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EDITORIAL

The Greatest Love Story

Love stories are very popular, as we can see by the fact that they’re such big business. Countless books, movies, articles and songs have been created about love stories. People obviously enjoy those themes.

This time of year we should be reminded of the greatest love story of all: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Millions of people have memorized this verse, the most popular one in the entire Bible. And rightfully so, because it’s a wonderful message.

How much do we understand and appreciate what it tells us? Let’s consider a few thoughts.

Who and what is God? He is the Almighty Maker of all things, including each and every one of us. He is eternal, immortal, without beginning or end. His ways and thoughts are infinitely higher than our ways and thoughts. But how does His Word, the Bible, reveal who and what He is? “God is love,” it tells us (1 John 4:8, 16, emphasis added throughout).

Let that sink in. Of all that God is, the one word that summarizes it is this—love.

And what is love? For all of mankind’s writing, thinking, singing and composing about love, we really don’t understand it all that well. We think of love in emotional terms, how we feel toward someone else or how someone else makes us feel. Those often-confusing emotions and feelings lead to confusion about what love really is, which is ultimately our actions that result from our mindset.

Love, as the word is used in the Bible, is primarily about action—how we treat others, motivated by a mindset that considers others better than ourselves, that wants the best for them, that puts their needs ahead of our own. It’s an outgoing, outflowing concern for others that takes precedence over our own wants and needs. The Bible’s “love chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13, beautifully illustrates this and shows how this kind of love should be our primary motivation in life.

John 3:16 tells us that this God of love loved all of humanity so much that He gave—in an act of personal self-sacrifice—that which was most valuable to Him, His only begotten Son. The two had existed together for all eternity outside the bounds of time and space. The character and nature of both are summed up as love. This is what They are and what They do. And in an act of supreme sacrifice for all of mankind for all time, One gave His beloved Son and the other gave up His glorious existence to become one of us and to give His life for us.

On the evening before His arrest and execution, Jesus Christ expressed to His disciples His motivation for what He was doing: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13). And He did exactly that, laying down His life not just for that handful of followers then, but for everyone He wanted a close relationship with—all mankind throughout all time.

What followed that evening and most of the next day was appallingly bloody and brutal. The Creator of man experienced one of the most horrifying deaths man could create.

How did He endure that agony? Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus “for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (New Revised Standard Version).

What was “the joy that was set before Him”? No doubt part of it was returning to the divine glory He had shared with God the Father before He came to earth as a human being (see John 17:5). But there was even more to look forward to—the reason He descended from that glory in the first place.

The context of what precedes and follows Hebrews 12:2 refers to the other faithful servants of God who, like Jesus, experience severe trials in this life but will, also like Jesus, be raised to immortality to share eternity with Him in the Kingdom of God.

As “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29), He kept Himself focused on that glorious future when, as made possible by His sacrifice, many others can become part of the immortal, glorified, divine family of God.

God’s promise to us given in 2 Corinthians 6:18 is clear: “I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:18).

God is creating a family—His own divine family. And as the great loving God that He is, He wants to see you and me and every human being be a part of that family and share in that great future He plans for us.

You can learn more about God’s plan and our future in the articles in this issue. Discover how it’s part of the greatest love story of all time! ☞

Scott Ashley
Managing editor
Have you ever been inspired by a story of great courage and conviction? Or stirred by an example of great personal sacrifice for the benefit of others?

We hear of such stories from time to time, and often they are truly inspiring. They can and often do move us to want to emulate such positive examples. They appeal to our better nature, as they should.

The Bible, too, records many such positive examples. Consider a few:

- The young shepherd David, who defied the Philistine army and common sense to do battle with the giant warrior Goliath.
- The young king Josiah who took on his nation’s religious and cultural establishment to rid the land of pagan idolatry and restore worship of the true God.
- John the Baptist, who stood up to a powerful ruling family and paid for it with his head on a platter.
- The apostle Paul, who first appears in the Bible as a persecutor of the Church but then dedicated his life to it, enduring such hardships as hunger, thirst, shipwreck, beatings and being stoned and left for dead.

And there are many more we could mention, faithful men and women who sacrificed greatly for a purpose greater than themselves.

The greatest sacrifice of all

But of all the examples of great personal courage and sacrifice found in the Bible—and indeed in all history—one stands immeasurably far above all the rest. It stands alone because it was the greatest sacrifice ever, the greatest of all time.

It stands alone because it involves One who gave up the most that has ever been given, and it involves One who gave the most to those who benefitted from that sacrifice.

It stands alone because it involves not just a great sacrifice that was remarkable enough in itself—but another, lesser-understood aspect of that sacrifice so great as to be almost beyond human comprehension.

I’m referring to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, astounding on more than one level.

Why was Christ’s sacrificial death necessary?

Many people are likely already familiar with Jesus Christ’s death by crucifixion, in which He was executed as a criminal. This is a major theme of the Christian religion, and rightfully so. It lies at the heart of biblical Christianity, although certainly not all who know of it understand it.

Many biblical passages tell us the importance of this sacrifice and why it was necessary. Let’s notice a few:
- “If we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we
have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7, New Living Translation used unless otherwise noted, emphasis added throughout).

• “[God] is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins” (Ephesians 1:7).

• “For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

• “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through what you would die? Many have wondered about that over the years. For some, the thought of knowing when they might leave this life could be comforting. For others it might bring great anxiety.

Uniquely among human beings, Jesus of Nazareth knew exactly when, where and how He would die. And His death would not come peacefully. It would come through brutal, violent, premeditated murder.

Only a few months into His ministry Jesus told the Jewish religious leader Nicodemus, “As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Here Jesus was comparing Himself crucified. Crucifixion was meant to be a public spectacle, a warning to potential wrongdoers. He knew exactly what awaited Him. He knew He would suffer the same horrible fate.

The excruciating pain of scourging and crucifixion

Crucifixion may well be the most horrible form of execution ever devised. An early form of it was practiced among the ancient Assyrians, who impaled defeated enemies on wooden poles. From there it passed to other ancient cultures, and eventually to the Greeks and finally the Romans, where it gained widespread use.

This form of execution was bloody, ugly and humiliating—exactly as it was intended to be. Victims were often crucified naked, the more to add to their humiliation and shame. These public executions were typically carried out along the main roads or outside city gates to send a very public message: Defy the mighty and power of Rome and this is what will happen to you.

Except Jesus had never defied Rome. The Roman governor of Judea at the time, Pontius Pilate, could find “no fault” in Him, no crime deserving of death (Luke 23:4, 14; John 18:38; 19:4, 6). The Jewish religious establishment that demanded Jesus be crucified had to change the charges. They initially accused Him of blasphemy (Matthew 26:65), but since that wasn’t a capital offense under Roman law, they changed the charges to sedition, rebellion and treason (Luke 23:2), crimes for which the punishment was execution by crucifixion.

They also weren’t above blackmailing Pilate into carrying out an underserved death sentence against this innocent man (John 19:12). Pilate bowed to the pressure and approved punishment by scourging, then a sentence of crucifixion. Scourging involved lashing the victim with a whip formed of multiple leather strips in which were imbedded pieces of metal or bone. These literally ripped the victim’s flesh to shreds. Many scourging victims died from this punishment before they could be crucified.

A prophecy in Isaiah 52:14 described what Jesus’ ravaged body would be like after His bloody scourging: “His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would
scarcely know he was a man.” Let that sink in. He was so badly maimed that He was barely recognizable as a human being.

After this, Jesus was taken away to be crucified. Victims of crucifixion hung by nails or ropes for hours—and often for several days—before succumbing to the release of death.

The agony of crucifixion was so horrible that the Romans invented a new Latin term to describe it, giving us the word excruciating, the roots of which literally mean “from the cross.” The word continues in our English language today to describe pain that brings near-unbearable torment.

**How did Jesus die?**

The process of scourging and crucifixion could result in painful death from several causes—blood loss from scourging, shock due to the overall massive trauma to the body, suffocation from the victim no longer having the strength to raise himself up on his nail-pierced wrists and feet to breathe, or any combination of these.

In the case of Jesus Christ, His death had been foreshadowed by the sacrifice of literally millions of sheep, goats, lambs, birds and cattle that had been previously offered over the centuries in Israel, including millions of Passover lambs. The apostle Paul, writing that “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7), knew this is what those pointed to.

Hebrews 10:4 similarly tells us that it was impossible for the blood of those sacrificed animals to take away sins; that can only be accomplished by what they all ultimately represented—Christ’s sacrificial death in our place (verses 5-10; Hebrews 9:11-14).

How did those many sacrificial animals die? They all died by *shedding of blood*. Their throats were slit, meaning they died quickly and relatively painlessly. Jesus Christ also died by shedding His blood, but His death was anything but quick and painless. After being scourged, He hung painfully from about 9:00 a.m. until His death at about 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon (Mark 15:25, 34-37). To understand more about why He had to endure all this, read “Why Was It Necessary for Jesus Christ to Suffer?” below.

The final blow ensuring Christ’s death came from the spear of a Roman soldier (John 19:34). The prophecy from Zechariah 12:10 was fulfilled, that “they will look on the one they pierced” (John 19:37). (For more details on all this, download or request our free study guide Jesus Christ: The Real Story.)

With His death, this part of His mission was ended. In His dying breath He could rightly exclaim, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The Greek here is *tetelestai*, which was written on receipts of that time to indicate “paid in full.”

His sacrifice was complete. This part of His mission, which He had previously described as “to give his life as a ransom for many,” was over. His bloody, lifeless body was lowered to the ground and taken to a nearby tomb, where it would be healed . . . the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

“He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearsers, he did not open his mouth. Unjustly condemned, he was led away. No one cared that he died without descendants, that his life was cut short in midstream. But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people . . .

“When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins” (Isaiah 53:3-11, New Living Translation throughout).

Jesus knew such suffering would be part of the heavy price He would pay for humanity’s sins. Well before His final journey to Jerusalem, “Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things . . . [and] He would be killed” (Matthew 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22).

Not long after, He repeated to His disciples that He “must suffer greatly and be treated with utter contempt” (Mark 9:12). Then on His final journey to Jerusalem, He told His disciples that He “must suffer terribly and be rejected by this generation” (Luke 17:25).

The suffering that Jesus endured was an integral part of His sacrifice on our behalf. Suffering is the bitter fruit of our sins, and “He bore the sins of many” (Isaiah 53:12). For a more detailed perspective on this subject, read “How Does Christ’s Suffering Help Our Suffering?” beginning on page 13.)
lay for the next three days and three nights until His resurrection (Matthew 20:28; 12:40).

**Jesus Christ’s preexistence**

There is a missing dimension to this story that many don’t understand. And that is the little-understood previous sacrifice that set the stage for the one just described.

Understanding the depth of this sacrifice requires grasping who and what Jesus Christ was before His human birth.

Most people assume the biblical story begins in Genesis 1:1, which tells us, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” But the biblical story actually begins before that with the opening verses of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through Him, and nothing was created except through Him” (John 1:1-3).

Here we see several remarkable truths revealed:

- “In the beginning” there were two divine Beings—one here called “the Word” and the other referred to as “God.”
- Along with the Being referred to as God, “the Word” also was God.
- Both Beings existed in the beginning—neither was created; neither created the other. Since “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), both of these Beings existed before the creation of the physical universe.
- The Being referred to as God “created everything through” the One called “the Word.”

(To learn more about this, read “That Rock Was Christ,” beginning on page 9 and download or request our free study guide Who Is God?)

**The Word became a human being**

In John 1:14 we see another remarkable truth: “The Word became human and dwelt among us . . . and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.” The Word who existed with God in the beginning as God, and who “became human and dwelt among us,” and who was seen by John and the other disciples, was the One we know as Jesus Christ.

In verse 10 we’re also told that “He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him.” Both here and in verse 3, we’re told that He was the One who created the world and the entire universe!

Hebrews 1:2 confirms this when it states that “through the Son he [God the Father] created the universe.”

Paul gives us additional details about this amazing truth in Colossians 1:15-16: “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him.”

Paul adds here that the Being who came in the flesh as Jesus Christ created not just the physical universe we know and see around us, but also “the heavenly realms”—a spiritual universe of angelic spirit beings “in the unseen world” that exists beyond the natural perception of human beings. (To learn more about this spirit world, download or request our free study guide Angels: God’s Messengers and Spirit Army.)

