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**Israel in Focus** will take you to the Promised Land with spectacular photos by Israeli photographer Hanan Isachar.

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Does history repeat itself? Yes, of course. But what’s the success rate for learning from past experiences? Not too good. That’s why we’ve chosen the book of Esther for the theme articles in this issue. All of the ingredients for past-present comparisons are here. But most important are the lessons for life that are indispensible for these last days. Mordecai’s challenge to Jewish Queen Esther is the urgent call to you and me: “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Est. 4:14). If you want to make a difference, here’s what you need to know. And for spiritual refreshing, check out the beautiful cover photo of the land preserved for the people Esther stepped up to save. It is of the wall of the Old City, Jerusalem, Israel (Richard Norwitz/Corbis).

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Fun, fun, fun! That’s the theme of the Jewish holiday of Purim. Special foods, floats, costumes. Learn how people celebrate today, both in the United States and Israel.
The world is filled with travesties of justice, and among the worst is the demonization of Israel. Yet Israel wants peace, and almost all its neighbors want Israel's destruction.

Our recent Up to Jerusalem experience included a visit to Metulla on Israel's Lebanon border. From 1978 to 2000, goods and workers flowed freely between Israel and the Lebanese Christians who populated southern Lebanon. The border, popularly known as the Good Fence, reflected the mutually beneficial interaction and genuine friendship that once existed. Today, with Hezbollah controlling vast areas on the Lebanese side, the Good Fence is but a memory.

From nearby Kibbutz Misgav Am, we were briefed on the security situation in the North by Ariyeh Bar-Yaakov, a leader responsible for kibbutz security. Looking out over the Hezbollah-controlled communities of southern Lebanon, we were struck by the extreme hatred of Israel spawned by a terrorist organization that casts itself as the “Party of God” while calling for Israel’s destruction. Not lost on our trip participants was the cruel irony of nearby UN “peace-keeping” troops that came primarily from Indonesia, a Muslim country with no diplomatic relations with Israel.

Ariyeh Bar-Yaakov’s parting words to us were a fitting testimony to God’s marvelous, even miraculous, preservation of Israel and the Jewish people. “Do come back,” he told us. “We’ll be here.”

Later that day we visited Israel’s northeastern perimeter where, across the border, we could see a Syrian flag flying. Another hostile neighbor. And another UN installation, this one in Syria, representing meaningless “monitoring” in the midst of a state-sponsored military buildup. In fact, Iranian rockets were being placed strategically throughout Syria.

Looking to the north, our excellent Israeli guide, Miriam Feinberg Vamosh, pointed to an area known as Majdal Shams near the slopes of Mount Hermon. There Syrian “Day of Rage” activists in 2011 tried to penetrate Israel’s border to deflect attention from Syrian President Bashar Assad’s brutal oppression of his own people.

Traveling farther south, we viewed the mountains of Israel’s eastern neighbor, Jordan, thankful for the peace and reasonable level of neighborliness that exists between these two Middle Eastern countries.

Although we did not visit Israel’s long border with Egypt in the south, we were briefed on the deteriorating situation in Egypt where violent Islamists, encouraged by the Muslim Brotherhood, are slaughtering Coptic Christians and causing them to flee in record numbers. The terrorists are working hard to destabilize Egypt’s vast Sinai Peninsula, while consolidating their positions and initiating terror attacks into Israel from the border.

Israelis with whom we spoke oppose unilateral Palestinian statehood. They understand that creating a Palestinian state in the heart of the Jewish state, without the Palestinians making real peace with Israel, will guarantee another Middle Eastern terrorist entity. All too fresh in their minds are the lessons of Hamas’s takeover of Gaza, which resulted in more rocket attacks against Israel’s southern communities.

Israelis everywhere expressed their great appreciation for our support as Americans and Canadians. This appreciation, however, did not extend to President Barack Obama, whom most Israelis view as unsympathetic toward their security and overly sympathetic toward their enemies. Likewise, we heard concerns about the U.S. State Department equating Israel’s attempts to defend itself with the violence of its enemies.

As terrorist organizations ratchet up their attacks on Israel and the nations of the world increase their pressure on the Jewish state, we as Bible-believing, Christian supporters of Israel must stand firm. We must reject the crimes of Israel’s enemies and rest in the knowledge that God will deal with them:

Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, “Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure: “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion” (Ps. 2:1–6).

William E. Sutter is the executive director of The Friends of Israel.
Did spring really come early for Arabs in the Middle East last year? Many believe so. Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak was forced out after decades of ruthless rule; and Libya’s dictator, Moammar Gadhafi, was ousted and killed. Many say democracy will now sweep into the region.

But the so-called Arab Spring isn’t coming to Egypt’s 8 million Christians. In October 2011, eight months after the “liberation,” 26 Christian Copts were killed when Egyptian security forces fired into a peaceful crowd protesting the bombing of a church. Prior to the shooting, an Islamist mob hurled rocks, bricks, and Molotov cocktails into the crowd. Christians there are in grave danger.

The main group behind the Islamic advance in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood. Created in Egypt in 1928, the Brotherhood is a global, revolutionary Islamic movement designed to reestablish the Global Islamic Caliphate under Islamic Sharia law. It proudly raises the banner of jihad, and its crest features a Qur’an with crossed swords. Its credo is “Allah is our goal; the Prophet is our guide; the Qur’an is our constitution; Jihad is our way; and death for the glory of Allah is our greatest ambition.”

If given the chance, the Brotherhood would kill all Jews and subjugate all Christians. In October 2010, Dr. Muhammad Badi, its supreme guide, called for jihad against the United States and Israel. Until January 2011, the Brotherhood was kept in check by powerful dictators like Mubarak.

Today it is in at least 80 countries. The U.S. Department of Justice identifies no fewer than 61 Brotherhood figures and entities operating in America, including the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA); North American Islamic Trust (NAIT); and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which is linked to Hamas.

The Obama administration says the Brotherhood is not radical. In February 2011, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called it “a very heterogeneous group, largely secular, which has eschewed violence.” Really?

U.S. Rep. Sue Myrick (R–NC), who serves on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, released the following statement after Clapper’s testimony:

“Either the Administration doesn’t know who the Muslim Brotherhood is, which shows incompetence, or they are apologizing for them, which is inappropriate for those in charge of protecting the American people. Let’s be clear—the Muslim Brotherhood is NOT secular.

In a raid several years ago on the home of a Brotherhood leader in Virginia, a document outlining the “strategic goal for the North American operation of the Ikhwan [Arabic for “brothers”]” was seized. Here is a key paragraph:

The Ikhwan must understand that their work in America is a kind of grand Jihad in eliminating and destroying the Western civilization from within and “sabotaging” their miserable house by their hands and the hands of the believers so that it is eliminated and Allah’s religion is made victorious over all religions.

Christians in Egypt are experiencing firsthand the cost of “liberation” as the Brotherhood tightens its grip. Fanatic Islam not only threatens Israel but Christians around the world. Believers must stand in solidarity with Israel and pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

by Steve Herzig
For people who doubt there is a war against God and Christianity in America, here is something to disabuse them of that notion. Last year, U.S. Rep. Bill Johnson (R-OH) sponsored a bill (H.R. 2070) to place a plaque at the World War II memorial in Washington, DC, bearing the words U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt prayed with the nation on June 6, 1944, the morning of D-Day.

The proposal seemed reasonable enough. After all, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s words to the invasion forces are etched in stone at the site. You might say the proposal corrects the oversight of neglecting the president’s words.

What appeared to be a given with representatives of the American people in both houses of Congress received a “not so fast” notice by the Obama administration’s Bureau of Land Management. Director Robert V. Abbey said the prayer would “intrude” on the monument and “dilute this elegant memorial’s central message.” Furthermore, he said, the prayer would detract from the memorial’s purpose to honor American troops in World War II and “commemorate the participation of the United States in that conflict.”

An excerpt of President Roosevelt’s “intruding” petition to the Almighty includes the following:

Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free suffering humanity. ... Lead us to the saving of our country, and with our sister Nations into a world unity that will spell a sure peace—a peace invulnerable to the schemings of unworthy men. And a peace that will let all of men live in freedom, reaping the just rewards of their honest toil. Thy will be done, Almighty God. Amen.

At stake in this all-too-familiar attempt to throw God out of every aspect of our public life is the future of generations of Americans to come. When those of us who remember a different America are off the scene, our children, grandchildren, and their children will be doomed to dwell in a godless, pagan wilderness.

The administration’s recent mocking of the House of Representatives’ vote to consider legislation reaffirming the words In God We Trust as the national motto speaks to the heart of what we can expect in days to come.

Make no mistake. We are fully engaged in an all-out revolution to refashion America into a godless, humanistic, pseudo paradise that obliterates the past. Among the warning signs is the upturn of anti-Semitism in America. A recent survey confirms that 133 anti-Jewish incidents were reported in New York City alone in 2010. In addition, an Anti-Defamation League survey discovered that 15 percent of Americans, nearly 35 million adults, hold deeply anti-Semitic views—up 3 percent from 2009.

There are those who will argue otherwise; but to Bible-believing Christians, a foundational aspect of America’s success has been its fundamental, historic hospitality toward the Jewish people. When Emma Lazarus penned, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses” in her poem “The New Colossus,” later inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, the call was to her Jewish brethren and to the masses of stifled Gentiles yearning to breathe the free air of the New World.

God-fearing freedom produced the greatest nation in the history of humanity. Are we now willing to stand aside while it is demolished brick by brick, to be replaced by who knows what? Perhaps by a spiritually dead, morally compassionate, neosocialist idiocracy?

Most notable is the pervasiveness of the anti-God aggression. It is not limited to America but is widespread throughout the Western world—evidence of the conflict’s true nature. This is a spiritual war—a Satan-God issue that is precisely spelled out in God’s Word:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12).

When Scripture admonishes us to be discerners of the times, we should not take it lightly. It is God’s call to action. In the end, the battle is for the soul. And for that fight, believers come armed with the right stuff—the simple message of the gospel, committed to us 2,000 years ago: Jesus born, crucified, risen, and coming again. “And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4). No matter how others see it, we are on the victory side.

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Esther Fragment Survives Holocaust

In October 1940, the Nazis established the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland, where they forced all Jewish people in Warsaw and surrounding towns to live. They crammed an estimated 400,000 Jews into an area measuring only 1.3 square miles and sealed it off from the rest of the world with a 10- to 20-foot-high wall topped with barbed wire and broken glass. Disease and starvation killed a staggering 300 to 400 a day. By July 1942, about 80,000 Jewish people had died. That summer the Nazis began deportations to the gas chambers of Treblinka where, in two months, they exterminated more than 300,000 Jews.

On January 18, 1943, the Nazis suddenly entered the ghetto, shot some 600 Jewish people, and rounded up another 5,000 whom they intended to deport for extermination. However, they met with unexpected resistance. The Jewish people fought valiantly with what little they had, holding off the Germans until Passover Eve 1943. Then the Nazis blew up and/or set fire to every building they could and shot to death everyone they came in contact with. An official report put the death toll at 56,065.

