

THE LIVING CHURCH NEWS

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Truth Before Comfort

Dear Brethren,

Mr. Wallace Smith created a firestorm with his February 2022 *Tomorrow's World* magazine article "The Credibility Crisis." In it, he wrote that "in the United States, former President Donald Trump divided the nation for four years." Some subscribers called to vent their wrath and cancel their subscriptions. The number was relatively small, but we know that even a few Church members chafed over that sentence.

What readers did not know was that the article as originally written was too long and needed words to be cut, so some qualifying statements were on the chopping block. Nevertheless, Mr. Smith reviewed the article as cut—and, as the trouper he is, took full responsibility. Of course, I reviewed it as well, and the thought occurred to me that we would get criticism from some who see the former President as a messiah who will save America—so I, too, take some responsibility. On the other hand, "Never Trumpers" no doubt reveled in the comment, especially those who see *Tomorrow's World* as too "conservative" and "Republican."

Interestingly, Mr. Smith later received criticism from a Canadian reader who, with strong emotion, accused him of being a Trump voter—which, of course, he was not. Sometimes you just cannot win. The statement about dividing the nation might have benefited from a little more context, but even Mr. Trump's supporters see him as "a disrupter"—which sounds a lot like someone willing to create division. Regardless, pleasing our audience is not our goal; we aim to tell the truth.

Mr. Smith is not our only writer to receive some readers' wrath. We are all targets for criticism. More recently, Mr. Richard Ames may have "bested" Mr. Smith with his January 2023 cover article, in which he asked the question, "Are You Going

to Hell?" Church members no doubt read it as giving encouragement to non-members who suffer with their thoughts of "unsaved" loved ones writhing in pain now and forever. But not so for some readers who do not want the wicked "off the hook." They want them to suffer "until the twelfth of never and that's a long, long time." But of course, unlike Johnny Mathis' popular love song, there is no love in this refrain. Some people simply love fire and punishment—for others!

Yet, while Mr. Ames' article received some negative reactions, there were others—such as four people who attended one of our *Tomorrow's World* presentations—who approached us favorably *because* of it. They felt enlightened and comforted by the truths of the Bible that Mr. Ames' article brought out.

Resist the Temptation of Bitterness

Some things must be said, and no articles or telecasts will please everyone—nor should they. Such is the case with my Editorial in this issue of the *Living Church News*. It will not please everyone, but the Church must take a clear stand on this particular subject, lest we take an *unclear* stand by ignoring it. "No decision *is* a decision."

We all tend to see things myopically, shortsightedly, from our own little world. It is difficult to see the grand picture on almost any subject, and to see it from someone else's perspective. And even among our most faithful members, we often fail to see that this Work is a worldwide Work involving many nations, peoples, tribes, and tongues. We are all children of Abraham if Christ is living in us, but that does not mean we don't come from different cultures and different tribes. How you or I personally perceive an issue may not appreciate the bigger picture.

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One of the most influential books I ever read is Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman describes how television in the second half of the twentieth century transformed the way we think and act. He explored the common expression "A picture is worth a thousand words." How many of us have repeated that? Yes, a picture may tell us a lot, but it can also be limited by a lack of context. What happened before the instant the shutter opened and closed? What happened after? What was just outside of the picture—to the left, right, top, and bottom?

In this age of instant facts, biased media, and misinformation—deliberate deceptions and carelessly shared messages—we tend to form strong opinions on topics we may not fully understand. Our age, our background, and our ignorance of the world and its history all shape and limit our perspective on many subjects. Since we can't visibly see the "god of this world," we may not notice how subtly he "works in the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2).

The author of Hebrews, whom we believe was the Apostle Paul, wrote to brethren who had been part of the Church for a long time, some of whom were losing their focus. They were self-satisfied with their understanding and had not grown to the degree their years in the Church would suggest (Hebrews 5:11–14). Paul admonished them to live in peace with one another. He warned them not to allow temporary desires or bitter emotions to blind them from the great prize for which they were called.

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears (Hebrews 12:14–17).

Satan is a master of making the worldly course he promotes look good, though it is not. He stirs emotions of lust, anger, and hatred as he appeals to the here and now. He will plant a root of bitterness in us if we allow him to do so—and he will cultivate it, fertilize it, give it plenty of sunshine, and plant more weeds to keep it company.

Never Forget the Big Picture

My Editorial in this *Living Church News* addresses a most sensitive subject, one that can stir emotions and bitterness for any who let that happen—but we must address it, as by *not* addressing it, we would be making a statement by default. We will never please everyone, nor should we try to. As Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26).

I appeal to you, dear brethren—all of you—let us love one another. Let us respect one another. Let us respect the decisions some have made prior to coming into the Church, or even after coming into the Church.

On one occasion, Jesus told His followers, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:56). Many of His disciples found this to be a hard saying, were unable to understand it, and were offended by it. This was a turning point for many, a bridge too far.

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:66–68).

Notice that Peter and the others did not say that they *understood* what Jesus was saying, but they saw the big picture. This is a lesson for us. We don't all understand everything the same way all at once, but we must never forget the big picture—and the Church of God must never be afraid to tell the truth.



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Seeking God's Mind on Marriage and Race

What is God's mind on the subject of marriage and race? The subject is complex, emotional, and often controversial. Furthermore, no matter how one approaches it, it can be a no-win subject. To say nothing offends some. To say anything will offend others.

God is love. Satan is hate-filled and wishes to divide mankind in general, and those whom God has called in particular. We all see things from our own background and perspective, and this subject is very personal. But, contrary to what some imagine, it is not something affecting one's own nation only. It is a worldwide issue, and the body of Christ is found all over the world. It is in no way limited to any one country or group of people, and it even goes beyond what we might think of as "race."

In many parts of the world, such as Africa, tribal differences are important. Heritage is highly respected. Xhosa and Zulu wedding customs are different and a marriage crossing these lines would likely concern both families. So, too, among the Dhlous and Kikuyus in Kenya, and the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda and Burundi. Additionally, some areas of the world have very little mixing of races and ethnicities, while other areas—such as the Caribbean and parts of South America—have long had significant mixing. And everywhere in the world we find individuals who are already of mixed tribe and race, including many of us reading this article.

Mixed marriages involving tribe, ethnicity, race, and religion are not new. It is evident from Scripture that mixed marriages have taken place since ancient times. It is also evident that God "made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). Yet the issue goes deeper than that, as shown in the remainder of the verse. We must guard against overreacting to or neglecting what is a sensitive and complex subject with many variables.

So, what is the Church to do? How are we to guide our members to see as God sees and to make wise decisions? I am going to be very open in this article, trusting that those who are guided by God's Spirit will understand.

Marrying outside of one's tribe, race, ethnicity, or culture presents challenges, as many studies demonstrate. Some think interracial marriage is only considered an "issue" by white people. This is patently false, as I have observed firsthand, both in the United States and elsewhere.

Therefore, if someone can be called racist for opposing an intertribal or interracial marriage, then that emotionally inciting accusation can be made toward people of all races, ethnicities, and tribes around the world. But does such an accusation simplify the problem or only exacerbate this sensitive issue?

Further complicating the issue is the fact that some couples prior to coming into the Church are already of mixed tribes, races, cultures, and even religions, and few of us are of what we might refer to as a single ethnicity. Our approach to the subject must take this into account. Not only do we strive not to offend such dear brethren, but we also do not want to make any children from these marriages feel awkward. They and their families are cherished members of our spiritual family in the Body of Christ, and we sincerely do not want to risk complicating or adding further complication to their lives.

In my personal memory—including nearly six decades in the Church of God—the Church has never counseled married couples of mixed races to separate. The Church recognizes that they are validly married in God's sight just as much as any other married couple.

But, at a time when many around the world are strongly encouraging mixed marriages, should we encourage marrying across broad racial or ethnic divides? How should we deal with this complex and emotional subject? To answer these questions, we must lay aside personal opinions and the "wisdom" of this world and look instead to the mind of God as revealed in the pages of His word.

Is the World "Ahead of the Church"?

When it comes to living in this world, Jesus set the example for us that we must reject Satan and his subtle devices: the misuse of Scripture, relying on human reason and emotion, and the influences of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (Matthew 4:1–11; Genesis 3:6; 1 John 2:15–17). We must overcome these and choose to think as God does. Positions of rulership will be taken away from the devil and his fallen angels upon Christ's return and given to the saints (Revelation 20:1–4; 5:10). This is the reward of those in the first resurrection! Do we comprehend the magnitude of this reward? Do we understand the enormous responsibility and trust that Christ will put in us at that time? It is this latter point—trust—that needs to be addressed.

As Dr. Roderick C. Meredith often said, “God is not playing games!” He also repeated many times that the *whole Bible* represents the mind of God in print. God must know that those in His Kingdom, especially those who make up the Bride of Christ in the first resurrection, humbly strive to think as He thinks and to make decisions that reflect His mind. None of us will be perfect in this life, but God must know that we are humble of heart, that we are meek and teachable, and that we are striving to overcome this world’s way of thinking. He will not have self-seeking individuals ruling in His Kingdom, deciding right and wrong based on their own reasonings and feelings.

Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong took us back, time and again, to the two trees. One symbolizes looking to God to understand right and wrong. The other symbolizes mankind using the “here is how I see it” approach to making choices in life. The choice between the two trees in the garden sounds simple enough, but was it? Is it now?

The prince of the power of the air is still ruling on earth, directing the course of this world, and working in “the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). Sadly, some by their actions presume that the ministry, the Church, and—by extension—the Bible and God Himself are out of date and the world is “ahead of the Church” in some areas. Are we to look to “the course of this world,” as directed by the “prince of the power of the air,” for answers? Can mankind outvote, outsmart, or outreason God?

