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Memories of Exodus

Dear Brethren,

The book of Amos begins, “The words of Amos, who was among the sheepbreeders of Tekoa... two years before the earthquake” (Amos 1:1). No one today knows exactly which year that was, but it was apparently an event well known to that generation. This is an example of how natural and man-made events mark time for us.

Even though my mother was not yet born at the time, stories of the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fire in San Francisco were well known to her. Our family had a figurine that had survived the fire—a memento of an event that had great meaning to my mother. Yet, today, barely a few are aware of the disaster that destroyed more than 80 percent of one of the best-known cities in the world, in which more than 3,000 people perished under rubble or in flames.

Many people living in the northwestern United States remember when Mount St. Helens in Washington state blew its top 45 years ago. Some people 300 miles away in British Columbia, Canada, still remember the roar of the explosion, which threw ash 80,000 feet into the air. For comparison, modern passenger jets generally fly at less than half that altitude.

My parents’ generation remembered Charles Lindbergh becoming the first to fly a non-stop solo transatlantic crossing from New York to Paris. He covered the 3,600 miles (5,800 km) in just over 33 hours between May 20 and 21, 1927. That was a major milestone, nearly 2,000 miles (3,200 km) farther than anyone had previously flown non-stop. Today’s jet aircraft, loaded with hundreds of passengers, fly from New York to Paris in about seven hours.

Pearl Harbor was another marker of time, as was D-Day, even for those of us who were not yet alive at the time. And

who can forget where they were when Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon—or, more recently, when they learned of the tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks? Even those not alive at the time are aware of those seminal events.

Many, especially those living in southern California, will long remember the fires of January 2025. Even as I write, the story is still being written in smoke and ashes. Lives have been lost and tens of thousands have been made homeless. Life in the Los Angeles area will never be the same. What happened is historic and will be a time marker, sharply dividing the affected areas by what they were like before and after.

However, time erodes our memories, especially when we are not personally touched by an event. How many people outside of Canada remember the Fort McMurray fire of 2016, in which 2,400 buildings burned down—many of them homes—and another 2,000 homes were declared unsafe? It was the costliest single disaster in Canadian history. And how many even today remember June 29, 2021, when the small community of Lytton, British Columbia, recorded the highest temperature ever in Canada at 49.6°C (121.3°F)—and when most of the town was destroyed by fire the following day?

One of the Greatest Marks in History

Yes, memories fade, especially when catastrophes do not touch us, or when great achievements are moved to the recesses of our minds as new ones grab our attention. That is what makes the Exodus remarkable. What happened then has not been forgotten, even after more than 3,000 years. Most children have some awareness of the Exodus account—though, sadly, many of this generation are not learning it. No matter what later time in biblical history you choose, that great event was never forgotten.

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Israel was instructed 40 years later to remember that they had been slaves in Egypt and that God had led them *out* of that brutal enslavement (Deuteronomy 15:15; 16:3, 12). Even the inhabitants of Jericho remembered what God had done for Israel (Joshua 2:10). The Exodus was known throughout the period of the Judges (Judges 6:13). Gentiles knew the history of Israel, as did Jephthah (Judges 11:13–27). Samuel reminded the people of their ancestors' journey out of Egypt (1 Samuel 12:6, 8).

We see that throughout the history of Israel, there were people who knew their history. There is reference to the Exodus from King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:7–10). He is only one of the many kings who knew Israel's history, to say nothing of the prophets, whose writings are full of references, as are the Psalms. We read in the New Testament that Stephen was well versed in Israel's history, nearly 1,500 years after the Exodus (Acts 7:2–51). Paul was as well (Acts 13:17), and so was Jude (Jude 5). That singular event was never neglected by the Scriptures in a period of over 1,500 years—attested to by multiple individuals.

By contrast, how many under the age of 70 are familiar with the San Francisco fire? The eruption of Mount St. Helens is barely remembered today. The history of World War II is little known by recent generations—many of my own generation have remarkably little real comprehension of it! And what is the big deal that man landed on the Moon? Many conspiracists do not think it even happened, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Yes, years go by and one event fades into another. Some happenings are remembered for decades, and some are written in history for those who read about them. Dramatic events mark time as “before” and “after” the sudden moment that changes lives forever. The people of southern California will always remember a few days in January 2025—that is, until greater traumas come along. Those not touched directly by the fires will find its memory crowded out by catastrophes to come. Even those who lost homes may see those memories fade as fulfilled prophecies truly begin to rock this earth.

A Future Exodus

Just as one great event overwhelms earlier ones in our memories, so a future exodus will take front stage, at least tem-

porarily. No, the lessons and history of Israel's exodus from Egypt will not be forgotten, but they *will be* overshadowed by a future physical deliverance.

“Therefore behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “that it shall no more be said, ‘The LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ but, ‘The LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north and from all the lands where He had driven them.’ For I will bring them back into their land which I gave to their fathers” (Jeremiah 16:14–15).

The Exodus of more than 3,000 years ago will not be forgotten. Through it, we learn about the Passover, which teaches us what it means to be covered by the blood of God's sacrificial Lamb—Jesus Christ. The crossing of the Red Sea pictured our baptism, demonstrating not only a watery burial but our leaving behind one world and coming up to a new world. And how many lessons can we draw from removing leaven from our lives and replacing it with unleavened bread?

The ancient Exodus also teaches us today not to lust after evil things, become idolaters, commit sexual immorality, tempt Christ, or complain (1 Corinthians 10:6–10). The Passover sets the stage in depicting God's plan of salvation for all mankind. The covenant at Mount Sinai introduces us to the formalization—a clear listing—of God's liberating law and covenant relationship with His people (James 1:25, 2:12; Hebrews 8:6–13). We also know from Zechariah 14:16–19 that the Festivals of God will be taught during the Millennium, and they all began with that first Passover in Egypt.

Yes, memories fade. One event replaces another—but God has used the Jews to preserve the memory of the Exodus, for it marks the beginning of God's master plan of deliverance for mankind.



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Don't Wait for the Feelings

“**B**ut what if I don't feel like....” We could all finish the sentence: apologizing for something we did or did not do, speaking to someone with whom we are at odds, helping someone who has a history of being unkind to us. Maybe the excuse is, “Aren't I a hypocrite if my heart isn't in it?”

Let us be honest with ourselves: In our dealings with others, we all encounter situations we would rather not face. But rising above our emotions is exactly what the Bible requires of us. How we feel about someone or something is not as important as how we act when confronted by a distasteful or difficult situation.

We are quickly approaching a sacred time of the year—the Passover, followed by the Days of Unleavened Bread. In that light, the purpose of this article is to examine the biblical truth that not only is it *not* hypocritical to do what we don't feel like doing, but also that, in fact, we are *truly* being hypocritical when we only do what we feel like doing.

Two Great Commandments

There is nothing more fundamental to Scripture and to our calling as Christians than how we conduct ourselves toward others—first of all toward God Himself and then toward our fellow human beings. When Jesus was asked, “Which is the great commandment in the law?” He responded, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40).

Dr. Roderick C. Meredith often instructed us to study the laws and statutes found in the first five books of the Bible. It is evident that this was something the early apostles did. Take for example how Paul drew a principle by comparing how oxen were to be properly cared for and how brethren were to care for the ministry financially. “For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.’ Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope” (1 Corinthians 9:9–10).

Just as Paul drew understanding from the statutes, we must do the same, and we can learn a lot from how

they teach us to care for animals. Here is a different lesson that also mentions oxen.

You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray, and hide yourself from them; you shall certainly bring them back to your brother... You shall do the same with his donkey, and so shall you do with his garment; with any lost thing of your brother's, which he has lost and you have found, you shall do likewise; you must not hide yourself. You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fall down along the road, and hide yourself from them; you shall surely help him lift them up again (Deuteronomy 22:1, 3–4).

And the statutes and judgments recorded at Mt. Sinai state the principle even more broadly. It applies not just to a brother, but also to an enemy, or to someone who hates us. To all such people, we are shown to have an obligation: “If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it” (Exodus 23:4–5).

Our carnal human nature may get in the way of our doing a good deed. But, as we see from this passage, we are to show mercy to an animal suffering under a heavy burden, even if it belongs to an enemy. It is not good enough to hide our eyes—to turn our heads away. Does this not agree with what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:43–48).

The Israelites of old were carnal—they did not possess God’s Holy Spirit. They nevertheless were to act out of concern for others, even if it meant acting against their emotions. “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:17–18).

Let Go of the Past

How sad it is when those who supposedly have God’s Spirit cling to hurts and carry grudges for days, weeks, or even years. If this even *remotely* applies to us, we need to remember what we agreed to at baptism—and we must fervently ask God to help us overcome such feelings.

Virtually all people we counsel have Romans 6 read to them before baptism, explaining that baptism is the figurative death and burial of the old person and the coming up to a new life—which, of course, portrays what Christ literally did for us. We must read these words carefully, letting them sink in so that they can motivate us to action.

How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin (Romans 6:2–6).

It is human nature to hold grudges. Forgiveness does not come easy. Yet we must overcome the old man and become a new man, with the Spirit of Christ in us. That is why Dr. Meredith considered Galatians 2:20 to be the best single statement of what it means to be a true follower of Christ.

The so-called “Lord’s Prayer,” a sample outline, tells us that we should ask for God’s forgiveness of our transgressions. But notice that there is a caveat. “And forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors*” (Matthew 6:12). Yes, if we want our sins forgiven, we must also forgive others. It is significant that in His prayer outline Jesus elaborated on only that one point—the importance of forgiving. “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14–15).

Luke adds a small but important detail: “And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive *everyone* who is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). No, we cannot pick and choose those we forgive and those we do not! As we enter the Passover season, it is vital that we understand forgiveness.

True Christianity

In many ways, this world’s “Christianity” is a selfish religion. People say much about what Christ has done for them, but not about what they do for Christ. Of course, whatever love we show to Him, He has already shown to us in far greater measure—but most nominal Christians lack the understanding that we must *respond* to God’s forgiveness.

They also lack a proper understanding of the meaning of Passover. Few understand that the One who thundered the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai was the One who emptied Himself and became known as Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5–8). They do not even understand the definition of sin (1 John 3:4). They may strive to keep *some* of the commandments, but their eyes are not opened to the true seventh-day Sabbath and the annual Holy Days. They instead violate God’s Sabbath and celebrate heathen traditions handed down to them.

