



# *Forerunner*

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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BY SIN**

# March-July 2019

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It is a well-known biblical principle that sin is addictive and ultimately enslaving. However, the apostle Paul uses an even more graphic metaphor taken from Roman penal practices, describing iniquity as a corpse to which a person remains shackled until he dies from its corruption. This repulsive image should spur us to redouble our efforts to repent of "the sin that so easily ensnares us" (Hebrews 12:1).

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# Why Hebrews Was Written

## Part Six

The apostle James boldly states:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. (James 1:16-18)

Despite a revived economy that provides steady incomes for many citizens, overall living conditions in the United States are not improving. It is not getting any safer to walk America's streets. The year is just over halfway expired, and the city I live in, Charlotte, North Carolina, has already exceeded the total number of murders it witnessed in all of last year. Charlotte has never been considered a crime capital, but it, too, has been inundated by the tidal wave of angry immorality that has engulfed America's conduct.

This article ties loosely to the previous one in this series, which was concerned with why

Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, highlighted the spiritual value of "treasure." A treasure's value lies in its power to motivate its possessor to give it his attention to protect and increase it. Jesus did not tell us what He believed the treasure should be. At that point in His message, His focus was on what a treasure's influence did to stimulate its possessor to build and protect it. Even so, Jesus desired that His brothers and sisters in the faith possess a treasure acceptable to Him.

We will begin by considering a general overview of the current state of American culture. Without a doubt, this world's Christians are not practicing their faith with the same high level of culture-stabilizing fervency as past Christians have. In fact, modern Christianity seems to have been overwhelmed. It appears to be flat on its back, ineffectively flailing away at its many objectives.

The religion obviously still exists, but it has no vibrant strength to provide moral leadership. Its enemies' many victories in America's courts suggest a reason why Americans, in terms of behavior, are hopelessly mired in a milling mass

of spiritually directionless confusion. They resemble people unsure of what they need to focus on to please God, regardless of what others do. Perhaps a simple answer is that most Americans do not truly desire to please God.

I believe that this uncertain conduct of members of “Christian” religious organizations is steadily eroding the fervency that Scripture expects of Christians. Sadly, Christian churches have become, in many cases, little more than social clubs containing nice people but not remaining steadfast and determined to glorify God through the righteousness that Jesus displayed and taught. The churches should be leading the way in glorifying God, but instead, they seem to be a “leading” means of confusion as to which way to go.

### National Immorality

Those in whom God’s Holy Spirit dwells and who have a growing relationship with Him can honestly and accurately conclude that the average American’s heart is not set on pleasing God. Jesus teaches in Matthew 15:19, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” Do not sinful behaviors like these typify much of American conduct?

We see on television and hear on radio of the fruit of this nation’s sinful behaviors. American news reports are dominated by brief stories on criminal statistics, listings of crimes of the previous day, and the political warfare between groups striving to wrest control of the governing bodies of the nation. The behaviors we observe in religious groups are not significantly different from those witnessed in the irreligious world. Neither group’s recent record makes one or the other considerably more appealing in terms of a peaceful and safe environment to live in.

Overall, what we see in progress is a major disaster of national immorality. Americans’ immoral conduct is mounting substantially, growing

ever more threatening to life and limb. In some regions of the nation, citizens who can withdraw from such danger zones are taking the opportunity. But where do they go? Across the board, America, whose standards of conduct were once higher than the rest of the world’s, is now thoroughly like the rest of the world!

The immoral conduct broadcast to us daily seems to be approaching what the Bible describes in Genesis 6. Genesis 6:5-6 catches the essence of life in those days:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.

This specific level of violent conduct has not been reached at this time, but we are moving toward it. To some degree, this increasingly perilous condition stands as an indictment against all of us because we have all contributed to this menacing situation. How? It is partly motivated by our collective lack of knowledge, understanding, desire, and/or will to seek God’s righteousness and pursue it as the Bible commands us to do.

Many secular-minded people severely question even God’s very existence, but God counters those challenges with a stern judgment of His own. Romans 1:18-20 states clearly that humanity is without excuse because God has made His existence known to mankind. As it is impossible for God to lie, it is a statement of fact: The proofs of His existence and overall governance are available in the observation of creation. Yet, no groundswell of Americans is searching for those spiritual truths.

Can today’s humanity change and practice a culture of morality superior to what we see in the world? Probably, because even this nation’s history shows an America with a much higher level of moral

***Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.***

—Genesis 6:5-6, NKJV

conduct among the general population. Within its histories of the Israelite peoples, the Bible shows a few instances of such a thing occurring.

However, the overall chances of reformation are slim because the Bible pointedly shows us that as long as man's self-centered, anti-God nature remains driven by its resident carnality, nothing will ever change! Romans 8:7 dogmatically states that man's carnal mind, the mind he develops from birth, is antagonistic to God. It is not subject to God by nature.

It has been this way since Adam and Eve. They sinned, bringing death upon themselves almost immediately after spending time in the presence of their Creator and being instructed by Him personally. This reality is evidence of how persuasive the anti-God nature we begin to take on at birth is. That one of their children murdered the other provides evidence that the same nature is passed on to us, their children.

Immorality has almost always been the dominant way of life for mankind, not just for Americans. The early chapters of Genesis show violence continued growing until God Himself put a stop to it by bringing the Flood on mankind. He wiped humanity out entirely except for one family of eight.