The fragment in the photograph at the left is a leaf from the scroll of Esther (1:18–19), rescued from the fires of the Warsaw Ghetto. Also targeted for destruction was God’s Word. Yet, like the Jewish people, it, too, survived because God’s Word promises that neither will be destroyed (Jer. 30:11). “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8).
A More Perfect Union

by Craig L. Parshall

Dear Court: Clean Up Your Mess!

Do you remember as a child being told to pick up your room? Most of us do. There are advantages to orderliness. And when it comes to our most fundamental liberties and America’s highest court, which is vested with the responsibility to protect them, the stakes become much higher.

When justices follow chaotic legal rules or use illogical reasoning, the results can be devastating and long-lasting. Unfortunately, I can think of no area that our highest court has mishandled more than that of so-called church-state issues involving the two religion clauses of the First Amendment.

Those clauses (1) deny government the ability to violate a citizen’s “free exercise” of religion and (2) prohibit government from creating an “establishment of religion.” But confused and misguided Supreme Court decisions in such cases have littered the landscape with legal landmines and booby traps.

Apparently Justice Clarence Thomas has had enough. After the Supreme Court’s refusal in October to hear the case of Utah Highway Patrol Association v. American Atheists, Inc., he took the opportunity to sound off.

The case involved a private law-enforcement association that had funded and spearheaded a worthy project to memorialize the courage and sacrifice of state troopers who have fallen in the line of duty along Utah’s highways.

The association used white crosses with identifying information about each trooper who was killed, and it obtained permission from state officials to place the crosses near the places where the troopers died—usually in rest areas or right-of-ways where people can safely stop and read the markers.

Not surprisingly, angry atheists cried foul and sued to get the crosses removed. In a dishearteningly wrong-headed decision, the U.S. 10th Circuit Court of Appeals said the crosses created an establishment of religion, violating the First Amendment. The Supreme Court, sadly, refused to take the ruling up on appeal.

Justice Thomas chastised the court, saying it is about time to iron out the mess it has created in these types of cases. And he is right. Noting that the Supreme Court’s rulings in religious-symbols cases is “in shambles” because of the “nebulous” and confusing legal tests it has employed, Thomas listed the inconsistent results—decisions that, for example, have alternatively upheld a Ten Commandments display on the grounds of a state capitol but struck one down that was located in a courthouse.

Such inconsistencies abound. In 1984 the court held that a nativity scene near a staircase inside a government building at Christmas violated the Establishment Clause; but it said that a Christian creche in a prominent public setting outside, which was near other secular Christmas displays, did not.

The irreconcilable, conflicting decisions of lower courts that have tried to settle such disputes over public displays containing Christian symbols are a hallmark of the Supreme Court’s failure to use a proper legal standard.

So what is the appropriate test? Justice Thomas mentioned one, and it has historical authenticity. As long as a display created by a government office or official does not commit actual “coercion” of citizens, Thomas wrote, thus forcing them to violate their consciences by acknowledging or worshiping a God not of their choice, then the display does not illegally create an “establishment” of religion.

Founding Father James Madison, one of the chief drafters of the Bill of Rights, advocated this approach. Reluctant to adopt this historically grounded standard, the Supreme Court’s majority has instead embarked on a long journey of missteps.

Another dangerous detour has been the court’s insistence that any public display or activity that references God in a sectarian way (e.g., a government official praying in Jesus’ name) gives rise to a likely “establishment” of religion.

Of course, that would be news to John Adams, American Founder and our second president. On March 23, 1798, in his capacity as our chief executive, Adams called on all Americans to ask God “through the Redeemer of the World, freely to remit all our offenses, and to incline us by His Holy Spirit.”

I can practically hear John Adams, who was a brilliant lawyer known for his occasional bluntness, calling to the U.S. Supreme Court: “Gentlemen, clean up your mess!”

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ENDNOTE

1 “A Day of Fasting & Humiliation (Not Thanksgiving!) 1798 by the President of the United States – A Proclamation,” Pilgrim Hall Museum <pilgrimhall.org/ThanxProc1789.htm>.

Craig L. Parshall is senior vice president and general counsel for the National Religious Broadcasters.
Where Have All the Christians Gone?

Egyptian Coptic Christians protest in front of the Information Center building in Cairo, Egypt, over the burning of their churches in the Cairo suburbs (Amel Pain/EPA/Corbis).
Israel has long been like the canary in the mineshaft. If the canary succumbs to odorless, lethal gases, the miners know it’s time to get out of the mine. Anti-Semitic militancy warns the rest of the world about what lies ahead. Now, however, there appear to be two types of “canaries” in the mineshaft. Merciless, life-threatening assaults on Christians in the Middle East may be a harbinger of what lies ahead for Christians elsewhere.

Liberal elitists in Western politics, academia, and the news media collectively swooned when the mobs in Cairo’s Tahrir Square swept friend of the West, Hosni Mubarak, out of the Egyptian presidency and into a prison cell to await trial. In the minds of so-called progressives, the ensuing “Arab Spring” revolution was precisely the balm of freedom the downtrodden had long yearned for. Democratic reforms supposedly were around the corner, and everyone would swing into an era of prosperous camaraderie. That’s how delusional Western leaders saw things. They were wrong again.

On October 9, 2011, Muslims attacked some 10,000 peaceful Coptic Christians who were protesting the burning of two of their churches. Some Christians were shot, while others were run down by the Egyptian army’s military vehicles or were beaten and dragged through the streets of Cairo. Compass Direct News reported 26 Christians dead and hundreds wounded.

Compass said the incident “could be the worst act of violence against Egyptian Christians in modern history." It reported that Samia Sidhom, managing editor for the Coptic weekly Al Watani, “said Copts across Egypt are distraught about the attack and the future for Christians across the country.”

Islamist jihadists, who have harassed and murdered Coptic Christians for years, are gaining strength in their support for an Islamic regime dominated by the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood. Their oft-stated objective is to rid themselves of Israel first, then to drape the entire region in Arab green. The Copts, who today number around 8 million, have lived peaceful, productive lives among their Muslim neighbors for two millennia. Now, with radicals at the helm of the burgeoning Islamist/Sharia “utopia,” many are talking about fleeing Egypt.

In Pursuit of Survival

A decade ago, 800,000 Christians lived in Iraq. Need we be reminded that American and coalition forces in 2003 delivered the country from the protracted agony of the butcher of Baghdad, Saddam Hussein? Their intent was to facilitate a stable, democratic government. However, when it comes to the country’s Christians, the new Iraqi constitution comes up short. Reported Compass Direct News:

Iraq’s Federal Constitution says each individual has freedom of thought, conscience and belief, but there is no article on changing one’s religion. This makes it legally impossible to apply freedom of belief in the cases of converts, said a Christian Iraqi lawyer on the condition of anonymity.

Radical Muslims ratcheted up their attacks in October 2010, massacring 58 people worshiping in a Catholic church in Baghdad. The persecution of Christians in Iraq has led to a mass exodus. More than 1 million Christians lived there in 1991; today fewer than 345,000 remain.1

Even children are targeted. Compass Direct News recently reported that a 9-year-old Iraqi boy was beaten and insulted because of his Christian faith. When he started first grade last year, his teacher beat him in front of the entire class, calling him an infidel.

His sister, in kindergarten, said her teacher told her she and her family would “burn” for being Christians. The parents, reported Compass, “are weary and wonder if the children’s lives would be easier in a Western country where so many Christian converts have already fled.”

Dismal Prospects

Still to be assessed is the possible imposition of fundamentalist, Islamist regimes in countries taken over by insurgents hostile to Christians and Jews. It is a fiction to insist that these “Islamocracies” can be cajoled into becoming democracies. A Sharia-dominated constitutional system is diametrically opposed to and irreconcilable with a democratic government. So Christians and Jews in Islamic countries face two dismal fates: dhimmitude or death.

Being a “tolerated” dhimmi means living an existence of medieval-like subservience. Many Christians, however, die instead. As demonstrated in a host of Islamist-dominated societies today, Muslims see genocide as a viable way of eliminating Christians, who are viewed as an unacceptable, corrupting presence.

In June 2010, World Net Daily reported that researcher Bert Hickman, with the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, confirmed that “105,000 people are killed every year because of
their Christian faith.” This means that one Christian is killed every five minutes. Furthermore, over the past 10 years, an average 100,000 Christians have been slain for their faith annually. “Those figures are accurate,” Hickman said. The vast majority is murdered by radical Islamists.

The Inevitable Question

Since the facts of the wholesale murder of Christians are indisputable, why the silence? Why do our leaders not chastise the countries where these atrocities are perpetrated? Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan are prime offenders. The United States endorsed the revolution in Egypt, even before clearly understanding who was behind it or receiving any inkling of the result. Now, with army vehicles running down Christians in the streets and rabid mobs killing at will, where are the opposition voices among those who are expected to keep Egypt financially afloat?

Iraq has benefited from Western money and military support, as well as from soldiers who shed their blood to breathe life back into the nation. Where, then, is the outrage when the Iraqis legislate offensive restraints on Christians and allow them to be mutilated and driven out of a country they inhabited centuries before Islam existed?

Add to this the insult of countenancing the churches in Afghanistan being destroyed until not one is left standing and Christians are forced to meet in secret. Yet all the while, young Christians are there from the other side of the world, taking the bullets to set these people free. It is incomprehensible.

Here in America, Muslims are protected, much more so than evangelical Christians. Protecting Muslim citizens is an honorable pursuit that raises America’s standards far above those in so many other parts of the world. Yet why are the same leaders who so passionately protect Muslim rights in America doing nothing for Christians who are dying in record numbers? Why do so many of our leaders hold their tongues as the world turns a blind eye?

And there is another question—one we must all ask ourselves: Why is the church virtually silent about the suffering of our brethren? We will meet them one day. What will we answer when they ask us, “Why?”

Imagine your 12-year-old daughter or granddaughter is on her way home from school. Several men jump out of a van and abduct her. Then they beat and rape her every day for months.

That is what happened to Engy Adel. Her tragic story exposes life in Egypt for Christians, particularly after the “Arab Spring.” Below is an excerpt from “Abductions, Forced Marriages, and Conversion of Christian Girls in Egypt” in the November 2011 online newsletter Persecution, published by International Christian Concern. The revolting details provide only a brief glimpse into the nightmare Christians face in Muslim countries:

[The] story is merely one among hundreds involving the disappearances of Christian girls following Egypt’s revolution. The lawlessness ruling Egypt’s streets and the lack of justice applied in her courts has emboldened radical Islamists to target Egypt’s most vulnerable and defenseless minority—Christians.

In April of 2010, U.S. officials recognized for the first time the disappearances of Christian girls in Egypt as a form of human trafficking. Eighteen members of Congress wrote to the State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) office concerning “reports of abductions, forced marriages, and exploitation of Coptic women and girls in Egypt.” They also stated that human trafficking in Egypt is often accompanied by acts of violence, including rape, beatings, and other forms of physical and mental abuse.