Over the years, I have met many people who were baptized in a worldly church before becoming interested in God’s Church. Some thought they were “okay” with God and felt only that they had been worshipping on the wrong day. Others thought that, since they had been baptized earlier, they had no need to be baptized again—failing to realize that they had never repented of the sin of following Satan and his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:4, 13–15; Revelation 17:1–5).

Truly, while some nominal Christians understand to some degree the meaning of Passover, they almost universally fail to understand the Feast of Unleavened Bread—our response to God’s great sacrifice. To learn more about the Father’s part in this, see our booklet *John 3:16: Hidden Truths of the Golden Verse*.

Who Crucified Christ?

Our Creator did not only *die* for our sins—He allowed Himself to be brutally beaten, spit upon, and called every name in the book. Yet it is for those very people who treated Him so despicably that He died. Some of those loudly chanting “Crucify Him!” were likely there on the Day of Pentecost when Peter declared, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

We should put ourselves in their shoes. No wonder “they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (v. 37). False Christianity has for generations blamed the Jews for Christ’s death. People of all races and nationalities have failed to realize that it

was they themselves—yes, *it is each one of us*—bearing the guilt of abusing and finally crucifying our Creator. Christ died for the sins of all. That makes every one of us individually guilty.

It is easy to read over familiar scriptures without meditating on how they affect us. We know what they say. We may even be able to quote them. But what have we failed to deeply comprehend? We should all carefully read and consider the following: “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6–8).

For those of us who grew up Catholic, Protestant, or in some other professing Christian religion—or in the Church of God—it may not be easy to accept that we were *enemies* of God and subject to His wrath. However, that was exactly the state of our lives until we came to repentance, accepted Christ’s sacrifice, and began allowing Christ to transform us by His Spirit. “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, *we shall be saved from wrath* through Him. For if *when we were enemies* we were *reconciled to God through the death of His Son*, much more, having been reconciled, *we shall be saved by His life*” (Romans 5:9–10).

Understand: The death of Christ reconciles us to God, but it is the *life* of Christ that saves us. This is where Galatians 2:20 comes in. “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of [*of*—not *in*] the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (*King James Version*).

Passover pictures the supreme sacrifice whereby the blood of our Creator was shed to pay for our sins and reconcile us to God (1 Peter 1:18–19; Colossians 1:15–18). The Days of Unleavened Bread reveal that our response to Christ’s sacrifice must be to come out of sin and be baptized (Acts 2:38). Pentecost then shows us that we must have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) in us to transform us. “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2).

And transformation is what we need. It is our nature to nurse hurts and to harbor a desire to “get even.” It is not easy to let go of such feelings. Sometimes human cruelty affects us terribly and very personally. For instance, some of us may have experienced abuse as children—physically, sexually, or emotionally—and the pain of that can create life-long burdens we must carry. In such grievous circumstances, forgiveness can be truly difficult. Yet, as we grow to fully embrace the profound truth we committed to at baptism—that “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us”—it dramatically affects how we think and act. And while others are often content to

let their actions be determined by their very natural hard feelings against those who have hurt them so severely, we will find that as Christ increasingly lives in us we will desire to remove even that leaven from our hearts and minds (1 Corinthians 5:7–8; Matthew 5:44).

A Practical Example

Marriage is a wonderful institution ordained by God, but too many couples who started out “in love” have “fallen out of love.” How often we hear things like, “I just don’t love him anymore,” or “I just don’t feel about her the way I used to.” Is such a marriage doomed to failure? Not at all, if we apply God’s instructions.

The apostolic era of the Church lost its first love, but God said that the Ephesians could get it back. “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; *repent and do the first works*” (Revelation 2:5). Note that it does not say, “wait until the loving feelings return,” but instead commands us to take action—to do the first works, to go back to doing the things we once did. When we show love, the feelings will follow.

A Covenant with God

When we were baptized, we made a covenant with God that we would put to death the old self and come up as a new person. We recognized our guilt in abusing and murdering the sinless Son of God. If He can forgive our multitude of sins, how much more must we forgive others for the hurt—no matter how great—that they have brought upon us?

So, are we hypocrites for doing something good to someone when we really don’t feel it in our hearts? Not at all. Love is an action. It may be accompanied by feelings—but in many cases, the feelings we think of as “love” come after we practice loving actions. Real hypocrisy comes when we profess to commit to a new way of life in Christ yet fail to act as He acts.

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind.... But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you *put off*, concerning your former conduct, *the old man* which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and *be renewed* in the spirit of your mind, and that you *put on the new man* which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:17, 20–24).

Don’t wait for the feelings before you act—act first, and the love of God in your heart will then follow. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Ⓛ

Lessons from the Golden Calf



By **Rod McNair**

What can get in the way of Christ's living His life in us? How can we make sure that He *does* live His very life in you and me? For some answers to these questions, let's consider a few lessons from the Israelites' brief and tragic worship of the golden calf.

Remember, the Israelites had been spared from the death of their firstborn at the Passover. They had left Egypt with a high hand, with the Eternal leading them through the wilderness. They crossed the Red Sea miraculously. At Mount Sinai, they heard God's voice thundering down from the mountain. The Eternal spoke to them, and He ate with the 70 elders. And Moses then went up the mountain to receive the law from God. But what happened next?

The Israelites, dissatisfied at Moses' delay in coming down from the mountain, asked Aaron to fashion replacement gods for them. Aaron molded the Israelites' golden earrings into the image of a calf. He then built an altar before the new idol and declared a feast. The Israelites rose early the next day and in celebration sacrificed burnt offerings to the idol (Exodus 32:1-6). After doing this, the Israelites began following the example of fertility cults found in the surrounding nations. In less than a month-and-a-half, they had gone from entering into a covenant with God to dancing around a golden calf.

This angered the Eternal, and the Israelites came within a hair's breadth of being annihilated. The One who would become Jesus Christ told Moses, "Say to the children of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you'" (Exodus 33:5).

How tragic! Though the Word had been with them, even talking with them, they went after a false, molten, created god instead of the true God who had delivered them.

But what about us? Are we turning to any false gods—turning to idols? Are we doing things that may cause God to refrain from dwelling in our midst—things that would lead to His consuming us instead of delivering us? There are lessons we need to learn from the golden calf.

Idolatry Starts in the Heart

Some might try to dismiss the Israelites' example, because we know we would never bow down to a big and ugly hunk of metal. But idolatry begins in the heart. Think for a moment: Where did the Israelites' idol come from? It wasn't something physical that they had brought with them from Egypt. It had come with them in their minds. Their idolatry started with a thought—in the mind, or the heart. So, if we are to avoid the Israelites' mistake, we must examine our own hearts. What idols are residing in our minds?

As Christians, we understand that we are coming out of our own Egypt. We are coming out of the world. But what idols are we still carrying in our hearts? Another way to ask the question is, *What is at the center of my life? What is my highest priority in life?* Most of us would say that God and His ways are at the center as our highest priority. But do we sometimes drift a little bit and find ourselves off-center, treating something as a higher priority than God? Anything that takes His place is an idol, and we are idolaters when we let that happen.

Hundreds of years after the incident with the golden calf, God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel. Captivity had already come on the Israelites for their disobedience against God, and He gave them a stern warning. We read:

Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity.... Therefore speak to them, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the LORD will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols"' (Ezekiel 14:1-5).

When we read this, we can practically picture God grabbing us by the collar and shouting, *Wake up!* It's as if He is

pointing right at our heart and saying, *I want to live here, but there is something else taking My place!* So, what are we to do about it? “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations”” (v. 6).

We don’t get a pass just because our idols aren’t big, shining, leering hunks of metal. Idols come from the heart.

Idolatry Spreads

How seriously should we take this warning? Should we be easy on ourselves, reasoning that our idols aren’t such a big deal compared to the Israelites? Notice something that the Apostle Paul told the Galatian brethren: “You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is” (Galatians 5:7–10).

Are we of one mind—God’s mind? Or are we allowing “a little leaven” to remain, because we think it is too hard to purge out of our lives or too small to matter? This is a lesson we should take from the Days of Unleavened Bread. Leaven spreads. Just a tiny bit in a big ball of dough will spread quickly and leaven it all. Leaven here typifies sin—and idolatry, like all sin, spreads quickly. Eventually, it will touch everything: our heart, our mind, our character. We must be vigilant to identify idolatry in our heart and stop it from spreading by eliminating it.

Notice, too, that the Israelites waited quite a while for Moses. They didn’t make and worship the golden calf right away. But they grew impatient, and worshipping their new idol eventually seemed like the right thing to do, even though it put something else in the place that should only belong to God. We are reminded of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians around the time of the Days of Unleavened Bread: “Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:6–8).

We must remain unleavened spiritually—not leavened with old idolatries. But what are some of those things that we can turn into idols of the heart?

Possessions as Idols

Sinful attitudes can sneak up on us. They start with a thought and spread if we don’t eradicate them. “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and *covetousness*, which is

idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them” (Colossians 3:5–7).

Yes, we can make an idol of possessions. Covetousness is idolatry. We are living in a very materialistic age—let’s not be fooled that we can’t be affected by the idolatry of possessions. We might say, *I have things, and I like nice things, but I’m not overly focused on them; I’m not coveting!* But it’s tricky. Idolatry sneaks up on us, and it can turn something that may not be *intrinsically* wrong into something that has *become* wrong for us.

We know intellectually that Christ was right when He gave this answer to the crowd: “Then one from the crowd said to Him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’... And He said to them, ‘Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:13–15). Do we worry about not having enough? That may seem responsible, even wise—but it isn’t what Christ taught. He continued: “Then He said to His disciples, ‘Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing” (vv. 22–23).

Whether we have a lot or a little, we have set the stage for idolatry if what we have becomes the center of our thoughts and plans—our highest priority in life. So, what should our attitude be? “And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you” (vv. 29–31).

When we put God first, He says, *I’ll take care of you*. “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (vv. 32–34).

We understand that times are getting harder and will grow even harder. What will we do when there are widespread food shortages? What will we do when there’s rationing? What will we do when there’s loss of jobs on a massive scale, and lower wages for those having jobs? The stress of these concerns will only increase before Christ’s return. And He said, *Put Me at the center, and I’ll take care of these things*.

