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Autumn 2024

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MESSENGER Magazine

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The Blessing of Truth

by Rod Reynolds

Your word is a lamp
to my feet
And a light to
my path --

Psalms 119:105

depending on whom you're having the conversation with, "What makes you think you know the truth?"

Truth, for many people, especially in today's world, is relative. You hear people say things like, "She's got a right to speak her truth." The idea is that her opinion is truth, simply because it's her opinion. Truth is malleable. Truth is subjective, it's whatever you want it to be, is a popular idea.

But according to Scripture truth is not malleable. In many dictionaries **truth is defined as that which conforms to fact or what is actual.**

The Bible assures us that God is the giver of every blessing (James 1:17). There are countless blessings from God that could be listed.

However, in this article I want to focus on one particular blessing of paramount importance to every single person, especially those who are in possession of that blessing. But those who are without it, or who are deficient in it, suffer as a result.

Even though the blessing I am focusing on here is rare in certain respects, and becoming even more scarce, it's a blessing that God wants everyone to have. And in due time, the world will be confronted with this blessing on a universal scale.

What is the blessing? It's truth.

What Is Truth?

When Jesus was on trial for his life, being examined before the Roman Prefect or Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, Jesus said to him, "For this

cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, **that I should bear witness to the truth.** Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "**What is truth?**" (John 18:37-38). In this question Pilate more or less admitted that he, an official of the Roman government, having the power of life or death over a nation of people, did not know the truth, or even what truth is.

Perhaps there was an element of derision in Pilate's question, "What is truth?" *Gill's* commentary suggests the question "might be put in a scornful, jeering way."

Can you imagine yourself in a conversation with someone about a particular subject, say a controversial subject, like "was Jesus an evildoer?" as his persecutors contended (John 18:30). Or was he "God in the flesh?" Or was he well meaning but delusional? And you say to whomever you're contending with, "I know the truth." What kind of reaction would you expect? Might the reaction be,

defined as that which conforms to fact or what is actual. In the 1913 *Webster's Dictionary* a definition of truth is "Conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been; or shall be." **Truth endures.** It doesn't change with the fashions or currents of popular fads or opinions. "For the Lord is good; His mercy is everlasting, And **His truth endures to all generations**" (Psalms 100:5).

"The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever" (Psalms 119:160).

Human beings come and go. Whole nations rise up, flourish and then decay and perish, but the truth endures. "All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever" (I Peter 1:24-25).

From God's standpoint, what is truth for one man or woman is **truth for all.**

God is no respecter of persons. From the standpoint of how the Bible defines truth, either Jesus did bear witness to the truth, as he said, or he didn't. And if he didn't, he was lying.

A lie is not true. A lie is contrary to fact, or reality. But a lie is often, if not always, **intended to give the impression of being true.** Individuals can lie deliberately, knowing that what they are saying is false, or may lie without realizing they are lying, because they are deceived. Because of pervasive lying, which seems to become ever more prevalent, on the part of governments, media, educational institutions, and just about everyone else, including religious institutions, the world is in a state of confusion.

Isaiah's words apply to our time: "No one calls for justice, **Nor does any plead for truth.** They trust in empty words and speak lies; They conceive evil and bring forth iniquity" (Isaiah 59:4).

"Hear the word of the Lord, You children of Israel, For the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: **There is no truth** or mercy Or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, Killing and stealing and committing adultery, They break all restraint, With bloodshed upon bloodshed" (Hosea 4:1-2).

Though hyperbole is used in these verses for emphasis, they convey the impression of a near universal lack of truthfulness, which, while not unique to the age in which we're living, certainly is characteristic of it.

The World is Deceived

The world is deceived. But this should not be surprising to anyone who believes the Bible, because that's how the Bible describes this world. As Revelation 12:9 says, Satan **"deceives the whole world."** Paul wrote, "evil

men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (II Timothy 3:13).

So if you know the truth, especially the truth about the most important issue that affects your life and future, namely your relationship with God, you are blessed in a way that exceeds that of most everyone else in the world.

The truth about God and his nature is fundamental to your ultimate destiny. Yet, the understanding and belief of such truth is extremely rare in today's world, as it has been throughout history, only perhaps more so in some than in other eras. Many either don't believe that God exists, or are agnostic, that is, they confess that they don't know if God exists or not.

The Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University recently released the results of a survey to study the prevailing worldview of various age groups in the United States. The study concluded that Americans younger than fifty-five years old are significantly less likely to embrace traditional biblical teachings about the nature of God, salvation, creation, life after death, and biblical morality.

The survey classified only one out of six Millennials, or 16%, as what they called "born again" Christians. "Millennials" is defined as people born in the 1985 to 2002 period. They are far more likely, according to the survey, to be among "people who either do not believe that He exists, or do not care if He exists."

The majority of Millennials surveyed (54%) believe humans developed over time from less advanced forms. They are much less likely to believe that the Universe was designed, created, and is maintained by God. ("AWVI 2021 Results – Release #3: The Seismic Generational Shift in Worldview: Mil-

lennials Seek a Nation Without God, Bible and Churches," Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, survey conducted February, 2021).

The survey conducted by Dr. George Barna, also concluded that only six percent of American adults possess what they term a "biblical worldview." Barna concluded that "nine out of ten American adults (88%) embrace an impure, unrecognizable worldview that blend ideas from multiple perspectives – a world view that Barna calls 'syncretism'" ("AWVI 2021 Results – Release #01: America's Dominant Worldview: Post-Truth America Stitches Together Patchwork Worldview of Conflicting Beliefs and Values; 'Syncretism' Top Worldview Among U.S. Adults," Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, survey conducted February, 2021).

What this means in plain terms is that most Americans are confused. Their worldview consists of a patchwork of lies, such as the theory of evolution, mixed with false religious beliefs and beliefs from a variety of conflicting philosophies.

It's little wonder that many live for the moment, without vision of a worthwhile purpose or meaning to life, pursuing their lusts and momentary pleasures with little or no understanding of the ultimate consequences of their decisions.

Historically, and today, the majority of those who do accept the idea of God's existence are enmeshed in false religion, the worship of idols and false gods. Most of those who profess belief in the God of the Bible, who profess Christianity, are in a state of confusion, following a religion that embraces many falsehoods and contradictions, that is itself syncretistic, that is, a blend of Biblical teachings, and doctrines and practices

borrowed from various idolatrous pagan sources, along with other man-made traditions that are in conflict with clear teachings of Scripture.

God's Word Rejected

Jesus said, **"If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."** (John 8:31-32). In the end, the truth is liberating, because it's the truth. But much of what is popularly called "Christianity" is not faithful to God's word, or the teachings of Jesus Christ. As a result, few even among professing Christians know the truth about why humans were created—about the destiny God has in mind for mankind.

Most Churches have traditionally taught that humans have an "immortal soul," and that humans don't really die but rather go to heaven or hell when they "die." What one does in heaven is seldom if ever discussed. In hell, the common idea is that those sent there suffer eternal torture. The common belief is that one's fate is sealed upon death. All of these ideas I've just mentioned, though commonly accepted among those who profess to be Christians, are false. Those who believe these concepts are deceived.

Many believe that one day Christ will return and there will be a resurrection. And the Bible confirms that. "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). But why is there a need for a resurrection if the "saved" who had died are already with God in heaven? If people have already received their reward in heaven, what sense does a "resurrection" make?

Scripture challenges us to prove the truth of what we believe, "Prove all

things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21, KVJ). Everyone who would be a Christian should diligently study the Scriptures, comparing Scripture with Scripture, allowing the Bible to interpret itself, and be willing to cast off popular beliefs and traditions that do not conform to what the Bible itself actually teaches. For further suggestions on Bible study see our article "How to Study and Understand the Bible", available at cogmes-senger.org.

Many Churches have taught a doctrine of lawlessness. They have taught that a Christian is not obligated to keep the commandments of God, including the ten commandments. The popular *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown* (JFB) commentary states the following on Colossians 2:14: "The law (including especially the *moral* law, wherein lay the chief difficulty in obeying) is abrogated to the believer...."

Or they may teach that some of the ten commandments, for example, apply to Christians, but other of the commandments do not.

A confusing and contradictory article appears on website called compellingtruth.org with the title, "Are Christians expected to obey the Old Testament law?" The article states, "Jesus fulfilled the law and culminated the requirement of following it (Romans 10:4). In its place, we have the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), which is expressed in Matthew 22:37-39: 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

They failed to note that Jesus was quoting from the "Old Testament law" when he made this statement. The context is shown in the following:

"Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.'" (Matthew 22:35-40).

The first of these commandments is quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5, and the second from Leviticus 19:18. Keeping these commandments doesn't mean you abandon other commandments. Nothing Jesus said suggests such a thing. These commandments are kept as one obeys the ten commandments, and ancillary commandments, which tell us in specific ways **how** to love God and our neighbors.

