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The sin of Laodicea — Page 32

Plus:
Atrocities in Sudan — Page 9
Revelation chart — Page 22
God's take on murder and capital punishment — Page 36
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I would love to hear from you. Why not contact me today? It’s never too early to become a lifesaver.
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About the Issue

Elwood McQuaid
Editor-in-Chief

It’s all about admonition. Few Bible believers today will find themselves at odds with Christ’s letters to the seven churches of the Revelation. And whether one views these messages as an historical continuum, representative of the types of churches in existence today, or as separate letters to actual churches existing at the time, the result is the same. The messages tell us clearly that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In this issue, Art Director Tom Williams and our authors give us a look at our local churches, the temper of the spiritual culture that surrounds us, and ourselves as individuals.

(Cover: Remains of an Ephesian street. Todd Bolden/BiblePlaces.com)
Much more than a trip—an experience of a lifetime!

That’s the way it is when you travel to Israel with The Friends of Israel. And that’s the way all 128 of us felt during our 10 days in the land before returning home March 30.

In Israel you walk where Jesus walked—on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret) and in Capernaum, the hub of Jesus’ ministry in the Galilee. During devotions aboard a boat on the Kinneret, you can visualize how Jesus rebuked the storm and miraculously calmed the wind and waves. Climbing the southern steps to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, you remember Jesus’ dramatic ascent 2,000 years earlier. And participating in a communion service at the Garden Tomb dramatically recalls Christ’s sacrificial death.

In Israel the Bible truly comes alive as you walk through the ancient Mediterranean port city of Joppa where Jonah set sail for Nineveh. You marvel at the magnificent, ancient amphitheater at Caesarea Maritime, a city that figured prominently in the lives of the apostles Peter and Paul. At Banyas you can almost hear Peter’s great confession of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). On the slopes of Mount Carmel you recall Elijah’s unparalleled contest with the prophets of Baal.

In Israel you affirm the truth of God’s prophetic Word. Viewing the huge expanse of Armageddon from the top of Tel Megiddo, you cannot but visualize the drama of this great end-times battle, when God’s judgment will fall on a rebellious world. And on the Mount of Olives, you stand where Jesus began His entry into Jerusalem and where He ascended into heaven and will return at His Second Coming.

The opportunity to relive Jewish history is another important part of the journey. You ride the aerial tram to the top of Masada, the site of the heroic Jewish stand against the Roman forces. You view the caves of Qumran where the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were found. At Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, your heart stirs by a reenactment of the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948.

Another feature of our Friends of Israel tours is the opportunity to interact with the people and places of modern Israel. Ascending to the Golan Heights, a natural barrier between Syria and Israel’s Galilee region, you easily come to understand the Golan’s strategic importance to Israel’s security. You have the opportunity to plant a tree, under the auspices of The Jewish National Fund, as a symbol of your commitment to the land. You see Israel’s parliament, the Knesset, where democracy thrives. You stand in awe at the famous Western Wall of the Temple Mount.

And it’s always important to have your camera ready as Ethiopian children at an absorption center swarm around you to have their pictures taken. You meet Israelis in the marketplace and on Ben Yehuda Street, Israel’s famous outdoor shopping plaza.

No two of our tours are quite the same. If you join us when we go again, be ready for some truly unique experiences, such as a morning “dig for a day,” sponsored by certified archaeologists.

Our recent tour included a presentation by world famous archaeologist Dr. Gabriel Barkay, who leads a group working to reconstruct Temple Mount history. We also heard from Zvi Vapni of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who provided a fascinating overview of the Israeli election process. Josh Reinstein, director of the Knesset’s Christian Allies Caucus, told the amazing story of Israel’s warm response to Bible-believing Christians who support the Jewish state based on their belief in God’s promises to the Jewish people.

And you definitely will not “rough it” when visiting Israel with The Friends of Israel. You may experience several nights in a lovely kibbutz guesthouse, as well as enjoying accommodations in Israel’s finest hotels. You will sample Israel’s wonderful food—bountiful breakfast buffets, local favorites for lunch, and scrumptious Israeli dinners.

We select knowledgeable, personable guides who are among the finest available in Israel. And experienced Friends of Israel staff members are there to help make your journey memorable.

The time to plan your visit to Israel is NOW. There may be openings for our October 14–22 trip. Or ask to be added to the list for information about our March 13–23, 2007, experience. For more information, call The Friends of Israel at 800-257-7843 and ask for Lisa Nickerson.

William E. Sutter is the executive director of The Friends of Israel.
aforementioned have eagerly jumped on board with the most radical, outspoken regime in the region.

For Israel the threat is imminent. So much so that Israel has launched a surveillance satellite that will keep an eye on the development of Iran’s nuclear facilities and military movements. Especially disconcerting for Israel is the alliance between Iran and the Hamas government that flaunts the same goal: the annihilation of the Jewish state and its people.

On the day before the observance of Holocaust remembrance in April, Iran’s president called for Jewish people to get out of the Middle East and go to Europe. Israel’s very existence, he said, is illegitimate. Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said, “Of all the threats we face, Iran is the biggest. The world must not wait. It must do everything necessary on a diplomatic level in order to stop its nuclear activity.” He added, “Since Hitler we have not faced such a threat.”

Despite all of the talk about progress, tolerance, understanding, and moderation, there is evil in this world. It is a perpetual presence that unfortunately will not diminish but intensify as we approach the end of the age. President Reagan was correct in calling the Soviet Union an evil empire. President Bush was right when he identified Islamists and their supporters as an axis of evil. Now we, together with Israel and our allies, face an axis of terror.

The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”

Today another evil entity stalks the scene. It has been identified as the axis of terror. It is real, it is deadly, and it is a menace in the Middle East, with designs on global supremacy. With the rise of the ayatollahs of Iran and the belligerence of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, totalitarian-leader wannabes have quickly followed Iran’s lead and joined its axis of terror.

Iran’s fellow travelers are Syria, elements in Iraq, the Hezbollah operating from Lebanon, and the Hamas terrorist government recently voted into power by the Palestinian people. Although much of the Arab world has distanced itself from Ahmadinejad’s threats against Israel and the West (particularly the United States), the

Speaking before the British House of Commons on June 8, 1982, President Ronald Reagan gave his famous “evil empire” speech in which he affirmed the reality of evil in the world and insisted on solidarity and determination opposing the enemies of freedom.

In view of the threat of the evil empire (the Soviet Union), the president declared, “The emergency is upon us. Let us be shy no longer. Let us go to our strength. Let us offer hope. Let us tell the world that a new age is not only possible, but probable.”

In President George W. Bush’s State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, he coined the term axis of evil, which defined perfectly the enemy confronting free people.

He declared, “We’ll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer.

The full story of evil on this planet has not yet been written. Thankfully, God is writing the last chapter.

★
Ignoring the Obvious

While Americans burn time arguing the merits, or lack thereof, of the absurd fiction *The Da Vinci Code* (24 percent of its readers said the novel aided their “personal growth and spiritual understanding”), a real-time, real world war rages on.

