 AM, Sundays 6:30 a.m.

Ohio
Portsmouth 1400 AM, Sundays 6:30 a.m.

Oklahoma
Tulsa 740 AM, Sundays 8 a.m.

Tennessee
Memphis 600 AM, Sundays 9 a.m.

West Virginia
Wheeling 1170 AM, Fridays 8:15 p.m.

Chicago ch. 35, Wednesdays 6:30 p.m.

Colorado
Boulder ch. 43, Fridays 1 p.m.

Connecticut
Norwalk ch. 10, Sundays 11 a.m.

Delaware
Wilmington 1270 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Georgia
Atlanta 1270 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Illinois
Chicago ch. 36, Tuesdays 6:30 p.m.

Iowa
Davenport ch. 11, Sundays 11 a.m.

Kansas
Topeka ch. 66, Sundays 11 a.m.

Kentucky
Lexington ch. 6, Sundays 5:30 p.m.

Los Angeles
Los Angeles 1300 AM, Sundays 12 noon.

Michigan
Bloomfield Hills 1310 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Minnesota
Saint Paul 1300 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Missouri
Kansas City 810 AM, Sundays 7 a.m.

North Carolina
Charlotte 720 AM, Sundays 7 a.m.

Ohio
Cleveland 1510 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Oklahoma
Oklahoma City 1510 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Pennsylvania
Philadelphia 1560 AM, Sundays 7 a.m.

South Carolina
Columbia 770 AM, Sundays 7 a.m.

Texas
Dallas 920 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Washington
Seattle 660 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

West Virginia
Wheeling 740 AM, Sundays 8 a.m.

Wisconsin
Milwaukee 870 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Wisconsin
Milwaukee 970 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Wisconsin
Milwaukee 1570 AM, Sundays 7:30 a.m.

Wyoming
Cheyenne 1310 AM, Sundays 7 a.m.

The New News
How can we trust God when many times we just don’t understand what He’s doing? Have you ever felt that way?

Most people claim to believe in a Supreme Being, with their ideas about God shaped by the Bible. It teaches that God is loving, all-powerful and able to be everywhere at the same time.

Yet at times those who believe in God find themselves in situations that don’t seem to make sense. Why doesn’t God intervene in a personal crisis? Why is a young person allowed to suffer an untimely death? Have we been left in the dark to work this out for ourselves?

Every human being desires a purpose in his or her life—a reason for existence. We all possess an emotional necessity to believe that we have value and that there is meaning in suffering.

These needs originate in an inherent deep-seated hunger for God. We try to fill that hunger with careers, wealth, sex, drugs, social crusades, the newest pop psychology theory and all kinds of other pursuits, but the hunger still exists. This hunger can’t be satisfied until we recognize that we were created to have a relationship with our Creator.

Why doesn’t God always answer prayer?

One of the remarkable gifts the Creator has given human beings is free will. We have self-consciousness, creativity, emotions and the ability to reason and make choices.

This freedom to make choices is one reason the world is in such a mess. Human history is a catalog of failed experiments involving governments, religions and philosophies that have promised happiness, peace and prosperity for everyone. The missing ingredient in all of these experiments is the way of life designed by the Creator of life.

It’s not that God doesn’t want to be involved—it’s that most of the time we don’t invite Him to be involved. Each of us labors under the belief that “I can do it my way” and make life work. Regrettably, we seldom stop to ask, “Is this really working?”

We can talk with God anytime, but a quirk of human nature is that if we don’t get an immediate and positive answer, we conclude He didn’t respond to our prayer.

When God doesn’t seem to respond to our prayers, we need to ask ourselves whether we have separated ourselves from Him by our actions and choices. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says:

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save . . . but your iniquities have separated you from your God . . .” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Sometimes we need to evaluate our own humility before the Creator of the universe. He’s not the proverbial genie in a bottle granting wishes to those who perform the right incantations. Far too many approach God with a flippant, disrespectful attitude and wonder why He doesn’t respond.

Jesus said that if we have faith, then we can ask God to move mountains and He will cast them into the sea. It’s safe to say that God doesn’t want Christians going around throwing all the mountains into the sea. One of the most difficult aspects of having free will is having enough trust in God to say, “Your will be done.” We must have confidence that
God has our best interests at heart.

**Sometimes God's answer isn't what we want**

Sometimes we have to accept that God’s answer is “no” or “wait.” Any adult understands that “wait” is a wise response to a 5-year-old boy’s request for a pocketknife even though “wait” seems arbitrary, even cruel, to the child because of his limited reasoning ability.

Anyone who works with children has tried to explain a simple concept only to be asked repeatedly, “Why?” No matter how many times you change your wording, talk slower or raise your voice, sometimes a child just can’t understand the reality an adult perceives.

It’s the same way between God and us. He sees a bigger picture of life. He understands our personalities, our weaknesses and our anxieties, and He certainly cares about our ultimate good. But with our limited minds we keep asking, “But why, Daddy?” At some point we have to trust that Daddy knows what He’s doing.

Due to our limitations as human beings, there will be times when God seems beyond our reach. It is haunting to consider Jesus’ exclamation, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). It’s hard to imagine the Son of God experiencing that level of despair.

Yet in that statement we can find comfort. Christ, who now sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father, knows what it’s like to feel estranged from the Majesty and Power of the universe. He experienced what it is to be human.

In that way Christ’s intercession is more than a legal action of taking our sins on Himself. It involves a personal relationship with us. Because of Christ’s intercession, we can ask God for what the apostle Paul calls the “peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). We may not always be able to understand what God is doing, but we can experience inner peace and confidence in what He is doing.

**People confused by Jesus**

Jesus had a special relationship with a man from Bethany named Lazarus. John 11 records how Jesus was teaching in another town when messengers arrived to inform Him that Lazarus was very ill. Jesus then did something that seems to make no sense—instead of rushing to the side of His sick friend, He stayed where He was for two days. In fact, He deliberately waited until Lazarus died before going to Bethany.