## Challenged by God

With the conditions we are living through as realities and the availability of the Bible as a resource, we are challenged to choose. God took this same approach toward ancient Israel, and His challenge remains in His Word to this day:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not

hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Since Jesus Christ walked the earth, history shows that never has any nation had such full and easy access to the Word of God as has America. Who then do we choose to believe, God or men? Even though God is not challenging the entire nation to choose at this time as He did Israel at that time in their history, the challenge remains for the individual citizen. If an individual sincerely desires to better his conduct before God and not follow the crowds eagerly throwing themselves into the pit reserved for those who do not want to please God, he or she can choose life.

The potential violence of immoral conduct across America deserves serious consideration and a positive response. Does our conduct follow the American pattern, or does it reflect Jesus Christ's teaching? Those two ways of life are not similar in character. The choices are clear. We have little excuse not to choose life.

## What Is God Doing?

Not only is the reality of His very existence questioned, but humanity also does not appear to be thinking about what God Himself has been doing since creating man and His seeming lack of revela-

*"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him . . . "*

—Deuteronomy 30:19-20, NKJV

tion and intervention to this present time. If a person sincerely seeks direction in his life, should he not be looking to God Himself? Is God actively moving toward the conclusion of a plan? Do we know what that plan is?

In a significant way, it is always helpful to consider such things from evidence provided by creation itself. The creation is so vast and filled with marvels of awesome creative and intelligent power, such as massive stars that so far surpass our system's sun as to make our solar system seem an afterthought. In addition, the creation is filled with life, imparted to it by its Creator, that is different from human life. Angelic life, of which Scripture informs us, is another example of life far different from human life. Animals, existing in thousands of different species, are not only different from humanity but also different from each other in many respects. The creation includes vegetable life, bird life, and aquatic life—such impressive variety! How can some think that this creative Genius made all this without a clear plan and goal in mind?

Indeed, the existence of the creation does not in itself provide a specific statement to give guidance for human behavior. But should its glory not provide people motivation to seek out more knowledge and understanding about the personality and character of its Creator?

In this culture, people are drawn to seek out and imitate those they admire for doing what they consider to be "great." Depending on the admirer's interests, the admired one might be an athlete, musician, entertainer, politician, even a religious personality. A reaction produced in the admirers is to make a significant effort to imitate the character and personal mannerisms of their hero. Considering what the Father and Son have already accomplished in producing this creation, why are people not giving enough thought to setting themselves to imitate Their characteristics? The lack of virtue among Americans is visible evidence that not many are thinking deeply about God and

His purpose.

Living in this American culture, one is surrounded by a constant, invisible pressure to go along with its sinful attitudes and conduct. People are living busy lives, but where are they headed? Is it purposeful and in alignment with the direction God has planned and teaches through Jesus Christ? Are they following God in their busyness?

We must conclude that their overall conduct reveals that Americans are not thinking of imitating Him as Christians are charged to do in I Peter 2:20-22:

For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth."

We readily see the evidence for this conclusion because what Americans think in their hearts does not result in ending immorality in their conduct.

American history shows that some of this nation's renowned Founders were sincerely religious, but theologically, many of them were Deists. They had some influence on the founding principles of this nation. Deists believe that God did indeed create all things, but partly because He remains unseen and seems inactive, they conclude that He then set His magnificent creation to operate on its own and walked away from it to observe the activities of mankind. Since He has a hands-off policy, they say, further labors on His part to improve mankind's behavior simply never happened. Though this is a simplistic explanation of Deism, it essentially summarizes its core beliefs.

Where does Americans' confused speculation  
*(continued on page 15)*

***For what credit is it if, when you are beaten  
for your faults, you take it patiently?  
But when you do good and suffer, if you take  
it patiently, this is commendable before God.***

—I Peter 2:20, NKJV

# Unity and Division: The Blessing and the Curse

## Part Four: The Twelve Curses

*“And let the peace of God  
rule in your hearts, to which  
also you were called in one  
body; and be thankful.”*

*—Colossians 3:15*

**T**he twelve curses recorded in Deuteronomy 27:15-26—those that were to be uttered from Mount Ebal by the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land—bear reviewing:<sup>1</sup>

### Curse 1:

“Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and *sets it up in secret.*” And all the people shall answer and say, “Amen.”<sup>2</sup> (verse 15; emphasis ours throughout)

The first-mentioned source of curses is not public or institutionalized idolatry, as practiced by the world’s religions, but *hidden* idolatry, that clandestine—maybe subliminal—elevation of anything before the true God. The reference is to the breaking of the first and second commandments (Exodus 20:2-6). In a modern context, such covert idolatry would include placing career, family, pleasure, or even, more subtly, social status in the church, above the worship of the true God.

### Curse 2:

“Cursed be anyone who *dishonors* his father or his mother.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 16)

The second curse revolves around the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). Exodus 21:17 mandates death for any person cursing either of his parents. It is noteworthy that *disobedience* to parents is usually not secret, but overt, often blatant. The word here, though, is not “disobey” but “dishonor.”<sup>3</sup> Dishonor can be a disguised response to parents. The hypocrite can feign honor to parents, all the while secretly loathing them.<sup>4</sup>

Along this line, Mark 7:1-13, where hypocrisy is a significant theme, becomes instructive. Some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem traveled north to ask Christ why His disciples do not follow the oral tradition. They are referring to the *halakha*, which Peter, addressing the apostles at the Jerusalem Council years later, calls “a yoke . . . that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10).

In His response to the Pharisees, Jesus calls His inquisitors hypocrites, honoring God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him.<sup>5</sup> They worship God in vain, He avers, since they have abandoned “the commandment of God [holding in its place] the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8). The sin of the Jewish leadership is hidden—not obvious to the populous, which frequently considered the Pharisees and scribes to be pious. Nevertheless, their sin remains one of grave consequence. Christ concludes in verse 13: “Thus [you make] void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”

Significant here is the fact that Christ cites the fifth commandment as His example in this discussion (verses 10-12), namely, the tradition that a man is released from the obligation of caring for his aged parents if he dedicates the funds to the Temple. Christ says that doing so is hypocritical and tantamount to dishonoring parents and to violating God’s law.