This war murders and mutilates Christians and represents a deadly threat to all of us. Yet it is undefined and largely ignored by the majority of politicians, religious leaders, and people in the streets of the Western world. Why this is the case continues to be a mystery. Why do so many choose to ignore the obvious or simply miss the point?

Consider what took place in London, England, a short time ago, when militant Islamists paraded in the streets with vicious, anti-British banners reading, “Behead those who insult Islam,” “Islam will dominate the world,” “Freedom go to hell,” “Europe will pay. Your 9/11 is on the way,” and “Be prepared for the real Holocaust!”

As is the case in America, uniformed police stood by to protect the people announcing their determination to destroy the country.

In a lengthy, well-publicized letter to President George W. Bush, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had this to say:

> Liberalism and Western-style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today these two concepts have failed. Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems... People around the world are flocking towards a main focal point—that is the Almighty God [Allah]... My question for you is: “Do you not want to join them?”

Ahmadinejad, you’ll remember, is the tyrannical boss of Iran who aspires to annihilate Israel and develop nuclear weapons that will threaten all of Europe and enhance his position in the war against America. Or, in his words to the president, or the collapse of America—with its Judeo-Christian heritage—and pull us into the mainstream of the Islamic faith.

His words sound eerily reminiscent of Vladimir Lenin’s and his Communist comrades who, in the early 20th century, proclaimed that the West would collapse from within, eliminating the Soviet Union’s need to destroy it.

Such is the ideological essence of global, Islamic jihad. “So what?” you may ask. “Aren’t these issues wrestled with in statehouses and international forums?”

True. But there is much more to them. And if we miss the point and ignore the obvious, we turn our backs on situations that have become relevant and personal to many Christians just like you and me. The only difference between them and us is locality. And if our enemies have their way, the issues our suffering brethren face will one day become extremely personal for us as well.

On Good Friday a man entered the Mar Girgis Church in Alexandria, Egypt, stabbed a worshipper to death, and wounded two others. In an article for *Breakpoint* titled “The Dangers of Being Christian,” Charles Colson wrote:

> He then went to another church and stabbed three other Christians.

CBS News put it this way: The Egyptian government has a history of “[playing] down incidents that can be perceived as sectarian in nature.” By “sectarian,” it means violence against Christians.

For decades we have heard the horrors in the Sudan described as “sectarian” conflicts between rebel and government forces. In reality, radical Islamist killers dispatched from Khartoum are systematically slaughtering millions of Christians and others who happen to be out of favor with the Sudanese executioners.

Colson further commented that many Iraqi Christians feel there is no future for them in Iraq and are getting out of the country. No matter what government is installed in Baghdad, it will be little comfort to them and their descendants. Colson cited Lawrence Kaplan’s comments in *The New Republic*:

> “Sunni, Shia, and Kurd may agree on little else, but all have made sport of brutalizing their Christian neighbors.” Christians “routinely disappear from the sidewalks of Baghdad.” Others, Colson said, are kidnapped and held for ransom. Kaplan called them “today’s victims of choice.”

So, while Western believers bat around the imminent impact of *The Da Vinci Code* movie, they would do well to keep in mind that this temporary phenomenon will soon have had its 15 minutes of fame. And after it is long forgotten, Christians will still remain “today’s victims of choice.” They are real people; and for their sakes, we can ill afford to ignore the obvious.
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Arab-American psychologist Wafa Sultan in an interview on Al-Jazeera TV, translated by The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI):

The clash we are witnessing around the world... is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21st century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality. It is a clash between freedom and oppression, between democracy and dictatorship. It is a clash between human rights, on the one hand, and the violation of these rights, on the other hand. It is a clash between those who treat women like beasts, and those who treat them like human beings.

The Jews have come from the tragedy (of the Holocaust) and forced the world to respect them, with their knowledge, not with their terror, with their work, not their crying and yelling. Humanity owes most of the discoveries and science of the 19th and 20th centuries to Jewish scientists... We have not seen a single Jew blow himself up in a German restaurant. We have not seen a single Jew destroy a church. We have not seen a single Jew protest by killing people... Only the Muslims defend their beliefs by burning down churches, killing people, and destroying embassies. This path will not yield any results. The Muslims must ask themselves what they can do for humankind, before they demand that humankind respect them.
T

housands of people rallied in Washington on April 30, hoping to pierce the conscience of America concerning the slaughter that continues in the Sudan. The focus of the demonstration was to protest the mass killings and ethnic cleansing the Sudanese government is carrying out against black farmers in the Western region of Darfur. Estimates are that the number of people massacred over the past three years stands at 200,000, with at least 2 million displaced. Most of the refugees have sought safety in neighboring Chad, where they exist in squalor and poverty.

Organizers of the rally were principally Jewish organizations. They sponsored a full-page ad in The New York Times promoting the event that brought together a faith-based coalition of more than 130 groups, including humanitarian and human rights organizations.

Interestingly, the Sudanese government is backing Muslims who are viciously driving other Muslims off the land. Furthermore, the belligerents and the Khartoum government enjoy the support of the Arab League.

As one listened to the principal spokespersons for the massive demonstration in Washington, it was difficult not to notice that virtually nothing was mentioned about the greater tragedy still going on in Southern Sudan, where 2 million Nuba Christians have been slain or starved to death and 4.5 million have become refugees. In this phase of the war, the Christians are called “rebels” against “government forces.”

These continuing atrocities are hardly a secret. But the world takes little notice. Several years ago WorldNetDaily.com published an article detailing this persecution. It reported that Christian villagers in several areas in the Upper Nile region said that, when women were captured, the government forces asked them if they were Muslim or Christian. Women who answered “Muslim” were free to leave. Those who responded by admitting they were Christian were gang-raped, then had their breasts hacked off as a warning to others.

One account told of five pastors who were killed before their parishioners; then the rest of the group—men, women, and children—were driven into a hut and run over by a Russian-made tank.

These grotesque accounts are examples of an endless series of tragedies the black Nuba Christians of Sudan have endured since 1983. Sudan’s Muslim jihad (holy war) was reaffirmed by the units slaughtering Christians. “The jihad is our way,” they declared in 2002, “and we will not abandon it and will keep our banner high. We will never sell out our faith and will never betray the oath to our martyrs.”

Recently we are hearing of progress, peace treaties, and promises in this war against Christians in Sudan. However, the hatred continues, and the killing goes on.

And though we must be encouraged to see people finally going public with cries for justice and for an end to the violence in Darfur, we cannot neglect telling the world about the nature of the predators and the identity of the oppressed. What’s happening in Sudan is just one front in the war of aggression being waged against Christians the world over. And there is no end in sight.

ENDNOTE

The saying “Nero fiddled while Rome burned” may overdramatize an historical event; nevertheless, it makes a point that should not be lost on this generation of Christians. A war is on—one aimed at us. And many evangelicals are fiddling around while the foundations of our faith are being blown out from under us.

Statistics tell the story for this country. Eighty percent of Americans claim some association with Christianity. In fact, we are told that probably 95 percent celebrate Christmas. And though you may argue about the depth, genuineness, and core beliefs of segments of the “Christian” community, the fact remains that sentiments at the grass roots are decidedly pro-Christan. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for much of the media, the left-wing political establishment, or the rabidly anti-Christian minorities sounding off in virtually every public forum.