Imagine the thoughts that went through the minds of Christ’s disciples. He performed miracles wherever He went, but now He deliberately delayed going to His seriously ill friend.

Jesus arrived in Bethany and was confronted by Martha, Lazarus’ sister. She was perplexed by Jesus’ delay. His actions toward His friend just didn’t make any sense. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (verse 21).

Mary, Lazarus’ other sister, was also perplexed by Jesus’ delay and asked Him why He didn’t come sooner. Jesus became so overwhelmed by the grief of those around Him that He wept.

Jesus then went to Lazarus’ tomb and prayed for God to resurrect Lazarus from the dead as proof that Jesus was the Messiah. Lazarus came walking from the tomb, wrapped in his burial clothes, like some mummy in an old movie.

Lazarus’ death had been allowed by God as part of a greater plan to reveal His Son. Of course, there was no way for friends and family to understand this during the crisis. God’s picture was much bigger than their immediate difficulties. And therein lies the dilemma: Human beings must trust in God’s bigger plan even though we can’t always see it.

Life is like putting together a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. We have to trust that eventually all the pieces will fit together to create the picture on the cover of the box.

**God’s help in times of despair**

Our predicament originates in a simple concept. Human beings were made in the image of God. Sin is any action, thought or emotion that differs from how the Creator designed life. Once sin enters into our experience, our emotions and thoughts become twisted. The result is suffering, broken relationships, meaningless lives and eventual death.

The gospel is the message of how God sent His Son to take our sins on Himself and receive the penalty we deserve. But that isn’t all there is to the gospel. Human beings are an incomplete creation. We have to be prepared for eternity. Eternity arrives when Christ returns a second time to resurrect the dead and establish His Father’s Kingdom on earth.

Understanding why our lives got into such a mess and how God has a plan to get us out of it is the beginning of seeing that bigger picture. We have to accept that our emotions and thought processes are damaged. Then we can begin to seek God’s help in being healed.

This includes living the way of life outlined in the Bible. Healing is more than going to a physician. You must also put into action the changes needed for getting well.

This healing includes accepting God’s love and the incredible future He has in store for those who are willing to let Him be involved in their lives. Today we can begin, in a very limited way, to view our present sufferings in the tapestry of the Creator’s plan for His creation, which includes Christ’s second coming to fix the world in which we live.

Many times it is easier to heal human illness than to restore damaged human emotions. When faced with terrible loss, or a difficult time of life, first accept that it’s okay to be human. Emotions like grief are a natural response to intense loss, not a lack of faith.

It’s important to have a support group in times of crisis. You don’t want to end up isolated. Most importantly, we need to be able to pour out our emotions to God. Write down what you are experiencing and read these intimate thoughts and feelings to God in prayer.

God isn’t the cause of suffering, but He is the only solution. As beings with free will, we have the opportunity to explore every possible solution to the human condition. We continue to come up woefully short.

When we suffer, the outcome isn’t usually as dramatic or immediate as it was for Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Remember, though, that during the dark days of Lazarus’ illness and death they didn’t know what the outcome would be.

All they had during those times of despair was a faith that God had not abandoned them and that Lazarus would someday be resurrected from the dead. Faith is more than belief in God. It is the trust that He is always acting for the ultimate, eternal good for every human being. It is the basis for hope in the future. **GN**
Why Some Christians
Don’t Celebrate Christmas

Many feel that Christmas marks Christ’s birthday and that it honors Him. After all, can 2 billion professing Christians be wrong? At the same time, some few Christians don’t observe Christmas, believing that Jesus didn’t sanction it and that it dishonors Him. Who is right—and why?

by Jerold Aust

One day, years ago, someone asked me why I kept Christmas. “The Bible says to keep it,” I responded. “Somewhere in the Gospel of Luke, it speaks of the nativity scene. An angel told some shepherds that were keeping their sheep in the fields at night that the baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem. I think they went to see Jesus at that time.

“That was the first Christmas! And that’s why I keep Christmas, because the Bible supports Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ.”

“That’s not true and here’s why,” my friend replied.

I soon learned that the Bible didn’t teach Christmas. I also found that its origins have nothing to do with the Bible. It was an important lesson about things I’d long assumed to be true.

Just because some 2 billion people—roughly 1 billion Catholics and another billion in Protestant faiths—observe Christmas, does that make it right? Does it really matter one way or the other?

Why do so many people observe it?

If you were asked, “Why do you celebrate Christmas?” how would you respond? Many would say Christmas honors the birthday of Jesus. Others feel that Christmas is a good Christian family get-together. Many do it simply because they’ve always done it.

Christmas can appear tantalizing to the eye and ear. People appear happy, generous, full of good cheer. Twinkling lights decorate many houses. Santa Claus and his reindeer are pictured as poised to lift off from snow-covered front yards or rooftops, although in the southern hemisphere and tropics there is no December snow. The colorful, peaceful-appearing Christmas scene can be intoxicating, addicting.

Shoppers pack stores, browsing for gifts they hope to buy at bargain-basement prices. Soaring strains of “White Christmas,” “Silent Night” or “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” resonate everywhere.

The December weather of the northern hemisphere might be frightful outside, but the feeling and warmth inside is delightful. Christmas trees with twinkling lights and bright, sparkling ornaments create a mystical and glowing environment. Entire families want to experience the special mystery that only comes with the Christmas season. There is no religious holiday quite like it for the millions everywhere who observe it.

Was Jesus really born on Dec. 25?

But stop and ask yourself: Was Christ really born on Christmas Day? After all, the Bible nowhere tells us the day of His birth.