**What are God the Father and Jesus like in Their divine state?**

As physical human beings limited to our physical senses, such as sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, it’s hard for us to imagine a spiritual existence beyond what we can perceive through them. How can we grasp a God who describes Himself in Isaiah 57:15 as “the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity”? (New King James Version). God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son live beyond the physical universe of time and space, with no beginning and no end!

Daniel 7:9-10 records a similar description of God the Father that Daniel saw in vision: “His clothing was as white as snow, his hair like purest wool. He sat on a fiery throne with wheels of blazing fire, and a river of fire was pouring out, flowing from his presence. Millions of angels ministered to him; many millions stood to attend him.”

The same apostle John who told us about Jesus Christ’s preexistence with God the Father also saw a vision of Jesus in His resurrected, glorified state. He describes this glorified appearance as best he can put it into words in Revelation 1:14-18:

“His head and his hair were . . . as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves . . . And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, ‘Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever!’”

This is what the One who became Jesus Christ existed like before coming in human flesh. This was His glorified divine existence. This is the existence He asked to be restored to when He prayed on the last night of His human life, “And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5, NKJV).

And He was restored. Hebrews 12:2 tells us: “Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne.”

**What Jesus Christ gave up for us**

Now we are gaining much more insight into the magnitude of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. Yes, He sacrificed greatly when He gave His life as an offering for our sins in our place. But He also sacrificed greatly when He gave up His glorified immortal spirit existence as God to become a lowly flesh-and-blood human being so He could die for our sins. As God in divine power and glory, He could never die because He was spirit and immortal. But by becoming flesh, He could die for us. And this is exactly what He did.
Paul holds out the humility and self-sacrifice in what Christ did as an example to all of us in Philippians 2:5-8: “You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.”

What we are told here is profound. When this Being who had been God with God the Father came to earth—the same earth He had created—how did He come? He didn’t come in glory in a blaze of light so all people would recognize Him as divine and worship Him. He didn’t appear as a celebrated philosopher of worldly renown such as Plato and Aristotle. He didn’t appear as a great general like Caesar at the head of armies marching to take over Rome and its mighty empire.

He could have done any of these, but He chose to do none of them. Instead He laid aside His glory, splendor, majesty and power and came to earth as a mortal human being subject to death and dying. And He did that to carry out the plan that had been worked out between Him and the Father from before the world and the universe were created (see 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8).

No one forced Him to make this decision. In John 10:15-18 He repeatedly emphasized that this was His own voluntary choice: “I sacrifice my life for the sheep . . . I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily.”

Why did He have to die?

Now we have a much more complete picture of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As God with the Father He was eternal and could never die. But because of mankind’s sin—the sin of each and every one of us—we needed a Savior, a sacrifice to pay the full penalty for all of it.

And this is why no other sacrifice would be sufficient. Only the life of Jesus Christ, as the One who created all things including the human race, could pay that penalty. It took the life of the Creator of all human life, of all who have lived or would ever live, to pay the death penalty for all the sins of all who have lived or would ever live.

Had Jesus been only a mere man, His sacrifice could only pay the death penalty for Himself—and if somehow sinless then perhaps for another if that could even be acceptable before God. But Jesus was no mere man. He was God the Creator in the flesh, the only life that was more valuable than all other lives of all humanity throughout all time.

The great goal of God’s plan

Behind all of this is a plan few understand. It’s not just a matter of Jesus Christ dying so we can be forgiven. There is a great purpose behind our need for forgiveness. And that purpose is for God to “bring many children to glory” as part of His family!

Notice how this is beautifully spelled out in Hebrews 2:9-12: “What we do see is Jesus, who for a little while was given a position ‘a little lower than the angels’; and because he suffered to give His life as a sacrifice for our sins. And this is why the Father resurrected Him to return Him to His previous glorious state as “the firstborn among many brethren.” Those “many brethren” are destined to be the very sons and daughters of God!

What will you do?

Jesus Christ exchanged His life for the lives of many. As God, He became man so that man—all who are willing to unreservedly give their lives to Him as He gave His life for us—could become God, as part of the divine family. That is the astounding truth of the Scriptures!

God’s plan is to “bring many children to glory” through Jesus Christ, “the firstborn of many brethren.” That plan and purpose includes you! You weren’t created for an empty and meaningless life, but for the greatest purpose imaginable—to become part of the family of God, one of God’s own children!

As we have seen, Jesus Christ offered the greatest sacrifice of all time. And He did it for you! Why don’t you commit today to making God’s purpose for you a reality by acknowledging the purpose for Jesus Christ’s suffering and death in your place, and committing your life to Him as He gave His life for you? 

In eternal glory He could never die. But because of our sin, we needed a Savior, a sacrifice to pay the death penalty for sin.

LEARN MORE

The Bible reveals much more about our purpose for being here on earth. God created us for a reason—part of a magnificent plan that few understand! Learn more about that plan by downloading or requesting our free study guide Why Were You Born? BTmagazine.org/booklets
In the Bible, the writings of the apostle Paul are well known for sometimes being hard to understand. Even the apostle Peter acknowledged this (2 Peter 3:16).

Often some things Paul wrote are a challenge for us to grasp for the simple reason that he lived and wrote in a very different culture 2,000 years ago in a very different part of the world. Our modern culture is unlike Paul’s world in many ways, and we often fail to appreciate or understand these differences when we read the Bible.

Other things Paul wrote are puzzling to us because he wrote from an intellectual background and knowledge base that was poles apart from our world today. Paul was a trained rabbi under the tutelage of the great Gamaliel, known and respected as “a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people” (Acts 5:34; 22:3).

As a result, Paul was highly knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures (today commonly called the Old Testament) and often makes reference to somewhat obscure passages or topics that he and his audience of that day well understood, but that today are foreign or largely unknown to most Bible readers.

A puzzling passage from 1 Corinthians

We find such an example of a partially or mostly misunderstood passage in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, where Paul writes: “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (emphasis added throughout).

Some parts of this passage are easy to understand—other parts, not so much.

In trying to understand the Bible, it’s always helpful to read the context. When we understand the overall picture the biblical writer is conveying, it’s much easier to understand the details.

In this case, Paul is writing this letter to the church in Corinth around the time of the biblical Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was the time of the year during which ancient Israel left Egypt in the Exodus some 15 centuries earlier. This timing is evident from Paul’s comment that “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 and his accompanying instructions about how to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread with a right attitude and perspective. In chapter 11, verses 20-29, he also gives instructions for how Christians should properly observe the biblical Passover ceremony.

Clearly the story of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt and lessons Christians should learn from that are very much on Paul’s mind in this letter. That’s why in this passage in chapter 10 he refers in verses 1 and 2 to the pillar of cloud (see Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-20, 24) and to Israel’s miraculous passage through the sea (Exodus 14:24-30), and in verse 3 to the divinely provided manna that fed the Israelites for 40 years (see Exodus 16:11-35).

Layered metaphors of “the Rock”

In verse 4 Paul transitions from another element of the Exodus story to make a broader point.

He mentions that the Israelites “drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.” We can read accounts of God providing water to the Israelites in the desert out of a rock Moses struck in Exodus 17:1-6 and Numbers 20:1-11. God had said He would stand on the rock, so the water really flowed to the people from Him by a miracle.

But notice that Paul was not focusing primarily on the physical rock that Moses struck and from which water poured out, but the “spiritual Rock that followed them”—that Rock being Jesus Christ.

What is this talking about? What is Paul telling us here? We should first note that “followed” isn’t the best translation here. The Greek verb used is a form of akoloutheo, which means to “go in the same way” or to “travel together.” Forms of the word appear 92 times in the New Testament, the overwhelming majority of which are referring to the disciples or crowds accompanying Jesus Christ on His travels along the roads of Galilee and Judea during His ministry.

While the word akoloutheo can and usually does mean...
“follow,” a better translation in the context of the Exodus story would be “accompany” or “travel together with”—since the “spiritual Rock” with the Israelites didn’t follow them, but accompanied them as they traveled together on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Accordingly, other versions translate this as “traveled with them” (New Living Translation), “went with them” (God’s Word version) and “accompanied them” (New International Version).

Paul is presenting the physical rock Moses struck to bring forth water as a type or symbol of a higher “spiritual Rock” giving spiritual drink, and Paul identifies this spiritual Rock as Jesus Christ.

The “spiritual Rock” that was Israel’s God

Where in the Exodus story do we find mention of another “Rock”? It’s found not in the books of Exodus and Numbers, as are the examples above, but another biblical book that recounts the Exodus story—Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy is the last of the five books of Moses, written shortly before Moses’ death as Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land.

The book of Deuteronomy in many ways recapts the story of the Exodus and Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Near the end of that book, in chapter 32, Moses offers an extended praise to God, “the Lord,” who had delivered and led the Israelites and protected them even when they were unfaithful to Him.

This part of the book of Deuteronomy is a direct tie-in to the Exodus story, where Moses repeatedly talks about God being Israel’s “Rock”—today we might call it their spiritual foundation—who has been with them right up to their entering into the Promised Land. And when Paul discuses this “spiritual Rock” that accompanied the Israelites on their journey, he no doubt has this divine “Rock” of Deuteronomy 32 in mind. (Illustrating the book’s popularity and their familiarity with it, the New Testament writers allude to Deuteronomy more than any Old Testament books other than Psalms and Isaiah.)

Let’s notice how Moses in Deuteronomy 32 repeatedly refers to Israel’s God, again “the Lord” or Yahweh (as this Hebrew name is commonly thought to have been pronounced), as “the Rock.” This is from the New Living Translation, which makes some of the wording clearer.

Moses begins this chapter with praise to God, Israel’s “Rock,” in verse 3-4: “I will proclaim the name of the Lord; how glorious is our God! He is the Rock; his deeds are perfect. Everything he does is just and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how just and upright he is!”

In verse 15 Moses calls the Israelites’ God their “Rock,” this time in the context of the nation rejecting Him: “But Israel soon became fat and unruly; the people grew heavy, plump, and stuffed! Then they abandoned the God who had made them; they made light of the Rock of their salvation.”

In verse 18 Moses again calls God their “Rock,” condemning the fact that they had rebelled against Him even though He had made a nation of them: “You neglected the Rock who had fathered you; you forgot the God who had given you birth.”

In verses 30-31 Moses compares the Israelites’ “Rock,” their God, to the false and unfaithful gods worshipped by the surrounding nations: “How could one person chase a thousand of them, and two people put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, unless the Lord had given them up? But the rock of our enemies is not like our Rock, as even they recognize.”

In this chapter alone Moses refers to the Israelites’ God five times as their “Rock.” Obviously Paul, highly knowledgeable biblical scholar that he was, had this in mind in referring to the events of the Exodus and wilderness journey and telling us “that Rock was Christ.”

The surprising truth about the God of Israel and Creator of all things

In Paul’s phrase—“and that Rock was Christ”—we see an amazing truth of the Bible made plain. Most people assume that God the Father was the God who directly interacted with individuals, groups and nations during the Old Testament period. But Paul here tells us that in fact the Being who did so, at the direction of the Father, was the One who would later be born in the flesh as Jesus Christ (see “The Greatest Sacrifice,” beginning on page 4).

Paul confirms this a few verses later in 1 Corinthians 10:9, where he writes of another significant event that took place during the Israelites’ journey from Egypt to the Promised Land: “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents.”

Paul (NLT). The incident he is referring to can be found in Numbers 21:5-9, where the people rebelled against God and, as a result, “the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died” (verse 6, NLT). Who was the Lord or God whom the Israelites tested there? Paul plainly tells us it was Jesus Christ!

How would Paul know that this God who interacted with Moses and the Israelites was the same Being who would later be born in the flesh as Jesus Christ? Keep in mind that Paul, after his miraculous conversion, was apparently directly taught by Christ for three years in Arabia before meeting any of the other apostles (Galatians 1:11-18).

And writing under God’s inspiration, he tells us in Colossians 1:16 regarding Jesus: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible… All things were created through Him and for Him.”

Here Paul clearly tells us that Jesus Christ was the One who created not only...
the physical universe we see around us, but also the invisible spirit universe or dimension of angels. These were, Paul tells us, “created through Him and for Him.”