This truth came to mind when the predictable assault was launched during the Easter commemoration of the resurrection. Major networks aired a succession of programs that claimed to debunk the credibility of the foundational, biblical essence of the Christian faith. And they relegated the Gospel accounts to the fictional rantings of men bent on inventing a means to capitalize on the hopes of gullible followers in order to promote their own agenda.

Not that we have not come to expect these annual excursions in denial. But as I remember it, years ago the crusade to deny Christ’s physical resurrection was generally led by liberal theologians and preachers. They spun theories of the disciples hallucinating or wishing Christ arose to the point that they believed their own “delusions.” But for the most part, these promoters of neoagnosticism, or functional atheism, were confined to their own circles of devotees and failed to shake the foundations of the faithful.

What has developed in recent years, however, has a different cast to it—one that, by its very nature, is agenda-driven and acerbically malicious beyond what we’ve ever seen. For all practical purposes, it is a jihad-type war to destroy
of Judas “documentary” claimed that this “biblical text” would “challenge our deepest beliefs” and “could create a crisis of faith.” It did nothing of the sort, of course, but the tone of the promotion and program illustrates how deeply the lines are drawn in this ever-intensifying war between the secular and sacred.

Playing Politics

Awhile ago I watched a TV show where media talking heads were supposed to tackle a question about religious beliefs during a hour-long discussion. The issue was, “Should religion be in (A) the church, (B) the synagogue, or (C) the voting booth?”

The question seemed rather rhetorical; and the answers, tiresomely predictable. Those who lean to the left consistently warn of the imminent danger of evangelicals taking their beliefs into the voting booth. We “render . . . to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt. 22:21). It is what citizens in democratic societies are expected to do. And it would compound the absurdity to assert that liberals, feminists, gays, abortionists, neo-conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents do not do likewise. Free people have both the right and obligation to vote their consciences.

By maligning a single segment of the population and attempting to deny its participation in government, liberals conspire to create a system controlled by anti-Christian forces. And those forces, unfortunately, are committed to a minority-driven intolerance that brooks no opposition from the vast majority, whom they see as an obstacle on the road to their particular vision of a ruleless, secular nirvana.

An even more unsettling manifestation of this crusade involves the forces that are casting evangelicals as subversive, conspiratorial members of lobbies that jeopardize the security of America. Two prominent American international relations and political science professors have released an inflammatory work, “The Israel Lobby,” accusing Israel of so strongly of American life” (the ADL’s Abraham Foxman), “moral retard” and “an ugly, violent lot” (City University of New York Professor Timothy Shortell), possessed of “the same kind of fundamentalist impulse that we see in Saudi Arabia” (Al Gore), and responsible for moving America “each day closer to a theocracy where a narrow and hateful brand of Christian fundamentalism will rule” (a full-page ad in The New York Times, signed by Jane Fonda, Ed Asner and other Hollywood savants).1

The strategic word in this litany of vituperation is theocracy—the idea that evangelicals have a unified, conspiratorial plan to elect an ultrafundamentalist, apartheid-type government to rule over every aspect of the lives of hapless Americans caught in their clutches. The fact that these “intellectuals” publicly make this absurd accusation would be embarrassing were it not for their motives. Certainly, evangelical Christians take their convictions and values into the voting booth. We “render . . . to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt. 22:21). It is what citizens in democratic societies are expected to do. And it would compound the absurdity to assert that liberals, feminists, gays, abortionists, neo-conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents do not do likewise. Free people have both the right and obligation to vote their consciences.

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manipulating U.S. policies that America has become a virtual puppet of Israeli interests, to its own detriment. Stephen Walt, academic dean at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and John Mearsheimer, from the University of Chicago, assert, “The combination of unwavering support for Israel and the related effort to spread ‘democracy’ throughout the region has inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardized not only US security but that of much of the rest of the world.”

And who are the members of this “Israel Lobby” that pulls the strings and endangers the world on the chopping block of Arab and Islamic hatred? They are a “loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to steer US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction.” In her Jerusalem Post column on the subject, Caroline Glick wrote:

Members of the Lobby include most US media outlets; Jewish American organizations generally and AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish American organizations in particular; pro-Israel evangelical Christians [emphasis ours] . . .

Lumping pro-Israel, conservative Christians with conspiracies is reminiscent of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which slanders Jews by doing the same thing. Evangelicals have been compared to the Taliban, Osama bin Laden’s terrorist cadre, the Nazis, and on and on it goes. And the fact that these baseless, slanderous accusations are on the rise portends what the future will hold for evangelicals.

Wrote Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer:

School districts in New Jersey and Florida ban Christmas carols. The mayor of Somerville, Mass., apologizes for “mistakenly” referring to the town’s “holiday party” as a “Christmas party.” The Broward and Fashion malls in South Florida put up a Hanukkah menorah but no nativity scene. The manager of one of the malls explains: Hanukkah commemorates a battle and not a religious event, though he hastens to add, “I don’t really know a lot about it.” He does not. Hanukkah commemorates a miracle, and there is no event more “religious” than a miracle. The attempts to de-Christianize Christmas are as absurd as they are relentless. The United States today is the most tolerant and diverse society in history. It celebrates all faiths with an open heart and open-mindedness that, compared to even the most advanced countries in Europe, are unique.

TV commentator Bill O’Reilly was right when he said there is an anti-Christian bias in this country, and it is more on display at Christmas than any other time. It is also well documented that the bias is spilling over into other arenas of American life.

“Other battle zones,” wrote Don Feder, “include Ten Commandments monuments, God in the pledge of allegiance, stigmatizing the Boy Scouts, advances in the culture of death, and attempts to impose homosexual marriage by judicial fiat.”

To be sure, these symptoms may seem superficial on the surface. But at the core, they reveal the battle taking place for the survival of all that we value.

Scraping the ‘Majority Rules’ Connection

The mind-boggling attacks on Christian commemorations are emblematic signs of the times. Consider the animus of secularists toward Christmas—and the astonishing success of a handful of radical minority groups in intimidating the majority of Americans.

The Freedom Elixir

An elixir is a substance thought capable of prolonging life indefinitely—a cure-all. In present context, the “elixir” is the idea that the freedoms lavished on us in the Western democracies, particularly in America, are inherently bestowed in perpetuity. That is to say, as it has been, so it will ever be; there are no threats of change blowing in the wind. The viewpoint reminds me of the end-times attitude of those so satisfied with their personal status quo that they renounce others who speak of the Lord’s coming by saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4).

Unquestionably, we are the most materially blessed society in the history of the world. For that reason, it may just be that our unprecedented affluence is creating an indifference to what is happening in the wider world around us.

Why is it so difficult to convince Christians that we are, in fact, in a terrorist-driven war of jihad that is killing people, mostly Christians, the world over? And why is the horror of the 9/11 attack so rapidly becoming all but forgotten by all too many? And why do we put up with those who tell us we should blame ourselves for so aggrieving Muslim fanatics that they were “driven” to strike back. That actually, we are the aggressors, not the victims.