In fact, most credible secular historical writings tell us that Christmas, more than 200 years after Jesus’ death, was considered sinful: “As late as A.D. 245 [the early Catholic theologian] Origen . . . repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th edition, 1910, Vol. 6, p. 293, “Christmas”).

In A.D. 354, a Latin chronicler mentioned Christmas, but even then he did not write about it as an observed festival (ibid.).

There is no biblical evidence that Dec. 25 was Jesus’ birth date. In fact, the Bible record strongly shows that Jesus couldn’t have been born then.

For example, Luke tells us that the shepherds were keeping their sheep in the fields at night when Jesus was born. “And she [Mary] brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:7-8, emphasis added throughout).

But late December is Judea’s cold and rainy season. Would shepherds actually keep their fragile flocks out in the open fields on a cold late-December night near Bethlehem?

No responsible shepherd would subject his sheep to the elements at that time of year when cold rains, and occasional
Why do some Christians not celebrate Christmas? Here are the reasons some gave for kicking the Christmas habit:

“I cannot find Christmas in the Bible nor can I find that Jesus Christ told us to observe Christmas. Santa Claus is a lie that some people teach their children every year. For that matter, Christmas is false since it has nothing to do with Christ or His birth. “Beyond this, business people, who make most of their income during this time of the year, have increasingly promoted Christmas. Well-meaning people go into debt during Christmas time to give gifts to other people, which in turn motivates other people to give gifts to them. It makes no sense to keep a religious holiday that is not biblical, that Christ never sanctioned, that promotes lying to children, that puts people in debt and that blinds people to what Christ really taught.”

PA, Georgia

“It is a historical fact that Christmas is not the day or the season when Christ was born. Why observe a day that is a lie? Most people do not want to admit this fact. For example, how does the use of Santa Claus depict the birth of Christ? How does the Christmas tree depict Christ? Celebrating Christmas violates at least the First, Second and Third Commandments of God's Ten Commandments. Observing a pagan holiday is a sin. God condemns the worship of pagan gods. “The Bible does not command people to observe the birth of Christ as a holiday. This day, Dec. 25, is the date that has been observed for centuries as a pagan holiday in honor of the pagan sun god. God commands those who want to serve Him not to observe pagan holidays or any custom that breaks His holy laws.”

D.S., California

“Our family traditionally celebrated Christmas on Dec. 24. We then followed up with a family day on Dec. 25. One day I had a strong desire to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, which I thought I had been doing up to that point. I met a number of people who were having the same strange experience. We asked ourselves, ‘What does God think about Christmas?’ ‘Are we truly pleasing God?’ ‘Am I doing something that Jesus did and taught?’ “I began to think of the songs we sang, ‘O Tannenbaum’ and ‘O! Christmas Tree.’ I had been singing to a tree as though it were alive and had some strange power. We decorated it and placed our gifts below the tree as though the gifts and good feeling emanated from and through the tree. “I thought about the words to ‘Silent Night, Holy Night,’ a truly beautiful piece of music. I wondered about shepherds and their flocks in the fields on a lovely evening at the end of December. But this was a contradiction. December was a very cold time of the year and sheep wouldn’t be in open fields during that time. “The Christmas stories about Santa Claus and the shepherds in the fields on Christmas Eve were false. I found out that Jerusalem has rain and cold that time of year and it sometimes snows in the region. Sheep are sheltered in the wintertime, not left out in inclement weather. “I discovered that the Christmas tree and its ornaments and giving of Christmas gifts come from ancient Roman festivals. I also learned that the Christmas tree represents idolatry, which is an affront to God (Exodus 20:4-5). Jesus Christ never sinned in His life and says we should avoid sin, going against God's will (Hebrews 12:1-4). “The gifts our children had asked of Santa Claus created a financial burden on us. The lies about Santa Claus and his flying reindeer were misleading our children. “Also, the Bible tells us it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). During Christmas time, I saw little joy in giving and I saw children always expecting to receive. I have come to understand that godly blessings come from carefully obeying God. This is why I don’t keep Christmas.”

B.B., Canada

God tells us to avoid the ways of the ancient pagans. Though modern Christianity observes Christmas, this is where it came from. To be frank, Christmas is a lie. Christmas is a substitute for righteous behavior. It makes people think they are doing good things for God, which somehow does Him service.”

A.H., Australia

“I have heard that Christmas has been around for nearly 4,000 years. If that is true, and I think it is, I do not see any evidence that the early apostolic Church observed Christmas or tried to ‘Christianize’ a pagan festival that predated Christ’s birth. “It seems clear to me that the apostles and early Church kept the Holy Days recorded in the Old Testament, and there are several Old Testament scriptures that speak about the Holy Days being kept by all people after Christ’s return to earth. The Bible is clear that we are to shun paganism and observe the annual Holy Days and the weekly Sabbath day.”

D.N., Oklahoma

“I figure you can’t go wrong sticking with what the Bible says and by following the example of Jesus Christ Himself and the apostles and early Church. They never kept Christmas or anything like it. They knew what the Scriptures said about trying to use other religions’ practices to worship and honor God. It just doesn’t work; God expects better from us. “It’s a shame that most people have never looked into the Bible and history to learn for themselves the true origins of Christmas. It’s an eye-opening study, one I started when I was only a teenager. I’ve learned so much more about what God is all about and what He wants and expects from us since I started relying on His Word rather than human traditions that have no basis in the Bible.”

R.A., Colorado

How much do you know about the origins of Christmas? What do Santa Claus, reindeer, elves, holly, mistletoe and yule logs have to do with Jesus Christ’s birth? Should we even celebrate His birth anyway, since such a celebration is nowhere mentioned by Jesus or found anywhere in the Bible? Request our eye-opening free booklet Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Really Matter Which Days We Keep? If you want to learn about God’s Holy Days that are in the Bible, request God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.

Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or request or download them from our Web site at www.gnmagazine.org/booklets
keep Christmas? Why didn’t they institute or teach it to the early Church?

Before you answer, consider that Jesus gave great authority to His 12 apostles, assuring them that they will hold positions of great importance and responsibility in His Kingdom (Matthew 18:18; 19:28; Luke 22:29-30). But since Jesus never taught His apostles to keep Christmas, nor did they ever teach it to the Church though they had years of opportunity to do so, shouldn’t that make us question whether Christmas is something Jesus really wants or appreciates?

So how did Christmas become such a widespread practice if the Bible doesn’t sanction it, if Christ didn’t observe it and if He never taught His disciples and the early Church to celebrate it?

**True origins of Christmas**

Most people never stop to ask themselves what the major symbols of Christmas—Santa Claus, reindeer, decorated trees, holly, mistletoe and the like—have to do with the birth of the Savior of mankind. In the southern hemisphere summer climate of December, few people question why they observe a Christmas with northern hemisphere winter scenery!

The fact is, and you can verify this in any number of books and encyclopedias, that all these trappings came from ancient pagan festivals.

Even the date, Dec. 25, came from a festival celebrating the birthday of the ancient sun god Mithras. (If you’d like to learn more about the origins of the many customs and symbols associated with Christmas, request our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*)

Jesus never told His followers to celebrate Christmas, but He did warn us not to adhere to false, man-made religious doctrines: “And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). The truth is, Christmas and other non-biblical religious holidays constitute vain or empty worship of Christ.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* indicates that the Christmas season came from an ancient midwinter festival that occurred at the time of the winter solstice. Interestingly, the Brumalia, and Matronalia are now frequent; gifts are carried to and fro, new year’s day presents are made with din, and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to their religion, who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians” (Tertullian in *De Idolatria*, quoted by Hislop, p. 93).

In time Catholic religious leaders added solemnity to this pre-Christian holiday by adding to it the Mass of Christ, from which it eventually came to be known by its common name of “Christmas.”

**A matter of whether, not what**

The purpose of *The Good News* magazine is to share with you the living truth of Jesus Christ. A true Christian cannot decide what he will obey, only whether he will obey God’s truth.

We strive to publish God’s pristine truth; people who read that truth have to decide what to do about it and whether they will honor it. Our commission from Jesus Christ is to teach the truth of God and to welcome as disciples and fellow workers those few who hear and obey the truth. We hope the truth about Christmas starts you on the road to true happiness and God’s purpose for you.

History shows that Christmas does not represent Christ. It misrepresents sound biblical teaching and is in opposition to God’s truth. God wants us to worship Him in truth (John 4:23-24), not fable.

In Deuteronomy 12:28-32, God told His people to worship only in the ways He commanded, telling them “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” He explicitly ordered them not to copy or adopt the religious practices of the pagans, calling such practices “abomination[s] . . . which He hates.”

Yet hundreds of millions of men, women and children unwittingly observe Christmas, not knowing or caring from where it came. They assume that 2 billion Christians can’t be wrong or that it doesn’t matter how we worship God so long as our intentions are good. But why should we think we honor God or please Him when we worship contrary to His commands?

**Crucial questions only you can answer**

The crucial question is, do we worry more about what others think or about what God requires? Also, can other human beings give us salvation? If honoring God’s truth determines our salvation, then why honor men over God? Jesus Christ said to those who appeared religious but denied the power of His true teaching, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46; compare Matthew 7:21).

Since Christ is opposed to Christmas, why would any thoughtful Christian observe it?

Walking in Jesus’ footsteps in a world that doesn’t is never easy. But it is much better and eminently more rewarding than following the empty ways of the world.

God tells us in 1 John 2:15-17: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

**GN**
Discovery proves existence of another biblical figure

An intriguing artifact was uncovered during the excavation of a structure that might be King David’s palace in Jerusalem (see “Remains of King David’s palace found in Jerusalem?,” The Good News, September-October, p. 23). Excavators found a bulla—a hardened clay impression bearing the imprint of a seal—bearing the inscription “Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, son of Sheli.”

Who was this Jehucal, and what is the significance of this find?

The same “Jehucal, the son of Shelemiah” (also referred to as “Jucal,” a shortened version of his name) is mentioned twice in the biblical book of Jeremiah. Apparently he was a senior official serving in the court of Zedekiah, king of Judah, shortly before Jerusalem’s destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Jeremiah 37:3 mentions Jehucal being sent by the king to ask Jeremiah to pray for Jerusalem’s deliverance from the besieging Babylonian army. Not long after, in Jeremiah 38:1-4, Jehucal and several other officials go to the king asking that Jeremiah be put to death for undermining the morale of Jerusalem’s inhabitants, after which Jeremiah is handed over to them and thrown into prison.

Many seals and seal impressions such as the one bearing Jehucal’s name have been found in the Holy Land, most bearing the names of various government officials. Small pieces of soft clay were typically used to seal documents, much as wax seals were used in more modern times. Officials would press their seals into the soft clay, leaving an impressed lump, which would later harden into what is called a bulla.

Many critics of the Bible, attempting to undermine its detailed history and record of prophetic fulfillment, claim that the books of the Old Testament aren’t accurate accounts of real events written at the time they happened. Instead, they argue, the books weren’t written until centuries later, well after the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were defeated and forcibly exiled from the Holy Land by the Assyrian and Babylonian empires.

Yet this claim—to which many critics still hold—has been repeatedly disproved by discoveries such as this bulla. After all, how could a seal or impression bearing the name of a biblical figure—in this case a rather inconsequential government official—have been created centuries before the person was written about in a supposedly invented biblical account?

Jehucal is only the latest of literally dozens of biblical figures whose existence has been proven by archaeology. If you’d like to learn more about how the biblical record has been repeatedly verified by archaeological discoveries, download our free article series The Bible and Archaeology at www.ucg.org/booklets.