Pleasure as an Idol

Pleasure is not a bad word—after all, we have seen that it’s God’s *good pleasure* to give us the Kingdom. There are many things that can give us pleasure, and there’s nothing wrong

with having fun, unwinding, having hobbies, and doing things that please us. But this becomes a problem when that pleasure is at our center—our highest priority.

Pleasure can also become addictive. Drinking alcohol in moderation can be pleasurable and appropriate, but we all know the disaster that comes from addiction to alcohol. Engaging in sex at the right time and in the right place, within marriage, is a blessing and a gift from God, but sexual addiction—where sex becomes the primary driving force in a person’s life, even leading to perversions—will destroy marriages and families. Pornography has been called “The Public Health Crisis of the Digital Age” (*Psychology Today*, April 15, 2021)—and rightly so, because it affects the brain in exactly the same

We should be one together with our spouse, right? But even our closest, most intimate relationship will not work if we make the other person the center of our life—our highest priority—because only God fits there.

way that illicit drugs do. When a person views pornographic material, the brain is overexposed to pleasure chemicals like dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and epinephrine. The brain rewires itself to accommodate the extra chemicals, building up first a tolerance and then a dependency, first wanting the pleasure chemicals and then “needing” them. Pornography is a drug epidemic, and it has taken the world by silent storm. For more on this important topic, you can read Mr. Adam West’s article on page 14.

Even simpler and seemingly innocent pursuits, such as checking emails, texting, or instant messaging, can be addictive. More and more reports are coming out that when people are separated from their phones, they go through withdrawal symptoms. “When a person is specifically fearful of losing access to their cellphone, the term used for this fear is ‘nomophobia’.... The precise definition of nomophobia is the ‘fear of being detached from mobile phone connectivity.’ In other words, someone with nomophobia could be holding their cell phone but still feel anxious if they can’t connect to the Internet” (“Help for Phone Separation Anxiety and Fear of Being Offline,” *FHERehab.com*, May 19, 2022).

I challenge you—go without the Internet for a whole day and see how you feel. If you feel lost, if you feel nervous and uncomfortable, maybe you’ve made an idol of the Internet. Of course, most of us can’t just throw away our phones, but it may be a good idea to shut them off from time to time. Maybe we don’t need to check them *every* time we think about them. Maybe we don’t need to answer *every* text right away. Maybe we can let our friends wait for an hour. They may freak out at first—but I assure you that they will survive

the suspense of getting a reply text an hour later instead of a second later.

The nature of addictions is that addicts cannot control their own will or mind. Remember Paul’s powerful words: “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?” (Romans 6:16). Are we slaves to our phones, or to other things that give us pleasure? We need to examine ourselves.

One vital way we examine ourselves is by looking at the examples God has given us in Scripture. Paul reminded the Corinthians that we should not consider ourselves above temptation, but also that we should understand that we can overcome any temptation we face. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful,

who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:12–14).

Idolatry usually starts off subtly. It can spring even from things that seem to be good and beneficial but that can destroy our lives when they take the place of God. So, we should ask ourselves, is the pursuit of pleasure taking on more and more of our focus? Are we thanking God for the blessings He gives us, or are we chasing after more and more “good things” instead of drawing closer to the giver of those blessings?

Spouses as Idols

We should be one together with our spouse, right? But even our closest, most intimate relationship will not work if we make the other person the *center* of our life—our highest priority—because only God fits there.

The world around us pushes the concept that we must look for someone we think will complete us. Some can even misunderstand what God said in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good that man should be alone,” thinking they must find someone to make up for their deficiencies. But husband and wife *complement* each other. And unless each has God at the center, they will come together with unrealistic and unfulfilled expectations. No human being can give us what only God can give. Husband and wife give to each other, learn from each other, and together fulfill God’s plan for their family. But without God at the center, there will inevitably be disappointment when we realize our spouse is not our savior!

Years ago, one of my instructors at college made a memorable statement. He said that only two whole, mature, complete people can form a marriage unit. He described it this way: you start with one whole, complete person—meaning that they have a solid relationship with God and are settled and at peace in life. Then you have another whole person like that. But this isn't like addition, where two half-complete people would *add up* to one complete person. Instead, it's multiplication—one *times* one, resulting in one complete *unit*. When you multiply two halves, you get one quarter—two people who are unhappy, who are lessened by putting a human being on a pedestal instead of God. Yes, idolatry can spread even to our marriages.

Family and Friends as Idols

For some parents, it is children who take the center place, the highest priority, which should belong to God. Yes, we should love our children, but if they become the centerpiece of our life, if we structure our existence around them, we will find either that we pander to their every whim or that we are constantly frustrated when they don't live up to our expectations—or both. We live in a world where children often rule over their parents. That was prophesied. As parents, it is good and right that we set aside our own desires in order to help our children, but our children must not become a golden calf that distracts us from what God wants of us.

For others, it is friends—and even enemies—who become a source of idolatry. Why is it so important to forgive others? Because God knows that if we harbor hurts and offenses inside, they become the primary motivation of our thoughts and actions. We can find ourselves wanting justice, or revenge, or even just to be acknowledged as a victim—and when we want that more than we want God living at the center of our life as our highest priority, we have become idolaters.

The same can be said about friendships. We should have—and be—good friends. But when we seek human friendship more than God's righteousness, we have given in to idolatry. Only God and His ways can take that central place, that highest priority in our lives.

Service as an Idol

It's easy to understand that our occupation can become an idol—it can become the core of our identity and the focus of our lives. But what about our service in the Church? Yes, we can even put our service to God's Church in the place where we should be putting God Himself.

Remember the account of Mary and Martha in Luke 10? The first time I read that, I thought, *Wow—this is horrible! I feel sorry for Martha. Why did Jesus Christ correct Martha for working so hard?* But I have come to understand it more.

Christ was showing Martha that Mary understood something important—that the Son of God was right there with them, teaching and conversing with people. Christ wasn't teaching that we shouldn't do our chores; He was revealing that we must first and foremost be close to Him.

If we sacrifice our personal relationship with God in order to “get things done,” we have put those things at the center of our lives, as our highest priorities, instead of God. If we are “too busy” for prayer, Bible study, meditation, and occasional fasting, this is a strong sign that we have put our work, and maybe even our service to the Church, ahead of our relationship with God—which is a form of idolatry.

Watch Out for Idols

As we have seen, we can fall into idolatry even without a golden calf or physical image to receive our worship. We must watch out for idols of the heart, as even normally good things can turn us toward idolatry when they displace God at the center of our lives.

Notice something that Christ said: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). He wasn't teaching us to hate our families; He was simply saying that nothing should be more important to us than God. He must be at the center of our lives as our highest priority. We may have all sorts of relationships and blessings and duties, but they must all revolve around Him at the center—even when keeping Him there may be difficult.

“And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (v. 27). We must bear our burdens, putting our Savior ahead of everything else—even our very lives. Why did Christ say this? He wasn't trying to hurt or punish us—rather, as our Creator, He knows how we work. He knows that better than we do! He knows that we will be frustrated to no end if we expect anything other than Him to provide true fulfillment in our lives.

Instead, when we ask Christ to live His life in us—and we go forward and grow in that desire every year that goes by—we feel happier and our relationships work better. When we repent, accept baptism, receive God's Spirit, and continue to grow, everything works better because we *put God first*. We're not striving after the wind; we're not grasping at things that don't work.

No, idolatry is not just some big, leering, ugly, metal idol. It is a sin against which we all must struggle every day. And the Days of Unleavened Bread should help us gain a deeper appreciation for what Christ is willing to do for us. Through the Holy Spirit, it is only God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, who can fill that empty spot at the center of our life. And that's a lesson of the golden calf. LN



God's Abundant Grace

By **Josh Lyons**

Grace is one of the central concepts of the Bible. It is one of the most wonderful aspects of the character of God the Father and Jesus Christ, and one that plays a key role in Their plan of salvation.

The Passover season provides an annual reminder of—and opportunity to follow—the Apostle Peter’s admonition to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18).

The topic of grace is a very large one and is widely misunderstood—especially among those who practice the world’s varieties of counterfeit Christianity. It can be easy for us in God’s Church to minimize the importance of God’s grace when we see it abused by those who turn it into antinomianism and reject the beauty and value of God’s law. There is much more that can be said than I can cover in this article, so I encourage you to read Mr. Gerald Weston’s booklet *Law or Grace: Which Is It?* His answer, of course, is both!

As we approach the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, we should remember that these days teach us about God’s grace and about our response to that grace. In *The Holy Days: God’s Master Plan*, Dr. Roderick C. Meredith wrote, “The Passover pictures the fact that we are ‘being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had *passed over* the sins that were previously committed’ (Romans 3:24–25)” (p. 14).

In this article, we’ll try to deepen our appreciation of the exceeding riches of God’s grace (Ephesians 2:7). We’ll consider the meaning of grace—how it runs through not just the New Testament but also the Old, how Jesus taught and gave grace, and finally how we should be deeply thankful for God’s grace.

What Is Grace?

One brief definition of grace is that it is the free and undeserved forgiveness and favor God gives to those who seek Him, made available through His Son, Jesus Christ. To forgive is to “stop feeling angry or resentful toward someone for an offense, flaw, or mistake” and to “cancel (a debt).” *Favor* can be defined as “an

attitude of approval or liking” (*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, 2002). Though it is an oversimplification, we might say that when God extends grace to us, it means He *likes us!* In truth, He *loved* us enough to send His Son to die in our stead and cancel the huge debt we’ve earned with our sins, even forgetting them—a key part of the New Covenant (Hebrews 10:16–17). These definitions may help in an intellectual way—but, like uncovering a small piece of buried treasure, it takes more digging to fully see the magnitude and beauty of the treasure.

God’s grace isn’t something we humans can earn or deserve, because we have *all* sinned (Romans 3:23). Yet God loved us when we were still practicing sin. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

As is often the case, thinking about physical parents’ love toward their children helps us understand God’s view. I can think of how my wife and I often extend “grace” in a human sense to our three-year-old son. Last summer, we enjoyed a family vacation that included siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and my son’s grandparents. We had been telling all the children that we would take them to an ice cream shop one evening, and that day had come. My son was extremely excited—like any three-year-old when ice cream is involved—but hadn’t eaten his dinner very well. As the time grew closer for everyone to get in the cars, he had become tired and very cranky. It had also gotten a bit late, so my wife and I decided that we would stay back and just have someone bring back a little ice cream for our son to enjoy the next day. This would allow us to put him to bed early, which he was starting to need.

