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# TIDINGS

Volume 87, Number 6, June, 2024

## THE POWER OF BEING APOLITICAL



Building faith in the  
Christadelphian community.

# TIDINGS

Volume 87, Number 6 / June, 2024



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E D I T O R I A L

# THE POWER OF BEING APOLITICAL

*How can believers in this media-bombarded society be apolitical?  
What does it mean for believers to be disengaged  
from political opinion and participation?  
What's at stake?*



**W**HEN Jesus answered Pilate's question about whether he was the King of the Jews, he provided an important principle that still governs the lives of all believers.

*My kingdom is not of this world:  
if my kingdom were of this world,  
then would my servants fight, that I  
should not be delivered to the Jews:  
but now is my kingdom not from  
hence. (John 18:36).*

If there ever was a time to resist the authorities and appeal to the political system of the day, it was during the unjust trial and condemnation of Jesus Christ. Wouldn't the world be much better off with Jesus exonerated and permitted to continue his preaching? Jesus understood the plan and purpose of God and was fully aware of His power to stop these evil proceedings. Yet in humility, he *"committed himself to him that judgeth righteously."* (1 Peter 2:23). He knew his Father was in control at all times. Righteousness was only to be found in submission to the Father's will.

How can believers in this media-bombarded society be apolitical? What does it mean for believers to be disengaged from political opinion and participation? What's at stake?

In the United States, this summer and fall will feature another hotly contested election of a president, along with many other governmental positions and propositions. The campaign strategies will focus on polarizing voters—painting one candidate as the guardian of positive values and the other as the adversary of those values. One presidential candidate has already linked himself to the powerful

Christian Conservative Movement. He is now selling *God Bless the USA* Bibles, packaged along with copies of the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as the lyrics to the popular song *"God Bless the USA,"* by country singer Lee Greenwood.

I wonder if there has ever been a more explicit attempt to affix Christian values to nationalism and the pursuit of political power. Usually, it is more concealed, appearing only as a call for Christians to stand up for the values of the Scriptures. After all, wouldn't the country be stronger and more blessed if the candidate elected espoused the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ?

In America, we have been seeing the unprecedented buildup of a multi-billion-dollar political system that is masquerading as a Christian-based social movement. Driving this crusade is a political group that seeks to gain power and impose its vision on all of American society. In her book, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, Katherine Stewart unveils a network of think tanks, advocacy groups, community alliances, super-wealthy ultraconservative donors, and family foundations. These powerful influencers are attaching their interpretation of the teachings of the Bible to American nationalism, proclaiming that to stand for their candidate is to stand for the Bible.

Stewart discusses Christian nationalism this way:

It is not a social or cultural movement. It is a political

movement, and its ultimate goal is power. It does not seek to add another voice to America's pluralistic democracy but to replace our foundational democratic principles and institutions with a state grounded on a particular version of Christianity, answering to what some adherents call a "biblical worldview" that happens to serve the interests of plutocratic [government by the wealthy] funders and allied political leaders. It is a political war over the future of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

So, what is Christian nationalism? Author Bradley Onishi defines it this way.

Christian nationalism is the idea that Christian people should be privileged in the United States in some way—economically, socially, politically—and that that influence and that privilege is a result of the country being founded by and for Christians. Christian nationalism is not the idea that others can't be here—that if you're a Muslim or an atheist, you have to leave. It's also

not the idea that only Christians can be part of the government. However, for most Christian nationalists, there is a core belief that the story of the United States is one where the country has been elected by God to play an exceptional role in human history, and as being chosen by God, it's the duty of Christian people to carry out His will on Earth.

So Christian nationalists take an approach to their Christianity that says it should have an undue influence on our government, on our economics, on our culture, and that it is by dint of our history, the religious faith that is meant to be privileged in our public square. With that said, there are different kinds of Christian nationalists and different ways that people manifest their understanding of the term. But when it comes down to it, if we all sit down as Americans at a table and there are people from different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different faiths, and someone who is a Christian says, just by being at



Christian nationalism takes the name of Christ for a worldly political agenda, proclaiming that its program is the political program for every true believer. That is wrong in principle, no matter what the agenda is.

this table, I should have a special place, well, to me, that's Christian nationalism because you're saying that somehow this country is yours in a way that it is not for everyone else.<sup>2</sup>

Christian nationalism has fooled millions. Some are so convinced of the “rightness” of the movement that they have been drawn into anti-democratic thinking and illegal behavior. This thinking has manifested itself in extremist actions, self-justifying violence, and even attempts to overthrow the government.

At the end of the day, we may find some limited Scriptural agreement with a **few** of the views of these Christian nationalists. We may share common interpretations of Scripture on issues like same-sex marriage and parental rights for the education of our children. But we are worlds away from how to represent these beliefs. Any connection with secular special interest groups and the political process is crossing a line that the Lord Jesus Christ himself would not do in the courtyard with Pilate.

I suspect that the Christian nationalist movement will increasingly be

labeled as dangerous, self-serving and unattractive to many Americans. In a recent article by *Christianity Today*, the dangers of Christian nationalism were identified.

Christian nationalism takes the name of Christ for a worldly political agenda, proclaiming that its program is the political program for every true believer. That is wrong in principle, no matter what the agenda is, because only the church is authorized to proclaim the name of Jesus and carry his standard into the world. Christian nationalism is calling evil good and good evil; it is taking the name of Christ as a fig leaf to cover its political program, treating the message of Jesus as a tool of political propaganda and the church as the handmaiden and cheerleader of the state.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Christian nationalists represent a minority of Americans but with significant power and influence. Will all of the denominations of Christianity eventually be painted with the same brush? Will there be a backlash against the gospel due to the platform and tactics used by Christian nationalists?



Will all Christians be branded as “extremists” due to this movement? We need to separate our community by demonstrating that following Jesus Christ is not about power and money but love and compassion.

The gospel does not spread appropriately through political action groups, the legislative process, or in the support of specific political candidates. It advances through the gentle appeal to a better way of life—one that can be lived in **any** country on earth. Jesus invited men and women to take up their cross and follow him. Paul instructed believers to pray for those who are rulers over us (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Not one of those faithful who carried the gospel into all the world did so through secular or governmental means. Later, when Christianity united with political power, it corrupted both the church and government. The gospel was suppressed by a false idea that a Holy Empire could exist in the Kingdoms of Men.

This thought reminds us of Joshua's significant interaction with the angel of God, who stood with a sword drawn. When Joshua confronted the angel, he asked, “*Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?*” (Joshua 5:13). A reasonable question to ask, as the nation was about to confront the great city of Jericho. Are you aligned with Jericho or the nation of Israel? The angel's answer is highly instructive, not only to Joshua but to believers today. “*Nay, but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come.*” (v. 14). The angel's allegiance was not to any nation, not even Israel. His only allegiance was to the LORD. Paul wrote that we

were to be “*ambassadors for Christ*” (2 Corinthians 5:20). While we live in a country, our citizenship and allegiance are only to our God and His Son. We represent them, not the country we live in.

Over the next few months, citizens in America will be called on to identify who they support, but this is really a global issue being faced in most nations. Nationalism is on the rise in many countries. Society wants us to identify our allegiance to a political party or a secular point of view. Our opportunity is to proclaim exclusively that our only leader is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just imagine for a moment what would transpire in our ecclesias if we didn't embrace the commitment to being apolitical. Might we have ecclesias split over political opinion? Would we hear exhortations promoting the support of a certain political candidate or a proposed legislation? Such behaviors would tear at the very fabric of ecclesial life.

Being apolitical is different than being “non-political.” A non-political person has a political point of view but has chosen to refrain from political engagement. That should not be us. The power of being apolitical is that we look at the issues facing our society through the eyes of spiritual discernment. We know that man is incapable of ordering his own steps. There is no future in the Kingdoms of Men, not one of them. They are all slated for elimination when our Lord returns. It's not just that we don't vote or engage in politics. We see them as a meaningless pursuit.

But being apolitical is in no way unengaged. We may be required to take an unpopular position on moral issues that we are facing. Our role is to influence and teach those with willing hearts and open ears about how life is to be lived as heavenly citizens. This is done through a patient explanation of what the Scriptures teach us. It is done through personal witnessing of how God has acted in our lives and brought us meaning and peace. We don't operate in the chambers of government but across the kitchen table as we share the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our strength is not political authority but the power of prayer to our God of unlimited power.

So, let's live up to our high calling. As Jesus told Pilate, this is not our kingdom. Our Lord tasks us to appeal to men and women who wish to live and reign with the Lord in his Kingdom. Let's model this by praying

for those who “*are in authority; that we might lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*” (1 Timothy 2:2). In years past, too many social media posts have been created by members of our own community praising or criticizing candidates. That's hardly a useful testimony of our faith community, and it is an evidentiary trail of evidence used against a young person who may face conscription in the future.

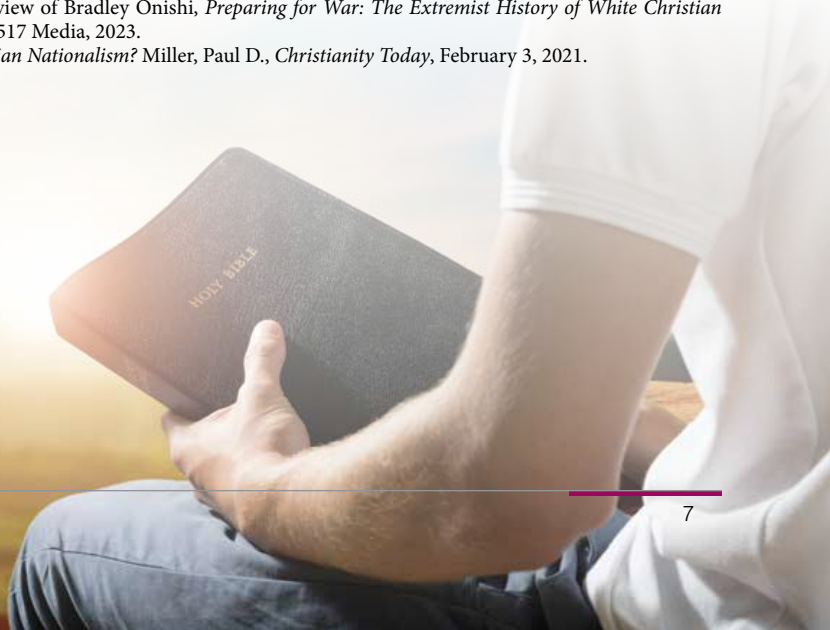
In the next few months, let's take the opportunity to demonstrate the power of being apolitical. Let's model the true call of the gospel for those around us: to invite men and women to repentance in love and compassion. We are preparing for a righteous government to be established over all the earth, led by the man God ordained. (Acts 17:31).