### Curse 3:

“Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor’s landmark.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 17)

Landmarks are usually nocturnal creatures. When they move, they frequently do so at night, secretly.<sup>6</sup>

The ongoing use of land obtained by the subterfuge of clandestinely moving landmarks is a superb image of “doing a lie”<sup>7</sup>—that is, living a lie. As such, it is an image of hypocrisy. Those who make use of land not theirs by falsifying boundaries might well benefit from the theft for generations. (For more details, see Deuteronomy 19:14.)

### Curse 4:

“Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 18)

See Leviticus 19:14 for more information about this deceitful act—one of trickery. Over the centuries, how many seemingly sincere teachers have misled uninformed and unsuspecting members of God’s church? Secularly, the phenomenon of “confidence-men” defrauding the elderly of their savings is a manifestation of this sort of thing.

### Curse 5:

“Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 19)

For details, see Deuteronomy 24:17.

### Curse 6:

“Cursed be anyone who lies with his father’s wife, because he has uncovered his father’s nakedness.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 20)

This is the first of four curses that pertain to sexual misbehavior. The example here is that of (usually) covert, incestuous relationships (see Leviticus 18:8; 20:11).

### Curse 7:

“Cursed be anyone who lies with any kind of animal.” And all the people shall say, “Amen.” (verse 21)

This is probably a catch-all reference pointing to

all types of sexual deviancy. In today's world, such sexual misconduct may be quite overt, "in your face," as it were. These days, people actually put such conduct on parade. In the context of God's people, such practices remain highly "in the closet." (For more details, see Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 18:23; 20:15.)

#### **Curses 8 and 9:**

"Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother." And all the people shall say, "Amen." "Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law." And all the people shall say, "Amen." (verses 22-23)

These two curses, the third and fourth curses relative to sexual deportment, are related. The fact that God dedicates a third of the Ebal curses to such matters—usually perpetrated surreptitiously—may indicate the stress He places on sexual purity (see also Leviticus 18:9, 17; 20:14).

#### **Curse 10:**

"Cursed be anyone who strikes down his neighbor in secret." And all the people shall say, "Amen." (verse 24)

In view here is furtively lying in wait (indicating "malice aforethought") with the intent to commit murder. See the sixth commandment in Exodus 20:13, as well as the prohibition of this specific kind of murder in Exodus 21:12. (For more details about murder, see Numbers 35:16-34.)

#### **Curse 11:**

"Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood." And all the people shall say, "Amen." (verse 25)

The reference is to taking bribes that lead to the death of the innocent, most often in a judicial context. Such bribes are by nature "under the counter," since the cornerstone of any properly functioning jurisprudence is impartiality (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 10:17-18, I Timothy 5:21; James 2:1, 9). Judges are to be unimpeachably honest, disinterested. This is, of course, in reference to the ninth commandment, forbidding bearing false

witness (see Exodus 20:16 and more specifically, Exodus 23:7-8).

#### **Curse 12:**

"Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." And all the people shall say, "Amen." (verse 26)

This last is a clincher, more expansive in scope by far than the other curses. By its substance as well as its position, it serves to point out that the previous eleven curses serve in aggregate as an encapsulation of all the laws of God. In fact, the curse will come to any person who violates any of the precepts of God's law. There is no room for hypocrisy. The apostle Paul may have had the twelfth curse in mind when he wrote to God's people in Rome: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13).

Confirmation of the law does not take place through word but through works, works of overt obedience. As a second witness, consider God's own orders to His prophet Jeremiah:

The LORD said to me, "Listen to the terms of the covenant. Tell the people of Judah and of Jerusalem that I, the LORD God of Israel, have placed a curse on everyone who does not obey the terms of this covenant. It is the covenant I made with their ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, the land that was like a blazing furnace to them. I told them to obey Me and to do everything that I had commanded. I told them that if they obeyed, they would be My people and I would be their God. Then I would keep the promise I made to their ancestors that I would give them the rich and fertile land which they now have." (Jeremiah 11:1-5, *Good News Translation*<sup>8</sup>)

Through the same prophet, God tells us that appearances do not fool God. He sees through the mask, recognizing reality clearly: "For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes" (Jeremiah 16:17).<sup>9</sup>

In the last part of this series, we shall bring the Ebal/Gerizim division home, as it were, looking at its implications for the people of God's church.

—Charles F. Whitaker  
(*Endnotes on page 14*)

# This Body of Death

*Many people consider Romans 7 to be among the most critical chapters of the New Testament. In it, the apostle Paul clarifies that God's law should be our primary resource for gaining insight into the manner of our Christian walk, and how our Father grants us discernment through our calling that exposes sin.*

Paul's writings also illuminate how dominating sin can be, requiring life-long struggles to overcome its destructive effects. Even though we become new creatures "in Christ," we still must always contend with our carnal nature that currently coexists disagreeably within each of us (Romans 8:7).

Therefore, we direct our warfare toward our carnality—our human nature, our flesh. Over a lifetime, corrupted and dysfunctional habits in opposition to God have become engrained into our respective characters, separating each of us from God and wreaking havoc in our personal lives (Isaiah 59).

In Romans 7:15-19, Paul's emotional words capture a depressing description of the trouble that sin causes:

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.