Few cases epitomize the harsh reality of human trafficking in Egypt more than that of 12-year-old Engy Adel who was fortunate enough to escape and tell about the barbarity she experienced. Engy was abducted while on her way home from school in Alexandria. Interviewed on Al-Hayat television, she explained what happened:

I was coming out of school on a normal day going home. Then there was a van and some guys who came out of the van and began following me. Then two of them grabbed me and tied my arms and pushed me into the van. I woke up and found myself in an apartment.

A man called Sultan took me into the room and tied my hands behind my back and raped me. Another four entered in and, one after the other, they raped me. Each raped me and was brutally hurting my body as if I was their enemy. They beat me so heavily that I could neither eat, drink nor sleep. All they cared for was that I took the drugs [so they could] rape me.

Another group of men came and took me away from them. I stayed with them two days and I don’t know how these two days passed by. There were five of them. They were all in the room with me at the same time. I couldn’t tell the difference between day and night—I was raped 24/7. No less than 50 men raped me. After that my father found me and brought me back home.

Engy’s captivity lasted for months until her father, Adel Wassily, found her after being notified of her location by an anonymous caller.

Like Engy, victimized girls are often underage Christians from poor, uneducated families. Muslim men use societal prejudices to their advantage, knowing that police officers and court officials will not give a poor Coptic family the time of day.

Once Muslim kidnappers force their victim to sign documents claiming she married and converted to Islam, the hope of her return is all but lost.
The Megillah Begins

(Esther 1—3)

In March 2011 a German freighter owned by a French company and flying a Liberian flag was intercept-ed by Israeli commandos. The crew of the ship Victoria had no clue they were carrying concealed cargo. Beneath the bags of cotton and lentils lay nearly 50 tons of Iranian weapons bound for Gaza. The secret Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operation prevented Iran and its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from supplying (in violation of a UN Security Council resolution preventing illicit trafficking) the terrorist group Hamas with weapons. And it also prevented the murder of many Jewish people. There was reason for Jewish people to celebrate.

It was somewhat ironic that a few days later, Israel celebrated another secret operation that saved even more Jewish lives. That story is recorded in the book of Esther, and the celebration is the feast of Purim. Though separated by 2,500 years, both events were instigated by haters of the Jewish people: the wicked Haman and Ahmadinejad, both from Persia, which today is Iran.

Although God’s name is not mentioned in the book of Esther, His presence is unmistakable; and His control and care for His people is evident even in a distant land. Their destiny was in His hands then, as it is today.

The Jewish people were brought to the area during the Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century B.C. Even after Cyrus the Great came to power in Persia, which overthrew Babylon, many Jewish people remained despite his decree allowing them to return to their homeland. Amazingly, only 49,897 Jewish people chose to return, led by Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:64–65).

God had removed them from their Promised Land because of disobedience to Him (Jer. 29:10). But to many, life in exile seemed a better option than the uncertainty of life back in Israel, even though it meant facing danger, anti-Semitism, and possibly death.

Before the Ayatollah Khomeini deposed the shah of Iran in 1979, 100,000 Jewish people still lived in Iran/Persia, a figure that fluctuated moderately through the years. However, when Khomeini Islamicized the country, a massive Jewish exodus occurred.

It is hard to imagine that Jewish people live in Iran today, yet 25,000 remain. They are forbidden to learn Hebrew or attend Jewish day school, and Jewish children are required to attend school on the Jewish Sabbath. Why do they stay? A Jewish Iranian interviewed by Israeli National News sounded as though he were living in the days of Cyrus: “People are afraid of the unknown,” he said.

Mordecai the Benjamite and his cousin and ward, Esther, were a part of the large Jewish population that remained in Persia. The scroll (Hebrew, megillah) of Esther tells the story.

The Careless King

Ahasuerus (Xerxes) ruled Persia from 485 to 464 B.C. His kingdom, all 127 provinces, stretched from India to Ethiopia (Est. 1:1) and through Asia Minor, Egypt, and parts of coastal Africa. To demonstrate “the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty,” Ahasuerus threw a six-month-long party to end all parties (v. 4). The wine flowed freely. Imbibing was not compulsory, as it sometimes was; but guests could drink “according to each man’s pleasure” (v. 8).

Evidently, many became intoxicated, including the careless king. “Merry with wine” (v. 10), he lost control of his tongue, bragging boisterously about his wife Vashti’s attractiveness and demanding that she appear and “show her beauty” (v. 11).

Vashti, hosting her own party for the women (v. 9), refused. (Some commentators believe the request was for her to come naked.) Ahasuerus’s advisors became concerned. If the king’s wife refused to listen to him, why should their wives listen to them (vv. 16–17)? Ahasuerus, now furious, agreed. On the advice of his wise men, he offered the “royal position to another who is better than she” (v. 19). Queen Vashti was to be replaced.

Mordecai, “a certain Jew” (2:5), “had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother” (v. 7). In compliance with the king’s command, the strikingly beautiful Esther was taken into “the house of the women” (v. 9). Before she left her home, Mordecai told her to tell no one she was Jewish. She lived in the king’s house a full year, bathing in oil of myrrh and perfumes to prepare her for the one night she would spend with Ahasuerus (v. 12). That night would decide her fate. She would either become queen or be relegated to the king’s harem forever.

Behind the scenes, God was working on Esther’s behalf. Scripture says, “The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight” (v. 17). In God’s providence, Esther became the new queen of Persia.

Haman: An Ancient Ahmadinejad

Before Esther’s time, God had commanded King Saul of Israel, also a Benjamite, to kill the Amalakite King Agag, all his people, and all their livestock. Instead, Saul spared Agag “and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and [was] unwilling to utterly destroy them” (1 Sam. 15:9). This displeased the Lord, and the prophet Samuel told Saul, “I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel” (v. 26).

Some scholars believe Haman was a descendant of Agag, whom King Saul failed to kill and whom Samuel the prophet then “hacked . . . in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal” (v. 33). However, Bible scholar John A. Martin disagrees:

Because Haman was an Agagite, some have supposed that he was
descended from Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:8). However, it seems unlikely that a high-ranking Persian official would be related to a west Semite who lived 600 years earlier. Archaeologists have uncovered an inscription which indicates that Agag was also the name of a province in the Persian Empire. This probably explains why Haman was called an Agagite.¹

Whatever the case, Haman became the Jewish people’s enemy.

Mordecai “sat within the king’s gate” (Est. 2:21), a place of honor and influence. Yet, he was required by law to pay homage to Haman, a noble or royal advisor (3:2) who clearly desired preeminence.

Mordecai refused. “Haman was filled with wrath” (v. 5) and not only wanted Mordecai dead but also “sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai” (v. 6).

So Haman offered the king a deal he could not refuse. He promised to put 10,000 talents of silver into the treasury if the king would agree to get rid of “a certain [unnamed] people” whose “laws are different from all other people’s, and [who] do not keep the king’s laws” (v. 8). The king agreed to Haman’s proposal, gave Haman his signet ring, and let him issue the decree (v. 12).

Written in Ahasuerus’ name, the decree was “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, . . . Adar” (v. 13). Persian law emphatically stated that once a law was enacted, not even the king could change it (Dan. 6:8). This was a death sentence for virtually all the Jewish people in the world.

Like Haman, Ahmadinejad tries to make it look beneficial to Iran and the world if Israel were removed from the earth. And though it may seem to some that God is silent to the imminent threat Iran poses to His Chosen People, be assured that these times, too, are in His hands.


Steve Herzig is the director of North American Ministries for The Friends of Israel.

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Dilemma and Decisions
(Esther 4)

Artist's rendering of King Ahasuerus extending the scepter to Esther (Standard Publishing/GoodSalt)
Ever been between a rock and a hard place, as the saying goes? It’s that terrible situation in which both choices that lie before you are bad. Queen Esther faced such a dilemma. Where would she find the resolve to make the right decision? Esther 4 tells how a Jewish woman went about trying to save her people from extermination.

An ancient rabbi once said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when?” Though Esther lived centuries earlier than the rabbi, he may have summed up her thinking.

The “final solution” plot was set. All the Jewish people in the world were slated to die because they all lived under the jurisdiction of the Persian Empire governed by King Ahasuerus, including those who had returned to the Promised Land (Est. 3:8).

Esther’s cousin Mordecai mourned, along with his people (4:1–3). When Queen Esther heard what Mordecai was doing, she sent her attendant to him to find out what was wrong (vv. 4–6). The servant returned with a copy of the death decree and a message from Mordecai telling her to go to the king and plead for pity for her people (vv. 7–9).

However, going before the king unannounced meant death unless the king extended his golden scepter (vv. 10–12). Mordecai accepted no excuse:

Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king’s palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish (vv. 13–14).

So Esther requested that Mordecai and the Jewish people fast, and she and her maids would do the same. Then she would go before the king (vv. 15–17).

### The Dilemma

Esther was right to be afraid, even though she was a queen. First, if she appealed to the king for her people, she would have to reveal that she was Jewish. The king could well think she had deceived him.

Second, even as queen she was bound by royal protocol. She had to be summoned to approach the king. She could not merely enter his presence whenever she wished.

Third, she also had to confront a powerful, high-ranking official in the kingdom: the evil Haman.

Although God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, His providential care for His people is evident throughout. Esther was placed in the palace for a purpose. Her destiny was to benefit others, and the welfare of her people was her responsibility. They needed her now. And she apparently recognized God was guiding her life. As Mordecai told her, “Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (v. 14).

### The Decision

Former Queen Vashti and Mordecai displayed courage in their life-threatening dilemmas (1:12; 3:2). Now it was Esther’s turn to be courageous. She did not disappoint; she risked her life for her people.

Her resolve came by seeking guidance through prayer and fasting. This combination was common among Jewish people in Old Testament times (cf. Ezra 8:21–23; Ps. 109:21–24; Dan. 9:3). With God’s help and the spiritual support of others who fasted and prayed, Esther received clarity in deciding what to do (Est. 4:16). After all, Scripture says, “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly; He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of His saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path (Prov. 2:6–9).

There will always be dilemmas in life. Seeking the Lord for wisdom through prayer is never a mistake: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (Jas. 1:5). As the apostle Paul wrote, “Be anxious for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6–7). God loves to help those who call on His name.

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**Muslims Beat Jewish Girl**

Five Muslim Moroccan girls in Belgium beat a 13-year-old Jewish girl classmate at a sports training center, calling her a “dirty Jew” and telling her, “Return to your country.” The girl filed a complaint with police, reported Arutz-7.

Jewish legislator Viviane Teitelbaum of Brussels denounced the “silence” of political leaders and most of the news media concerning the attack. Arutz-7 said an umbrella group of Jewish organizations in Belgium expressed “shock” at the attack and asked for an immediate investigation. The group is considering filing a civil suit and said the Jewish community is “exasperated” by repeated attacks on Jews, 40,000 of whom live in Belgium.
Haman’s Main Problem
(Esther 5)

Artist’s rendering of Mordecai at the king’s gate
(Providence Collection/Goodsalt).
Haman had it all: prestige, power, and possessions. Still, he was unhappy simply because one Jewish man refused to bow down to him. This insult incited the Persian official to pursue an evil bloodlust to kill all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. In the fifth century B.C., that meant all the Jewish people in the world. Esther 5 reveals two root causes for Haman’s obsession: God and the Torah (Law).

