BEYOND TODAY

Envisioning a Better World Tomorrow

Can *You* Change the World?



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Church president: Rick Shabi
Media operation manager: Peter Eddington
Associate editor: Tom Robinson
Senior writers: John LaBissoniere, Darris McNeely, Steve Myers, Gary Petty, Tom Robinson
Design production manager: Mitchell Moss
Senior graphic designer & illustrator: Matt Hernandez
Circulation manager: John LaBissoniere

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Embrace the Change You Can Make

Never before has there been such a seismic transformation of attitudes, morality, economies, national alliances, political ideologies, and movement of people from one nation to another. And things won't slow down in 2024, as more than 60 nations will be electing leaders this year.

Western nations face inflation, massive debt, plummeting morals, rising homelessness, political hostility, violence, "woke" indoctrination and pushes for abortion rights up to the time of birth, significantly altering societal norms.

Add to this the threat of increasing war and ongoing uncontrolled immigration, particularly at the U.S. southern border, and things can seem quite grim. We address aspects of the border crisis in this issue.

Yet for all the geopolitical and domestic shifting we see occurring, the old maxim holds true: The more things change, the more they stay the same. The roots of our troubles are the same as always—the fact that we live in a corrupt world that runs according to the thinking of Satan the devil. And all people face this deep-seated problem in themselves, as explained in this issue's article on human nature.

Furthermore, besides people bringing natural consequences on themselves for their wayward choices, it should be understood that, according to the Bible, the defiant disobedience of our nations to the laws of God revealed in Scripture is bringing terrible curses and divine judgment—and there is yet far more to come.

Where, then, does that leave you? As you survey society's ills, what can you do? Can you change the world, as our cover story asks? Can you as one person or with some others budge the world out of its set pattern of wrong?

Not as things stand. "What is crooked cannot be made straight" (Ecclesiastes 1:15). The problems are at such a scale that even major movements are unlikely to sufficiently undo them. The problems confronting this world and each nation will not be solved by any man, political party, think tank, organization or corporation.

Only the return of Jesus Christ will save mankind from the utter destruction it's hurtling toward. The Bible foretells terrible devastation unlike anything ever seen. Yet it also reveals that Christ will return just in time to usher in a world where true peace, harmony, joy and abundance for all will be possible. You see, God has the power to provide all those blessings. If only man would listen to God and follow His way *now,* things could be so much different.

In a moving statement that reveals His love for mankind and His desire to bestow blessings on those who will obey Him, God says in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

This would take the whole nation yielding to God and turning to follow Him. Yet that's not likely to happen presently, as people and governments are just too steeped in the pursuit of ways of life that are contrary to the Bible (see Jeremiah 6:16). Surely, "their feet run to evil" (Isaiah 59:7), further and further from even the standard morality of a generation ago. God will not provide blessings to such a people with that attitude.

But, while you can't change the world at large, you can change *your* world. If your life is empty, frustrating, and lacks the happiness, sense of purpose and hope for the future, you can do something about it! While the world around you won't turn to God, *you can!*

All the answers to life's problems are in God's Word. It explains that what you need is a new nature from God that comes through His Spirit, as highlighted in this issue. At this time of year the Church of God observes the biblical feast of Pentecost, the occasion on which God gave His Spirit to Christ's early followers in *founding* the Church (see Acts 2).

Christ gave His Church a commission to accomplish today, but it's not about changing this world now. Yet the Church *is* being prepared to change the world at Christ's return. So if you are being called now and if you respond faithfully and endure, you will indeed help to ultimately change the world in the future.

When you know why you're here, what God is doing and what His plan for mankind is, you will find peace of mind, a sense of satisfaction, a meaning and purpose to life, with goals and aspirations given by God that you cannot imagine. It's all waiting for you. God offers it, but you have to reach out and embrace it and live it. Let the change in your world start today!



Rick Shabi, President
United Church of God

A Biblical Worldview in a Darkening Era

The cover article in our January-February 2024 issue explored how we should embrace a worldview and way of life based on the truth found in the Bible.

I wanted you to know how impactful the cover photo was on the January-February issue. It is said a picture is worth a thousand words. It captured my interest, and I greatly appreciated imagining seeing the world through the lens of God, where children play without fear. God speed that day, when our children won't hurt anymore.

From the Internet

"Three Dangerous Worldviews Permeating Modern Society" by Becky Sweat

Thank you for your article. In my 92 years, I have come across them all, and thanks to God and my parents and grandparents, rejected all three of them. While housebound and unable to attend weekly and annual Sabbath services with the United Church of God, I am thankful I can watch webcasts, together with my daughter and full-time caregiver. Thank you again for your timely article.

From the Internet

Thank you so much for the service that you offer in the truth of the Scriptures. This article was truly informative. It allowed me to identify some of the cultural beliefs and intellectual processes that I held in high esteem as being facets of a larger collection of ideologies that I do not and cannot agree with. Bless you all and thank you again for the information and services you provide.

From the Internet

"Don't Quit, Keep Playing" by Terri Eddington

Thank you so much for this article. It is encouraging and helpful for me. I, too, feel like God has me "under construction," and articles like this help me immensely. After my husband died, I was so alone and afraid because he was always there to take care of me—then he was gone! Now I am slowly learning that God is the One who takes care of me, and I need to rely on Him as He makes me ready for His Kingdom. I hope to see more articles like this one.

From the Internet

Your article truly grabs my heart. With tears I thank our loving Father for inspiring this beautiful message for all of us. Thank you for writing this. It's truly a gift from God.

From the Internet

Thanks so much for the article. It was so encouraging. I read the article and came to tears. Thanks for allowing God to use you.

From the Internet

This is a note of appreciation for your article. I've just read it through for the second time, and am keeping it for future reference. Thank you (and the One who guided you) for the clarifying effect of what you wrote.

From the Internet

From the author: Thank you very much for your comments. Writing is how I process and work through my thoughts and emotions. It is very daunting to share one's personal walk of discipleship, but I pray the article's principles will encourage and have positive application in the lives of others (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Readers send their thoughts on and thanks for *Beyond Today* literature and United Church of God resources

Greetings and God bless you all for the wonderful work you do in spreading Christ's gospel message of the Kingdom of God. Thank you so much for all the literature you have sent me. I enjoy reading and learning about God's great plan for mankind.

From the Internet

I am enclosing part of my tithe to help with the cost of the free literature you offer to all upon request. Thank you for your belief as recorded in the Bible when Jesus sent out his disciples: "Freely you have received, freely give." May God bless your churches around the world and especially here in Canada.

Subscriber in Canada

Your magazine is very informative and enlightening. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am serving time in prison, where there are many false religions, false views of the Bible and an overall hate for Jesus, as well as lack of taking responsibility for mistakes that were made to land a person here. I am thankful for your resources to read and meditate on. Most people take all kinds of medication to cope with prison surroundings; I use the Bible and Bible-based material to serve as medication for my soul. Thank you and God bless you all.

Reader in prison

Your magazine has opened my eyes to truths I never knew before. Please thank the ministers and Church members who give tithes that pay for the booklets you mail to me and others.

From the Internet

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to Beyond Today, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or email BTinfo@ucg.org (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).



Can *You* Change the World?

The big problems of today's world provoke fear for the future. Can you really do anything about these looming issues? Here are practical steps you can take to change your world—and prepare to change tomorrow's world.

by Darris McNeely

Much of life today seems beyond our control, with the world heading into worsening times. Each day brings news of some big event that impacts us—if not directly, at least weighing us down with serious concerns about the future. War continues in the Middle East and Ukraine. The Hamas atrocities against Israelis were shocking and horrifying. Israeli retaliation brought more scenes of suffering and death. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has ripped apart lives and threatens other European states. But what can we really do? Initial shock and prayers for peace give way to trying to get on with normal lives.

But that can be hard when we think more about it. The possibility of nuclear arms in these conflicts adds another present threat. Our generation has not seen a nuclear weapon used on a specific population. We know of it only from the history of World War II. Yet the threat for today is real, pressing on us with real fear.

In the end, just what can you, as an individual, do about these things? Nothing, it seems. Such matters are beyond our power to control or influence. So is there anything you can do to bring needed change? In noting some other worrisome issues, let's consider steps we should take.

Debt and inflation

I read a lot about inflation eating away our savings and pushing many people to the edge of insolvency. Food and energy prices take increasing chunks of our monthly wages. The Bible talks about putting money into "a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:6)—a hole in your pocket in today's language—as a sign of a sick and weak economy, as it is now.

Government spending is a significant contributor. America's national debt is metastasizing into a cancer that, unless corrected, will kill us off as a people. Bear with me for some unsettling statistics.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article reported that the Congressional Budget Office "forecasts that under current law the national debt [federal publicly held debt borrowed from credit markets] will grow to $48.3 trillion in 2034 from $26.2 trillion this last fiscal year—a whopping 84% increase. Debt as a share of GDP will rise to 116% in 2034 from 97.3%. As helpful historical context, the U.S. added $22.3 trillion in debt in its entire history through 2021, about as much as

it's projected to pile on over the next 10 years" ("CBO Shows the U.S. Is Paddling Toward the Fiscal Falls," Feb. 9, 2024).

Since the majority of this spending is in entitlements and discretionary spending like Medicare and Social Security, no politician wants to be the one to reduce these items. We're entangled in a web of spending from which there is no turning back. Any sane person looking at this picture knows it will one day kill the republic.

Look at that figure of $48.3 trillion. America is currently adding about $1 trillion in new debt *every three months.* No one understands how much money one trillion is, much less 48 trillion. It's an inconceivable number. Yet it's real, and it has consequences.

There is nothing you or I can do to correct this in our lifetime today. But there is something we can do in our own life, in our personal world. We can live within our income. We can avoid the kind of deficit spending that could push us and our family into bankruptcy or systemic generational poverty.

Sound financial management of personal income is within your means to learn, use and master. There are sound financial principles found in the Bible that form a basis for a solvent lifestyle. The Bible speaks well of the saver, noting the ant wisely stores up food for the winter (Proverbs 6:6-11). It speaks favorably of someone who would provide for his children and grandchildren: "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous" (Proverbs 13:22). Of course, not everyone today has such means, but we should strive to do what we can in our given circumstances.

When we manage our money to save not just for ourselves but others, we're practicing other spiritual principles taught in the Bible. Money does not become an obsession, a god or false idol. Having savings instead of chronic debt puts you in a position *to help others* who may be going through a rough period. We then become givers rather than takers. It's far better for us to help others than always go to a friend, relative or government program for support. This pleases God, as it aligns us with His nature.

You cannot change out-of-control government spending, but you can change *your own* spending and reap the tangible blessings. In the process you will also be learning how to manage spending on a larger scale. This puts you on the track of God's great purpose for your life should you choose to follow. More on this later.

Let's consider another major problem we face but cannot change.

> We cannot change the world, but we can change *our* world. We cannot solve these large problems through activism or our engagement and intention to help.

Corruption in government and leadership

It seems not a day passes without another revelation of corrupt behavior by a politician, judge, business leader, religious figure or other high-profile person. It may be salacious. And sometimes it's criminal, such as embezzlement of funds or deliberate financial fraud. Incompetence and lying lead to public humiliation too. Sadly, we've come to expect nothing better from those appointed to positions of stewardship.

Isaiah's description of such corruption fits our day: "Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward. Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment" (Isaiah 1:4-6).

Shock at the corruption leads to discouragement and gives way to cynicism and a breakdown of trust. But what can you do about it? Elect a righteous congressman, governor or president?

Years ago I heard it said that if you could find a person with the wisdom of Solomon, the patience of Job, the integrity of Joseph and the righteousness of Jesus Christ, such would be worthy of high political office. Perhaps there's someone today with high integrity and capability, but such a person running for office would still be attacked, hindered and destroyed by the system.

The point, again, is that we will not be able to change this—*but we can make choices to change ourselves.* And that's what God wants you to do. He wants you to *start changing yourself* to be like these figures from the Bible. That's why the record of their lives is preserved—to be an example to us of how to live, not just for today but for eternity in the family of God (1 Corinthians 10:11).