The Church’s approach has long been that mixed marriages are not sin, but marrying across broad racial, ethnic, or tribal differences is generally discouraged. We have not always applied this approach consistently, to be sure, and we have made our share of mistakes. But the approach itself has been consistent for decades and it remains our approach, which brings us to an important question: *Is the world ahead of the Church?*

The world around us is certainly stepping up its promotion of mixed marriages, but the promotion is not new. For those who remember, ask yourself: What was the 1958 musical *South Pacific* about? What about the 1961 movie *West Side Story*, recently remade by Steven Spielberg? These extremely popular productions, scored with beautiful music, stir the audience’s emotions to accept a particular theme: *Personal attraction supplants consideration of family heritage.*

Different approaches to forming a family were promoted on stage, in films, and in the media even before anyone reading this article was born, though often subtle in presentation. And aren’t subtle messages more easily overlooked and accepted? Once the subtleties are accepted, the heat is turned up and the advertising becomes incrementally more blatant. And video, music, and print are almost never so explicit as to say, “Do this.” Instead, ideas are promoted by flooding us with example after example, until we think, *Everyone is doing it, so it must be O.K.—in fact, it must be good.*

What do you see in television and magazine ads? Even innocuous HGTV programs showing home remodeling feature interracial couples far more often than we see them in day-to-day life. Why? Why do producers and directors go out of their way to seek out those couples and feature them?

Is It a Sin?

Many on each side of this subject engage in a never-ending battle of dueling Bible passages, each looking for a “silver bullet” verse that proves, in their opinion, that their side is right. For instance, those who firmly believe interracial marriage is a sin may cite Nehemiah 13 as evidence, ignoring that the context makes it plain that the main issue was religion and cultural degradation (vv. 26–27). As another example, on the other side of the issue, those who believe race should never be a consideration may cite 1 Corinthians 7:39, claiming that marrying “in the Lord” is the *only* factor, making the same error in handling the Bible as those who use verses like Romans 14:5 to falsely claim it is up to the individual to determine Sabbaths and Holy Days, ignoring anything else the Bible might say on the matter.

Most such verse “exchanges” go similarly, and even when the error in interpretation is pointed out, it seems to change no one’s mind on either side of the question. Consequently, I will not attempt in this article to address every single verse someone might present to “prove” his or her point. It only promotes debate and tends to settle the question for no one.

Instead, we need to follow Jesus’ own example by stepping back to get a larger picture of the mind of God on the issues involved. Let me explain what I mean.

In my 2017 sermon “Is It OK? Is the Wrong Question” and in my March-April 2023 *Living Church News* editorial “Challenge Yourself to Think Like God,” I pointed out that there are many actions we can take in life that are not sins in and of themselves, but which are still *unwise* decisions that do not reflect the fullness of God’s mind and thinking.

A good example is found in Paul’s counsel to fellow Christians regarding a situation they frequently faced in the first century—meats offered to idols. The discussion in his first letter to the Corinthians shows that focusing merely on what was or was not allowed misses a bigger point, and that “It’s not a sin, so it must be OK” is the wrong approach.

In this context, Paul explains a vital principle we all must understand: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Corinthians 10:23). We must recognize the profound significance of this principle. That is why *Is it a sin?* is the wrong question—not because we don’t care what sin is (we do!), but because we are not to be content with merely “not sinning.” The *right* question is, *What is God’s mind on the matter?*

Jesus corrected the Pharisees on this point when they challenged Him on the laws of divorce. Please note this, as it

is important in understanding God's mind. They sought nothing more than answering "Is it *sin* to divorce for this reason or that?" based on Deuteronomy 24:1. Christ trumped them all by leaping *over* Deuteronomy all the way to Genesis to reveal *God's mind* on divorce (Matthew 19:3–9), pointing them to the beginning and to God's purpose and design for marriage.

Yes, God had allowed divorce in His law, due to the hardness of their hearts, but to fully understand His mind on the matter they needed a broader view beyond what was merely "lawful." While the Pharisees focused on the narrow question of "Is it *sin*?" Christ admonished them to aim higher, dive deeper, and *seek God's mind*.

We know who the present "ruler of this world" is. Therefore, we would do well to ask ourselves other questions: What is *Satan's* mind on the matter? Is it the same as God's? In what way is the prince of the power of the air directing the course of this world? What is he promoting? Is it not prudent to see red flags whenever the world is pushing a particular agenda? What is his endgame?

Satan hates the family as God designed it, and he hates the true Church of God. He targets the family because God is building a Family (Ephesians 3:14–15). That divine Family will be built from human beings of both sexes and all tribes and nations (Galatians 3:27–29)—people who demonstrate during this lifetime that they *get it*. They recognize that God's thoughts are not our thoughts: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.... 'For *My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,*' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and *My thoughts than your thoughts*'" (Isaiah 55:7–9).

God expects us to *grow* in learning to think His way and discern His mind as His Holy Spirit works within us (1 Corinthians 2:9–11; Hebrews 5:13–14). We are to set aside human reason, which is often driven by human emotion. Carefully read Paul's correction of the Corinthian brethren in 1 Corinthians 2:6–14. The apostle makes plain that what the "wisdom of this age" and "man's wisdom teaches" falls far short of the wisdom of God, even as the understanding of the Spirit of God seems like foolishness to a world that has no spiritual discernment.

Yet how often do we say, "This is how I see it" or "This is what I think"? Our initial thoughts on any subject may very well be tainted by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, as John warned us (1 John 2:15–17). What we think is too often influenced by emotion and human reason apart from the revelation of God, starting us off on the wrong foot from the very beginning.

Satan's Approach to Human Love

The challenges to marriage involve far more than culture, race, tribe, or ethnicity. Satan's all-out, multiple-front assault on this

divine institution goes beyond the immediate topic of this article. Fornication, adultery, selfishness, self-will—all are of the devil and not of God. That is why marriage and family in our modern world face disaster and continue to deteriorate before our eyes! Too often, individuals who once pledged their lifelong love and loyalty to each other end up divorcing, claiming any number of reasons—leaving children caught in confusion.

Some today have little regard for family heritage or lineage. All that matters is "I love her, she loves me, and the rest of the world can take a hike." Parents are often left out, having no part in who their children marry. Couples in love often minimize or ignore the effect their decision will have on their parents, future children, and grandchildren, focusing only on themselves.

But God does not think about marriage as modern society does. The Bible gives example after example illustrating God's mind on families and marriage, and His thoughts are far from the shallow concerns of modern thinking—even beyond concerns of religion and culture.

Consider the case of Zelophehad's daughters. Zelophehad had no sons. If his daughters married outside the tribe of Manasseh, Zelophehad's inheritance would then transfer to another tribe. The chief fathers of the families sought Moses' guidance, and Moses brought the case directly to God, who plainly considered inheritances and family origins important enough to override personal desires:

"[M]y lord was commanded by the LORD to give the inheritance of our brother Zelophehad to his daughters. Now if they are married to any of the sons of the other tribes of the children of Israel, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our fathers, and it will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry...." Then Moses commanded the children of Israel according to the word of the LORD, saying... "This is what the LORD commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, 'Let them marry whom they think best, but they may marry only within the family of their father's tribe'" (Numbers 36:2–6).

In the mind of God, marriage was obviously something larger than "I love her, and she loves me." Yet, many today care little or nothing about family considerations.

The account of Israel going into the Promised Land, and God's commands about the permanency of land ownership by family lines—a practice He will continue in the Millennium—show that heritage is important to Him. His many Old Testament regulations as to whom Israelites could and could not marry, whom priests could and could not marry—and even marriages required when a brother must raise up children for a dead sibling—illustrate that, in God's mind, marriage

is inseparable from considerations of lineage, heritage, and lines of descent. Consider *how much* of God's word is devoted to preserving a record of lineages. This was important to Him. When the Jews, Levites, and priests returned from Babylon, some were excluded from the priesthood because they could not trace their roots (Ezra 2:62–63), which Christ will continue to consider for the physical service of the Millennial temple (Ezekiel 48:11).

There are too many examples in the Bible to list them all, but they paint a clear picture of God's mind on marriage. As He designed and intended it, marriage is more than merely a formalization of romantic attraction between a man and a woman—much more than “I love her, she loves me, and that's all that matters.” Marriage is the foundation of family—and, therefore, of civilization itself. In addition to faith and culture, issues of lineage, heritage, inheritance, extended family, and descendants are inherent concerns in God's design of marriage. God's mind on the matter is at odds with the relatively shallow modern take in many parts of today's world.

Variety by Divine Design and Decree

Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong noted that God equipped Adam and Eve genetically to produce varieties in their offspring. In fact, by directing different families to occupy geographically distinct regions of the earth—as we will see that He most definitely did—God guaranteed that humanity would produce concentrations of unique characteristics and variations we call “races.”

Did God make a mistake in creating the races? Of course not! He is a God of variety, and He obviously loves filling His creation with variety—including within humanity. Individual people differ, one from another, and so do the different tribes and races of mankind. If the creation of different races of mankind is God's intent, should we not respect that? Should these differences not be seen as a blessing to humanity?

Knowing this—that the Almighty is the author of the races and that the variety among His potential sons and daughters, created in His own image, exists by His design—we see that there is no room for people who consider themselves Christian to harbor prejudice in their heart or to allow room in their mind for delusions of racial superiority and racist attitudes. All people of all races, ethnicities, tongues, and nationalities have equal standing before God and will be given the opportunity to be a part of His divine family in the Kingdom of God (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). God will hold accountable those who judge one race as inferior or unworthy in His eyes.

Yet, we must not conclude that race is meaningless. If God loves the variety He created in the different families of man, who are we to view that variety as unimportant?

Science and history demonstrate that the different major races of humanity reflect different geographic origins and

ancient homelands. Who dispersed humanity into the ancient nations and homelands reflected in the races? Let the Bible answer this question. “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you: *When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel*” (Deuteronomy 32:7–8). From this passage Paul shows that while we are all sons of Adam and Eve (of one blood), it was God who separated the nations. “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and *has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings*” (Acts 17:26).

It was important enough to God that when mankind at Babel refused to separate and the people sought to make a name for themselves with no boundaries, He intervened and miraculously forced them to separate geographically into their distinct families (Genesis 11:1–9). He would not allow His plan and design for multiple, distinct family lines to be thwarted by humanity's vain belief that it had a better plan.