In all this we see that Paul, under God’s inspiration, tells us that Jesus Christ is the Creator, the One through whom God the Father created the physical universe and the angelic realm, and also that Jesus was the God and Lord who interacted with Moses and the Israelites during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

“No one has seen God at any time”

The apostle John made several remarkable statements that help us understand Jesus Christ’s role during the Old Testament period. In John 1:18 he tells us: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

Earlier in this chapter (verse 14) John explained that he was a personal eyewitness of “the Word” who became flesh as Jesus Christ. So “God” in verse 18 cannot refer to Jesus even though Jesus was also God (verses 1-3). The “God” whom no one has ever seen at any time thus has to be referring to God the Father.

Notice also that John says Jesus Christ “declared” the Father. Other versions translate this as “made him known” (New International Version, English Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version) or “reveal[ed] Him” (Green’s Literal Translation).

If God the Father was known to the Israelites as God during the Old Testament period, why would Jesus need to make Him known? That doesn’t make sense. There’s no need to reveal the Father if the Father was already known when Jesus came.

John repeats this exact same statement in one of his epistles: “No one has seen God at any time” (1 John 4:12). John apparently wrote near the end of the first century. At the time it seems that he was the last of the apostles still alive. He’d had more than half a century to reflect on his personal time with Jesus Christ and to allow Jesus’ teachings—including Jesus’ own statements that no one had ever seen God—to deeply sink in. Surely John knew exactly what he was saying.

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

And just to be clear, Jesus again says that no one has ever seen the Father in John 6:46: “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” (New International Version). Here Jesus plainly says that no one has ever seen the Father except the One who is from God—referring to Himself. He alone has seen the Father. No human being has ever seen the Father.

Many Scriptures Point to God as Israel’s “Rock”

The apostle Paul is not the only biblical writer who referred to Israel’s “Rock.” Several Old Testament writers also referred to God—or Yahweh, as many believe the Hebrew form of His name was pronounced—as their or Israel’s “Rock.” In addition to the five mentions in the book of Deuteronomy, at least 24 other verses, mostly in the Psalms, refer to God being Israel’s “Rock.”

As explained in the main article here, the apostle Paul likely had the five references to God as Israel’s “Rock” in Deuteronomy 32 in mind when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:4, “and that Rock was Christ.” But being an expert in all the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called the Old Testament, he likely also had in mind a number of these other references.

Notice these 24 other verses where God is called Israel’s Rock. And included in the divine identity, as Paul made clear, is the One who became Jesus Christ!

“The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer” (2 Samuel 22:2).

“For who is God, except the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God?” (2 Samuel 22:32).


“The God of Israel said, The Rock of Israel spoke to me . . .” (2 Samuel 23:3).

“The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer . . .” (Psalm 18:2).

“For who is God, except the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God?” (Psalm 18:31).


“To You I will cry, O Lord my Rock . . .” (Psalm 28:1).

“Be my rock of refuge, a fortress of defense . . .” (Psalm 31:2).

“For You are my rock and my fortress . . .” (Psalm 31:3).

“I will say to God my Rock . . .” (Psalm 42:9).

“Lead me to the rock that is higher than I!” (Psalm 61:2).

“He only is my rock and my salvation . . .” (Psalm 62:2).

“He only is my rock and my salvation . . .” (Psalm 62:6).

“In God is my salvation and my glory; the rock of my strength . . .” (Psalm 62:7).

“You are my rock and my fortress” (Psalm 71:3).

“Then they remembered that God was their rock, and the Most High God their Redeemer” (Psalm 78:35).

“You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation” (Psalm 89:26).

“The Lord is upright; He is my rock . . .” (Psalm 92:15).

“The Lord has been my defense, and my God the rock of my refuge” (Psalm 94:22).

“Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation” (Psalm 95:1).

“Blessed be the Lord my Rock . . .” (Psalm 144:1).

“Is there a God besides Me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one” (Isaiah 44:8).

“Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? . . . O Rock, You have marked them for correction” (Habakkuk 1:12).

When Paul wrote “that Rock was Christ,” he wasn’t pulling the word “Rock” out of thin air. He knew that Moses, David, Isaiah and Habakkuk all referred to God—Yahweh—as their or Israel’s “Rock.” Paul was intimately familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and their repeated references to “Rock” as a term applying to Israel’s God. And Paul clearly tells us who the Rock who directly interacted with the Israelites was—“that Rock was Christ.”
The biblical record of people who saw God

Yet in the books of the Old Testament period we see that a number of people did see God. They include:

• Abraham (Genesis 12:7; 15:1; 18:1).
• Isaac (Genesis 26:2, 24).
• Jacob (Genesis 28:13; 32:30; 35:9-10).
• Moses (Exodus 3:6; 33:11, 21-23).
• Moses, Aaron and the 70 elders of Israel (Exodus 24:9-11).
• Joshua (Joshua 6:2).
• Gideon (Judges 6:14).
• Solomon (1 Kings 11:9).

Nearly all of these are described as face-to-face encounters. Two are specifically described as visions, including one of these encounters with Abraham and one with Jacob. But in addition to those visions, Abraham and Jacob had face-to-face encounters with God also—during which Abraham ate a meal with God and Jacob wrestled with God.

In these various encounters, the “God” who appeared and spoke with these individuals is identified as “God” (Hebrew Elohim), “the Lord” (Hebrew YHWH or Yahweh), “the God of Israel,” “the God of your fathers,” “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” “God Almighty” (Hebrew El Shaddai), “the word of the Lord,” “the Angel of the Lord,” “I AM WHO I AM” and “I AM.”

How, then, do we reconcile “No one has seen God at any time” with the many individuals who saw God?

Earlier we saw multiple statements from the apostle John and from Jesus Christ Himself that no one has seen the Father at any time. So who did these individuals see when they saw God? The only way we can make sense of this is to understand that no man had seen God the Father at any time, yet people had nevertheless seen One who was also God.

What they saw as recorded in these many passages, and at other times when God appeared to individuals, was the Word who was also God (John 1:1), the One who was born in the flesh as Jesus. With this understanding, there is no contradiction. We know that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

What we see revealed in Scripture from these verses is that Jesus was the One who interacted with the patriarchs and prophets and the people of Israel as the Lord or God on behalf of the Father. The One who became the Father was not generally known to the Israelites when Christ came. They had never seen the Father, but only the Word or Spokesman of God, Jesus Christ, who came to reveal the Father.

Jesus was the “I AM” who spoke to Moses

Jesus Himself clearly said this, and the people who heard Him got the point of what He was telling them. Notice the exchange in John 8:57-58, where Jesus was in a heated debate with some of the Jews who opposed Him, and He said that Abraham rejoiced to see His day.

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

Here Jesus specifically told them of His divine identity—that He existed before Abraham and, more amazing still, that He was the God who had interacted with people during the Old Testament period. Who did He specifically claim to be?

We find the answer in Exodus 3:13-14, where God appeared to Moses at the burning bush promising to deliver the Israelites out of their Egyptian slavery.

“Then Moses said to God, ‘Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they say to me, “What is His name?” what shall I say to them? And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”’”

Jump 15 centuries forward, and who did Jesus say He was? Returning to what we just read in John 8:58, “Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’”

And notice what happened immediately after Jesus said these words: “Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by” (John 8:59).

The Jews who heard Jesus say these words realized what He meant—that He was claiming to be the “I AM” who had interacted with Moses. And how did they react? They immediately took up stones to stone Him to death for claiming to be God!

The amazing truth of Jesus’ identity

Putting all of these scriptures together, we see a remarkable picture emerge: The One who came to earth as a flesh-and-blood human being, Jesus Christ, was in fact the One who interacted with people as God throughout the Old Testament period.

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

This is not just opinion or conjecture, but from the direct statements of the apostle Paul, Jesus’ beloved disciple John and Jesus Christ Himself. Likewise the apostle and Gospel writer Matthew affirmed Jesus to be Immanuel, meaning “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), and the apostle Thomas proclaimed Him “my Lord and my God” (John 20:27-29). (To learn more about this, download or request our free study guide Who Is God?)

To be sure, Jesus always directed worship toward God the Father and was totally subservient to Him (John 4:23; 5:19, 30; 8:28; 10:18, 29, 37; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24; 15:10). In the same way we must always put God the Father first and honor Him above all. But Jesus accepted worship also without dissuading people (Matthew 8:2-3; 9:18-19; 14:33; 15:25; 28:9-10, 17; Luke 24:51-52), and He said it’s God’s will “that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:23).

Let us never lose sight of the astounding role of Jesus Christ throughout the Bible, knowing that He can also be our Rock accompanying us on our spiritual journey!

LEARN MORE

Most Christians think they understand who and what Jesus Christ was. But do they really? The Scriptures reveal many little-understood truths about His real purpose and identity. Request our free study guide Jesus Christ: The Real Story to get the amazing full picture!

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God, are You sad at the state of the world? “Why is there so much evil in the world, and why don’t You stop it?” “Why do good, kind people suffer, and why do evil people seem to prosper?” “Why have You allowed evil to exist and persist from the beginning of humanity?” “Where are You in our trials and tribulations?” These questions and many similar ones come to us from hurting and puzzled people who wonder why God appears to be silent to never-ending human pain.

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered too. He, as God in the flesh, underwent horrific beating and pain before breathing His last. What was the purpose in that? We hear how Jesus suffered for us. What then does His suffering have to do with our suffering?

Could God have made a world without evil by just taking away our ability to commit wickedness? Wouldn’t it have been easy for Him to have simply said, “I’m going to make you all marionettes—I’ll pull the strings, and everybody will do only what is right and good”? Wouldn’t that be better for everyone than what we have now?

Suffering and evil affect every one of us at different intensities. Some of you have gone through torturous physical and mental trials over the past year. Does a loving God use evil and suffering to accomplish a greater good? And if so, how? We need an explanation. We need a sensible explanation with a comforting hug.

To give fuller context to the human experience, let’s start with the end of man’s journey, the future culmination described by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:18-24 (English Standard Version):

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to [or into] us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons [or full status of sonship], the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved” (emphasis added throughout).

Various reasons are given about suffering’s place in the human experience. Is it to build character? The result of cause and effect? Punishment? Testing? Time and chance? To learn compassion or empathy? To become stronger—no pain, no gain? Just God’s random will for whatever or unknown reasons—with some severely suffering, and others not so much? To induce repentance?

Let’s go beyond these common reasons for suffering and ask: Where is God in all the pain? This question is a primary one for all religions and philosophers. Where can we turn for the best answers to why suffering and evil exist? Who has the truth? What is the truth? While we seek an all-encompassing answer for all mankind, we also want a personal answer for our pain, suffering, injustice, hurt, anger, disappointments, tragedies and catastrophes.

Back to the beginning

We’ve seen the end of the story, but now let’s go back to the beginning of the human experience.

The clues and answers about why evil and suffering exist emerge in the Garden of Eden shortly after the creation of man. But actually the story starts long before. And God clearly shows that He has not walked away from us but has actually been very much with us, as He was to lose His own Son in this saga. He has not been silent. He has spoken loudly and frequently to us through His Word and still does, remaining very much with us.

From the first verses of the Bible describing God’s creation we see that everything God created was good and very good (see Genesis 1:3-4, 10, 17-18, 31). God gave Adam and Eve access to
It was Satan who appeared in the garden to lead humankind astray. And mankind chose to follow him and his errant ways.

This sad condition goes back to the sin of Adam and Eve. But God was not caught unaware by their big mistake in following Satan. His plan had not been thwarted. Rather, God determined well before the creation of man to redeem man from sin and its consequences—"with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb ... foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:18-20). This was part of the plan all along.

But why would God allow all this?

The need for free will

One of the foremost objections to the Christian faith is: How could there be a loving God who permits so much pain, suffering and evil in the world? Many people think God being all-powerful means He could do anything He wants to do. But the Bible is very clear that there are some things God can’t and won’t do.

For instance, it’s impossible for God to lie or break a promise (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18; Psalm 89:34). This is intrinsic to His nature. In fact, God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). This quality of outflowing love (1 John 4:8, 16) is intrinsic to His nature. In fact, God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). This quality of outflowing love defines His identity. God cannot be evil or hateful. The need for free will defines His identity. God cannot be evil or hateful. The need for free will.