*Dave Jennings*

<sup>1</sup> Stewart, Katherine, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, NY, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> From an interview of Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism*, 1517 Media, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> *What is Christian Nationalism?* Miller, Paul D., *Christianity Today*, February 3, 2021.







# POLITICS AND HOPE

*All of the things we might hope a candidate for political office could do—health care, welfare, justice—the LORD does these things. And best of all, “The LORD shall reign forever... to all generations.” (Psalm 146:10 ESV).*

*By Bill Link*

## Drawn Into Politics?

**T**HROUGHOUT all of our history, Christadelphians have managed to stay away from the muck of politics. But this may be changing. One hears of Christadelphians who have decided to vote. Others do not vote but still hold strong political opinions. And because “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45 ESV), these are hinted at in our teaching or openly expressed in our private conversations.

Why is this happening? In part, it is because we reflect the society in which we live. There has been a well-documented increase in political polarization in the United States over the last fifty years.<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of information sources fuels this: we choose our news sources based on our prejudices, and our internet experience is often tailored to reinforce rather than challenge our perspectives. We are awash in a sea of information, and partisan voices are amplified.

What's more, many of the political issues debated in society have moral overtones. We have Biblically informed views on abortion, gender issues, social welfare, and the role of government, and are naturally attracted by one side or another of political debate. We are easily drawn in, consciously or unconsciously identifying ourselves with one political party or another, despite none representing God's perspectives.

One of our reasons for political abstinence has always been the conviction that God is in ultimate control of world affairs. We quote the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar had to be taught, that "*the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives it to whomever He will, And sets over it the lowest of men.*" (Daniel 4:17 NKJV).<sup>2</sup> God has His purposes, we say, and if we were to vote for the one who is in fact the better person, we might be going against His will.

Perhaps that's true. But another reason for staying out of politics might be more compelling. It has to do with Hope.

### Political Messages of Hope

Two of the most memorable political slogans in recent US political history are about hope—explicitly so in Obama's 2008 "Hope and Change," implicitly so in Trump's "Make America Great Again." Trump's slogan had been previously used by Reagan in 1980 and by Clinton in 1992.

In the worst moments of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt's 1932 slogan was "Happy days are here again!"

William McKinley's 1900 slogan was more modestly aspirational: "Four more years of the full dinner pail!"

Every four years the United States goes through a ritual of sloganeering and chatter designed to win the support of the public behind a new president. Messages of hope and promises of good leadership are countered by dire warnings and character assassinations. Barry Goldwater's 1964 theme "In your heart, you know he's right!" was countered by "In your guts, you know he's nuts."

The elections focus on hope for better times and fears of worse. Put your hopes on "Candidate X," and things will be better than with "Candidate Y." But what does the Bible say?

### Two Familiar Passages... About Hope

Two particularly relevant Scriptures are ones that we may remember (and ought to!) because of the clarity with which they teach things about the nature of man. The first is Psalm 146, from which we often quote, "*His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish*" (v. 4, KJV) in teaching the unconsciousness of death. The second is Jeremiah 17, from which we often quote, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.*" (v. 9). These are clear statements, and our use of the passages is both valid and useful.

But the passages say more. Have a closer look.

Psalm 146 begins with encouragement to praise the LORD. The psalmist<sup>3</sup> says that he will praise God as long as he lives (v. 2) and describes as blessed

those “*whose hope is in the LORD their God.*” (v. 5 NIV). And why? Because “*He remains faithful forever.*” (v. 6 NIV). Because He “*upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.*” (v. 7 NIV). Because “*The LORD gives sight to the blind.*” (v. 8 NIV). Because He cares for the disadvantaged and overthrows the wicked (v. 9).

All of the things we might hope a candidate for political office could do—health care, welfare, justice—the LORD does these things. And best of all, “*The LORD shall reign forever... to all generations.*” (Psalm 146:10 ESV).

The familiar verses 3 and 4 are squeezed into this hymn of praise to provide a contrast. “*Do not put your trust in princes, Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; In that very day his plans perish.*” The best of people, the best of the politicians, is ultimately one “*in whom there is no help*” if for no other reason than his mortality.

Jeremiah 17 is similar in contrasting the trust of man and the trust of God. Verses 5 and 6 say that a person who puts his trust in man is cursed, comparing him to a withered shrub in a dry place. By contrast:

*Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, And whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, Which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit.* (Psalm 146:7-8 KJV).

The reason for the contrast? Because even the best of people still has a heart that is “*deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.*” (v. 9). Only God can know the motives of men’s hearts (v. 10).

As we enter the upcoming election cycle in the USA—whether living here or watching with interest from abroad—let’s remind ourselves that our Kingdom is not of this time. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.*” (2 Timothy 2:4). Let’s not be entangled with the false hope of politics.

Ours is a better hope.

### **Our Hope, the Hope of Israel**

Our abstinence from politics has always been because of a clear vision of a better day to come.

In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a giant image representing human kingdoms and then a stone that toppled the image and grounded it to pieces. As Christadelphians, we have rejoiced in the explanation provided to Nebuchadnezzar by Daniel, that “*the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.*” (Daniel 2:44). The King who reigns will heal all the world’s problems (Psalm 72) and will teach the nations God’s ways (Isaiah 2:1-4).

Our hope is “*the Hope of Israel,*” of which Paul spoke to the leading Jews of Rome while awaiting trial before Caesar (Acts 28:20). It is the hope he

spoke of before King Agrippa in Acts 26:6-7 *"I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews."*

Being Christadelphian means living a life of hope, even in hopeless times.

Isaiah 9 was written in a time of gloom, distress, and oppression (9:1), in a time of darkness, *"in the land of the shadow of death."* (9:2). Bursting through all of that is *"a great light"* of hope:

*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. (Isaiah 9:6-7).*

Our hope is for a righteous government and its consequences. Isaiah tells us that the Spirit of God shall rest upon our Lord: *"the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD"* (11:2) and that *"He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, And decide with equity for the meek of the earth."* (11:3-4). There will be peace and equity, and the shattered environment will be restored: *"They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea."* (11:9).

Bill Link,  
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1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/>

2 The King James Version renders the last phrase of Daniel 4:17 as *"setteth up over it the basest of men."* Growing up with the KJV, I assumed it meant that God chose the worst, or at least might choose the worst sort of person to be in charge. It came as a bit of a disappointment to find out that the true sense of the phrase is *"the most ordinary, even the lowest esteemed by men."* This definition is borne out by the use of the Hebrew equivalent to Daniel's Aramaic, for example, in 1 Samuel 2:7, *"The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up"* and Job 5:11, *"He sets on high those who are lowly, And those who mourn are lifted to safety."* This sense of the word is evident in the immediate context of Daniel 4, in the final verse, where Nebuchadnezzar says, *"Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase."* (Verb form of the adjective "basest").

3 The Septuagint Greek translation attributes Psalm 146 to Haggai and Zechariah.

# MOTHERS IN ISRAEL:

## MENTORING, MEETING AND MATTERING

*By Ruth Hensley*





**M**OTHERHOOD is a lot of different things. It's a lot of joy, a lot of humbling, a lot of personal and spiritual growth, a lot of exhaustion, a lot of wonder, a lot of frustration, a lot of laughter, a lot of patience, a lot of love—so much! But here's the thing. We're not in this alone. It's taken me years (and a global pandemic with its isolation of long lockdowns) to realize just how crucial a point this is.

Motherhood is a lot, but there's a lot of support out there, too. The expression: "It takes a village to raise a child" is so cliché and yet so true. I have a favored variation: "It takes a village to raise a mother, too." Or, in our case, it takes an ecclesia. In reflecting on the early years of my children's lives as I adjusted to motherhood and found my place in the ecclesia in a new stage, three things stood out: mentoring, meeting, and mattering.

I write this with a very big disclaimer. All of this is solely from my own experience and reflections, and it won't be relevant for everyone. God's principles are universal, but applications are personal. That said, I'm hoping something in this resonates with you or provides a springboard for helping you reflect on what is helpful in your situation.

### **Mentoring**

I distinctly remember holding our eldest child shortly after her birth and looking into her face with a mingled sense of wonder and trepidation. Who was this little person, and why in the world did everyone seem to think it was

reasonable to send her home with **me**? I'd worked with children for years, but motherhood was something entirely different. Fast-forward nearly twelve years, and our first baby isn't far from her teen years, yet that same feeling of wonder and trepidation is still strong. Sisters of children older than mine have been an amazing support because they have a broader perspective that I lacked, yet they also have strong memories of the stage of parenting I'm in. There are several sisters, some I see in person regularly and others I keep in touch with by text, whom I turn to for advice. Some have children just a few years older than mine, and some are a generation older than me. They're the ones who have modeled to me Paul's command to older sisters to teach younger sisters how to love their children (Titus 2:4).

Relationships matter. Moms of young children know well that there's a lot of advice out there in the form of parenting books, mom blogs, social media, and more. Some of them are truly excellent resources, and some really, really aren't. Choose your information sources carefully and seek out spiritually minded sisters to connect with. This advice means reaching out, which can feel awkward initially, but it's worth it.

Thoughts for moms of young children:

- Find a mentor or multiple mentors. It can be helpful to hear various perspectives. Look for sisters you respect in your ecclesia or have met at gatherings, such as Bible Schools. Ask them for advice and stay connected.



- Keep in touch with others in the same life stage. If you're in an ecclesia without other young families, Bible Schools are a great way to meet other parents (and start lifelong friendships for your kids!).
- Seek the help you need. Respect that everyone has their own lives with many demands on their time. But if you need help, ask for it. If a person you ask isn't in a position to provide support at that time, don't give up! Keep asking around. You're not in this alone. It's worth mentioning that at some point, you will undoubtedly receive parenting advice that is offensive or
- Be available. Advice and assistance are tricky things. Unwanted and unhelpful advice can cause unintentional offense, and assistance requires thoughtfulness on the giver's part and humility on the receiver's part. Those things both require a relationship.
- Offer practical help.
- Make Sunday mornings welcoming and comfortable—more on that next.