Biblical practice found to greatly reduce spread of AIDS

A study of more than 3,000 South African men found that male circumcision—a practice God commanded for the patriarch Abraham and the ancient Israelites (Genesis 17:10-12; Joshua 5:2-5)—dramatically reduces the risk of contracting AIDS.

At the International AIDS Society conference in Rio de Janeiro in July, French researcher Bertran Auvert reported that circumcised men in the study contracted HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, at a rate less than a third that of uncircumcised men.

The study tracked 3,273 uninfected South African men ages 18 to 24 over 2½ years. Half the men were randomly assigned to be left uncircumcised while the other half were circumcised. By the end of the study researchers found that for every 10 uncircumcised men who contracted HIV through sex with HIV-infected women, only three of the circumcised men became infected.

The results were so dramatic that the study was ended nine months early. The researchers concluded it would be unethical to continue without offering the uncircumcised group the opportunity to be circumcised and perhaps save their lives.

This was the largest study to date correlating circumcision’s effect on HIV infection. Some 35 previous studies have indicated a link between circumcision and lower rates of HIV infection.

Researchers have long suspected a link because HIV rates are much lower in regions of Africa where circumcision is practiced. For example, in areas where circumcision isn’t common, such as eastern South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana, adult HIV infection rates are above 30 percent while the comparable rate is less than 5 percent in West Africa where males are commonly circumcised.

Researchers also believe that male circumcision reduces transmission of other sexually transmitted diseases, including herpes and syphilis.

“Male circumcision must be recognized as an important means to fight the spread of HIV infection and the international community must mobilize to promote it,” concluded Dr. Auvert in the abstract of his presentation at the AIDS conference. “The first thing to do is to offer safe male circumcision to those who want to be circumcised. We must adapt the health system so that it can afford male circumcision,” he urged.

Francois Venter, a South African AIDS expert, in September urged adoption of male circumcision as the most effective “vaccine” for AIDS in his country, where some 6 million are infected with the virus and more than 600 die from AIDS daily. “We dream of a vaccine which has this efficacy,” he said. “The results are phenomenal.”

While the Bible spells out no specific health benefits for circumcision, and tells us that physical circumcision is no longer required, modern science continues to find solid reasons for paying close attention to its benefits.

Of course, the only sure solution for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases is spelled out in the Bible—to avoid all sexual activity outside of marriage (Exodus 20:14; 1 Corinthians 6:18). Only then can we avoid the diseases, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, emotional turmoil and other suffering brought on by ignorance or disobedience to God’s instruction in this regard.
University of California system sued for anti-Christian bias

The Association of Christian Schools International, representing more than 800 schools, filed a lawsuit in August against the University of California system, accusing UC admissions officials of discriminating against students graduating from Christian schools that teach Christian viewpoints and creationism.

The lawsuit states that UC rejected student coursework because the texts used in the courses were produced by Christian publishers and approached the subjects from a Christian perspective. The biology texts, for example, pointed out problems with Darwin’s theory of evolution and presented creationist beliefs.

The suit claims that history, English and social studies coursework was rejected due to its Christian perspective. One rejected history course was titled “Christianity’s Influence in American History.”

In disqualifying certain textbooks and classes, UC decided to discount the affected students’ grade point averages, forcing them to score in the 98th percentile on ACT tests and in the 96th percentile on SAT tests for admission into the UC system. Thus graduates of Christian schools are forced to score higher on standard college entrance exams for admission than counterparts from public schools.

“This is not in any sense [only] a creationism-versus-science suit,” said an attorney representing the plaintiffs, arguing that UC policies violate the rights of students and religious schools.

A UC spokeswoman stated that the UC system has the right to set course requirements and standards. “These requirements were established after careful study by faculty and staff to ensure that students who come here are fully prepared with broad knowledge and the critical thinking skills necessary to succeed,” she said.

What is truly ironic about this sad state of affairs is that students who attend private schools such as these, or who are homeschooled, consistently do better on standardized tests than public school students regardless of the subject matter. Rather than fighting private schools, it seems that institutions of higher learning should focus more on finding out what they’re doing that’s working and encouraging public schools to do more of it.

Questions

Continued from page 9

general state of the human race?

We need to be rescued

Have you considered that Hurricane Katrina is only one tragic event in a series of increasingly greater events that should inevitably lead us to ask the single most important question that most people have avoided until now?

Namely, if such horrific events should continue, which one will tell us once and for all that we can’t solve our problems, that we can’t rescue our people when they are in trouble no matter how well prepared we are? Which event is going to tell us that we really don’t have the answers we once thought we had, that we’re not even close?

Let’s face yet another hard fact. God’s creation—humanity as a whole—has never really taken Him seriously when He has spoken. And we still won’t pay attention as long as we have a job, our health, food on the table, a roof over our heads and our entertainment to distract us.

Humankind speaking—from our point of view—as long as we have everything we need, why should we look any further? Why should human beings humble themselves before God if everything is going okay? Maybe that’s why things aren’t going okay!

Here is the good news: We are going to be rescued from ourselves. The step-by-step events leading to this end are already in motion and have been for some time. God is revealing Himself in the way He chooses so as to finally get our attention.

The good news is the same as it was nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus Christ first announced the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15). The people of that day needed a change too, but God had determined that it wasn’t yet the time to establish the rule of His Kingdom over the whole earth. Rather, it was His time then to send His Son to the earth so our sins could be forgiven (Galatians 4:4-5). “So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation” (Hebrews 9:28).

That was His message then, and it continues to be the message of The Good News magazine now. Jesus Christ told His disciples that He would return just as many severe world troubles reach their peak and threaten all human life on earth—and then He would usher in His benevolent rule over the entire world.