But human beings can think and act for good or bad. With the moral freedom we’ve been given, there’s a possibility for...
abundant good, but there’s also the possibility for abundant evil—particularly under the influence of a powerful evil spirit, as has been the case since the Garden of Eden.

Having created human beings with the power of free choice, God can discern what they’re going to do, but He can’t make people do what they’re going to do in an ultimate sense. Otherwise they’re not really free. Evil entered the world when people freely chose to not do the right thing and to instead do the wrong thing.

God wanted those made in His image to freely choose to love Him and love others. You cannot love someone unless you have the choice to not love him. Love is a choice, a function of free will.

The sort of love people can give to God and one another depends on them being able to do it willingly from the bottom of their hearts without being forced. As soon as it’s coerced, it’s not love.

So we see in this something else God cannot do. He cannot instantly create loving beings—beings of free will with the choice to love and do right and stay that way. Genuine love and righteous character can only be developed over time—and only through allowing ongoing choice.

Of course, that of necessity also allows for consequential bad choices and all the evil we see. But what God desired was worth it. It was a good thing for God to create human beings with free will, allowing others to express sincere love not only to God but also to each other in the closest of human relationships.

Sci-fi utopias in contrast

Science fiction offers stories of futuristic utopian societies that have eradicated suffering through technology, curing disease, ending war and poverty, controlling accidents, sometimes even conquering death by artificial immortality. But the societies in these stories prove to be colossal frauds—apparently happy but experiencing deep failure, seemingly humane but really heartless. The elimination of suffering turns out to be the elimination of humanness. These utopian societies become dystopian, denoting an imagined state or society where there is great suffering or injustice.

(Don’t get me wrong—there will yet be a truly perfect society, but not one brought about by man. Instead, God will ultimately establish His Kingdom over all nations, at last bringing true peace and joy to the world. This will be unlike any sci-fi vision.)

One of the most famous science fiction utopias is that of the 1931 book *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, ranked fifth on a list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century.

The story’s setting is London in the year 2540. The publisher describes it as “a streamlined, soulless Eden” where there is no suffering. On the surface everyone is happy through endless combinations of mindless games, the wonder drug soma and free sex. Fundamental human relationships such as families and motherhood are relics of the past. All sources of suffering have been eliminated.

The characters in the book are happy because they’re not really human. The only truly human character in the story maintains his humanity only by suffering—and since suffering is no longer possible in this new society in which he unexpectedly finds himself, he ultimately takes his own life.

What’s missing in these imaginary societies is not just suffering but the freedom of choice for everyone that could lead to suffering—or, on the other hand, to truly positive results. Free will is both the source of and the solution to human suffering.

**God became man—to suffer and die and lead many to glory**

We should further realize that all the suffering God has allowed will, in His plan, work toward a good outcome for those who ultimately choose to follow God (compare Romans 8:28).

And the supreme demonstration of God’s use of suffering and evil for good is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The most inconceivable event in all of history is when the timeless, eternal Word of life left the spirit realm to become a human being. He came into the world to which Adam and Eve were exiled, the kingdom of Satan, to perform His mission.

We read of this in John 1, some of the most eloquent words in Scripture: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (verses 1-14).

This One who had been God with the Father, the “I AM” who spoke in the Old Testament (John 8:58; Exodus 3:14), came to earth as a man to die (Philippians 2:5-8).

It was hard for the Jews of His day and even His own disciples to understand this. Even the devil must have pondered...
why Jesus would make Himself vulnerable as flesh and enter the world of his dominion, the world of death.

Christ faced the greatest ignominy of a Roman execution. Invented a few centuries before Jesus, crucifixion was so horrific that Roman citizens were not permitted to be crucified (see “The Greatest Sacrifice” beginning on page 4).

The worst thing that ever happened in history was the suffering and death of God. Could God the Father have stopped it? Of course. But He allowed the devil to influence Judas Iscariot, Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate and others to bring about the worst event in the history of the world. In fact, this was God’s plan all along.

Jesus Christ endured great emotional and spiritual agony as He experienced the consequences of the actual sin of the world, feeling betrayal, injustice, isolation and unimaginable torment.

But the horrific misery inflicted on Him was redeemed by an all-wise, all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful God. It was used for the greatest goodness imaginable—reconciliation and justification leading to the salvation of mankind!

Jesus’ suffering and death was not the end. He would rise from the grave, victorious over death to return to the Father and then live in us to make of us a new creation—to ultimately lead us into resurrection to eternal life as well. Jesus went through all this “in bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10). This is why we have hope!

Jesus has thus led the way for us. And here we get closer to answering the question of why we must suffer at Christ’s crucifixion, but the answer is still occurring in our lives now.

Christ has empathy for us because He went through it and has suffered. We too, can have empathy for others.

Do we cry with emotional and physical pain? Christ was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Are we cast aside? Christ was despised and rejected of men. Have we been misunderstood, betrayed, broken? Christ experienced all these.

In the kingdom of Satan, Christ has been to Rwanda, Auschwitz, Syria, Stalingrad, abortion clinics and countless other places of crisis and tragedy over the entire history of man on this planet. But He will turn it to victory! That was God’s plan from before the creation of man.

In God becoming human, He descends into the whole of the human condition.

Does He descend into the depths of our hells? Yes. Corrie ten Boom of the Netherlands recalled the words of her sister Betsie in the depths of a Nazi death camp: “There is no pit so deep that the love of God totally gets it regarding our pain. He entered into the experience of mankind and knows how we feel. He truly understands. And He shows us the way forward.

God “totally gets it” regarding our pain. He entered into the experience of mankind and knows how we feel. He truly understands. And He shows us the way forward.

God is not deeper still” (The Hiding Place, 1974, p. 118).

There’s a kinship in knowing that God “totally gets it” regarding our pain. He’s been there. He doesn’t just have it figured out logically and clinically. He has personally entered into the experience of mankind and really knows how we feel. He truly understands. And He shows us the way forward.

**Solving the problem of suffering**

In summary, Jesus came into the human condition. He suffered with us. He showed the gravity of mankind’s sins in what He went through—for sin brings not just death but misery. Thus His suffering and death paid the price for sin. (See “Why Was It Necessary for Jesus Christ to Suffer?” on page 6.) And in this He also showed the awesome love of God in what God was willing to go through to save us—encouraging us to trust Him and cast all our cares on Him.

Further, after suffering and dying,
Jesus rose again. In this way He opened eternal life for us, transforming death from an end into a beginning—turning death pangs to birth pangs.

In becoming flesh as one of us, Jesus made our suffering part of His work of our redemption and salvation. Again, our trials and death pangs become birth pangs for eternity. We are being prepared for a new nature.

This amazing sacrificial death is summarized in one of the most quoted of all scriptures: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

We must keep this future fixed firmly in our minds, just as Jesus did, to endure (Hebrews 12:2).

The Christian response to the problem of evil and suffering was perhaps best summarized by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:8-17:

“We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment [in comparison to what follows], is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

The Word of God helps us understand this problem of evil and suffering as followers of Christ—that God can cause all these things to work for good in our lives.

As we look back on our own trials and resultant sufferings, even severe crises with our families, work and health, we can say that there were lessons that have given us a valuable perspective about ourselves and our relationship to those around. We become different people from what we would have been if we had not gone through these things. These momentary, light afflictions are producing for us the eternal weight of glory.

The story that started in the Garden of Eden makes full circle to a return to Eden and the tree of life with the coming down of the New Jerusalem in the last two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21-22.

And here in Revelation 21:3-4 we at last see an end to all suffering, as a loud voice out of heaven announces: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

LEARN MORE

Suffering is a big subject, and the Bible has much more to say than can be covered in just this one article. To better understand, you need to read our free study guide Why Does God Allow Suffering? Download or request your free copy today!

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Yeast, Unleavened Bread and Pride

The Days of Unleavened Bread are not just about avoiding bread and yeast. They teach us to receive God’s nature and resist self-centeredness and spreading sin.

by Peter Eddington

H ow much do you think about yourself? Are you always on your mind? Do you ever find yourself getting a little “puffed up”? Or do you think more about the needs of other people?

We’re of course talking about pride and self-centeredness. But in delving further, let’s talk about something that might seem unrelated—yeast! Yeast is used in the Bible in a spiritual analogy—particularly during the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread (also called the Days or Feast of Unleavened Bread) following Passover in early spring in the northern hemisphere. These biblical days, kept by the apostles and early Church, continue to be observed by the Church of God today.

Commonly associated with making bread, yeast consists of single-celled microorganisms classified as members of the fungus kingdom. Around 1,500 species are currently identified.

Through fermentation, the yeast species **Saccharomyces cerevisiae** converts carbohydrates to carbon dioxide and alcohols. The heat of baking causes the resultant carbon dioxide bubbles to expand in bread dough and the alcohol to evaporate. So in bread baking, the yeast acts as a leavening or rising agent.

Yeast microbes are probably one of the earliest domesticated organisms. Archaeologists digging in Egyptian ruins found grinding stones and baking chambers for yeast-leavened bread, as well as illustrations of 4,000-year-old bakeries and breweries.

Yeasts have recently been used to generate electricity in microbial fuel cells and to produce ethanol for the biofuel industry.

But other species of yeasts, such as **Candida albicans**, are opportunistic pathogens and can cause infections in people.

What, then, are we to understand about the symbolism of yeast in the Bible and how this relates to pride? And what lessons can we learn from the Days of Unleavened Bread?

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump”

During the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as laid out in Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23, leavening is to be removed and avoided for one week, as it is used at this time to picture sin and its effects. (The symbolism also existed year-round in Israel’s grain offerings—see Leviticus 2:11.)

Pride puffs us up, like yeast. We talk about people having a big head, thinking they are big stuff. Vanity and arrogance truly are dangerous to our spiritual health. They can lead us to cutting ourselves off from God, suffering spiritual decay and disease!

But the puffed-up stage of leavening is not immediate. It takes time for tiny yeast microorganisms to multiply and spread—for the carbon dioxide to bubble up. And then, by the time swelling comes, the process is well along—as a spreading infection.

Consider that while the yeast species **Saccharomyces cerevisiae** is helpful and good in baking, it works by spreading through dough like harmful yeasts such as **Candida** do in an infected body. In that light we can think of leavening picturing sin as a parallel with disease cells that must be killed or removed. Getting to the infection quickly can prevent further damage. But unchecked, it grows out of control and can lead to spiritual sickness.

Notice what the apostle Paul wrote during the Days of Unleavened Bread to the Christians in Corinth who were tolerating a terrible sin in their midst:

“**You are puffed up . . .** Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened [indicating that they were literally observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread]. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:2, 6-8, emphasis added throughout).

The Corinthians had been exposed to infection, to spreading sin, and were not dealing with it properly. Rather, they were prideful over their wrong kind of tolerance, sin giving rise to further sin.

So Paul admonished them to behave spiritually in accordance with what the festival they were observing represented. He said Christians are to be **unleavened**, not embracing sin and being puffed up with pride.

**Biological and chemical warfare**

Again, leavening is in itself beneficial, and leavened bread is a blessing from God. Jesus even used the imagery of leaven to picture the expansion of God’s righteous reign (Luke 13:20-21).

But for one week each year during the Days of Unleavened Bread, we are to focus on the analogy of leavening as a weapon of Satan. The leavening we avoid comes in two types—biological (yeast) and chemical (baking powder and baking soda). Biological and chemical weapons are among the most feared types of warfare today. And so their spiritual counterparts should be to the Christian—to *us*.

Some of the gases that have been used in chemical warfare can incapacitate a man in concentrations of as little as one part in 10 million. In parallel, how much sin can we embrace and say, “That won’t hurt me”? The only true protection is to get away from the cause.

Chemical warfare involves using the toxic properties of chemical substances as weapons. Along with nuclear bombs, both chemical and biological agents of war are considered...
weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). And so, by analogy, Satan the devil has immense stockpiles of WMDs, including biological and chemical leavening agents ready to be unleashed upon us!

Yet God gives us the power, through His Holy Spirit, to address the cause of the infection, the sin, the leaven, the pride.