Abraham understood that family lineage mattered when he sought a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham told his servant not to find a wife among the nearby Canaanites, “but you shall go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son Isaac” (Genesis 24:4). Isaac similarly commanded Jacob to “take yourself a wife from there of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother” (Genesis 28:2). Religion does not seem to have been the driving factor in these considerations, since Laban's family had pagan household gods (Genesis 31:19, 30). The motivating reason was clearly related to family line and heritage. Was Abraham, the father of the faithful, racist? Was Isaac? Rebekah lamented that her son Esau had ignored such considerations and had married “the daughters of the land” (Genesis 27:46). Was Rebekah racist?

Fast-forward to the Millennium. We read of distinct nations—distinct “families” (Zechariah 14:16–18)—such as Egypt, Assyria, and Israel. While David will rule over Israel as a whole, the twelve distinct tribes will be ruled by the twelve apostles (Matthew 19:28). Just as when Israel came into the promised land, during the Millennium each tribe will have its own separate inheritance within the greater nation (Ezekiel 48). As with Zelophehad's daughters, there will be some restrictions on marriage to preserve inheritances. God has kept track of the ancient tribes and families of the earth, and Scripture is clear that those familial lines do and will matter to Him, even through the Millennium when Christ will reorganize the world under His rule and God's laws.

Truly, as we are taught, God does not change (Malachi 3:6), and Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

What It Means to Be One in Christ

Some members ask, “Aren’t we all the same in Christ?” based on Paul’s statement to the Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28–29).

Paul’s statement is true, but was he referring to marriage? If so, based on this passage, the roles of men and women in marriage would also be the same—which, as Paul shows elsewhere, is not the case. Furthermore, the same argument would justify same-sex marriage: “Aren’t we all the same, since there is ‘neither male nor female?’” This is, of course, absurd. The passage is speaking of all being equal in having the same opportunity for salvation.

The fact is that it is natural and normal for people of all races, ethnicities, tribes, and cultures around the world to want their children and grandchildren to be as they are. Yet, we know that God loves all, and offers to everyone the same hope of eternal life as His children in His glorious kingdom. The God who made us created the races of mankind to fulfill His own joy and purpose, and there is no room whatsoever for hatred of *any* race. But neither is there room to ignore God’s created differences as though He did so without purpose, or to act with indifference to His desires.

It is God who created our racial variety. It is God who divided the nations. It is Satan who influences mankind toward the destruction of the races. Even while promoting the amalgamation of the races God created, the devil is simultaneously stirring up hatred and strife between them. He is dividing families and causing children to grow up confused.

Before jumping on any bandwagon the world presses on us, we must ask ourselves: What is Satan’s agenda? What is he promoting? What is his endgame? And are we falling for his deceptive tactics as he, the prince of the power of the air, directs the course of this world?

Brethren, we must not be naïve. The world is not “ahead” of the Church on this issue. We must not be prejudiced against any of God’s children and potential children, but this does not mean marriage should be a free-for-all in which we focus on little more than our own personal desires. Scripture makes it plain that God’s mind on marriage is the exact opposite of such an approach. He was the one who separated the nations. He put restrictions on whom His priests could marry. He put restrictions on marrying across tribes when inheritances came into play. The patriarchs were involved in whom their children married, and He instructs us to honor our mothers and fathers. All these considerations and more will be in place during the Millennium when the world is under the direct control and guidance of Jesus Christ. People will know their heritage. Family lines will be maintained, and

those families will rebuild their nations in beautiful homelands within clear boundaries.

The Living Church of God promotes love between all peoples. Where individuals have already crossed racial lines in marriage, we fully love and support these marriages and their children. We also recognize that there are singles of mixed race who might have questions as they seek to find a spouse and build a family.


Because of these complications, the Church provides counsel to couples considering engagement, and must make judgments from time to time and on a case-by-case basis. Those judgments include whether to perform a wedding or not. And those decisions are based on a multitude of factors, such as general compatibility; whether both are members; family input; significant differences in age, nationality, or culture; and, yes, differences in race, ethnicity, or tribe. We seek God’s will and mind in each individual case, and none of our decisions are likely to please everyone. But in most cases, as a general guideline, we discourage marriages across broad racial lines. We also discourage marriages where parents and family disapprove.

This has long been the Church’s approach and continues to be. As mentioned earlier, the ministry has not always been consistent in its application, and it is certain that we have made our mistakes. But the mind of God and Jesus Christ must matter to us—those whose whole purpose in life is seeking to reproduce His mind in our own (Philippians 2:5).

Dear brethren, I have no illusions that this will satisfy everyone, but decisions must be made, and explanations must be given. When Jesus told a crowd of disciples that they had to eat His flesh and drink His blood, many fell away because they did not understand. We also saw people fall away when Mr. Herbert Armstrong made decisions on smoking, makeup, and the correct day on which to observe Pentecost. More recently, members were challenged by decisions the Church had to make regarding COVID-19.

Our true conversion is not shown by what we do when we agree with a controversial decision, but by what we do when we sincerely do not understand or do not agree with one (Deuteronomy 17:8–13). Whether the day on which to observe Pentecost, makeup, masks, singing, or social distancing, I will be the first to say that the ways some of these subjects were handled were not perfect. Yet many members who disagreed with how they were handled nevertheless kept their focus on the big picture and showed true conversion.

So, I appeal to all of you: Please do not allow Satan to stir up your emotions to serve his purposes. He has filled the world with a spirit of offense and division, but we do not need to follow his lead. And remember that God tells us that His ways are not our ways. Let us seek *His* mind—His way of thinking. (LW)



“Shear” Folly

Lessons from David, Nabal, and Abigail

By **John Robinson**

It might surprise you to know that, with the exception of Jesus Christ, no human being has more biblical text devoted to his life story than David the son of Jesse. Described as having a heart that sought to mirror God’s own (Acts 13:22), David provides example after example of love and obedience toward God, kindness toward his fellow man, and faith in the face of adversity.

But while we can learn much from David’s example, God also inspired accounts of those around him that can add a lot to our understanding. One such account took place shortly before David became Israel’s king, as the reign of Saul was nearing its end. Let’s dive into the story of David, Nabal, and Abigail, and see what one brief event in Israel’s tumultuous history can teach us about the time we’re living in right now.

“Then Samuel died; and the Israelites gathered together and lamented for him, and buried him at his home in Ramah” (1 Samuel 25:1). Samuel’s death was truly the end of an era for Israel, making way for a time of heated division. The nation was experiencing the reign of the first king in its history, and the latter half of King Saul’s reign had taken a very dark turn. After God rejected Saul because of his rebellious attitude, David was anointed to be the next king of Israel—but, in what probably seemed to be a puzzling move, God did not immediately remove Saul from Israel’s throne, leaving David as the heir apparent with no idea of when his kingship would begin.

Beginning with David’s defeat of Goliath and continuing with his military successes, Saul had become increasingly jealous and fearful of David, especially when he realized that he had been chosen to replace him and his house. Saul let his jealousy consume him and he spent the rest of his reign vainly attempting to capture and kill David. At the time of the account we’re reviewing, we find David essentially doing what King Saul had originally tasked him to do: As “David arose and went down to the Wilderness of Paran” (v. 1), he and his men patrolled the borders of Israel to protect the nation from invaders.

In 1 Samuel 25:2–3, we’ve been introduced to the three key figures in this story. *Nabal* was a very wealthy man and a descendant of Caleb who, as one of the two faithful spies

who gave an accurate report of the Promised Land, was given his pick of that land once God brought Israel safely into it. The area Nabal resided in was known as “vineyard land” or “garden spot” and renowned for its lush vegetation. Nabal is described as harsh and evil, and the name Scripture gives him literally means *fool*, signaling the archetypal behavior that he represents. All Nabal could see, or all he was willing to see, was the way things currently were—he refused to imagine a world in which he was not a wealthy landowner with an attractive wife.

Abigail was Nabal’s wife, described as lovely and shown to be realistic about her husband’s nature. She is the only woman the Hebrew Scriptures specifically describe as having “good understanding” or “good insight.” As we’ll see, she represented those who feared God and who, by extension, understood that David would eventually be king.

Finally, *David* played the role of a fugitive on the run, destined to be king—and through this incident, he learned a powerful lesson about taking vengeance into his own hands. He is the subject of the central controversy in this account, and Nabal and Abigail represent the two most common attitudes in Israel during the time of Saul and David: There were those who just didn’t see how David would ever become king, and there were those who recognized that David was led by God and *would* therefore be king eventually.

David? Who’s That?

The drama begins in 1 Samuel 25:4–9, as David sends men to tell Nabal, “Peace be to you, peace to your house, and peace to all that you have! Now I have heard that you have shearers. Your shepherds were with us, and we did not hurt them, nor was there anything missing from them all the while they were in Carmel.” So Nabal would know that this was not a trick, David added, “Ask your young men, and they will tell you.” Then came David’s simple request: “Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever comes to your hand to your servants and to your son David” (1 Samuel 25:6–9).

All David did was ask for some provisions from Nabal in exchange for the protection he had provided from the raiding Philistines. He was very courteous and unthreatening toward

Nabal—and he emphasized that Nabal’s shepherds had dwelt peaceably with his men, who had taken nothing from them. He boosted his credibility by encouraging Nabal to ask his own men about it. Nabal was going to have a feast soon, which indicates his affluence—surely, he could share just a little of that abundance with David and his men.

Apparently not: “Nabal answered David’s servants, and said, ‘Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who break away each one from his master. Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give it to men when I do not know where they are from?’” (1 Samuel 25:10–11).

Nabal basically responded, *David who?* He gave himself away, though, by his reference that David was the son of Jesse: He knew full well who David was. Then he emphasized that it was *his* bread, water, meat, and shearers, as if he alone were responsible for his success: *Why should I give my stuff away to the riffraff?* He had no realization that his material blessings were from God, and to add insult to injury, he also accused David of being a rogue servant in rebellion to his master.