Queen Esther donned her royal robes. She was about to do something dangerous by approaching the king seated on his throne, without being summoned. Providentially, the king was pleased and accepted her by extending the gold scepter (vv. 1–2). So she invited King Ahasuerus and Haman to attend a banquet. At that banquet, she requested they attend another banquet the next day, when she would reveal her petition (vv. 3–8).

Haman left jubilant until he saw Mordecai, the Jew who would not tremble before him. At home, he gathered his wife and friends to boast of his achievements (vv. 9–12). But then he declared, “Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate” (v. 13). His wife and friends offered an appealing solution: Hang Mordecai on a gallows (v. 14).

‘He Who Keeps Israel Shall Neither Slumber Nor Sleep’ (Ps. 121:4).

Haman’s fixation about Mordecai and his people actually was a fear of the Hebrew God. The ancient rabbis said in the Talmud that hatred for the Jewish people began at Mount Sinai where the true God, the God of Israel, revealed Himself in terrific awesome-ness: “Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (Ex. 19:16). For sure, the Jewish people were different from all other people because of their God.

Haman should have learned at least two things about Mordecai’s God. First, He alone claims first place in all worship and devotion: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). Second, He is a jealous God: “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Dt. 4:24).

Throughout history there have been people like Haman who hated the true and living God (Rom. 1:28–32). Scripture makes it clear that this evil sentiment will increase in these last days (2 Tim. 3:1–4):

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

‘The Commandment of the Lord Is Pure, Enlightening the Eyes’ (Ps. 19:8).

Also inciting Haman’s hatred were God’s laws. Haman accused the Jewish people before the king that their laws were different from other people’s laws (Est. 3:8). Someone once said, “The main reason we Jews are so hated in this world is because we introduced the Ten Commandments.” Moral imperatives were inaugurated at Mount Sinai; and ever since, the world has felt its guilt before God.

God’s law is a light that pierces the darkness (Prov. 6:23). Haman may not have been familiar with God’s law, but he loved darkness rather than light. As Jesus said, “Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). It’s possible that Haman felt convicted in his soul when he saw Mordecai.

Many people today, like Haman, love darkness and prefer evil. The world comes under conviction of sin because of Jesus (v. 19). He said, “I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness” (12:46).

Haman indeed was obsessed with Mordecai. But perhaps he was more upset because he knew Mordecai’s God demanded complete devotion and that Mordecai would never switch his devotion to Haman.

Haman learned, perhaps to his fright, that God will bless Mordecai’s people. As God told Abraham, “Blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Gen. 22:17).

Haman’s self-esteem and self-worth were bundled in his accomplishments. However, his heart reflected a more serious spiritual condition. His words mirrored Satan’s own arrogance: “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also set on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High” (Isa. 14:13–14).

For Haman, Mordecai represented the God who stood in the way of his worldly gratification. Therefore, he allowed his heart to be filled with satanic hatred for God and His people.

God warns mankind, “‘Do not lift up your horn on high; do not speak with a stiff neck.’ For exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another” (Ps. 75:5–7), as He did with Haman and Mordecai.
### Assyria Falls

Babylon defeats Assyria. The 10 northern tribes of Israel captured by Assyria in 722 B.C. now belong to Babylon.

*Nahum 1—3*

### Babylon Captivity

First deportation to Babylon (includes the prophet Daniel) in 605 B.C.; 70-year Babylonian Captivity and Times of the Gentiles begin. The Babylonians burn Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

*Jeremiah 25:11–12; 39:1–18; Daniel 1:1–6; 9:1–2*

### Babylon Falls

Babylon falls to Medo-Persia in 539 B.C. Persian ruler Cyrus lets the Jewish people return to their land in 538 B.C.

*2 Chronicles 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4; Daniel 5:1–31; 6:28*

### First Return

49,897 Jewish people in the Persian Empire return home under Zerubbabel’s leadership.

*Nehemiah 13:6*

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<td>539–538 B.C.</td>
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### Ahasuerus

Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) becomes ruler over the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire.

*Esther 1:1–2*

### Esther

The Jewish maiden Hadassah (Esther in Persian) becomes queen of Persia in place of Vashti.

*Esther 2:17*

### Haman

Haman decrees the destruction of all the Jewish people. Esther foils his plot. Haman is hanged. Purim is established.

*Esther 3—10*

### Artaxerxes I

Artaxerxes I succeeds Ahasuerus as king of the Persian Empire.

*Nehemiah 13:6*

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<td>479 B.C.</td>
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The dates in this chart come from the 2011 edition of the *Ryrie Study Bible* published by Moody Press. Although we do not know exactly when Daniel (Top row, left to right: Balage Balogh/Art Resource, Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, bpk Berlin/Art Resource, Briton Riviere/Superstock. Bottom row, left to right:
**RICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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<td>Daniel is thrown into the lions’ den. Angels protect him. He dies in Persia in 536 B.C.</td>
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<td>Construction of the second Temple resumes and, from this point, takes six years to complete under the leadership of Zerubbabel.</td>
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<td>520–518 B.C.</td>
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**SECOND RETURN**

- 5,000 Jewish people return to their homeland under Ezra, the priest and scribe.

| 458 B.C. |

**THIRD RETURN**

- Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes, leads the third return to the land to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls.

| 444 B.C. |

**JERUSALEM REBUILT**

- Once construction begins, Jerusalem’s walls go up in 52 days.

| 443 B.C. |

**MALACHI**

- Malachi begins his ministry. The book of Malachi concludes the Hebrew canon.

| 430–400 B.C. |

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Was thrown into the lions’ den, we do know it had to be after 539 B.C., when Babylon fell, and before 536 B.C., when Daniel died at approximately age 84.


by Thomas C. Simcox
The flourishing State of Israel attests to God’s preservation of His Chosen People. Israelis relax in this Jerusalem cafe terrace (Iconotec/Fotosearch).

Criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot.” So says one of America’s popular comic-book superheroes. He could have added, “And they’re a proud lot, too.” Most villains are proud and arrogant to a fault. Such was the case with Haman, the villain in the book of Esther.

A bureaucrat in the court of Persian King Ahasuerus in the fifth century B.C., Haman not only enjoyed Ahasuerus’s trust, but he also enjoyed wealth, power, and authority (Est. 5:11). Was he satisfied? No. He was miserable because a lone Jewish man named Mordecai refused to bow before him. Despite all he had, he was convinced he could not fully enjoy his position until Mordecai and, ultimately, Mordecai’s entire race were obliterated.

Haman is the earthly foe who troubled the Jewish people in the
Persian Empire. However, their ultimate foe—the power behind Haman—was the same as it is today: Satan. Before his rebellion against God, Satan was known as Lucifer, “the anointed cherub who covers” (Ezek. 28:14). At some point after his creation, Lucifer declared, “I will be like the Most High [God]” (Isa. 14:14). His prideful self-exaltation and desire to be worshiped motivated his corruption of humanity in the Garden of Eden and the spiritual conflict of the ages between him and the God of the universe.

Bible scholar Dr. Charles Ryrie suggested Mordecai refused to bow to Haman “because Haman claimed some sort of divine honors, as did the Persian kings.”1 This lack of worship so irritated Haman that he hated Mordecai and every Jewish person in the world. So he hatched a plot to annihilate them. He deceived the king into believing Mordecai was plotting to kill him. Haman, suddenly terrified, fell on his knees and declared before the king: “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!” (vv. 8–9).

Ultimately, Esther revealed Haman’s plot to Ahasuerus. The king became enraged. Haman, suddenly terrified, pleaded for his life. “Now Harbonah, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, ‘Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who stood at the house of Haman.’ Then the king said, ‘Hang him on it!’” (v. 10). So Haman was hung on the gallows he had built for Mordecai.

God’s Intervention

A sleepless night led King Ahasuerus to do what many do when they cannot sleep: read. He read “the book of the records of the chronicles,” which recorded how Mordecai had alerted the author to a plot to annihilate them. He deceived the king into believing Mordecai was plotting to kill him. Haman, suddenly terrified, fell on his knees and declared before the king: “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!” (vv. 8–9).

Imagine his surprise when the king told him, “Hurry, take the robe and horse, as you have suggested and do so for Mordecai the Jew” (v. 10). Oh the humiliation Haman must have felt as he did as he was commanded.

Ultimately, Esther revealed Haman’s plot to Ahasuerus. The king became enraged. Haman, suddenly terrified, pleaded for his life. “Now Harbonah, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, ‘Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who stood at the house of Haman.’ Then the king said, ‘Hang him on it!’” (7:9). So Haman was hung on the gallows he had built for Mordecai.

The King’s Second Decree

Esther begged the king to revoke Haman’s letters calling for the Persians to massacre the Jewish people throughout the empire. However, the empire’s laws prevented Ahasuerus from doing so. But he gave Mordecai and Esther authority to write another decree, giving the Jewish people the right to defend themselves (8:11–14).

And all the officials of the provinces . . . helped the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them. For Mordecai was great in the king’s palace, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for this man Mordecai became increasingly prominent. Thus the Jews defeated all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, with slaughter and destruction, and did what they pleased with those who hated them (9:3–5).

Haman’s 10 sons were hanged, and Mordecai and Esther established the holiday of Purim (vv. 26–32). Purim is a joyous festival because the story has a happy ending. The Jewish people prevailed, Mordecai became great, and all turned out well.

Today the Jewish people are again threatened by a Persian. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, formerly Persia, wants nuclear weapons so he can destroy Israel. His goal is much like his ancient predecessor’s. Times change, names change, but Satan’s goal remains the same: to destroy Israel. And his eternal abode will be the same as Haman’s (Rev. 20:10–15).

The Lord has promised that His beloved Israel will never be destroyed. His security is forever settled in the heavens: Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, who disturbs the sea, and its waves roar (The LORD of hosts is His name): “If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the LORD, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever.” Thus says the LORD: “If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the LORD” (Jer. 31:35–37).

He has told Israel, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3); and He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).


Thomas C. Simcox is the staffing coordinator for The Friends of Israel.
The Holiday of Purim

Israeli women dressed in costume participate in Purim festivities in Netanya (Vitality Berkovych/Shutterstock). Inset: Hamantashen (Sarah Bessert/Shutterstock).
What holiday has a carnival-like atmosphere where people dance in the streets and ride on floats dressed in costumes? What holiday has special foods, gifts, plays, songs, and noisemakers? It isn’t Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Christmas. Only the Jewish celebration of Purim has all of these elements in a single holiday.

Purim is a joyous time that commemorates the Jewish people’s deliverance in the ancient Persian Empire from Haman’s evil plot of destruction. On the Jewish calendar, it is celebrated each year on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar. This year the holiday begins at sundown on March 7 and ends at sundown on March 8.

Like Hanukkah, Purim is more a national than religious festival; and unlike the holy days ordained in the Torah, Purim permits business as usual and manual labor.

Perhaps that’s because it was not ordained by God but by Mordecai and Esther, as recorded in the book of Esther:

And Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, to establish among them that they should celebrate yearly the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them. So they called these days Purim (9:20–22, 26).

The word Purim itself comes from the Hebrew word pur, meaning “lot” (3:7), because lots were cast to determine the day the Jews would be destroyed.