Here is how the apostle Paul described it, once again to the congregation at Corinth: “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself [in pride] against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

The old leaven (our prideful and selfish ways) must be put out and replaced—displaced—by the Holy Spirit. You can’t get rid of poisoned air in your lungs without good air replacing it. Even so, to get rid of the spiritual toxin of sin, you have to take in of God’s Holy Spirit, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

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Sin is a dangerous infection to be avoided at all costs. In setting aside the leavened bread—the rolls, the croutons, the crackers, etc.—during the Days of Unleavened Bread this year, the people of God are to be thinking about putting out the infection of sin—the biological and chemical weapons of Satan in this analogy. And as unleavened bread is eaten instead, we can be reminded that we are not just putting sin out, but God is putting His nature in us as we submit to Him with His help.

“Pride goes before destruction”

We must continually battle against the overarching sin of pride. In the sense we’re talking about here, pride is an inwardly directed, foolish and irrational sense of one’s personal value, status or accomplishments—a vice also known as vanity or vainglory.

Recall Paul’s description of those in Corinth as “puffed up,” having no contenton over their misplaced tolerance of evil (1 Corinthians 5:2). “Puffed up” is a vivid description of people who are proud and vain—who want to make themselves seem bigger, better or more important than they are or who are, as we say today, full of themselves.

This is what led Satan himself astray, God telling him in Ezekiel 28:17, “Your heart was lifted up [or proud] because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.” As famed author C.S. Lewis correctly observed in “The Great Sin,” chapter 8 of his book Mere Christianity, “It was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

There are many other biblical examples of pride and its consequences. One of the more notable from the Old Testament is that of Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26. It’s worth opening your Bible to read it. It’s a cautionary tale against arrogance and pride.

When he became king of Judah at age 16, Uzziah set his heart to seek God and put himself under the spiritual mentorship of a godly advisor named Zechariah. And as long as he continued to follow God, he was blessed. As a result, he and his kingdom acquired great wealth and became politically and militarily powerful (2 Chronicles 26:1-15).

But then things changed. What happened? There are hints in the text that at some point he stopped seeking God and the spiritual mentoring of Zechariah. This suggests a lessening dependence on God and a growing reliance on himself and his own strength and wisdom (2 Chronicles 26:16-22).

It’s easy for pride to increase as we become stronger, more successful, more prosperous and more recognized in our endeavors. In fact, anything, real or imagined, that elevates us above others can be a platform for pride. Ironically, this is true even when these things come as a result of God’s blessings.

So it was with Uzziah. Rather than humbling himself in thanksgiving to God, he began to think more highly of himself than he should have and developed an exaggerated sense of his own importance and privileges.

In the end Uzziah gravely overstepped, entering the temple of God to carry out a ceremony only priests were to perform. God then struck him with leprosy, and he was banished from society—all because of his pride. Remember, “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). And: “When pride comes, then comes shame [disgrace]; but with the humble is wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2).

Self-absorption and corruption

Pride turns everything into a means to an end, to get respect and approval. We want people to respect us. We are always adding things up, comparing. We’re always asking: Am I getting the thanks I deserve? Am I getting appreciated here? How am I being regarded? Pride concentrates on self.

This comes in overt and subtle variants. On the one hand is the superiority form of pride, which is easily recognized as pride by most people because people with a superior air are constantly comparing themselves. They’re always thinking: How do I look? Am I being appreciated? But another form of pride fixates on one’s inferiority. This is when you’re

Take a Pride Test

Have you ever taken a quiz to gauge how much pride you have? You can find a number of such quizzes with an online search. One is titled “Am I Prideful?” at beliefnet.com. Following are the 12 questions it asks. (Online, there are three multiple-choice answers to choose from for each question.)

1. When talking to others, how often do you talk about yourself?
2. Why do you do good things?
3. How often do you think about yourself?
4. Do you work to further your own situation or to help others?
5. When you go to the store, the first thing you look for is . . .
6. How often do you find yourself discussing others’ faults?
7. When bad things happen your first reaction is to . . .
8. When someone criticizes you your first reaction is to . . .
9. How often do you talk about what you are doing on social media?
10. How often are you wrong?
11. Do you hold grudges?
12. How do you react when someone disagrees with you?

So, I took the test and received my results. Maybe you should ask yourself these same questions. Pride—being full of ourselves, “puffed up” with hot air like a yeast-filled loaf of bread—can ruin us.
down on yourself and you don’t like yourself. You don’t like how you look. You’re very self-conscious and always beating yourself up.

This is certainly not true humility and selflessly esteeming others well. For you’re just as self-absorbed, perhaps even fishing for affirmation. Everything still revolves around you. You’re doing all the same comparisons as in the superiority form. And you’re effectively putting yourself in the place of God as the one who determines your worth. This all amounts to self-exaltation—pride.

We must not entertain such thoughts. They will expand and permeate a person’s mind—and can also spread to other people. (For a self-check, see “Take a Pride Test” on page 19.)

Returning to the imagery of baking bread, think again of how a batch of dough gets puffed up when a small amount of leaven is added. Before long the leaven (such as yeast) spreads everywhere, fermenting and leaving hundreds of little bubbles of carbon dioxide in the dough, causing it to be “puffed up.”

In the same way, pride, vanity and other evils grow and spread when even a small amount is initially present. Pride is an evil attitude that often leads to other more specific sins. A proud person is full of spiritual bubbles—lots of visible surface area, yet with nothing inside but gas!

It’s a great word picture that would have been immediately understandable to most people as recently as the last century. Today most of us get our bread from the supermarket and don’t have as much experience with the leavening process. That’s probably why modern translations tend to translate “puffed up” in 1 Corinthians 5:2 as simply “proud.” While that’s a reasonable translation of the underlying Greek expression here for the people’s attitude, it doesn’t capture the imagination in the same way “puffed up” does.

It’s harder for people today to catch the contrast Paul is making between the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (verse 8) and people who are puffed up with pride like a loaf of leavened bread.

Also, many today sadly reject or don’t even know about the yearly observance of the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Yet Paul was here teaching the non-Jewish converts of Corinth to, with the right mindset, “keep the feast.” It remains relevant for everyone who follows the way of God!

Leaving Egypt and flattening your pride

God introduced this festival season to the Israelites when He led them out of Egypt (Exodus 12:14-20). Here’s another interesting analogy, with Egypt being used to represent sin, as leavening here does. We, in parallel to the ancient Israelites, are to come out of the Egypt of this world and its sinful ways and ideologies.

In Matthew 16:5-12 Jesus talked about the “leaven” of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the leading Jewish religious sects of the time, referring to their false doctrine with its corrupting effects. Their teachings caused them to become puffed up with pride, with vanity, and to veer from the intent of Scripture.

For the seven days of the spring festival we are to eat unleavened bread, symbolizing a stark break from this world. A flat piece of bread—not puffed up with yeast or any other leavening agent that causes it to rise—is the type of bread God uses to teach us to remove sin from our life while taking on His ways. He wants us to flatten ourselves in relation to Him and learn humility and service. Partaking of unleavened bread represents our receiving Jesus Christ and Him living through us.

Think about flattening your pride before God and others. Ask yourself: Do I look down on those who are less educated, less affluent, less refined or less successful than me? Do I think of myself as more spiritual than people in my church or at work? Am I driven to receive approval from others? Am I guilty of trying to leave a better impression of myself than is honestly true? Do I overly worry about what others think of me—about my reputation?

Or maybe you’re thinking: I’m not proud. I don’t have anything to be proud about! I don’t have any special gifts. I’m not beautiful. I don’t have any achievements to be proud of. Well that, as mentioned, can be a subtle form of pride.

Are you now thinking how many of these questions apply to someone else you know—with you feeling pretty good that most of these things don’t really apply to you? Careful—that could be evidence of pride!

Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector

In Luke 18:9-14 we read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee was thankful to be distinguished above others such as the tax collector for his righteous acts—while the tax collector beat on his breast and pleaded with God to have mercy on him as a sinner. There’s clearly a lesson here—along with a warning. Be very careful about exalting yourself like the Pharisee. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (verse 14).

We learn a lot from this parable about our heart toward God. By acknowledging our sinfulness and crying out for God’s help, just as the tax collector did, we can be exalted before God. Humility involves assessing ourselves honestly before Him.

During the Days of Unleavened Bread when the people of God are to have no leaven in their diet or in their homes, we must realize our utter sinfulness in comparison to Jesus Christ, and accept the help He has provided through His sacrifice.

Avoid a dangerous infection

Sin is a dangerous infection to be avoided at all costs. As God’s people set aside leavening and leavened bread products, we must think about removing the infection of sin. But remember that we are not just putting sin out, but God is putting His nature in. That’s what unleavened bread at this time is all about. Leavening is a symbol of sin—for this one week a year—that helps us to understand something very important in God’s plan.

If you are interested in following Jesus’ example and keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread, request our free booklet below to learn more or get in touch with one of our ministers who can explain it in more detail. ❘

LEARN MORE

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is the second of seven annual festivals of God in the Bible. To learn more about these observances and what they picture, download or request a free copy of our study guide God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind. BTmagazine.org/booklets
**EASTER: Why Shouldn’t We Celebrate Jesus’ Resurrection?**

How can someone be Christian and not celebrate Jesus’ resurrection? This is a common question facing followers of Jesus Christ who do not observe Easter—one that certainly deserves an answer.

by Tom Robinson

Easter is one of the world’s most popular religious holidays, with hundreds of millions celebrating it every year. For most the celebration is meant to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet there are a number of Christians who see problems with that and refuse to participate in the tradition.

But what’s so wrong with Easter? How can it be that Christians would not celebrate Christ’s resurrection? Let’s consider some problems with the Easter tradition.

**Easter’s origins long predated Christianity**

To begin with, Easter is not rooted in biblical Christianity but in ancient pagan religious practices that existed far earlier. Customs involving rabbits, colored eggs, hot-cross buns and sunrise services come from ancient fertility rites of spring in honor of ancient gods and goddesses.

The name Easter, associated with dawn in the east, refers to an ancient goddess of the dawn—Eostre in Old English or Ostara in German. And this apparently ultimately derives from the Babylonian Ishtar, elsewhere known as Astarte and Ashtaroth, the queen of heaven, whose worship is directly condemned in the Bible (see “The Resurrection Connection” on page 23).

In fact, the worship of any false god is condemned in the Bible—as is using practices derived from pagan religion to worship the true God. God does not accept such worship even if meant to honor Him. Notice His clear instruction in Deuteronomy 12:29-32:

“When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods . . . Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (emphasis added throughout).

**The timing is all wrong**

Well, it might then be argued, why not strip the day of the pagan stuff and use it only to honor Christ’s resurrection? Yet we must understand that the very timing of the observance comes from false religion. It is not biblical.

In Romance languages—those that derive from Latin like Italian and Spanish—the holiday is not called by the pagan name Easter but by the name of a biblical festival, Passover. Yet this holiday is not the authentic biblical Passover. That day on which the Israelites had offered lambs since the Exodus of Egypt prefigured the offering of Jesus Christ, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And it was on the true Passover day that Jesus was crucified.

A close look at the Gospel accounts shows that in that time the Jewish people had come to call the Passover and the entire seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread that immediately follows (Leviticus 23:4-8) by the name “Passover” also—referring to the whole early spring festival period.

And as Jesus was in the grave for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40), He was resurrected during the Feast of Unleavened Bread or “Passover week.” This enabled a later-invented resurrection festival during that week to be called “Passover.” But it was not really the Passover of the Bible. In fact the name of Easter in Latin languages is sometimes given as “Passover of the Resurrection” to distinguish it from the actual Passover day on which Christ died.

Yet, again, this is all a complete misnomer—especially since the date of the Easter holiday does not depend on the biblical dates of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread on the Hebrew calendar. Rather, Easter was set to fall on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the spring equinox (with some divergence in interpreting this between eastern and western Christendom). This only sometimes aligns with the biblical dates for the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. These are just not the same observance—not by theme nor by the actual day celebrated.

Another problem with the timing here is that Jesus was not even resurrected on Sunday—the supposed basis for weekly Sunday worship and annual Easter Sunday observance. The Good Friday–Easter Sunday time frame is wrong. It can be conclusively proven from the Bible that Jesus died and was buried on Wednesday and left His tomb three days and three nights later (see Matthew 12:40 and look up “three days and three nights” on our website at BTmagazine.org).