For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

### A GRUESOME METAPHOR

Then, in verse 24, Paul utters a question that is the focus of this article: "O wretched man that I am! *Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" (emphasis ours throughout). *The Amplified Bible*

paraphrases this question: “Who will release and deliver me from [the *shackles* of] this body of death?” It is this metaphor alluding to our shackled condition that we will study further, hopefully gaining deeper insight into the ravages of sin.

Certain ancient Roman authorities were infamous for their sadistic manner, particularly when dealing with criminals. Most people are familiar with the gruesome and inhumane practice of crucifixion, but many consider another method of punishment even more shocking and appalling—one meted out by Roman tyrants most frequently upon murderers: They shackled the convicted killer to the dead body of his victim.

We gain some insight into this heinous practice from the poet Virgil, who described it in his *The Aeneid*, Book 8, starting on line 485:

The living and the dead at his command  
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,  
Till, chok’d with stench, in loath’d embraces tied,  
The ling’ring wretches pin’d away and died.

Shackled to his victim, eye-to-eye, hand-to-hand, waist-to-waist, and foot-to-foot, the murderer—still

very much alive—was forced to live out the remainder of his life directly bearing the weight and the putrefying stench of the dead body. In time, of course, the rotting flesh of the corpse would become rife with disease, infecting the killer and leading to a most horrible and grisly end.

Such vile disciplinary measures typically became

*The living and the dead at his command  
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,  
Till, chok’d with stench, in loath’d embraces tied,  
The ling’ring wretches pin’d away and died.*

VIRGIL

well-known in the Roman provinces by design, all the better to keep a foreign populace in check. As not only a Roman citizen from a prominent family but also classically educated, the apostle Paul was likely aware of this, as well as most other Roman laws, customs, practices, and traditions. Indeed, he wrote several of his epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) while incarcerated by the same government. He had faced Roman punishment

on several occasions (see, for instance, II Corinthians 11:23-28).

It may very well be that Paul recognized the value of the metaphor this deplorable punishment depicted: a man being shackled to and destroyed by the cumbersome weight and the horrific nature of his sins. Such a metaphor is an effective tool, warning us never to underestimate the power, the weight, the gravity, and the sordid nature of sin that Satan will use against us (Genesis 3:13; 1 Corinthians 7:5; II Corinthians 2:11; 1 Peter 5:8).

## SURROUNDED BY SIN

Consider also that we are surrounded by and

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.*

*“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”*

ISAIAH 55:9

constantly in touch with sin throughout our physical lives (Genesis 19:4; Isaiah 1:4-6; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:10-18). Just as the dead body eventually infects and destroys the healthy body to which it is attached, so also does sin infect each of us if not overcome. Death is not immediate but instead slow and painful. Direct punishment from God is not typically swift either (Ecclesiastes 8:11), but an unrepentant life of sin slowly poisons us, separating us from God, our only dependable protection (Isaiah 59:2).

Most, if not all, Christians lack the understanding of the depth of hatred God has for sin. In Isaiah 55:8, God tells us that His ways and thoughts are not at all like ours, and then He declares in verse 9, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Amos 5:21 displays God’s refusal to “savor” the sinful way the Israelites were keeping His holy days, with the implication that these sins were an offense to His sense of smell. “I hate, I despise your feast days,” He declares. The Israelites were spiritually dead, and their sins repulsed God, for He is holy, clean, and pure. He cannot and will not come into contact with sin.

## UNCLEAN AND DEFILED

Have you ever touched a dead animal? What was your response? The very thought of having to touch a dead animal, be it a squirrel, a mouse, or even a common, well-cared-for domesticated pet, is revolting to most people. Many of us will quickly steer our car around the body of a dead animal lying on the road ahead of us to avoid even making contact with it with our tires! Why? Because we consider it repugnant and nauseating. Think for a moment about the revulsion we would feel if a small, dead cat were bound to us for only a few minutes, much less a few weeks!

Closely related is the teaching that appears in Numbers 19:11-13:

He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean. Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD. That person shall be cut off from Israel. He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness is still on him.

Because of this instruction, to an Israelite, a dead body was extremely tainted and profane, requiring both the passage of time and two separate washing rituals before the defiled individual could be declared purified. Without this detailed purification process, a defiled person would be completely cut off from Israel—and thus cut off from God, so great was the potential danger of profaning the Tabernacle of the Lord.

As difficult as it may be to consider the repugnancy of rotting flesh, a potent metaphor for our sinful nature is called for to warn us of the dangers

of relaxing our standards within the context of our relationship with God, the purest of all beings. Since we are always surrounded and bombarded by sin, it is only too easy for us to let our guard down and to forget how our transgressions cause our Creator to regard us as unfit to be in His divine presence.

### COMPLACENT AND OBLIVIOUS

Consider the heavy smoker or the lazy homeowner who fails to maintain his pet's litter box. After long-term exposure to the foul-smelling tobacco smoke, the typical smoker becomes oblivious to the odor fouling his home, his car, and his clothing. After long-term exposure to the excessive bodily waste of his cute, furry companion, a complacent pet lover becomes used to the malodorous assault on his senses. In time, the offensive smells seem to disappear from their nostrils altogether.

Such is the manner of our sins if we are not willing to heed the strong warnings from someone wise like the apostle Paul. Without constant contact with God, we risk becoming used to—and even comfortable with—our defiled manner, and sadly, used to the separation from God. At this point, we are in grave danger. The author of Hebrews, most likely the apostle Paul, writes, “[H]ow shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation . . . ?” (Hebrews 2:3; see Joshua 23:11-16; Deuteronomy 4:9). Later, he adds, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12; see II Samuel 12:10; Isaiah 59:2). Hence the need for such an intense and disturbing

*“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”*

HEBREWS 3:12

reproach.