We cannot change the world, but we can change *our* world. We cannot solve these large problems through activism or our engagement and intention to help. Don't misunderstand. Where we can engage and make a difference, we should. But it's far more important we come to see that we can start changing ourselves and begin a life of preparation for the world to come. This is God's intent.

Working with what you're given

It's described in a parable Jesus gave for His disciples through the ages—the parable of the pounds or minas in Luke 19. In it a man gives to each of 10 of his

Matt Hernandez, with elements by lemono/iStock via Getty Images

servants the same amount of money, amounting to about three month's salary, telling them to use this to "do business" until he returns (verse 13). And on returning he demands an accounting showing how much each servant had increased his master's investment.

The first servant increased his amount by 10 times. The nobleman (representing Christ in the story) rewarded him with authority over 10 cities. The second increased his amount by five times. He received the promise of five cities. Then came another who had done nothing with his money. He had wrapped it in a cloth and hidden it away, not even putting it out for loan in the bank to gain a bit of interest. His amount was taken away and given to the first servant.

Jesus is here using money as an example of spiritual growth. The money and opportunity given here represent living within your means and using what you've been given to grow in knowledge, character and experience—in short, making changes in life and becoming a productive and profitable servant. This parable gives us clear and direct help in dealing with the monumental challenges confronting this present world. We cannot change this world. Only Jesus at His return will bring lasting change through the Kingdom of God, which will replace the kingdoms of this world (Revelation 11:15).

The parable tells us we can work to change ourselves and our circumstances as part of preparing to rule with Christ in His Kingdom. Get your financial life in order, live by God's financial teaching—this applying to all areas of your life—and you will be able to manage the affairs of many people in the coming Kingdom. Live within your means and avoid crippling debt and you in your personal "city" will develop spiritual priorities enabling you to manage the larger affairs of multiple cities. Lay up an inheritance as you're able, and you will know how to implement policies that enhance the lives of those who will live in those cities.

This is why you were born

This life is preparation for a coming world where righteousness reigns. If you today develop the wisdom of Solomon, your judgments, properly used, will bring stability to your life and your family. If you build the spiritual fruit of patience, like Job, you will not be tossed about by the currents of problems in the world that could shipwreck your personal life.

If you live with the integrity of a Joseph in your thoughts and actions, you will find inner peace and calm and will rise above the stress of life, able to avoid temptation and secure in the knowledge that God guides your life despite what everyone else does.

And by drawing near to God and continually seeking His help to become righteous like Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:48; 6:33), you can live and reign with Christ and assist in the coming transformation of the entire world (Revelation 20:5).



> Where we can engage and make a difference, we should. But it's far more important we come to see that we can start changing ourselves and begin a life of preparation for the world to come.

You cannot change the world at large—yet. But you can *change yourself*. Change is difficult. Well-meaning resolutions in January are not enough. It takes much more. Change is something God wants us to do. But He doesn't expect us to do it alone. Neither does He expect us to rely on a lot of self-help ideas and techniques. God wants us to live successful, positive lives, and He promises us the help we need to transform our lives into the vibrant happy lives we desire but often find so elusive.

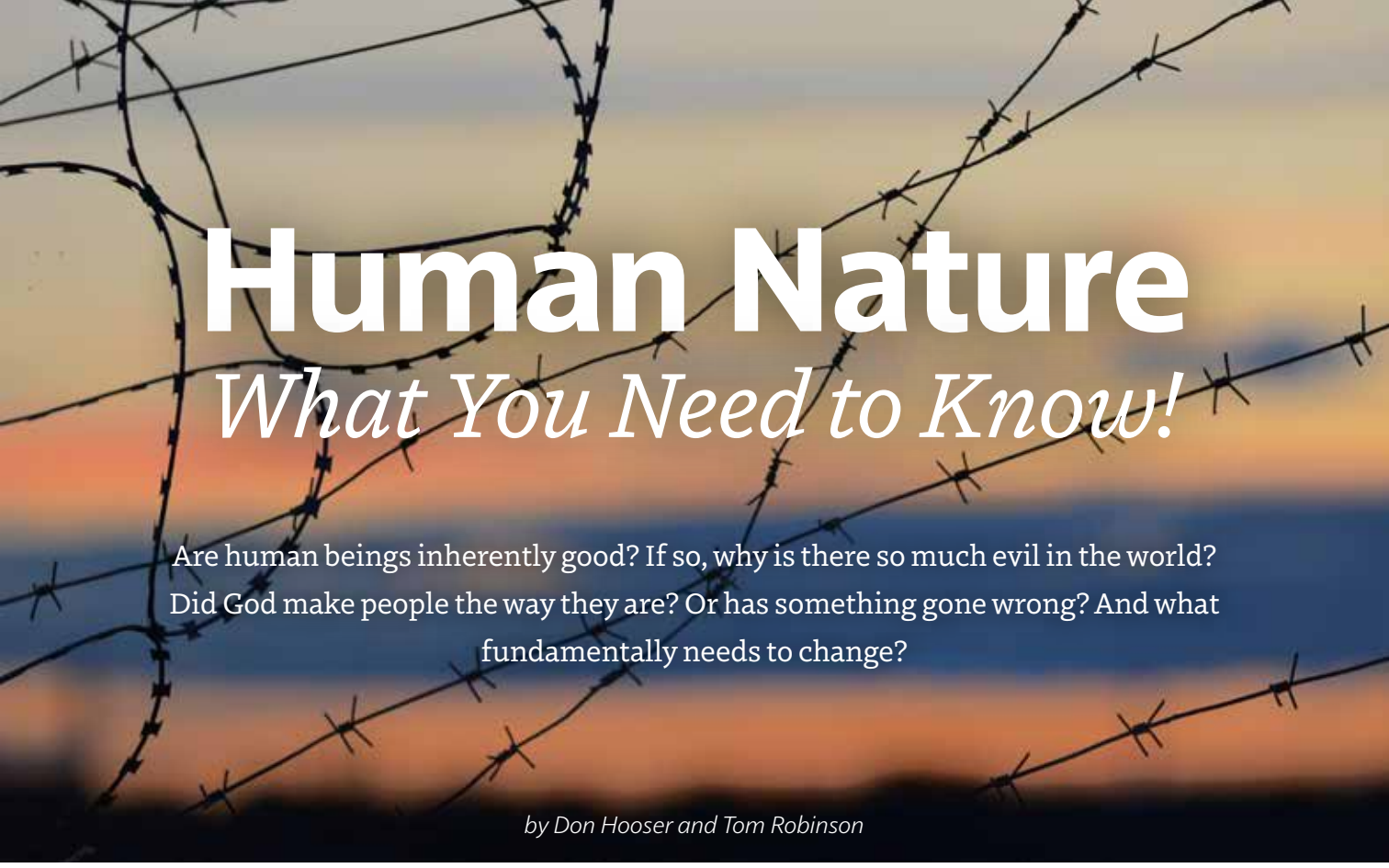
All change begins in our mind and heart—where we consider our lives and what we do. When we're aligned with the mind of God, the power of God, we can expect to produce change that endures. Change that leads to a Spirit-led life with real meaning and purpose! BT

DIVE DEEPER



To learn more about the wonderful Kingdom of God, which Jesus will bring to the world at His return—and how you can experience the reality of the Kingdom in your life today—be sure to download or request your free copy of our study guides *The Gospel of the Kingdom* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*

Scan the code or visit ucg.org/mj24 to find it.



Human Nature

What You Need to Know!

Are human beings inherently good? If so, why is there so much evil in the world? Did God make people the way they are? Or has something gone wrong? And what fundamentally needs to change?

by Don Hooser and Tom Robinson

Albert Einstein once said regarding the threat of modern warfare: "It is easier to denature plutonium than it is to denature the evil spirit of man" ("The Real Problem Is in the Hearts of Men," *New York Times Magazine,* June 23, 1946). That is, it would be easier to alter the key element in nuclear weaponry, rendering it harmless, than it would be to change what people are in their inner core and render destructive human nature harmless.

But is man's inner nature really evil? It's a long-debated subject. For many centuries in the Western world, Catholic dogma taught that man is inherently evil—even born with the stain of "original sin" passed down from Adam and Eve. Many Protestant churches persisted in this view.

Enlightenment philosophers brought new ideas, some espousing that man is inherently good, like Jean-Jacques Roussseau's concept of the "noble savage" corrupted by civilization into unnatural wants. But so-called "primitive" cultures were wracked with war and atrocities. John Locke advocated for an empiricism or nature developed through experiences, arguing that in terms of character man is not born sinful but with a clean slate and is later corrupted into wrongdoing.

Later psychologists would argue that human character is a product of biological urges, mental health issues and social dynamics, dismissing the issue of morality as bringing harmful stress and guilt. Yet understanding morality and the biblical topic of sin is vital to understanding human nature.

> It's critically important that, to understand human beings, we look to the Creator of humankind. Through His Word, the Bible, He gives us understanding of our basic human nature.

Indeed, it's critically important that, to understand human beings, we look to the Creator of humankind. Through His Word, the Bible, He gives us understanding of our basic human nature and thereby provides essential wisdom in dealing with the world around us and our own problems.

According to the Bible, is human nature good or bad?

In Jeremiah 17:9, God declares: *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked;* who can know it?" (emphasis added throughout). The word "heart" refers to man's thoughts and spiritual nature. People try to hide this nature, even from themselves, but it nevertheless gives rise to wrong thinking and action. As Jesus Christ stated, "For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness"

Images, from left: Jem Sahagun/Unsplash; ehmitrich/Unsplash



(Mark 7:21-22, New Living Translation).

The apostle Paul explained that all flesh-and-blood human beings share this nature: "The mindset of the flesh is *hostile to God* because it *does not submit to God's law.* Indeed, it is *unable* to do so" (Romans 8:7, Christian Standard Bible). God's law is the expression of His perfect righteous and good character of love or outflowing concern toward others—the way of giving, helping and caring. The opposite of this is the evil selfish and self-promoting way of vanity and taking for self. Man has a nature set on the latter—being *hostile* to God.

Yet don't people give and share? To an extent yes. But are they fully in line with God in all they think and do? Jesus remarked of average, everyday people: "If you then, *being evil,* know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:11). "Being evil" is a problem that besets everyone to varying degrees. But notice that those Jesus addressed also knew how to give to their children.

The Bible makes it clear that all human beings have a spiritually downward pull away from pure godliness. And none of them has lived without sin, the violation of God's law or way of life, except for Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23; 1 John 3:4; Hebrews 4:15).

So how is it that many people are kind and decent in character? Each person has a unique temperament, personality and set of past experiences and future goals that have helped in shaping his or her life. People are shaped by many influences, both good and bad. Development of thinking and behavior is influenced by parents, family, teachers, friends, religion, etc. The Bible greatly emphasizes that parents must *continually teach* their children God's laws and values (see Deuteronomy 6:6-9). People also learn from cause and effect—the consequences of our actions leading to some needed reforms.

We must further realize that God made people as social beings who need to be able to get along with each other to certain extents for the sake of human survival. Paul also mentions that even gentile nations apart from God's law had a sense of conscience about right and wrong (Romans 2:14-15), though that would not always steer them right and could be suppressed (compare Proverbs 14:12; 1 Timothy 4:2).

The origin of human nature

God did not create man with an evil nature. In Ecclesiastes 7, where Solomon is lamenting the sinfulness of people, he makes this comment: "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes"—or inventive ways to be bad (verse 29).

This did not mean that Adam and Eve had godly righteous character when they were formed in the Garden of Eden. Rather, they were in a state of innocence—having as yet made no moral choice against an alternative way. God decreed their creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31). But righteous character was to come through right choices yet to be made. God had made them to be initially responsive to Him and to get along with each other. So they started in the right way. They had certain physical needs and desires that were being met, so there was as yet no temptation toward selfishness.