On Purim it is customary to observe several mitzvot (“obligations” or “commandments”). One involves reciting a special prayer called “For the Miracles.” Another is to read the scroll (Hebrew, megillah) of Esther. When Haman’s name is heard, listeners stamp their feet and use noisemakers (usually handed out in the synagogues to children) to drown out the sound of his name, based on Deuteronomy 25:19: “You will blot out the remembrance of Amalek.” Many people believe Haman was an Amalekite.

In America, children particularly enjoy this fun holiday and often present dramas of the story of Esther, complete with costumes and masks. According to the website unitedwithisrael.org, Esther’s name in Hebrew means “hidden,” as in “And I will surely hide (‘as-thir’) My face on that day. . . .” (Deuteronomy 31:18). And that is why Jewish children (and adults too!) “hide” their faces by wearing masks and dressing up in all sorts of costumes. The message is clear: God may be hidden but we know that He is there! 1

Another Purim mitzvah is “sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor” (Est. 9:22). In Hebrew the tradition is called Mishloach Manot and involves giving both food and charitable donations. Often people send Purim baskets—gift baskets filled with wonderful things like nuts; grape juice; candy; fruit; and hamantashen, delicious three-cornered, fruit-filled pastries named after Haman’s hat.

More recently in the United States and in Israel, organizations honor the holiday by sending baskets and gifts to soldiers in the Israeli military.

**Purim in Israel**

Although Purim is celebrated in the West, it is celebrated on a far greater scale in Israel. Teenagers dominate the scene, streaming through the streets in carnival-like parades and on decorated floats. Everyone gets into the act. A young woman in Tel Aviv described what Purim was like for her last year: “[I heard] noise on the streets—people yelling, screaming, celebrating, loud firecrackers going off—even when I was in the house. . . . The place was crowded with costumes—pirates, bumblebees, a caveman, Lady Gaga, flappers, and more.” 2

However, for the young at heart, like the elderly at Yad LaKashish, a nonprofit organization in Jerusalem that supports older residents and provides them with creative jobs, Purim is as joyous as ever:

**Purim at Yad LaKashish this year was as colorful, musical and joyful as ever, thanks to hordes of visitors who came to make merry with the elderly artisans. Jerusalem celebrates Purim a day later than everyone else, and so we took the opportunity to double the festive fun with two days of costumes, singing, dancing and mishloach manot. We distributed the traditional hamantashen and candy to all 300 elderly artisans alongside their regular morning snack, and this was supplemented by some extra goodies. 3**

**The Traditional Foods**

On the 13th of Adar, some observe the fast of Esther (Est. 9:31–32). Then the feasting begins, and no festive holiday would be complete without traditional foods. Popular among Polish Jews is a big challah bread with raisins, called Koolitch. Besides hamantashen, seeds and nuts are also Purim fare. The Talmud claims Esther ate only seeds and nuts in the palace, as she had no access to kosher food.

Other delicacies include kreplach—meat-, chicken-, or liver-filled dumplings served in soup. The meat hidden in the dumpling is considered another reminder of how God seems hidden in the book of Esther but is there with His people always. Jews of Hungarian and Romanian descent serve a dessert of fried dough balls and vanilla custard. Moroccan Jews eat a bread called Ojos de Haman (“Haman’s eyes”).

Yet another Purim mitzvah is to eat a special meal (seudat Purim), usually in the afternoon after prayer services (minchah). Holiday candles are lit, and a blessing called Kiddush is recited before eating. Since the holiday revolves around Jewish salvation from physical destruction, there is much physical activity, such as singing, dancing, eating, and drinking.

Many Jewish holidays are solemn remembrances, but Purim is a joyous time of celebration, commemorating how God again saved His people:

“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms; He will thrust out the enemy from before you, and will say, ‘Destroy! Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD’” (Dt. 33:27, 29).

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1 “Why Is God’s Name Hidden?” United With Israel <unitedwithisrael.org/idf-purim-baskets>.
3 “Purim Celebrations,” Yad LaKashish <tinyurl.com/PurimIsrael>.

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ENDNOTES
If Replacement Theology is true, then certainly God has an opinion about it—one He states clearly and teaches visibly in Scripture. Conversely, if it is not plainly taught, then Replacement Theology must be the fictitious creation of men.

What It Maintains

Replacement Theology maintains that, because the Jewish people rejected Jesus Christ, God has replaced or superseded ethnic Israel with the church* and punished them by rescinding all of the covenant promises He gave them.

It also claims (1) the church began with Abraham in Genesis 12, (2) the church is merely a continuation of Old Testament Israel, (3) the church is true or “spiritual Israel,” and (4) true Israel in the Old Testament was comprised of Abraham’s spiritual, not physical, descendants.

Replacement theologians also claim we must first understand the New Testament before we can understand the Old. The New Testament, they say, teaches us how to interpret the Old Testament. This method enables them to redefine Israel to mean Abraham’s spiritual descendants only. However, interpreting Scripture this way ignores the progress of God’s revelation and implies that people who had only Old Testament revelation could not have understood it.

Replacement Theology also conveniently manages to uncouple God’s covenant promises from His covenant curses. The church inherits all of the promises to Israel, but the Jewish people (ethnic Israel) keep all of the covenant curses. This uncoupling is quite a feat.

Since the Replacement church sees itself as a continuation of Old Testament Israel, it applies portions of Old Testament Law to itself while ignoring important New Testament teachings.

Finally, Replacement Theology teaches there is no future for national Israel: God has thoroughly rejected Israel and no longer has a place for it in His plan for eternity apart from the salvation of individual Jewish people. They are no longer His Chosen People; nor is there a future 70th week of Daniel (see Daniel 9:24–27) or a future, literal, Millennial Kingdom of God on Earth.

Replacement Theology is the historical position of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and the common position of the Reformed and Covenant churches. Unfortunately, it has fueled anti-Semitism for 1,800 years. It has been said that more anti-Semitic acts have been committed in the name of the church than by all other groups combined.

Christ’s Words

Since Israel did not reject Christ until the Gospels, we would expect Replacement Theology to be taught in the New Testament. Using a literal-historical-grammatical method of interpretation, we would expect to find:

- Clear, concise statements that God has rejected Israel.
- Definitive passages that teach that the church has replaced Israel.
- God’s declaration that He has excluded Israel from the Old Testament covenants.
- A total lack of New Testament verses that speak of Israel’s future in God’s plan.

Speaking to a Jewish audience, Jesus said, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Mt. 21:43).

Replacement theologians say this passage teaches that Jesus said (1) God has permanently rejected national Israel, and (2) the “nation” to whom the Kingdom of God will be given is the church.

On the surface, this explanation seems reasonable. However, scrutiny shows otherwise. Throughout the first part of His ministry on Earth, Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom is at hand!” He offered the restored Kingdom of God to Israel if the people repented of their sins and accepted Him as their Savior and Lord. But they would not.

Later Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, “who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! You shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ” (23:37, 39).

Although this passage teaches that Israel will be judged, it concludes by promising a future day when a new generation of national Israel will repent and accept Him as Messiah. If Matthew 21:43 taught that God had rejected Israel, then Jesus would not have taught later that a future Jewish nation will accept Him. Therefore, Matthew 21:43 cannot imply God has permanently rejected Israel as His people.

Furthermore, nowhere does Scripture define the church as a “nation.” Rather, it teaches that the church is composed of people from many nations. Christ’s use of nation in Matthew 21:43 refers to the future generation of Jewish people who will accept Him and bear the fruit of the restored Kingdom. Christ chose the word nation rather than generation because He knew the Jewish people would soon be scattered; and He wanted to note a future day when Israel would again be a nation, accept Him as Messiah, and usher in the restored Kingdom of God.

Far from teaching Replacement Theology, Jesus emphasized that, because the Jewish generation alive during His First Coming refused His offer of the restored Kingdom, God would take the Kingdom from them and give it to a future Jewish nation that will accept Him.

Paul’s Words

One of the most often-quoted passages in defense of Replacement Theology is Galatians 6:16: “And as many as walk...
according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God,” written by the apostle Paul. Replacement theologians say Israel of God refers to the church.

Their argument revolves around the Greek word kai that precedes the words upon the Israel of God. Kai is most commonly translated “and”; but they say kai is an explicative case (what follows explains what came before) and therefore, should be translated “even.” This change makes Israel of God refer to as many as walk according to this rule, meaning Christians. They also say Paul taught in Galatians the unity of all ethnic believer groups. Therefore, the words Israel of God refer to all believers, that is, the church.

However, the explicative case of kai is extremely uncommon usage and not likely supported by context or grammar. The more commonly used and to connect the words Israel of God with the first half of the verse makes more sense.

In Galatians, Paul defended salvation by grace through faith alone. He spoke against the Judaizers who taught circumcision was required for salvation. They added works (circumcision) to faith. When Paul said, “as many as walk according to this rule,” he spoke of those who walked by faith in Christ alone. His use of Israel of God contrasts Jewish people who believed in Christ alone with the Judaizers who taught one must have faith plus works to be saved.

In all other Pauline passages, the word Israel refers to national or ethnic Israel. It is highly unlikely he would use Israel here to refer to the body of all believers. Paul prayed in Galatians 6:16 that God would bless all who put their faith in Christ alone for salvation and that He would especially bless the Jewish believers who were distinct from the Judaizers. This verse does not say the church has replaced Israel. Even if one accepts the Replacement explanation, the most it says is that Gentiles are included with Israel.

Replacement theologians also use Galatians 3:7 and 29 to bolster their position: “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (v. 7). “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (v. 29).

They maintain the words sons of Abraham and Abraham’s seed imply the church has become true Israel, concluding that all believers are spiritual Jews. They tell us Abraham’s seed means believers are related to Christ, whom they say is the true seed of Abraham; thus the church is true Israel.

However, it is possible to be Abraham’s “son” or “seed” but not be Jewish. Ishmael was Abraham’s son, but he was not Jewish. In Romans 4:11-12 Paul taught that Abraham is the father of both the uncircumcised (Gentiles) and circumcised (Jewish). Some of Abraham’s descendants are Jewish, and others are not.

Abraham himself was not Jewish. He was a Gentile from Ur of the Chaldeans. If he had been Jewish, then all of his descendants would be Jewish. Yet only the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are Jewish. It wasn’t until Jacob that God bestowed the title of Israel, after Jacob wrestled with God all night (Gen. 32:24-30).

Galatians 3:7 and 29 do not say Israel has been replaced; they merely teach that people (Jewish or Gentile) who put their faith in Christ become partakers of the spiritual promises God made to Abraham. Paul affirmed this fact in 3:28 when He said, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

* Unless otherwise specified, all references to the church refer to the church in its broadest sense, including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and evangelical.

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There are five views concerning the Rapture: pretribulation (pretrib), midtribulation (midtrib), posttribulation (posttrib), partial Rapture, and prewrath.  

Pretrib says the church will be raptured before the future, seven-year Tribulation.  

Midtrib believes the church will live through the first half of the Tribulation and then be raptured.  

Posttrib has the church living through the entire Tribulation and enduring many of God’s judgments.  