The story of King David and Bathsheba comes to mind as a great and tragic example of the potential dangers of our spiritual complacency (II Samuel 11-12). David was a righteous man—a man after God's own heart—and deeply loved by God (I Samuel

13:14; Acts 13:22; Psalm 17:8). He was not prone to practice sin, but he grew complacent—perhaps too self-assured—and committed a great transgression against Uriah, indeed, a sin against God (II Samuel 12:9). Moreover, he remained unaware of the

*“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?*

*I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”*

JEREMIAH 17:9-10

stench of his offense until Nathan the prophet pointed it out (II Samuel 12:7). Psalm 51 reflects his shame and frustration upon recognizing his defiled state.

### RIGHTEOUS SENSITIVITY

The closer a person draws to God, the more opportunities he has to grow in righteousness (Isaiah 55:3, 6). The more righteous he becomes, the greater appreciation he has for God's law and the more sensitive he will become to his stench and corruption. Paul's words in Romans 7, written about twenty years into his conversion, reflect his own growing sensitivity to sin, leading to his famous utterance: “O wretched man that I am!”

However, we can easily be overwhelmed by the revelation of our tainted condition. We may feel shame and self-disgust and tend to withdraw from our fellowship within the Body of Christ, drifting away from our only hope—our only solution—God. We are readily discouraged, and if we are not careful, such discouragement often leads to even more sin, further drifting, and a vicious circle that can take us down quickly. We will always struggle with our carnal nature, but just as Paul found encouragement in his relationship with Christ, we, too, can turn to our divine Brother. In Him, there is always hope

## Prophecy Watch

*This Body of Death*

(Romans 7:25)!

Because of our carnality and our deceitfully wicked heart (Jeremiah 17:9), we will always struggle to see our sins as God does, but that is our goal. With God's help, a lot of patience, and persistent effort, we can learn to become more righteous. With daily prayer and Bible study, we can discover how to become more holy. With hard work within the fellowship of the Body of Christ, we can understand what it means to become pure as God is pure. While we must learn to respect and fear the corrupting power of sin, we can become more aware of, intimate with, and faithful to the superior power that God grants His children to overcome its corrupting effects (Romans 6:5-6).

We do not need to remain weighed down by the dead body of our sinful, carnal nature. We must, instead, call upon the faith that our Creator provides each of us and learn to trust in His promises. He will be faithful!

If we remain faithful, enduring to the end, God, through Jesus Christ, will completely renew us and cleanse the stench of our sinful ways, releasing us from "this body of death." Then, God willing,

we can become a sweet savor in His nostrils.

Finally, the author of Hebrews provides us with the perfect summation and conclusion in Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares [and shackles] us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

—*Ted Bowling*

*O wretched man that I am!  
Who will deliver me from this body of death?  
ROMANS 7:24*

## Ready Answer

*Unity and Division: The Blessing and the Curse*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Verse 14 provides important information as well: "And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice." Commentators agree that it was probably only the men above twenty who actually took their places on the mountains. After each curse, all the men—not just their elders—answered, "Amen," thereby transferring the curses listed in Deuteronomy 28 to the Israelites in the Promised Land. For more about the use of the word "amen," used to ratify a vow, see Numbers 5:22.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew verb is *qalah* (Strong's #7034), which appears only six times in the Old Testament, the first time in Deuteronomy 25:3. The translators of the King James Version have rendered it as "seem vile" (once), "shall be condemned" (once), "lightly esteemed" (once), "despised" (once), "base" (once), and "sets light" (once).

<sup>4</sup> The Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32) may be applicable here. The son who answered his father that he would go to work in the field but did not follow through was hypocritical.

<sup>5</sup> Christ is quoting Isaiah 29:13:

"And the LORD said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men."

<sup>6</sup> The protection of boundary markers provided by God's law bespeaks the propriety of the private ownership of property. When wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites owned no land. Boundaries had no real significance to them, aside from the boundary of the camp at large. Now, coming into inheritance of the Promised Land, and its concomitant subdivision among the tribes, the sanctity of boundary markers becomes vital to the efficient and peaceful functioning of society.

<sup>7</sup> See Revelation 22:15, *Young's Literal Translation*.

<sup>8</sup> *Good News Translation*® (Today's English Version, Second Edition) Copyright © 1992 American Bible Society. All rights reserved.

<sup>9</sup> See Psalm 90:8. The light of God's presence displays secret sin: "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence."

*(continued from page 6)*

lead a person in terms of governance of a nation, a business, or an individual's conduct? Is there any specific guidance from a Creator God as to the conduct He expects and according to which He will judge? Where does a conclusion to that question lead those who ask and answer it?

It is not true that nobody is thinking about God. On the contrary, many do think about God. It can be truthfully stated that Americans have been doing so ever since the nation was founded, though they have never had a central set of theological principles or authority to agree upon and use for guidance. A major problem, it seems, is that it is every man for himself (Judges 21:25). It is not at all like the ministry of Jesus Christ, during which He led the apostles unerringly through His conduct and message.

The manifold choices of which direction to move in seem only to multiply the individual ideas of how life should be lived. It leaves the individual stuck with what an obviously confused mankind has produced to this point in time. However, with greater numbers and intensity of troubles, the clear forecast is that only more of what has already been produced will continue to be produced. The moral and spiritual diversities will only worsen. Has man, of his own volition, ever shown himself capable of turning from the pattern of immoral behavior humanity has displayed from the beginning to follow God?