The article in question goes on: "Do Christians need to obey the Old Testament Law? No. However, the Old Testament Law does provide guidelines for living the Christian life. The 'moral' laws given to the Israelites describe practical ways to love God and others."

So are these "laws," or mere "guidelines" for Christians. In other words, is there any real penalty for disobedience to these precepts? What does Scripture say?

"He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:7-8).

"Therefore put to death your members

which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience" (Colossians 3:5-6).

"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21). All of these statements were written to Christians, though they could apply to others, as well.

In another article with the title, "Are the Ten Commandments repeated in the New Testament?" compellingtruth.org affirms that the ten commandments are repeated in the New Testament. It says, "We see [in the New Testament] nine of the Ten Commandments given as instructions for Christians in how they are to live the new lives they have been given in Jesus." But it says, "...the Saturday Sabbath command is not specifically given for New Testament believers" (compellingtruth.org, retrieved August 13, 2021).

The Apostle James wrote: "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty" (James 2:10-12). In commenting on verse 10, *Gill's* commentary says: "it may be inferred from hence, that a man is not at liberty to obey and neglect what commandments of the law he pleases, but should have respect to them all; which

seems greatly the design of the apostle, as appears by what follows."

What is implied is that any transgression of God's commandments merits the death penalty. Also, it should be noted, the breaking of any one commandment almost always involves breaking others. The Apostle Paul warned, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Anyone, especially professing Christians, who willfully violates the laws or commandments of God is subject to God's wrath, unless he repents.

We have published several articles relating to various questions about the Sabbath, and whether Christians are obliged to keep it. Included are "Did Jesus Break the Sabbath?" "The Weekly Sabbath and its Meaning," and "Why Christians Should Keep the Sabbath." These may be found on our website, cogmessenger.org. If you want a printed copy of any of these articles and have no means of printing them from our website, contact us to request a copy. Some who keep the Sabbath teach that the law forbidding graven images does not apply to Christians.

The Apostle John wrote: "He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). If one rejects any or all of the ten commandments and ancillary commandments, he is rejecting the truth. "You are near, O Lord, **And all Your commandments are truth**" (Psalms 119:151).

God's Commandments Are Truth

The commandments are truth. And if we strive to keep the commandments of God we can grow in understanding, and increase our security in the truth. "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The com-

mandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Psalms 19:8). "For the commandment is a lamp, And the law a light; Reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Proverbs 6:23).

The Word of God, the commandments of God, the truth, are all inseparably linked. "Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, And Your law is truth" (Psalms 119:142).

"My son, do not forget my law, But let your heart keep my commands; For length of days and long life And peace they will add to you. Let not mercy and truth forsake you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart, And so find favor and high esteem In the sight of God and man. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:1-5).

"The works of His hands are verity and justice; All His precepts are sure. They stand fast forever and ever, And are done in truth and uprightness" (Psalms 111:7-8).

"For the word of the Lord is right, And all His work is done in truth" (Psalms 33:4).

According to Scripture Christ's followers are **sanctified by the truth**, the word of God. In a prayer to the Father he said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. **Your word is truth**" (John 17:17). God gives his Spirit to us if we keep his commandments. "If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the **Spirit of truth**, whom [which] the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:15-17). We read in Acts 5:32 of "... the Holy Spirit which God hath given [gives] to those who obey him" (Acts 5:32, Noyes Translation).

Essential to having and maintaining the blessing of knowing and understanding the truth is yielding to and striving sincerely to obey the ten commandments and those commandments that show how the more general commandments are to be applied to various circumstances. Also we must follow the teachings of the apostles as preserved in the New Testament if we are to retain our grip on the truth. The Church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20). For additional commentary on how the commandments of God apply under the New Covenant, please see our article titled "Applying God's Laws Under the New Covenant," available on our website, www.cogmessenger.org.

To have truth working in us to effect righteousness means we must be sincerely seeking to be truthful in our words and conduct. David committed the grievous sin of adultery. In an effort to conceal that sin he also committed what amounted to murder. But David came to understand the weakness of his carnal nature when he faced up to what he had done. He understood that facing the truth, acknowledging the truth, is a key to further understanding and wisdom. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, **You desire truth in the inward parts**, And in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom" (Psalms 51:5-6).

One of the great sins of the religious leaders who opposed Jesus was hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a form of lying and deceit. He said to his disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known" (Luke 12:1-2). In the final

analysis, none of us can hide from God. He knows our innermost thoughts, and he can see what is in our hearts, regardless of any efforts to hide these things from him or others.

Israel of old was rejected because of hypocrisy, among other sins, deceitfully using God's name. "Hear this, O house of Jacob, Who are called by the name of Israel, And have come forth from the wellsprings of Judah; Who swear by the name of the Lord, And make mention of the God of Israel, **But not in truth** or in righteousness" (Isaiah 48:1).

We are to cast out the leaven of hypocrisy, malice and wickedness, and replace it with the unleavened bread of **sincerity and truth** (I Corinthians 5:8).

Worship God in Truth

God demands that those who worship him worship in truth. "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in **spirit and truth**; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him **must worship in spirit and truth**" (John 4:23-24). Worship that is characterized by falsehood, by deceit, by substituting man's rules for God's commandments, is vain worship. In quoting Isaiah, Jesus condemned worship rooted in hypocrisy. "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, **Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men**" (Matthew 15:8-9).

We need to seek the truth continually, and cry out for God to reveal it to us more perfectly. "Show me Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths. **Lead me in Your truth** and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; On You I wait all the day" (Psalms 25:4-

5).

We should study God's word diligently, so we may grow in our comprehension of the truth. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15). Or, as it is in the New English Translation: "Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately" (II Timothy 2:15). No matter how much you have learned of Biblical truth, there will always be more to learn. "... if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know" (I Corinthians 8:2). "... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

One of the benefits of knowing and believing the truth is that it gives you something stable to shelter you in times of turmoil such as the world faces now. "He shall cover you with His feathers, And under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler" (Psalms 91:4).

Those who have knowledge of the truth have an obligation to share it when given the opportunity, not that we are to harangue or get into heated debates with unbelievers. Peter wrote: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to **everyone who asks you** a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (I Peter 3:15).

We of the Church of God together are making a collective effort to make known truth through the public preaching of the gospel through our ministry. "I have proclaimed the good news of righteousness in the great assembly; Indeed, I do not restrain my lips, O Lord, You Yourself know. I have

not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have declared Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth From the great assembly" (Psalms 40:9-10).

We should be careful that what we communicate to others is the truth, even if they don't believe it. "But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them" (II Corinthians 4:2-4).

We should speak the truth to one another, and put away lying. "Therefore,

putting away lying, Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25).

We're told in Scripture that God "...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:4).

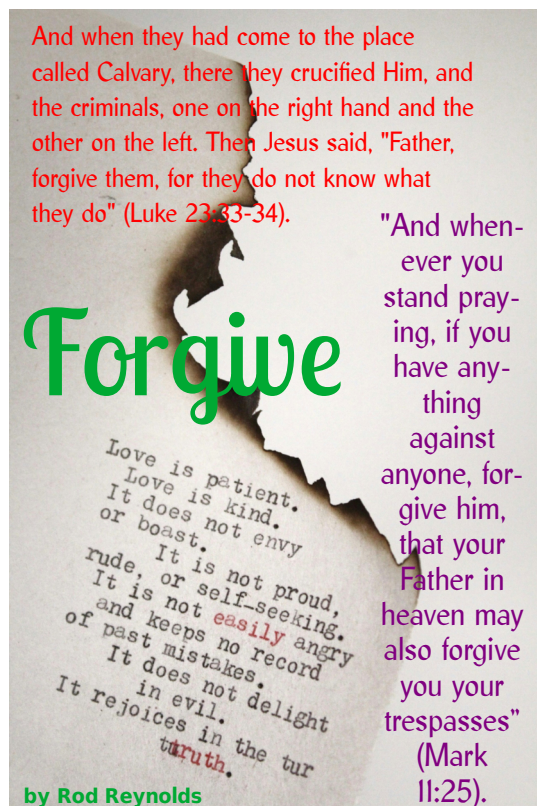
When Jesus Christ returns to the earth he is going to remove the veil of deception from the eyes of mankind. "And He will destroy on this mountain The surface of the covering cast over all people, And the veil that is spread over all nations" (Isaiah 25:7).

The peoples descended from Israel, and the other nations of the earth, will have the truth revealed and taught to them. They will learn to walk in truth. "Open the gates, That the righteous nation which keeps the truth may enter in" (Isaiah 26:2).

"For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery for burnt offering; I will direct their work in truth, And will make with them an everlasting covenant" (Isaiah 61:8).