Partial rapturists say some people are raptured at the beginning, some here, some there. If you’re a good Christian, you go first. If not, you’ll languish in a sort of Protestant purgatory and then be raptured as you shape up.  

Prewrath, which is relatively new, maintains that God will rapture the church three-quarters of the way through the Tribulation before He pours out His wrath.
I used to answer questions on a radio program; and, inevitably, after a few programs, someone would write to say, “The Rapture is not even in the Bible!” Yes, it is in the Bible. In Acts 8:39, Scripture says, “The Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away” to Azotus. Rapture means “to move from one place to another.” The word is used again in 2 Corinthians 12:2 where the apostle Paul spoke of being “caught up”—raptured—to the third heaven. Paul used it the same way in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” In this passage, Paul said people will be carried away from Earth to heaven. So the Rapture is a scriptural event.

Who Are Raptured?

First Thessalonians 4 describes the Rapture in great detail. It is Paul’s answer to questions the Thessalonians and first-century Christians had posed. They had expected the Lord to return soon after He ascended to heaven. But the Lord did not. Meanwhile, Christians died. So the Thessalonians were concerned they had missed the Second Coming.

Paul assured them they had not: “I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who believe” (vv. 13–14).

These verses do not refer to soul-sleep, as some cults teach. The soul does not sleep when it dies. Then as some cults teach. The soul does not sleep in Jesus’ (vv. 13–14). God will bring with Him those who believe. Paul assured them they had not: “I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who believe” (vv. 13–14). God will bring with Him those who believe.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first (vv. 15–16).

The only “dead in Christ” are those who died after the day of Pentecost. Old Testament saints were saved, but they were not put “in Christ.” No one was “in Christ” until the day of Pentecost. So the dead in Christ will rise first.

Who will rise second? The living in Christ. Paul said, “We who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (v. 17). Caught up. Raptured. Rapture actually comes to English through the Latin translation of the Greek word.

At the Rapture, Christ will not touch Earth. We meet Him in the air. The Rapture is part of the Second Coming—just as the virgin birth, the Lord’s appearance and teaching in the Temple, and 35 specific miracles He performed were part of His First Coming.

Seven years after the Rapture, Christ actually comes to Earth—to Armageddon in northern Israel and Jerusalem in central Israel. He also stands on the Mount of Olives. So there are a number of facets to both comings of Christ.

When Is the Rapture?

The timing of the Rapture is highly debated, mainly between pretribulation and posttribulation rapturists. Christendom as a whole is primarily posttribulation, although many Christians have no position. Some say, “Yes, I believe in the Rapture. It’s at the Second Coming. People will be raptured, go up to heaven, turn right around, and come back in the Second Coming.”

They believe that, in that brief moment between arriving in heaven and turning right around and coming back, they are changed—given new bodies. The pretrib view, on the other hand, says everyone will be raptured prior to the Tribulation.

To fix the time of the Rapture, you first must fix the time of the Tribulation. When do the seven years begin ticking on the Tribulation clock? When the Antichrist signs a treaty with the Jewish state and gives it its protection.

So when is the Rapture? If you’re pretrib, it begins just before the treaty is signed. Perhaps the day it is signed. Perhaps the day before.

There is a sequence in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–2: “We ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by [a] spirit or by [a] word or by [a] letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.” Even in Paul’s day, spirits were communicating, messages were being spoken, and letters were being written promoting the error that the Day of the Lord had already come.

So Paul provided a sequence of events: Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God (vv. 3–4).

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So Paul provided a sequence of events: Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God (vv. 3–4).
The Day of the Lord will not come until (1) there is an apostasy and (2) the man of lawlessness (the Antichrist) is revealed. At the beginning of the Tribulation, he will sign a treaty to protect Israel; during the first part of the Tribulation, he will consolidate his power; and in the middle, he will perform the ultimate blasphemy, setting himself up in the Temple of God and saying, “Worship me.” That’s humanism at its peak: the worship of a man.

The Antichrist must be revealed before the Day of the Lord, and then the other things will begin to happen. So we have to have apostasy and the revelation of the man of sin. Then the Day of the Lord begins.

Apostasy, of course, is present today; but the great apostasy occurs before the Tribulation. The minute the Antichrist signs the treaty, many people will know who he is. They will probably guess who he is beforehand. But he will certainly be revealed when he signs the treaty with Israel. These things must occur before the Day of the Lord begins, indicating a pretrib Rapture.

Furthermore, the pretrib position allows for populating the Millennium. If the Rapture were to take place at the end of the Tribulation, Christians would go to heaven in earthly bodies and return immediately in glorified ones. The wicked are condemned to hell. So where are the mortals who will populate the Millennium? Spiritual bodies do not procreate. Scripture teaches that, in the resurrection, we will be like the angels (Mt. 22:30). No baby angels are born, and no baby spiritual bodies are born. The postrib position has no one left on Earth, in mortal bodies, who can produce offspring.

However, if the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation, the situation changes. Although many people will be martyred for their faith, some will survive the Tribulation and enter the Millennium in mortal bodies. People also will be born during the Tribulation and enter as children.

The Promise

Revelation 3:10 says, “I also will keep you from the hour of trial [testing] which shall come upon the whole world.” This promise was written to the church in Philadelphia. The apostle John wrote to each of the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 1:4), ending each letter with, “Hear what the Spirit says to the churches”—churches, plural. So what the Spirit told the Ephesus and Philadelphia churches for example, was intended for all seven churches—and for us.

People with different prophetic views do not debate that verse 10 refers to the Tribulation: The suffering (1) is worldwide (“which shall come upon the whole world”) and (2) affects people in all walks of life, causing them to prefer death over life:

Excuses, Excuses

S
ome people object to studying prophecy because they claim it is “too deep” and difficult to understand. Nonsense. For example, in Revelation 6:2, the apostle John wrote, “And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.” Which words are difficult to understand?

If you don’t know where to begin in Revelation, start with chapters 6, 8—9, and 16 because these are the places where three series of judgments are described. No one should dismiss prophecy because he thinks it is too difficult to understand.

Others make the excuse that prophecy is something new Christians do not need to know. Why not? You tell them they need a Savior who died for them, who is God. Can you explain the God-Man? That is a difficult thing to do. We should encourage new Christians to read and understand as much as they can. As the years go by, they’ll understand more.

Two of Paul’s earliest epistles are 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Both are loaded with prophecy. Paul was in Thessalonica little more than four weeks (Acts 17:2), yet he taught the people there about future things (eschatology).

And when the Thessalonians sent questions to him, Paul reminded them, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?” (2 Th. 2:5). So don’t use the excuse that prophecy is too difficult or suitable only for mature Christians. Neither is true.

by Charles C. Ryrie
And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man...said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come” (6:15–17).

So when the events are worldwide and people start acting like they’d rather die than live, the Tribulation is here. Yet God promises believers, “I also will keep you from the hour of trial” (3:10). That seems pretty clear.

Posttrib rapturists think they’re going to live through the Tribulation. They say the phrase I will keep you means God will protect the Christians as He protected Israel in Egypt. However, the Israelites did not live in the same area as the Egyptians. They lived in Goshen. At the fourth seal judgment of Revelation, a fourth of Earth’s population is killed. At the sixth trumpet judgment, a third is killed. By the latter part of the Tribulation, you’re left with one half the number of people you started with.

There will be earthquakes, tsunamis, and water turning to blood. People in the Tribulation will turn on a faucet and get blood. If they can find water, it will be bitter. It seems highly unlikely that an earthquake or other disaster that affects millions will not touch Joe and Sarah Christian who live in the same area as everyone else.

The Tribulation will encompass the whole earth. So the only place where you can be kept “from the hour” is somewhere where there are no hours. Pretty simple, isn’t it? And the only place where there will be no Tribulation clock ticking down the hours is heaven. This is one of the strongest arguments for a pretribulation Rapture. Just before the man of sin signs the treaty with Israel and the seven years start, God will remove His church. The promise could not be more specific.

I’ve been a teacher most of my life; and if I were to tell my students, “I’ll keep you from the hour of the exam,” I don’t think one of them would arrive to take the test. “From the hour.” That’s crystal clear, and everyone who is a believer should thank the Lord that it’s that way.

If being raptured were to depend on our being qualified, no one would be taken. We do not qualify. The Rapture is another wonderful act of God’s grace, where we’ll be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. And the older you get, the brighter that hope becomes.

So whether in death or in life, we will all be changed. We will meet the Lord in the air, be reunited with others who have died in Christ, and receive new bodies. All those things will happen, and it will be wonderful. But one thing outshines them all: We will finally see Him face-to-face.

Charles C. Ryrie served as professor of systematic theology and dean of doctoral studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and as president of Philadelphia Biblical University. He is a well-known theologian and writer and is the editor of the popular Ryrie Study Bible.

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Whether to spend the rest of their lives with someone. One of the most important decisions we will ever make will be where we will spend eternity. Yet many people never question their faith or evaluate what they are trusting in. However, if we are going to make spiritual decisions—life-or-death decisions—that count for both time and eternity, we should be sure we understand what kind of faith God accepts.

The New Testament defines faith in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is, first of all, an understanding that what we believe is real and not an illusion, dream, or trick. This is why, throughout the New Testament, the writers challenged people to examine the evidence of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Luke, one of the Gospel writers, said at the beginning of the book bearing his name, “having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order . . . so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught” (1:3–4, NASB).

Real faith is faith in real things. It understands that what Jesus Christ did was historical fact, not fiction. But biblical faith is even more. Hebrews 11:1 calls it “substance.” Faith is substance. It points to the reality of an assurance that rests securely in that in which it hopes. It is a conviction that the historical facts are not merely true in the same, mundane way as the world history you learn in school; they are truth God has revealed so that we can know Him personally.

But real faith is still more. It is not merely knowing—even being convinced—that something is true; but it involves accepting it as true for you. Not
true for the church, not true for the preacher, not true for your parents, not true for your friends, but true for you.

In the mid-1900s, famous daredevil Charles Blondin regularly thrilled audiences by walking a tightrope stretched across the rapids of Niagara Falls, with a man on his shoulders. One day, as he was about to start across, he asked a man in the audience if the man believed Blondin would be successful.

“Yes,” the man replied. “You can do it!” He then asked him if he were sure that he could do it. “Yes, I’m really sure that you can do it!”

“Good,” said Blondin, “because my regular man isn’t here today, and I need you to ride over on my shoulders.”

Now the man was faced with the real issue of faith. He said he believed, but was he willing to stake his life on it?

You see, faith is not faith until it’s all you’re holding onto. Our faith is only as good as that in which it is placed. That is why we must make sure it is placed in something that can do for us what it promises to do. No matter how much you may trust your parents, religion, church, rabbis, priests, or preachers, not one of them can give you eternal life when you die. They may be able to help you now; but they cannot help you afterward, for they too must die. The problem is not that they don’t want to help you. The problem is that they have no power.

The only One who can help you is God Himself who came here as a man to die in your place and pay the penalty for your sins. He proved He has the power to give you life beyond the grave because He Himself conquered death and lives forever. He did what He promised He would do; and now He can do for you what He promises He will do: give you eternal life if you believe.