### Meeting

The most important point is that there's not one perfect ecclesial model. Our ecclesia has a huge Sunday School, and

## Seek the help you need...

If a person you ask isn't in a position to provide support at that time, don't give up! Keep asking around.  
*You're not in this alone.*

aggravating. Assume the best and forgive. But don't let that dissuade you from seeking relationships within your spiritual family. It's investing in your needs now and your family's needs as your children grow.

Thoughts for sisters looking to reach out to moms of young children:

- Develop relationships. Connect outside of Sunday morning. This development could mean inviting a family with young kids over for dinner, meeting up at a park, dropping off a meal, or offering to help with housekeeping/childcare/errands, etc.
- 

our family is grateful for it every week. It's wonderful but not the only way an ecclesia can be a good place for young families. By contrast, some friends of ours are members of a small ecclesia, and their kids make up about half of their Sunday School. Their family loves their kids' strong bonds with the adults in the ecclesia. A lack of peers hasn't meant a lack of friends! Instead, they've got friends of all ages that they look forward to seeing on Sundays. Again, the key thing is relationships. Relationships are formed by the time spent together. Although ecclesial relationships need to extend far beyond Sunday mornings, that time spent together remembering Jesus each week is so important.

Thoughts for moms of young children:

- Getting out the door on Sunday mornings can be really tough. As overwhelming as it is, it is a worthwhile habit. Once the habit is established, it's much easier to maintain as your kids grow. Eventually, it also gets easier to pay attention to classes and exhortations!
- It's okay if everyone doesn't look perfect. This is coming from someone who has shown up at Meeting only to discover that one kid has mismatched shoes, another has unbrushed hair, and another has... well, anyway, you get the idea. That happens sometimes, and it's okay.
- Regarding acceptable noise levels during Meeting, there's a lot of variation in family and ecclesial culture—whether to sit in the main hall during Memorial Service or in another room. Respect the expected volume levels wherever you are. Some kids are really good

at sitting quietly in Meeting from a very young age. Some kids have absolutely no sense of volume control. (Among our four kids, we've experienced both extremes.) Don't get consumed by comparing them to others. All kids are different.

- Sundays are different from what they used to be before kids, so give yourself some grace. It's a transition, but again, it's worth it.

Thoughts for sisters looking to reach out to moms of young children:

- No matter your ecclesia's size or age range, the key is to create a welcoming environment for families. Early years of parenting can feel lonely, especially on Sundays when the routine is so different from what it was before kids.
- There's something so refreshing in simple things, like being greeted by name as you walk into the hall on a Sunday morning—and this goes for both kids and parents!

*Sundays are different from what they used to be before kids, so give yourself some grace. It's a transition, but again, it's worth it.*

- Seek out parents of young children—feeding a baby or following around a toddler while everyone else is visiting can be so lonely.
- Consider offering to watch young children so parents can visit without interruptions or listen to a class without distractions.
- Find ways to incorporate the kids into the ecclesia. This situation could look like singing kid-friendly songs during Sunday School, getting kids involved in helping pass things out, etc.
- Be patient with kid noises during Meeting, and if there's anything you can compliment the parents and children on after Meeting, share that compliment! Encouraging words go a long way.

### Mattering

Mattering matters. Whatever stage of life we're in, it's important to know that what we're doing **matters**—that it's important and worthwhile. Raising children is vital work and undeniably worthwhile, but it's hard sometimes to push through childrearing's constant demands and exhaustion to see the big picture. Raising children to know and love God and to love others is one of the most important things we can do on this side of the Kingdom. Remind yourself that your work as a mother matters. Don't lose heart!

With the goal of doing work that matters, there's a lot of value in finding ways to be involved in the larger ecclesial family, even in the little kid stage. I say this with a great big disclaimer. There are some stages when doing more than just putting one foot in front of the

other isn't feasible. That's okay. Those stages are so all-consuming. Take heart in knowing they won't last forever.

Thoughts for moms of young children:

- Just showing up brings a lot of joy. Fellowship matters a lot. Connecting with others of all ages, in all stages, is a crucial part of ecclesial life.
- If you're at a stage where you're ready to be more involved, find ways to serve from home or during odd hours. Ask around for ideas!
- Don't forget that raising kids **matters**.

Thoughts for sisters looking to reach out to moms of young children:

- Look for ways to help moms of young children feel connected and involved in the ecclesia.
- Support others where they are. Some people thrive on taking on projects, while others are overwhelmed by it.
- Take time to listen.
- Help moms remember that their work deeply matters, even on the most mundane days.

### Conclusion

Motherhood is a lot, but you're not in this alone. Whether you're a mom of young children or a sister looking to support moms of young children, reach out. Build relationships. Connect both on Sunday mornings and outside of Sunday mornings and remember the importance of your work.

*Ruth Hensley,  
Simi Hills Ecclesia, CA*



# A CALL TO KEEP HOPE ALIVE

By Melinda Flatley

*Not forsaking **the assembling of ourselves together**, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25 KJV).*

**WHAT** would you say if I told you Hebrews 10:25 is about something other than being present at Meeting and other ecclesial events? Would that surprise you? Have you often used this verse to admonish others (or maybe yourself) to show up? To be at the Memorial Service or Bible class every week? Is this a command to go to church? Should ecclesias take attendance? These questions deserve further consideration.

Now, I'm not suggesting that getting together and taking attendance have no merit. They're good things. Fellow believers need to meet to worship God and encourage each other. We want to know about our members who are sick, struggling, or traveling so we may offer prayers and help if possible. We also want to discern when someone consistently avoids the meeting so we can be extra caring. And it's prudent to keep an attendance record of those who might be subject to the military draft.

However, this verse has more profound thoughts beyond these practices. To study fresh aspects of Hebrews 10:25, we must bear in mind the context of the passage and some Greek words and their parts of speech.

### The Context

A good start to assessing the context is to read through the whole of Hebrews chapter 10. When the anonymous author wrote this book, severe persecution against the Christians from both the Jews and the Romans had begun (Hebrews 10:32-33). The author exhorts them to *“Encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”* (Hebrews 3:13).<sup>1</sup> *“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.”* (Hebrews 10:35). Some had already abandoned their **faith** (*elpidos*). Thus, the writer admonishes them to *“Let us hold fast the confession of our **hope** (*elpidos*), without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”* (Hebrews 10:23).

As we see above, the word *elpidos* is translated as *“faith”* in some Scriptures and *“hope”* in others.<sup>2</sup> (See also: Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:6; 28:20; Romans 5:2; 8:19-25; Ephesians 1:18; I Thessalonians 4:13; Titus 2:13). These all refer to

resurrection and being in the Kingdom. So, in Hebrews 10:25, the subject is about standing strong concerning the hope in the resurrection and inciting one another to love and good deeds as we await the day. What day? **The Day of the Lord!**

When the Book of Hebrews was written, ecclesias met in small groups in homes, warehouses, or on riverbanks. It wasn't until the 4th century that Emperor Constantine ordered the building of churches.<sup>3</sup> It appears, therefore, that the writer to the Hebrews is not talking about gathering in church buildings. In fact, the word “church” or *ekklesia* in the New Testament is not a building.

### The Noun

Verse 25 (KJV) says not to forsake the **“assembling of ourselves together.”** This phrase in English is just one word in Greek: *episunagoge*.<sup>4</sup> It's a noun, not a verb, and should be translated as “the gathering.” *“Together”* is not in the original text. The only other place in the Bible where the noun occurs is II Thessalonians 2:1-2. There, it is also talking about a specific gathering—our gathering to Christ on his Day, not getting together in a church building:

*Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord*



*Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from our composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).*

### **The Verb**

The related word, *episunago*,<sup>5</sup> is a verb meaning “to gather together.” It’s used in Mark 1:33-34 and Luke 12:1—people gathered together to Jesus. In Matthew 23:37 (also Luke 13:34), Jesus wishes to gather the people of Jerusalem under his wings like a mother hen. Notice how these references happen in the days of Christ’s first coming but do entail some sort of gathering of people to Christ. Finally, Matthew 24:30-31 (and Mark 13:26-27) use *eposunago* to describe how the angels will gather the elect to the Judgment Seat, clearly about the Day of the Lord:

*And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET*

*BLAST, and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.*

### **An Essential Message**

In both instances where *episunagoge*, the noun, appears, the context is all about the **Day of the Lord** and petitioning the brothers and sisters to have patience and endurance, not throwing away their confidence, nor being deceived by those who say the **Day** had already come. It’s about being aware of the apostasy, and not departing from the Truth. The warning is:

*For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27).*

Note in these verses the lack of mercy available to those who stop believing. While meeting with our brothers and sisters is a crucial concept, it is only part of our devotion to following Christ. It’s essential that we maintain

*While meeting with our brothers and sisters is a crucial concept, it is only part of our devotion to following Christ.*



our zeal for the Truth. It is our earnest hope to gather to Christ at his return. Hebrews 10 heartens us to retain and support others to do so, too. The Green Hymn Book, Hymn 140, voices what our mindset should be:

Though our pilgrimage may be dreary,  
This is not our resting place;  
Shall we of the way be weary  
When we see the Master's face?  
No; By faith anticipating,  
In this hope our souls rejoice;  
We, his promised advent waiting,  
Long to hear his welcome voice.

### **The Ins and Outs of Being There or Not**

The writer to the Hebrews urges the ecclesia to help troubled brothers and sisters and those who show hints they may be in a faith crisis. Our goal is to do what we can to foster a vibrant ecclesia full of zeal to be together and do the work of the LORD. The advice is to *“consider how to encourage one another in love and good deeds.”* (Hebrews 10:24). Let's explore what love and good deeds look like in a healthy, active ecclesia.

Although the major thrust of Hebrews 10 is to not give up on the Truth, we should also consider that one of the first signs a person is contemplating leaving is a decrease in attendance. So that's the opening we have to help our brother or sister lovingly. Even if someone is attending, there's often no real engagement in the service—tuned out, not opening Bibles or hymnbooks, attentive only to their cellphones, high-tailing it out of the hall at the end of the service. In these instances, a checkmark in the attendance book is

meaningless and equally as worrisome as non-attendance.