Truth abiding in one's heart is necessary for him to enter God's Kingdom. "Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, **And speaks the truth in his heart**" (Psalms 15:1-2).

Most people in the world do not yet have an understanding of the truth matching that of many of the readers of this magazine. We need to appreciate the blessing of the knowledge of truth that we have, or that is available to us if we seek it out. We should think about it often, and thank God for it often. "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, But to Your name give glory, Because of Your mercy, Because of Your truth" (Psalms 115:1).



Forgiveness has the power to heal hurt feelings, it's a balm for injured relationships. For some it may be

bitter medicine at first, but for all of us it's necessary, vital, essential to our emotional, mental and spiritual well being.

Each of us needs to ask himself a very important question. The answer for you individually will likely have a great deal of bearing on your personal happiness and success in life.

Here is the question: Have I learned the art of forgiveness? If not, will I learn to forgive? And will I practice the principle of forgiveness? This question is one we must not take lightly. It goes to the very heart and core of Christianity. How we handle this matter of forgiveness can tell us a lot about

how converted we really are.

The answer to this question can have

a great deal to do with the unity or disunity of God's Church, and our effectiveness as instruments to do his work. The answer even may determine whether you or I will ultimately be in God's Kingdom in the resurrection.

Scripture declares that Jesus Christ is coming at the end of this age to establish God's Kingdom on earth (Matthew 24:3, 30; Revelation 11:15). It will be a kingdom of universal peace and tranquility (Isaiah 2:4; 9:7).

In that respect as in many others it will be different from — and opposite to — the past 6000 years of recorded history. For thousands of years individuals, tribes and nations have been feuding and fighting. The pages of man's history are soaked with blood. What factors will account for the difference between the 6000 years of mankind's bloody self-rule and the 1000 years of peace under the reign

of Christ?

One important factor is that men will learn to forgive. An attitude of forbearance and forgiveness is an essential key to people learning to live together harmoniously.

Who's going to teach mankind how to forgive? Perhaps you will, under Christ's direction, if you have learned yourself how to forgive. The time for Christians to learn this lesson is now. Our time to begin practicing forgiveness is now, for as Peter wrote, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

It's inevitable that in life there will be differences of opinion, there will be slights, misstatements, errors in judgment. If you're the one who's been slighted, if you're the one who's been falsely accused, if you're the one who's been hurt, are you going to stay hurt, or are you going to get well?

Do you nurse grievances? Do you condemn those who have made mistakes and errors in judgment? Do you seek to hurt those who intentionally or unintentionally have hurt you? Or do you forbear? Do you forgive? How magnanimous, how noble, how charitable are you in your treatment of others?

What Is Forgiveness?

What is forgiveness? It is, according to one dictionary, "compassionate feelings that support a willingness to forgive" (*Wordnet*). Various definitions of forgiving or forgiveness include the ideas of ceasing to be angry or resentful toward someone who has done wrong, to grant pardon, to stop blaming, to absolve from payment.

Forbearance is to act with patience, to withhold a penalty or claim against someone.

We're told those who are in the first resurrection "shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him" (Revelation 20:6). If we are to rule under God we must become like God. The Eternal our God is a forgiving God, a merciful God.

God would be fully justified in blotting everyone of us out of existence, yes, all mankind. Yet God's plan is to save, not destroy, mankind. David wrote: "For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You" (Psalm 86:5). And Daniel observed, "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him" (Daniel 9:9).

Notice how God described himself to Moses at Mount Sinai as he showed himself to him. In part he said, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Exodus 34:6-7).

God's willingness to forgive is manifested in the fact that he sent his beloved son, Jesus Christ, to give his life in payment for our sins, that we, despite our sins, might be saved. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16-17).

Jesus did not die for us because we are righteous, but because we were sinners in need of forgiveness. As Paul wrote, "Christ died for the ungodly.... But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8).

Jesus, even in his hour of suffering, asked forgiveness for his tormentors (Luke 23:33-34).

We're to imitate God's example of mercy even to those who are undeserving. Jesus taught, "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:35-37).

We Need Forgiveness— and to Forgive

Each of us has and will do things for which we need God's forgiveness. God tells us that if we expect to be forgiven we must forgive those who have offended us.

In the model prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, "...forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors" He went on to comment, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:12, 14-15).

History abounds with examples of wars fought, kingdoms destroyed, populations decimated, because of man's unwillingness to forgive.

Jacob's sons Levi and Simeon killed all the men of the city near where they dwelt in Canaan because the two brothers refused to forgive Shechem, a young prince in the area, for engaging in sexual relations with their sister, Dinah. This was done even though the young man had done all he could to make amends, and sought to marry Dinah (Genesis 34).

Jacob later pronounced a curse on the angry and unforgiving spirit that had provoked the crime of his two sons, and their descendants in the latter days were to be left scattered among the Israelite tribes. "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob And scatter them in Israel" (Genesis 49:5-7).

Another more recent example of the consequences of an unforgiving spirit is that of Adolf Hitler, who was embittered over the German nation's surrender in the First World War.

Hitler largely blamed German Jews and Marxists for Germany's capitulation. Indeed, nearly everything that was wrong in Germany could somehow be blamed on the Jews in Hitler's twisted logic. And for this and other reasons in Hitler's view the Jews had to be gotten "rid of" (*Mein Kampf*, Adolph Hitler, Trans. James Murphy, 1.11; 1.12).

"There is no such thing as coming to an understanding with the Jews. It must be the hard-and-fast 'Either-Or.' " (*Mein Kampf*, 1.7).

Hitler also saw France as a mortal enemy, and foresaw a need for the Germans to one day "rally together for a last decisive contest with France" (*Mein Kampf*, 2.15). Though there were additional factors, resentment, bitterness, and hostility toward perceived enemies on the part of people like Hitler played no small part in initiating the catastrophe of World War II, and the Holocaust which accompanied it. Many millions died, and the lives of many others were irreparably damaged.

People have left the Church, or even turned completely from God, because of some slight or fault of someone else they were unwilling to forgive. Often it involves petty things, human

weaknesses, personality quirks, a minor affront, a difference of opinion over a matter of relative insignificance. Each of us will almost certainly be challenged by slights, offenses, and injustice in our lives, and we will have to show God which is more important to us, salvation, or nursing a grudge.

In a chaotic world filled with hatred, anger, violence, bitterness, and division, it's imperative that we practice forbearance, forgiveness, mercy, compassion and tolerance. I'm not talking about forsaking sound principles or abandoning truth. I'm talking about our treatment of those who are weak, who are hurt, who are blind, who are in need of nurturing. I'm also talking about our attitude toward those who offend us, perhaps without meaning to, and also those who deliberately do evil against us.

God Condemns Slander

We must make judgments about what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong according to God's word (Luke 12:57; John 7:24; Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 5:12; 6:2-3; 10:15). But we must avoid slander and condemnation. "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge" (James 4:11-12).

The law forbids us to falsely accuse or spread malicious gossip about others. "You shall not go about as a talebearer [slanderer, calumniator] among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:16). When we do so we, in effect, become judges of the law, and take on prerogatives which are not ours. There are times when sinful conduct must be confronted and censured, but only within

the parameters of the principle of love toward God and loving one's neighbor as oneself. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:17-18; cf. Matthew 22:37-40).

If we acknowledge God's sovereignty over all of us, and trust him to judge righteously, it is easier to bear with the faults and mistakes of others (Romans 14:10-12). If God has forgiven us, how can we be justified in refusing to forgive a brother? "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do" (Colossians 3:12-13).

All genuine Christians are servants of Christ, and it's from him that we will be rewarded, or, if warranted, punished. "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality" (Colossians 3:23-25; the Greek for "does wrong," *adikeō*, is in the form of the present active participle, which in this context implies to keep on doing wrong, i.e., someone who persists in wrongdoing and will not repent).

When to Forgive

When and how often should we forgive? We should at all times be of a ready mind to forgive and have a forgiving spirit. When we pray, we are to pray in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation toward even our enemies,

as well as anyone against whom we may have a complaint. "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44-45). "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25-26).

If you don't have a forgiving spirit, you are likely to begin harboring resentment, hatred and bitterness, and perhaps even plotting vengeance. Cain out of anger and envy hated his brother Abel and murdered him, though in truth Abel had done him no wrong (Genesis 4:1-8; 1 John 3:11-15).

But we are to do good even to those who hate us, and pray for them, trusting God to judge them (Romans 12:17-21). An example of someone who did not harbor bitterness toward those who had done him a terrible wrong is Joseph.

Of all his sons, Jacob (Israel) showed preference for Joseph, and as a result his older brothers "hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" (Genesis 37:4). When Joseph related to his brothers dreams he had indicating that the other members of the family would bow down before him, they hated him even more (Genesis 37:5-11).