But then came direct temptation from Satan the devil as the serpent in the garden. Eve succumbed to deception and the enticement to disobey God's command. Adam wasn't deceived but he also ate the forbidden fruit (1 Timothy 2:14). In partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, man effectively chose to determine good and evil for himself, submitting to Satan's influence and rule. Here was the beginning of the nature of man being corrupted. But the corruption did not stop with them.

As noted earlier, many have taught the idea that all people are now tainted with "original sin" through descent from Adam and Eve—born condemned in sin. Quoted in evidence is Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—" Why did death spread to all? Not because of Adam's sin but *"because all sinned"* (same verse)—and in different ways from Adam (verse 14). It was not from being tainted with Adam's sin.

God says people are only condemned for their own sins, not those of their forefathers (Ezekiel 18:20). It's true that consequences of sins are passed down generationally (Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18), but that's because of life patterns, teachings and altered circumstances being passed on and having long-term effects.

There were major consequences of Adam and Eve's sin for their descendants to follow. These included being largely cut off from God and living in a cursed world subject to the malignant influence of Satan and his demons.

Growing up in Satan's world

Until Jesus Christ returns to earth, God is allowing Satan to continue as the "god of this age" and the "ruler of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4; John 12:31). Satan is a vicious liar who "deceives the whole world" to believe and "call evil good, and good evil" (John 8:44; Revelation 12:9; Isaiah 5:20).

At times he misleads people directly, but he promulgates his deception further by letting it spread, with many acting as

Pablo Heimplatz/Unsplash

> What's the remedy for human nature? It's to "be transformed" spiritually (Romans 12:1-2).

his unwitting agents. Satan and his demons operate behind the governments and other institutions of this world. They control the media, education, religions. They operate among the masses and in individuals.

Ephesians 2:2 explains that the course of this world is set by Satan as *"the prince of the power of the air,* the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." Evidently, Satan has what we might call a spiritual "broadcast" of wrong moods and attitudes going out to the world to which human minds are attuned. So there's far more to all the moral ills of the world than just competing self-interests. Rather, people are stirred up to live sinfully—and this starts early.

People are not born with sin, as many assume. Babies begin with a clean slate, as Locke maintained. Jesus used the innocence and teachableness of little children to illustrate the proper attitude for receiving God's Kingdom (Matthew 19:14). But at some point in early moral development, corruption sets in. We don't know when this happens except that Genesis 8:21 says of people that "everything they think or imagine is bent toward evil *from childhood"* (NLT).

Obviously, babies need to be self-centered so they will let parents know when they are hungry, hurting, need changing, etc. (Even when we're older, a degree of self-concern and self-care is appropriate.) But at some point toddlers will start exhibiting some measures of selfishness and greed.

As children are growing up, they need lots of good influences to counteract the many bad influences of Satan and society and the urges to gratifying self without proper consideration for others, and for God above all. They must be taught the Bible and biblical values. And all of us need to continue in these through life.

Those who believe human nature is basically good come up with many excuses for people's destructive behavior. They often blame circumstances like poverty or race rather than holding each evildoer personally accountable, promoting a *victim mentality* among perpetrators. Elitists seeking tyrannical power over others reason that the inferior ignorant masses need their wise guidance.

Recognizing the deceitfulness of human nature, avoid putting too much trust in leaders, in other people *and in yourself* (Psalm 146:3; Jeremiah 17:5; Proverbs 3:5). Satan's world is arrayed against us—and the chief agent in that is our own human nature. We are our own worst enemy!

Dealing with this ingrained corrupt nature

As we've seen, since the sin of Adam and Eve humanity has been subject to the sway of Satan. His spiritual broadcast and societal influences permeate people's thinking from a young age, so that man's innate nature is gradually dominated by what we refer to as human nature—really a *corrupted* human nature taking on *Satan's* nature.

Yet we might wonder why God would allow Satan's continuing influence over the earth and his ongoing work in human nature to pull people downward. We're told that God allows temptations and difficulties as a means of *testing* and *strengthening* us (James 1:2-3). We can compare this with physical exercise. We need resistance such as weights to pull and push against to better strengthen our muscles. And so it is with building spiritual character.

What's the remedy for human nature? It's to "be transformed" spiritually (Romans 12:1-2). The apostle Peter explained: "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38, NLT).

God's Holy Spirit heals our spiritual blindness, enabling us to understand spiritual truth! (Matthew 13:16; 1 Corinthians 2:9-12). And Galatians 5, after relating the "desires of your sinful nature" (verses 19-21, NLT), tells us the wonderful "fruit"—the holy and happy virtues—of the Holy Spirit (verses 22-23). (See "Do You Really Have the Holy Spirit?" beginning on page 22.)

However, having God's Holy Spirit does not completely remove one's ingrained human nature. In Romans 7, Paul, even though an *apostle,* describes his ongoing "war" with his "carnal" or fleshly human nature. He wrote: "I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate" (verse 15, NLT). Happily, in the next chapter, Romans 8, Paul explains a lot about how the Holy Spirit transforms and empowers a person!

Human nature is like a magnet. The closer one gets to a temptation, the stronger is the pull of that temptation. So don't rely on only "resisting" temptations. Several scriptures urge us to avoid them and *"flee"* from them! (e.g., Proverbs 4:14-15; 1 Timothy 6:9-11; 2 Timothy 2:22).

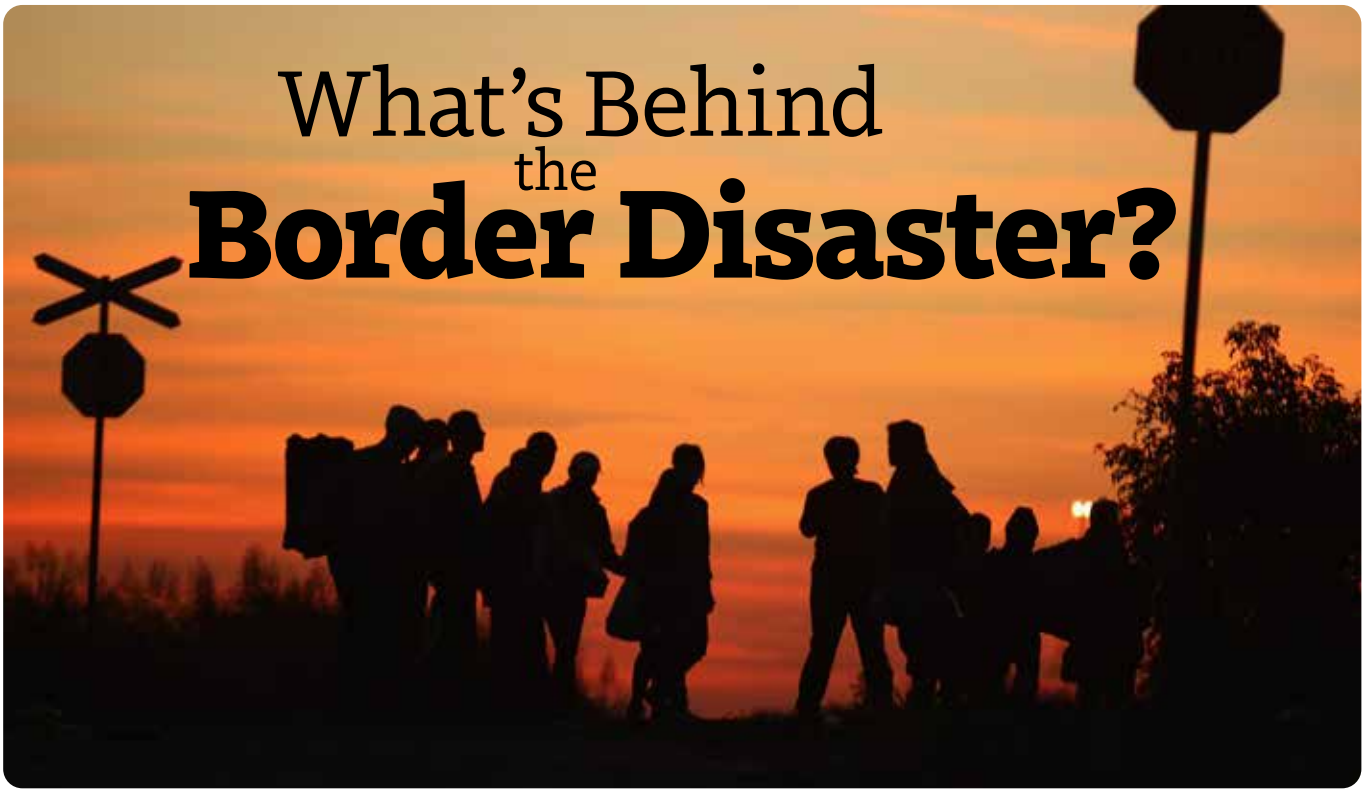
We need to be drawing near to God (James 4:8)—and should do so every day through prayer and Bible reading and striving to live by every word of God (Luke 4:4). If we do, we can thoroughly enjoy the power and pleasure of *God's nature* at work within us! (2 Peter 1:2-4). And then after we're ultimately transformed in the Kingdom of God, we will no longer be burdened with human nature—for we will be filled completely with the pure and wonderful nature of God! BT

DIVE DEEPER



Would you like to change from the person you've been to the new person God wants you to be? You can—in submitting to Him and receiving His help. To learn more, request or download our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*

Scan the code or visit ucg.org/mj24 to find it.



What's Behind the Border Disaster?

Illegal immigration has reached crisis levels in many nations, threatening the rule of law and national security. It's hitting the United States on a scale never before seen. Why is this happening, and what is the ultimate solution to this disturbing global issue?

by John LaBissoniere

Enormous numbers of people around the world are experiencing poverty, persecution, crime and warfare. Many are willing to leave their homeland to find a better life in another nation—some seeking to do so lawfully but others by illegal migration. This can profoundly change the nations being flooded with such migrants. And amid the huge influx are many entering for nefarious reasons. Even if that's a small percentage of the millions of illegal entrants, it could still mean many thousands bringing serious harm.

We certainly sympathize with true asylum seekers and even those just looking for better opportunities. But there must a be a careful, lawful process for immigration for the safety and well-being of all concerned. Non-enforcement of immigration laws as part of an effectively open-border policy promotes increased lawlessness and a real threat to national security.

The problem has reached crisis proportions—on a massive scale of millions in the United States but also in other countries on a smaller scale. In 2022 authorities in Italy reported that more than 138,000 people entered the country illegally—many arriving by boat from North Africa. Spain reported in 2023 that nearly 57,000 migrants unlawfully entered its territory by land and sea, marking an 82 percent year-on-year increase over the previous high recorded in 2018. Other European nations experiencing high numbers of illegal aliens in 2022 included Germany, Greece, France and Hungary.

In 2022 the consultancy firm Immigroup listed the world's top 10 destinations for unlawful immigration. The highest by far was the United States—and this was based on figures before the huge surge of the last few years—followed by India, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, Malaysia, Brazil, South Korea, the Philippines and Canada.

We'll focus here specifically on the example of the United States as the planet's topmost destination. The nation's 2,000-mile (3,200-km) southern border has often faced the challenge of unauthorized entry by foreign nationals. Government policies a few years back slowed illegal migration significantly, but this was reversed under the current administration, leading to the worst period of unlawful entry on record—seen now by many as amounting to a foreign invasion supported by the federal government. The crisis is so severe that some states have passed laws and sent their own personnel to the border to defend themselves against this invasion.

We should consider the grave dangers here, seeking to know what's behind all this and if there is a way out of the problem.



As small groups of migrants and huge caravans of thousands began arriving at various points along the border, U.S. Border Patrol agents and border cities and towns were completely overwhelmed.

Successful border enforcement measures canceled

The current situation began soon after Joe Biden took office as president in January 2021. In line with campaign promises, he immediately began reversing the enforcement measures of the former president, Donald Trump, canceling 64 border-related executive orders that had reduced illegal immigration to its lowest level in 45 years.