Well, as the rest of the family began to leave, we could see that our son really wanted not just to get ice cream, but to be part of the family group going out together. My wife’s heartstrings were tugged, and she whispered to me that maybe we should go. We briefly talked about it, and we did go. And our son and everyone had a wonderful family ice cream outing.

This is a very small example—but, as with many parenting moments, it gives a glimpse, however imperfect or limited, of how God deals with each of us as His children. My wife and I extended a bit of “grace” to our son. We extended a bit of “unearned” and “undeserved” favor and forgiveness, not because he had earned it, but because we really like him!

Again, the picture isn't perfect. Our thinking might have been closer to Moses' after Aaron's very rough day at the end of Leviticus 10. And sometimes parents "turn grace into license"; if that ice cream was going to teach him that bad attitudes would be rewarded, we could not have followed through on our desire to extend grace. And, of course, God doesn't just "set aside" the penalty of His law—His grace toward us meant that the penalty we'd earned would be fulfilled instead by the shed blood of His Son on our behalf.

Yet like my son in this little story, we want our Heavenly Father to extend to us His grace, His unearned and undeserved forgiveness and favor, when we sin.

Finding Grace in the Old Testament

As we strive to understand and appreciate God's grace, we must not forget to look in the Old Testament, because God's grace is a central thread there. If you rely on a simple word search for "grace," you won't find it as often in the Old Testament as in the New Testament, but here are three simple ways you can recognize grace throughout the Old Testament.

1) *Notice words and concepts closely related to grace and its meaning.* For example, after God says that He will destroy the earth because of man's wickedness, we read that "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8). Many translations use the word "favor" instead of "grace," and the Hebrew word is often translated as "favor" in other verses in the *New King James Version*.

Jeremiah's prophecy about the forgiveness of sins under the New Covenant is another example. "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). No one earns or deserves to have their sins forgiven and forgotten, but God chooses to do so and extends His grace to those who strive to repent and seek His forgiveness in faith. And consider this poetic description of how God extends His mercy, His grace, by forgiving sins completely: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:11-12). Finding and studying words that convey aspects of grace's full meaning—such as *love*, *lovingkindness*, *mercy*, *favor*, and *forgiveness*—can help us to find examples of God's grace throughout the Old Testament.

2) *Look for the Hebrew word hesed or chesed.* *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* describes the connection between *hesed* in the Old Testament and grace. Exodus 20:6, the last part of the second commandment, reads as follows: "but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." *Expositor's* makes this comment on this verse: "Actually חֶסֶד (*hesed*), which is rendered ["mercy" in the *NKJV*], is one of the best words in the OT for the grace of God. It appears over 250 times" (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Exodus," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, 1990, p. 426).

The Hebrew word *hesed* is used many times in the Old Testament and is very close in meaning to "grace" in the New Testament, though it isn't usually translated into English as "grace." Rather, it is most often rendered as "lovingkindness." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* shows that *hesed* can be translated as: "loving-kindness; steadfast love; grace; mercy; faithfulness; goodness; devotion." Mr. Peter Nathan explained this very helpful point in a *Living Church News* article (November-December 2014) titled "*Charis, Hesed, Law and Grace*," showing how *hesed* helps us to see God's grace more fully in the Old Testament.

3) *Notice Old Testament examples where God extended abundant grace.* Throughout the Old Testament, we see God extending His favor and undeserved forgiveness to people, families, and nations. In Genesis 12 and 20, we read two accounts where Abraham lied, and told his wife to lie, to say that she was his sister and not his wife. He did so out of fear, self-preservation, and lack of faith, yet he is one of the great "heroes" of faith God holds up as an example. God dealt with Abraham—who was just as human and sinful as we are—with grace, extending favor and undeserved forgiveness. Centuries later, Jesus Christ would die, paying the death penalty that Abraham deserved and had earned. Even the "father of the faithful" needed God's grace and to have his sins atoned for by Christ's sacrifice in order to receive salvation.

Other examples include that of David and his sins involving Uriah and Bathsheba. God extended abundant grace to David. The nation of ancient Israel received God's grace again and again as God repeatedly extended favor and undeserved forgiveness to them.

We could even turn to Hebrews 11 and think about all the "heroes of faith" mentioned in that chapter. Many of them led amazing and exemplary lives of faith—however, each one still sinned and therefore didn't "earn" salvation. In fact, they, too, all earned death. But they *will* be saved because God justifies them of their sins "freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24).

As these examples show, there are various ways to find God's grace in the Old Testament. It doesn't always appear as obvious as it does in the New Testament, but it is there throughout.

Jesus Christ Was "Full of Grace"

Some may be surprised to learn that the *New King James Version* doesn't record Jesus Christ using the word "grace" in any of the four gospel accounts. But the record of His actions shows that grace was and is a key part of His character. He habitually taught and gave grace in His human lifetime.

Consider these New Testament passages: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, *full of grace*

and truth” (John 1:14). Indeed, “*grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” (John 1:17).

Christ was “full of grace” and “grace and truth came through” Him. Let’s notice two examples during His ministry where He taught and showed grace.

First, consider the parable of the lost (or prodigal) son, which Christ gave in Luke 15:11–32. This famous parable tells the story of a man with two sons. The younger asks for his inheritance before moving away, squandering his wealth on wasteful and extravagant living and becoming destitute. Later, the son comes “to himself” and returns to his father in humble and sincere repentance, fully confessing his sins. When the father sees his son returning, he feels great compassion, runs to greet his son, and hugs and kisses him. He then instructs his servants to prepare a wonderful meal to celebrate the return of his lost son.

This moving story teaches several lessons, including a lesson about God’s grace. The father, who greatly liked and loved his son, favored him by extending grace to him. He gave undeserved forgiveness by celebrating his son’s return and

you, let him throw a stone at her first.” And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:3–11).

Jesus didn’t dispute that the woman had committed adultery. He told her to “go and sin no more.” She deserved to be stoned, according to the law (Leviticus 20:10), but Christ dealt with her with grace. He extended favor and undeserved forgiveness to her, while insisting on the ultimate and necessary response to grace: “go and sin no more.”

Although Jesus didn’t use the word “grace” directly in His preaching, He taught it through other words and through

His example. Furthermore, a few decades after His ascension to the Father, He inspired Paul to use the word “grace” quite often in 14 books of the New Testament.

Christ taught and showed grace during His ministry

because He was preparing to give His life to pay the death penalty not only for every human being who accepts His forgiveness, but also for *every sin* each of us has committed. Romans 6:23 explains that, under the New Covenant, “the wages of sin is death,” but Christ paid that penalty so that grace, in its full physical and spiritual meaning, can be extended (Romans 5:15; Hebrews 2:9).

Extremely Thankful for the Gift of God’s Grace

God’s grace truly is one of God’s greatest gifts to us. We should appreciate the irony and brilliance of God’s choice to use an ex-Pharisee, an expert in the law, to explain the concept of grace more directly in Scripture than anyone else! Much as the Apostle John is often called the “Apostle of Love,” the Apostle Paul is sometimes called the “Apostle of Grace.” As Mr. Weston reminds us in his booklet, “The grace side of the coin is Paul’s great contribution to our understanding” (*Law or Grace: Which Is It?*, p. 4).

In the *New King James Version*, we find Paul using the term “grace” 97 times in his letters, compared to just 31 uses in all the other New Testament books. And Paul made some of the most direct and helpful statements about the importance of grace. Let’s look at three prominent examples.

Christ taught and showed grace during His ministry because He was preparing to give His life to pay the death penalty not only for every human being who accepts His forgiveness, but also for every sin each of us has committed.

repentance. The son had done everything to *not* deserve his father’s favor and forgiveness, much less a beautiful banquet and celebration of his return.

One great personal lesson for us is that the father represents God and the prodigal son represents each of us as sinners. Whenever we fall into the role of the prodigal son by sinning, we can be incredibly and deeply thankful that, when we kneel before God in repentant prayer, our Father is willing to receive us with open arms, a kiss, and abundant grace.

Another example is how Christ dealt with the woman caught in adultery. We read:

Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?” This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among

- Paul writes of our “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed” (Romans 3:24–25).
- He deplores lawlessness: “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!” (Romans 6:14–15).
- And he reminds us that we do not earn or deserve the grace that saves us. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

These are among the many places where Paul explains that Christians are justified freely by grace, are under grace and not law, and are saved by grace through faith. Sadly, these concepts have been greatly misunderstood and twisted for centuries. But they are true and must be understood. Put simply, Paul is saying that Christians can be freely justified—cleansed and made innocent from past sins—by God’s grace. No amount of obedience or good works can justify us. Christians are “saved by grace” because we must be cleansed, justified, and forgiven of our sins to be saved.

Repentant Christians are not “under law” in the sense of being under the ultimate death penalty that the law required (Romans 6:23). By God’s grace, Christ died and paid the death penalty for each of us. We would each be under the death penalty for our sins, the *eternal* death penalty, unless God had extended grace to us personally (Romans 3:23). But by God’s grace—made possible by Christ paying the penalty that we all have earned with each sin we’ve ever committed—we are no longer subject to the death penalty of the law. What a true blessing, to be under the grace of our Father and Jesus Christ!

Paul is *not* saying that Christians don’t need to obey God’s law. As Mr. Weston wrote in his booklet, “All the apostles and writers of the New Testament, including Paul, understood that behavior matters, but no amount of current or future law-keeping can cover our many sins—only the shed blood of the Son of God can do that. That is what we call *grace*... that supreme gift of God” (*Law or Grace: Which Is It?*, p. 15).

Paul surely recognized that people would misunderstand or even twist his teaching, so he repeatedly emphasized the importance of the law, as in the sixth chapter of Romans. Peter, too, warned that Paul’s letters could be misinterpreted (2 Peter 3:16–18). And Jude warned about those who would seek to promote lawlessness. “For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who *pervert the grace of our God*

into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4, *New International Version*).

Indeed, if we *weren’t* required to obey God’s law, there would be *no need* for grace. The very purpose of God’s grace is to forgive us for and reconcile us from *sin*—and sin is the breaking of His law (1 John 3:4, *King James Version*).