The statistics and the appearance of spiritual crises are merely symptoms of any number of problematic situations. It could be depression, disbelief, marital and family troubles, debt, feeling overlooked, inability to contribute, harassment, disagreement about gender roles in the ecclesia, not having “proper” clothing, lack of transportation, and maybe even having difficulty revealing reportable occurrences. Sometimes, disagreement with ecclesial policies can make staying away seem easier than working to reconcile. The exact reason may not be discernable, and this list is by no means complete, but we need to attempt to sort it out. The ecclesia must reach out and try to understand the fundamental problem, not simply react to the number of missed Sundays or apathetic behavior. Selecting suitable mentors and methods of reaching out, as well as strictly keeping the promise of confidentiality, are essential. Remember, acting “sooner rather than later” is the best way to avoid entrenched behaviors that are difficult to ameliorate.

If any actions taken to remedy the problem are handled in an unloving and inappropriate manner, the brother or sister's resolve to stay away may only be solidified. Some problems take more than a few weeks to settle—patience is fundamental. Give them the gift of time. There have been occasions when members who drifted off have returned years later. While they are alive, there is always hope God will prick their hearts.

## Be Diligent

The appeal in Hebrews 10:24-25 calls for serious thought about the welfare of other brothers and sisters—to encourage them by love and good works to not abandon their hope of joining Christ in the Kingdom. Perseverance in cherishing our fellow worshippers should be a community endeavor. Here are some practical suggestions for the ecclesia to implement:

- Have counseling plans in place or a professional counselor on call.<sup>6</sup>
- Match mentors to the needs of those deemed in danger of leaving.
- Hold regular social activities and invite everyone.
- Be hospitable. Open your homes.
- Arrange a Meal Train to alleviate exertion during a rough time.
- Set up a system to send cards and emails and make phone calls.
- Recognize every member's special occasions: birthday, baptism and anniversary dates.
- Reach out with friendship, not admonitions.
- Give positive advice rather than criticism.
- Train yourself to be empathetic to others' plights.

- Offer transportation to Meeting, Bible Class and Bible Schools.
- Pray for and with our brothers and sisters who are struggling.
- Engage in the *Tidings Magazine* EcclesiaSafe program.
- Positively reward Sunday School and CYC attendance for our young people.

## Love Bears All Things

What was good advice for the early Christians is good advice today. When we forsake the strict traditions of legalism and approach our members with love and grace, there is much good we can accomplish. These efforts support our earnest goal to be in Christ's Kingdom on that **Day** for ourselves and our loved ones.

*The one who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.* (1 John 4:16-17).

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<sup>1</sup> All Scriptural citations are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless specifically noted.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1984, 1986, Thomas Nelson publishers, pp. 222 and 311-312.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/november/why-and-when-did-christians-start-constructing-special.html>.

<sup>4</sup> W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1984, 1986, Thomas Nelson publishers, pp. 42 and 263.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://tidings.org/articles/a-case-study-how-one-ecclesia-started-a-counseling-program/>

# THE FEARS AND JOYS OF WITNESSING

*By Martin Webster*

**T**HE book of Esther is not one you would expect to find in the Bible. In its ten chapters, there is no mention of God and nothing about praise or worship. It is all about a young Jewish girl who won a beauty contest and was exalted to become the wife of the “all-powerful” king of the Persian Empire. She would enjoy a charmed life of prestige and opulence.

Having been strongly cautioned not to reveal her true identity, the situation that developed was potentially catastrophic! All Jews in the empire were under the threat of death! Esther, being queen, was in a position to help, but the stakes were high! The “crisis” of the story is when Esther risked her position and her life, yes, **everything** to go to the King, uninvited, and appeal to him to spare her people. She was the one person able to be a “witness” for her people and save them from annihilation. The consequence of the king not accepting an uninvited person was death!

The record tells us that before going to see the king, she asked all the Jews in Susa to fast for three days, including herself and her maids, in this request. There is no indication that they prayed, but fasting and prayer typically go together. Probably every Jew in Susa would be praying for the King to accept Esther.

Was there fear in Esther’s heart when she waited for the king to hold out the scepter? It is hard to imagine there was not. Everything depended on this one young woman in that one moment! Then, when she was accepted, she needed wisdom to fulfill her task.

None of us today are required to be witnesses to our faith as Esther was, but we may feel that the challenge we do have, although not life-threatening, is too great.

It is crucial to appreciate that Esther’s story is about the LORD God Himself, silently working behind the scenes, a principle that applies to us today as members of our ecclesias and as living witnesses to the Hope of Israel.

### Times Change!

The 21st century is quite different from the 19th century when our community was established and grew rapidly. That growth came not from members’ families but from the few members witnessing the faith they had recently found. Today, there is little interest in the Bible, so conversations about the Bible with those we meet are more complex. So, how do we initiate a conversation? Current events are a good start, but what do we say?

Alternatively, what do we say to another Bible believer, for instance, a Jehovah’s Witness or a Mormon who comes to the door? Do we say we are uninterested or let them leave because we feel inadequate in “defending” our understanding of first principles? If it is not a convenient time when such a call occurs, set a date to meet. Then prepare!

Yes, perhaps that’s the challenge! We do not feel we are prepared. We are not so well grounded in first principles and feel unable to “defend” our understanding of them. We are probably comfortable with the covenants to Abraham and David, but what about the devil, or the Deity of Christ, or his death as a representative and not a substitute?

In a conversation about Biblical topics, it is helpful to appreciate that relationships are important. Building a rapport with a person we are talking to will help us faithfully witness the hope of the gospel. Also, it is often better to ask questions than make statements. For example, in a recent discussion I had about the devil with a Jehovah's

Witness, he went to Job 1:6. *"Now there was a day when the sons of God came,"* the comment being that this was a "meeting" in heaven. "That's interesting," I said, then quietly asked, "Is there day and night in heaven?" Suddenly, the conversation stopped! "I hadn't

thought of that," he said. Then the following question: "So if there is no day and night in heaven, what is that part of the story telling us?" There was no clear answer. Discussions with this Jehovah's Witness continue with more questions to be asked in this endeavor to witness to the truth of the gospel.

After many experiences of preaching over the years, I have learned something important: none of us has all the answers, and humility in our discussions with others is essential. And it may surprise you that we may even learn something! This approach will certainly help us to reduce our "fear" of being a faithful witness to what we live for.

After many experiences of preaching over the years, I have learned something important: none of us has all the answers, and humility in our discussions with others is essential.

## Fear Versus Love

Why do we feel fearful and timid, thinking we cannot find the "right" words? But it might be simpler than that. Sometimes, a six or ten-word comment will stimulate interest in another person. And although that interest does not develop immediately, it is remembered, and years later, a

harvest from the seed sown bears fruit. Moreover, we may not even realize we **have** spoken the right words.

Our love for the faith we hold can be a strong motivation for witnessing in a different but highly effective way; it is in our deportment.

How do you behave

with others at work or school? How do you respond to their off-color humor, swearing, etc.? Appropriate discretion and wisdom are what Paul called a *"good advertisement for the Christian faith."* (Titus 2:5 J. B. Philips).

There have been times when brothers and sisters in school or at work have been observed doing the right thing. A colleague says, "There is something different about you." "Your language is different, and your comments about things are thoughtful." What is our response to such a comment? This situation is an excellent opportunity to explain the reason for this "difference," that our hope of the gospel is the foundation of what we are. But there may be something more profound. The apostle Paul talks about *"the gospel of*

peace,” and if there is a sense of peace with God in our heart, then that peace is perhaps what shows and prompts the question. This “peace” is something we should seek because having it will be reflected in our relationship with others. When such inquiries are made, we can confidently convey our clear sense of **knowing** how things will work out in the world and that there is an answer to the growing unrest among nations and societies. When that happens, somebody has indeed seen a “good advertisement for the Christian Faith.” Are you a single brother or sister? Consider this: your deportment could be the thing that attracts your “perfect” spouse. That kind of witnessing is indeed a joy!

There may be times when others ask us how Christadelphians are different from other churches. Instead of saying, “We don’t believe in going to heaven,” or “We don’t believe in the Trinity,” perhaps a better response is: “We don’t have a “head office,” and each congregation is at liberty to run their services based on a common set of beliefs that we all agree with. We don’t

have a paid ministry, so all talks at services are given voluntarily. We have a reading plan that enables us to read the entire Bible in one year.” We believe Christ will return to the earth to set up a Kingdom. The earth will be cleansed, and wars will cease. This kind of answer is much more inviting than “We don’t” and may result in more questions.

Can we embrace Paul’s comment to Timothy? “*For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.*” (2 Timothy 1:7 NLT). The power of love can conquer so much. Can caring for those we meet who are unrelated to the covenants of promise stimulate us to say, “*a word in season*”? Like Paul, we have all been “*entrusted with the gospel*” (1 Thessalonians 2:4 NKJV), and that means we must use it!

### Only One Talent?

However, it is all too easy to feel that we do not have a “talent” for preaching. We do not know why the “one-talent” man put his talent in the ground. Perhaps he was timid, or he could not conquer his inability to use that talent





profitably. Is this how we feel? Some of us are naturally bold and find it quite easy to speak about the gospel. Some of us are shy and retiring, finding it very difficult. But what is “*a word in season*?” What will give us the strength and wisdom to say the right word at the right moment? Never forget that preaching starts on our knees and not on our feet or with our tongues! Although we may not experience what the apostles experienced when Jesus declared: “*It shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak*” (Matthew 10:19), there is a measure of that truth in the lives of believers today. We could never imagine the Apostle Paul finding it hard to preach, but did he? He asked the Ephesians to:

*Pray for me also, that I may be given the right words when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may be able to speak boldly as I ought to speak.* (Ephesians 6:19–20 NET).

Is this request because there were times when he felt unable to be a witness for Christ?

In a dramatically different situation from Esther’s going before Ahasuerus, Paul was to stand before Nero to be a witness for his hope in a King—one that the emperor would typically see as a challenge to his own deity and authority. Was Paul nervous? Was there a feeling of timidity in his heart? When he stood before Nero, he risked **everything!** That “everything” was not just for himself; it was for the entire body of believers! We do not know what Paul said at that first appearance, but it was successful. His desire was granted, and he was given his liberty for some time. He continued proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God to all who would listen. However, on the second occasion before Nero, the result was different. He was condemned and joined the “*great cloud of witnesses*,” dying in faith, with his eyes “*fixed on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*.” (Hebrews 12:2 NET).