Was there any truth to Nabal’s accusation? Absolutely not. Just one chapter earlier, David had what many would have seen as a golden opportunity to be rid of King Saul forever, finding him alone and vulnerable in a cave. But it was an opportunity David refused to take, and he instead turned it into proof of his loyalty to God and to God’s anointed king, saying to Saul, “Let the LORD judge between you and me, and let the LORD avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you” (1 Samuel 24:9–12).

Certainly, Nabal had the right to withhold his prosperity from David, though it clearly wasn’t the godly or even sensible thing to do. But David was *not* in rebellion against Saul, and had in fact repeatedly passed up opportunities to take

Nabal couldn’t seem to determine the times or seasons—he was completely out of touch with God’s plans, namely that **David would become the king of Israel** and there would be serious changes to the sociopolitical landscape as a result.

matters into his own hands. Nabal should have known this—but, a little like Saul, he profited from the system, taking his prosperity completely for granted and being selfish.

Nabal acted out of “shear” folly in more ways than one. For starters, he was just being rude, which is never a good idea. Also, even if he didn’t accept any obligation to help David and his men, it’s clearly a bad idea to unnecessarily

provoke someone who could potentially turn into a capable adversary. Perhaps most importantly, Nabal couldn’t seem to determine the times or seasons—he was completely out of touch with God’s plans, namely that David would become the king of Israel and there would be serious changes to the sociopolitical landscape as a result.

“So David’s young men turned on their heels and went back; and they came and told him all these words. Then David said to his men, ‘Every man gird on his sword.’ So every man girded on his sword, and David also girded on his sword. And about four hundred men went with David, and two hundred stayed with the supplies” (1 Samuel 25:12–13).

Enter Abigail

With David on the warpath, what did Nabal’s “kids” do? Naturally, they ran to “Mom.” 1 Samuel 25:14–17 tells us, “Now one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal’s wife, saying, ‘Look, David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master; and he reviled them.... Now therefore, know and consider what you will do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his household. For he is such a scoundrel that one cannot speak to him.’”

The young men of Nabal described their master’s tone as one of *reviling*, which is not only insulting, but also conveys the idea of scornful contempt. Nabal made clear that, in his eyes, David and his men were worthless riffraff in rebellion to their masters. This was especially foolish of him, and his young men knew it, having seen with their own eyes that David’s men were well armed, battle hardened, and in no way a group anyone should want to revile.

Abigail didn’t let fear paralyze her. “Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep already dressed, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded them on donkeys. And she said to her servants, ‘Go on before me; see, I am coming after you.’ But she did not tell her husband Nabal” (1 Samuel 25:18–19). When you consider that Nabal had 3,000 *sheep*, five really wasn’t much—we see that it would have been extremely easy for Nabal to simply have given David what he had requested, and it would have cost him very little.

With this, we’re shown the wisdom of Abigail; she sprang into action, knowing that only she was in a position to do anything about this threat to Nabal’s household, and she was realistic enough to know that telling Nabal would be a bad idea. But Nabal? All he was doing was living up to his name. Not only was he foolish toward God for failing to recognize or acknowledge David’s bright future—he did not even act with worldly shrewdness. If he had, he would at least have recognized the foolishness of reviling a well-armed man of war with a large contingent of hungry war-

riors. Even Nabal's young men were well aware of the danger they were in, as they demonstrated by taking their well-founded concerns to Abigail.

Abigail to the Rescue

And they were right to do so, because Abigail quickly grasped the situation and danger that had come upon the entire household of Nabal, and she bravely met David and his men on the road. "Now David had said, 'Surely in vain I have protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that noth-

Abigail's speech shows that she understood and acknowledged that David fought the battles of the Eternal God. Most importantly, she recognized that, no matter what conditions may have looked like at the time, **David was the anointed of God—protected by God and used by God—and he would become the king of Israel.**

ing was missed of all that belongs to him. And he has repaid me evil for good. May God do so, and more also, to the enemies of David, if I leave one male of all who belong to him by morning light'" (1 Samuel 25:21–22).

The narrative leaves no doubt as to David's true intentions: Unless someone changed his mind, there was going to be a massacre. It's interesting to consider that Abigail may have had good reason to suspect that her own life, as a woman, was likely to be spared, even if she did nothing; in fact, David only vowed to kill all the *males* in Nabal's household. But Abigail did a lot more than nothing. Upon seeing David, she prostrated herself in front of him with the following words:

On me, my lord, on me let this iniquity be! And please let your maidservant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your maidservant. Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him! But I, your maidservant, did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent. Now therefore, my lord, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, since the LORD has held you back from coming to bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hand, now then, let your enemies and those who seek harm for my lord be as Nabal. And now this present which your maidservant

has brought to my lord, let it be given to the young men who follow my lord (1 Samuel 25:24–27).

Some might be tempted to be critical of Abigail here, accusing her of being disrespectful to her husband—but consider that the narrative as a whole paints Nabal as a greedy, selfish fool who can't be reasoned with, and shows Abigail as a realistic, understanding person. And consider, too, that Abigail isn't simply sharing observations about her husband with just anyone. She is literally trying to save his life from those on their way to slaughter him and all the males of his household.

With that mission driving her, Abigail wisely presented herself as a character witness who could confirm, as Nabal's wife, that he was a foolish man who was not worth David's mission of vengeance. She also insightfully invoked the name of God in her pleading, essentially telling David, *God wouldn't want you to seek vengeance for yourself, especially not on such a foolish, unworthy man.* And to top it all off, she did far more than make a compelling and emotional case, she gave David exactly what he requested, in generous measure.

The Key to the Story

Had Abigail simply stopped here, it's possible David would have relented. But Abigail continued with the most important part of her plea:

Please forgive the trespass of your maidservant. For the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord fights the battles of the LORD, and evil is not found in you throughout your days. Yet a man has risen to pursue you and seek your life, but the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God; and the lives of your enemies He shall sling out, as from the pocket of a sling. And it shall come to pass, when the LORD has done for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you ruler over Israel, that this will be no grief to you, nor offense of heart to my lord, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has avenged himself. But when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your maidservant (vv. 28–31).

Abigail's speech shows that she understood and acknowledged that David fought the battles of the Eternal God. While noting that David's life was preserved by God Himself, Abigail also made a clear reference to David's God-given victory over Goliath—proving that, unlike her husband, she was very willing to acknowledge David's fame and exploits.

Most importantly, she recognized that, no matter what conditions may have looked like at the time, David was the anointed of God—protected by God and used by God—and he *would* become the king of Israel. The key to the story, and the key difference between Abigail and Nabal, is that Abigail believed what would later be written in Psalm 89: “I have found My servant David; with My holy oil I have anointed him, with whom My hand shall be established; also My arm shall strengthen him. The enemy shall not outwit him, nor the son of wickedness afflict him. I will beat down his foes before his face, and plague those who hate him” (vv. 20–23).

Vengeance in God’s Hands

Abigail’s wisdom, insight, and recognition of God’s long-term plans not only saved Nabal—at least temporarily—and her household, but also prevented David from taking vengeance into his own hands, which, as he acknowledged, he would have regretted. He told Abigail, “Blessed is the LORD God of

Abigail’s wisdom, insight, and recognition of God’s long-term plans not only saved Nabal—at least temporarily—and her household, **but also prevented David from taking vengeance into his own hands, which, as he acknowledged, he would have regretted.**

Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! And blessed is your advice and blessed are you, because you have kept me this day from coming to bloodshed and from avenging myself with my own hand.” He gladly accepted her humble gift, and bade her, “Go up in peace to your house. See, I have heeded your voice and respected your person” (1 Samuel 25:32–35).

Meanwhile, entirely unaware that his wife had just saved him from a nasty death, Nabal was holding a feast fit for a king and essentially drinking himself into a stupor (v. 36). By doing so, not honoring David as God’s anointed, Nabal proved that he did not believe that God’s promises would come to pass. It’s hard to be more foolish than that.

Having treated God’s chosen ruler shamefully, Nabal was punished accordingly: “So it was, in the morning, when the wine had gone from Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became like a stone. Then it happened, after about ten days, that the LORD struck Nabal, and he died” (1 Samuel 25:37–38). It’s very important to note that it is God—*not* David, not sickness, and not

old age—who strikes Nabal down. *God* judges Nabal and condemns him to death. Nabal was “weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life,” and God’s judgment comes on him unexpectedly, as Luke 21:34–36 warns *us*.

Abigail, however, was richly rewarded for taking God’s promises seriously and acting on them: “So when David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Nabal, and has kept His servant from evil! For the LORD has returned the wickedness of Nabal on his own head.’ And David sent and proposed to Abigail, to take her as his wife” (v. 39).

The Anointed King Is Coming

Nabal lived prosperously as his property was guarded and protected by the future king of Israel—but he was unthankful, greedy, and foolish. In his hubris, Nabal reviled the future king of Israel. Can we apply the lesson of his attitude to our time now, at the end of the age?

We most certainly can.

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.” For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men (2 Peter 3:1–7).

We live in a time when the kings, the nobles, and the merchants of the earth have concluded either that God doesn’t exist, or that He doesn’t care what they do—or, at the very least, won’t do anything about it. But their rebellion is “shear” folly. They will soon find out, just as Nabal did, that there is a well-armed King who will appear on the scene—but this King will rule over all the earth, and will ride out with His army to enact vengeance on the wicked who, in their sheer folly, believe they are untouchable.

Let’s be like Abigail, recognizing this fact and embracing this soon-coming reality, having complete trust that what God has promised, He *will* bring to pass. (L^N)



How to Study the Bible

This is the first of four articles in a new “how to” series, each of which will discuss basic approaches to one of the spiritual disciplines: Bible study, prayer, fasting, and meditation. We hope that those new to the faith, and even those who have been walking the way of God for some time, will find these articles beneficial.

By **Wallace G. Smith**

The Bible holds a special place in the life of every Christian. As the Apostle Paul told the young evangelist Timothy, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Today, most followers of Jesus Christ have access to copies of the Bible in their own languages—truly, one of the great blessings of the modern age.