His resurrection was actually on Saturday, on the weekly Sabbath. So if we were to celebrate the day on which Jesus rose from death, that day would be the seventh-day Sabbath (observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset each week). Of course we should be doing that anyway, since observing the Sabbath is commanded in the Ten Commandments, regardless of what day Jesus was resurrected on. (Weekly Sunday worship also originated in pagan religion—“Sun day”...
Resurrected on the Feast of Firstfruits?

Some believe that the Sunday during the Festival of Unleavened Bread is the proper day for celebrating Jesus’ resurrection, calling it the Feast of Firstfruits. Is that valid?

It is true that the Sunday during the Days of Unleavened Bread marked a special occasion. On this day God commanded the Israelites to bring a firstfruits offering of a sheaf of barley to be waved before Him for acceptance (see Leviticus 23:4-14).

Jesus Himself is the firstfruits of God’s spiritual harvest of mankind (see 1 Corinthians 15:20-23). And He evidently ascended briefly to heaven on the day following His resurrection—since He first told Mary Magdalene not to hold on to Him because He had not yet ascended to the Father, but He later allowed people to hold on to Him and worship Him (compare John 20:16-17; Matthew 28:9-10; Luke 24:39). So Jesus must have ascended in between—on the day the wave-sheaf offering was presented. Thus Jesus would have fulfilled what was pictured by this offering.

It should be clarified that this occasion was not the Feast of Firstfruits as a distinct feast. Rather, it was an offering of the firstfruits of the barley harvest during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The name Feast of Firstfruits more accurately applies to Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, 50 days later, with its unleavened loaves of wheat representing God’s people of this age as spiritual firstfruits, Jesus Himself being the first of the firstfruits (see Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Numbers 28:26; James 1:18.)

Regarding the wave-sheaf offering, we should realize that it did not specifically commemorate Jesus’ resurrection. Note that the sheaf was not waved before God at the end of the Sabbath when Jesus was raised but the next morning—after the time He was already risen. Again, the wave-sheaf showed Jesus’ acceptance by His Heavenly Father as the first of the firstfruits—anticipating all those Christians who would later find acceptance with God through Him. Consider, too, that while the wave-sheaf offering was listed among the appointed times of the Lord in Leviticus 23, there is no command for a worship assembly on this occasion as on the various Holy Days listed here.

The fact is, the Bible gives no directive to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection of itself. There is no commemoration of the time or date of the resurrection (although, as noted above, we are to observe the seventh day of the week anyway as the weekly Sabbath).

Some might contend that even though God has not commanded a resurrection day observance, what would be wrong with having one? But a far better question would be: Why would we do this and not observe the occasions God has specifically commanded?

Symbolism in God’s commanded spring feasts

God has commanded two connected annual festivals in early spring (in the northern hemisphere) that we definitely are to observe as Christians, even as Jesus and the apostles did. These are Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread (see our free study guide God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind at BTmagazine.org/booklets to learn more).

Jesus died on the Passover day. For centuries this day had foreshadowed His dying for our sins as the sacrificed Lamb of God, and He commands His followers to keep the Passover as a remembrance or memorial of His sacrifice for us (Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Three days later Jesus was resurrected during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Does this mean that the seven-day festival is meant to be a weeklong resurrection celebration—sort of an extended Easter minus the paganism? No, because the Feast of Unleavened Bread is much more than that. Jesus’ resurrection is a vital theme in the festival’s meaning—yet as part of a bigger picture. (See “Yeast, Unleavened Bread and Pride,” beginning on page 18).

Consider what literally happened. Jesus was dead and buried for the first three days of this festival, was raised to life in the midst of it and was then accepted as the firstfruits of God’s spiritual harvest, remaining alive to teach His disciples thereafter. All of this is part of the meaning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, like the Passover, was revealed to the Israelites at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 12-13). Over the course of these days, the Israelites left the slavery of Egypt. And the removal and avoidance of leavening (an agent such as yeast that causes bread dough to rise in baking) was to symbolize our coming out of sin (see 1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

At the same time, eating unleavened bread as commanded during this same time symbolized partaking of the true...

We are to figuratively be crucified and die with Christ—our old, sinful self being put to death and buried with Him so that we can be figuratively raised with Him to walk in newness of life, as pictured in baptism (read Galatians 2:20, Romans 6, Colossians 3:1-10 and Philippians 3:10-11).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread represents our coming out of sin. But we must realize that our coming out of sin relies on the person we formerly were being figuratively put to death and buried with Christ and then, in effect, rising with Him into a new way of living—His way.

As the true Bread of Life represented by the unleavened bread Christians are to partake of during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Jesus Christ lives His resurrected life in us through the Holy Spirit. This enables us to live a lifetime of sanctification and transformation until the culmination in our literal resurrection at Christ’s return. Thus what these days symbolize, our coming out of sin to ultimately find new life and acceptance with God, was enabled by Jesus being literally buried, raised and accepted by God during these very days. This was clearly no coincidence!

We need to grasp that Jesus’ resurrection is vital to the process of coming out of sins. As Paul wrote: “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Corinthians 15:17). And this is where the resurrection focus of Easter fails.

It merely gazes at a hero who has conquered death. In the case of Jesus Christ, that is awesome and wonderful, to be sure. But by itself it lacks the context of His death and resurrection as the basis for our own forgiveness for a lifetime of sin, and then our renewed lives with Jesus Christ living again within us, ultimately leading to our own future resurrection.

In keeping the Days of Unleavened Bread, we do commemorate the fact that Jesus was resurrected to live in us to enable us to overcome—yet not as a celebration specifically of the resurrection in the way that Easter is for many, which misses the big picture of God’s great plan of salvation. It leaves out a proper balanced focus on the need for our old selves to remain buried and on now living a new life through Christ, looking forward to ultimate transformation in the future at His return (1 Corinthians 15:50-54).

For those who recognize the problems with Easter, we should not let pagan corruption take away from having a proper perspective on Jesus’ resurrection—and a recognition of His role in the meaning of the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread as the Bread of Life through whom we also may receive eternal life by our own resurrection from the dead (John 6:50-58).

Lastly, then, in response to the opening question, we could in turn ask: How can someone be a Christian and not observe the days God commanded us to—the days that picture His great plan of saving mankind through Jesus Christ? Before knowing about them, one might plead ignorance. But having learned about them, now you know. And we encourage you to come to know more—and to honor God the Father and Jesus Christ as They have directed!

**The Resurrection Connection**

How did worship of an ancient god and goddess come to be associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? A closer look at the ancient mythology surrounding the worship of these gods and goddesses will help us understand how pagan practices have survived in popular Easter customs practiced to this day.

Two of the earliest recorded deities were the Babylonian fertility god Tammuz and the goddess Ishtar. Every year Tammuz “was believed to die, passing away from the cheerful earth to the gloomy subterranean world . . .” (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 326).

The seasonal cycle came to be connected with Tammuz’s supposed annual death and resurrection. “Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life . . . which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same” (p. 325).

As worship of Tammuz and Ishtar spread to the Mediterranean region, including the territory of biblical Israel, the pair came to be worshiped under other names—Baal and Astarte (Ashtoreth), Attis and Cybele, and Adonis and Aphrodite. God heatedly condemned the sensual, perverted worship of other names—Baal and Astarte (Ashtoreth), Attis and Cybele, and Adonis and Aphrodite. God heatedly condemned the sensual, perverted worship of these earlier deities, including this earlier supposed “resurrected” god, and applied them to the real and true resurrected Son of God.

In this respect Easter followed the pattern of Christmas in being officially sanctioned and welcomed into the Roman church: “Motives of the same sort may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic god which fell at the same season.”

“Now the Easter rites still observed in Greece, Sicily and southern Italy bear in some respects a striking resemblance to the rites of Adonis . . . The Church may have consciously adapted the new festival to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ” (Frazer, p. 359).

(Easter is mentioned in the editor’s notes in the Easter section of the Bible, but is not a part of the actual text of the Bible. This information is excerpted from our free study guide *Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, 1950, p. 58).

In its various forms, worship of Tammuz-Adonis-Attis spread around the Roman Empire, including to Rome itself. As a corrupted form of Christianity spread through the empire, religious leaders merged customs and practices associated with various pagan deities, including this earlier supposed “resurrected” god, and applied them to the real and true resurrected Son of God.

Easter we shall see how many of its customs and ceremonies resemble these former rites” (*Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, 1950, p. 58).

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In this respect Easter followed the pattern of Christmas in being officially sanctioned and welcomed into the Roman church: “Motives of the same sort may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic god which fell at the same season.”

“Now the Easter rites still observed in Greece, Sicily and southern Italy bear in some respects a striking resemblance to the rites of Adonis . . . The Church may have consciously adapted the new festival to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ” (Frazer, p. 359).

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The world is facing a deadly development of which far too many are unaware. The latest coronavirus is just one part of the bigger picture. And there’s no easy way out, no “magic pill” we can look to for a solution.

On Nov. 13, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a troubling new report about antibiotic-resistant bacteria titled “Antibiotic Resistant Threats in the United States, 2019.” The foreword, by CDC Director Robert Redfield, is especially urgent about not only the future danger of antibiotic-resistant infections, but the present reality.

“Stop referring to a coming post-antibiotic era—it’s already here,” writes Dr. Redfield, an expert in viruses and the diseases caused by them. He points out that “antibiotic resistance has been found in every U.S. state and in every country across the globe. There is no safe place from antibiotic resistance.”

When I was 11 years old, I had a four-wheeler accident that left an enormous gash on my leg. After being rushed to the hospital and undergoing surgery, I was told the medical staff had stopped counting the interior stitches at 600, and on the exterior there were 22 staples—I still have quite a scar!

After being released and going home, one evening my cat jumped in my lap, setting off searing pain from the incision. I’ve always counted it a miracle that the initial gash narrowly missed a major artery in my leg (despite its size, it barely bled!), but the truth is that the infection discovered after the cat jumped in my lap that night was every bit as dangerous! I spent more than two weeks in the hospital with a serious staph infection, not at all grasping the danger I was in while I happily watched television to pass the time.

From “wonder drug” to stopgap

The first modern antibiotic, penicillin, was discovered in 1928 by Sir Alexander Fleming. Put into medical use beginning in 1942, it was hailed as a modern miracle. Its effectiveness against bacterial infections was seen as an unprecedented triumph of science. But as Dr. Redfield laments, “You and I are living in a time when some miracle drugs no longer perform miracles and families are being ripped apart by a microscopic enemy.”

Today several types of resistant bacteria are not affected by even the most cutting-edge antibiotics the medical community can muster. The report estimated that there are more than 2.8 million antibiotic-resistant infections in the United States each year, killing more than 35,000 people.

The media is, and always has been, an exercise in sensationalism. As new antibiotics were discovered, Time magazine envisioned the future of antibiotic combinations as limitless: “They could give it for all infectious diseases, and many of the courses in medical school could be abolished” (“The Newest Wonder Drug,” Jan. 29, 1945, p. 66).

Alexander Fleming knew penicillin was not a cure-all that would thrust mankind into a disease-free era. He speculated that “the greatest possibility of evil in self-medication [with penicillin] is the use of too-small doses, so that, instead of clearing up the infection, the microbes are educated to resist penicillin” (“Penicillin’s Finder Assays Its Future: Sir Alexander Fleming Says Improved Dosage Method Is Needed to Extend Use,” The New York Times, June 26, 1945).

It’s now common knowledge that Fleming’s fears came true—and also that penicillin and other antibiotics are not consequence-free “wonder drugs” as once thought. Postwar optimism and the dazzle power that science held in popular opinion allowed life-threatening allergic reactions to penicillin to go unreported for years.

In a 1980 symposium titled The History of Antibiotics, James Whorton reported unfortunate “cases of several physicians who knew themselves to have allergic tendencies, yet treated their own colds with penicillin—and died from the reactions” (“Antibiotic Abandon: the Resurgence of Therapeutic Rationalism,” J. Parascandola, editor, 1980).

Colds, and many deadly illnesses, are caused by viruses, against which antibiotics are totally ineffective. But reckless antibiotic over-prescription and use for viral infections is still common. The “miracle drugs” never truly performed miracles.