The Glory of His Grace

Paul described God’s grace more often and more directly than any other biblical writer, and he often praised God for His grace. Consider these beautiful words:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence (Ephesians 1:3–8).

God’s freely given grace is such an incredible gift, and it is so powerful to cleanse and justify past sins, that a trap we want to avoid is to “take advantage” of God’s grace, leading to us not taking sin seriously enough. This is a trap into which many Protestant denominations have fallen. Yet Paul warned of that misunderstanding clearly, as when he wrote, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (Romans 6:1–2). Paul also made the vital point that we are saved by Christ’s *life* (Romans 5:10), describing how Christ must live His faith-filled and obedient life within true Christians (Galatians 2:20).

Correctly understanding God’s grace will lead to a deep and sincere appreciation for it, and lead to the exact opposite of taking sin lightly. When a Christian truly comprehends and values God’s grace, he or she strives diligently and fervently to overcome sin and to obey God (2 Corinthians 7:9–11). Someone who correctly understands and appreciates God’s grace recognizes the invaluable price that was paid—the life of the Son of God—to make His grace possible in its full power. This proper understanding recognizes the gravity and enormity of the fact that “through Him we have received grace” (Romans 1:5).

So, let’s conclude with the final thought recorded for us in God’s word: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen” (Revelation 22:21). ^(L)

The Pornography Problem

Porn

By **Adam J. West**

Pornography is a growing plague among young and old alike, one that thrives on secrecy while leaving enduring scars on individuals, families, and society. Those in God's Church are not exempt from this societal scourge. Often excused as a private indulgence or victimless vice, pornography's true nature is far more sinister. It manifests in many forms, but all lead to the same result—submission to evil desires, drawing individuals away from the Eternal God.

So, how can those allured by the pernicious problem of pornography conquer this temptation?

The fight against pornography is not just a moral or social challenge—it is a deeply spiritual one. Understanding pornography's prevalence and harmful effects is vitally necessary for anyone striving to live a life pleasing to God. But knowledge alone is not enough. Victory over pornography requires spiritual insight, practical steps, and—above all—reliance on God for the strength to overcome.

The Hidden Epidemic

Modern technology has made pornography more accessible than ever before. What was once relegated to secret stashes is now a multi-billion-dollar industry that targets people of all ages. Through the Internet, pornography infiltrates homes, workplaces, and even schools, creating a relentless battle for those striving to maintain purity.

The statistics are sobering. A *Common Sense Media* study reveals that many are exposed to pornography by age 12, with 15 percent encountering it as early as 10 years old—and 73 percent of teenagers admit to having consumed it (“2022 Teens and Pornography”). What was once seen as an adult issue now ensnares children and young adults at alarming rates, shaping their understanding of relationships and distorting their values before they reach maturity.

For many young people, pornography has replaced proper education about sexuality. A recent study found that one in three Australian youths uses it as a primary source of information about sex (“New report reveals young Aussies are relying on pornography for ‘sex education’,” *News.com*.

au, November 13, 2024). Tragically, this so-called “education” normalizes behaviors that are violent, degrading, and far removed from God's purpose for intimate relationships.

An additional challenge lies in how pornography rewires the brain. Neuroscience has revealed that using pornography to satisfy sexual desire activates the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine—the chemical responsible for the sense of pleasure and reward. Over time, repeated exposure leads to desensitization, requiring more explicit material to achieve the same level of stimulation. This mirrors the way addictive substances work, creating dependency and making it even harder to break free (“The Neuroscience of Porn Addiction: Visual Stimuli and the Brain,” *The Rehab Podcast*, July 25, 2024).

The impact is profound. Pornography use fosters the objectification of others, reducing human beings—created in God's image—to mere instruments of gratification. This mindset twists relationships, replacing love and respect with selfish desire. As we are warned, “if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matthew 6:23). Allowing such material into our minds inevitably shapes our character and behavior, making it imperative to cut off these toxic influences.

A Spiritual Battle

While pornography is often addressed as a social or psychological problem, its roots are deeply spiritual. At its core, pornography is a weapon in Satan's arsenal. Humanity's God-given sexual desire is designed to foster love and unity within the sacred bond of marriage, but pornography twists this gift into a tool for selfish indulgence.

Pornography preys on the inherent tendencies of the human mind, especially the male mind, which is often visually driven. This is not a flaw but a characteristic of how God designed men. However, Satan has exploited this trait, using visual stimuli to foster lust, which Christ warned against in no uncertain terms when He said that “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

Furthermore, pornography's influence extends beyond individuals—it has spread throughout society. Popular media increasingly strives to imitate pornographic imagery, normalizing lust and degrading human beings to mere objects of de-

sire. God's people are to remain "unspotted from the world," an increasingly difficult task (James 1:27). We are exhorted to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11). Guarding against exposure to these snares is key to keeping temptation at bay.

While this problem more frequently affects men, what is often left unaddressed is that women are also drawn in by its corrupting influence. One of the largest websites dedicated to pornography reports an audience comprised of roughly 80 percent men and 20 percent women ("How Many People Actually Watch Porn?," *Psychology Today*, September 25, 2023). The need to spiritually overcome is as dire and urgent for women as it is for men.

In this battle, discipline of both the eyes and the mind is essential. It is vital that, as Christians, we actively train our eyes and discipline our thoughts to align with God's truth. The Apostle Paul instructed Christians to take captive every thought, striving to achieve within one's thinking "the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Victory begins when we recognize the need to submit even our thoughts to God's authority. We are to adhere to the spiritual law of God outwardly, keeping the letter, but Christ came to magnify the law and make it even more binding by placing Christians under the New Covenant—keeping the spiritual intent of the law in the mind and heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16).

The miracle of our calling is that God's Spirit enables us to view His law as He does. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God writes His law into our hearts and minds. Living by the spirit of God's law means addressing sin at its source—the mind. It is there that the spiritual battle must be fought and won.

Understanding the Trade-off

One of the most damaging effects of pornography is that it replaces a desire for intimacy with a desire for intensity. True intimacy, as designed by God, fosters unity, love, emotional connectedness, and respect within the marriage covenant. Pornography substitutes this with fleeting intensity—a shallow pursuit of pleasure that prioritizes the self above all else.

This trade-off reflects a deeper spiritual problem. Lust, like greed, elevates temporary gratification above lasting joy, replacing God's rightful place in the heart with the idol of pleasure. Over time, this idol demands more and more, consuming the individual and drawing him or her further away from God.

Paul warned against this cycle of idolatry, describing those who are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4). Breaking free requires understanding that sinful pleasure hinders true joy. While joy is a fruit of the Spirit rooted in a relationship with God (Galatians 5:22), sinful pleasure leads to emptiness, shame, and regret.

Paul issues a clarion call against this evil when he exhorts us to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision

for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Romans 13:14). Premeditating how to fulfill wrong desires is a dangerous mindset. Ungodly behavior corrupts character and nurtures deceitfulness. Conversely, God desires truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6).

Overcoming pornography use requires more than avoiding temptation—it requires a deliberate decision to clothe ourselves in Christ's character and reject anything that caters to sinful desires. This proactive mindset means the difference between spiritual growth and spiritual decay. Our destiny is determined by the decisions we make throughout the day, every day. Above all else, those decisions must be rooted in love of God and love of our fellow man (Matthew 22:37–40).

Ultimately, choosing joy over sinful pleasure means pursuing what truly satisfies. Jesus Christ Himself set the ultimate example of resisting sin by wholeheartedly working toward what His Father had given Him to accomplish (John 4:34). We are reminded that we should be "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). Just as Christ endured the pain and humiliation of the stake, keeping His focus fixed on His future eternal role, so also must we deny sinful desires for the hope of our calling: to one day be born into God's glorious Family.

We read of the powerful example of Moses and his godly approach toward this world and the deceitful pleasures it offers: "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24–26).

We can also learn from Joseph's response to temptation when faced with the persistent advances of Potiphar's wife, which he steadfastly refused. He was bold in labeling sin as sin, stating, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9) Joseph's godly reverence eventually led him to literally flee from temptation (Genesis 39:12).

God calls His people to this kind of zeal in the face of temptation. Paul encourages us to "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:22). Nevertheless, resisting temptation may come with immediate trials. Joseph was, as we know, subsequently imprisoned, yet he waited on God's deliverance, and in time the way of escape arrived (1 Corinthians 10:13). We must prioritize obedience to God above all else.

Surrendering our thoughts to sin creates guilt, shame, and separation from God. True freedom comes when we surrender every part of our lives to *Him*, allowing no room for secret sins. In prayer, give this part of your life, every aspect of it, to God. Ask Him to show you "the way, the truth, and the life" He would have you to live (John 14:6).

Practical Steps to Overcoming

Breaking free from pornography is not easy, but with God's help it is possible. The Bible provides both principles and practical guidance for overcoming sin, and these steps can help those struggling with wrong desire to find freedom and healing.

First, we must recognize and admit the problem. We are reminded that "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). Denial only strengthens the hold of sin, but humility and honesty open the door to God's mercy and healing. Scripture provides encouragement: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8–9).

Another practical step, one that is often overlooked, is fasting, which can break cycles of addiction by focusing the mind on spiritual needs rather than physical cravings. Isaiah 58:6 declares, "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?" Fasting, combined with dedicated prayer and study of the Scriptures, strengthens resolve and deepens our reliance on God.

Furthermore, we must flee temptation. The Bible repeatedly urges us to avoid situations and environments that lead to sin. We read, "Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn away from it and pass on" (Proverbs 4:14–15). Proverbs 22:3 and 27:12 similarly state that while "a prudent man foresees evil and hides himself," those who fail to take necessary precautions "pass on and are punished." This is a continual process of discernment that takes determined effort.

Practically, this means taking deliberate action in specific areas. It may be helpful to install accountability software on your devices or limit Internet use altogether. When tempted, instead of allowing your mind to dwell on ungodly desires, engage in positive activities that can help redirect your focus, such as exercise or biblical meditation.