The Church of God has found that those who seek to follow Christ benefit from the habit of spending some time, every day if possible, in God’s word—often in the morning, before the cares of the day “take over.” King David once wrote, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Psalm 119:11). That daily time, spent devoted to understanding and internalizing the words of God, feeds the growing influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and keeps the flame of God’s gift active within us (2 Timothy 1:6).

But it can be intimidating! The Bible is a big book, filled with histories, sermons, poetry, prophecies, proverbs, and more—all organized in a particular manner, yet not one that makes it obvious how one should go about learning it.

With this article, we hope to help. There is no one way to study the Bible, and most people approach Bible study in multiple ways—varying their approaches depending on the goals of each study, yet remaining grounded in firm principles. We will summarize those principles and then describe simple approaches to studying the Bible to help you on your lifelong exploration of the word of God.

Seven Fundamental Principles

No matter what approach you use in any one Bible study, these fundamental principles will always apply:

Every word of God is true. Jesus said that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and that God’s word is truth (John 17:17). Any apparent contradiction is *merely* apparent.

Every word of the Bible is inspired. As mentioned earlier in Paul’s comments to Timothy, the words of Scripture are inspired by God, or “God-breathed” as some translations say. While God utilized the talents and proclivities of each human author, each one wrote under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recording what God wanted.

The Bible must be understood as a whole. Even though God’s word exists as a group of individual books, the Bible is one inspired unit from Genesis to Revelation. To gain a full understanding of God’s mind on a subject, we must consider *all* that the Bible says about that subject—precept upon precept and line upon line (Isaiah 28:10).

The context of each verse and book matters. Even as the Bible is an inspired whole, each book was written or compiled by one human author addressing a specific audience and for a specific reason. Understanding the context of an author’s writing helps to understand specific statements he makes.

There is no perfect Bible translation. While some translations are more helpful and accurate than others, it is simply not possible to perfectly translate from the inspired, ancient texts into our modern languages. Consequently, carefully choosing translations is important, and comparison among translations is often helpful.

We need God’s Spirit to understand His word properly. The Apostle Paul made it plain that “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). All who seek to understand the Bible should ask God to help them do so.

God provides teachers and ministers in His Church to define biblical doctrine and prevent confusion. God has always appointed people to help clarify difficulties in His law and commands (e.g., Deuteronomy 17:8–13; Acts 15:1–29). It is through this appointed ministry that the Father and Christ maintain unity in the Church and protect Christians from false teaching and doctrinal misunderstanding (Ephesians 4:11–16).

Choosing a Main Translation

Again, there is no perfect translation, but some are better and more helpful than others. Bible translations can be

loosely arranged along a spectrum. On one end, you have a “word for word” approach, which seeks to be very accurate in translating the words of the ancient languages. With this approach, ideas can sometimes be hard to discern, since our modern languages convey some ideas through different idioms and cultural contexts. On the other end is a “thought for thought” approach, which sacrifices literal accuracy in the hope of communicating what the *translators believe* is the intended thought or idea. “Paraphrase” Bibles fit into this category.

The best translators seek a well-chosen balance between these two extremes. However, because translations using the “thought for thought” approach are too frequently vulnerable to interpreters’ biases and theological errors, we in the Living Church of God strongly favor leaning toward the “word for word” end of the spectrum. While ancient idioms or sayings can sometimes be strange, these can easily be learned without sacrificing doctrinal accuracy,

The Living Church of God uses the *New King James Version* as the main English-language translation in all of its publications. We believe the approach used in translating the *New King James Version*, or *NKJV*, is superior to that of many other translations, giving us a text that balances well the needs of accuracy, clarity, and readability. But it is not perfect—no translation is. In a few places, other translations provide a more accurate reading or a clearer understanding—but as a main Bible one can use as a central focus of his or her study, the *NKJV* has for decades served God’s Church very well.

What About Study Aids?

Many who are just beginning to seriously study the Bible ask about study aids that might help. Especially with digital and online resources that make entire libraries available, the selection can be intimidating—but it doesn’t need to be.

First, recognize that much profitable Bible study takes place without any aids. Most people throughout history have not had access to the resources now available, and the value in simply reading the Bible and meditating on its words has not diminished! Then, of course, the booklets, magazines, and other materials from the Church should be considered your first stop in seeking more information, not to mention the wonderful *human* resources the Church makes available in the form of your local ministry. As Mr. Richard Ames likes to say, “Don’t overlook the obvious!”

The Church of God has found that **those who seek to follow Christ benefit from the habit of spending some time, every day if possible, in God’s word**—often in the morning, before the cares of the day “take over.”

But what about materials from outside the Church? They may be helpful at times, but we must remember—they were not created by Spirit-filled individuals inspired by God. While their content may *sometimes* be helpful, it is sometimes *dead wrong*, especially in matters of doctrine and spiritual understanding. Therefore, their information should be considered with at least a grain of salt. Here are some examples of those resources.

Concordances: These references help you to find verses where various words appear. The most popular, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, includes every word appearing in the *King James Version* and assigns to each Hebrew and Greek

word a number that is often used as a reference in other works. Online concordances, such as Bible Gateway, often utilize multiple English translations. Concordances sometimes contain information about the original Hebrew and

Greek words used in Scripture.

Atlases: A Bible atlas contains maps to help you understand the locations of various biblical events and peoples.

Dictionaries: Like small encyclopedias, Bible dictionaries contain information about ancient cultures, customs, and history. They sometimes comment on archaeological finds related to biblical peoples or events.

Lexicons: These resources specialize in the meanings of Hebrew and Greek words, and contain more detailed information about these words than concordances do.

Commentaries: Collections of the perceptions and opinions of scholars on Bible passages, commentaries can be helpful sources of insights, but must be handled carefully and are vulnerable to the scholars’ biases. Dr. Meredith often highlighted that commentaries tend to err when they discuss the supposedly “immortal” soul, the purpose of man, the identity of Israel, the concepts of law and grace, and the meanings of prophecies. If you refer to a commentary, do so cautiously, with these concerns in mind.

Approaches to Bible Study

With those principles and considerations in place, we can look at several approaches to Bible study. A healthy relationship with God’s word will, over time, involve multiple approaches, varying over time, circumstance, and need. These are not the only approaches, but basic approaches to help you on your way.

Reading and Meditation: We shouldn’t fail to mention the most basic approach of all: simply reading a passage and

meditating on it! While it seems “too simple,” there is great value in reading straight through a passage of Scripture—say, Matthew 5 or Psalm 23—then reading through it again more slowly, taking the time to pause occasionally and meditate on what it is saying and how it relates to your life. Comparing the passage via multiple translations can be helpful, as well. Reading through the historical sections gives us much in the way of testimonies, so we can learn lessons of history and from the experiences of others. Simply reading the whole Bible through gives one a good overview of and basic familiarity with it, and schedules can be found to keep you on target to read through it in a year.

The Tomorrow’s World Bible Study Course: Again, it may seem an obvious choice, but many overlook it. The Church’s 24-lesson *Bible Study Course*, written by the late evangelist Mr. John Ogwyn, has been carefully planned to take you through some of the Bible’s most important teachings. Following the course’s instructions by looking up, and even writing down, the scriptures presented to answer the course’s questions not only makes for engaging and enlightening Bible study, but also results in a valuable personal resource.

Topical Study: Topical studies involve picking a topic—the Sabbath, patience, mercy, heaven, forgiveness, etc.—and looking up all that the Bible has to say about it. A concordance can help with this—or a digital, searchable Bible—by allowing you to search for a word or group of related words (say, “forgive,” “forgiveness,” “forgiving,” etc.) and read the passages you find. Sometimes nuances of translation may mean some passages are missed if you search for English words instead of Greek or Hebrew, but that doesn’t mean you are “doing it wrong”—and remember, your relationship with the Bible is lifelong. Further study will likely fill in any gaps.

The Church’s many booklets, articles, and recorded sermons provide ready-made resources for topical Bible study. For example, if you would like to study the Bible on the topic of life after death, Mr. Ames’ booklet *What Happens When You Die?* is an ideal guide! Our booklets cite biblical passages to back up their teachings, and taking the time to look up each scriptural reference as you review a booklet makes for an organized, thorough Bible study on its topic.

Book Study: While we can’t fully understand a topic without considering what the *whole* Bible says about it, there is great value in sometimes focusing your study on just one book. For instance, you might study the book of 1 Corinthians. Other resources, as mentioned above, can help you understand where and when the Apostle Paul wrote the book, and what situations in the congregation he was dealing with as he wrote. An atlas can show you where Corinth was and illustrate Paul’s journeys that brought him into contact with the Corinthians. With those

contexts in mind, you can then begin reading the book, taking time to look at connections between 1 Corinthians and other books of the Bible, such as other letters of Paul. For instance, reading about Apollos in 1 Corinthians 1:12 might prompt you to see where else he is mentioned—and a concordance or a search on a digital Bible would reveal references in Acts and Titus.

Word Study: Similar to a topical study, a word study generally focuses on a specific Greek or Hebrew word and how it is used and translated in the Bible. This may involve looking up the passages in which the word is used and consulting a lexicon to see the different meanings that the word can convey.

Character Study: The Bible tells of many lives, and those lives hold lessons for us. You might choose, for instance, to study the life of Abraham by taking the time to slowly read and meditate on the chapters that detail his life and then following up with additional references to Abraham that add to our understanding of how God sees him. Or you could choose a figure who appears only briefly, such as Nabal, whose life is covered in one chapter (1 Samuel 25), but whose example still brings lessons worth learning!

The Journey of a Lifetime

No matter what approach you take in any particular study, you will often find that one study plants the seeds of several future studies. Perhaps your study of the book of Genesis will lead you to a character study of Abraham. Seeing that Abraham “believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6) might later prompt you to do a topical study on belief, or a word study on “righteousness.”