It happened that Israel sent Joseph to check on the well being of his brothers as they were out in the countryside tending flocks. When some of the brothers saw him coming they con-

spired to kill Joseph out of envy and hatred. However, when the oldest brother, Reuben, heard of the plot he sought to save Joseph by suggesting they cast him into a pit instead of killing him outright, intending later to deliver him back to his father. When some Midianite traders came by in Reuben's absence, the other brothers sold Joseph to them, whereupon he was taken to Egypt and sold into slavery (Genesis 37:12-36). He was about seventeen years of age when this happened (Genesis 37:2).

Joseph spent years serving his Egyptian master, Potiphar, a high ranking officer of Pharaoh. Eventually, Joseph was cast into prison on false charges. But through all this tribulation Joseph was being watched over by God, and despite his difficulties, he received favor from those he was subject to (Genesis 39-40).

When he was age thirty Joseph was given an opportunity by God to interpret a dream of Pharaoh in which it was revealed that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and Joseph proposed a plan to prepare effectively for the lean years. Whereupon Pharaoh made Joseph second in the land of Egypt, subject only to Pharaoh himself (Genesis 41).

When eventually in the time of famine Joseph's brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph did not seek to "get even," but treated them with compassion. Eventually Israel and his family moved to Egypt and with Joseph's help resettled in the "land of Goshen."

After Israel's death, Joseph's brothers thought that he would seek vengeance for their crime against him (Genesis 50:15-18). But he said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant

it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones" (Genesis 50:19-21).

Note that Joseph did not seek to usurp God's place to execute judgment on his brothers, rather he treated them mercifully and with kindness. Joseph's suffering was in the context of a larger picture that God had in mind, as Joseph himself eventually came to realize.

Similarly, Jesus' suffering was allowed with a larger picture in mind. And likewise, we may also be allowed to suffer with a larger picture in mind, so we must retain a forgiving spirit and let God work out his purpose without allowing resentment and bitterness to destroy us (James 5:7-11; Ephesians 4:30-32).

Many slights and offenses can simply be forgiven and overlooked. Sometimes, however, there may be major issues that require resolution. Where it is a personal matter between you and your brother, go to him first, then if necessary, seek judgment from the Church (Matthew 18:15-18). "Will be bound," and "will be loosed," (as translated in the NKJV) in the Greek are future perfect passives, properly translated in some modern translations, such as the English Majority Text Version: "Assuredly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." In other words, the judgment made must be made in accordance with God's own judgment (cf. *Basics of Biblical Greek*, William D. Mounce, p. 115; Isaiah 8:20; Ezekiel 44:24; Malachi 2:7-9).

In all cases, even if the guilty person is unrepentant and must be separated from fellowship, a willingness to forgive must be maintained on our part

(Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 17:3-5).

As we've seen, God is very merciful, and ready to forgive. He is kind even to the unthankful and evil. Even so, in terms of eternal salvation, God's forgiveness is predicated on our willingness to repent (1 John 1:9; Proverbs 28:13). However, God's judgment on sinners is his to make. We need to be very careful that we do not condemn others in our hearts, but that we leave their judgment to God. This applies even to those from whom we must separate ourselves due to unrepentant and sinful conduct (2 Thessaloni-

ans 3:14-15).

If you have trouble forgiving others ask God for a forgiving spirit. Peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness are fruits of his Spirit. Pray that God will increase your faith and grant you the fruits of his Spirit, including forgiveness.

Numerous problems between people could be settled or avoided by a simple willingness to forgive. Marital problems, family problems, problems among Church members, among members of your community, or na-

tion, even problems between nations, tribes, races and cultures, could often be solved if we learn to forgive one another.

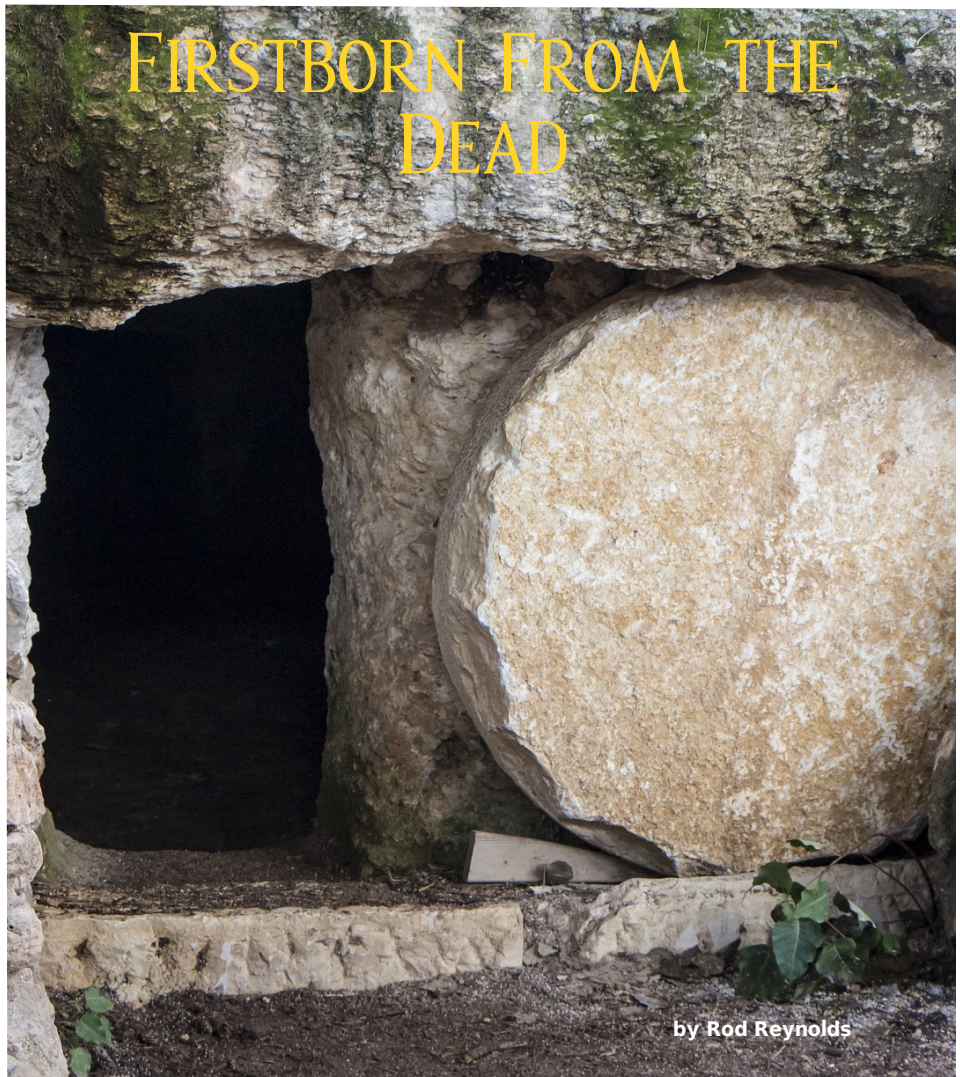
One day, that lesson will be learned by all peoples and nations (Isaiah 2:2-4).

But if you are a Christian, or seek to become a Christian, now is the time to learn and practice the art of forgiveness. God's Kingdom will be one of peace partly because all who are in it will have been forgiven and will have learned to forgive.

"Firstborn from the dead" is how Jesus Christ is referred to in Revelation 1:5 and Colossians 1:18. What are the implications of the title "Firstborn from the Dead," as it applies to Jesus Christ?

Is this term to be understood only as a title denoting preeminence, as some have suggested? Or does it also imply that Jesus Christ is the first, in time order, to be "born" from the dead, as a metaphor for the resurrection? We know that others were resurrected from the dead before Jesus Christ was. He himself had resurrected his friend Lazarus, who had died, and had also resurrected others from the dead during his ministry (Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25; 11:5; Luke 7:11-16, 22; 8:41-42, 49-56; John 11:11-45). So why is Jesus Christ called the "firstborn from the dead," and what significance does that have?

The Greek word translated "firstborn" in Revelation 1:5 and Colossians 1:18 is *prototokos*. It is a compound word derived from *protos*, "first," and *tikto*, "to bring forth," or to "bear" or "produce." The word is used several places in the New Testament, including the account of Jesus Christ's birth by the virgin Mary (Luke 2:7).



by Rod Reynolds

Scripture says of Jesus' birth to Mary, "And she brought forth her **firstborn** Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in

the inn" (Luke 2:7).

First in Order of Birth

In commenting on the use of the word

translated "firstborn" in Luke 2:7 the Greek grammarian A. T. Robertson writes, "The expression naturally means that **she afterwards had other children** and we read of brothers and sisters of Jesus" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*). Matthew names four brothers of Jesus, and mentions sisters, as well: "And when He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, 'Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?' So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house'" (Matthew 13:54-57).