Besides announcing a 100-day cessation of deportations of illegal migrants and offering them work permits and several government benefits, the new administration also halted the construction of the U.S.-Mexican border wall and the "Remain in Mexico" policy—which had required all migrants seeking asylum to wait there until they were given a hearing before a U.S. immigration judge. Moreover, the Biden administration disregarded various provisions of the legislation governing immigration policy detailed in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

As word spread around the world about Biden's promises and his direct call for migrants to surge the border, the numbers began increasing so sharply that in less than three months after taking office, his administration was thrust into a major humanitarian and political crisis. As small groups of migrants and huge caravans of thousands began arriving at various points along the border, U.S. Border Patrol agents and border cities and towns were completely overwhelmed. In fact, rather than guarding the border, officials were compelled by the new policies to spend most of their time simply processing border crossers and releasing them into the country.

In a U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee meeting on Dec. 20, 2023, Chairman Mark Green said: "Processing and releasing illegal aliens into the interior is not the job they [the border agents] signed up for and it pulls them away from their vital frontline security mission. It goes directly against their law enforcement mandate to enforce consequences against lawbreaking, not reward it."

A harrowing journey of abuse and rape

Tragically, vulnerable people are often hurt more than helped in coming.

As massive numbers of migrants made the dangerous 3,000-mile journey across Central America and Mexico, many were reported to have been exposed to violence and death, as had happened in previous migrant caravan treks along this route. According to a 2018 report by David Sivak at checkyourfact.com, 80 percent of migrant women traveling to the U.S. border through Mexico were subjected to rape by transnational gang members, other migrants or corrupt officials.

In 2023, when Luis Miranda, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security spokesperson, was questioned about reported rapes he said, "The inhumane way smugglers abuse, extort, and perpetrate violence against migrants for profit is criminal and morally reprehensible."

Another outcome of the shift in border policy is that some parents, especially from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, paid smugglers to bring their minor children to the U.S.-Mexican border to escape poverty and gang violence. Sadly, many of these children were mistreated or abused, and some died on the precarious journey. Those who arrived at the border were taken into protective custody by U.S. border officials. According to a CBS News report on Oct. 14, 2022, the number of unaccompanied minor children entering the United States numbered 130,000 by the end of the 2022 fiscal year.

Drugs, guns, human smuggling and trafficking

Two of the seven vicious Mexican drug cartels, Sinaloa and Jalisco—that in effect control who and what crosses the U.S.-Mexican border—took full advantage of Biden's virtual open-border policy. These criminal organizations vastly increased their wealth and power by expanding their lucrative cross-border drug and weapons smuggling operations and intensifying their human smuggling and trafficking efforts.

The drug offensive is killing in vast numbers, particularly through fentanyl (see "Border crisis facilitating fentanyl onslaught" on page 17).

On bringing people in, the U.S. State Department says that *human smuggling* "occurs when a person voluntarily enters into an agreement with a smuggler to gain illegal entry into a foreign country and is moved across an international border." And *human trafficking* is defined as "a crime involving the exploitation of an individual for the purposes of compelled labor or a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, or coercion."

Images, from left: John Moore/Staff; Christopher Furlong/Staff. Both via Getty Images.



Human smuggling often becomes trafficking when exorbitant fees demanded for the migrants' journey to the border leads to debt bondage. The migrants agree to work off the payment to the cartel, entrapping them in an abusive cycle of never-ending debt and forced labor, often as sex slaves, as "fees" and compounding interest penalties mount up. Migrants have been killed for not following through on paying their debts.

No vetting of asylum claims or hostile nation concerns

While migrant admittance is legally justifiable in cases of genuine need for asylum, most are coming for economic benefit. Yet they are frequently coached by immigration lawyers and others to claim asylum over "persecution" back home, obligating U.S. border agents to issue them a "notice to appear" at a future asylum hearing. Prior to that court date, which is often set years later, they are permitted (paroled) to travel and settle in the country. Many are bussed or flown by the government or other handlers to cities throughout the nation. Will these people really show up later? Records to date show that very few do.

In his 2024 State of the Union Address, Joe Biden repeated what he'd recently explained—these court dates are intentionally set years off because if they were only a few weeks or months after arrival, the migrants, fearing they might be turned back shortly, would not risk paying all the money to cartels and going through the ordeal to come. Thus, the later court dates are meant as incentive for vast numbers to pour in!

And then there are those who may intend harm. Border agents can only check U.S. and some allies' crime and terrorism databases but can't investigate such data about migrants coming from Russia, China and other nations that may be hostile to America—with the migrants possibly acting as foreign agents. (More on this shortly.)

Citizens increasingly alarmed

A January 2024 survey by Rasmussen Reports and the National Pulse found that 65 percent of likely U.S. voters believe it is accurate to describe the current situation with migrants at the border with Mexico as an "invasion" of the country. Citizens have become increasingly alarmed that

While migrant admittance is legally justifiable in cases of genuine need for asylum, most are coming for economic benefit. And then there are those who may intend harm.

terrorists have been given the opportunity to enter the nation to do great harm—especially in view of the vicious attacks carried out by Hamas terrorists in Israel in October 2023.

In testimony before the U.S. House's Homeland Security Committee on Oct. 31, 2023, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray stated, "The reality is that the terrorism threat has been elevated throughout 2023, but the ongoing war in the Middle East has raised the threat of an attack against Americans in the United States to a whole other level."

He continued by saying that the attack that killed over 1,300 people in Israel "will serve as an inspiration [to potential terrorists] the likes of which we haven't seen since ISIS launched its so-called caliphate years ago."

Terrorism watch list, "gotaways" and "special interest aliens"

The U.S. Border Patrol has reported a marked increase in apprehensions of individuals with matches on the FBI's "terror watch list." According to an Oct. 11, 2023 report by CBS News, "Of those processed at official ports of entry, there were 227 terror database hits with individuals processed along the southern border in fiscal year 2023."

Also, in a March 6, 2024 report, Fox News reported that the current total number of terror-watch encounters stands at 340 compared to 11 during the four years of the Trump administration. That elevated figure does not include terror suspects who may have illegally entered the country and evaded arrest—described as "gotaways" by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Although the agency does not release this data publicly, it is estimated that there have been 1.7 million gotaways since the beginning of the Biden administration.

Even more concerning are what are described as "special interest aliens," referring to individuals from nations that either promote terrorism, harbor terrorists or pose possible security threats to the United States. The Border Patrol encountered *nearly 73,000* such migrants from October 2021 to October 2023—many from the Middle East. These encounters included 6,386 nationals from Afghanistan, 3,153 from Egypt, 659 from Iran, 538 from Syria, 139 from Yemen, 123 from Iraq, 164 from Lebanon, 1,613 from Pakistan, 13,624 from Uzbekistan and 30,830 from Turkey.

Furthermore, there are increasing concerns about men of military-age allowed into America from Russia, China and other nations. In 2023 *more than 37,000* Chinese citizens

John Moore/Staff via Getty Images

crossed into the country, which is nearly *10 times* the total in 2022 and more than double that of the entire previous decade. With the control China exercises over its people, it seems extremely unlikely that such numbers could come in large groups of their own accord. (Also read "Alarm over invasion at the U.S. southern border" on page 16.)

Migrant crime potential and criminal gangs

A Pew Research Center survey conducted from January 16-21, 2024 asked specifically about the impact of the migrant influx on crime in the United States. A majority (57 percent) responded that the large number of migrants seeking to enter the country could lead to more crime.

Even as many migrants want to come to the United States for a chance at a better life, it's clear that criminals are also arriving. As before, even if this is a relatively small percentage, the huge number of people coming in unvetted would make this a significant number. For example, members of the violent La Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) gang and those from other criminal gangs have exploited the open border to enter the country.

Some recent news stories in this regard have received wide attention. On Jan. 31, 2024, seven illegal aliens took part in a beating attack on two New York City police officers in Times Square. On Feb. 22, the brutal murder of Laken Riley, a 22-year-old female nursing student in Athens, Georgia was allegedly perpetrated by a Venezuelan illegal immigrant who had apparently been released into the United States in 2022. Moreover, on Feb. 27 the state of Louisiana reported that an illegal alien from Honduras had been arrested for the rape of a 14-year-old girl at knifepoint and for the repeated stabbing of a man during a robbery.

The roots of the crisis and needed deliverance

Again, it's important to be sympathetic to people seeking a better life for themselves and their families. But this certainly must not mean condoning actions that ignore or abrogate lawful and commonsense safeguards. Granting unrestricted access to enter the United States or any country is profoundly unwise and destructive—and uncompassionate to both citizens and migrants. Any action that causes harm to many and subverts morality is ungodly, reprehensible and shameful.

Why is this happening? We can't see all the reasons. A lot can be said regarding the desire of some to gain more political power through changed constituencies, of causing economic harm and increased unease to expand government dependence, of corporate interests looking for cheap labor, and of foreign and globalist interests that would like to see a weakened country—to bring greater parity among the nations. Such elements exist in other countries as well.

But when we see such widespread harm from the nation's leadership, we should recognize that the problems are fundamentally spiritual. The Bible explains that there are dark forces stirring up people to betray and hate one another—led by Satan, the ruler of this world (see John 14:30).

But something else is also happening. God foretold that nationwide obedience to Him would bring national blessings, while widespread disobedience would bring national curses (see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). And frankly that's where we are. God has given us over to corrupt and confounded leaders. He foretold, "The LORD will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of heart" (verse 28). And He also warned, "The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower" (verse 43).

God also said, "I will even appoint terror over you . . . Those who hate you shall reign over you" (Leviticus 26:16-17). The people's own leaders have put them at risk of far greater infiltration by terrorists than what the world saw on 9/11. This is deadly serious.

Thankfully, every person can look forward to a magnificent coming time when the ultimate solution to all the troubles of humankind will finally take place—at the return of Jesus Christ.

There have been campaign promises from those opposed to current policies to try to turn things around, including through deporting many illegal immigrants—although that would be massively difficult. How do you track down literally millions who've been wrongly admitted in? And would they all leave willingly? Where would they go? There are no good answers, and the only sure thing is that even harder times are coming.

The only real solution to such problems is a return to God and heartfelt plea for His forgiveness and deliverance. Thankfully, every person can look forward to a magnificent coming time when the ultimate solution to all the troubles of humankind will finally take place—at the return of Jesus Christ. Then all will learn to live in peace with each other, and no one will need to flee their home country. Indeed, all will be fully satisfied with no fear (Micah 4:4). Let us eagerly anticipate and spiritually prepare for that coming marvelous future age! BT

DIVE DEEPER



What is happening to the United States and other English-speaking nations? Is there really a connection to the blessings and curses laid out in the Bible? Be sure to request or download our free study guide *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*. And to learn more about the ultimate solution coming for the whole world, also get a free copy of *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/mj24 to find them.**

Alarm over invasion at the U.S. southern border

On March 9, 2024, U.S. Border Patrol agents apprehended a Lebanese migrant crossing from Mexico into the United States who claimed to be with Hezbollah, a terrorist organization. He further stated his intentions of heading to New York and making a bomb ("Report: Self-Proclaimed Hezbollah Terrorist Arrested at Border in Texas," Breitbart, March 18, 2024). This was following 60 other immigrants over the few months prior who were



identified as being on the terror watch list—and 270 apprehended in the two years before that. Yet how many have not been caught or identified?

Frankly this is just the tip of the iceberg among the thousands and even millions of illegal migrants who've been allowed into the country—with many coming in from the Middle East and China. A letter to U.S. Congressional leaders from 10 former executives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), dated Jan. 17, 2024, expressed alarm over the crisis in these terms:

"In its modern history the U.S. has never suffered an invasion of the homeland and, yet, one is unfolding now. Military aged men from across the globe, many from countries or regions not friendly to the United States, are landing in waves on our soil by the thousands—not splashing ashore from a ship or parachuting from a plane but rather by foot across a border that has been accurately advertised around the world as largely unprotected with ready access granted.

"It would be difficult to overstate the danger represented by the presence inside our borders of what is comparatively a multi-division army of young single adult males from hostile nations and regions whose background, intent, or allegiance is completely unknown" (quoted by John Solomon, "FBI Luminaries Starkly Warn Congress That U.S. Being Invaded at Border: 'Alarming and Perilous,'" Jan. 25, 2024).