Antibiotics were believed to usher in the end of disease, but in reality were only an imperfect stopgap.

The growing fear of MRSA

Staph infections, like the one I had as a child, are caused by the bacterium known as *staphylococcus aureus*, an organism so common it’s even found on human skin. This is not usually a problem since God designed our skin as a natural barrier and first line of defense against harmful microorganisms, and it works amazingly well! Surgeries of all types carry the risk of infection because the skin must be breached, and the presence of *staphylococcus* bacteria in hospitals is inevitable.

The first documented case of an antibiotic-resistant bacterial infection in a human being occurred in 1968, marking the discovery of the first known methicillin-resistant strain of *staphylococcus aureus*—giving rise to the all-too-familiar acronym MRSA (pronounced “mersa”) that has haunted headlines since.

The recent CDC report includes a plan for more stringent controls of antibiotic use to hold out against the growing problem. Dr. Redfield states, “These actions are protecting us today and will continue to protect us, our families, and our nation from a
threat that will never stop” (emphasis added). There is little hope in this vision of the future. At best he sees a never-ending fight for survival against devastating, merciless and unseen enemies.

**Inevitable epidemics**

Disease epidemics are nothing new. A 2006 article from the journal Influenza titled “1918 Influenza: The Mother of All Pandemics” recalls the flu virus (known as the Spanish Flu) that infected and caused symptoms in 500 million people worldwide over a span of just two years, sickening a full one-third of the earth’s population. Total deaths from the Spanish Flu are estimated at a staggering 50-100 million—rivaling the total death toll of World War II.

Viral outbreaks are of even greater concern than antibiotic-resistant bacteria—they can potentially spread faster, making them very difficult to contain, and they are not affected by antibiotics at all.

Experts argue that world conditions are now ripe for an even worse outbreak than the Spanish Flu. The unprecedented world population, approaching 8 billion, has led to overcrowding in urban areas throughout the world. Combining the poor sanitation conditions in many countries with the ease and prevalence of air travel, today’s world could allow a highly contagious disease to spread faster than ever before in human history.

Recently, we have seen this playing out with the outbreak of coronavirus from the city of Wuhan, China. At the time of this writing, tens of thousands of infections and hundreds of deaths have been reported, though many believe the Chinese government is purposefully underreporting to prevent people from panicking. Additional cases are appearing all over the world. (For more on this, read “Spreading Chinese coronavirus has the world on edge” on page 27.)

Meanwhile, even the common flu virus carries a tremendous burden of sickness and death throughout the world year after year. The 2019-2020 flu season, according to the CDC, has already resulted in 22 million infections and 12,000 deaths in the United States alone! Every year carries with it the fear that a particularly virulent and deadly strain of influenza will again crop up.

Jesus Christ warned that, prior to His return, “there will be famines, pestilences [disease epidemics], and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.”

The hope of all mankind

Thankfully, the Bible describes a future when our all-powerful God will take control and put an end to human suffering. That does not mean simply stepping in to instantly heal every disease. Rather, it starts by establishing a never-ending Kingdom under which mankind will learn the right way to live and be blessed abundantly.

As humanity finally learns to obey our Creator, God will eradicate disease, fulfilling in even greater measure the words spoken to ancient Israel: “If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight . . . I will put eradication for disease, fulfilling in even greater measure the words spoken to ancient Israel: “If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight . . . I will put all the plagues of Egypt upon Egypt. . . . I will plague them with such a plague as has not been in Egypt . . . and they shall know that I am the Lord.” (Exodus 9:13-15)

In Isaiah 53:5, we read that “the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” Christ suffered to bring about the end of suffering, including disease. The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates the previous verse, Isaiah 53:4, to say that “He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains.”

Followers of Jesus Christ therefore have tremendous hope! James 5:14 instructs the sick to seek healing through anointing with oil by church elders, and verse 15 then states that “the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up!”

While God does not now heal every sickness among His Church in this life, by faith in Jesus Christ and through the promise of the new covenant we have the hope of the resurrection—the ultimate healing!

Furthermore, God has a plan for _all mankind_ that is contrary to the CDC director’s bleak prediction of “a threat that will never stop.”

**God will turn the tables**

In Hosea 13:14, God promised to turn the tables: “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O grave, I will be your destruction!” Jesus Christ died in order to overcome death in all its forms and from all its causes.

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Ultimately, God’s plan is to transform the world—all who will obey and submit to Him—into a new creation, where “there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying” (Revelation 21:4).

The “microscopic enemy” Dr. Redfield refers to—antibiotic-resistant bacterial infection—is just one of the many agents of our great enemy death, which Paul described as the “last enemy that will be destroyed” (1 Corinthians 15:26).

That wonderful future with no need for antibiotics will be the true “post-antibiotic era”! It is not a time to fear, but a time to hope and pray for—it is coming!
Brexit official; Britain and EU enter uncharted waters

On Jan. 31, 2020, Britain officially left the European Union, becoming the first nation to leave the supranational. Britain was the EU’s second-biggest member nation, its large economy contributing much to the union. Some Britons had longed for this day for decades, while others feared it for economic or political reasons. Still others believed the actual exit would never happen. And some leaders believe Britain will return to the European Union before long.

Brexit began after a June 2016 referendum, which only passed by a 51 percent majority. This kicked off a process that lasted longer than anyone imagined. It was a four-year circus of political fighting, negotiations, renegotiations, poll-taking, media frenzies, government collapses, bitter elections and, finally, the agreement between Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s freshly formed government and the European Union. Instead of taking effect at midnight in London, it happened at 11 p.m. there, midnight in Brussels.

As difficult as Brexit was, this next stage will probably be harder, as Britain must negotiate new trade agreements and make decisions about other EU countries wanting to make an example of Britain. Britain was the EU’s second-biggest member nation, its large economy contributing much to the union. Some Britons had longed for this day for decades, while others feared it for economic or political reasons. Still others believed the actual exit would never happen. And some leaders believe Britain will return to the European Union before long.

It’s anti-democratic and . . . it gives people power without accountability. People who cannot be held to account by the electorate. And that is an unacceptable structure.”

During his final comments he and his British compatriots pulled out Britain’s Union Jack flag and waved it with a final goodbye. Mr. Farage’s microphone was then cut off for “disobeying the rules,” and he was told by the Parliament’s chairperson to remove the flags. She said: “Put your flags away, you’re leaving and take them with you if you are leaving now. Goodbye.”

A bright spot for Britain is that Brexit appears to be bringing about the renewing of a special bond between Britain and the United States. Mike Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of State, said Jan. 30 regarding the two nations’ “historic relationship”: “The previous administration took the view that if the United Kingdom made this decision it would be at the back of the line [for a bilateral trade agreement]. We intend to put the United Kingdom at the front of the line.”

The comments about a special relationship between these great nations hold an important key to understanding what is really happening with Brexit. There’s more here than shared language and culture and pursuit of liberty. The roots of the relationship lie in the biblical identity of Britain and the United States, which must do not understand. This identity stands in contrast to the power bloc centered in Europe, which is on a different trajectory.

To learn the amazing missing details that explain what ultimately underlies Brexit, request or download our free study guides United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy and The Final Superpower at ucg.org/booklets. (Sources: Raw footage, news agencies.)

Call 988: the next step to combat the U.S. suicide epidemic

In December 2019, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) unanimously approved the creation and implementation of a three-digit suicide prevention hotline, similar in purpose to 911. The phone number 911 is the general emergency number used across North America, with children often taught from an early age how to dial it, and the simple three-digit number (similar to those used in other countries) has saved countless lives. The reasoning behind the suicide prevention hotline’s three-digit number, 988, is the same.

The decision comes in response to an overwhelming surge in deaths by suicide over the last decade. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, with more than 47,000 suicides in 2017 and an estimated 1.4 million attempts that same year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2017 suicide was the second-leading cause of death for Americans aged 10–34 and the fourth-leading cause for Americans in the 35–54 age group. Americans aged 10–34 are more likely to die by suicide than heart disease or homicide.

The current national suicide prevention hotline, 1-800-273-TALK, already routes callers to a network of 163 call centers nationwide. When implemented, the 988 number would have the same function while improving accessibility.

A Washington Post article noted: “The decision comes as the United States grapples with a spike in suicides, even as rates are on the decline in other parts of the world. The suicide rate hasn’t been this high since World War II” (Taylor Telford, “FCC Advances Plans for 988, a National Suicide-Prevention Hotline,” Dec. 13, 2019).

According to the same article, commissioners at the FCC meeting that approved 988 commented that “more than 20 veterans commit suicide each day, and more than 500,000 LGBTQ youth attempt to kill themselves annually. In 2018, more first responders died by suicide than in the line of duty.” The proposal gives nationwide communications systems 18 months to implement 988.

Within the varying circumstances those who attempt or die by suicide find themselves in, the common denominator is often a lack of hope. Beyond Today strives to share the good news of the coming Kingdom of God to offer hope to all who hear it.

If you or someone you know is considering suicide, call the U.S. hotline, 1-800-273-TALK, or one in your region. Also request our free study guide Suicide: Understanding and Preventing It at ucg.org/booklets. (Source: The Washington Post.)
News headlines have been changing by the day with the rapid spread of a new strain of coronavirus from China. On Jan. 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global emergency in response to the international spread of the virus, hoping to prevent outbreaks in countries that do not have the resources and standards to contain it. Despite the extreme quarantine measures being taken in China, cases have already been confirmed in dozens of other countries, including the United States.

Coronavirus causes a respiratory infection. Previous strains include the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic of 2002-2003, which also originated from China and took almost 800 lives, and the MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) outbreak that began in Saudi Arabia in 2012 and killed even more.

Coronaviruses are zoonotic, meaning they originate in and usually only infect animals. However, history has shown that viruses jumping from animals to human beings is both possible and very dangerous. For example, the infamous Spanish Flu of 1918 began when influenza strains in wild and domesticated birds began to interact with human influenza virus strains to produce a particularly infectious and deadly mix.

The new strain of coronavirus is said to have originated in a so-called “wet market” in the city of Wuhan, China. These markets are known for trading in a wide variety of exotic meats and for unsanitary conditions.

Since the SARS outbreak, public health officials around the world have warned of the danger such markets pose in allowing zoonotic viruses to cross species, as they put live and recently slaughtered animals in close proximity to one another amid large and dense masses of people. This is made worse by the diversity of species offered in markets such as the one in Wuhan, which trade in cats, dogs, bats, snakes, turtles, seafood and many other forms of wildlife that are not typically consumed in the Western diet and would not normally have the opportunity to share viruses.

The new virus has been reported as originating in bats or snakes, both of which are designated as unfit for human consumption by God’s food laws found in Leviticus 11. God’s laws also prohibit the consumption of blood (Genesis 9:4), which despite being a known source of infectious disease, is still consumed in many cultures. Maintaining sanitary conditions and humane treatment of one’s livestock is also a biblical principle (Proverbs 12:10) routinely violated in modern times—also contributing to diseases now plaguing the world. Some say the virus entered the Wuhan market from outside, arguing it was engineered in a bioweapons lab and slipped out. Either way, it poses a major threat.

Viruses with severe, easy-to-recognize symptoms, even if deadlier, are usually easier to contain—precisely because of their severity. Since the new coronavirus appears to often result in only mild illness in many individuals, it’s easier for people to transmit it unknowingly, making it very difficult to determine appropriate quarantine boundaries. Currently entire Chinese cities with populations numbering in the millions are under quarantine.

In addition to Chinese quarantine measures, other governments have tightly restricted travel to and from China. It’s very possible the outbreak is already far more widespread than has been realized, as those with only mild symptoms may not seek medical treatment at all and would thus go unreported—even as they unknowingly spread the virus further.

Another major factor in the development of new viruses is how easily it spreads through human-to-human contact. Coronaviruses typically infect animals, like many strains of influenza, but become dangerous when they mutate and gain the ability to infect humans.

The Swine Flu (a strain of influenza known as H1N1) outbreak in 2009-2010 is an example of a virus that mutated to become very efficient at human-to-human transmission. In the 2009-2010 flu season, Swine Flu infected 60 million people in the United States and caused about 12,500 deaths, a relatively low death rate of around 0.002%.