The equivalent Hebrew word for firstborn is *bekor* (בכור), which, along with cognate words with similar or related meanings, occurs extensively in the Old Testament.

There are a few instances in the Old Testament where "firstborn" is used in a purely figurative sense of that which is supreme or preeminent over its kind, but in the vast majority of cases it is used of that which is literally the first in time order to be born of a parent, especially the firstborn son of a father. Scripture reveals that God from the beginning had a particular regard for that which was first to be born or produced, and claimed it as his own in a special way: "**Consecrate to Me all the firstborn**, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine" (Exodus 13:2).

Abel's offering was pleasing and acceptable to God, in part, because it included the firstborn of his flock. Cain's did not. "And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an of-

fering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell" (Genesis 4:3-4).

Rights and Privileges of Firstborn

Under the culture and legal system of the Old Testament firstborn sons were accorded certain rights, privileges and responsibilities solely by virtue of having been born first. Among them was a double portion of the inheritance divided among a father's sons.

"If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and they have borne him children, both the loved and the unloved, and if the firstborn son is of her who is unloved, then it shall be, on the day he bequeaths his possessions to his sons, that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son of the loved wife in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his" (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). It wasn't intended from the beginning that a man have two wives in the first place, but as with divorce, polygamy was tolerated under the Old Covenant system due to hardness of human hearts (cf. Genesis 2:21-24; Matthew 19:3-8; Ephesians 5:31; 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6).

Among the patriarchs the birthright of the firstborn included chieftainship, or rule over the brothers and the entire family. Esau, the firstborn of Isaac, had sold his birthright to Jacob, his brother. Through guile, Jacob also received the blessing, that normally accompanied the firstborn status. In giving the blessing of the firstborn son to Jacob, his father Isaac said: "Let

peoples serve you, And nations bow down to you. **Be master over your brethren**, And let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, And blessed be those who bless you!" (Genesis 27:29). The blessing in this case also encompassed title to the blessing of promise, passed down from Abraham, which included physical inheritance for their descendants of the choice parts of the earth and the spiritual blessing of fellowship with God in a covenant relationship.

Covenant with Abraham

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.' Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: 'As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God'" (Genesis 17:1-8).

Issac confirmed the blessing was Jacob's. "Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, and said to him: 'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and take yourself a wife from there of the daughters of Laban your mother's

brother. May God Almighty bless you, And make you fruitful and multiply you, That you may be an assembly of peoples; And give you the **blessing of Abraham**, To you and your descendants with you, That you may inherit the land In which you are a stranger, Which God gave to Abraham" (Genesis 28:1-4).

"He [God] remembers His covenant forever, The word which He commanded, for a thousand generations, The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac, And confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an everlasting covenant" (Psalms 105:8-10).

"For He remembered **His holy promise, And Abraham His servant**. He brought out His people with joy, His chosen ones with gladness. He gave them the lands of the Gentiles, And they inherited the labor of the nations, That they might observe His statutes And keep His laws" (Psalms 105:42-45).

The land God promised to Abraham's descendants eventually far exceeded the confines of the land of Canaan. **"Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south;** and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 28:14).

"For the promise that he would be the **heir of the world** was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13).

During the period of the kings, it was customary for the **firstborn son** of the king to succeed his father as king, though the custom was not always honored.

"And Jehoshaphat rested with his fa-

thers, and was buried with his fathers in the City of David. Then Jehoram his son reigned in his place. He had brothers, the sons of Jehoshaphat: Azariah, Jehiel, Zechariah, Azaryahu, Michael, and Shephatiah; all these were the sons of Jehoshaphat king of Israel. Their father gave them great gifts of silver and gold and precious things, with fortified cities in Judah; but he gave the kingdom to Jehoram, **because he was the firstborn**" (II Chronicles 21:1-3).

Firstborn Rights Could be Transferred

Under the law of the Old Covenant, **the right of the firstborn was to be long to him who was born first**. It is clear from Scriptural example, however, that **the right could be transferred to another for cause**. While the descendants of all Israel's sons were to share in his blessings, the greater part of the physical inheritance went to Joseph and his sons. Joseph was born later than Reuben, but was the firstborn to Israel's wife, Rachel. **In terms of the inheritance of physical blessings, Joseph had replaced Reuben as the firstborn** (Genesis 48:15-16; 49:22-26), while **the scepter, symbol of royal authority, was given to Judah** (Genesis 49:8-10).

Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, forfeited his right to firstborn status by committing adultery with Jacob's concubine.

"And Jacob called his sons and said, 'Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you **in the last days**: Gather together and hear, you sons of Jacob, And listen to Israel your father. Reuben, you are my firstborn, My might and the beginning of my strength, The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, **you shall not excel** [or you shall not have preeminence, as in the English Standard Version and some

other translations], Because you went up to your father's bed; Then you defiled it -- He went up to my couch" (Genesis 49:1-4).

The blessing of Jacob, or Israel, on Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh is recorded as follows: "Then Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn. And he blessed Joseph, and said: 'God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has fed me all my life long to this day, The Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; **Let my name be named upon them, And the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac;** And let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth'" (Genesis 48:14-16).

In this case the descendants of Ephraim, the younger son, were to become greater than those of Manasseh, Joseph's firstborn. "Then Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn. And he blessed Joseph, and said: 'God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has fed me all my life long to this day, The Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, Bless the lads; Let my name be named upon them, And the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; And let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.' Now when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took hold of his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, 'Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.' But his father refused and said, 'I know,

my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude [or family, as in some translations] of nations.' So he blessed them that day, saying, 'By you Israel will bless, saying, "May God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh!"' And thus he set Ephraim before Manasseh" (Genesis 48:14-20).

Additional specific blessings on the descendants of Joseph, especially to be fulfilled in the "last days," or near the end of the present age, (verse 1) are recorded in the next chapter: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a well; His branches run over the wall. The archers have bitterly grieved him, Shot at him and hated him. But his bow remained in strength, And the arms of his hands were made strong By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), By the God of your father who will help you, And by the Almighty who will bless you With blessings of heaven above, Blessings of the deep that lies beneath, Blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father Have excelled the blessings of my ancestors, Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, And on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers" (Genesis 49:22-26).

Green's Literal Translation renders verse 26 of chapter 49 as follows: "The blessings of your father are **above the blessings of my offspring**, to the limit of everlasting hills; may they be for the head of Joseph and for the crown of the leader of his brothers" (Genesis 49:26; for additional commentary on these Scriptures see *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*, by Herbert W. Armstrong).

Scepter Promise to Judah

The scepter, representing the office of king, was given to Judah. "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the lawmaker from between his feet, until Shiloh [understood as a reference to the Messiah] come, and the obedience of the peoples to him" (Genesis 49:10, Green's Literal Translation).

"Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel – **he was indeed the firstborn**, but because he defiled his father's bed, **his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph**, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright; yet **Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came a ruler**, [or the chief ruler, as in some translations] although the birthright was Joseph's" (I Chronicles 5:1-2).

Judah was the last of four sons of Jacob to be born by his wife, Leah. Reuben, as we've seen, was disqualified. The two who were born next in order by Leah were Simeon and then Levi. These two had murdered Shechem, who had sought atonement for fornicating with Jacob's daughter, Dinah (Genesis 34). Because of their crime their descendants were to be scattered among the other Israelite peoples in the latter days (Genesis 49:5-7). But the kings of Israel would come primarily from descendants of Judah, as would ultimately the Messiah.

Eventually, David, although he was not the firstborn among his father's sons, was chosen by God to become king of Israel. And **he became one regarded by God as a firstborn son**. Speaking of David: "But My faithfulness and My mercy shall be with him, And in My name his horn shall be exalted. Also I will set his hand over the sea, And his right hand over the

rivers. He shall cry to Me, 'You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.' Also **I will make him My firstborn**, The highest of the kings of the earth" (Psalms 89:24-27).

Keil and Delitzsch Commentary remarks as follows: "What is promised in Psalms 89:26 is a world-wide dominion...." Largely unknown to most people is the fact that David's kingdom was worldwide in its scope and influence, and even more so under his son, Solomon (cf. *The 'Lost' Ten Tribes of Israel...Found!*, Steven M. Collins, chapters 1-2).

But what we read in Psalm 89 concerning David, was not complete in David, nor even in his son Solomon. **In Jesus Christ, a descendant of David, this promise of worldwide dominion and other promises have been or will be fulfilled to the utmost.**

Jesus Resurrected from the Dead

Jesus Christ, after a ministry of three and a half years, being about 33 years old, was crucified and died an agonizing death. But women disciples of his came looking to anoint his body after he had been dead and buried for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:39-40). The morning after that period, they arrived at the tomb where he had been laid.

"Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, 'Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?' But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away--for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white

robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. **He is risen!** He is not here. See the place where they laid Him'" (Mark 16:1-6, for a detailed explanation concerning the sequence of events related to Jesus' death, burial and resurrection see our booklet, *When Is the Biblical Passover?*, available as a pdf file you can download, or as a print copy by request).

After his resurrection, Jesus had remained for forty days before he ascended into heaven. "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom **He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs**, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:1-3).

Peter proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost following Jesus' death and resurrection: "For David says concerning Him [Jesus Christ]: 'I foresaw the Lord always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.' Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, **He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne**, he, foreseeing

this, spoke concerning **the resurrection of the Christ**, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. **This Jesus God has raised up**, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:25-36).

No doubt the news of the empty tomb where Jesus had been laid was well known in Jerusalem by the time Peter spoke to the crowd on the day of Pentecost. And he had been seen alive by more than five hundred witnesses after being publicly executed, by being whipped to near the point of death with a scourge (a whip consisting of a handle with leather strips attached, with jagged pieces of bone or metal tied to the ends which lacerated and tore chunks of flesh from the victim with each blow). Then he was nailed to a cross, and finally, had a Roman spear thrust into his side (John 19:34, for more details about the punishment Jesus endured see chapter 8 of *When Is the Biblical Passover?*).

Paul wrote: "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that **He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. Af-**

ter that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time" (I Corinthians 15:1-8).

Paul, who had previously persecuted Christians, became himself a disciple, a follower, and apostle of Christ after Christ appeared to him in a vision, and later personally taught him. Paul testified: "But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. **For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.** For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, **I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem** to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, 'He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy'" (Galatians 1:11-23).

So Paul, the former persecutor, did not confer with any of the apostles who had known Jesus Christ until three years after his conversion. Yet he was soon a foremost teacher within the Church, and was **teaching the same doctrine** that the other apostles were teaching, the doctrine **he had been taught by Jesus Christ**.

Paul continues: "Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain" (Galatians 2:1-2).

"But from those who seemed to be something—whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man—for those who seemed to be something **added nothing to me**. But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do" (Galatians 2:6-10).

So **there was harmony in the teaching of Paul and that of the other apostles**. His primary mission was to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles, but they asked that he remember the poor among the circumcised, as there was poverty among the fol-

lowers of Jesus in Judea, due largely to persecution. Paul took pains to raise money to send to the Judean Christians during the course of his ministry.

Paul, in presenting a defense before the Roman authorities regarding charges brought against him by Jewish leaders, said: "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, **saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles**" (Acts 26:19-23).

The *Jamieson, Fausset, Brown* Commentary on verse 23 remarks: "The construction of this sentence implies that in regard to the question 'whether the Messiah is a suffering one, and whether, **rising first from the dead**, he should show light to the (Jewish) people and to the Gentiles,' **he had only said what the prophets and Moses said should come.**"

In What Sense was Jesus Christ the First to be Resurrected?

Even though the way this is phrased in the original does not explicitly state that Christ was the first to rise from the dead, but only that he would rise from the dead and give light to both Jews and Gentiles, it is nevertheless true, as a number of Scriptures make plain, that Jesus Christ **was the first to rise from the dead in a certain**

respect.

Adam Clarke comments on Acts 26:23: "*That he should be the first that should rise from the dead*] That is, **that he should be the first who should rise from the dead so as to die no more**; and to give, in his own person, the proof of the resurrection of the human body, no more to return under the empire of death. **In no other sense can Jesus Christ be said to be the first that rose again from the dead**; for Elisha raised the son of the Shunammite. A dead man, put into the sepulchre of the Prophet Elisha, was restored to life as soon as he touched the prophet's bones. Christ himself had raised the widow's son at Nain; and he had also raised Lazarus, and several others. **All these died again**; but the human nature of our Lord was raised from the dead, and **can die no more. Thus he was the first who rose again from the dead to return no more into the empire of death**" (*Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*).

Jesus Christ is **firstborn from the dead** insofar as **he is the first and so far the only person who has been resurrected from the dead to eternal life**. Paul wrote to Timothy of Jesus Christ that **he "... alone has immortality"** (I Timothy 6:16; for more concerning the subject of death see our article "What Is Death?").

"Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and **declared to be the Son of God with power** according to the Spirit of holiness, **by the resurrection from the dead**" (Romans 1:1-4).

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the firstborn son of God in that he

is the first human being to have been resurrected from the dead to become fully like God [as he was before his incarnation], an immortal Spirit being in the image and likeness of God.

"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and **the express image of His person**, and upholding all things by the word of His power, **when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You'? And again: 'I will be to Him a Father, And He shall be to Me a Son'? But when He again **brings the first-born** into the world, He says: 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.' And of the angels He says: 'Who makes His angels spirits And His ministers a flame of fire.' **But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your Kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions.'** And: 'You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; And they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will fold them up, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will not fail.' But to which of the angels has He ever said: 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool'? Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minis-

ter for those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:1-14).

More clear in verse six is the following: "When God was about to send his **firstborn Son** into the world, he said, 'All of God's angels must worship him'" (Hebrews 1:6, God's Word to the Nations Version).

Others to be Resurrected in Like Manner

Jesus Christ is the **firstborn from the dead to enter into eternal life. But he is the forerunner of many more.** "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, **that He might be the firstborn among many brethren**" (Romans 8:29). As explained in our article "Are the 'Lost' Predestined to Hell?" this passage of Scripture simply means that mankind exists for the purpose of becoming like Christ, immortal and sharing his nature. There will be countless others who will follow Christ into immortality in future resurrections.

"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits [Greek: firstfruit] of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. **For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order:** Christ the firstfruits [more accurately, a firstfruit, as in Young's Literal Translation], afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For 'He has put all things under His feet.' But when He says 'all things are put under Him,' it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all

things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, **that God may be all in all**" (I Corinthians 15:20-28).

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, **now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him**, for we shall see Him as He is" (I John 3:1-2).

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, **who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body**, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21).

Jesus Christ has Preeminence

Not only is Jesus Christ first to be resurrected as explained above, he has supreme authority—preeminence—as the firstborn of God. "He has delivered [aorist, should be "delivers"] us from the power of darkness and conveyed [aorist, should be "conveys"] us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn over all creation.** For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the **firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the**

preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:13-20).

A note in the New English translation of verse 15 from the above passage states as follows: "The Greek term πρωτότοκος (*prototokos*) [firstborn] could refer either to first in order of time, such as a first born child, or it could refer to one who is preeminent in rank.... In Col 1:15 the emphasis is on the priority of Jesus' rank as over and above creation (cf. 1:16 and the "for" clause referring to Jesus as Creator)." A note from the same source concerning the word "creation" at the end of verse 15 states: "The genitive construction πάσης κτίσεως (*pases ktiseos*) is a genitive of subordination and is therefore translated as 'over all creation.'"

Jesus Christ holds the status of the firstborn over all creation. This implies he has a status superseding—that is, superior to—that of any created thing.

"...and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the **firstborn from the dead**,

and the **ruler over the kings of the earth.** To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Although Jesus Christ has authority over the kings of the earth, he is not yet exercising his authority to govern the earth as he will when he returns in power.

Daniel saw a vision from God which he wrote down. "I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus Christ testified before his persecutors that he was the one spoken of in Daniel's vision. "But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, 'I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!' Jesus said to him, 'It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the

Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven'" (Matthew 26:63-64).

In the Olivet prophesy he said, "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:30-31).

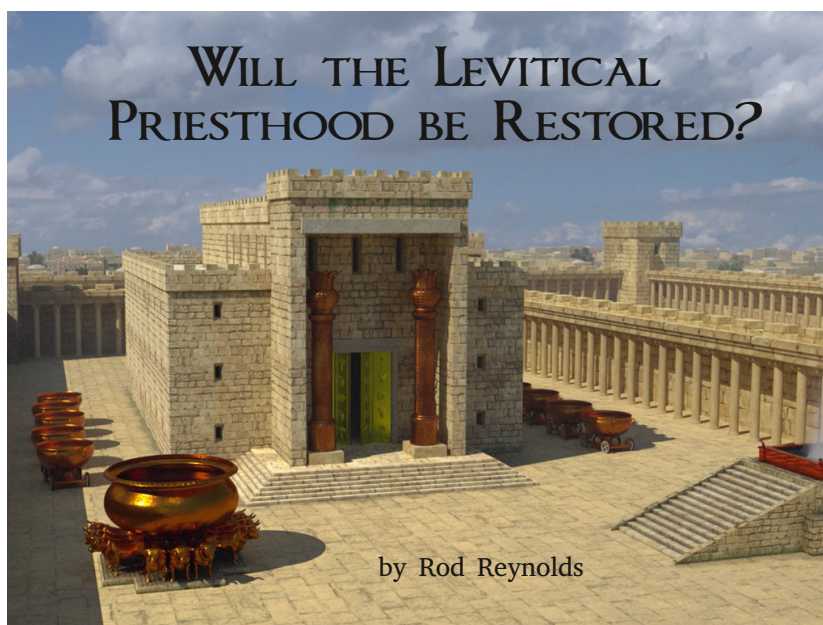
Meanwhile, it's up to us to follow the admonition of Paul to Timothy: "... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing, which He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (I Timothy 6:11-15).