Do not be discouraged that sometimes you missed an opportunity to speak “*a word in season*” or think you spoiled such an opportunity, being rebuffed or laughed at. We will often meet people who will never change, regardless of what we say, but occasionally, we run



into someone eager to listen and learn. That person will hear the gospel of salvation through the voice the LORD gives us at that moment. We should never forget that preaching starts on our knees! As a saint with immortality given the task of preaching to the world, will you be as timid then as you are today?

Have you ever wondered about Mary Magdalene? In New Testament times, the testimony of women was counted for nothing. Women were never involved in any judicial procedure; they were simply considered unreliable. But Mary was the first to take the

news of the resurrected Lord to her friends, the disciples. What did they do when she told them? They treated the news as an *“idle tale.”* But what prompted Mary to bring such news to the disciples, regardless of what their reaction might be? It was her joy. Yes, ecstatic joy! That joy would have overcome any concern she may have had about being laughed at because she was a woman! There is a lesson here for us!

### **“Here Am I. Send Somebody Else!”**

Then there is Moses. When he thought he was ready to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, God said, “No.” When God considered him ready, Moses said, “No.” He asked that God send somebody else! Moses was afraid of facing Pharaoh! However, with God’s

help, he conquered that fear and was a powerful witness to the God of Israel. How many Egyptians left their country in the exodus because Moses was such a mighty witness to the God of Abraham? We don’t know, but perhaps some of them were faithful all the way to the Promised Land.

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It is easy to leave outreach to the “preaching committee,” but this is not a substitute for personal witnessing. Being a witness is like reading the Bible. It is all about being observant. Look for opportunities to speak, and have in mind the kind of comment that can be wisely made if someone

mentions social unrest or wars in the news. Do you feel you will not have the right words? Then, in a quiet moment, imagine the conversation and write down something you could say. Have the comment in mind because it will help at the time.

On Saturday, May 5, 1951, in the South London (England) ecclesia, a man with no previous strong Christian convictions was baptized, and almost immediately, he felt the need to spread the good news to others. He started (at his own expense) to put small advertisements in the “personal columns” of newspapers in several African countries. The advertisements were brief, inviting readers to take a Bible correspondence course. He received many replies and brought in

other brothers and sisters to handle the increasing volume of correspondence. In due course, baptism requests were made, and visits were made to those countries. Then, the word spread to East Asia, Russia, etc. As a result of one man's dedication, hundreds have heard the Faith, who then, in turn, preached the Faith to their family and friends.

Think of all those "foreign" countries where the Truth is flourishing. How many have become saints through the desire of one person to be a witness of the faith they had in their heart?

Then there is Sis. Mabel Briggs. In retirement, she advertised a Bible correspondence course in the Farmer's Almanac. Responses came from dozens of people across Canada, and she answered them all. Some correspondents completed the course but were content with their own church, so there was no further contact. Where possible, plans were made to visit some of these correspondents. Out of it all came one baptism, then two, then four. But what about those who had the full gospel presented to them but indicated they were content with their church? We do not know the long-term effect that correspondence course had on those people. Perhaps the fruit of that work will only be seen when the Lord returns.

For all of us Christadelphians, witnessing is being a "*light to the world*" and "*a city set on a hill*" (Matthew 5:14), and we are expected to "*occupy until I come.*"

Witnessing to our hope may be as simple as wearing a cap, which is the idea of a Canadian brother. He had

some made, as illustrated, and yes, people do notice and comment!



And on the back:



We all report to the same Master, but there will be only one performance evaluation for all of us at the same time! We are laborers in the Lord's harvest. Let's go out carrying the seed of the gospel, spreading it everywhere we go.

*Martin Webster,  
Kitchener-Waterloo Ecclesia, ON*

# IT IS FINISHED!

*By Dave Jennings*



**W**ELL beyond our comprehension are the magnificent workings of our God. Set against the entirety of our human experience, God has elevated rulers, overthrown mighty armies, and carefully revealed His plan and purpose to lowly men and women. He commanded the work of the ministering angels and now has put all power and authority under His Son. Meanwhile, His incredibly complex plan is achieved, without flaw, outside the perception of mortal men. The most extraordinary accomplishments

of men blush in comparison to the finger of our God.

Five unique milestones are revealed in God's plan in Scripture. Each phase of these plans involved incomprehensible attention to detail. When a milestone is accomplished, it brings great joy to the creation and the Creator. The angels rejoice as the work is successfully completed.

## **God Finished His Work of Creation**

**The first milestone** is the creation of heaven and earth. We can't fully imagine the brilliance of the natural

creation, which we are blessed to admire daily. I took a course in college in the early 1970s called “The Bible as Literature.” I remember the professor stating that the greatest throwaway line in all of literature was, “*He made the stars also.*” (Genesis 1:16). As we peer today through high-powered telescopes sent deep into our galaxy, we see images that stun scientists. The immensity of space and our tiny place in it humbles even the proudest of men. The diversity of organisms and plants was created with an intricate knowledge of their interdependence. Each detail of the thousands of unique species was designed with purpose. Finally, the pinnacle of creation was the formation of man. Man was the one part of creation with the capacity to reflect the character of God, along with a mind capable of spiritual thinking.

No wonder God commanded His people, Israel, to remember the Sabbath each week. His creative work spanned six days, after which He “*rested.*” So Israel was to remember this majestic work and give honor to God by a renewed commitment to holiness and obedience to Him. We, too, remember the magnificent work done on our behalf by our Lord Christ each week when we contemplate the second “*finishing,*” which was accomplished by our Lord. It spurs us on to be a holy people unto our God.

### The Focus on God’s Son

As we know, the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden set in motion a merciful redemptive plan centered on the Seed of the Woman, the Lord Jesus Christ. The **second milestone** was accomplished on the cross, but we should pause here to think about the amazing work of our God and His angels to enact the progress of His plan. His angels diligently delivered Noah and his family from the Flood’s destructive waters. God assured the patriarchs that even though they were sojourners, they would inherit the land forever through the Seed. We see the work of Jesus Christ foreshadowed in the Law. The prophets spoke of his work and how he was betrayed and suffered. David was told that his Seed would sit on his throne forever. All of these prophecies, down to the details, were executed flawlessly by God and the angels.

The obedience of His Son in all things was essential to His plan. The angels rejoiced when the promised Seed was born. Our Lord’s birth wasn’t just an ordinary birth; it was a crucial element of the plan. The angels would happily sustain him in all his trials, for his success was essential to all their work. Our humble Lord submitted to God’s will in all things. Though tempted like us, he fulfilled every detail prophesied about him. Finally, while breathing his

The fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden set in motion  
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last on the cross, he exclaimed, “*It is finished!*” (John 19:30).

Jesus’s death and resurrection fulfilled many prophecies. These are the very foundations of our faith. But what was “*finished?*”

### **The New Creation**

The natural creation ended for all in the grave. Recorded of all faithful and unfaithful men was: “*And he died.*” Mankind was powerless to reverse the consequences of sin. It would require our righteous Lord Jesus to provide another option for the natural creation. The **third milestone** is the establishment of the new creation in Christ Jesus. He was the “*firstfruits of them that slept*” (1 Corinthians 15:20), the Master of the new creation in his blood. His was not a creation of flesh and blood but the quickening of a spiritual life that no man could otherwise attain. The Lord Jesus, resurrected and exalted by his Father, now has been given all power and authority to develop the new creation. Our Lord controls the beastly nations, preserves Israel, and directs the angelic work in our lives, graciously calling us to salvation.

James wrote about this new creation, using natural creation language. Remember, in the natural creation, God created animals after their own “*kind.*” The horse had a kind that was separate from the kind of the cow. God’s natural creation differentiated creatures based on their kind. So listen to what James says about the new creation.

*Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.* (James 1:18).

This work is what Jesus is now doing, making up the firstfruits of the new creation. We are begotten, not only born. We are to be differentiated from those in the natural creation, for we are raised up with him in baptism and living on a new plane altogether. So, in addition to the work at a global level for the past two millennia, the Lord and his angels have been working at a granular level—pulling new kinds of creatures into the fisherman’s net.

But this work also has a terminus. Soon he will return to redeem his new creatures and begin the next major work on this earth. The Revelation tells us of this ending in dramatic form. In Revelation 16, the sixth angel pours out a vial. The vial brings about the drying up of the Euphrates and the Turkish power, enabling Israel to return to the land and for the northern powers to begin forming their confederacy. Frog-like spirits emerge from the mouth of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. Then Jesus uses language that closely matches the Olivet Prophecy, warning our generation to watch.

*Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.* (Revelation 16:15).

Finally, our Lord returns. The day so longed for by the new creation has



arrived. He judges the quick and the dead, and by his grace, we will be with him in that day. But still ahead is the great battle of Armageddon. Here, he demonstrates his great power and authority to the world, utterly destroying the attacking confederacy. With Israel saved and repentant, the seventh angel then pours out his vial into the air and exclaims with a great voice, “*It is finished!*” (Revelation 16:17 NLT—“*It is done.*” in other versions).

Another milestone is complete. The preparation of the firstfruits has been accomplished. Jesus is now prepared to move to the **fourth milestone**, ruling in righteousness over all the world.

### **The Millennial Rule**

As much as we may think we understand the magnitude of change in the Kingdom of God on earth, we must confess that we have little idea how he will transform this troubled world. There are so many things that all need attention. The environment is in danger. Nearly a billion people are hungry. The world is filled with non-religious and anti-religious people, and billions have a confused religion. The economy must be replaced. The nations must be tamed. All these changes represent massive work for the saints. Add to this that when Babylon and the Kingdoms of Men fall, the world weeps and laments over her. The world is not going to change easily, maybe not even willingly.

We can't imagine a world governed in righteousness by our Lord. Men and women will have unprecedented access to righteous teachers. All will know

Him, from the least unto the greatest.

### **The Work Complete**

The end of the Millennial work sees a final rebellion against the mortal believers. All the rebels are devoured by fire from heaven. The devil, the beast, and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. There is a second judgment. And the victory of our Mighty God is accomplished through our Lord when sin and death are finally destroyed and cast into the lake of fire. The complete plan and purpose of the Kingdom of God have been accomplished with the **fifth milestone**. The earth is finally as it should have been. The nations are gone. Sin and death have ended. The tabernacle of God is with men. All tears, sorrow and crying have been mercifully wiped away from our eyes.