Accountability can also come in the form of counsel. James 5:16 encourages believers to confess their faults to one another and pray for one another. While we must be wise and careful about the nature of what we share with others, a minister, parent, or other trusted and mature confidant can provide guidance, support, insight, and encouragement on the path to purity. The greatest support, however, comes through our heartfelt, sincere, and continuous prayer to God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

The mind is a seemingly limitless "hard drive," so directing it as to what to "store up" is vital. The young but discerning Elihu stated that "the hypocrites in heart store up wrath; they do not cry for help when He binds them" (Job 36:13). This is the opposite of how God would have us approach our

sins. "And if they are bound in fetters, held in the cords of affliction, then He tells them their work and their transgressions—that they have acted defiantly. He also opens their ear to instruction, and commands that they turn from iniquity. If they obey and serve Him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures" (vv. 8–11). This refers, of course, to pleasures that please God.

Finally, we must rely on God's strength. Willpower alone is not enough to overcome addictions. As Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). True victory comes when we yield our will to God and seek His power to overcome.

Victory Through Christ

Breaking free from pornography is not simply about avoiding sin—it is about replacing sinful habits with godly ones. Developing self-discipline, renewing the mind through Scripture, and focusing on eternal rewards are all critical components of this process.

We must be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). Daily study of God's word provides the spiritual nourishment needed to resist temptation and align our thoughts with God's will. Memorizing scriptures like Psalm 51:10—"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"—helps fortify the mind against impurity.

Building self-discipline in one area of life can also strengthen resolve in other areas. For example, committing to a consistent exercise and prayer routine can foster the mental and spiritual discipline needed to overcome temptation. Shifting focus to eternal rewards is another powerful tool. Jesus taught us to lay up treasures in Heaven, "where neither moth nor rust destroys" (Matthew 6:20). When we set our sights on eternal values, the sinful pleasures of this life lose their allure.

Finally, never underestimate the power of gratitude in redirecting focus. Actively thanking God for blessings shifts the mind from frustration and temptation to contentment and joy. Paul reminds us to "in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Overcoming pornography brings profound rewards. It restores peace, strengthens relationships, and draws us closer to God. As we commit to living in purity, we reflect His holiness and become lights in a world darkened by sin. In doing so, we not only experience freedom and joy—we also inspire others to seek the same victorious path.

Let us resolve to honor God with pure hearts, disciplined minds, and lives that glorify Him. The fight against pornography is a lifelong battle, requiring daily vigilance and reliance on God, but when we walk in the Spirit, we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Galatians 5:16–17). For those who trust in Him, victory is not only possible—it is *promised*. The Eternal is the great problem-solver! (LW)

The Sign of Jonah

By **Dexter B. Wakefield**

The scene was set around the eighth century BC, in the Assyrian capital city of Nineveh—a city that spanned over seven miles in circumference and housed an estimated 120,000 people within its walls. The Assyrian Empire, notorious for its violence and brutality, ruled with iron-fisted cruelty. And into the heart of this empire walked a lone Israelite prophet.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?”

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it (Jonah 3:1-10).

Assyria was a brutal nation, known for its merciless oppression of the northern tribes of Israel and many other peo-

ples. The Ninevite culture was pagan, violent, and barbaric. Does it seem far-fetched to you that they would listen to a seemingly powerless Israelite prophet? Why didn’t they just kill him and continue their usual way of life?

Could this be just a fanciful story—a legend that somehow found its way into the biblical canon? Jesus Christ pointed to the “sign of the prophet Jonah” as the only proof that He was the Messiah (Matthew 12:39-40). Is our faith in Christ based on a myth?

When you consider other scriptures and the historical context of Jonah’s time, there is every reason to believe that the events described in the book of Jonah happened exactly as recorded—and it’s crucial to understand why Christ called these events the sign of His Messiahship.

Even Pagans Feared the God of Israel

First, let’s consider some history regarding the Assyrians and their capital, Nineveh. The Assyrian Empire is widely regarded as one of the most violent in history. Stone-carved reliefs excavated from the ruins of Nineveh vividly depict the brutal practices the Assyrians employed to subjugate their enemies. These carvings were a message to conquered peoples: submit or die. Through terror and cruelty, the Assyrians controlled and enslaved those they conquered, exacting tribute and forced labor as the price for survival.

When the northern ten tribes of Israel split from Judah and Benjamin under Solomon’s son Rehoboam, Israel quickly fell into idolatry under Jeroboam, their new king. This ultimately led to Israel’s defeat and captivity by Assyria, just as God had prophesied (Amos 5:27; 7:17). The Israelites’ rejection of the Sabbath caused them to lose their national identity, while Judah, which kept the Sabbath, retained theirs (Exodus 31:12-17). God referred to Assyria as “the rod of My anger” in bringing about Israel’s punishment (Isaiah 10:5). When Assyria became God’s instrument of judgment, it was a very big stick indeed.

While the Assyrians and other pagan nations preferred their own idols, the Bible records that they were often aware of the God of Israel. From generation to generation, they knew He was a living being capable of tremendous power—especially when He was punishing those who opposed Him or

His people. They still resisted His laws, but numerous biblical examples show that pagan nations feared the God of Israel (see 1 Samuel 4:7–8; 5:10–11; 6:20; Daniel 3:26; Ezra 1:2; 7:15; 7:23; Nehemiah 9:10; 2 Chronicles 2:12).

Though they feared the God of Israel, these pagan nations did not worship Him, because they did not want to live according to the moral standards He set. This tendency persists today, as most people live according to the ways of Satan's kingdom rather than God's truth. As our Savior explained, "This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Time and again, the Bible shows that pagan peoples around Israel were aware of and feared the God of Israel. This, at times, included even the Assyrians.

Jonah is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible as a respected prophet in Israel. The book of Jonah begins by identifying Jonah by his family: "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me'" (Jonah 1:1–2).

We also find Jonah giving a crucial prophecy to Jeroboam II of Israel. Israel had been severely oppressed, perhaps nearly to extinction, and God sent Jonah to the king to tell him to rebel against Israel's oppressors. Because Jeroboam II followed Jonah's instruction, the lands of Israel were fully restored to their original borders, reviving Israel as a nation. It was a catastrophe for Assyria—and, no doubt, they remembered it.

In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant *Jonah the son of Amittai*, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher. For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel. And the LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash (2 Kings 14:23–27).

Though Jeroboam II had gone into idolatry, he was still willing to do what a prophet of the Eternal ordered; Jonah must have been well known as a credible prophet. The Assyrians surely later remembered what had happened and

why. Rebellion by Israel must have seemed unthinkable at the time—but, on the word of this particular prophet, Israel *had* successfully rebelled and regained territory. So, the Ninevites had good reason to believe that Jonah's pronouncements, however implausible, could be bad news for Nineveh.

As we have seen, the events of the book of Jonah are not far-fetched when viewed in their historical context. We read that when the crew understood Jonah's identity, they feared greatly (Jonah 1:9–10). The ship on which he had sailed would have had to return to its port after his apparent demise, because its crew had thrown all its cargo overboard—and, after making port, the crew undoubtedly told people about the extraordinary events that had occurred. Then, Jonah, very much alive, showed up on a beach, along with his ride—a uniquely gigantic fish. It must have caused quite a stir. The news of such an event involving a well-known prophet may even have reached the distant city of Nineveh before Jonah did.

The ruler and nobles of Nineveh made a *well-informed decision* to repent upon Jonah's preaching—after all, one of Jonah's earlier prophecies had led to disaster for them. They had good reason to believe that their lives were at stake. Terrified of the power of the God that Jonah represented, they knew that God would do what He said through His prophet.

The Ninevites may have been ruthless and brutal, but they weren't stupid. When we look at Nineveh's repentance in the context of the time, it is clear that the ruler of Nineveh made a rational decision.

An Important Prophecy

God sometimes had prophets act out prophecies for emphasis, as when God instructed Ezekiel to make a model of the coming siege of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4:1–3). Similarly, God had Jonah act out a prophecy. The Eternal Himself—Jesus of Nazareth—was going to fulfill the sign of Jonah and, in doing so, fulfill prophecy.

The sign of Jonah is one of the most important prophecies in the Bible, because it is *the only sign* Jesus of Nazareth gave that He is the Messiah. "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign," Jesus said, "and *no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah*. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." He further added that "the men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:39–41).

After He had already been baptized by John, Jesus said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with" (Luke 12:50). Jesus

also said to His disciples, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Matthew 20:22–23). What other “baptism” was that? Christ was referring to His death and resurrection—fulfilling the sign of Jonah. And Jesus assured His disciples, “With the baptism I am baptized with you *will be* baptized” (Mark 10:35–39). They had already had the baptism of John, and—as Christ’s faithful disciples—they, too, would die and await resurrection.

Christ’s fulfillment of the sign of Jonah points us to an obligation we bear, as well. The Apostle Peter was asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And he responded, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38–39). The Greek word in the text is *baptizo*, which means “immerse” (see Matthew 3:13–17; 28:19).

Christ told us to repent of our sins (Mark 1:15), and the Apostle Paul said that “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). But while repentance changes what we *will do*, it can’t change what we *did*. We are guilty and profaned by our past sins, and only one remedy can cleanse us of that guilt—the sacrifice of Christ. It removes the guilt of our past transgressions—“you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

As we live a repentant life of obeying God and keeping His commandments—which God’s Holy Spirit, dwelling in us, makes possible by transforming us inwardly (Romans 12:2)—we still sin and need ongoing forgiveness (1 John 1:8–2:4). All the repentance and commandment-keeping we can ever do in the future cannot remove the guilt of our *past* sins. Only Christ’s shed blood cleanses us of the guilt of our sins and justifies us.

In our baptism, we are buried in the likeness of Christ’s death—the death He experienced in fulfilling the sign of Jonah. In his letter to the Roman brethren, Paul explained that “we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection” (Romans 6:1–5; also see Colossians 2:11–12). In baptism, we symbolically join Him in the grave, in a picture of His own death, followed by a picture of His resurrection as we rise out of the water.