Image on right: Artist's conception of Solomon's Temple.

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Question: It's been taught that after Christ's return the Levites will once again offer burnt offerings and other sacrifices. Why is this necessary? Will it be used as a tutor to train people the overall scheme of things? Or is it meant figuratively?

Also, Jeremiah 33:18 says there will always be a Levitical priest to offer sacrifices and offerings. But there have not been priests doing offerings since 70 AD. So, it looks like it means that, as the Levites have been offering up sacrifices all these centuries, it is in a figurative or



spiritual sense rather than literal. In verses 21-22, of this chapter, God refers to the priests as His ministers. So maybe all these things (specifically the offering of sacrifices after the return of Christ) are merely a type of the spiritual healing that will become the norm on earth. Can you give me some feedback on this?

Answer: There is a difference in how the prophecy of Jeremiah 33:17-18 applied and was carried out with respect to the throne of David as opposed to the Levitical priesthood. The differences are explained in other Scriptures which deal with these subjects and with how the Scriptures have been fulfilled historically.

It's important to take into account the context of Jeremiah 33, which is the restoration of Judah, Israel and Jerusalem under the rule of the Messiah. The primary application of this specific prophecy is to the Millennium. The prophecy looks forward to the reestablishment of David's throne in Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the Levitical priesthood to offer sacrifices there. Note for example: "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will keep the promise that I made to Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David. He will do what is fair and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live securely. Jerusalem will be called The LORD Our Righteousness.' This is what the LORD says: 'David will never fail to have a descendant sitting on the throne of Israel. The Levitical priests will never fail to have a descendant in my presence to sacrifice burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to prepare daily sacrifices'" (Jeremiah

33:14-18, *God's Word to the Nations* version) The Hebrew *yowm* used in verse 18, translated "continually" in the KJV, means "daily," in this context, in reference to the daily sacrifices (as in the version quoted above; cf. Numbers 28:3; *Strong's Lexicon*; *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, et al).

The prophecy says, "nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me..." (Jeremiah 33:18). It does not say that they will have continually offered sacrifices without interruption until the Messiah's coming. The main point is that the Levites (and the descendants of David) will have continued to exist up to that time.

Jeremiah himself both prophesied of and witnessed the destruction of the Temple (Jeremiah 7:4, 10-14; 26:2-6, 12, 18; 25:13). The Temple having been destroyed, there was no place for the Levites to legitimately offer physical sacrifices (Deuteronomy 12:20-28; 2 Chronicles 7:12). And they did not (except for the impure sacrifices at Elephantine) until the altar and later the Temple were restored in Jerusalem (Ezra 3-7).

Joel prophesied of a time when sacrifices would cease to be offered (Joel 1:9, 13). Hosea wrote, "For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim" (Hosea 3:4). Daniel prophesied that the first coming of the Messiah would "bring an end to sacrifice and offering" (Daniel 9:25-27). Jesus prophesied the destruction of the second Temple (Matthew 24:1-2), which occurred in 70 A.D. All of these prophecies, as well as the historical reality of what has happened, point to

a suspension in the activities of the Levitical priesthood due to God's displeasure, but not a permanent obliteration, because of God's promise in Jeremiah 33 as well as other prophecies that speak of its restoration (e.g., Ezekiel 44).

Why will the Levitical priesthood be restored during the Millennium? The suggestion that it will be done as a teaching device is absolutely correct. As Paul points out in the book of Hebrews, the earthly sanctuary and its divine service under the Levitical priesthood served as a "copy and shadow of the heavenly" (Hebrews 8:5). All of this was intended to teach spiritual lessons and principles. As Paul wrote elsewhere, "...the law [meaning the Old Covenant, including the Levitical system] was our tutor to bring us to Christ..." (Galatians 3:24). The primary job of ministers, including priests, under God's system is to teach God's way by word and example (1 Timothy 4:12-13). "For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:7; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:3; Ezra 7:10).

Under the New Covenant the physical temple and priesthood with their system of physical sacrifices have been superseded by the reality of which they were only a figure and type. "He takes away the first that He may establish the second" (Hebrews 10:9). The spiritual priesthood of Melchizedek ("King of Righteousness" – Jesus Christ) has replaced the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:11-19). Those in the first resurrection will be added to this spiritual priesthood, serving under Jesus Christ, the High Priest (Revelation 1:6; 20:6).

The High Priest of the spiritual priesthood of Melchizedek is not a Levite, but was, humanly, of the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:11-19). Those of the spiritual priesthood added in the first resurrection will be humanly “of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9-10).

But in the Millennium, serving with the spiritual priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, as an adjunct to them, will be the physical Levitical priesthood in a restored physical temple in the restored city of Jerusalem. Their duty will be to, “...teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. In controversy they shall stand as judges, and judge it according to My judgments. They shall keep My laws and My statutes in all My appointed meetings, and they shall hallow My Sabbaths” (Ezekiel 44:23-24). The rites of the physical temple, including its sacrifices, will be an aid to their teaching responsibility, as they were intended to be from the time the Levitical priesthood was initially established.

As for the house of David, God

promised David that the kingdom of his seed would be established forever, and that if his descendants sinned God would chasten them, but not as Saul, who was punished by having his dynasty ended (2 Samuel 7:12-16; cf. Psalm 89:4, 30-37). Hence, when Solomon sinned God took away from the dynasty ten tribes, but left one (Judah, joined by Benjamin and most of the Levites) to it “for the sake of my servant David” (1 Kings 11:13).

As we read earlier, because of their sins the tribes of Israel were removed from their land and scattered, and various of the tribes have abided for many days without a king (Hosea 3:4). The Jews, for example, have been without a king of the house of David for more than two thousand years. So that prophecy has been and is being fulfilled.

At the same time, the record indicates that somewhere descendants of the house of David have been ruling over some portion of the people of Israel at all times. For example, indications are that some of the kings of the Scythians (c. 700 B.C.-100 A.D.) and the Parthians (c. 250 B.C.-226 A.D.), many of whom were descendants of

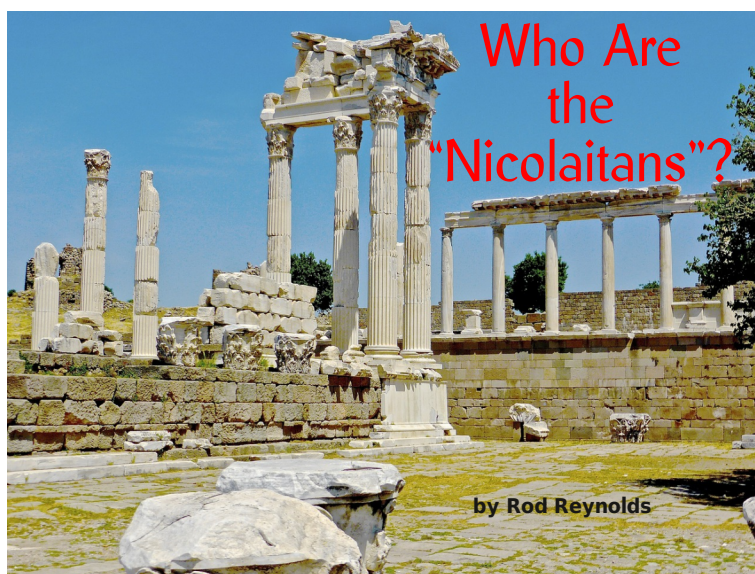
the Israelites, were of the house of David (see *The ‘Lost’ Ten Tribes of Israel...Found*, Steven Collins, pp. 176, 213-215).

History and tradition indicate that descendants of the Jewish kings of the house of David were transported to Ireland at the time of Judah’s fall to the Babylonians, and their descendants ruled there over a portion of the house of Israel. The kings of England trace their lineage back to David. And there is much evidence both from Bible prophecy and secular history establishing the British as descendants of the people of Israel (specifically Ephraim). Almost alone among the royal houses of Europe, the British throne survives.

In summary then, although the Levites have been preserved to once again serve as teaching priests in the future, even offering physical sacrifices, they have not continued without interruption to offer physical sacrifices, because God has willed it so. At the same time, his covenant with David wherein he promised to “build up your throne to all generations,” and, “as the sun before me” (Psalm 89:4, 36), has also been kept.