Finally, we are told that he who sat upon the throne declares,

*It is finished! I am the Alpha and Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. (Revelation 21:6 NLT).*

Since the time the first organisms of life were placed on the earth, God has been in full control. But when a voice comes from the throne, we know that God's plan is complete. “*It is finished!*” How blessed we are to have this grand vision. How vitally important it is that we redeem the time we have now to serve Him with our whole hearts.

*Dave Jennings,  
Simi Hills Ecclesia, CA*

# OFFER OF PEACE

## DEUTERONOMY 20

*By Robert Prins*

**SOME** people have said the God of the Old Testament was a blood-thirsty and vindictive God. To back their view, they point out that the LORD instructed His people, Israel, to go to war and kill all the inhabitants of Canaan without mercy and then take over their land. But God's mercy extended much further than we might care to remember.

In His instructions as to how Israel was to behave during battle, God gave these instructions:

When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labour and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city (Deuteronomy 20:10–12).

The people Israel battled were not destroyed without a say in the matter. They were offered peace, but most refused and engaged Israel in battle, thus signing their own death warrant. When Joshua led the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, some of the inhabitants did make peace with them, and Israel honored that agreement for peace, going to extreme measures to do so.

Old Testament or New, God shows Himself to be a merciful God, giving sinners the opportunity to repent and accept His conditions right up to the last minute. We have the same choice. Have we made peace with God?

*Robert Prins,  
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# NOAH: SAVING YOUR FAMILY IN A DARK WORLD

## PART 3: ALL THAT GOD COMMANDED HIM

*By Dennis Bevans*

**A** quick reminder to pick up where we left off: Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD and was given 120 years of warning. He had the three kids mentioned by name at age 500, setting up a little math lesson we had been leading up to. Today we will continue at Genesis 6:10 and see what the math reveals to us in the story. Let's start with the names. Shem means "name" or

"renown" (i.e., v. 4). Ham means "hot" or "desert." Japheth means "open" or "expand." Chapter 10:21 tells us Japheth was the oldest of these three, and 11:10 tells us Shem was two years younger, or 98 when the Flood happened. Finally, Genesis 7:6 tells us Noah was 600 years old when the Flood began. Now, let's put that math to work.

**600 – 120 = 480**

Therefore, if Noah was 500 when the first of these three children was born, that would be 20 years after the warning from God that the population would be destroyed! Imagine Noah and Mrs. Noah talking to each other and saying something like, “The world is a mess, and God is fed up. The ecclesia is gone, and it looks like everything alive will die. Let’s have some kids, shall we?” What an amazing act of faith! Ready for the tragic part? How many were saved in the ark? Eight.

If you look at the names in Genesis 5 and pay attention to the ages of each listed child, you will see that the range is from 65-187. They also all had other sons and daughters. In fact, we know Seth had at least two older brothers by name (Cain and Abel). Noah, at 500 years, was almost three times as old as Lamech or Methuselah to have the named child and almost eight times as Enoch! Translation: Noah and Mrs. Noah most likely had other children (grandchildren, great-grandchildren, etc.), and perhaps many of them would have been lost in the world of darkness and perished in the Flood. Imagine hearing the taunts of your own children (in addition to your friends and family, including brothers/sisters, aunts/uncles, cousins, and neighbors) while you preach repentance. Then imagine their cries for help as they drown in the waters of judgment. Very sobering thought. Noah and his wife not only know what it takes to save their children but likely they also intimately understand how it feels to lose them! They would have understood the grief

that comes from watching loved ones walk away from the family because they have lost interest in the things of God.

We are not alone in our struggle. If you have ever felt alone in your walk to the Kingdom, the Scriptures are loaded with examples to show us we are not. Some instances are easier to see than others, but none may be as profound as this one. By its very nature, our topic takes on a somber tone—struggle before glory, or to use New Testament terms, the cross before the crown.

Genesis 6:11 adds, “*The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.*” This is the world in which they decided to have more children! Now we can imagine a slightly different version of the conversation as: “Honey, our kids are a mess, and our God has had it with the planet and its sinful ways; let’s have a couple more, shall we?” The word “*corrupt*” is the same word translated as “*destroy*” from verses 13 and 17 in this chapter, and in Hebrew, it means “to spoil or ruin.” This meaning is not soil contamination. It is the flesh running wild as the planet chooses to follow the ways of the lust of the flesh rather than the ways of God. This situation is an immoral population being inspected and judged, not an environmental study. Verse 12 adds, “*for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.*” The way to the Tree of Life was proscribed in Genesis 3:24. Access is denied if we follow the way of the flesh instead. We all want to be in control of everything in our lives, but the reality is that we have very little

actual control of anything. Recognizing that reality and surrendering to the Father is challenging but critical for all of us.

Revelation 11:18 says, *“And shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth.”* It is popular today to use this passage environmentally, but that is totally out of context (even if it is not a bad idea to conserve the planet). The most dangerous environmental contamination on earth is the population pleasing itself and disregarding God. Now, give them isolation, funeral news, and advertisements to match their own thinking, and you will have the post-COVID world here in 2024!

There is always a note of mercy in the tragedy of God’s work. He displayed patience in allowing the oldest person ever to have lived Noah’s grandfather (Methuselah) and Noah’s father (Lamech, who died five years earlier) to both die before the waters of the Flood began (more math if you want it in Genesis 5). Noah preached God’s message of warning, but it had been ignored long enough (Genesis 6:3, 7, 13). Remember, Jesus has warned us too. A few times, we have referenced Matthew 24:37-39. Look at the end of verse 39, *“and knew not until the flood came.”* “Knew” is the intimate word for knowledge in the Greek. It is not that they were unaware. They had heard it all before and casually

knew the message. Still, they did not intimately understand because they were not concerned with God’s order for their lives and salvation: too busy eating, drinking, and marrying to be distracted by the promises of Almighty God! Sounds like that could describe the state of the world today.

Let’s look at Genesis 6:14. Here, we see some cameos for future salvation and glory. The word “ark” in Hebrew is only used in one other place, Exodus 2:3-5, regarding the chosen vessel to

place baby Moses in to float him away from certain death and into the hands of a merciful God. Both these “arks” depict wood as a type for salvation (connecting directly to the cross). It should be noted that the first word, *“pitch,”* in this verse is the first use of the word usually translated as atonement. In Hebrew, it means a covering. This use

The most dangerous environmental contamination on earth is the population pleasing itself and disregarding God.

implies reconciliation and forgiveness, the fundamental objective of the Flood (and the crucifixion, for that matter). Note they were to apply the pitch (or covering) completely within and without, a tie to complete immersion in baptism through waters all around and a protective covering on the wood. Covering of sin requires the shedding of blood to have hope. The symbolism is astounding! This topic is quite extensive and would be a diversion we do not have the time to take, but it does deserve an honorable mention and I hope it inspires you to dig further.





Genesis 6:15 provides specific details: wood type, nests, covering, and dimensions because there were no ark builders by trade. However, what made them special was that they were willing and able to follow instructions from God—a good exhortational point for all of us. We all have talents and gifts that make us unique, and when properly applied to service toward God and His family, we can be amazing vessels to His glory. Yet even the most talented person is relatively useless if left to their own devices and self-service. Using eighteen inches as a cubit, the ark's dimensions in feet were 450'x75'x45'. That is the approximate size of a high school football field if you include the track and part of the stands around it. Not bad for amateurs. Compare that to those who assumed that “not even God Himself could sink this ship.” We know how both stories ended.

Genesis 6:16 in the RSV states, “*Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit*

*above,”* which suggests this was a row of windows on the top story for both light and ventilation (recall animals and their nests inside). God thought of everything. God also told them to make a door on the side. There was only one way in (God’s way), which is the theme of this whole episode. Two specific instructions: let light in and only one door—a nice tie-in to John 14:6.

Verse 17 adds a dramatic detail that is quickly lost if we do not stop and ask a couple of questions. How would water come from the sky? What is rain? We take that for granted today, but it was not so during the pre-Flood era. Look at Genesis 2:5-6.

*And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground. But*



*there went up a mist from the earth,  
and watered the whole face of the  
ground.*

Why do we need a weather report? The first actual occurrence of rain was noted in the story of Noah. Hebrews 11:7 also touches on this: *“By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet.”* Now, this gets even more interesting. This family was asked to build a giant box in the desert because water would fall from the sky! That would be the equivalent of my being asked to build a giant heat-resistant bomb shelter in the middle of Texas because there was a volcano going to erupt! I would look crazy, as I am sure they did to their family, friends, and neighbors.

Another intriguing and logical clarification at the end of verse 17 is limiting the damage of the Flood to things *“in the earth.”* Obviously, a rise in water levels would not be a devastating circumstance for fish. Aquatic life would have gone from an apartment to a mansion when that happened. The animals were not the target of this judgment of God. All animals, save man, are amoral, meaning they are not capable of sin. The animal kingdom operates on instinct, using stimulus and response without the governing pause of morality. People are capable of moral guidance, albeit some behave like they are not. The sinless animals would be condemned with the sinning human population. The blessing of peace to the people who chose God’s way was in grand and direct contrast to the way of the flesh and its turmoil and destruction.

The first use of the word *“covenant”* appears in verse 18. Like Jesus, Noah

had to save himself first to save others (think airplane instructions for parents with small children). A key ingredient for all of us to save our families in this dark world is to personally dedicate our lives to the service of and surrender to our God so that our closest contacts see it as a blessing. This mindset requires us to defy our nature. We all are naturally inclined to complain when things do not go as planned or expected. Those most likely to hear our complaints are the ones closest to us. How can we inspire our children to seek to be active participants in the ecclesia if we vent to (or even in front of) them at the dinner table? During the wilderness wanderings, this was the condemnation of a generation. Two different words translated as *“murmur”* are used interchangeably throughout the record. One literally means “to complain.” The other means “up all night.” Put together, and you have the ecclesia up all night complaining about the provision of God and the workers in His family. That is a little scary in our modern context if we are honest with ourselves. The covenant relationship we individually share is no different than the one other individuals have access to. That God is working in my life is more evident to me than that God is working in yours. Let’s assume that when challenges disrupt the harmony of the ecclesial setting, God is working to refine all of us by the trial, and our perspective will change as we overcome our nature toward his glory.