Christ’s choice of the sign of Jonah is intimately connected with the fact that He is the Savior, the only way we can have eternal life. In fulfilling the sign of Jonah, He was showing us the way by His example. *There is no life unless we follow Him into that grave.*

Why Jesus Had to Die

We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Without Christ, all carry the guilt of their sins. To be freed of that guilt, we must be cleansed, made holy, and reconciled to the Father—and Jesus made the way for us. Not even the most righteous person can achieve that on his own. God is holy, and we cannot enter His divine Family unless we too are holy. Nothing sinful can approach God (see Isaiah 59:2). Unless we are cleansed of our sins and made holy, we cannot be resurrected to immortality in the first resurrection. Truly, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

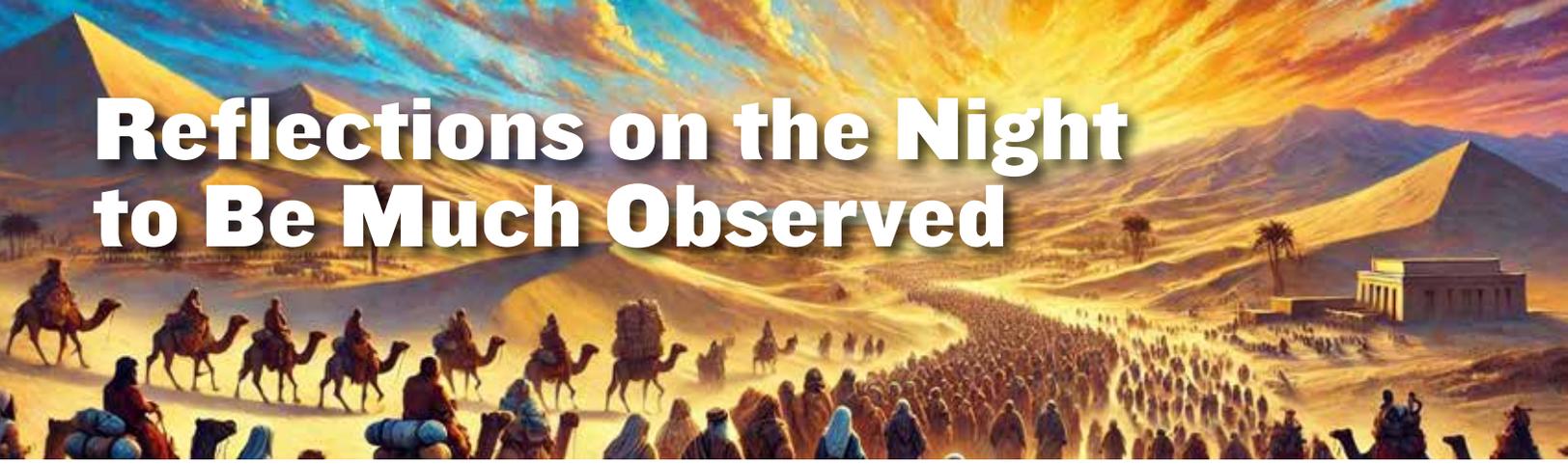
Thankfully, through the Son of God we have redemption. Our Father has made it possible, through Jesus Christ, for us to be completely forgiven and reconciled with Him. Through Christ, we are no longer accountable for the guilt of our past sins.

Why did Jesus have to die? The sins of the world had to be laid upon a sinless, infinite Being in order to be wiped out. Only Christ, being holy and sinless, could be resurrected to a glorified, immortal body. For us to be resurrected to glory, we must be cleansed, holy, and reconciled—which Christ made possible. “He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again [fulfilling the sign of Jonah].... For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:15, 21).

What was nailed to the stake? Not the commandments of God, but *God in the flesh*—with the sins of mankind laid upon Him. Our sins were laid on the Passover Lamb of God, and our sins are passed over through His death. Christ’s death made it possible for those who accept His sacrifice to have their guilt removed: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). We memorialize that each year when we take the Passover.

We are told to “be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38), and in that baptism we emulate Jesus’ death. Jonah *had* to be under the water for three days and three nights, because it was a *prophecy*. And the sign of Jonah was the *only* sign that Jesus would give as official verification that He was, indeed, the Savior. Others did miracles, and others were raised from the dead, but Jesus’ death and resurrection, fulfilling the sign of Jonah, was unique. Jonah’s adventure occurred because of what Jesus would do later—not the other way around. We go into a watery grave and rise out of it in the likeness of Christ’s death and resurrection—awaiting, in newness of life, our own resurrection to immortal bodies like His.

There is redemption through Jesus Christ, pictured by the Passover. There is no eternal life without that redemption from the penalty of our sins. As we take the Passover this year, let us keep Jonah’s great prophecy in mind. (LH)



Reflections on the Night to Be Much Observed

By **Wyatt Ciesielka**

The central lesson of the Night to Be Much Observed is reviewed every year. But as is often the case with the Holy Days, there is far more to be gained from meditating on this night than we might too quickly conclude.

Passover and the Night to Be Much Observed occur at the beginning of God's Holy Day calendar, and both represent important steps that begin God's plan of salvation. We are very mindful that God instructs us to examine ourselves as we prepare to participate in the New Testament Passover (see 1 Corinthians 11:27–29). But what about the important meaning that we should be reminded of as we prepare for the evening that follows the Passover? Since there is sometimes less of a focus on the meaning of the Night to Be Much Observed, a brief review of this evening, which begins the first Holy Day of God's sacred year, may be helpful.

As the Bible makes clear, we observe the Passover during the evening that begins on the fourteenth day of the Hebrew month of Nisan, also called Abib (Exodus 12:6–12; Leviticus 23:5). Nearly 2,000 years ago, at His final earthly Passover, Christ implemented new symbols, as well as instructions that New Covenant Christians are to follow (Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:15–20; John 13:3–17). Passover commemorates the first step in God's great plan of salvation, which we know applies to each of us individually—and, ultimately, also to all humanity (see John 1:29). As Jesus said, the example He set at that Passover was for all Christians to follow annually, on the evening of Nisan 14, until He returns (John 13:15, 17).

Within hours, the One Who had delivered Israel out of Egypt (1 Corinthians 10:4) would be arrested, beaten, and crucified. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God—without sin, perfect in every way—had willingly humbled Himself to pay the price incurred by the sins of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Those whom the Father has called *deeply* appreciate His incalculable sacrifice—and they eagerly wait for Him to return in power (John 6:44; Luke 21:27). “To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation” (Hebrews 9:26–28).

Biblically, days begin at *evening* (see Genesis 1:5, 8, 13; Nehemiah 13:19). After the Passover, the *next* evening begins

the *fifteenth* day of Nisan, which, from the *King James Version* translation of Exodus 12:42, we typically call the Night to Be Much Observed. Just as Passover is its own event with its own special meaning, so does the Night to Be Much Observed have a special meaning of its own. As the Apostle John explains, Jesus' body was placed in a tomb on the afternoon shortly before the beginning of an annual Holy Day known as the First Day of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31–42)—a day that remains a holy convocation for God's people (Leviticus 23:6–8).

God instructs us that, during the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, “no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a native of the land... seven days you must eat unleavened bread” (Exodus 12:19; Leviticus 23:6–8; see also 1 Corinthians 5:6–8). Faithful Christians continue to keep these days holy (Matthew 26:17; Acts 20:6; 1 Corinthians 5:8).

We should also note that although some have wrongly attempted to shift the Passover observance from Nisan 14 to Nisan 15, the biblical account does *not* permit this. If you haven't already, please be sure to read Mr. Gerald Weston's Editorial in the March-April 2020 issue of the *Living Church News*, in which he gives seven proofs that the Living Church of God is continuing to keep the Passover in the way Christ intended. Rather than telling us to conflate the two commemorations, Scripture is clear that the Passover and the Night to Be Much Observed are two *separate* ceremonies on two *sequential* evenings, each with its own symbolism and lessons.

Lessons for Us Today

Next, let's consider four lessons the Night to Be Much Observed holds for us. First, as many of us know well, this night commemorates God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery. The Bible's account is very clear. The Israelites had stayed indoors on the night of the Passover, the evening of Nisan 14, when God struck the firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 12:12, 22). The next morning—which was, of course, still Nisan 14—Israel plundered the Egyptians. Then they journeyed to Succoth, where that *next* evening—beginning Nisan 15—they celebrated their freedom and kept the Night to Be Much Observed (Exodus 12:42). Christians today appreciate that God

has, similarly, delivered us from spiritual slavery (Romans 6:16).

This is one of the most fundamental lessons we can gain from the Night to Be Much Observed. But with a little more reflection and meditation, we find that this special evening can remind us of so much more.

For example, this night reminds us of God's great promises to Abraham. In Genesis 12:1–3, God promised Abraham that He would eventually make a great nation of his descendants. Genesis 22 shows that God confirmed Abraham's faith and made those promises *unconditional* (vv. 12–18). Scripture describes God's instructions to Abraham to "take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Genesis 22:2).

Having proved Abraham's faith, God spared Isaac, intervening at the very last moment and then substituting a ram (v. 13). This event anticipated the Passover and subsequent deliverance from slavery that God would provide for Israel in Egypt (see Exodus 12:1–6; 14), and it *ultimately* anticipated the Passover of Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God" through

This night should bring to mind the patriarchs' great faith in that covenant. **Because of their deep faith in God's promises, Jacob and Joseph made their descendants promise to remove them from Egypt after their deaths and bury them in the land God had promised to Abraham.**

whom deliverance from sin is made possible for all (see John 1:36; John 3:16). God would not leave Israel in bondage forever—His delivering Israel from slavery was a necessary step toward fulfilling the covenant confirmed with Abraham so many years earlier (Exodus 12:40–42; Galatians 3:17–18).

Furthermore, this night should bring to mind the patriarchs' great faith in that covenant. Because of their deep faith in God's promises, Jacob and Joseph made their descendants promise to remove them from Egypt after their deaths and bury them in the land God had promised to Abraham. "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones" (Hebrews 11:22). Those instructions were recorded in Genesis: "When the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'Now if I have found favor in your sight, please put your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers; you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place' (47:29–30).

And later, we read that "Joseph said to his brethren, 'I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob'" (50:24).

The Night to Be Much Observed represents the very evening on which Joseph's faith-based wishes were fulfilled as his remains were removed from Egypt—a witness to his faith that is worth remembering.

Finally, while the events of that night several thousand years ago focused on the physical descendants of Israel, many non-Israelites also came out with them (Exodus 12:38). Ultimately, the full truth of the Night to Be Much Observed is not just about deliverance for the physical people of Israel, but the deliverance of the whole world—the people of every nation, race, and tongue—from the rule of Satan and sin. This is the ultimate *future fulfillment* of God's promises.