A big part of the problem is that we internalize our freedom and prosperity to the extent that we have become insulated from some of the harsh realities of the real world. We have become self-immunized against feeling a personal obligation to actually participate in the conflict. For even if we indulge feelings of passivism toward military combat, we must recognize and respond to the fact that behind every attack leveled against us—social, political, terrorist, or whatever—there is a spiritual battle being waged that is as old as the Fall of Man. Therefore, no true Christian can afford to fiddle while we are engaged in such an immense conflict.

Whether you are a pastor, parishioner, Bible teacher, or student, you must learn what the issues are for yourself, your country, your world, and your brothers and sisters in the faith the world over.

continued on page 25
In Exile for the Word

John, the apostle and pastor of the church in Ephesus, was exiled to the island of Patmos in A.D. 95, according to church historian Eusebius. It was here that the book of Revelation—the final closing vision of God’s Word—was given to him:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,” and, “What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea” (Rev. 1:9–11).

A tourist attraction today, Patmos boasts that it is the “Jerusalem of the Aegean.” But that was clearly not the case when Rome took over the island and used it in John’s day as a place to exile convicted prisoners, denying them legal rights and holding them ad infinitum without accusation or trial, subject exclusively to the whim of the evil Roman emperor, Titus Flavius Domitianus, also called Domitian (A.D. 81–96).

Church history says John survived being thrown into a vat of boiling oil in Rome. Livid with John’s constant preaching about Jesus, Domitian was so angry John did not die that he banished him to Patmos. John was probably 90 when exiled to the desolate island because he preached the Word of God with conviction and without apology. Apparently Rome sent its undesirables to Patmos to work in a mine.

It was here, in this barren place, that the Lord revealed the closing book of the Bible to His faithful servant. John had already penned the gospel account that bore his name, along with three vital epistles. But John was not yet finished. Through visions on a lonely island, he would be inspired to pen what has been called the Apocalypse, or The Revelation of Jesus Christ.

History indicates that John was on Patmos 18 months. Then Marcus Cocceius Nerva ascended the Roman throne due to the assassination of Domitian. Nerva released the exiles, and tradition holds that John returned to his beloved flock of faithful believers in Ephesus.

End notes
1 “Patmos Island of Greece” <www.12net.gr/patmos/english/>.
3 Ibid.
4 “Patmos Island of Greece.”

by Thomas C. Simcox,
Northeastern States director for The Friends of Israel.
Ephesus was one of the oldest and largest cities in Asia. This stately municipality was impressive, with its civic and commercial agora, its temples, gymnasia, public baths, huge library, and a theater that seated 24,000. Politically, it was a free city and was home to the Roman governor of the province.

Located on the Cayster River, three miles from the Aegean Sea, Ephesus was a major harbor where ships could unload their cargo. Caravan routes from cities in the north, south, and east converged in Ephesus, making it a leading commercial center and a place of opulence and wealth.

Paul founded the church at Ephesus on his second missionary journey, around A.D. 53. He returned to the city on his third missionary journey and spent three years preaching and teaching in the synagogue and in the hall of Tyrannus. Ephesus became a missionary center from which all of Asia heard the gospel (Acts 19:8–10).

In Revelation 2:1, Christ addressed His letter to “the angel [literally, “messenger”] of the church of Ephesus.” The word angel most likely refers to a human messenger (not a supernatural angel, as some commentators believe) who was the elder, or pastor, of the Ephesian church. Christ is seen holding the “seven stars [churches] in His right hand,” symbolizing His authority and power. Christ protected, controlled, and cared for both the church and its pastors, whom He held accountable. Thus the Lord was mindful of their spiritual condition, for He walked “in the midst of the seven golden lampstands [churches].”

Commendation. The Lord gave a glowing commendation to the church at Ephesus. He said, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil” (v. 2); that is, He had complete knowledge of all things concerning it. He knew the church’s service, that it labored until it was totally exhausted—physically, mentally, and emotionally. He knew its steadfastness, that this body of believers had patience and persevered while suffering persecution and privation.

He knew of its separation, that it stood against “those who are evil” (v. 2). The Ephesian Christians possessed discernment and discipline, enabling them to detect those living in sin. He knew their standards. They “tested those who say they are apostles and are not” (v. 2). They were able to spot deceivers in sheep’s clothing and remove them from the flock.

They also stood against a formidable sect called the Nicolaitans (v. 6). Nicolaitans professed faith in Christ but taught antinomianism (freedom to live without moral law).
and practiced licentious living in the name of Christian liberty.

Christ acknowledged the Ephesians’ stamina in service. This body held up under opposition and did not grow weary during its exhaustive service, all for the sake of Christ’s name (v. 3).

Condemnation. Abruptly, however, the Lord changed His tone: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (v. 4). Notice that they did not lose but had left (forsook) their first love of the Lord. The Ephesians once had an agape (spiritual, selfless) love for Christ, but their devotion had severely eroded. When love for Christ cools, labor done in His name can become self-centered and lead to compromise and spiritual corruption. The Ephesian Christians now carried on out of duty, not love. God had their heads and hands—but not their hearts.

Counsel. So the Lord gave the church four admonitions concerning its condition:

1. “Remember therefore from where you have fallen” (v. 5). The Ephesians were to recall their past commitments, reevaluate their present compromises, and refocus on love for Him. Love can be rekindled by taking to heart the counsel of Scripture and cultivating a close communion with the Lord.

2. They were to “repent” (v. 5). Repentance is a genuine change of mind about one’s spiritual condition. It involves turning away from sin, experiencing contrition of heart, confessing sin, and committing to live a godly life before the Lord.

3. They were to repeat their “first works” (v. 5) and serve Christ with a burning heart of love. All members were called on to revive the original commitments they had made out of love for Christ at the time of their conversions.

4. Refusal to repent would result in their removal: “Or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place” (v. 5). Loveless churches eventually lose their ability to shine in a lost world.

Compensation. The Lord promised compensation to the overcomer: “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (v. 7). The word overcomer does not refer to Christians who have gained some spiritual victory in life, but rather to those who have accepted Christ as Savior (cf. 1 Jn. 5:4–5). True believers are assured of eternal life; they will eat from “the tree of life” that was first mentioned in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9) and is now in heaven.

The path back to loving Christ is not difficult. Remember your past commitment and rekindle your first love for Him. Repent of your compromise and coldheartedness. Repeat your first works of serving Christ out of a devoted heart of love. And remember that if you refuse to be restored, Christ may remove your church or service, as He did the Ephesians’ in the fifth century.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (v. 7). Christians and churches in every age are to respond to Christ’s message. Are we listening?

David M. Levy is the director of International Ministries for The Friends of Israel.
Smyrna was named for the word myrrh, an aromatic gum resin that is bitter to the taste but sweet to the smell. It was used to embalm the dead in the first century (Jn. 19:39). The church in Smyrna faced bitter persecution and death, yet it emitted a fragrant testimony of faithful commitment to Christ in the midst of an idolatrous society.