In the wake of the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) major Amir Tsarfati warned that it's not just Jews in Israel in the crosshairs but Western Christians too: "Europe must wake up. America must wake up. America has thousands of sleeping cells all across the country. Your southern border is so open . . . I can't even imagine how many Hezbollah and Hamas cells are in your country right now. They're testing you . . . And then boom, one day they will strike" (quoted by Suzanne Bowdey, *The Washington Stand,* Nov. 28, 2023).

Read more about this serious crisis in our feature article "What's Behind the Border Disaster?" beginning on page 12. And seek God for help in preparing for the difficult times soon to come on the world at large.

Today's calendar filled with celebrating perversion

When the Biden White House put out a presidential proclamation declaring March 31 the Trans Day of Visibility for 2024, it drew ire from its apparent offense against Christians, as this day was Easter Sunday.

It's true that we at *Beyond Today* often explain that Easter along with Christmas and certain other traditional Christian holidays are observances with pagan roots that really should not be celebrated by Christians (see Deuteronomy 12:29-32 and our free study guide *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*). But there was no thought in the White House statement of diminishing Easter for a biblically appropriate reason. Rather, it was to promote evil and swipe at widespread Christian belief.

It was pointed out that this transgender observance of March 31 was on the calendar since 2009 and only happened to overlap with Easter, which falls on different dates year to year. But the trans day has only recently become widely promoted—and many noted that it could have been postponed. Yet it served the interests of those attacking biblical morality to make the transgender cause the focus of the day. The White House actually banned all displays of religious symbols at its Easter celebration that day. The governor of New York ordered the World Trade Center and other New York landmarks lit up with trans flag colors for the occasion.

Against the idea that transgenders and others on the LGBTQ+ spectrum are underrepresented on the calendar, some noted that they have around 150 days of promotion on the calendar—more than 40 percent of every year! Consider this partial list for 2024 and mourn:

- Feb. 18-24: Aromantic Spectrum Awareness Week

All of March: Bisexual Health Awareness Month

- March 18-22: LGBTQIA+ Health Awareness Week
- March 31: Transgender Day of Visibility
- April 6: International Asexuality Day
- April 10: International Day of Pink (opposing homophobia)
- April 12: Day of Silence
- April 26: Lesbian Visibility Day
- May 17: International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia
- May 19: Agender Pride Day
- May 22: Harvey Milk Day
- May 24: Pansexual & Panromantic Awareness Day

All of June: Pride Month

- June 28: Stonewall Day
- June 28: International LGBTQ+ Day
- July 14: International Non-Binary People's Day
- July 16: International Drag Day
- Aug. 14: Gay Uncles Day
- Sept. 16-23: Bisexual Awareness Week
- Sept. 23: Celebrate Bisexuality Day

All of October: LGBT History Month

- Oct. 8: International Lesbian Day
- Oct. 11: National Coming Out Day
- Oct. 17-24: Genderfluid Visibility Week
- Oct. 17: Spirit Day (Support for LGBTQ+ Youth)
- Oct. 19: International Pronouns Day
- Oct. 20-26: Asexual Awareness Week
- Oct. 26: Intersex Awareness Day

All of November: Trans Awareness Month

- Nov. 3: Trans Parent Day
- Nov. 8: Intersex Day of Remembrance
- Nov. 13-19: Transgender Awareness Week
- Nov. 20: Transgender Day of Remembrance

This is absurd—and a complete abomination!

Border crisis facilitating fentanyl onslaught

As illegal immigration at America's southern border has turned from crisis to disaster, its consequences have been felt in every state in America. This is especially true regarding the deadly drug fentanyl—most of which is mass-produced at secret factories in Mexico by drug cartels using chemicals sourced from China.

Fentanyl is 50 times more powerful than heroin, and a lethal dose is small enough to fit on the tip of a pencil. This deadly drug is smuggled across the U.S.-Mexican border concealed inside tractor-trailers carrying loads of legitimate cargo and hidden in passenger cars or on the bodies of pedestrians. It's also "backpacked" by couriers, also known as mules, between ports of entry. A package of fentanyl, about the size of a brick, can be worth about $200,000 in the United States.

Fentanyl is also being laced with or substituted for traditional opioids like oxycodone and heroin and in non-opioids like cocaine and other counterfeit pills. In 2023 the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) seized more than 79.5 million fentanyl-laced fake pills and nearly 12,000 pounds of fentanyl powder. Those seizures were equivalent to over 376.7 million lethal doses of fentanyl—more than enough to kill every American.

These drugs are pushed in communities in every state. Each day an average of 300 Americans die due to fentanyl poisoning—which is the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 45. According to a 2021 *Washington Post* article, more than 100,000 people died from drug overdoses in the United States that year—two-thirds from fentanyl. The number of people killed by the drug has almost doubled over the last four years alone.

This vast explosion in smuggling deadly drugs has created a financial windfall of billions of dollars for Mexican drug cartels and their Chinese accomplices—at the cost of tens of thousands of American lives each year.

Sheriff Rand Henderson of Montgomery County, Texas told Fox News on Sept. 14, 2022: "They should declare this a weapon of mass destruction and also categorize this poison as for what it is. It's something that's killing our population."

Hamas claims Oct. 7 attack instigated by Jewish aggression with red cows

The current Israeli-Hamas war began with Hamas' brutal attack against people in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. It was recently brought to light that a video message from a Hamas spokesman 100 days after in January declared that a major trigger for the Hamas action was Jewish "aggression" against the Arab people and al-Aqsa (the Muslim designation for the Temple Mount as an Islamic holy site) through *the bringing of red cows.* Of course, Hamas terrorists have sought to attack the Israelis in any case, intending their destruction or expulsion from the land—and this could be just a PR justification meant to bring further international ire against the Jews for stirring things up. Yet this does point to some intriguing developments related to Bible prophecy.

In Numbers 19, ashes from the sacrifice of a red heifer were used to produce water of purification, used to cleanse people from ceremonial defilement to make them fit for participation in the worship at the tabernacle and later the temple. Thus it's seen as necessary to the reestablishment of the Jewish temple worship system—which Muslims perceive as a threat to Islamic worship and control at the Temple Mount.

According to rules of the Mishnah, or Jewish oral tradition, the cow must be fully red (reddish brown), perfectly unblemished, without white or black hairs. A couple of candidates for the sacrifice were identified



over the past few decades, but they were eventually disqualified. More recently, in September 2022, five red heifers were imported to Israel from Texas, and these are considered fit for sacrifice by rabbinic authorities.

The book of Daniel foretells a recommencement of the sacrificial system, which will then be cut off and given over to idolatrous defilement by invaders around three and a half years before Daniel's resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ (Daniel 12:11, 13; Matthew 24:15). So it's thought by various prophecy watchers that we are nearing these end-time events.

Some involved with bringing in the heifers had announced a sacrifice at the time of Passover this year—which is after the time of this writing—but it was then stated this would not happen to avoid inflaming the region further right now. We will continue watching to see how things develop. For a short video presentation on this subject, see "Why Hamas Attacked Israel" at our *Beyond Today* YouTube channel.

More Americans, including churchgoers, promote same-sex marriage and identify as LGBTQ

It's disturbing to see that "according to recent Gallup polls, 71% of Americans think same-sex 'marriage' should be legal, and 64% believe gay or lesbian relationships are morally acceptable. These numbers are double from a generation ago. Among those who attend church weekly, 41% support same-sex 'marriage,' while 67% of those who attend church less frequently do" (John Stonestreet and Jared Hayden, "Why More Americans (and Christians) Now Support Same-Sex 'Marriage,'" The Christian Post, March 25, 2024). That's a high percentage for churchgoers.

Hollywood and the Internet have dragged society farther down the moral slope—as has legalization of homosexual marriage. "Law is also a teacher. When something is legal, it becomes more socially acceptable. The Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell* [legalizing same-sex marriage] not only reflected cultural beliefs, but it also spread them" (ibid.). This and outright government promotion of this immorality has made it seem okay—to both churchgoers and general society.

Indeed, not only acceptance but the immorality itself has steeply increased, especially among younger people. According to Gallup polling, those identifying as LGBTQ+ went from 3.5 percent in 2012 to 7.6 percent in 2023—more than doubling over the decade. And shockingly more than 20 percent of Gen Z adults (ages 18-26 in 2023) identify as LGTBQ+ ("Gallup: LGBTQ+ Identification in US Rises to 7.6%—1 in 5 of Gen-Z," Fox News, March 13, 2024).

What's truly lacking, even in many churches, is respect for biblical authority in setting the boundaries of morality. To learn more about God's teachings on sexuality, see our free study guide *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension* (available at ucg.org/mj24).

Images, from left: Karen Kasmauski/Corbis via Getty; Greg Salk/Wikimedia Commons

Three Keys to Knowing God



Sixteen Miles Out/Unsplash

Can a Christian believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but not the Trinity? Yes, in fact the Bible reveals that we must—that it's vital we come to know the true God.

by Darris McNeely

Do you want to live forever with God? Let me ask you another question. Do you really know God? Do you know who God is? Do you know what God intends for us? Don't be too sure. Most people don't.

But these issues are crucial. As Jesus said in prayer to the Father, "This is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth" (John 17:3, New Living Translation).

Notice there's no mention of the Holy Spirit in this statement, even though many proclaim the Spirit to be a third person in a divine Trinity. Yet the Holy Spirit is certainly vital, as we will see.

The idea that God is a Trinity is widely accepted, even though many churchgoers don't actually know what their church teaches on the topic and probably couldn't explain it. Despite confusion over this doctrine, it has for many become a litmus test of who is or is not a Christian.

A book titled *The Forgotten Trinity* points out: "We hang a person's very salvation upon the acceptance of the doctrine, yet if we are honest with ourselves, we really aren't sure exactly why. It's the topic we won't talk about: no one dares question the Trinity for fear of being branded a 'heretic,' yet we have all sorts of questions about it . . . Many believers . . . have often been confused by the contradictory answers they received" (James White, 1998, p. 14).

Yet the same source asserts on the very next page: "We must know, understand, and love the Trinity to be fully and completely Christian. This is why we say the Trinity is the greatest of God's revealed truths" (p. 15).

That's quite a statement to make about a teaching that really can't be found in Scripture!

We find the same in many reputable mainstream Christian sources on biblical teaching, some with shocking admissions about the Trinity doctrine. It's called "an absolute mystery," in both its origin and content. It's labeled "unintelligible" and even "impossible for Christians to understand."

That's interesting. Why would a supposedly fundamental, necessary teaching about God be impossible to understand? Could it be that something is seriously wrong with the teaching of the Trinity?

Keep an open mind, and let's see from the Bible what we can know about God and about the *family* of God. The truth sets us free from error and ignorance and opens entirely new understanding about God.

Following are three biblical keys to knowing God.

There are two divine Beings

First, the Bible reveals *two* Beings who are God, not one God in three persons.

We'll start with the plural aspect. Genesis 1:26, a bedrock scripture about the creation of human beings, says, "Then God said, 'Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness'" (emphasis added throughout).

Note the plural forms "Us" and "Our." To whom is this referring? Throughout the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis, and in much of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated "God" is *Elohim*, a *plural* noun denoting more than one entity.

God, then, is presented as a plurality. Yet who are these



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entities who together are God?

Let's look at another passage in Scripture that identifies just who was at work in creation. We find it in the New Testament, in the opening of the book of John. Here, we can say, is the real beginning of understanding this topic. John 1:1-3 states: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with 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."

The original Greek wording here says that the One called the Word was with *"the* God," while the Word Himself was *also* God. There are *two Beings* mentioned in these verses. Again, there is no mention of a third person. If God were three, wouldn't we see that here? But we don't. There's One called "God" and another *with* Him called "the Word" who is *also* God.

Continuing further in the account, we see exactly who this Being called the Word was. Verse 14 states: "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." The Word was conceived and born in the flesh as a physical human being—the One we know as Jesus Christ.