Freedom from Captivity

Just as Christ did not leave Israel in bondage, God has promised that He will not leave the world in bondage (Romans 8:21). The first whom He has delivered from the spiritual bondage of

Satan's world are the firstfruits He has called into His Church, and they are "eagerly waiting for the adoption [or sonship], the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:19–23) at the seventh trumpet, when Christ returns (Revelation 11:15).

The returned Christ will free *all* the nations of this world, and He will reign as

King of kings (Isaiah 2:2; 49:26; Revelation 19:11–16). Christians pray that He will soon bring the Kingdom of God to this earth, and they eagerly anticipate that time when, as God promised to Abraham millennia ago, the "'Seed', who is Christ" will reign and *all nations* will be blessed (Genesis 22:18; Galatians 3:8, 16).

Much more could be said, as we understand that both the Passover and the Night to Be Much Observed are profoundly meaningful. We thank God for the Passover and for what it pictures—the great sacrifice that took place when Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), gave Himself to pay the price for our sins. And we are also deeply thankful for the evening that follows, the Night to be Much Observed, and for its lessons of coming out from under bondage into the freedom that Christ offers us.

God is faithful to His covenant promises. He delivered Israel from physical bondage millennia ago, He delivers us from spiritual bondage today, and He will deliver the entire world at Christ's return. May God bring that day soon! (LH)

Births

Daniel Bryan Fall was born on August 30 to Dr. and Mrs. Bryan (Stephanie) Fall of the Columbus, Ohio, congregation. Daniel's three older siblings, along with his grandparents Dr. and Mrs. Jeffrey (Barbara) Fall and Mr. and Mrs. Steve (Debra) Smith, as well as his large extended family, are enjoying one more "arrow in the quiver."

On September 18, **Charlotte Louise Mew** came into the world to join her three older sisters. The labor and birth were uncomplicated, and Charlotte was able to enjoy her first Feast of Tabernacles. Mr. and Mrs. Anthony (Melanie) Mew, of the Brisbane, Australia, congregation, are very thankful for the addition to their family.

Mr. and Mrs. Roedolph (Andrea) Opperman are excited to announce the birth of **André Riaan Opperman**, who was

delivered at home on November 17, weighing 9 pounds, 8 ounces, and measuring 21.5 inches long. Mom and baby are both doing fine, and André's older brothers are excited about the new addition and to start "teaching him how to crawl." The Opperman family attends the Charlotte, North Carolina, congregation.

Mr. and Mrs. Ryan (Lisa) Patterson were blessed with the birth of their fourth child, **Matthew William Patterson**, on November 21. He weighed 9 pounds, 9 ounces, and was 21 inches long. Big sisters Ava, Rachael, and Sophie are excited to have a little brother! The Patterson family attends the Traverse City, Michigan, congregation.

Ordinations

Mr. Adenir Dos Santos Teixeira was ordained a deacon on March 4, 2023, by Messrs. Paul Shumway and Damian Weekes. Mr. Teixeira serves in the Moscou congregation in Brazil.

Weddings & Anniversaries

Mr. and Mrs. Bernard (Paula) Da Costa recently celebrated their **50th wedding anniversary**. They were married on November 30, 1974. The Tulsa, Oklahoma, congregation honored Mr. and Mrs. Da Costa with a cake and sparkling cider after services on December 7.

of the Ottawa congregation in Canada, who recently celebrated **fifty years of marriage**. They started this chapter of their lives on November 23, 1974, and have together enjoyed a life of family, love, and many years of service toward God's people.

versary on October 4. Mr. Whitaker is the Pastor Emeritus of the Walterboro, South Carolina, congregation, and Mrs. Whitaker is a longtime deaconess. Congratulations to Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker!

Congratulations are in order for **Mr. and Mrs. Robert (Bonita) Goddard**

Mr. and Mrs. Bill (Sheila) Whitaker celebrated their **66th wedding anni-**

In Loving Memory

Mr. Herbert Beare, 88, a member of the Belfast, Northern Ireland, congregation, died on September 23. Mr. Beare was baptized in August of 1965 and was a faithful Church member for almost 60 years.

Mrs. Verda Marie (Reed) Burson, 87, died peacefully on December 3 in Cambridge, Ohio. She is survived by her second husband, longtime elder Mr. Jim Burson, whom she married in April of 2002. Together, they served God's people for many years in the Ohio and Mississippi areas. Mrs. Burson was baptized in 1976. She and her first husband, Mr. Norbert (Jim) Reed, who died in 1993, had two sons and two daughters who survive her, as well as ten grandchildren, 18 great-grandchildren, three siblings, and many nieces and nephews. Mrs. Burson was a dedicated wife and mother. She was also an artist who loved to paint with watercolors and draw with charcoal. She delighted to work with her chickens, make flower arrangements, and teach her children about nature and God's truth. She will be lovingly missed by her husband and all in her family, as well as by many brethren. Mr. Phil Sena conducted her funeral.

Mr. Harry Gaddes, 85, a long-standing Church member from the London congregation in the UK, died on October 28 after a lengthy illness. Mr. Gaddes stayed faithful to God's truth since his baptism in October of 1963. He was a "people person" who was willing to help others, and he had a wonderful sense of humor. A memorial service was held in Borehamwood on November 30. Mr. Gaddes will be greatly missed by many.

Mrs. Yvonne Macedo, 84, entered her rest on Monday, December 2, surrounded by her loving family. Mrs. Macedo was born and raised in Massachusetts. She lived most of her life and raised her six children there. She devoted her life to her husband, children, grandchildren, and so many others. Known for her selflessness, she went above and beyond for those around her. Mrs. Macedo and her husband of 31 years, Mr. John Macedo, moved to Largo, Florida, in retirement and had many happy years together. While in Florida, Mrs. Macedo was baptized into God's Church, finding her second family. Her love of God prevailed above all else as she ded-

icated her spare time to studying the Bible and praying for others. At her funeral service, numerous family members commented on how much she loved the Church, reading her Bible, and talking about God's coming Kingdom. She will be greatly missed by her family and the brethren of the Pawtucket, Rhode Island, congregation.

Mrs. Diana M. Marshall, 85, a member of the Hook congregation in the UK, died on the Sabbath of September 21 while under palliative care for cancer. Baptized in April of 2011, she was a kind, pleasant, and faithful member for 13 years, and she was at peace with God's will for her life. She will be dearly missed and now awaits the resurrection.

Mrs. Renee Strain, 78, died December 21 after a short illness. Born in Oklahoma, she was 16 when she read a booklet by Mr. Herbert Armstrong about the Sabbath and began keeping the Sabbath at home. In 1964 she applied and was accepted to Ambassador College, and she was baptized in 1965. Her parents began attending services after she left home and her father later became an elder in God's Church. Renee met Mr. Keith Walden at Ambassador College, and they were married after graduating in 1968. Mr. Walden entered the ministerial training program, and through the years they served congregations in New Mexico, West Virginia, Texas, and Florida until Mr. Walden's death in 2007. They had three daughters—Tess (Wyatt) Ciesielka, Audrey (John) Robinson, and Jodie (Shawn) Dumas—and six grandchildren. In 2013, Renee married Mr. John Strain, who pastored congregations in Florida. In 2019, they were transferred to serve the Headquarters congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina, and nearby congregations. Mrs. Strain was a wonderful Christian wife, mother, and grandmother, who remained faithful to God until her death. She will be remembered for being a fabulous cook and a warm hostess, for her talent for decorating, and for her impeccable style. Above all, she had an unwavering commitment to God and His Work, dedicating her life to her calling for 62 years. She was predeceased by her first husband, her parents, and her older brother, and is survived by her loving husband, her daughters, and her grandchildren. She is also mourned by many friends.

Electronic Service Requested

For Signs and Seasons

Clearing out a neglected inbox where non-urgent, personal emails have accumulated can be a daunting task—perhaps somewhat similar to figuring out what to do with mounds of paper mail. With bravery and a bit of cheerfulness, I tackled my inbox one evening, realizing I could delay no longer. To my surprise, it was a delightfully nostalgic and insightful experience. It's peculiar what can trigger our memories: sights, smells, a song, etc. In my particular case, cleaning an inbox brought to mind fond memories.

We all reminisce on life's experiences at times—enjoyable occasions, exciting moments of success and achievements, friends whom we've loved. There were periods of life when the good times seemed to fly by. There were times when we never thought we'd make it out of a trial. These are what some call the “seasons” of life, famously written about in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. The nostalgia and occasional sadness from going down “memory lane” is exaggerated when we are removed from a “season of life” we can never relive, such as childhood. It can also be painful when we are removed from friends and family by the sting of death. Being human is a contrasting ebb and flow of sorrow and joy, and everything in between.

In Ecclesiastes 3, King Solomon states that everything is “beautiful in its time” (v. 11). The fabric of time and experience we call life can seem very beautiful when recalling the “good times.” God—who inhabits eternity and is not bound by times and seasons—*gave* times and seasons for us to enjoy. With the physical creation comes the byproduct of times and the various seasons. In setting the earth and other astral bodies in their place, God said, “Let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years” (Genesis 1:14). Yet

Solomon also acknowledges that, while it is a gift to recall the past, God has put eternity in the hearts of human beings (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Knowing where we come from and what we have experienced is not the answer to reconnecting with loved ones, nor is it the answer to where we are ultimately going.

The answer to the desire to reconnect with loved ones and find meaning in life's past “seasons” is part of what Solomon alludes to as a mystery in the latter half of Ecclesiastes 3:11: “No one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.” The mystery of making sense of past, present, and future is cleared up in what God calls His “feasts” (Leviticus 23:1–2).

God has outlined His great plan for mankind from beginning to end through these observances. They revolve around three agricultural “seasons” made possible by the physical creation referred to in Genesis 1:14. God's Holy Days are beautiful in their time, both in the annual festival celebrations God's people enjoy and especially in what they represent. The first Festival season focuses on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and on redemption and deliverance. Pentecost focuses on the Church and holiness. The third Festival season focuses on a time when the entire world will be reconciled to God and lost loved ones will even be reconnected with through resurrection. The Holy Days are a mystery to the world, yet paradoxically they offer the world hope in some of the most joyous occasions yet to come. Thank God He has given us the “seasons of life” to enjoy—as well as His Festival seasons, which point to our greatest hope.

—Jonathan Bueno