The good news is that the Deistic Founders were wrong in their religious speculations. We can state this with confidence because God has decreed that mankind is without excuse as to His existence and nature. Their conclusions were mere insignificant guesses drawn from human reasoning, not from the authority of God's Word. Jesus says plainly in John 5:17 that God has been active all along the way: "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working," a profound revelation considering this subject. Mankind is so focused in the wrong direction that

it is not looking for help in the right direction. Nor have people shown much willingness to believe and apply what is readily available in almost every home in the nation.

## Why Did God Create?

God did not construct this hugely profound and complex universe with all its laws, forces, energies, and life merely for His own amusement. He is engaged in a serious purpose. I believe, not only is there a Creator God, but He created with a specific purpose and plan to carry out His objectives. In His Word He tells us what He is doing. What would we think of the wisdom of a God who was merely "winging it" just for the fun of it at our expense?

He has a robust, reliable program, and He has never deviated from it. This purpose has continuously consumed most of His time and energy since He began working toward its fulfillment, whenever that was. He has anticipated every eventuality His enemies, including Satan and mankind, might devise. He is not one to let responsibilities go undone while He wonders what humanity will do.

His plan contains one element that is particularly bothersome to many humans: It includes seemingly unknowable time elements within it. This is trying to a person's faith. Time is of special concern to humans, partly because we are subject to death. Nagging anxieties build within us that life is slipping away from us without our having accomplished anything meaningful. Perhaps this anxiety exists in people due to their ignorance of His purpose. And, once we do know it, we rue the fact that we have accomplished so little that is meaningful because we are so self-centered. We have wasted much of our lives.

Near the beginning of the twentieth century, Irish composer Victor Herbert put to music in the operetta *Naughty Marietta* a poem by Rida Johnson Young that expresses the fervent yearning of countless

***"Let Us make man in Our image,  
according to Our likeness; let them have dominion  
over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and  
over the cattle, over all the earth and over every  
creeping thing that creeps on the earth."***

—Genesis 1:26, NKJV

numbers of people since Adam and Eve.

Ah! sweet mystery of life, at last I've found thee;  
Ah! I know at last the secret of it all;  
All the longing, seeking, striving, waiting, yearning,  
The burning hopes, the joy and idle tears that fall!

For 'tis love, and love alone, the world is seeking;  
And it's love, and love alone, that can repay;  
'Tis the answer, 'tis the end and all of living,  
For it is love alone that rules for aye!

The thoughts are grand; the sentiments are sweet; and the object is, for the most part, a worthy pursuit. However, it still does not correctly answer this ages-old mystery of why we were born into this world so subject to thoughts about the passage of time and ignorant of God's stated purpose. Within the context of the operetta, the love proclaimed in the poem and acted out on the stage is merely romantic love between a man and woman.

God's purpose for this awesome creation is far grander. It is exhilarating to the highest degree and deserves all the fervent and steadfast devotion we can pour our thoughts and energies into. The astounding revelation of this great mystery is a major message presented in the pages of the Bible. It is so important to God, as well as to our well-being, that He does not allow the first chapter of Genesis to conclude without providing a statement about it.

Countless people have spent years of their lives searching for the answer to this question. If they would only believe what the Creator God Himself said in Genesis 1, they would begin to progress toward understanding that the problem is not with God but with man's unwillingness to believe and to continue to search out the details. This article will provide a simple, no-nonsense overview of God's purpose and plan, one that is not confused by technicalities of language that complicate the simple but marvelous wonder of what He is working out.

### Early Clues

The first clue, as mentioned above, appears in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Most people's thinking is almost invariably limited to what immediately follows, the creation of Adam and Eve. This concentration on them is natural, but it is most assuredly not the whole story of God's creative purposes. It is only the beginning of God's intention, a first step, as it were. His purpose is that we become as fully manifested in His image as He was when He made that pronouncement and remains to this day. The Father and Son are eternal spirit Beings of awesome intellect, character, power, and purpose.

We find another clue to God's intention in Genesis 3:22 after Adam and Eve had eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God says, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever. . . ."

Do we catch the full effect of what God says here? He says that from the beginning, He has intended that mankind live forever! He means "forever" even as He and the Son live forever. The tree, of course, was only a symbol, and its fruit would not literally impart everlasting life. However, from the very beginning, it was His ultimate purpose that, when His creative efforts are complete, those whom He created as physical human beings would live forever in His image. The creative methods God must employ to ensure that we will live as God lives are the most difficult and time-consuming part of His operation.

***"Behold, the man has become like one of Us,  
to know good and evil.  
And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the  
tree of life, and eat, and live forever. . . ."***

—Genesis 3:22, NKJV

Genesis 17:7 provides further evidence as God reaffirms His covenant with Abraham, adding circumcision as the outward sign of the inner intention to be faithful to it: “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.” For them to enjoy everlasting possession of the inheritance, they must also have everlasting life! No matter where we search, except for Christ Himself, no human yet has lived an everlasting life.

We have only progressed through the first seventeen chapters of the first book, and significant clues about what God has been doing and continues doing stand revealed. Do we believe them?

### Everything Begins with God

We often fail to give much consideration to—and thus overlook to our detriment—that this universe is God’s creation. It did not arise from nothing. It was designed, took shape, and was given life from within God. Equally important is that He governs His creation. He has overseen and administered it from the moment it came into existence. He brought it into existence in a massive procedure through His Companion, the One the Bible reveals as Jesus Christ, the Word. The problem is not that God has failed to communicate these truths but that *we* fail to believe Him or take what He says seriously enough to do something about His revelation.

The Creator God is carrying out what every living thing does, except for the angels, whom He also created through Christ. In His case, He is systematically reproducing Himself. He is expanding into a Family in His image to share what He is and does with others of His eternal kind. In one sense, the poet was correct: God is love, and His love is guiding the salvation of mankind to be part of what God is producing in those who believe.