Thus in this passage in John we have two great personages, two uncreated eternal Beings, the One called *the* God, or God the Father as we know Him, and God the Word who became Jesus Christ—both divine and both bringing about the creation of everything else, giving life to others.

What does this mean? It means that the classic Trinitarian doctrine is false. There is no *third* person, only *two* who are God. The truth here also upends a common argument that rejecting the Trinity equates to a denial of Christ's divinity—as there is no denial of that in accepting that the Father and Christ are both God, as They clearly are. The problem is the addition of a third person and claiming that the supposed three persons are one being.

If you hold this popular idea of three divine persons in one, you actually have a wrong understanding of God. And you cannot truly worship the God described in Scripture with this false concept, as Jesus Himself said we must "know what we worship" and "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:22-24).

Likewise, He said that eternal life comes through truly knowing God and Himself. What you believe about the nature of God *does* matter. It's a salvation issue. We can't have a relationship with God unless we understand the truth of who and what He is.

God is a family

Related to the fact of God as a plurality is a more specific description—God is a *family.* That's our next key. This relationship of the two divine Beings, again not three, is pointed to in many places.

The apostle John opened His first epistle in similar terms to that of his Gospel yet more personally, writing: "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and we touched Him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us" (1 John 1:1-2, NLT).

A major aspect of what's revealed here is the special relationship between the two divine Beings, which They wanted to expand on, as we'll see. John continues: "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (verse 3, NLT).

It is clearly revealed here and elsewhere that God the Father and Jesus Christ constitute a divine family—a Father and a Son, as Scripture repeatedly refers to them. And they have a very close, loving relationship.

That bond of love was between Them always. In fact, Jesus prayed, "Father . . . you loved me even before the world began!" (John 17:24, NLT). They existed then in that loving relationship.

And amazingly, They decided to produce others with whom to share that relationship—creating offspring who would also bear the divine nature. That's where *you and I* come in. It's through that *family* relationship that human beings made in the image of God can be empowered to share in this love of God at a much higher level than

we can ever imagine!

That's why human marriage and family are so important. They mirror what God is doing on a far higher level. This awesome parallel is something that is frankly not offered by false teachings such as the Trinity, which hides the truth about what God is ultimately doing in expanding His divine family relationship through humankind.

The Scriptures, all the way from Genesis to Revelation, reveal God in terms of a family relationship—God the Father and Jesus the Son together as the God family. And when we understand this, it changes how we understand God's eternal plan for us, because it's what God has purposed to have and to be with His human creation made in His image.

God tells us, "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18). Thus we too can become part of the spiritual family of God, bearing the name of God along with Christ as other children of "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom *the whole family in heaven and earth is named*" (Ephesians 3:14-15).

Sadly many have, on the human level, missed out on family or had bad family experiences. But realize that God has made people to be part of His perfect divine family—which He will grant to all who accept His offer and live accordingly.

We see, then, that God is personal and wants to expand the divine relationship. Indeed, God through Christ is "bringing many sons to glory" to share His divine nature (Hebrews 2:10). Again, the teaching of the Bible is that there are two Beings who are God—God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son. And Their purpose is to share Their divine nature with human beings, transforming the *human* family into the *divine* family.

Traditional Trinitarian doctrine doesn't teach this. That unbiblical position in fact distorts and even hides, when it's all said and done, *who and what God is* along with *God's ultimate purpose for human life*. That's why this matter is so important. We must have this foundation right to *know* God—and for His purpose for us to be fulfilled!

God wants a relationship with you

As a last key here, we'll delve more into God's desire to expand His family, particularly the fact that God wants a relationship with you. We'll also cover here a critical role for the Holy Spirit.

In Genesis 2 we're given a second account of the creation. Verse 7 tells us, "The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." These words paint a warm portrait of very close, intimate involvement by God in forming and shaping man from the ground—like a potter with clay, as presented in other verses.

So right at the outset we see that God is not impersonal. Previous acts of creation were presented declaratively. But here we see more—a God who is gentle, who desires hands-on interaction and deep fellowship with us, with human beings, the highest expression of His creation. Man was made in God's image. Think about that. *We were planned and designed to have a family relationship with God.*



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Even after man's sin and rebellion against Him, God still desired this relationship. And later God the Word came down again, this time as a man—the Word made flesh as Jesus Christ—to live among us and die to redeem us.

A beautiful passage from the apostle Paul in Philippians 2 states of Christ: ". . . who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped [or tightly held onto], but emptied Himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature [being truly a man though uncorrupted by sin]. He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!" (verses 6-8, New English Translation).

God wanted so much to share glory and life on the divine level of existence with His human creation that the divine Word emptied Himself of these to take on human flesh. In doing so He took the longest of steps for mankind. His coming as the only begotten Son of God has made possible our redemption and hope for salvation and sharing in divine glory.

He also came down for a further creative purpose as in Genesis 2:7, this time to intimately fashion us into a new creation—and to breathe new life into us.

The very essence of salvation—living forever with God, as I asked you about at the outset—is to know that God is able through the life of Jesus Christ to begin the process of a new life in those who are called to the purpose of God. And that purpose is to put His life, His Spirit, His very essence, His power into us in the act of a spiritual creation, forming us in His image by the power of His life, which is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not a third person in a Trinitarian conception of God. The Holy Spirit is the very power of God by which He made the universe. It is the very essence of the nature of God, and He puts that within us. The Holy Spirit is, furthermore, the agency of spiritual conception into a profound relationship with God. As Romans 8:16 states, "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (New American Bible Revised Edition).

> The Holy Spirit is the essence and the power of God. It's how we enter the ultimate relationship with God and stay in that relationship.

God's Spirit joins with our human spirit to bear witness that we are God's own children—His spiritual family. It's through that Spirit that we are enabled to partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), the very nature of God, according to the purpose and plan He's bringing to pass.

Moreover, God dwells within us through His Spirit, His life essence. God's "spiritual DNA," as it were, is in all true Christians—those who have repented of their sins, accepted Jesus Christ as personal Savior, been baptized and, through the laying on of hands of Christ's ministry, received the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is the source of the power that connects us with God in our new life in Him.

In 2 Timothy 1:7 Paul says that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." It is a spirit and a power that changes us.

Once more, the Holy Spirit is not a third person of a Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the essence and the power of God. It is the means by which God the Father and God the Son live in us, Their projected presence imparting to us the very divine nature. It's how we enter the ultimate relationship with God and stay in that relationship.

The doctrine of the Trinity is, to be blunt, a destructive heresy that denies the true God, both the Father and His Son Jesus Christ—locking Them into a coequal Trinity with a nonexistent third person and rejecting God's great purpose of exalting mankind to divinity as His family. Denying the Father and Son, as the Trinity does, makes it part of the doctrine of antichrist (1 John 2:22). Those who promote this false teaching will have to answer for that before God in the judgment. Think about that in studying the nature of God. The truth of God's Word is so much more sensible—and wonderful!

As I asked at the beginning, do you want to live forever with God? You can, in a deep, spiritual relationship with God the Father as your Father and Jesus Christ as your Elder Brother. God is expanding the divine family, of which you can be part. Eternal life comes through knowing and understanding the true God and the purpose He is working out. Begin to worship that true God today! BT

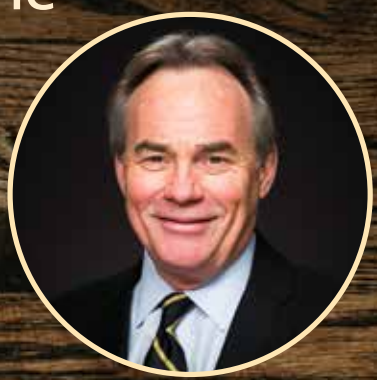
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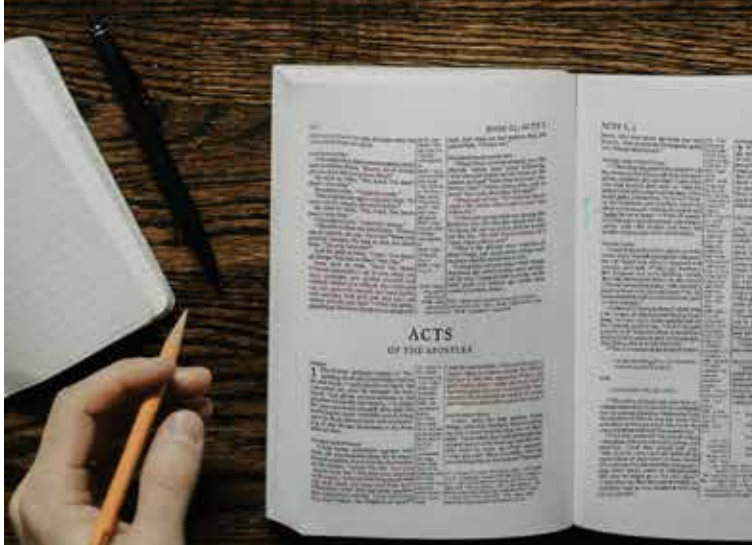
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Do You Really Have the Holy Spirit?

A true Christian is a person in whom dwells the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of God and of Christ. What *is* this Spirit? What does it do in your life? And how can you know whether you've received it?

by Peter Eddington

If you do not have the Spirit of God, also called the Spirit of Christ, *you are not His!* That's a very bold statement made by the apostle Paul: "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, *he is not His"* (Romans 8:9, emphasis added throughout).

Do you have the Holy Spirit? How do you know? Paul admonishes: *"Examine yourselves* as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Let's see what the Holy Spirit is and help determine if you really have it.

What *is* the Holy Spirit, and why do we need it?

Contrary to popular belief, the Holy Spirit is not a third person in a divine trinity. As Paul stated above, it is the Spirit of God the Father and of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is Their shared power, mind, life essence and projected presence through which They act throughout creation and dwell within converted Christian believers. (To better understand the nature of God, see "Three Keys to Knowing God" beginning on page 18 and the free study guide *Is God a Trinity?* offered below.)

All people are created with a human spirit (Job 32:8). But we must receive the Holy Spirit, joined with our human spirit, to become the Spirit-converted children of God (see Romans 8:15-17). God's Spirit works with our spirit and provides a *connection between Him and us.* The apostle John describes it this way: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this *we know that he abides in us*, by the *Spirit* that he has given us" (1 John 3:24, New Revised Standard Version).

Through God's Spirit—which He gives us to *abide in us*—we can be influenced by God for the good and keep His commandments. When Jesus promised the apostles He would send the Spirit to them, He said it would *guide them into all truth* (John 16:13).

He also said it would be a "Helper," "Comforter" or "Advocate" to strengthen our faith and ability to follow in the footsteps of our Savior: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you" (John 14:16–17, New American Bible Revised Edition).

While most English Bible translations refer to the Spirit in this passage with the pronouns "him" and "whom," the version quoted here correctly uses "it" and "which." In other verses, the pronouns referring directly to the word Advocate have masculine gender in Greek, but should not in English translation. Confusion concerning these pronouns has contributed to many mistaking the Holy Spirit for a distinct person like the Father and Jesus Christ.

But getting back to the role of the Spirit as Advocate, Helper or Comforter, true comfort and reassurance come from God's Spirit dwelling within us. God's Spirit helps our

Mitchell and Dana Moss

minds to recall and rely on God's many promises, such as assuring us that whatever happens will work out for the good "to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

This assurance provides an outlook on life that is rare in our world. Yes, we can get discouraged, but it is through the Holy Spirit that we can truly look at life differently—being strengthened and encouraged from within by God.

The Holy Spirit works with our spirit to *transform* us—enabling us to continue in obedience to God and grow in His way in this life and be led eventually to an awe-inspiring transformation to spirit life at Christ's return.

How do you receive and retain the Holy Spirit?

Have you done what is required to receive the Holy Spirit? Read the following verse from the inspired message given by the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 when the Church first received the Holy Spirit. Consider if you've completed these requirements:

"Then Peter said to them, *'Repent,* and let every one of you be *baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [or forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (verse 38).