As you progress with your Bible studies, you are sure to come upon questions you can’t answer. Be sure to note them! They can lead to great discussions with your spouse or your parents, or they might prompt you to look into Church literature for an explanation. If an answer still eludes you, your local minister might enjoy chatting with you about it. Of course, God sometimes chooses not to reveal an answer to a question (Deuteronomy 29:29), and sometimes answers might not come until years later! But we can rest in faith—knowing that one day, all will be revealed (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Few endeavors in life promise us what regular Bible study does. So we hope these basic principles, approaches, and tips will help you make the most of your efforts as you begin to develop this spiritual discipline—or take a long-established discipline to a new level in your life. And as you seek God in the pages of His word, rest assured that He will faithfully draw near to you (James 4:8).

Once you decide you want to understand this book of books, you embark on the journey of a lifetime! (L)

Family Weekend Recaps

Texas Winter Family Weekend in Mineola

The Texas Winter Family Weekend at Hidden Pines Venue in Mineola was a tremendous success, with 195 in attendance for Sabbath services. Dr. Douglas Winnail gave an inspiring sermon titled “From Whom Much Is Given, Much Is Required,” which was followed by a delicious dinner, Talent/Fun Show, and dance.

On Sunday morning, 150 attended the Bible Study given by Mr. Glen Harrison, “Being An Encourager.” That was followed by a Sunday brunch of eggs, beef sausage, and biscuits and gravy—as well as fresh fruit, coffee, and a juice bar—with more fellowship afterwards.

The weather was a tad cold, but this didn’t hamper the wonderful time had by the brethren! There were many comments by attendees saying that the Family Weekend was well organized and that “everything went so smoothly, it was like a well-oiled team.” It ended around 3:00 Sunday afternoon to give everyone travel time for their return home.

The participants included brethren from the pastorates of Messrs. Rick Stafford, Glen Harrison, Daniel Friz, and Phil West, as well as from the Dallas and East Texas area. The messages were outstanding and the food and fellowship were exceptional. Our children and teens particularly enjoyed plenty of outdoor space to congregate and have a delightful time.

—Gary Stein

Charlotte Family Weekend

People from all over the East Coast and even Canada joined in the fun for the Charlotte Family Weekend, which ran December 24–25. The weekend was filled with excitement and



enthusiasm for the various activities, as well as the building and strengthening of friendships new and old.

The event began with Sabbath services and an inspirational video message commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the forming of the Global Church of God and then the Living Church of God. This message was followed by special music, a rousing performance of two selections sung by the Charlotte Family Weekend Choir. During the main message, Mr. Weston emphasized the need for us not to forget the things of the past. After the close of the service, Mr. Ames presented Mr. Weston with a commemorative crystal globe, honoring the Work God has done through His presiding evangelists over the last 30 years.

Later that evening, a delicious lasagna dinner was served so everyone could continue to fellowship. In the evening, a lively casual dance featured a variety of songs for all ages to enjoy.

On the following day, numerous activities included a silent bake sale and craft sale to browse. Artists of various styles and skills displayed their magnificent pieces of art; these included paintings, weavings, sketches, crocheted items, sewing projects, miniature art, and origami. Some artists even gave live demonstrations.

A morning of carnival-style games filled the gymnasium with people. Games such as balloon races, guessing the purpose of various hand tools, foam axe throwing, plinko, Nerf marksmanship, reading stories to children, and balloon animals were among the activities that the brethren enjoyed. Group games, like distinguishing fake news from real news after hearing absurd-sounding headlines, gave everyone an opportunity to participate and enjoy being together. After the lunch of hamburgers and hotdogs, many enjoyed chatting at the tables or playing and watching volleyball matches in the afternoon.

The Charlotte Family Weekend was a great success for all who came and joined in the fun. Brethren went home recharged after a fun-filled, inspiring, and encouraging weekend.

—Julian Braddock

Kansas City Weekend Versus Freezing Temperatures

Despite a large winter storm affecting much of the country, 254 brethren from nine states braved freezing temperatures to attend the Kansas City Family Weekend on December 24–25. Mr. Michael Elliott conducted the Bible Study, Mr. Michael DeSimone spoke to 399 brethren (including some online attendees), and Mr. Mark Sandor provided a seminar. The thirtieth-anniversary message by Mr. Weston made the gathering even more special!



On Saturday evening, brethren feasted on a tasty buffet. Afterward, children, teens, and adults enjoyed dancing. Those who didn't dance took the opportunity to fellowship. The Bible Olympics the next day opened with a flag ceremony. Family teams gathered under ten banners of various "tribes of Israel" to face ten spiritually and physically challenging events. The tasks ranged from shepherding to placing animals on the ark. Brethren encountered other unique challenges that led to the final bronze, silver, and gold awards.

Many thanks to everyone locally and from Headquarters, as well as all the visitors, who made this Family Weekend possible and special.

—Rand Millich

Birmingham/Montgomery Family Weekend a Wonderful Success

The Embassy Suites hotel in Birmingham, Alabama, was the site of our regional Birmingham/Montgomery Family Weekend, December 23–25. The hotel has a huge atrium where the sunshine glistened through the skylight into a beautiful lobby, complete with a koi pond full of fish that young and old alike could enjoy feeding. On Friday, we enjoyed snacks throughout the day as many fellowshiped together, followed by a Bible Study—presented to 74 members present and online by our Regional Pastor Dan Hall—titled "Delighting in God's Word."

On the Sabbath, Mr. Hall spoke to 94 brethren present and online, giving a sermon titled "Lessons from the Book of Job." After Sabbath services, we had a baptism, and later that evening, 80 of us enjoyed a Dinner/Dance with delicious food and much dancing.

Sunday was a day filled with games for kids and adults alike, and the highlight was Bingo. Many prizes were given out for Bingo winners, including Bibles, blankets, gift cards, and more.

The toughest part of the whole weekend was enduring one of the worst cold streaks Alabama has endured in recent years. The temperature on the Sabbath was 5°F—and it didn't warm to more than 20°F the entire weekend.

Many said how much they enjoyed the weekend, while some even said it was the best they had attended. Thanks be to God for such a wonderful weekend with liked-minded people! What a treat!

—Anthony Stroud

Merrill Family Weekend

The Merrill congregation hosted its annual family weekend at the end of February. Just over 70 brethren from a half-dozen



states were able to enjoy the warm—for Wisconsin in February—20-degree days and the fresh foot of snow that had fallen earlier that week. Mr. Mike DeSimone provided the Friday night Bible Study as well as the sermon for Sabbath services. The brethren enjoyed extra fellowship during the Sabbath followed by trivia games and a dance Saturday evening. The weekend concluded with a Sunday morning brunch and sledding.

The Merrill congregation has five adults and six children in regular attendance. They provided most of the organizing and planning of the weekend, but it was inspiring to see that all of the guests were also willing to serve by contributing to meals, setting up and taking down the hall, organizing children's activities, giving donations, and performing other acts of service. It is spiritually refreshing to spend extra time with so many brethren who come with a desire to serve one another. We are already looking forward to next year!

—Mark Sandor





Pentecost and God's Covenants

By **Wyatt Ciesielka**

The Old and New Covenants are powerful manifestations of God's sovereignty, His purpose, and His love. Both covenants have a special connection to the Feast of Pentecost, making this time of year a special opportunity to meditate on what they can teach us.

Anciently, God entered into a covenant with a small, imperfect, but chosen and special people. But even in those ancient times, God's plan pointed to future events. Under the Old Covenant, ancient Israel became God's Church in the wilderness (cf. Acts 7:38). The Israelites were predecessors of God's Church today, and God offered them His law, blessings, and great promises. But, as a whole, and because of repeated national sin, they did not obtain what they sought (Romans 11:7). In New Testament times, God is again working with a small, imperfect—but chosen and special—people. These special people, of all ethnicities and nationalities (cf. Colossians 3:11), form God's Church, and they have been called to become "firstfruits" (Romans 8:23; James 1:18). Better understanding the relationship between the Old and New Covenants and Pentecost will help us better understand how to fulfill more perfectly our role as those special people.

Why Covenants?

Simply stated, a *covenant* is a binding legal agreement between two or more parties. The Bible contains many covenants. Genesis 9:8–17 records God's covenant to never again destroy the earth with a flood. God's covenant to establish David's house forever is found in 2 Samuel 7:11–16, and His promise to bring the Messiah from that line in Jeremiah 23:5–6. The New Covenant is anticipated in numerous Old Testament passages, including Jeremiah 31:31–33, and is referenced numerous times in the New Testament, such as in Romans 11:26–27 and Galatians 4:21–31. But covenants were not only made between God and humanity. There were also covenants between human beings, such as the covenant between David and his friend Jonathan (cf. 1 Samuel 20:8). Innumerable covenants were made throughout history that are not recorded in the Bible, such as treaties between kings or nations, or promises or deeds between common people.

But there is something unique about God's covenants. When God makes a covenant, He *always* fulfills it, even if the complete fulfillment takes generations or millennia. Notice that the Abrahamic covenant will ultimately be fulfilled through Jesus as the Messiah at the Second Coming, as the descendant of both Abraham and King David (2 Samuel 7:11–16; Jeremiah 30:9; Ezekiel 37:24; Hosea 3:5; Matthew 1:1).

But why did God establish a covenant with Israel in the first place? Scripture reveals that God established His covenant because of *hesed*, a Hebrew word that could be rendered into English as "covenant love." *Hesed* is more than just a general type of fondness—to display *hesed* is to display binding love. And this meaning fits perfectly with *berit*, the Hebrew word for "covenant," which means to "fetter" or to mutually "obligate" oneself to another, as in a binding marriage covenant. The marriage ceremony is the recognition and formalization of preexisting love (*hesed*). These two terms are often used together when God speaks of His covenant love for ancient Israel (cf. Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Daniel 9:4)—where God keeps His covenant (*berit*) in love (*hesed*) with those who love Him.