The next couple of verses show that Noah was to receive the animals, not collect them, a reminder God does the calling. The ark does not contain an

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aquarium, as the sea life is preserved naturally in the water. We cannot read this section of verses without commenting on the Gentiles being drawn from the sea of death to the saving wood and covering of God. In chapter 7, we will see that the remnant is elevated by water and preserved to convert the world to righteousness, which is certainly not a coincidence in these last days.

God brings the animals. Noah gets the food. This happening is a type of Jesus feeding the nations brought to him by God. Food for thought: at this point, all animals are temporarily vegetarian (Edenic state), or the carnivores are hibernating. It could work in several ways. The critical point is that God was in control because this living arrangement would never work without that. Like so many other things in life, we need to focus on what the Bible does say and not try to fill the space with what it does not. It is perfectly fine to have an opinion, but

we must never be so bold as to make our opinion the only one that would be reasonable unless there is a clear *"Thus saith the LORD."* Chapter 7 is a profound example of this. We will get there soon.

The closing statement from Genesis 6 is, *"Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he."* From warning to preparation to execution, Noah did all that God required. We pray that we can emulate this same attitude and activity as we see the day approaching.

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# PHARISEES TO THE RESCUE!

*By David Levin*

**T**WO critical situations arose shortly after the death of Jesus on the cross. Timely action, including appeals to Pilate, was needed to ensure a plausible account of the resurrection. Pharisees accomplished both, but the similarities end there because one action manifested courage and belief while the other stemmed from mistaken fear and disbelief. In very different ways, these two strategic moves sequentially ensured a credible belief in Jesus's resurrection.

You have probably guessed the first one of this pair: Joseph ensuring the burial of Jesus' corpse. The second is less obvious but equally important: assigning a detachment of soldiers to seal and guard the tomb.

### **Theological Context**

The precepts and doctrines of Biblical Christianity, as rational and sensible as they are, are not the core or basis of our belief. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is central and essential to Christian faith. Our Statement of Faith records some of the theological particulars, but the basis of all of them is the validity of **"God raised Jesus from the dead."**

The resurrection of Jesus is a historical event, not a theological doctrine. Not a subject for proof texts or logic. The resurrection must have convincing historical evidence. Any report of a dead person subsequently being

declared alive you would skeptically receive. Indeed, you would not accept as true any news report of a person dead for three days, revived to life.

First-century men and women who accepted the physical resurrection of Jesus had a different challenge to belief than we do today. For those who saw the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ, their challenge was: **"Can we believe our eyes?"** For those who heard the testimony and preaching of these witnesses, it was: **"Can we believe what these people are preaching?"**

For everyone after the apostolic age and the completion of the written Scriptures, the challenge has been: **"Can we believe what we read?"**

A religion based on an **incredible** occurrence needs **credible** evidence and documentation if believers of all times and places can and will confidently devote themselves to the implications of their belief.

### **Necessary Evidence of a Resurrection**

How does one provide adequate evidence that a dead person has become alive again? The most straightforward strategy would be to have the deceased person publicly appear. People would recognize the person and so acknowledge that a resurrection indeed occurred. Jesus did this, as reported by Paul (I Corinthians 15:3-7).

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This strategy only works if it meets two criteria. First, it must be demonstrated that the deceased had actually died, was stone-cold dead. You can't have someone fake a death, lapse into a coma, or disappear for a while, and then come back and claim he has risen from the dead. That won't convince anyone. Evidence of death is mandatory. Second, you have to have solid proof that the revived person is indeed the very same person as the deceased, not a double or someone who looks enough like the deceased to pull off a "switcheroo" somewhere between the death and the time of resurrection.

Substantiating the outlandish claim that Jesus was alive again required these two points of verification: that Jesus was indeed dead, and the resurrected person claiming to be Jesus was indeed him. I refer to these as the **death and identity criteria**.

### Evidence for Death and Identity

With this evidential framework in mind, we can now examine the two critical functions that Pharisees

performed. We'll look at the burial first. Placing the body in a tomb was necessary to demonstrate both criteria. The faithful act of one man, Joseph of Arimathea, ensured that the burial took place. Joseph "took courage" and asked Pilate for custody of Jesus's body. Along with Nicodemus, he prepared the body for burial and placed it in Joseph's own tomb.

These men were Pharisees of high rank, likely two of the most influential and powerful Pharisees at the time: Joseph, on account of his wealth and status, "*a respected member of the council*" (Mark 15:43), and Nicodemus, because he was "*a ruler of the Jews*" and "*the teacher of Israel*." (John 3:1, 10) Although both have been maligned for hiding their discipleship for fear of losing their status and being excommunicated, they stood up when needed. They utterly deplored their Pharisee colleagues' behavior—specifically, their machinating of Jesus' arrest and farcical trial (Luke 23:51, John 7:50-51). Jesus's deportment during those most distressing hours made it clear to Joseph and Nicodemus where their allegiance now lay.

No one from Jesus's close circle rose to see to his burial—no one among the eleven, his family, nor the group of women that had seen so often to his needs. Mary, Martha, Lazarus—where were they? Had they not heard in Bethany what had transpired in Jerusalem?

Was it because none of his close followers had funds for a burial? Or were their hearts so shattered they didn't even think of tending to the body? Did they lack the social status to request the body from Pilate? Were



they afraid to show themselves as Jesus's associates, in a sense denying their Lord as did Peter just the night before? Or was it something else?

One thing we do know. The disciples had no understanding of what was to transpire within three days. On several occasions, Jesus told them plainly what was awaiting him: arrest, torture, death, and resurrection. But this straightforward talk was incomprehensible to them. Mark 9:31-32, Luke 9:44-45, and Luke 18:31-34 affirm the disciples' veiled condition. Their messianic hopes were shattered, and their grief over the murder of their dear friend and teacher was incalculable. If any of them were to somehow see to Jesus's burial, it would have been, in their mind, making a permanent interment.

Not so for our two heroes, Joseph and Nicodemus. Their motivation for the entombment was their knowledge of and belief in the resurrection and, apparently, the immediate establishment of the Kingdom (Mark 15:43). They knew God could bring Jesus back to life again even if his body was cast into the flames of the Valley of Hinnom. Still, they were not going to

allow that repulsive scenario to happen. Their Lord was going to walk out of a tomb like Lazarus.

Aside from decency and respect, Joseph likely reckoned that the burial was essential for both of the evidential criteria of resurrection. If so, he had foresight commensurate with his faith. If not, he would later reflect on the astounding hand of providence that placed all the pieces in order. Either way, the body of Jesus was wrapped, spiced, and laid in Joseph's virgin tomb (John 19:38-40; Matthew 27:59-60).

### **The Worst Tactical Blunder Ever**

As Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were lovingly and faithfully preparing Jesus for burial, their unbelieving Pharisee cohorts were conferring among themselves on how to prevent a possible hoax. The Pharisees worried that the disciples would expect a resurrection on the third day, and when that didn't happen, they would come at night to remove Jesus's body. The next day, they would invite all to see the empty tomb as evidence of the resurrection (Matthew 27:62-66), "*and the last hoax would be greater than the first.*" The Pharisees' assumptions were completely wrong, of course, and their attempt to prevent a hoax actually

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ensured the best evidence for the resurrection!

Where did the Pharisees go off the rails? First, they mistakenly assumed the disciples planned on a third-day resurrection. Ironically, the Pharisees remembered Jesus saying this (although the gospels do not record that he ever said it in their hearing),<sup>1</sup> but this fact was, as noted above, hidden from the disciples. They could not have attempted to fake something they weren't ever aware could actually happen.

Second, the Pharisees greatly erred on their estimation of the disciples' character. Even if the disciples were still unsure as to what "*rise again on the third day*" meant, they weren't the kind who would fake a resurrection. More likely, they were all in hiding those few days, fearful of what might come next.

Third, did they really think his disciples would gain anything by faking a resurrection? Jesus' preaching was about giving up all to follow him. Would anyone give up all to follow their own hoax?

It was absurd of the Pharisees to think that even if the disciples did remove Jesus's body and leave an empty tomb, this would convince anyone of a resurrection. They needed only demand to see Jesus alive— "Show us that he's alive, not that you took his corpse away." It's hard to imagine this group of wise men being so utterly shallow on this matter.

However thin their reasoning was, God's hand was in this. The Pharisees appealed to Pilate to cooperate with their plan to stop something that would never have happened.

With a guard of soldiers to prevent disciples from coming by night and sealing the tomb to boot, the Pharisees had the situation under control. A real resurrection would certainly not happen, and if the disciples came to fake a resurrection, that could be squelched. If they hadn't come, then they would have been finished anyway, and there was nothing to be concerned about.

At this point, the greatest tactical blunder in the history of anything meets with the greatest of ironies. During the night, with no one else present to witness the miracle, the angels descended from heaven, opened the sealed tomb, and brought out the risen Jesus. Matthew's account makes it clear that when the women arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning, the resurrection had already taken place. No one but the band of Roman soldiers, unwitting witnesses for sure, saw this! Had they not been there, the story that the disciples came by night and stole the body would have been spread and believed by most people. The Pharisees hung themselves on their own rope!

The guard could not avoid reporting what happened and could not be other than convincing because of the extraordinary visibility, assuming bright lights were involved. Perhaps if there had been only one guard on duty, he could have been dismissed as hallucinating, but this unit probably numbered sixteen to twenty-four.

This scenario is so remarkable, yet it reads with convincing verisimilitude. The fearful Pharisees post a guard, and there are no disciples in the area. God performed exactly what Jesus said He

would, and the only witnesses were entirely reliable because they had every reason not to believe what they saw. And what they saw confirmed both evidential criteria: death and identity.

Without a burial site (the act of faith) there would be nothing to guard, and without a guard (the act of unfaith), there would be no reliable witnesses. Pharisees to the rescue, indeed!

### Lessons Learned

**1. Beware of stereotypes**—some Pharisees, perhaps many, became believers.

**2. Trust God**—Jesus had no control over these critical aspects of evidence for his resurrection. In life, he was always in control of every situation. Now, he was completely in his Father's hands.

**3. Providential activity can be obscure.** It might look like ordinary human affairs, but God designs the necessary outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> They did hear Jesus when he metaphorically spoke of raising the Temple in three days (John 2:19-21), but it's hard to imagine that from this alone, they deduced he spoke of his resurrection on the third day.