The city of Smyrna was 35 miles from Ephesus. It was located at the base of Mount Pagus, nestled between seven hills in a well-planned and protected coastal harbor on the Aegean Sea. Because of its location on the Aegean and also on the Hermes River, Smyrna was a major commercial center and brought great wealth to the area that rivaled Ephesus and Pergamos.

Smyrna possessed wide, paved streets and beautiful buildings. The city was noted for its art, education, philosophy, science, school of medicine, and large library. Temples to the pagan gods Apollo, Asclepia, Aphrodite, Cybele, Emperor Tiberius, and Zeus dotted the landscape. In A.D. 26 Rome granted Smyrna the right to erect a temple in honor of Tiberius and his mother, Julia. A golden street extended from the temple, connecting it with the others within the city.

Scripture is silent on the establishment of the church at Smyrna. The church was surrounded by a demonic system dedicated to these gods of Rome. Yet, in the midst of this cesspool of pagan pollution, the Smyrna church exhibited a powerful testimony of purity during the years that Christians were severely persecuted for their faith.

Christ identified Himself to this church in four ways: “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life’” (v. 8). He is (1) “the First,” existing before creation was formed; (2) “the Last,” meaning He will exist after this present universe is dissolved and recreated for eternity; (3) He is eternal because He “was dead, and came to life”; and (4) He is God because He is the First and the Last and was alive at this time. The Lord’s words were a great encouragement to the believers in Smyrna, many of whom were being martyred for their faith.

There was no condemnation for this church, only commendation:

I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (vv. 9–10).

Tribulation refers to how believers here suffered because of their uncompromising commitment to Christ. First, they were persecuted politically because they would not worship Caesar as a god. Second, they suffered abject poverty because of persecution. Yet they were “rich” in Christ’s love and had spiritual blessings and scriptural encouragement (v. 9; cf. 2 Cor. 6:10).

Third, they suffered religious persecution through “blasphemy,” meaning slander. A large Jewish population lived in Smyrna, and Satan used it to hinder the church; thus the title “synagogue of Satan.” Fourth, they suffered physical persecution. The Lord allowed Satan to incarcerate some of the Christians in Smyrna to test them for “ten days” (v. 10).

Commentators hold four positions on this tribulation: It was (1) 10 literal days of persecution, (2) 10 major Roman persecutions for the first 250 years of the church, (3) a 10-year persecution through the Emperor Diocletian, and (4) 10 is a symbolic number signifying a complete yet brief period of testing. The first interpretation is most likely correct.

In A.D. 155, Polycarp, the famous bishop from Smyrna, was singled out as a leader of the church. Refusing to recant his faith at the age of 86, Polycarp was burned alive at the stake. Before he died, he is reported to have said, “Eighty and six years have I served Him [Christ], and He hath done me no wrong. How can I speak evil of my King who saved me?”

The Lord commanded and counseled the church, “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer” (v. 10). Christ assured them that He was in complete control of their circumstances. God limits what Satan can do to believers. He will not allow them to be tried beyond what they are able to bear, and His grace is sufficient to carry them through any trial (1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Cor. 12:9).
Those who remained faithful during persecution will one day be compensated by receiving “the crown of life” (v. 10). The reward is not eternal life, which they already possessed by putting faith in Christ’s finished work on the cross; it is the martyr’s crown, given to those who are “faithful until death” in recognition of their unwavering faith (v. 10).

The section on Smyrna concludes with verse 11:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

No true believer will have to endure the Great White Throne Judgment and be condemned to the Lake of Fire, which is the second death (20:11–15).

The Christians in Smyrna underwent crushing persecution, but throughout their experience they displayed great faith in Christ. Materially poor though they were, they were rich in spiritual blessings. Because of their faithful commitment to Christ, this church lived a victorious life.

Christians today who undergo trials for their faith can glean encouragement, strength, and comfort from the testimony of this church. The Lord challenges each reader to take this message to heart and “hear what the Spirit says.” It is a message each of us needs to heed.

by David M. Levy

TAPE OF THE MONTH

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Like cities that use levees to guard against the destructive power of the ocean, the church must guard against the pressure of prevailing culture. In His third message to the churches of Asia Minor, our Lord drew attention to a failure to resist the invasion of paganism in the church at Pergamos.

Promising to expose insidious doctrines seeping into the church, Christ began, “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (Rev. 2:12). The double-edged sword refers to the incisive Word of God used in judgment. Walking among
the candlesticks that represent the churches addressed, Christ judged based on direct observation:

I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells (v. 13).

The Lord’s critique offered little praise and hinted strongly at the church’s spiritual decline. Beyond the martyrdom of Antipas, the Lord only commended the church in Pergamos for maintaining a presence in the community.

Twice He mentioned the church’s proximity to Satan’s seat. Contrary to what many believe, Satan is not currently in hell. The Bible refers to him as the “god of this age,” with his capital on Earth (2 Cor 4:4). From earliest times, Babylon was Satan’s center of operation and the axis of pagan and idolatrous practices. After its decline, the ancient mystery religions migrated to the city of Pergamos in Asia Minor.

Pergamos was a sophisticated city with a large university and library of 200,000 handwritten volumes. Its notoriety as an intellectual center encouraged a thriving parchment industry. The city boasted the temple of Aesculapius where, in the courtyard, devotees sought healing through contact with hundreds of slithering snakes. Looking over the metropolis stood one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the temple of Zeus, with its altar towering 800 feet above the plain. No doubt, satanic influence was oppressive, and the fact that a church existed at all was extraordinary.

The Lord addressed two serious concerns that stemmed from the same problem of compromise: the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Whether we see His message as representing the historic progression of the Church Age or as addressing the unchecked deterioration of a local church, erosion in the walls of separation was, nevertheless, evident in Pergamos:

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality (Rev 2:14).

Balaam was a prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the nation of Israel as it wandered in the wilderness. (See Numbers 22—24.) On three separate occasions, God caused Balaam to articulate blessing rather than cursing. Failing in his mission, Balaam instructed Balak to develop friendships with the Israelites, enticing them into sinful relationships. Balaam’s teaching resulted in blurring the distinctions between Israel and its pagan neighbors.

In Revelation 2:14, the “doctrine of Balaam” refers to teaching designed to promote cooperation between the church and the world. It is an insidious conciliation stemming from an obsession for acceptance at the expense of sound doctrine. Likewise, the Lord rebuked the church at Pergamos because it espoused the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. It appears the doctrine of Balaam paved the way for the heresy of the Nicolaitans. Although many believe the Nicolaitans instigated the distinction between clergy and laity, there is evidence of a licentious sect led by Nicolas of Antioch, who advocated freedom in conduct and encouraged participation in pagan practices. The doctrine of Balaam allowed interaction with surrounding paganism and culminated in the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, in which promiscuity was actually incorporated into the activities of the church.

In verse 15 the Lord bluntly stated, “Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate” (cf. v. 6). The church professed to serve the Lord but in practice served popular opinion. Our Lord warned, “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth” (v. 16). In spite of the church’s history and even martyrdom for the cause of Christ, the Lord Himself judges compromise decisively.