To appreciate more fully the purpose that God is working out on earth, it is helpful to be reminded that the Old Covenant—this *berit* based on *hesed*—was a divine oath that bound or fettered God's chosen people to Him in an intimate way. As God's love and sovereignty are absolute, so was ancient Israel bound to its Creator absolutely. This special and binding relationship is expressed in numerous passages where God inspires it to be recorded that "they shall be My people and I will be their God" (cf. Jeremiah 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 34:30; 36:28; 37:27; Zechariah 8:8). This language expresses the covenant-love that God had for His people, and the very real and binding oath into which they had entered. Under the terms of the Old Covenant, God even intended to dwell with His chosen people (Exodus 25:8; 29:44–46)! Interestingly, these terms and benefits are very similar to what God offers in a more personal way under the terms of the New Covenant. This should not be surprising, since the same God who established the Old Covenant also established the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 10:4)—and He never changes (Hebrews 13:8).

Faithful to Our Covenant?

Regrettably, ancient Israel was not faithful to the terms of the Covenant. Passages such as Ezekiel 20:1–21 and Jeremiah 3:1–8 contrast God’s love and longsuffering with ancient Israel’s dismal failure to live up to its covenant oath. Consequently, Israel (and later Judah) suffered curses, national correction, military defeat, eventual captivity, and dispersion. But did ancient Israel’s failure foil God’s great plan to bless and call a people who could become His firstfruits?

No, it did not. The time was coming for a New Covenant. The New Covenant—just like the Old Covenant—is intended to bring blessings (1 Peter 2:9). Under its terms, God dwells in those who enter into this binding oath with Him (Acts 2:1–4; Ephesians 4:23–24; 2 Corinthians 5:17). But, as Hebrews 8:7–8 explains, the New Covenant has certain advantages over the Old Covenant—not that the Old Covenant was flawed, but that God makes available additional promises. Under the New Covenant, Christians are blessed to have Jesus Christ as Mediator

Remember, the “fault” was not with the Old Covenant—it was with the people who refused to keep God’s law.

(Hebrews 12:24), and, as was powerfully demonstrated on Pentecost 31 AD, God’s Spirit can now dwell in us (Acts 2:1–39; Hebrews 8:6–10). The New Covenant is available to Christians personally, and Christ—who is Mediator and Lawgiver (James 4:12)—lives personally in those who have accepted those terms (Galatians 2:20). Very few in ancient Israel personally received the Holy Spirit at the time of the Old Covenant (1 Peter 1:10–11). But in the New Testament Church, the Holy Spirit is available to all who repent, are baptized, and have hands laid on them in response to God’s call (Acts 2:38; 8:17; 9:17; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

In the New Testament Greek, God inspired the word *diatheke* to be used for the New Covenant. During the Apostles’ time, a typical contract or legally binding agreement would usually be referred to not as a *diatheke*, but as a *syntheke*, which was a legally binding agreement between two parties of relative equality. However, God did not choose to use *syntheke* in the New Testament. He inspired *diatheke*, which is derived from *diatithemai* and conveys the relationship of one with plenary or absolute power over another. In secular Greek, the word was usually used to mean one’s last will and testament. The connotation of *diatheke* is that the dispenser—God—is overwhelmingly, entirely, and completely superior. His power is absolute in every way. He can dictate His own terms and the other party may not alter those terms. Just as with the Old Covenant, God again asserts His absolute authority over those with whom He enters into covenant. But, again, His covenants are always based on loving kindness.

Becoming Firstfruits

Some mistakenly assume that the New Covenant is a less-binding or “softer” agreement between God and those who answer His call. But in fact, under the New Covenant (*diatheke*), as we become the recipients of the Holy Spirit, we are bound more intimately to God than was ancient Israel. We become God’s literal slaves and bondservants (*doulos*), as the apostles often emphasized (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 1). But God’s purpose remains the same. Just as God intended ancient Israel to be His “special treasure” (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6; Psalm 135:4; Malachi 3:17), He even more so now expects New Covenant Christians to become His royal, special, and chosen treasure (1 Peter 2:9). Both covenants are based on love. Both covenants make the people a special treasure to God. But, under the New Covenant, we have the advantage of Christ as Mediator and of the Holy Spirit in us individually. Thus, the New Covenant is more personally binding (Hebrews 6:4–6), and is also a better covenant (Hebrews 8:6).

God entered into the Old Covenant with Israel on the day of Pentecost, when He delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, codifying the terms of that covenant. But ancient Israel failed to keep those covenant terms. Then, beginning on the Day of Pentecost in 31 AD, and under the terms of the New Covenant, God made the Holy Spirit available to His Church. Because of the Holy Spirit in us, Christians can have the mind and heart to keep God’s law and the terms of the Covenant (John 14:16–20; Acts 2:1–4; Romans 5:5; 8:1–14; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:14–16). Ezekiel recorded God’s promise that comes with His gift of the Holy Spirit: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

The Holy Spirit in us gives us a new heart that is able to keep God’s Commandments, *which are the terms of His covenants*. Remember, the “fault” was not with the Old Covenant—it was with the people who refused to keep God’s law. Now, with the Holy Spirit in us, we can have the heart to do what ancient Israel, for the most part, utterly failed to do. We can keep God’s law; it can be written in our hearts and we can be His special people (Jeremiah 31:33).

When we observe the Feast of Pentecost, we commemorate the wonderful day when God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Church to call a few in this age to become firstfruits in His Kingdom. We also celebrate that God has given us new hearts, so we may love and keep His law and thus be faithful to the binding oath that we have made with the Creator God who loved us (1 John 4:19), who called us (John 6:44), and who wants us to be His special people (Exodus 19:5–6; 1 Peter 2:9). ^(LN)

TITUS 2:3-5

Woman to Woman

The Homeless Year

By **Amber Leonard**

Some experiences stay with you forever. I will never forget the year we packed seven times—when we were “vagabonds,” utterly dependent on God’s mercy and grace. Although we owned our home, mold had made it uninhabitable due to a hidden water leak. We lived in many different places for various lengths of time over the course of several months. Each temporary “home” helped me grow as a woman in God’s Church. We started off by camping in a tent, and later lived in a camper, then a hotel, and after that with family, before finally moving back home. Along with this were other trips: serving at camp and Church events and going to the Feast of Tabernacles. Throughout all of this, we never went without a place to stay.

In each part of our journey, I grew in faith and hope. There were also dark times of doubting and lacking faith—but with each dip into depression, God threw me a “rope of hope” in the form of His word, like when I would read that “we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Putting Our Trust in Him

To begin at the beginning, when we discovered the problem, we arranged for a construction company to remedy the situation. The workers tore out our entire kitchen and living room wall, leaving the mold exposed. At that point, we had to leave and did not know when we would be able to return. We left with many unanswered questions and an uncertain future. We had been told that the demolition and remodel would take a few weeks, but we figured we would just go camping while the work was done.

Somehow, our family camping trip didn’t seem so much fun when we were forced to do it. I lay on an air mattress next to my sleeping husband, our children on another air mattress at our feet, and stared up at the lights from neighboring camp sites playing on the sides of our tent. Worries ran through my anxious mind, warring with scriptures saying, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13) and “I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you

will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25).

I worried about where we would go if the work took longer than expected; I remember thinking that four weeks seemed like an eternity. We did not yet realize that four weeks would turn into *many more* of struggle, frustration, and trusting in God to get us through. My faith as a woman in God’s Church would be tested many times in the months ahead.

A Battle We Couldn’t Fight Alone

At the beginning of this trial, I mentally weighed my faith and thought that I could be strong for my husband and children and trust that God would handle the situation, whatever it might be. I knew He would fight the battle for us. After all, the Bible tells us, “He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the LORD shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in Him” (Psalm 37:39–40).

Months later, however, when things were at their worst, I did not see things so optimistically. I felt helpless, vulnerable, and spinning out of control. I asked God, “Why have you forgotten me?” When we were severely pressed financially, when my husband and children became ill, when nothing moved forward on the house, when it seemed that



everything came crashing down at once, it took faith to keep moving forward on my knees. There were times I had to just let go of worry and remind my Father in Heaven of His many promises of protection and provision. I prayed that God would fight our battles for us, just as He did for the Israelites: “The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace” (Exodus 14:14).

Reading scriptures of promise helped me endure many emotional roller coasters during months of battling with insurance and construction companies. I began to fast and pray more earnestly.

Seeing Prayers Answered

Finally, we began to see progress: a new floor, a fresh coat of paint, and the hope of a new kitchen to come. I was a happy woman. We began to see God’s hand working in the trial.

I see now, after this trial, that I have become a different woman than I was on that forced camping trip. Having had to rely on God for everything, **with hindsight I can honestly say that He never let me down.**

When one company said no, the other said yes. Many times, God used them in competition with each other to get a favorable result. He was saying, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Seeing these events unfold before us brought incredible peace of mind.

It is an amazing feeling when God answers our prayers and comes through for us at exactly the right time. Sometimes you can’t see Him working behind the scenes. You can’t see what the puzzle will look like until He has put the pieces together—but you can have faith that He is moving and turning each puzzle piece until it fits perfectly.



When we were finally able to step through our front door again, things were still a little bit disappointing—an unfinished home still unfinished. But, after months of being away, just being able to go *home* felt like a weight had been lifted off our shoulders. The trial was not over; the house was not finished, and we were still waiting on our “happy ending” kitchen, but things were looking up and prayers were being answered. “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps” (Psalm 40:1-2).

Not Just One Lesson

We’re told that there is always a lesson to learn from a trial, and that we should ask God to reveal it to us quickly. But sometimes it isn’t just one lesson that we need to learn—and sometimes it isn’t quick. Sometimes the lessons unfold as the trial plays out. Sometimes it takes a few breakdowns and a few times asking God “Why?” to prompt the deepest and most heartfelt prayers you have ever prayed.

I see now, after this trial, that I have become a different woman than I was on that forced camping trip. Having had to rely on God for everything, with hindsight I can honestly say that He never let me down. He is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20).

The lessons I learned as a woman of God are invaluable. I learned that in a world where circumstances can change in the blink of an eye, there is One who is solidly there for you. I learned that prayer is as essential to a true Christian’s life as breathing. I learned that when you are stuck and can’t do anything to help your situation, God is already moving behind the scenes to work it out for you. He knows what we need before we ever do; we just need to ask and trust that He is faithful to give it. “And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22).