Standing by itself as truth, this revelation is mind-boggling. However, when we learn of

mankind’s activities through the histories of nation after nation, we begin to grasp why it is taking so long for Him to accomplish His purpose. God’s plans for the size of His Family and the level of godly character He must create in each individual are of such a high degree that lengthy periods of time are critical to the process. God does not want anyone to fail to achieve His purpose, as Peter reminds us in II Peter 3:8-9:

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Consider the initial size of the Family God is creating (see Revelation 14:1-5). Even for God it takes a great deal of time to bring a human to birth, allow him or her to mature while developing a mind able to understand life’s realities and responsibilities, reveal Himself and His purpose, and finally bring him or her to repentance. Now multiply this by 144,000.

Sin is the primary element that has caused God’s purpose to take so long. God did not create us so that we had to sin. He certainly created us so that we could choose to sin. Eve deliberately chose to take of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Her desire to eat of it was so obvious to Satan, it was as if it were “written all over her face,” motivating him to ask that leading question in Genesis 3:1.

And Adam, watching this happen, failed in His responsibility to God and to Eve, not exercising His God-given authority, rightful leadership, and guidance of her. He was not deceived (I Timothy 2:14). He, too, chose to sin, making her an idol before God, and they both were ushered out of Eden into the world outside. God was not taken by surprise by their choices. Within God’s creative process, a

***“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.”***

—Genesis 17:7, NKJV

human being must overcome the desire to sin to reach the level of godly character God desires to be created within him or her.

Recall that it was God who chose Noah to build the ark and preserve His purpose for humanity. God chose Abraham from all the families descended from Noah. God confused the languages at Babel, motivating mankind to spread over the entire earth. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau even before they were born. God chose David, also of the progeny of Noah and Abraham, from whom the family line of Jesus Christ would spring. We can clearly see that as time moves forward, it is always God who takes the lead in pressing toward the completion of His purpose.

Under Jesus, this pattern did not change. He was still God though in human flesh. He tells the apostles in John 6:70, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" He reinforces this statement in John 15:16: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you." He adds in verse 19: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

God is nowhere suggesting that those He has chosen were any better than others. God chooses no one due to having earned His election by his good works. God Himself, we have seen, is the Prime Mover of His purpose. The earth and its people are His creations, and He has not entrusted appointments to further, spiritual creation to anybody except for Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son.

## Open Season on Salvation?

John 6:44 contains an astounding statement delivered by Jesus: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Do we believe it? His words more than suggest that God is choosing people

from the human population worldwide one person at a time!

On the other hand, human religion teaches that people are free to volunteer themselves to be "saved," and God will accept them based on their desire. People sincerely believe that God is almost desperate to "save" people. If that is so, who is really in charge? From what we have seen, God personally devised, oversees, and works out His purpose through His Son.

As mentioned earlier, Revelation 14:1-5 reveals that the first resurrection will contain 144,000 resurrected children of God to work under the leadership of Jesus Christ. To whom will be entrusted the evaluation of their character? Do not the Father and the Son have the last word? Or will it be entrusted to those who volunteer in a moment of sincere elation but who probably have little idea of the immense value of the goal or the depth of sin remaining within them? Such people have little grasp on what is really taking place.

Mankind's studies into the intricacies of creation reveal that God is a perfectionist in what He sets His hands to do. This creation abounds with the wonders of God's mind. The same perfectionism extends to His spiritual creation. On top of that, have the people of this world not read in Revelation that, not only is God creating a Family in His image, but He is also forming a government to exercise worldwide power to His glory?

We are beginning to see the blurred edges of the scope of why God's purpose is taking so much time to bring to pass. Creating character in His and His Son's image is not something He can do in a moment, or as Herbert Armstrong used to say, by fiat. Those entering His Kingdom must be trustworthy to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree. That takes time to develop.

In Christian love,



*"You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you."*

—John 15:16, NKJV

# The Pope Edits Jesus

In Catholicism, the highest authority—besides perhaps God Himself—is the so-called Vicar of Christ, the Pope. Catholic belief says that when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, with papal authority, the Pope is infallible concerning faith or morals to be followed by the whole church. In this way, he is superior to the Bible, as he can redefine and even replace biblical doctrine through his declarations from Rome. Many popes have used this authority down through the centuries, adding and taking away from Scripture (for example, Sabbath observance, Mary worship, purgatory, holy wars, papal authority itself, etc.).

It should come as no great surprise, then, that the present pontiff, Pope Francis, has approved a change in Jesus' model prayer, traditionally called "The Lord's Prayer," in Matthew 6:9-13. The emendation is a small but significant one in the wording of verse 13, which reads in the New King James Version, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." With Francis' go-ahead, Catholic Bibles—at first only Italian ones (although French, Spanish, and Portuguese Bibles have already implemented the change)—will render the verse as, "And do not let us fall into temptation. . ." (emphasis ours throughout).

The Vatican approved the change following, they say, sixteen years of research by scholars who found the current translation mistaken "from a theological, pastoral, and stylistic viewpoint." Evidently, the Catholic experts cite "the Aramaic original" to claim that Jesus' spoken words might have carried the "permissive sense." (Theologically, the *permissive sense* is when God allows or permits circumstances from which He would normally shield a person. For instance, in I Samuel 16:14, "a distressing spirit from the LORD troubled [Saul]." Read in the permissive sense, this verse implies that God *allowed* a demon to torment the king but did not Himself send it.) However, a "permissive sense" reading cannot be inferred from the Greek text of Matthew 9:13.