There is a note of hope for some in the church:

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it (v. 17).

The Lord promises provision uniquely suited to overcomers who stand firm in the face of spiritual compromise. Manna represents spiritual sustenance critical to overcomers. The white stone may well be a diamond, corresponding to the Urim the high priest of Israel used to discern God’s will, giving the bearer spiritual stability. The white stone also bears a name known only to the one who receives it, reflecting a unique relationship to the Lord. Withstanding compromise is by no means easy, but with the Lord’s provision, it assures blessing.

Although it was standing for the moment, the church in Pergamos faced the peril of succumbing to the pressure of pagan culture and being flooded by the world. It is a peril every church faces when compromise becomes more important than truth.

Charles E. McCracken is the Canadian director of FOI Gospel Ministry in Brampton, Ontario.
What did the Lord mean when He used the words *synagogue of Satan* in His revelation to His beloved apostle John in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9?

The Greek word translated “synagogue” literally means “an assembly.” The word *Satan* means “adversary.” So John was told that the believers in Smyrna and Philadelphia would suffer persecution from “an assembly of the adversary”—literally, “a gathering of Satan.”

The phrase does not mean that Jewish people are satanic or devil worshipers. It means only that Jewish people in Smyrna and Philadelphia persecuted believers. They did not comprehend the message of God’s grace as revealed to the fledgling church. This was so because they were being prejudiced by their teachers and, being uninformed, were encouraged to oppose the early Christians, many of whom were Jewish.

These two verses (2:9; 3:9) have led to much anti-Semitism down through the centuries. Some Gentiles (including some Christians) have used them to deny the Jewish heritage of Christianity and even go so far as to deny that Jesus Himself was Jewish.

However, such people do so because of personal prejudice, blind hatred, and ignorance concerning whom the Bible is identifying in these two verses.

There is not much difference between the unbelieving Jewish people in Revelation and the unbelieving Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted the church unto death (Acts 9:1–2; 22:20). Saul, in his unregenerate state, thought “the Way,” meaning the early church, was wrong and contrary to Judaism. So he attacked it and sought to destroy it. Later, when he met the resurrected Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road, his life was transformed; he ceased persecuting the church and became the apostle Paul, a believer in Jesus the Messiah.

The late scholar Dr. Harry A. Ironside, in his commentary on Revelation, suggested another possible interpretation of the verses. Perhaps there was still an attempt to make Gentile Christians become Jewish before they became followers of Jesus. This heresy of Judaizing was first addressed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Wrote Ironside, such advocates “oppose the truth of grace and seek in every way to hinder the carrying out of the principles . . . pleasing to the Lord.” They “put the consciences of Christians under the bondage of Jewish legalism, thus really doing Satan’s work.”

Perhaps the correct position is a hybrid of both interpretations. The important thing to keep in mind is that the Bible teaches that Christians will have tribulation and persecution. Yet they are not to hate or despise the perpetrators. Believers are to love them, pray for them, and do good, so “they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

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2. Ibid.

by Thomas C. Simcox
Who Are the Church 'Angels'?  

The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches (Rev. 1:20).

Who are these “angels”? The Greek term *aggeloi* means “messengers.” Each of the seven messengers was assigned to one of the seven churches, and each received Jesus’ remarks to his church. Are they heavenly “spirit-messengers,” as the term is usually used? Or are they human messengers?

*Aggelos* is used 176 times in the New Testament (67 times in Revelation), almost evenly divided between plural and singular. Of these occurrences, 169 refer to heavenly spirit-messengers. Seven times the word is translated “messenger(s)” when it clearly refers to human beings (six times) and Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (“A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me,” 2 Cor. 12:7). Three times *aggelos* refers to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 7:27) and three times to men sent as messengers by John (Lk. 7:24), Jesus (Lk. 9:52), and Joshua (Jas. 2:25).

Its overall usage favors interpreting “the angels of the seven churches” as heavenly spirit-messengers. But the context and nature of such an understanding raise difficult questions. Why would the resurrected Jesus instruct John to write a letter on parchment to heavenly spirit-messengers? Would Jesus not talk to them directly? Would not heavenly spirit-messengers already know the things Jesus communicates to them here? Are these angels to be identified with the respective messages to their churches? Were these angels to appear (angelically or humanly) to read these letters to their churches? Were they to communicate mystically with their respective churches? Does each church have a heavenly spirit-messenger today?

On the other hand, understanding these *aggeloi* as human messengers answers many of these questions. If each *aggelos* was the minister or bishop of his church, it makes sense that Jesus would write to them through John. The written message would provide an evaluation that would enable each minister to lead his congregation better.

Understanding *aggeloi* as humans also explains why they do not already have the heavenly perspective. So they were given direct revelation from Jesus, authenticated by an apostle. They did identify (notice the predominance of second-person singular pronouns), to one degree or another, with the divine message.

It would seem that Jesus was affirming the singular leadership office ( overseer) of the local church, as exemplified by the Jerusalem church under James’s leadership (Acts 21:18). Perhaps the plural elders’ leadership (Acts 14:23) was designed as a temporary measure until mature leaders emerged.

by Richard D. Emmons
**Author:** The apostle John  
**Date:** A.D. 95–96  
**Thesis:** Messiah’s judgment of the nations establishes His earthly and eternal Kingdom.  
**Synopsis:** After addressing selected churches on typical Church Age problems, Jesus summons the apostle John to heaven to show him His Father’s plan for establishing Israel’s long-promised Kingdom. The presentation of the unfolding of the 70th Week of Daniel, which is the heart of Revelation (chs. 6—18), follows the pattern (first half, middle, second half) of Jesus’ original amplification (Mt. 24:4–31) of Daniel 9:27. Messiah’s Kingdom is established on Earth for 1,000 years (see the Old Testament prophets for its description) prior to its transfer to the new

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<th>GLORIFIED JESUS ADDRESSES CHURCHES</th>
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| Jesus’ revelation from God to John for the church.  
Glorified Jesus walks among the churches; holds angels in hand.  
Jesus addresses selected churches on typical Church Age problems.  
Ephesus: left its first love.  
Smyrna: persecution.  
Pergamos: doctrinal compromise.  
Thyatira: personal, moral compromise.  
Sardis: spiritually dead.  
Philadelphia: keep working.  
Laodicea: lukewarm.  
John summoned to heaven, perhaps symbolic of the Rapture.  
Throne of God.  
24 elders (on 24 thrones) and 4 seraphim stand before God’s throne and worship God.  
Book presented.  
Lamb alone able to open book.  
Hosts of heaven worship the Lamb.  
1. Antichrist  
2. Warfare  
3. Famine  
4. Death  
5. Martyrs  
6. Calamity  
Wrath of God and the Lamb have begun.  
144,000 Jews sealed.  
Multitude of martyrs in heaven from the Great Tribulation.  
1. Third of vegetation killed.  
2. Third of sea destroyed.  
3. Third of fresh waters destroyed.  
4. Third of heavens struck.  
5. Demons released from the abyss.  
6. Angels’ horsemen; third of mankind killed.  
Open book (from 5:7) eaten by John; sweet in mouth, bitter in stomach. | Five time-markers indicate events of second half:  
1. Jerusalem trampled 42 months.  
2. Two witnesses minister 1,260 days.  
3. Woman nourished 1,260 days.  
4. For a time, times, and half a time (3 1/2 years).  
5. Authority given to beast for 42 months. | | | |
## STABLISHES MESSIAH’S KINGDOM

**DANIEL’S 70TH WEEK**

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<td>Ages 1,260 days.</td>
<td>Mankind warned.</td>
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<td>Nourished</td>
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<td>Given 42 months.</td>
<td>Bowls of judgment from God’s Temple:</td>
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<td>1. Malignant sores.</td>
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<td>5. Thick darkness.</td>
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Application: Knowing God’s sovereign plan and ultimate victory encourages church saints to persevere in their battle against Satan’s kingdom. Jesus will win, and win BIG! And so will Israel.