Humankind will desperately need Him to come and rescue us. He promises to do just that. And after He does, mankind will at last be willing to listen to Him. GN

Questions

Continued from page 9

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Protection

Continued from page 17

God wants us to change

God, speaking through the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, offers these words of reassurance: “‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked [those who commit sin], but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’” (Ezekiel 33:11).

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter wrote that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

However, Ezekiel 33 does give a warning to nations of the consequences of sin, of breaking God’s laws. Ezekiel’s warnings are directed specifically at the end-time descendants of Israel, of which America is a part.

The time will come, indeed perhaps has come, when God will remove His hand of protection from America because of its sins. As explained in our booklet The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy, this is foretold in many prophecies of Scripture.

The message is clear that this nation must repent and turn back to God. It is also clear that those individuals who respond to God’s call to repentance will receive His protection and help in time of need.

We should certainly be concerned for our physical safety and the security of our loved ones. But Katrina and Rita remind us that we cannot always rely on human government to take care of us and the needs of our families.

As 9/11 and the recent hurricanes show, disaster could strike us at any time. When that happens, it is important to know that there is a God in heaven who cares about us and to whom we can turn in time of need. We can look to Him for physical and material help when needed and can also enjoy the peace of mind that comes with the reassurance of eternal life for His faithful servants, no matter what may befall us. GN
Letters From Our Readers

Issue gives many answers

I received the September-October issue and enjoyed it very much. So did my husband. We are requesting that you send this magazine to us on a regular basis. Thank you for your honesty and for revealing what is going on around the world. You give us many answers to the numerous questions we have in understanding this sin-saturated world and to allay the many fears that plague us. Please keep up the good work. We need it desperately.

Mrs. L.J., Estill Springs, Tennessee

Articles used in HIV/AIDS program

The Good News issue titled “Marital Happiness: The Choice Is Up To You” reached me at an appropriate time when I was organizing a trainers’ program for HIV/AIDS peer educators. I have incorporated the articles “The Disturbing Fruits of Premarital Sex” and “Why Isn’t Sex Safe?” into my training program as these were informative and relevant to it. I wish to take this opportunity to convey my sincere word of gratitude and appreciation for this valuable information at no cost.

N.A., Papua New Guinea

Interested readers may want to request our free booklet Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension.

The Book of Revelation Unveiled

I recently ordered The Book of Revelation Unveiled. What an immense amount of precise information! I just wanted to let you know how wonderful it was to stumble upon your Web site. I have never found such biblically accurate and insightful information before. What a blessing it is that you offer this at no cost or fee.

T.M., Internet

Profiles of biblical characters

Thanks for your kind reminder to renew my subscription to The Good News. I have a suggestion. Could you edit some Bible stories to tell about the relationships between the huge numbers of characters in the Bible?

X.H., Republic of China

Since you have Internet access, you might want to access our Good News Web site, which has a series of articles called “Profiles in Faith.” It covers most of the major characters in the Bible.

Truth still being taught

I had the privilege of reading several of your free booklets while I was incarcerated for drug use. I was released and tried a few local churches and television ministries. I must say I was appalled by the things I heard. Now for a year and six months I have been reading the Bible for what it is, not from some denominational twist. Needless to say, I was shocked at the perversion of truth out there and the traditions of men that are followed in today’s churches. After reading your publications, I was happy to discover that there is truth still being taught. You have lifted my faith when I was beginning to have doubts.

M.J., Silverstrand Beach, California

Comments from around the world

I accidentally came across your Good News magazine recently and found it very informative. I highly appreciate your creating such a conducive context in which people can familiarize themselves with the latest developments in science and technology along with religion. Your publication is a magazine of understanding in the true sense of the word, be it scientific or religious. It compares the science and religious worlds and shows us that God will finally prevail.

T.D., Ethiopia

Thank you for sending me my first copy of The Good News. It is really Bible-based and helps me to know more about God and His plan here on earth. I have been searching for a way to know more about God, and this magazine is the solution God made to satisfy my spiritual hunger and thirst. Clear explanations of Bible references make it easier for me.

C.M., Beirut, Lebanon

I first read your booklets about a month ago. They are very informative and helpful in my everyday life. Now I really need your magazine. It is a great chance for me to detect biblical truth and study the Bible. I strongly believe that my knowledge of the Bible will help me to overcome numerous hardships and problems I face almost every day.

L.C., Russia

I have just received my issue with the notification that unless I renew, it would be the last issue sent to me. Not receiving The Good News would be a disaster, and I hereby respectfully request that you retain me as a subscriber. I am very grateful for the high moral values that you stand for. We need more people in this sad country of ours to speak out against those that transgress God’s commandments.

J.C.K.P., South Africa

We have gladly renewed your subscription.

I am grateful to the United Church of God for keeping me reading every two months since I subscribed to the Good News. I go to church on Saturday. At times I didn’t have the courage to answer biblical questions, but ever since I started reading your magazine I’ve become very alert and could even give a sermon.

J.A., Kenya

Bible Study Course

I have just finished my first Bible Study Course lesson. It was fantastic! I have taken other courses that seemed to be a drudgery to get through, but your format kept me coming back. Thank you very much to all the people who put their time and effort into producing a great study course.

D.T., Jackson, Missouri

My short letter is to say thanks very much from the bottom of my heart for the magazines and the Bible Study Course. Both have been a blessing to my family and me. The lessons are so inspiring and really make me want to learn more about the greatness and uniqueness of God Almighty.

A.E.K., Belize

Thank you very much for the Bible study materials which are really helpful in understanding the Word of God. I would like to continue receiving them for further studies and would like to make a voluntary contribution to your church.

__________ A.D., Kuwait

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to The Good News, Box 541027, Cincinnati, Ohio 45254, U.S.A., or e-mail gninfo@ucg.org (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).
Q: The article titled, “The Biblical Festivals That Reveal Christ’s Role in God’s Plan” in the September-October issue is totally wrong. There is nothing in the Scriptures to support anyone getting a second chance for salvation once they are dead.