I learned that He wants to give us good things. “So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you and your house” (Deuteronomy 26:11). He wants us to have our hearts’ desires. “Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). I learned that our lives, as God-fearing women, are truly in His hands—and there is no better place to be. (LN)

In Loving Memory

Mr. Austin Carl Bolin, 41, died November 17. He was a member in the Amarillo, Texas, congregation. Mr. Bolin's survivors include his wife of twelve years, Tammie Kinikin Bolin; one son; two daughters; his parents, David and Lanita Bolin; and two sisters, Samantha Williamson and Emily Fite. Mr. Bolin had an excellent work ethic and worked hard to ensure the wellbeing of his family. He had a heart for those in need and will be greatly missed by many people.

Mr. Louis A. Crespo, 70, a longtime member of the Church of God, died suddenly on December 15. He was born August 25, 1962, and he was baptized July 1, 1974, while attending the Long Island, New York, congregation of the Worldwide Church of God. He and his family later moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, where he served the congregation faithfully and was ordained a deacon on December 24, 2011. He is survived by his wife Arlene, his daughter Rebecca, and his son Stefan. Mr. Crespo was an active participant and faithful servant in all of the Charlotte congregation's activities, fulfilling several duties for the congregation. His occupation as an administrator required great attention to detail and organization, which manifested in how he performed his service to the congregation. Always available and always willing to help, and known for his warmth, sense of humor, and friendly smile, he is greatly missed by his fellow members of the Church.

Mr. Michael Fennell, 84, a member of the Manchester congregation in the UK, died on January 28. Mr. Fennell loved the outdoors. He was a family man who had six children as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Mr. Fennell was baptized in 2017 and was a light to those around him. One of his relatives commented that Mr. Fennell's faith had helped him through his health challenges. His family deeply appreciates the prayers and cards from the brethren and other gestures of sympathy and support in their loss.

Mme. Chaja Frydrych, 104, died on January 2. She was the oldest member in the Belgian congregations. Baptized in 1989, she was passionately committed to God's truth and way. Mrs. Frydrych was born in Poland at the end of World War I. In the 1920s, her family, which was Jewish, moved to Belgium. During a time of upheaval, she was placed in a Catholic institution. When Nazi forces invaded Belgium, she barely escaped arrest and deportation. Her mother and one sister, who lived in France, were arrested and ultimately died at Auschwitz. She

came in contact with God's Church in the 1980s and was baptized in 1989. She is survived by one son.

Mrs. Betty Jo Griffith, 86, died December 27 after a few years of declining health. Baptized in 1969, she was a longtime member of God's Church. She was predeceased by her husband, Billy, along with her sons, Charles, Timothy, and John. She is survived by three daughters, Kathryn, Martha, and Sarah; three grandchildren; six great-grandchildren; two sisters; and many nieces and nephews, who loved her dearly. Mrs. Griffith and her husband lived in various states, including Kentucky, North Dakota, Alaska, Michigan, Virginia, and Texas. She loved to draw, write, and paint, and enjoyed crossword puzzles. She is also remembered for her humor and her Minnie Pearl impersonation. She performed that act with an exaggerated Southern drawl at Church events and even at a seniors' community center. Mrs. Griffith was kind and loving to others and gave good advice. All who knew her have wonderful memories and she is greatly missed by many.

Mrs. Patricia McIntyre, 82, of the Glasgow congregation in the UK, died peacefully at her care home on June 9, 2022, with her husband, Colin, at her bedside. She had suffered from Parkinson's disease for several years. Mrs. McIntyre was born in 1940 but didn't meet her father until 1945, when he returned home after serving in the Royal Air Force during World War II. After she finished school, she worked in an office until she had the opportunity to achieve her dream of becoming a schoolteacher. In the mid-1960s, she learned of the truth through Radio Scotland and was baptized into God's Church in 1970. Mr. and Mrs. McIntyre were ordained deacon and deaconess in 2002. They worked for the UK Church office at a time when the Church in the UK and Ireland was still being reestablished after its former organization broke up. Mrs. McIntyre was known for her kindness and beautiful smile. She was a good cook, and her dinner parties are fondly remembered by the brethren. She is survived by her husband, two children, and six grandchildren. Many cards and messages of sympathy from around the world were a great comfort to her family after their loss.

Mr. Benito Agoili Parbo, 83, died peacefully on October 13 at his home in Macebolig, North Cotabato, in the Philippines. Mr. Parbo began attending the Radio Church of God in February 1960, was baptized in 1964, and later served as a deacon and then an elder in several congregations in the Philippines.

He will be remembered as a man who taught the truth on every matter according to Church doctrine. He was married to Salome Casing Parbo for 62 years and they had six children. He will be remembered fondly by the brethren.

Mrs. Charmaine Read, 52, died unexpectedly but peacefully in her sleep on December 27. She had battled health problems for several years. She and her husband Rick were baptized together in South Africa in 2017 and most recently have been part of the Belfast congregation in Ireland. Mr. Read survives her. She will be greatly missed.

Mr. John van Rensburg, 63, died on November 28 after struggling with severe health problems, including a five-year battle with cancer. He had been baptized just a few months before his death. He is survived and mourned by his wife and two children, who were very inspired by his conversion. Mr. van Rensburg is also missed by the Brisbane congregation in Australia.

Mrs. Meta Schnalle, 98, died peacefully on August 15. She was a much-loved and highly respected member of the Sydney

congregation in Australia. A native of Germany, she moved to Australia right after World War II, and she and her husband Frank eventually settled in New South Wales where they raised two sons. Baptized in 2007, Mrs. Schnalle loved God's word and made every effort, despite failing health, to attend services every Sabbath until COVID lockdowns prevented her from attending in person. She remained mentally alert until shortly before her death at the nursing home where she lived. Mrs. Schnalle is greatly missed by her two sons, grandchildren, and the brethren.

Mrs. Geraldine "Gerry" Wilson, 91, died on March 15. She married William "Bill" Jay Wilson in 1949, and they were married for 61 years until his death in 2011. They had two daughters, Julia (Steven) Black and Annette (Michael) Wright, as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She loved gardening, traveling, visiting with family and friends, and serving God to the best of her ability. Mrs. Wilson started attending the Living Church of God in 2011 after a *Tomorrow's World* Presentation given by Mr. Roderick C. Meredith in Gladstone, Missouri. Baptized in 2019, she was a member of the St. Joseph, Missouri, congregation.

Weddings & Anniversaries

The Springfield, Illinois, congregation celebrated the **50th wedding anniversary** of **Mr. and Mrs. Ken (Marilyn) Kerr**. Mr. and Mrs. Kerr were married January 20, 1972. They attribute the longevity of their marriage to living God's way of life.

Mr. and Mrs. David (Tania) Polosky celebrated their **50th wedding anniversary** on February 4. Mr. Polosky serves as a deacon and pianist in the Asheville, North Carolina, congregation.

Births

On September 10, after being in hospital for four days, Mrs. Susan Yow Kim Lan Salmon gave birth to a beautiful baby girl named **Skylyn Susan Salmon**. The baby weighed 2.81 kilograms and measured 32 centimeters. Mr and Mrs. Salmon and

their first daughter welcome the baby joyfully, as do the brethren in Bahau, Malaysia, who are happy to have this wonderful addition to the congregation.

Ordinations

Mr. Ben Nelson was ordained a deacon on January 28 by Pastor Jeffrey Fall. Mr. Nelson serves in the Reno, Nevada, congregation.

Mr. Mike Rivet was ordained an elder on February 11 by Area Pastors Glen Harrison and Ed Breaux and elder Chip Wheelahan. Mr. Rivet serves in the New Orleans, Louisiana, congregation.

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Made in the Image of God

The *Star Wars* film franchise has thrilled audiences since the original movie hit theaters in 1977. You might remember its iconic “cantina scene,” in which numerous creatures from a distant galaxy interact while their bizarre forms strain our imagination. But why don’t we see such creatures in actuality?

Astronomers have estimated that the universe contains more than 200 billion galaxies—perhaps as many as two trillion. Yet, as far as can be determined by cutting-edge telescopes and mankind’s attempts to explore our own solar system, the vastness of outer space is inhospitable to life. But planet Earth is a beautiful jewel in space, with just the right amount of atmosphere, water, landmass, and temperate zones to make it habitable for mankind and for animals, insects, and plant life. While there are certainly fantastic creatures in this physical creation, and speculation about “exo-planets” that may be quite similar to Earth, the many variations of life with human-level intelligence popularized by fantasy and science-fiction are exactly that—fantasy.

Humanity exists in various colors, shapes, and sizes, but every ethnic and racial type is unmistakably *human* in its form. The biblical account of creation reveals the basis of that form: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness....’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26–27).

Our human form is like our Creator’s form, which is to say that we are like God, and not that God is like us. Jesus explained this to His disciples when He said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Christ is like the Father in form and character.

The Apostle Paul made it very plain when he explained, “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.... Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising” (Acts 17:26–29).

When one understands our origins as human beings and where we are going in the plan our heavenly Father has for mankind, the pervasive fog of confusion clears, revealing the purpose for human life. There is no basis for racial prejudice. Paul stated emphatically that “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (Colossians 3:11). *Every* human being has been created in God’s image.

This understanding reveals why *Star Wars* biology does not resemble actual biology: God *specifically* designed intelligent life—*truly* intelligent life—to be like *Him*. The diverse races of fantasy and science fiction can easily make one’s head spin; by contrast, God’s design of mankind is so perfect in its simplicity that there is confusion only if we clumsily *misinterpret ourselves*.

Wonderfully, God intended us to share not only His form but also His substance. Paul made this important point to the Christians in his day: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit... from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

To become like God, not only in form but in our spirit and character, is a destiny that few can really imagine—yet it is our Creator’s true and glorious purpose for us.

—J. Davy Crockett III