Images for panels 1, 5, 7, 8: Thomas E. Williams, Stan Stein. Panels 2, 6, 9: Thomas E. Williams. Panel 3: top, Antony Njuguna / Reuters / Corbis; middle and bottom, Stan Stein. Panel 4: Stan Stein.)
This [Rev. 3:10] is the Lord’s own pledge to those who love His Name and seek to keep His word: they shall not be left down here to pass through the appalling Tribulation, which is just ahead of those who “dwell upon the earth.” This expression is found frequently in the book of Revelation. It does not mean simply those who live in the world; a careful reading of the various passages in which this peculiar term is found will make manifest that “the earth dwellers” are in contrast to those whose citizenship is in heaven. They are persons who, while professing to be Christians, refuse the heavenly calling and prove by their earthly mindedness and worldly ways that they really belong to this world. . . . The coming Great Tribulation will be, for them, a time of fearful trial. . . . But when that hour comes the church of the current dispensation will have been caught up to meet the Lord according to the promise in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. And to this agrees the verse that follows in our chapter: “Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” [v. 11]. The Lord’s return is the hope of every Christian heart.

—Harry A. Ironside, Revelation
Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth (Rev. 3:10).

The language of this verse makes it clear that the church will not go into the Tribulation. This hour of trial will be a time when God’s wrath will be poured out upon the world. Several things verify this fact.

1. The preposition from (Greek, ek) means “out of,” that is, “out of the midst of,” a clear indication that the church will not go through any portion of the Tribulation. If the writer meant to say that the church was going through the Tribulation, he could have used a different Greek preposition, dia.

2. This is not just any trial, but the hour of trial, a specific season of Tribulation that is coming.

3. Christ promised to “keep” (protect or preserve) the church, not in, but from this season of trial.

4. Protection is granted to all believers, not just the Philadelphia church, because this time of Tribulation will come “upon all the world.”

5. The phrase to try them that dwell upon the earth refers not to the church but to unbelievers who will be settled into the world’s system during the Tribulation.

—David M. Levy, Revelation: Hearing the Last Word
All eyes were riveted on the television monitor in the lobby as a second plane slammed into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The previous night, a guest speaker at Friends of Israel’s Willow Valley Prophecy Conference had described the threat posed by terrorist sleeper cells in North America. Although members operate within the parameters of normal society and appear no different from those around them, their goal is destruction.

In the Lord’s letter to the congregation at Thyatira, Christ exposed a spiritual sleeper cell operating inside the church. A seemingly harmless clique, it was actually a threat with devastating consequences.

Although implied in His other letters, in this message Christ declared His deity explicitly: “These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass” (Rev. 2:18). This was a personal message from the very One to whom this church was ultimately accountable. With eyes of fire searching their works and feet of brass ready to crush all contrary to His Word, He declared, “I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience” (v. 19). He had witnessed their faith and perseverance, and knew their latest works were more impressive than their first. The church of Thyatira demonstrated much that was praiseworthy; nevertheless, it had a problem of flagrant apostasy:

I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols (v. 20).

Christ referred here to a literal woman in the church. Whether or not her name was actually Jezebel, He referred to her by it, using the odious name of the seducing queen of Israel who introduced the worst era of idolatry and apostasy in the nation’s history. Thyatira’s Jezebel, like her Old Testament counterpart, was not merely a sincere but misguided individual. She was adept at distorting the truth to condone and encourage immorality and idolatry. A self-proclaimed prophetess, she may have insisted she possessed a higher level of spirituality. But Christ exposed her as a fraud.

Many have speculated about her identity, some even claiming she was the pastor’s wife. Regardless, the church had failed to deal decisively with her and her erroneous teaching. Since Lydia was instrumental in founding the work, it is possible that believers had chosen to ignore Paul’s instruction that forbade women to teach in a way that exercised authority over men.

The church leadership apparently did not espouse this woman’s teachings but over time simply allowed her activities to go unchecked. This error in judgment compromised the integrity of the church’s testimony. Because it failed to eradicate her heresy, Christ took it on Himself to deal with her, promising, “I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds” (v. 22). Not only would she and her followers be punished, the second generation of those who dabbled in the supposed deep secrets she taught would be as well:

I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works (v. 23).

To those who did not embrace “Jezebel’s” false teachings, the Lord gave a single charge:

Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come (vv. 24–25).
I will give power over the nations... and I will give him the morning star (vv. 26, 28).

Overcomers who hold fast can look forward to a place of authority in the Messianic Kingdom: “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12).

Christ referred to Himself as the Morning Star, assuring believers of His presence throughout eternity: “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 22:16). This is the hope of all who suffer the cost of contending for the faith in an environment where false teaching thrives.

The letter closes with an admonition: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:29). The message to the church at Thyatira required decisive action. Christ will not tolerate false teaching. It not only offends Him personally, it destroys the life and vitality of His church. Those who take the words of this letter to heart will recognize the dire consequences of “sleeper cells” and will actively engage in removing false teaching. Their stand may not be popular, but they will enjoy the reward for faithful service to Christ.

Interestingly, Christ did not counsel people to leave the church but rather to hold fast to those qualities for which He had already commended them; namely, their charity, service to Him, and patience. Those who heeded the challenge could look forward to the fulfillment of two promises:

And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him

by Charles E. McCracken
Seventy-five miles northeast of Ephesus lay the church at Sardis, which received a blunt message from its Builder, the Possessor of the “seven stars.” He shocked the leader at Sardis with His analysis: the church was dead.

*And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God* and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead’” (Rev. 3:1).

Jesus’ self-description at the outset of His letters to the churches in Revelation was fitted to their circumstances. To Sardis He was the dynamic Source of life, the Possessor of “the seven Spirits who are before [God’s] throne” (1:4).

**SARDIS: Averting Spiritual Suicide**

(Revelation 3:1–6)

Ruins of the ancient temple of Artemis in Sardis, Turkey (Vanni/Art Resource, NY).
His message that Sardis’ spiritual life was a façade came as a stinging rebuke: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God” (3:2). The words watchful and strengthen confirm the metaphor of death, referring to living in a state of self-centeredness.