There is a deadly balance between the human-to-human transmission rate and the lethality of a virus that has many concerned about the latest coronavirus. Viruses with very high death rates, such as Ebola (around 50 percent), tend to be self-limiting, like a flame that burns very brightly for a short time. The reason for this is that viral infections require a living host in order to spread.

Viruses that act most quickly are often the most deadly by percentage since the disease can easily be too far advanced by the time a person realizes he needs treatment. However, if a slower-acting virus with a moderate death rate is able to sustain a high transmission rate, the overall impact on the world population can be devastating by comparison.

As this issue was going to press, this new coronavirus has spread to dozens of countries and totaled tens of thousands of infections. The infection is estimated to be lethal for about 2 percent of those who become ill. This is already a much lower estimated lethality than either SARS (10 percent) or MERS (35 percent)—however, it also opens the potential for the virus to spread to far more people throughout the world.

As the World Health Organization has pointed out, overpopulated countries with poor sanitation standards are at the highest risk, as was the case with the 2013-2016 Ebola outbreak. Unlike the flu, there are no current vaccines against coronavirus because it has not been widespread among people. Furthermore, because the virus is new to human beings, there has not been time for natural immunity to develop either.

Many of these outbreaks could have been prevented by obedience to God’s food laws, the sanitation and quarantine standards revealed in the Bible and humane treatment of one’s animals, as God has instructed. All human misery is the result of sin and the process of decay that encompasses the world, but God promises that the entire creation “will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21).

To learn more, read “Plagues on the Horizon?” beginning on page 24, as well as our free Bible study guide The Housemen of Revelation at ucg.org/booklets. (Sources: CDC.gov, The Washington Post.)
“I Go to Prepare a Place for You”

As we focus on eternity before us, we need to understand where we’re headed, what makes it possible, and the encounter that awaits us.

by Robin Webber

In concluding the last "Follow Me" column titled "Fixing Our Eyes on Eternity," I stated that next time we would explore eternity together. So here we are. Are you ready?

Jesus said on the last night of His human existence, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). The wording “I go” gives a sense that He was confidently in motion to prepare something special yet ahead. What was He talking about?

Where should our focus and vision be when it comes to eternity? This is an important question.

It’s been said that the adventurer Christopher Columbus “didn’t know where he was going, didn’t know where he was when he got there, didn’t know where he had been when He got back—and did it all on borrowed capital.”

Columbus was searching for a passage to a new realm beyond the familiar, and likewise so are we. But unlike Columbus’ journey, our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ guide us toward understanding of where we are headed, for whom and why.

Having this understanding living within us is vital to maintaining our spiritual pilgrimage in responding to the upward call of God through Christ’s invitation of "Follow Me" (see Philippians 3:14; Matthew 4:19).

This understanding comes from God today through the Bible. So let’s open up eternity one scripture at a time.

The intimate fellowship of eternity

Our first step forward in discovering the "prepared place" is to grasp the manner in which God the Father and His Son exist in their supernatural, uncreated state. God offers this self-disclosure in Isaiah 57:15: “For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place . . .”

Here we are introduced to a different realm beyond our world of time and space. The Hebrew word for eternity in this verse is "ad," which speaks to continuity, carrying the sense of everlasting and always, having no beginning or end. This does not define a mere location. No tangible man-made “X” could mark a spot called eternity. Rather, eternity designates the limitless existence of God. And to focus on eternity is to focus on God, who alone has inherent life eternal.

Having said this, there’s an amazing verse in the book of Ecclesiastes concerning human beings that tells us God “has put eternity in [our] hearts” (3:11). In creating people in His image, God has purposefully planted a seed of longing for what only an eternity in our hearts” (3:11). In creating people in His image, we have heard the calling to explore eternity together. So here we are. Are you ready?

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Even with man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, there remains a thirst and deep-down hunger for meaning in life beyond “the now” of this goldfish bowl of time and space. Human history and our personal story demonstrate how we have searched for eternity in all the wrong places by imperfect means. Put simply, there are no shortcuts to eternity!

Nearly 2,000 years ago on the last night of His mortal life, Christ earnestly and specifically prayed: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as you have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as you have given Him” (John 17:1-2).

Jesus implores the Father to be with Him at this time for Him to be offered up as the ultimate atoning sacrifice to reconcile and restore humanity to God so that eternal life might be ours.

He then defines what eternity is ultimately about: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (verse 3, emphasis added). Here we discover that eternal life is predicated first and foremost on a relationship that is personal and intimately connected!

The word “know” here is translated from the Greek term ginōsko, indicating a close, warm, even passionate intimacy. The term is applied to Mary not having “known” a man in physical marital terms (Luke 1:34)—as its Old Testament Hebrew equivalent yada was also used of fleshly union (see Genesis 4:1).

Of course, God’s desire is to intimately bond not in flesh, but in spirit and holiness with those made in His image (see 1 Corinthians 6:16-17). The echo of God’s voice through Scripture declares His intent that He would be our God and we His people (Leviticus 26:12; Hebrews 8:12).

Eternity comes at a cost!

Once we understand that eternity is first and foremost defined by an intimate and personal relationship with God who inhabits eternity and that Jesus Christ is “the door” and “the way” to enter such existence (see John 10:7; 14:6), we can begin to understand the truly rich future being prepared for us. Unlike Columbus, our spiritual journey toward eternity is not based on “borrowed capital,” but is paid for by a perfect freely given gift of love.

The prophetic book of Revelation, which ends with a description of eternity, begins with this reality: “All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us” (1:5, New Living Translation).

Let’s fully absorb this reality. Eternal life with God the Father and Jesus Christ comes with a cost—but it’s already been paid for us. That’s why the apostle Paul was inspired to write that “the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

Yes, salvation is a gift! We have nothing by human endeavor to earn or deserve entrance into eternity. It comes by God’s grace through the gift of Christ’s blood—though, as other scriptures tell us, repentance, submission to God, obedience and change through God’s Holy Spirit are required to receive that gift.
So where does this leave us today? Jesus Christ, who existed from eternity, entered our realm of time and space and, after living and dying in the flesh, reentered eternity forever, where He is now preparing a place for us! Absorbing this and in turn freely surrendering our lives in faith in recognition of this supreme act of love signal our ongoing appreciation as we strive with God’s help to be holy, as He is holy (see Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). This means we seek to obey God and become like Him in every way, to “be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

**What are we waiting for?**

Yet some might object to the very idea of eternal life, thinking, “I don’t want to keep living, because what I’m already experiencing seems like an eternity—and you are talking about forever?” Understood! But I’m speaking of a *worthwhile and purposeful eternity* in intimate oneness with our Heavenly Father and His Son, our Elder Brother Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:9-12). They promise us a wonderful future, one far different from the common misconception of lazily laying around in heaven for billions of years!

The same Elder Brother will greet us at the threshold between time and space and eternity and welcome us into His level of existence—thus keeping His promise to go and prepare a place for us. Unlike Columbus, we will know we have arrived at our ultimate destination—of eternal life in the family and Kingdom of God.

Which leads me to one last question for now: Why do we desire to experience eternity? Is it merely for the headaches and heartaches of this realm of time and space to be left behind? (That seems more than humanly reasonable!) Or is it to experience our ultimate encounter of oneness with our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ?

Consider that early Christian believers were not just looking for something to happen. They were waiting for Someone to arrive—to return! Think of making an airport pickup. Are you waiting at the airport just for a jet to arrive, or are you waiting for someone to step off that jet? Imagine if it’s someone you love and who loves you! You are there to see that person’s face, experience his or her smile and embrace. Sometimes you want to hold on and just not let go. Isn’t that what really matters?

Remember the connection Jesus made in John 17:3 between eternal life and our knowing God the Father and Himself. At the end of the day—or, should I say, of time and space—framing eternity is not about applying a tape measure or watching a clock that has stopped forever, but about you and God. It’s about experiencing His love and in turn you answering Jesus’ probing question, “Do you love Me?” (as He asked of the apostle Peter in John 21:15-17). He wants your answer as to whether He is enough for you. Only you alone, like Peter, can provide the answer as to your motivation toward eternity.

**Life’s longing to be fulfilled**

Before I close for now, Scripture describes that ultimate moment of encounter when the door of eternity swings wide open and God the Father steps out to embrace all of perfected humanity—not on an airport runway, but as the apostle John describes in Revelation 21:1-3:

> “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle [or dwelling] of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself be with them and be their God.”

Revelation 22:3-4 further describes the incredible up close and personal encounter God’s faithful servants will have with Him, stating of the coming city: “The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.”

Moses was not allowed to see God’s face and live (Exodus 33:20). Yet he will see it then, as will all God’s faithful. For then will be the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

We have only begun to peek into eternity, but the faithful of God know where we are headed, who will welcome us and what it cost to enter. We have come to understand through Scripture that the hallmark defining eternity is *relationship*. Now we can step further into this realm as we heed Jesus’ invitation of “Follow Me,” seeing more of what Christ has gone ahead to prepare.

In the next column we will delve into “Eternity on Display” as we continue our examination of this subject.

**LEARN MORE**

The future God has planned for us is far greater than the common idea that we’ll go to heaven to sit on clouds playing harps for all eternity. Download or request our free study guide *Why Were You Born?* to learn the astounding truth!

BTmagazine.org/booklets
Thanks for literature and publications

A big, big thank you for your amazing booklets and video teachings. To be brief, our Father in heaven has been leading me for a few years now, responding to my prayers about being led to the narrow path. Your literature has helped me greatly to “put meat on the bones,” if you would excuse the phrase. I’m feeling so much more confident in my right relationship with Him, and also in sharing the gospel of truth. I’m so thankful.

From the Internet

I feel so blessed whenever Beyond Today magazine arrives, and wanted to thank you so very much for making such important material available. Every page provides wisdom, insight and knowledge. Not only that, it’s interesting and provocative. Once I have absorbed all the contents of each issue, I willingly pass it on to others who find its worth just as appealing and uplifting as I do! Thank you from my heart.

Subscriber in Hillcrest, South Africa

Questions about the Trinity

Thank you for your excellent booklet Is God a Trinity? Do you have a site that I could link to, so people could read it online?

From the Internet

Do you teach the Trinity? I personally don’t believe in it and am looking for a church where they do not teach it.

From the Internet

We do not teach the Trinity, and as the comment just above yours mentioned, we have an in-depth Bible study guide about it titled Is God a Trinity? It’s free for the asking. You’ll find it on our website at BTmagazine.org/booklets. Search for it there, and share it with whomever you’d like!

Question about our political views

Does your organization support Trump? I appreciate your transparency.

From the Internet

The United Church of God does not support one political party over another in elections and politics around the world. Our principles come from Scripture, in particular the admonition from the apostle Paul to Timothy, where we read: “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Therefore, no matter who is the leader of any particular country, we teach that prayers are to be made to the Father in heaven for peace and for the opportunity to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. It’s that Kingdom we ultimately support. Of course, we share more common ground with those who promote living in accordance with biblical laws and principles than we do with those who reject the Bible’s instructions.

“You may very well have saved our marriage”

Beyond Today magazine has changed my way of thinking and my life for the better. I especially want to thank you for the Nov.-Dec. 2018 issue on the topic of “A Lasting Marriage.” My wife and I have been going through some difficult times, unsure if we wanted to stay married or not. Yet when I read the editorial in that issue I knew I was not ready to give up! When I shared this article with my wife and we discussed our marriage further, we decided to stay together and put in that work that you talk about. You may very well have saved our marriage from becoming one more to add to the statistics list. I am forever grateful to you and all the wonderful staff at Beyond Today.

From the Internet

Want to send donation

I would love to thank you for your literature, which is an amazing gift for me. I can’t get out and attend church very often due to severe pain and the treatments I’m going through now. I am soon to start chemo again and radiation therapy. My battle is still far from over. God has been wonderful in many ways. I thank Him for all He has given me. Again thank you for your blessing. I don’t have money right now, but I will try to do my best to send a gift soon.

From the Internet

We’re so sorry to hear of your illness. It’s a pleasure to hear our publications have been meaningful for you in your fight against cancer. We have understood it to be our God-given commission to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God freely, charging nothing for it. Thank you for your letter and we pray for God’s healing hand to lift you up.
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