Some may say, “I don’t know if I can do that. My faith is not strong enough.” Let me answer that with a little story.

A young boy had waited for the first big freeze of winter so he could ice skate. Now that the big one had come, he ran down the snow-covered slopes to the lake, which was glistening with a newly formed layer of ice. Confidently, he ran out on the ice. But when he was only a few feet out, the ice cracked; and he fell in up to his waist. What went wrong? He had sincerely believed the ice would hold him. The problem, of course, was not with his faith but, rather, with the object of his faith.

After a few more freezes, he returned to the lake at the insistence of friends. But now he was afraid to trust himself to the lake again. He reluctantly ventured out, nervous and trembling as he went. But do you know what? Despite his faltering faith, the ice held firm.

You see, it is not the strength of our faith that matters but the strength of what we place our faith in. A weak faith may receive a strong Savior, for salvation does not depend on our power but on His.

Have you trusted your life to Jesus Christ, who can hold you up forever? To do so, you must forsake every other thing you have trusted in and trust in Him alone. Faith in Christ is not faith until Christ is all you’re holding onto. But He is able to hold you forever, all the way through eternity.

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Iran Revises Story of Esther, Labels Purim a Day of Mourning

On March 7 at sundown, Jewish people around the world will celebrate Purim, marking the deliverance of the Jews of the Persian Empire from extinction 2,300 years ago. In Iran, the center of the ancient Persian Empire, the date will be marked with mourning and anger.

For years Iran has been teaching schoolchildren that Purim marks the massacre of 75,000 Persians by the Jews under the command of Queen Esther. It is presented today as an ancient Iranian holocaust perpetrated by the Jews.

The Iranian version leaves out the part where Haman, the royal advisor, convinced the Persian king to sign a decree permitting the wholesale slaughter of all the Jews in the empire. When Esther revealed her Jewish background to the king and that Haman was tricking him, the king issued a second decree, allowing the Jews to defend themselves. By God’s grace, the Jewish people were largely spared, while their enemies were slaughtered.

Last year Iran went further than simply revising the biblical account. Iranian authorities decided to downgrade the status of the “Tomb of Esther and Mordecai the Jews” in the city of Hamadan in central Iran. The tomb had previously enjoyed the status of an official pilgrimage site.

Following the downgrading, the Iranian news agency Fars began pushing the idea that Esther and her cousin Mordecai were responsible for a massacre of Iranians and that their burial place had merely been tolerated until now. The Iranian news agency Mehr reported that, several weeks earlier, a group of 250 militant Iranian students gathered at the tomb and threatened to tear it down.

by Israel Today, www.israeltoday.co.il
The Accomplishments of Faith

The beginning of Hebrews 11 describes faith. Then it systematically illustrates it in the lives of those who lived before the patriarchal period until Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land (vv. 1–31). Then the author expressed his quandary: “What more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell” (v. 32).

To mention all the faithful individuals in Israel’s history would be too time-consuming. Thus, for the remaining verses of chapter 11, he selected a few faithful individuals to illustrate that the principle of faith was manifested through Israel’s history.

Six men of faith from the period of the judges, kings, and prophets are listed out of chronological order. In the Old Testament, Barak precedes Gideon, Jephthah precedes Samuel, and Samuel precedes David. Scripture does not say why these men were chosen or why they were presented in this order (v. 32).

We do know they were ordinary men whom God called on to accomplish extraordinary feats of faith after being endowed and energized by the Holy Spirit. These men appear in verse 32 exclusively because of their faith.

People of Faith

Gideon (cf. Jud. 6—9). The Lord sent Gideon to save Israel, which was groaning under Midianite oppression (6:14). God’s plan was to defeat the Midianites with a mere 300 Israelite soldiers. Against overwhelming odds, Gideon put unwavering faith in God’s plan and power and defeated the Midianite coalition of 135,000 men. In confusion, the Midianites fought one another and eventually fled from the Israelites (7:1–25; 8:10).

Barak (cf. Jud. 4—5). King Jabin of Canaan had suppressed Israel for 20 years, and the nation cried out to God for deliverance. The Lord promised Deborah, the judge of Israel, that she would defeat Sisera, the captain of Jabin’s army, who had 900 iron chariots under his command. The Lord told Deborah to ask an obscure man named Barak to muster an army of 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, assemble them atop Mount Tabor, and charge down the mountain. There the Lord would defeat the Canaanites.

Many believe it was Deborah, not Barak, who had faith to believe Israel would triumph. Not so. Barak was a fearless warrior of faith who willingly fought Sisera. Barak wanted Deborah with him, not because he was fearful, but for her spiritual wisdom and direction as the Lord’s spokesperson (4:1–24).

Samson (cf. Jud. 13—16). Samson was a judge in Israel who was given a special mission: Oppose the Philistines oppressing Israel. He is best known, not for his faith, but for his physical strength, immaturity, self-will, self-confidence, and foolishness in trusting the pagan woman Delilah who brought him down. Nevertheless, God used him in many situations to defeat the Philistines. On those occasions, Samson exercised faith in God to perform mighty acts, never doubting that his power and strength came from God.

Jephthah (cf. Jud. 11—13). Jephthah, the son of a harlot, became a soldier of fortune whom God later selected to be a judge to fight the Ammonites. Despite his downfall by making an awful vow, Jephthah was a man of faith. He trusted totally in God’s power, manifested great faith in the Lord, and believed he would be victorious over the Ammonites.

David. King David exercised great faith when he killed a lion, a bear, and the Philistine giant Goliath. His faith never wavered when he ran from Saul, who sought his life; faced rebellion within his own family; and directed and fought wars while king. Despite his gross sins of adultery and murder, God called him “a man after My own heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22; cf. 1 Sam. 13—22).

Samuel. Samuel was called as a child to be a priest and prophet. Later he became the last judge over Israel (1 Sam. 3:10, 20–21; 7:15–17). He exercised great faith, standing against Israel’s enemies (Philistines, Amorites, and Ammonites) and courageously opposing King Saul, who was disobedient to the Lord. While Saul was still in office, Samuel exercised faith in anointing David to be king (13:1–14; 16:1–2, 12–13).

Prophets. There were many prophets of faith in Israel, but the author did not list them.

Persecution of the Faithful

In quick succession, Scripture lists many great examples of faith, even during persecution, but does not name names.

Triumphs of Faith
(Heb. 11:33–35)

- Subdued kingdoms: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David.
- Worked [performed acts of] righteousness: Through faith they walked uprightly and lived righteously. Samuel and the prophets were such examples.
Obtained promises: What God promised He provided, especially specific victories over Israel’s enemies, as promised to Gideon, Barak, and David.

Stopped the mouths of lions: This was true of Samson (Jud. 14:5–6), David (1 Sam. 17:34–36), and Daniel (Dan. 6:16–23).

Quenched the violence of fire: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego survived in King Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace (Dan. 3).

Escaped the edge of the sword: Many within Israel escaped being killed by adversaries, including Moses (Ex. 18:4), Elijah (1 Ki. 19:1–3), and Elisha (2 Ki. 6:31).

Out of weakness were made strong: Gideon (Jud. 6:14–16), Samson (16:30), and David (1 Sam. 17) all were weak but by faith were made strong.

Became valiant [brave] in battle [and] turned to fight the armies of the aliens: Such was true of Joshua, some judges, and especially King David.

Women received their dead raised to life again: Elijah raised from the dead the son of the woman of Zarephath (1 Ki. 17:17–24), and Elisha raised the son of a Shunammite woman (2 Ki. 4:18–37).

Trials of Faith
(Heb. 11:35–37)

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection: The word tortured (Greek, tumpānizo) means to “to beat a drum”; thus the torture involved being beaten. The tympanum as an instrument of torture seems to have been a wheel-shaped frame upon which criminals were stretched and beaten with clubs or leather whips.

The Greek text reads “the deliverance,” referring to a specific deliverance offered to Christians if they would deny their faith. However, those being tortured refused the offer because they looked to “obtain a better resurrection” (v. 35). They preferred to die, rather than renounce Christ, knowing they would experience eternal life in their resurrected bodies.

Others had trial of mockings and scourgings . . . chains and imprisonment: Many Old Testament prophets experienced such persecution, particularly from their own countrymen. Yet they never wavered in their faith or commitment, nor did they compromise the message God asked them to deliver.

They were stoned: Stoning was Israel’s usual form of capital punishment. Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, likely was stoned to death (2 Chr. 24:20–22), as was Stephen who was falsely accused of blasphemy (Acts 7:55–60).

They were sawn in two: Jewish tradition has taught that Isaiah the prophet died by being sawed in half.

Were tempted. Satan tempted believers with discouragement and doubt when they were called on to exercise faith. Moses was tempted with position, wealth, and the pleasures of sin before he left Pharaoh’s court in Egypt. Job was tempted to doubt God because of his suffering, and Daniel was tempted to compromise his faith while a captive in Babylon.

Were slain with the sword: Elijah said Israel slew its prophets with the sword (1 Ki. 19:10). Evil Queen Jezebel had many prophets slain (18:4). Herod Agrippa had James slain by the sword (Acts 12:2).

They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented: Men and women of faith became outcasts. Elijah wore goatskins. Often prophets in Israel were destitute, afflicted, and tormented physically and verbally.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth: This fact was true of 100 prophets whom Obadiah saved from Jezebel’s wrath by hiding them in two caves (1 Ki. 18:4). Many people of faith experienced such things through the centuries.

Scripture describes these people as individuals “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:38). The world had no use for people of faith and poured contempt on those who were forced to flee their godless persecutors. Some believers had to live in caves and the desert.

PROMISE TO THE FAITHFUL

The author then summarized chapter 11. First, the faithful received God’s approval because they “obtained a good testimony through faith” (v. 39). They demonstrated that believers can live lives of faith and will be rewarded by God. The list in Hebrews 11 is merely a sampling of godly people in the Old Testament.

Second, these faithful anticipated receiving what God had promised but “did not receive the promise” (v. 39). Old Testament believers looked for a Messiah who would provide a Messianic Kingdom filled with national and spiritual blessing. Although they never saw the Kingdom in their day, they died in faith believing God would do what He promised.

Then the author drove home his application: “God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (v. 40). The Old Testament saints received promises from God because of their faith, but they did not receive the promise apart from us. In other words, the promise of salvation and the Messianic Kingdom for all believers could not be completed until after Christ’s death and resurrection. Old and New Testament believers will be made “perfect” (complete, v. 40) at the same time: at their glorification and return to Earth at Christ’s Second Coming.

The testimony of the Old Testament faithful is an appeal to all believers, especially first-century Jewish believers who were considering a return to Judaism because of persecution. Instead, they were to take heart and exercise greater faith in God’s promises because they had greater revelation in the resurrected Messiah.

Hebrews 11 illustrates how men and women in ages past exercised great faith despite their circumstances and were triumphant. We should emulate their faith and, like them, with patient endurance, stand firm in our commitment to the Lord no matter what the cost.

David M. Levy is the director of International Ministries for The Friends of Israel.
The Love and Mercy of God (Part 3)

Previously we examined characteristics of God’s mercy or lovingkindness as revealed in the Old Testament. Now we will focus on God’s mercy in the New Testament.