Have you deeply *repented* for your past sins in life? Have you understood God's laws to the point of recognizing sin you need to repent of? Was this informed repentance accompanied by faith, trusting in the gospel Jesus taught, which He said was needed to be saved? (compare Mark 1:14-15; 16:15-16). Did you have faith in Christ's sacrifice for the promised forgiveness?

Did you carefully consider, as a mature adult, the conditions necessary to receive the Holy Spirit and *truly repent,* committing to turn from your past wrong ways? And were you then *baptized,* fully immersed in water? And did you then also follow the directive to have *hands laid on you* by a minister of Jesus Christ to actually receive God's Spirit and have it actively at work within you?

Later in Acts 8 we find converts who had been baptized but *had not received the Holy Spirit.* Why not? Because they had not yet had hands laid on them by the ministry: "(For as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had *only been baptized* in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John *laid their hands on them,* and they *received the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 8:16–17, NRSV).

To receive the Holy Spirit and have it actively at work within you takes deep repentance in faith followed by baptism and the laying on of hands by Christ's duly appointed minister. Have you fulfilled all these requirements?

And have you done what's required to *keep* the Holy Spirit? Acts 5:32 states that God gives the Holy Spirit to those *who obey* Him. And many verses tell us we must continue in obedience, and that the Spirit helps us in this. We do not instantly become perfect, but will continue to repent and keep striving.

> Does your daily life show the fruit of the Spirit in you? Just as an apple tree produces apples, God's Spirit produces a particular type of fruit in the life of a Christian—godly fruit.

Continued obedience is evidence of God's presence: "He who *keeps His commandments* abides in Him, and He in him . . ." (1 John 3:24). We are to be obeying the Ten Commandments and other commands of God and Christ—and growing in this. Are you?

Do you produce *fruit* of the Holy Spirit?

Consider further, does your daily life show the *fruit* of the Spirit in you? Just as an apple tree produces apples, God's Spirit produces a particular type of fruit in the life of a Christian—*godly* fruit.

The apostle Paul lists the fruit that should be evident in those who are led and filled by God's Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). And he further said that "the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth" (Ephesians 5:9).

The apostle Peter wonderfully sums up the process of growing to spiritual maturity through the Spirit of God: "By which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the *divine nature* . . . For this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith *virtue,* to virtue *knowledge,* to knowledge *self-control,* to self-control *perseverance,* to perseverance *godliness,* to godliness *brotherly kindness,* and to brotherly kindness *love"* (2 Peter 1:4-7).

Does this describe what's happening in your life?

Again, do you *really* have the Holy Spirit? Have you done what's required to *receive* it and *keep* it? Is the fruit of the Spirit evident in your daily life?

These are questions you must face squarely and honestly. In any case, those who are led to true repentance need the help from God to continue on that path that comes through the Holy Spirit. BT

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To better understand the nature of God and what the Holy Spirit is amid a confused world, request or download our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?* And to help you on the road of repentance, baptism and living by God's Spirit, read our free study guide *What You Need to Know About Baptism*.

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Did the New Covenant Cancel God's ~~Commandments~~?

Many Christians believe that the laws God gave ancient Israel under the Old Covenant are obsolete and therefore do not need to be obeyed.



However, shouldn't they rather follow the perfect example of Jesus Christ, who said, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love"?

by John LaBissoniere

Perhaps you are among many Christians who believe that since you live under the terms of the "New Covenant," the Ten Commandments and other laws God entreated the people of ancient Israel to obey are not applicable today. But is that true according to the Bible? In answering this question, it would be important to first define what a covenant is. The dictionary describes it as "an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not do something specified."

Following the Israelite's Exodus into the Sinai desert from bondage in Egypt, the patriarch Moses informed them of God's desire to establish a covenant with them (Exodus 34:10). It was His intention to bless, guide and protect them if they obeyed His commandments and statutes (Exodus 20-23; Deuteronomy 11:1; 28:1-14). How did the people respond after Moses told them the terms of the covenant? They said, "*All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient*" (Exodus 24:7, emphasis added throughout).

It's important to note that while God's laws formed a foundational component of the Sinai covenant, they were *not the covenant itself*. Again, the covenant involved God's commitment to bless the Israelites if they diligently obeyed Him. But why did God offer this covenant? He wanted Israel to be His special people, and it was His desire to fulfill the promises He had made to their faithful forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6-8). Additionally, He wanted Israel to become a model nation—showing other nations how they, too, could be blessed if they obeyed His commandments (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

Sacrificial system did not alter the Sinai covenant

But what happened shortly after the Israelites agreed to the provisions of the covenant? Sadly, they failed in their commitment to obey God by producing and worshiping a false god—a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-35; Ezekiel 16:59). Over the course of a year after that incident, God instituted a system of animal sacrifices and offerings to remind the people continually that the penalty for sin was the shedding of blood. Moreover, the sacrifices foreshadowed the future sacrificial death of the Son of God for the sins of all humanity (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Galatians 3:19 says: "What purpose then does the law serve? It was *added* because of transgressions, till the Seed should come [that is, Jesus Christ] to whom the promise was made." The "law" that was *added* was *not the commandments previously revealed,* but the whole system of rituals and sacrificial offerings (compare Hebrews 10:1, 8).

And it's important to realize that the establishment of the sacrificial system *did not alter the terms of the Sinai covenant* since it had been fully ratified *prior* to the golden calf incident. As Jeremiah 7:22-23 states: "For I did *not* speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, *concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices.* But this is what I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people.'"

The New Covenant does not eliminate God's commandments; it makes them a very part of the minds and hearts of those who accept Christ's sacrifice, repent of sin and receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

Moving forward hundreds of years in biblical history, the prophet Malachi foretold John the Baptist announcing the first coming of Jesus Christ: "'Behold, I send My messenger [John], and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek [Jesus Christ], will suddenly come to His temple, even *the Messenger of the covenant,* in whom you delight" (Malachi 3:1). Hebrews 8:6 further states of Jesus, "He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also *Mediator of a better covenant,* which was established on *better promises.*"

Finding fault with the people—not the laws

But why did Christ come as the herald of this better covenant? What was wrong with the Old Covenant so that a new one was needed? The common assumption among many Christians is that *the commandments* God gave the Israelites *were the problem.* But Scripture reveals that this supposition is incorrect. The actual fault in the Old Covenant was *not* with God's laws but *with the people!* Hebrews 8:7-8 says: "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because *finding fault with them,* He says: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.'"

The Old Covenant failed because *the Israelites* "did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD" (Hebrews 8:9). The reason the people were unsuccessful in keeping the covenant was that it was not in their hearts and minds to obey the laws God had given them for their good (Deuteronomy 5:29; 29:4). As Romans 8:6-7 says: "The mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace. Because *the mind of the flesh is hostile to God:* It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Berean Standard Bible).

What did God do to resolve this issue? Was it to cancel His laws? Was it, as some have said, because Jesus Christ had instituted new, different and better laws? The answer is absolutely not! Rather, God said, *"I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts;* and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Hebrews 8:10).

The New Covenant does not *eliminate* God's commandments; it makes them *a very part of* the minds and hearts of those who accept Christ's sacrifice, repent of sin and receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:2; Acts 2:38). It is through the power of God's Spirit that obedient individuals can have the desire and capacity to comprehend, appreciate and obey God's laws—which the ancient Israelites did not have. Having one's mind imbued with God's Spirit can empower a devoted individual to replace damaging thoughts and attitudes with a strong and sincere willingness to love and obey God and genuinely care for others (Romans 8:5-8; 2 Peter 1:4).

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law"

The New Covenant is "better" and delivers "better promises" (Hebrews 8:6) because it provides forgiveness of sin through Jesus' sacrifice, the Holy Spirit to empower obedience and develop God's character, and ultimately salvation and eternal life—which were not promised under the Old Covenant. God says: "I will give you a *new heart* and put a *new spirit* within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them"* (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Throughout His earthly life, Christ set the perfect example as to how people should live by His full and faithful obedience to His Father's commandments (John 14:21, 23). He came to "exalt the law and make it honorable" (Isaiah 42:21). Furthermore, Jesus plainly stated: *"Do not think* that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle [the smallest written marks] will *by no means pass from the law* till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:17-18).

Finally, God's commandments are described as "holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12). Therefore it's clear that the New Covenant does not cancel out God's laws. Instead, Christians must diligently apply the words of Jesus Christ, who said in John 15:10, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." BT

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Many claim that the laws God gave are set aside in the New Covenant relationship initiated through Jesus Christ. There is much to say in response beyond what's addressed in this brief article. To learn much more about this important subject, we encourage you to download or request our free book *The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?* **Scan the code or visit ucg.org/mj24 to find it.**

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7 Constructive Ways to Fight Loneliness

Coping with loneliness is an age-old struggle. Now, despite numerous means of instant electronic communications, the problem is growing, with people seeming even more cut off from each other. For those who feel alone, here are steps that will help.

by Becky Sweat

"I feel so down and lonely," sobbed a friend on the phone. A few months earlier, health problems forced her to leave her job and essentially become housebound. Her husband's occupation required him to be on the road five days a week, and their three grown children all live in other states. "I haven't had visitors in ages," she continued, "and hardly any of my friends have called to see how I'm doing. My husband can never talk long when he calls because he's under so much pressure with work. I feel like I'm having to face my problems all by myself."

My friend's situation isn't unique. Disconnection is a hallmark of our age, and many people struggle with at least occasional bouts of loneliness. We might go through periods where we ache for company, but nobody seems to have time for us. We might have a lot of acquaintances, but not anyone we can really call a good friend or rely on for companionship. Loneliness can be a matter of real isolation or, though surrounded by other people, feeling like we can't connect with them on a meaningful level.

Loneliness can often be brought on by changes in our personal lives, such as the death of a loved one, the dissolution of a marriage or close friendship, having good friends or relatives move away, our own relocation to another city or state, or entering a different life stage, such as becoming empty nesters, or retiring from work. This kind of loneliness is usually temporary and subsides when new connections are found.

Other times, loneliness reflects societal trends. Workloads have increased dramatically in recent years, and many people think they no longer have time for friends. We frequently change jobs and move to new areas, leaving relatives and friends behind. More employees are working remotely, which has its pluses but also lessens opportunities to build workplace friendships. Most people rarely interact with their neighbors anymore or even know them. We often rely on digital technologies to stay in contact rather than face-to-face communication, resulting in shallower relationships. In living this way, loneliness can become a chronic condition.

This is not what God intended. He created us to be social creatures, to have relationships with others. Genesis 2:18 tells us, "It is not good that man should be alone." Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says that "two are better than one," and that companionship provides support in facing difficulties. We need warm, caring relationships with friends and family.

But while loneliness is a growing trend, you don't have to be one of the casualties. You can take active steps to increase and deepen your connections with others, and even turn lonely periods into growth opportunities. Following are seven suggestions.

1. Look for opportunities that lend themselves to developing close connections.

Friendships rarely happen as the result of a chance meeting. Being intentional about developing them helps. One of the best opportunities comes by regularly attending church services. Hebrews 10:25 stresses the importance of not "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." Not only should we attend to hear the messages, but we should stay for the fellowship afterwards and attend any church socials that are organized. Becoming part of a community of people holding the same core beliefs is an effective antidote to loneliness.

Also consider joining a local recreational team (like a bowling league), exercise class, book discussion club, garden club or another special-interest group. Or organize your own activities. Over the years, I've regularly hosted ladies' events in my home—afternoon tea parties, home spa parties, cooking and baking classes, canning lessons, and soap-making demonstrations. Participating with others in hobbies and social activities can help build connections with them. If no one else you know is organizing these types of events, be willing to initiate them and make them happen. If age or health challenges keep you mostly homebound, consider inviting people over for coffee and dessert if you're up to that.

2. Focus your attention on those in need.

The Bible encourages us to provide for the needs of others in addition to our own (Philippians 2:4). If you know someone who is facing a difficult situation, mail a cheerful card or call



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that person to say hello. Ask your pastor for names of shut-ins or those who are infirm and could use a visit and encouragement (James 1:27). Or volunteer at a homeless shelter, nursing home or hospice. When we show support to others, that not only encourages them, it also helps us feel more closely connected to them, which helps relieve our own loneliness.