A: We appreciate your concern and the opportunity you have given us to clarify. An important point to understand is that God is “the Judge of all” (Hebrews 12:23). It is He who decides the salvation of all men and women, and we can trust Him to do it with utmost justice and mercy.

Is there hope for a person who has already rejected God’s calling and spurned His way of life? No, a person who has been given every opportunity but has knowingly refused God’s calling will die in what the Bible calls the “second death”—ending his or her existence forever (Revelation 21:8; Hebrews 6:6-7; 10:26-29). The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)—not eternal life in hellfire. This death is the cessation of existence.

However, there is another type of unbeliever—one who never had the opportunity to choose or reject God’s way of life.

What about the people who have lived out their lives without ever hearing the name of Christ or anything that He taught and therefore had no chance at salvation (Acts 4:12)?

Are people condemned because of geography or the timing of their birth? Billions of people, by no choice of their own, have been born, lived and died in regions or during eras in which the Word of God was never available to them. How could a just and loving God condemn people born into such a situation?

Would it be fair for God to destroy them forever when they never really had an opportunity to understand His truth? Indeed it would not be just or fair. That’s why the Bible reveals that God’s plan encompasses the billions of men, women and children who have lived and died under just those circumstances.

Many know that God will resurrect the saints at Christ’s return (1 Corinthians 15:52), but most read right over Christ’s teachings about a second resurrection.

He spoke of people from different eras of human history coming face-to-face in “the day of judgment” (Matthew 11:20-24; 12:41-42; Luke 10:12-15). Jesus said that God will bring back to life the people of ancient Sodom, Tyre, Sidon and Ninevah along with the Queen of Sheba in a physical resurrection at the same time as those people who heard Christ speak these words in the first century.

The only way for this to be possible—for people who lived many centuries apart to live again at the same time—is for God to resurrect all of them at the same time. Then, learning God’s truth for the first time, they will be able to choose whether to follow Him or not—and be fairly judged for the first time.

The Scriptures are plain about the fact that all people have only one opportunity for salvation. It is not a “chance” at all but a matter of choice and God rewarding that choice.

A second life is not the same as a second opportunity for salvation. Coming to life again will enable those brought to life in the second resurrection to have their own real opportunity for salvation. Only a few out of the millions of people who ever lived have had this one and only opportunity in the present lifetime.

The apostle Paul referred to this second resurrection in his writings (Romans 11:26-27), and in Revelation 20:5, 11-13 Christ again speaks of it as specifically as He did during His earthly ministry. These references are plainly not about the resurrection spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15:52, for God did not judge the people in the above references in terms of their eternity.

In Revelation 20:5 the expression “This is the first resurrection” refers to the resurrection of the saints. We know from the above reference in 1 Corinthians that God raises them at the beginning of the thousand years, not at the end. The first part of the verse (“But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years are finished”) is a parenthetical statement that speaks of dead people who will not live again until the thousand years are over.

Clearly, the first part of the verse, which says, “But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished,” isn’t speaking of the resurrection of the righteous dead, who have been judged in this life (1 Peter 4:17) and are raised at Christ’s second coming, but rather of those who died without ever having had an opportunity for salvation.

Of those to be brought to life in the second resurrection, Jesus said it would be “more tolerable” for some than for others during this “day of judgment” (Matthew 10:15).

If God resurrects these people only to sentence them to death, Christ’s comments wouldn’t make any sense. If all were to die, judgment would not be “more tolerable” for one than for another. But clearly, their judgment is incomplete, and hence, God brings them back to physical life. Judgment is a process rather than a one-time sentencing, and these people will be judged at this time.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 describes the second resurrection in colorful detail. This chapter shows how God will work with people of all nations, for Israel has no spiritual advantage over other people (Galatians 3:26-29).

Ezekiel 37 describes an entire nation that died without hope of eternal life and without the knowledge of God that could lead to the people’s salvation. God promises them two things—renewed physical life in a resurrection and spiritual understanding (verses 10, 14). The gift of God’s Holy Spirit will enable them to live the Christian way of life, and if they are faithful to the end of their future natural lifetime, they will then receive eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

Most people in the grave have never known the only name by which salvation is possible (again see Acts 4:12), yet God’s clear desire is that all mankind have an opportunity for salvation (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). If there were no second resurrection, the majority of people down through history would suffer unfair condemnation to death in the lake of fire without ever having an opportunity for conversion and salvation.

We realize that this second resurrection is a shocking concept to most people because they have never heard anything like it in the churches they’ve attended. Yet the Bible’s revelation is clear once we get past our preconceived notions and misunderstandings.

Interested readers can find more information on this important and often misunderstood subject in our free booklets What Happens After Death? and Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?
Win-Win: Who Says There Has to Be a Loser?

The idea that there is always a winner and a loser is flawed thinking. Sometimes a change in approach makes a world of difference.

by Mike Bennett

Dawn and Pam were both good basketball players—good enough to make the varsity team their sophomore year. And they were good friends, until Dawn started hitting four or five shots a game and getting more attention. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Pam became resentful and stopped passing to Dawn.

Sometimes it seems life’s all about winners and losers—in sports, business, reality TV and even school.

Sean Covey, author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens (1998), talked about the “forced curve” grading policy in his business school that demanded 10 percent of each class would flunk.

Our competitive world influences us to think in strange ways. Sean Covey says that this duel-style mentality is like “two friends being chased by a bear, when one turned to the other and said, ‘I just realized I don’t need to outrun the bear; I only need to outrun you.’”

But even if movies, sports, school and cutthroat business practices glorify winners and demean losers, that’s not the way it has to be in the most important things in life.