The Pope's publicly stated reason for the change runs along these same lines:

"I am the one who falls; it's not him pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen," Francis explained to Italian broadcasters about the phrase change. "A father doesn't do that. A father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation. That's his department." (*Fox News*, "Pope Francis made this big change to Lord's Prayer," June 5, 2019)

The difference in wording may seem minor at first, but in the end, it subtly weakens the nature of God in the minds of readers of Scripture. The apostle James

does state, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (James 1:13), which the Pope has gone to great lengths to stress. There is, though, a difference in God *leading* a believer into temptations and God *directly tempting him*. Jesus' use of "do not lead us into temptation" is intentional, teaching us something critical about the God we worship.

The Greek verb in Matthew 6:13, *eispherô*, means "to bring into." "Do not bring us into temptation" and "do not lead us into temptation" are thus correct, literal translations. The idea of God putting His people to the test is common in Scripture (see Exodus 16:4; 20:20; Deuteronomy 8:2, 16; 13:3; Judges 2:22; etc.). He frequently leads people into such trials because He wants "to know what [is] in [their] heart, whether [they] will keep His commandments or not" (Deuteronomy 8:2), that is, when He needs to prove a person's loyalty or commitment to Him.

In formulating the model prayer this way, Jesus instructs His disciples to beseech God to lead them in such a way that such testing against the world's temptations is not necessary. It is far preferable to avoid any such trials of our faith, as this world's temptations can be both extremely seductive and destructive. Thus, Jesus completes the couplet with "but deliver us from the evil one," when we find ourselves in spiritual troubles we cannot handle.

We see, then, that while it may seem minor to some, the papal emendation inserts a subtle distortion into Scripture that undermines God's personal work with His elect. The Pope's change shifts God's activity with His people from proactively walking us through life, even through testing and trial, to help us grow in character to being merely a last line of defense when we are about to make an unwise choice.

Matthew 4:1 teaches that the Father was intimately involved in the preparation of His own Son: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil," a necessary exercise to demonstrate the Messiah's unshakeable commitment to His purpose. God works just as deeply with His elect, yet this new translation obscures this fact, reducing God's involvement to the level of throwing a life-preserver to a drowning person.

God unambiguously commands in Deuteronomy 12:32, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (see Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5-6; Revelation 22:18-19). The Pope should know this and fear to defy it, yet in his pride, he has proven once again that "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (I Corinthians 1:25).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

## Excellence in Character

### Part One

Most sinners despise people who do not participate in their sinful activities. King Solomon writes, “An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, and he who is upright in the way is an abomination to the wicked” (Proverbs 29:27). Therefore, the righteous person must often confront implicit and even explicit persecution within his or her business, political, and social communities (John 15:19). People who endeavor to display Christian virtues in the workplace commonly suffer ridicule while losing out on opportunities for advancement. Invitations to parties or other social occasions are rarely forthcoming.

It is not easy to establish or maintain excellent character in such a hostile environment, and many decent and sincere people feel tempted to give in to their natural desires for popularity and the potential comfort and power that comes by abandoning virtue and “fitting in.” However, associating with those who would sneer at virtue ultimately leads to discomfort—even pain—for the virtuous, and such discomfort should be anticipated when dealing with a world at odds with its Creator (Romans 8:6-9).



**1.** Can worldly people corrupt a Christian’s virtue? I Corinthians 15:33; Proverbs 13:20.

**COMMENT:** Scripture abounds with God’s admonitions against becoming too friendly with the world (II Corinthians 6:17; James 4:4; Revelation 18:4; Deuteronomy 7:1-4). Even though God’s elect possess the power of His Holy Spirit, they place themselves in grave danger if they choose to conform to worldly standards of behavior (Deuteronomy 6:14-15; Proverbs 13:20; Romans 12:2). The apostle Paul is succinct with his warning in I Corinthians 15:33: “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’”

**2.** Have the virtuous suffered peril because of their virtue? Matthew 24:9; II Corinthians 11:24-26; Matthew 27:22-23, 28-31, 35.

**COMMENT:** The Bible pictures countless righteous persons encountering hostile reactions to their virtuous efforts while taking stands against worldly corruption and decadence (Hebrews 11). The apostle Peter exclaims, “[Those in the world] are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you” (I Peter 4:4, *New International Version*). King David wrote of wicked liars, “which speak insolent things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous” (Psalm 31:18). Jesus Christ condemned the Jewish leaders for their persecution of the virtuous prophets whom He sent:

Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city . . . from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah . . . whom you murdered (Matthew 23:34-35).

Soon thereafter, as the most virtuous Man who ever

lived, Jesus was cruelly murdered.

**3.** Can the world produce true virtue without God’s standard of righteousness? Genesis 6:5; Psalm 14:3; Mark 7:21-22; John 3:6; Romans 1:28-31.

**COMMENT:** The modern humanist movement teaches that man requires no godly source of morality, believing all humans possess an inherent sense of right and wrong. However, God contradicts that belief through the words of Solomon: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

Further contrasting worldly beliefs, Jesus teaches in Matthew 7:18 that “a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” The apostle Paul expounds on man’s carnal nature that is in complete opposition to God—or virtue—(Romans 8:7-8), describing people of this world as:

. . . having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness (Ephesians 4:18-19).

Without God’s message of righteousness, expressed throughout His written Word, no bona fide standard of morality would exist anywhere. After all, it is God’s law that defines unrighteousness and sin (Romans 7:7). Therefore, the wise and virtuous Christian anticipates mild discomfort at best to bitter resentment and spiteful persecution at worst from a world so averse to virtue and so incompatible with genuine excellence in character.

In Part Two, we will look further into our need to define and develop a virtuous character.

—Martin G. Collins