Image at right by Siggy Nowak from Pixabay, is a photo of the ruins of a pagan temple in Pergamos (or Pergamon or Pergamum), which was a center of false worship, with temples dedicated to a variety of false gods. Jesus Christ warns his Church not to follow the example of some in the Pergamos church who held to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, compromising the faith with lawless, immoral or idolatrous practices.

Some writers from the second century onward attempted to link the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6, 15) with the deacon Nicolas (or Nicolaus) mentioned in Acts 6:5. However, as the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states, “The historical value of these attempts is debatable, and the paucity of information about either Nicolaus or the Nicolaitans makes such a connection questionable – especially in the light of Luke’s portrayal of Nicolaus’s Christian



character" ("Nicolaus," vol. 3, Eerdmans revised edition, 1986, p. 534).

Whether or not there was ever a specific sect that called themselves "Nicolaitans," as used in Revelation "Nicolaitans" is a symbolic term for haters of God's law who by their teachings lead members of God's Church and others into committing idolatry and spiritual adultery or fornication (and perhaps literal fornication or adultery, as well; Revelation 2:6, 14-15).

One might ask though, why was this term chosen?

"Of the Nicolaitans" (Revelation 2:6, 15) is from the Greek νικολαιτων (*nikolaitōn*) which is the genitive plural form of a compound of the words *nikos* (victory) and *laos* (people). Its meaning, which implies a destructive power over peoples, corresponds with Balaam (a swallowing up of the people; verse 14, see *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*). It denotes a form of doctrine which is at the same time licentious or lawless and oppressive.

During the era of the apostles Paul wrote, "... the mystery of lawlessness is already at work" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). The leaders of the Church at that time, the apostles and those who worked closely with them, vigorously resisted and fought against the false doctrines of those who sought to blend Christianity with pagan philosophy and religious practices, as reflected in Christ's statement to that era, "you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans" (Revelation 2:6).

But the tendency to compromise and be drawn into the spiritual harlotry and idolatry represented by such teachings has always been present to one extent or another among those associated with the Church of God throughout its history. From about the

seventh to tenth centuries A.D. existed in Asia Minor and nearby areas a large number of people known in history as the Paulicians. While their doctrines and practices identify them as representing the Church of God, they were subjected to severe persecution, and many among them reasoned that they could pretend to go along with the prevailing, corrupted, persecuting "Christian" religion, partaking of mass and other idolatrous practices, but secretly maintain their former faith. Of course this only led to further compromise and eventually complete abandonment of the true faith by many. This appears to be what Jesus Christ specifically foresaw and warned about in Revelation 2:14-15.

The term "Nicolaitan" suggests also who is behind the enticing but destructive doctrine which has succeeded in deceiving vast multitudes and drawn away many even who had been among God's elect at various points in history. It's not accidental that popular "Christianity" almost universally celebrates Christmas as its premier holiday. And at the center of the celebration is a character called Santa Claus.

Santa Claus is a diminutive form of Saint Nicholas (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, William Walsh, p. 13). Saint Nicholas is a name associated with the ancient god Saturn. "... in face and figure the Saint Nicholas of the early painters was not unlike the ancient idea of Saturn" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p. 70). Many modern day Christmas customs are derived directly from the Saturnalia, the winter feast in honor of Saturn (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, pp. 65-67).

The Saturnalia and other pagan feasts that occurred at the same time of year and which form the basis for the custom of Christmas, were marked by debauchery and licentiousness. "The wild revels of the Bacchanalia, the

Saturnalia and the [German feast of] Twelve Nights survive in... the merriment and jollity which mark the season of Christmas today" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p. 67). "The wild revels, indeed, of the Christmas period in olden times almost stagger belief. No amount of drunkenness, no blasphemy, no obscenity was frowned upon. License was carried to the utmost limits of licentiousness. Master William Prynne discovered in them those vestiges of paganism which are apparent enough to the historian of today.

"If we compare,' he says in his *Histrio-Mastix*, 'our Bacchanalian and New Year's tides with these Saturnalia and feasts of Janus, we shall find such near affinity between them, both in regard of time, — they being both in the end of December and the first of January — and in their manner of solemnizing — both being spent in revelling, epicurism, wantonness, idleness, dancing, drinking, stage-plays, masques and carnal pomp and jollity — that we must conclude the one to be but the ape, or issue, of the other'" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, pp. 75-76).

Saturn was called by the Greeks Cronus (or Kronos), the horned one (*The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop, Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1959, p. 32; *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, "Saturnus," Oskar Seyffert, 1995 revised edition, Gramercy Books, p. 559). "The god baal was frequently depicted as a two horned deity and the name 'Kronos' derives from the Hebrew 'Keren,' meaning 'horn'.... Similarly a horned god of the British Celts was known as Cernunnos" (*Book of Isaiah with Yair Davidi*, 45:15; <http://britainm.org/isaiah/chap-forty-five.html>. Numerous other sources provide corroborative information). A horn is often in both the Bible and mythology a symbol of power and authority (cf.

Daniel 8:1-12; Revelation 13:1, 11).

The name given to the tenth sign of the zodiac is Capricorn. The sun enters Capricorn at the time of the winter solstice. Capricorn is Latin for horned goat, and in mythology is associated with Saturn and Satan the Devil.

In mythology Saturn was chief of the gods cast into hell. Whom do we know as the chief of the so-called gods cast into hell, often pictured, as in ancient times, with horns and hooves? None other than Satan, of course.

God said through Amos, "I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies" (Amos 5:21). This is not His own feast days God is referring to, because by the time Amos prophesied in the eighth century Israel had long since abandoned God's festivals in favor of those of their own devising, and had adopted heathen festivals and customs, including the very customs that are today associated with Christmas. God told them if they turned to him they could take possession of true life. But they would have to forsake their apostasy, forsake their syncretized religion. The people of Israel are indicted for their idolatry, as even in the wilderness journey to the promised land, God says through the prophet, "You also carried Sikkuth your king And Chiun, your idols, The star of your gods, Which you made for yourselves" (Amos 5:26).

In verse 26 the words mean "the tabernacle of Moloch" (as in A Conservative Version translation) and "Chiun your star god" (cf. Acts 7:43). The Semitic "Chiun" is equivalent to the Egyptian name for Saturn, "Remphan," used in the Septuagint and Acts 7:43 (see Jamieson, Fausset, Brown *Commentary; The Two Babylons*, p. 231). Ancient writers considered the chief god of Tyre and

Carthage, Baal Hammon (also called Milqart or Melqart) to be identical with Saturn and Cronus. This worship anciently involved winter and spring festivals, worship of astral bodies, and often human sacrifice. "*Milqart*. ...The name of the god... means literally 'king of the city'. Since the publication of the Ras Shamra poetic texts, it is clear that we are to understand this as meaning 'king of the underworld'..." (*Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winton Thomas, Ed., Harper Torchbooks, 1961, p. 240). Once again we see that stripped of its disguise, we are faced with none other than Satan worship. And this same religious heritage forms the basis for the popular customs of Christmas and paganized Christianity in general.

The first of the seven seals of Revelation is that of a rider on a white horse with a **crown** and a **bow** (implying rulership gained by conquest), "and he went out conquering and to conquer" (Revelation 6:2). This symbol corresponds with a system of religious deception that Christ also prophesied of elsewhere, that would use his name, and yet "deceive many" (Matthew 24:5).

Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 speaks of the "synagogue of Satan" or Satan's Church. In Revelation 17 we are told of a great harlot full of abominations and fornications. She's drunk with the blood of martyrs of God's people, and extends her power throughout the world from the great city which reigns over the kings of the earth. This Church of Satan is associated with a political system called the "beast," which is also empowered by Satan (Revelation 13:2). This system has shaped history for thousands of years, and continues to do so today. Under its power has been shed the blood of countless martyrs among God's elect. And scores or hundreds of millions of others have perished through its wars,

persecutions and oppression as well. At the same time while using the name of Christ it has led billions into a way of licentiousness and idolatry.

In Isaiah 14 this system under Satan's sway is spoken of as the "oppressor," the "golden city," whose rulers "struck the people" and "ruled the nations in anger" (verses 4-6). In following a form of religion that calls itself "Christianity," but which rejects God's commandments and embraces idolatry in its various forms, people don't realize the truth that they are really duped by and doing the bidding of Satan. He is the one behind the "doctrine of the Nicolaitans."

When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it. (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. (I Corinthians 10:21)

Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God: 'Are you defiling yourselves in the manner of your fathers, and committing harlotry according to their abominations?'" (Ezekiel 20:30)

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about God's purpose and plan for mankind.

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak
according to this word, it is because there is no light
in them. (Isaiah 8:20)