Sean Covey and his father, leadership expert Stephen Covey, talk about a different way of thinking. They call solving a problem so that all parties are satisfied “win-win” thinking. Sean Covey compares life to an “all-you-can-eat buffet.” No one has to go hungry—no one has to be a loser.

Dawn’s dilemma

But what about the basketball duo of Dawn and Pam? Sean Covey relates the story as Dawn shared it with him:

“One night, after playing a terrible game in which Pam kept the ball from me most of the game, I was as mad as I had ever been. I spent many hours talking with my dad, going over everything, and expressing my anger toward my friend-turned-enemy, Pam.

“After a long discussion, my dad told me that the best thing he could think of would be to give Pam the ball every time I got it. Every time. I thought it was the most stupid suggestion he had ever given me . . .

“The next game came quickly, and I was determined to beat Pam at her own game. I planned and plotted and came out with a mission to ruin Pam’s game. On my first possession of the ball, I heard my dad above the crowd . . . ‘Give her the ball!’ I hesitated one second and then did what I knew was right.”

Pam was shocked, but not too shocked to sink the basket. Dawn felt good, and kept it up throughout the game, only shooting if the play called for her to shoot, or if she was wide open.

“We won that game, and in the games that followed, Pam began to pass me the ball as much as I passed it to her” (Sean Covey, pp. 152-153).

Winning relationships

In all our relationships in life (and what is life but relationships?), we really want everyone to win. When our family, friends, coworkers and classmates win, it doesn’t mean we lose. In fact, it makes it more likely we’ll “win” too.

Win-win thinking is an application of the Golden Rule: “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12). The apostle Paul also discussed this principle in Philippians 2:3: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” (Romans 12 also describes
Win-win thinking is important in the business world as well. The Mediation Center of the Pacific states that “studies suggest that 30%-40% of a manager’s daily activities are devoted to dealing with some form of interpersonal conflict.” That investment of time and resources makes it very important to turn win-lose conflict into win-win thinking.

Leadership expert Warren Bennis says: “Leaders do not avoid, repress or deny conflict, but rather see it as an opportunity. Once everyone has come to see it that way, they can exchange combative posture for a creative stance, because they don’t feel threatened, they feel challenged” (“Mediation Skills for Managers,” p. 3).

The Bible has some interesting examples of win-win thinking. In 1 Samuel 25, David had already been anointed as king, but was still on the run from the reigning king, Saul. While a fugitive, David and his men had actually been protecting the flocks of a rich rancher and decided they needed to politely ask if the rich man would be willing to share some food with them.

The rich man, Nabal, rudely refused. When David heard this, he was angry! The scene was set for a deadly win-lose confrontation (verses 4-13)!

But Nabal’s wife, Abigail, intervened and presented a sensible win-win plan. David’s men and Nabal’s household were both satisfied. (Not everyone lived happily ever after though, as Nabal himself fell ill and died—but that’s a different story.)

Another example is found in Moses’ leadership of the Israelites. Moses was being overworked in an “I lose, the people lose” scenario. By spreading himself too thin in trying to resolve all their problems alone, Moses was overworked and the people had to wait a long time for answers to their questions.

But after his father-in-law brainstormed a possible solution, Moses wisely listened and applied the plan to give him helpers (Exodus 18:13-24). The people got the advice and assistance they were seeking faster, and Moses got some much-needed time off. It was a win-win solution.

When you can’t win

Of course there are times when a Christian is called on to be willing to lose—in the short-term (1 Corinthians 6:7). Sometimes the other person isn’t interested in a win-win solution, only in making you lose. But we know that in the end, God wins and so do His people.

Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” When we do this, we end up as winners whether the other person does or not. As Christians, we should always try to make it possible for the other person to win too, but sometimes people will choose otherwise. If this happens, Christians shouldn’t feel like failures since they have done their part.

Conquering conflict

If it looks like someone is going to be the loser in a situation, think win-win! Here are some steps suggested by experts in conflict resolution at the Mediation Center of the Pacific:

• Get the facts.
• Focus on the present and the future, not the past (don’t play the blame game).
• Break down the problem into smaller parts and find mutually beneficial agreements on these step by step.
• Brainstorm for possible solutions.
• Find common ground.

Stephen Covey’s fifth habit also helps with this: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” This requires what he calls empathetic listening, where “you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and your heart” (The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, 1989, p. 241).

These steps lead to the sixth habit, “synergize,” or creative cooperation. Synergy is like winning multiplied. When everyone is working together creatively, the results can be phenomenal!

Helen Keller agreed: “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

The basketball duo of Dawn and Pam came to exemplify this. “We won the majority of our games that year and became a legendary small town duo,” Dawn said. “The local newspaper even did an article on our ability to pass to one another and sense each other’s presence.” That’s win-win! GN
Where did the Christmas holiday come from? How did it begin, and why? Does it really honor Jesus Christ and celebrate His birth, or is there more to the story that most people don’t know?

Did you realize that historians (and the Bible) agree that Jesus Christ wasn’t born anywhere near Dec. 25? Or that this particular date was well known for its pagan religious celebrations long before Jesus Christ was born?

What does a jolly old man in a fur-trimmed red suit (who supposedly lives at the North Pole and is assisted by elves!) have to do with the birth of the Son of God? And what about reindeer and a flying sleigh?

How much do you know about the origin of the Christmas tree? How did holly come to be connected with the holiday, and why is mistletoe supposedly good for kissing?

Few people know why they believe or do the things they do—especially when it comes to their religious beliefs and practices. If you want to discover the real facts about the strange history of this popular holiday, request your free copy of Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep? This eye-opening booklet is waiting for you!

In this free booklet you can discover the shocking truths about several of the world’s most popular holidays. Perhaps even more surprising is how they came to be connected with Jesus Christ and the Christian religion. For your free copy, visit our Web site or contact any of our offices listed on page 2.