New Testament Key Words for God’s Mercy

God’s mercy is expressed through three clusters of Greek words. The first cluster has as its base the Greek word eleos, which refers to the “emotion roused by contact with an affliction which comes undeservedly on someone else. There is in it an element of fear that this can happen”; therefore, there is “sympathy” for the victim.1

When Jewish scholars produced the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek prior to Christ’s birth, they usually used eleos for the Hebrew word hesed.2 Hesed was the key Old Testament word for God’s mercy or lovingkindness. (See this series in the September/October 2011 issue of Israel My Glory.)

Examining all the New Testament passages that use eleos prompts the conclusion that, although it is the key word for God’s mercy, it can also refer to “the sense of ‘pity’ or ‘sympathy’” and “can include ‘loving-kindness in general.’”3

The base word of the second cluster is oiktirmos. It communicates “pity, mercy, compassion.”4

The third cluster’s base is splagxnon. In ancient Greek it referred to “the bowels” as “the seat of the emotions.” In modern Western literature, “the heart” replaces “the bowels” as “the seat and source of love, sympathy, and mercy”; thus the expression the merciful heart.5 Splagxnon is “a pointed term for personal love,”6 referring to the heart that is focused on a specific object of love.

The Relationship of God’s Love to His Mercy

The Bible reveals that God’s love prompted His mercy in both Old and New Testament times. The apostle Paul wrote,

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4–6).

The root meaning of the word translated “rich” means “to be filled.”7 Because God’s love for people is so great, even when they are unsaved, He is filled with mercy toward them.

God’s Mercy As Expressed Through Eleos

In the New Testament, God’s eleos mercy “is often thought of as in the original OT sense of ‘faithfulness,’ i.e., the gracious faithfulness of God.”8

God’s Sovereign Authority Over the Administration of His Eleos Mercy. Shortly after God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He brought them to Mount Sinai. There He established the Mosaic Law Covenant with them (Ex. 19—24). Through that covenant He entered into a unique relationship with them that guaranteed the fulfillment of the promises He had made earlier to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through the Abrahamic Covenant.

While at Mount Sinai, the Israelites seriously violated the Mosaic Law Covenant by making a golden calf to worship as a false god, thereby angering God (Ex. 32:1–10). God could have destroyed them and been unfaithful to the everlasting commitment He had made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their biological descendants through the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 13:14–15; 15:13–21; 17:7–8, 19; 28:10–15; 35:9–12).

But in order to be faithful to that commitment, God sovereignly determined to give mercy, rather than judgment, to the people of Israel.
The situation demonstrated clearly a divine principle that God expressed later to Moses: “I will have mercy on whomsoever I will have mercy” (Rom. 9:15; cf. Ex. 33:19). The apostle Paul rendered the following conclusion: “So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Paul thus indicated that God’s mercy is not prompted by human determination or effort. It is determined exclusively by God’s sovereign authority.

**God’s Eleos Mercy Related to the Births of the Messiah and His Forerunner.** For many centuries the Israelites were oppressed by Gentile powers: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Through Old Testament prophets, God revealed that, in the future, He would free the Jewish people from Gentile bondage; and He would do so through a promised Messiah. The Messiah would be a biological descendant of King David (Isa. 11:1), be born of a virgin (7:14), and be God’s Son (9:6; Ps. 2:7). He would have an Elijah-like forerunner (Mal. 4:5–6), crush Gentile rule (Ps. 2:8–9; Dan. 2:44–45; Zech. 14:1–4, 12–15), and sit on the throne of David to govern the world (Ps. 72:8–11, 17; Isa. 2:1–4; 9:6–7; 11:1–5).

The New Testament records the fact that God faithfully gave the Israelites the promised Messiah and His Elijah-like forerunner as acts of mercy. God sent the angel Gabriel to elderly Zacharias, a priest of Israel, to tell him his elderly wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son named John. John would be “great in the sight of the Lord” and “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk. 1:15). He would “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” and would “go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah” (vv. 16–17).

Several months later God sent the angel Gabriel to a young Jewish woman named Mary (Hebrew, Miriam), who was related to Elizabeth. Mary was a virgin (vv. 26–27). Gabriel told her she had found favor with God and He would supernaturally cause conception to take place in her womb. As a result, she would give birth to a holy son who would be called the Son of God and would have the name of Jesus (Hebrew, Yeshua, meaning “salvation.”) In addition, God will give Him “the throne of His father David” (v. 32). He will reign over “the house of Jacob” forever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end (v. 33). (See Luke 3:23–31.)

Mary recognized the favor God bestowed on her was associated with His mercy. She declared,

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (vv. 68–79).*

**ENDNOTES**


2 Ibid., 479.

3 Ibid., 483.


5 Ibid., “splagxnon,” 770.


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Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood held a “kill the Jews” rally in Cairo in November. Thousands attended, promising to “one day kill all the Jews” and wage war against Jerusalem’s “Judaization.”

The rally was held on the anniversary of the 1947 UN partition plan that established the State of Israel and that was immediately followed by a pan-Arab war aimed at annihilating the newborn state.

The Brotherhood is suddenly promoting itself as a party that favors nonviolent rights for women, but it boasts its hatred of Jewish people and Israel. “The Muslim Brotherhood (is) very opportunistic. They don’t care about the Egyptian blood. . . . They only care about taking power,” said Azza Kamal, a political activist. (IsraelNationalNews.com)

Bribery at UN

Though there is little need to provide incentives for most nations to vote against Israel at the UN, some Arab states are nevertheless bribing countries that traditionally side with the Jewish state in order to make passage of anti-Israel resolutions more one-sided.

Johnson Toribiong, president of the Pacific island nation of Palau, told Israel’s Yedioth Ahronot newspaper the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recently offered him $50 million to start voting against Israel.

“We told them, ‘Forget it. We will not vote against Israel for anything in the world,’” Toribiong said. Palau, Vanuatu, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and a number of other Pacific micro nations are firm supporters of Israel due to their strong Christian faith.

When the Solomon Islands, another Pacific island nation, suddenly began voting against Israel in 2009, many wondered why. Like other Christian island nations, they had always backed the Jewish state. Later it was discovered that Iran’s foreign ministry had bribed the impoverished Solomon Islands with a $200,000 check and technological aid. (www.israeltoday.co.il)

Sarkozy: I stand with Israel

French President Nicolas Sarkozy told French Jews recently his country “is at the forefront of the struggle against the Iranian nuclear weapon” and reiterated his “commitment and his friendship” toward Israel. He made similar remarks earlier in 2011, saying, “If Israel’s existence will be threatened, France will not stand by and ignore it.”

Sarkozy also addressed the embarrassing incident in which he was caught calling Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a “liar” in a conversation with U.S. President Barack Obama. He said his old friendship for Israel cannot be questioned and stressed that no French president has had such sympathy for Israel. Sarkozy spoke of “his relation of friendship and respect” with Netanyahu, even if there are “significant differences” between them.

He said the Palestinian Authority should recognize that Israel is the state of the Jewish people, start bilateral negotiations, accept Israel’s security constraints, and not take legal action against it. (IsraelNationalNews.com)

Africans infiltrate

Africans have been infiltrating Israel at a dizzying pace through Israel’s border with Egypt. They then proceed to the southern tourist city of Eilat. Approximately 950 people infiltrated in the first week of November 2011 alone.

Tens of thousands have remained in Israel, which often does not deport them and allows them to remain in the country. In one incident in May 2011, dozens of Sudanese and Eritrean infiltrators entered Eilat in the wee hours of the morning and began knocking on doors, seeking food and water. (IsraelNationalNews.com)

Jordan in trouble

Refugees from Iraq, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Syria swarming across the borders to Jordan, along with the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, threaten Jordan’s stability, researchers report. Also, America’s withdrawal from Iraq may cause anarchy there and increase the flow of Iraqi refugees to Jordan, a report said.

The violence in Syria already has spread across the Jordanian border. Syrian soldiers shot at a girl fleeing to Jordan in November 2011, and Jordanian forces rescued her. Jordanian soldiers also arrested a youth for allegedly helping Syrians buy arms; he died in jail, prompting street protests.

Another huge threat to King Abdullah is the prospect of a PA unity government that would restore Hamas’s status in Judea and Samaria and the Jordan Valley. Jordan has a peace treaty with Israel. (IsraelNationalNews.com)
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ISRAEL MY GLORY

70.1

**ENDNOTES**


3 Ibid., pp. 3–4.

A of child who survived occupies part of her day playing in water in a resettlement area (Matthew Miller/Baptist Press).
I have lived in the same neighborhood in Jerusalem for 37 years. Most of the people here know me, and we are good friends. But some people do not like me because I believe in Christ and speak about true faith in God, according to the Bible.

One family in particular has made life difficult for me over the years. The children were good, but the father was much against me and brought others like him to the neighborhood to make trouble for me. Some were men who spent their days sitting in yeshivas, studying books written by rabbis, rather than studying God’s Holy Word. This man fought against me so much that he even threw stones at my house.

Yet it is written in the book of Romans, “I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38–39). So I trusted the Lord to help me.

Not long ago I was outside and saw this man’s sons near my house, weeping. I was surprised and asked them, “Why are you weeping?”

One replied, “Our father is no longer among the living, and we do not know what caused his death.”

“How can I help you?” I asked immediately.

One answered, “We have come to apologize to you for what our father did to you. We are very sorry. Can you forgive us?”

“Of course I can forgive you,” I told them. “You see what the Lord has done. He has forgiven all those who come to Him and ask for forgiveness of their sins. So I can forgive and forget, and we can be friends.”

They became very comfortable speaking with me and were friendly.

“We do not cast stones against those who are not with us,” I said. “We go to people to show them what the Lord has done for us all and to tell them how we can have forgiveness. And through whom can we obtain such forgiveness? Through This One whom you are so against.”

I could see the boys were receiving what I was telling them. “If you want to know more about the One in whom I have believed, I can help you,” I said.

“Yes,” one replied. “We are interested.”

I showed them my Bible. “If you want it, you may have this.” They seemed surprised.

Then one replied, “You see, we also believe what is written in your Bible.”

“This is not my Bible only. The Bible is for everyone,” I said. After a while, some of their friends arrived; and they, too, wanted Bibles.
I did all this with great love. Now, from time to time, when they see me on the street, they speak to me as to a good friend. I told them the importance of humbling oneself before the Lord and going to Him for forgiveness. “Only when you come before the Lord,” I said, “and say, ‘Oh Lord, I am a sinner; and I come to you,’ can He forgive you for what you’ve done.” I showed them how to go before the Lord and ask for forgiveness.

Then, to my surprise, I received an invitation to their home. Their mother was very nice to me. They asked me to go before the Lord and ask for forgiveness. “Only if you come to me,” I told them. “Follow Him.” I opened my Bible to Isaiah 53 and asked them to read verse 5, where it is written, “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.”

They said they believed in the One who came from Bethlehem. So I asked them to read Micah 5:2: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.”

“Why,” one asked, “if it is so clearly written here, are our rabbis against Him?”

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