3. Reevaluate your time commitments.

If you're constantly busy and don't think you have time for friends, reevaluate your schedule so you can make time to build and maintain these kinds of connections. Assess your weekly schedule and ask yourself: Do I really need to work this much? Can I cut down on work hours so I'm not so busy? Are there areas in my life that are swallowing up large amounts of time that should be lower priorities?

Obviously, we need to work so we can pay our bills, and sometimes it does take a second job to get by financially. It's when we're putting in a lot of extra hours just to buy more "stuff" that we need to rethink how much we're working. Ephesians 5:16 tells us to "redeem" our time—to make the most of it. God does not want us to be so busy or working so much overtime that we can't manage a heartfelt conversation with a family member, have a leisurely visit with a lonely widow or go out to lunch to catch up with a friend.

4. Pull away from your digital devices.

Another way to "redeem the time" and build friendships is to limit how much we engage with entertainment technologies. These days a lot of people spend inordinate amounts of time in a sort of "entertainment mode"—checking out social media posts, playing video games or just aimlessly surfing the web. With our smartphones and entertainment devices constantly at our side, it's easy to become absorbed by such distractions.

To be fair, social media can help us feel connected. But it's often superficial and certainly no substitute for in-person contact or even phone calls. Making status updates about your vacations or restaurants you've visited and then getting some "likes" hardly qualify as meaningful social interactions. Sometimes, too, seeing other people's social media posts about their parties (that you weren't invited to) can make you feel left out, intensifying feelings of loneliness.

What if you're not going on social media, but instead have immersed yourself in online gaming? The concern with that is it's *passive* entertainment, meaning you're "engaging" with a digital device and not interacting with another person (as you would be if you were playing a board game, for instance), which takes away from having actual interactions with family and friends.

This is not to say we need to completely disconnect from technology. But if we start feeling like we don't have any "real" connections with anyone, or if we spend more time socializing online than in person, then it's definitely time to start limiting our use of entertainment technologies.

5. Schedule "phone dates."

I've lived in five different states. Consequently, a lot of the people I more deeply care about live far away, and we rarely get to see each other. And while in-person contact has always been the best way for me to fill my "people need," talking on the phone can still help ease the loneliness.

I recommend scheduling these kinds of phone calls in advance—so that both parties will be setting aside an ample amount of time to talk. Just about every week I have at least one phone chat planned with a long-distance friend.

These phone calls strengthen our connections because we go beyond just sharing news about what activities have been going on in our lives, but also cover "iron sharpens iron" topics (Proverbs 27:17). We'll seek each other's perspectives about what we've been addressing in our personal Bible studies, information we've gleaned in books and articles, personal struggles and concerns, and life lessons we've been learning. I've found that even just one in-depth conversation with a friend every few months is enough to keep a close friend close.

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With God, we can be strong even though we may feel weak. When we are truly close to God, we will no longer feel as though we are facing life alone.

6. Befriend people older or younger than you.

Most of us naturally gravitate towards others in the same age group and life stage. Moms of preschoolers tend to want to spend time with women who also have young children. Teenagers like to hang out with other teens. Retirees often socialize with other retirees. That's normal. However, we shouldn't *limit* our friendships to those close in age or circumstances, especially if we're struggling with loneliness. We might be surprised how much being with someone who's a lot older or younger can fill our need for companionship.

We can all benefit from intergenerational friendship. The Bible points out that younger adults can benefit from the wisdom, experiences and skills of older individuals (Job 12:12; 1 Timothy 4:12; 5:1-2; Titus 2:3-5). And then older people can certainly benefit from hearing the perspectives of young people. Plus, when young people make time for them, it makes them feel loved and valued. Truly, each party can be a source of encouragement to the other.

I see a shining example of someone who seeks out this kind of connection in a college-aged woman at church. Other than her siblings, there aren't any other young adults in the congregation. However, she has taken the initiative to build connections with the ladies at church who are old enough to be her mother (including myself). She's gone out to lunch and on shopping trips with us, regularly helps one of the ladies with craft projects, has come over to my house for crocheting lessons, and has spent weekends at our homes just to socialize. For me, being a recent empty nester who really misses having my kids around, I've appreciated having an "adopted niece" to get to know.

7. Use your time alone to draw close to God.

The previous six suggestions usually go a long way in alleviating loneliness. Yet sometimes it seems we're doing everything we can and still face feeling alone. Realize there's one other very important strategy we need to take, and it's really the most important of all. Turn your time alone into an advantage by drawing closer to God. Take your concerns to God in prayer, meditate on Scripture, do some in-depth Bible studies and get back in touch with God. This is the strategy my friend mentioned at the outset has taken, and she says it has helped her immensely.

The apostle Paul made it clear that with God, we can be strong even though we may feel weak: "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10, New International Version). When we are truly close to God, we will no longer feel as though we are facing life alone. Our sadness and discouragement will fade. Many times, loneliness is a void only God can fill.

Although we may cherish family members and friendships, people move away, die, or grow apart from us. Sometimes there are fallouts with friends, the other party having no interest in patching things up. It can make us feel very disconnected. We need to remind ourselves that as long as we have a relationship with God, we will never be completely alone.

Even Jesus Christ was misunderstood by those closest to Him, but He knew the Father was always with Him (John 8:29; 16:32). And even when He was surrounded by crowds of people who had come to hear Him, He often withdrew to "lonely places" to pray to His Father (Luke 5:16, NIV). We, too, should learn to embrace our solitude. We can all benefit from at least some solo time each day to reflect and recharge.

There may be times when we have to endure longer periods of isolation than we'd like, but some good can still come out of it. If we're not making sufficient time for God, loneliness is one way He may get our attention. The truth is, it's often when our lives feel empty, when we have no one to socialize with and nothing going on, that we become motivated to take an honest look at who we are. We then have an opportunity to sort our thoughts and priorities—and God has an opening to draw us into a more intimate relationship with Him and to encourage us with His love! BT

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Moving Beyond Our Human Strategies

We have a limited perspective when it comes to setting our own course in life. We must learn to expect the unexpected from a God who presents us with hard challenges—and the direction and means to meet them and press on.

by Robin Webber

There's an old maxim that says life is what happens to us while we're making other plans. We think we've learned that lesson already—until the next time. Surprise! As much as we plan and hope, life is not a straight line from point A to point Z. We experience dips, bumps and curves in the path. Some are self-made, some from the impact of others—but what I sincerely desire to focus on are interruptions caused by a gracious God who puts us on new paths never imagined to fulfill His purposes beyond our best intentions.

For a few minutes, let's put ourselves in the shoes of Joseph of Nazareth and walk with him through an unforeseen interruption in his life to better understand how to spiritually enhance our personal calling to heed Jesus Christ's invitation of *"Follow Me"* (see Luke 9:23; John 21:21-22).

Confronted with a seemingly terrible dilemma

We come alongside Joseph as he is introduced in chapter 1 of the Gospel of Matthew. He's preparing to permanently "tie the knot" of marriage to one named Mary. Anticipation is in the air! According to Jewish custom of the times, marriages were often arranged during childhood by parents and perhaps a matchmaker. On coming of age and agreement to the union, the young man and woman were "betrothed" (engaged) to one another for a year and were technically considered married other than physical intimacy, which was not to come until the wedding ceremony occurred. During their engagement, the man or woman could end the relationship, but that required an official divorce.

It's here in Matthew 1:18 that shocking news comes to a man anticipating his upcoming wedding, expectant that his fiancé has been faithful. Yet he learns she's pregnant. As we're told, *"she was found with child of the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 1:18). Say what? Talk about a person's lifetime plans crumbling before him. Just imagine the roar in Joseph's mind to Mary's surprise announcement: *What have you done with whom?!* Again, I don't want to go too deep into Joseph's mind where Scripture is quiet, but we can perhaps fill in some blanks based on what we might be inwardly thinking when the "best laid plans of mice and men"—and, yes, even we as disciples of Christ—go awry.

As a religious person Joseph was acquainted with God's previous blessing on the wombs of Sarah and Hannah, but that was with the involvement of Abraham and Elkanah, not the work of the Spirit of God with no human father! "C'mon!" Little could Joseph put together the grand significance of what God was doing here.

In any case, we do know from Scripture what Joseph's initial line of response entailed. We are told in Matthew 1:19 that he, being a "just man," did not want to make Mary a public example, subjecting her to shame and perhaps even death by stoning (Leviticus 20:10; John 8:3-11). Instead, he was minded to quietly divorce her.

God presents a third option

Let us understand the gravity of the moment. With Joseph's life upended, it seemed his choice was between these two courses, with him intending the more merciful one.

But at this critical juncture, God calls a "time out," to use a sports metaphor, and huddles with Joseph through a messenger: "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS . . .'" (Matthew 1:20-21).

What's going on here? Joseph had sized up the situation and arrived at what seemed the best way to handle it. Yet God steps in with a *third* option: *Marry her!* This was beyond Joseph's



humanly compassionate consideration. God granted Joseph a new way—a third option of measuring outcomes and moving beyond our human strategies to personally glorify God. With this introduction of "the third option" we are confronted with the gulf between our human best versus God's perfection.

Four steps towards godliness

What are some takeaways here as we heed the Master's invitation of *"Follow Me"?*

Step 1: Knowing God and knowing a biblical verse about how He intervened in the lives of others are of no value unless you *become faithfully open to God's intimate intervention in your personal time of need.* He bluntly shares with us: "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Our hearts must be prepped into a state of readiness to move beyond human shortsightedness, expectant of God's greater reality centered on eternity and not just our moment in time as we perceive it.

Step 2: In praying for "our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), think beyond your kitchen cupboards and *ask that our Heavenly Father supply the vital spiritual nourishment to see and live beyond our human perspective.* Remember, it's not merely *when* you pray but *how* you pray and *what* you're asking to receive (see Matthew 7:7-8; James 1:2-6). Prayers on bowed knees without a bowed heart will go no farther than your ceiling. Instead, bow your heart and tell God that you are stuck on trying to see and decide your way through. You need more than good answers—you need His holy perfection!

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Step 3: Then *be prepared to meet the timing and manner of God's response to your prayers,* which may be quite outside what you had in mind. Joseph was visited by an angel, but the One Joseph was to call Jesus would later proclaim, "I will come to you" (John 14:18)—speaking to His disciples then and now. He does so through the Holy Spirit, leading us in the right direction (Romans 8:9, 14). Revelation 3:20 presents His people with a heads-up for preparing our hearts: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him and he with Me." Perhaps now is the moment to admit we don't have all the answers. We are stuck, and we need God's "third option." Christ may well be knocking on your door right now through this column!

Step 4: In opening the door to the Spirit of our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ, *be prepared to receive Their direction and respond to Their bidding.* Jesus always requested that His disciples do what they can do, but then He and the Father do through us what only They can perform (see John 15:4-8). Proverbs 16:9 informs us, "A man's heart plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps."

Joseph and Mary followed the directives or assignments given to them. We'll close here with these three. God told them both, "Do not be afraid"! (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:30). He told them to marry and have and raise the child in Mary's womb, the Son of God. And He told them to name the Son Jesus, meaning "the Eternal Is Salvation." Both Joseph and Mary followed through on each of these directives from Above as each step built on another to glorify God and His purposes beyond their human planning.

Until next we meet, I implore you to take and keep taking these four steps as we walk in faith towards God's perfection beyond our strategies in heeding the Master's call of *"Follow Me."* BT

DIVE DEEPER



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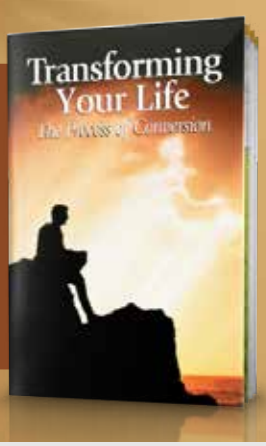
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