# WHO TEMPTED JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS?

*By Richard Morgan*



**W**HEN we start reading about Christ's life in Matthew's gospel record, we're struck by the wilderness temptations and the presence of the devil who appears on the scene without introduction. Who was the tempter in these wilderness temptations? Of note is the lack of reference to names used in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

for the devil, such as Mastema from the Book of Jubilees. The New Testament continues the language of the Old Testament, not the intertestamental Jewish writings.

Mainstream Christianity would tell us that the devil or Satan, as Jesus refers to him in the record is a malevolent fallen angel bent on turning Christ and his

followers away from God. On the other hand, we could go with the Jewish idea that Satan is God's prosecuting angel. Or maybe it's the *yetzer hara*, the Jewish concept of the evil inclination in Jesus, which we know he had because he came in the flesh.

Christadelphians are divided over the identification of the devil in the wilderness. Some take it as a literal individual acting as an adversary (Satan) and false accuser (devil) against Jesus, perhaps someone like the High Priest. Others believe Jesus to be alone with his thoughts in the wilderness, and the devil stands for Jesus' natural desires of the flesh, like the *yetzer hara*. The debate centers on whether Jesus' temptations were internal, external, or both.

We need to clear up one issue first. The temptations had to be internal; otherwise, they wouldn't have been temptations. If what the tempter said to Jesus wasn't appealing to him somehow, then the whole scene would have been a charade.

### Internal Struggle

There's a hint we're meant to look at Jesus struggling against the flesh by Paul's allusion to the wilderness temptations in Romans. Notice first, the connection between the beginning of Matthew 4 and the end of chapter 3. Ignoring the chapter division, chapter 3 ends with the voice of God declaring, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (3:17), followed by the words, "*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*" (4:1).

In Romans 8:14, Paul picks up on both verses when he writes, "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*" Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and he overcame his temptations by the spirit of God when he used the Word of God to combat what the devil threw at him. The verse immediately before this one in Romans says, "*But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*" We see Jesus as the supreme example of that—someone who put to death the deeds of the body, or as John summarizes it in his first epistle, "*the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life.*" (1 John 2:16).

Was that it, then? Was Jesus alone with his thoughts, and we're meant to see the devil/Satan as the *yetzer hara* or the natural desires of the flesh?

I do think Jesus was alone, but there's more to it than this simple explanation. There's a reason why the words "devil" and "Satan" are used in the record.

In Matthew's and Luke's records of the temptations, we're told that afterward, "*The devil left him.*" (Matthew 4:11). That's a problem if we stick strictly to the idea that Jesus' natural desires tempt him. Those natural desires don't leave unless Matthew tells us that after defeating the flesh for a time, the temptations have gone away. That can happen; we can have a victory over the deeds of the body, and then whatever it was that was tempting us ceases to be a temptation, at least for a while.

However, Luke records, "*When the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune*

time.” (Luke 4:13). Luke’s comment that the devil later returned will help us determine who the tempter was.

### **The Voice of God**

To continue our investigation, let’s return to the voice of God at Jesus’ baptism. Just before he entered the wilderness, the voice declared, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* Jesus, knowing the Scriptures, would have understood that God was quoting two passages from the Old Testament: *“This is my beloved Son,”* from Psalm 2:7 and *“with whom I am well pleased,”* from Isaiah 42:1. What would have gone through Jesus’ mind when he considered the context of these verses?

*“You are my Son; today I have begotten you”* (Psalm 2:7) is prophetic of Jesus as the Son of God. The psalm declares him as the promised Messiah, the one to whom God says, *“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”* (v. 8). Jesus would have known this was spoken about him and his eventual rule as Messiah on David’s throne. However, the psalm begins with the words, *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed.”* (v. 1-2). So, there was going to be antagonism towards the Anointed (Messiah/Christ), and Acts 4:27 tells us this was fulfilled by *“Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.”*

The second quotation from Isaiah 42:1 is also prophetic of Jesus as God’s Messiah. He is described in the verse as *“my chosen, in whom my soul delights,”*

and then we’re told, *“I have put my Spirit upon him,”* which is exactly what happened at Jesus’ baptism. The next couple of verses are directly quoted about Jesus in Matthew 12:18-21 and speak about his humility, that he *“will not quarrel or cry aloud,”* and *“a bruised reed he will not break.”* In other words, he was not to be a political or warrior Messiah but someone who would be gentle and harmless.

Notice that the section in Matthew 12 is bracketed by some of the antagonism prophesied in Psalm 2. In verse 14, we’re told, *“The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him”* and then in verse 38, *“Some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’”*

### **The Devil Returns**

These connections are important because of the word the gospel writers use for the *“temptation”* of Christ. When we’re told Jesus was *“tempted by the devil,”* the word is *peirazo*. Matt. 4:1 is the first time we come across this word in the New Testament. It’s the same word used in verse 3 and Mark 1:13 and Luke 4:2 in their respective records of the wilderness temptations.

Remember that Luke said the devil would return at *“an opportune time.”* When did that happen? Well, Matthew uses the word *peirazo* again in chapter 16 when *“The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.”* (v. 1). The next time the word is used is in chapter 19:3—*“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him,”* then in 22:18 when Jesus asked the Pharisees *“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?”*



Finally, “A lawyer asked him a question to test him” in 22:35. Each occurrence in Matthew refers to someone like a scribe or Pharisee. We see the same thing in Mark (8:11; 10:2; 12:15) and Luke (11:16).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all direct our attention later in Jesus’ ministry to the scribes and Pharisees as Jesus’ tempters. Since Luke said the tempter would return, and these are the only occurrences of the word *peirazo* in the synoptic gospels, a sound conclusion would be to say that the tempter in the wilderness was a scribe or Pharisee.

However, I do not think a scribe or Pharisee was **literally** there in the wilderness with Jesus, but that he was, in fact, alone. There are a couple of clues that we shouldn’t take the wilderness account literally. During the second temptation, “*The devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple.*” (Matthew 4:5). Yet, they were in the wilderness unless we think they took a journey together to Jerusalem. That is possible, but when “*The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory*” (v. 8), that most certainly is not something we can take literally.

It is more likely that Jesus, alone with his thoughts, pictured himself on the pinnacle of the temple and on a high mountain in his mind’s eye. The question is, why?

The wilderness temptations prepared Jesus for his ministry when he would continually debate with the experts in the law.

## A Rabbinical Debate

First, let’s return to the idea that we’re meant to think of the scribes and Pharisees when we read “*devil*” and “*Satan*” in the wilderness temptation narratives. Several Bible scholars have noticed that the records are written in the form of a rabbinic debate. For instance:

A typical rabbinical “show-debate.” Such debates were a form of midrash (meditation on Scripture) that displayed an authoritative figure responding to a series of challenges by citing the correct passage from Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

In form, this narrative is closest to a “controversy dialogue,”

and, in fact, resembles the kind of debate one expects from two experts in the law.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the wilderness temptations prepared Jesus for his ministry when he would continually debate with the experts in the law. He claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God and the scribes and Pharisees would put those claims to the test.

## Jewish Expectations of Messiah

Earlier, we looked at Isaiah 42 and Matthew 12 and how Jesus would be a humble Messiah. However, that’s not what the experts in the law and the general populace of Israel expected of their Messiah. We have many writings



from the time period that express Jewish expectations of Messiah, for instance:

*Psalms of Solomon* 17:21—See, Lord (the misery of 17:1-20), and raise up for them their king, the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel.

*Psalms of Solomon* 17:37—And he will not weaken in his days, (relying) upon his God, for God made him powerful in the holy spirit and wise in the counsel of understanding, with strength and righteousness.

*Philo On Rewards and Punishments* 95—There shall come forth a man, says the oracle, and leading his host to war he will subdue great and populous nations.

The Jews were expecting a militant Messiah who would remove the Roman occupation and usher back in the Kingdom of David. But Jesus didn't do that, and that's one reason they rejected him as their Messiah.

There's also a Midrash (*Pesiqta Rabbati*, 162a) that states Messiah would manifest himself on the pinnacle of the temple. While that is dated after Christ, it may reflect older Jewish tradition.

When taking all these things into consideration, imagine what it would have been like for Jesus as he embarked on his ministry. With Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 ringing in his ears, he goes into the wilderness. He knows he is God's promised Messiah. Jesus also knows, as Psalm 2 predicts, that he

will ultimately be king over all nations. But Isaiah 42 teaches him what kind of Messiah he needs to be.

The pressure on Jesus was that the people expected something other than what was taught in Isaiah. Knowing he **was** their king, the seed of David, the wilderness temptations presented him with an opportunity to train his mind to deal with those expectations. He would not use the power of the Holy Spirit incorrectly. He wouldn't make an open show of himself by doing something like jumping from the pinnacle of the temple. And he wouldn't bow down to the wishes of the people and become the kind of Messiah they wanted.

So, we could say the devil was a personification of the people's expectations, especially the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus dealt with while alone with his thoughts in the wilderness. Those same temptations would reappear throughout his ministry as the devil entered his life again, now in the form of the people, scribes and Pharisees, chief priests, and even his disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kelly. *Satan: A Biography* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2006) p. 87

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener. *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2009) p. 143



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We are focusing on solid preparation for 2025 instead. Please keep watching for news later this year and for future plans. If you are interested in participating next year, please visit the CBMA/CBMC website, where you can get a head start by volunteering to be a Truth Corp member or a North American ecclesia to host the training.

*Jan Berneau, CBMA Publicity*

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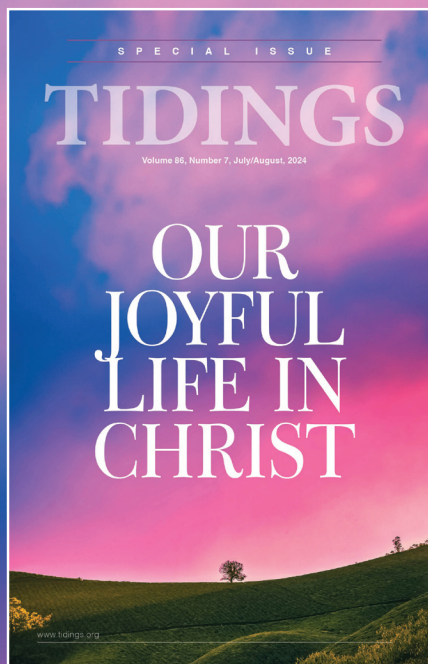
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