How does this happen? How can a church that seems alive actually be spiritually dead? To the human eye, the Sardis church was thriving; but Jesus was not impressed. Scripture teaches, “You are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness” (Rom. 6:16).

Nonspiritual living produces an estrangement from God that is characterized as death despite pleasing appearances and programs. Conversely, living consistently under the Holy Spirit’s direction and control produces an existence energized by God and characterized as life: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Sardis was dead; without the Holy Spirit’s energizing, the church was producing worthless “wood, hay, straw” (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12–15).

Jesus prescribed the necessary corrections:

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain. . . . Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent (vv. 2–3).

Watch. “Be watchful” indicates the drift into Spiritless living was not intentional. Blunted sensitivity to genuine spiritual life caused religious carnality. Satisfied with the status quo, these believers experienced spiritual asphyxiation. Spiritual stupor prevents the necessary correction and prompts Jesus’ judgment, which He will bring suddenly, like a thief. Spiritual sensitivity comes by humble self-examination in the light of God’s Word.

Strengthen. The word strengthen means to “establish” or “confirm”—to secure the elements that are good, truly spiritual, and therefore of value. Stop the downward slide. Reestablish genuinely spiritual works, habits, and endangered past practices. Secure the good that remains.

When a major Protestant group was recently alerted to its liberal drift, a handful of people accepted the warning signs, drafted a plan to secure what remained, and retook much of the ground that had been lost. Sardis was told to wake up and confirm the truly spiritual works because its divinely designated agenda was not yet fulfilled.

Remember. Referring to the joy with which they had received the gospel, Jesus urged believers to revive their original enthusiasm. Routine and carnality are subtle enemies of enthusiasm and joy (no wonder it’s called “death”). Reestablishing God’s purpose for one’s life requires regaining lost joy. Jesus was not talking about short-lived, weekend worship or retreat reverie but a renewed spiritual fervor that produces joy in life’s trenches. Not only was Sardis to remember its fervor, it was to “hold fast.” Leading folks to personal faith in Jesus is the best way to maintain godly joy.

Repent. While the first three steps are present tense, indicating ongoing activities, repent is once-and-done action (aorist imperative). Like reversing direction on a highway, fulfilling their destiny demanded these Christians’ commitment to genuine Holy Spirit control. Those who had not succumbed to the carnal religiosity of the majority were to be commended heartily because, like one bad apple, a carnal believer corrupts many others (1 Cor. 15:33).

The majority needed to reverse course and join the ranks of the faithful. God always has a remnant—a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments” (v. 4). These had not committed spiritual suicide, as so many of their colleagues had, but sought God’s ideals and values instead of imposing their own. J. I. Packer mentioned a friend who remained faithful under similar pressure:

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who has effectively forfeited his prospects of advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. “But it doesn’t matter,” he said at length, “for I have known God and they haven’t.”

Such faithful saints do not permit the politics and practices of their carnal colleagues to infect their integrity or enthusiasm for Jesus. In Sardis, they resisted the spiritual death that characterized their church. Consequently, Jesus told them, “they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (v. 4). Many fine Christian organizations have been satanically sabotaged by one or two influential people whose failure to walk in the Spirit infected many of their colleagues.

Jesus then offered similar incentives to the entire church:

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels (v. 5).

He promised that overcomers will be clothed in white and have their names protected in the Book of Life and confessed (heralded, perhaps) before God and the angels. The term overcomer indicates a battle. Jesus Himself overcame when He rejected the desires of the flesh and submitted Himself completely to the Father’s will and the Spirit’s control (v. 21). He expects the same of His followers.

God’s children overcome by their faith in Him who has the power and authority to defeat the evil one (1 Jn. 5:4).

**Endnotes**

2. “Not blot out,” or “not erase” (v. 5) is a figure of speech called litotes, wherein emphasis is added by denying the opposite of something. Jesus did not imply that erasure from the Book of Life was possible but emphasized the security of those who endured.

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No matter the nature or size of life’s obstacles, Jesus expects His church to take advantage of the doors He has opened.

To the brethren at Philadelphia, the Lord described Himself as the one who has authority over the church—as “He who is holy, He who is true, ‘He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’” (Rev. 3:7). His combined attributes—particularly His holiness, truthfulness, and sovereignty—are emphasized to encourage the struggling but faithful church at Philadelphia. It’s the only church of the seven that receives no criticism.

Jesus came alongside. He knew the deeds of believers there, their faithful struggle in His assigned vineyard. He reminded them that no one could prevent their completion of this ministry. As He said in Matthew 16:18, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Rather than criticize their “little strength,” He cited it as the reason for His opened door:

I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name (v. 8).

Since He did not tell them to seek power (ability of the Holy Spirit, for example), the word little apparently referred to their size and/or impact. Nevertheless, they kept His Word and held forth His name.

Like Jonathan’s approach to the overwhelming size and strength of the Philistines in King Saul’s day, these saints should say, “It may be that the Lord will work for us. For nothing restrains the Lord from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6). These believers may not have taken Philadelphia by storm, but they made inroads. Now they needed the same encouragement Jesus gave the apostle Paul in Corinth: “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9–10).

Then Jesus promised victory. He would deal with “the synagogue of
Messiah’s program. Apparently, Jesus would bring some of these Jewish people into His church, as He brought Saul of Tarsus who became the apostle Paul.

The translation here is difficult. Literally, the Greek says, “Behold, I am giving from [didomi ek, “giving out of”] the synagogue.” Bringing some recalcitrant Jewish folks into the church seems more likely Jesus’ meaning. The alternative would mean bringing the entire synagogue into humble submission and acknowledgement of Jesus’ love for the church. Because of His love for the Jewish people, He exhorted the church to continue its efforts to teach Jewish people the truth about Him; it would be successful.

Then Jesus promised protection:

_I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown_ (vv. 10–11).

In light of promised protection, Jesus encouraged the Philadelphians to “hold fast.” The context argues for the “crown of life,” which is given to “the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life” (Jas. 1:12). Using God’s wisdom to endure life’s trials produces great reward.

Once again incentives are offered for saints to heed Jesus’ words and serve Him faithfully:

_He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name_ (v. 12).

Being “a pillar in the temple of My God” seems to be a promise of prominence for these overcomers (cf. Gal. 2:9). Being such a pillar that bears the names of God, Jerusalem, and Jesus seems to connote honor and significance.

No matter the nature or size of obstacles, Jesus expects His church to go through the doors He has opened. And He encouraged the humanly unimportant church at Philadelphia to fulfill every opportunity for ministry despite what appeared to be overwhelming opposition and trial, because it was the little church that could.

_by Richard D. Emmons_
And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent’” (Rev. 3:14–19).

Lukewarmness. It’s nearly impossible to escape this menacing tendency.

The 19th-century American evangelist G. D. Watson, in his book Soul Food, clearly stated its most pernicious factor:

One of the worst features about lukewarmness is that it steals on the soul in such quiet, respectable ways. If the horrible thing had horns and hoofs, and a smack of criminality in it, it would alarm the soul; but, as a rule, lukewarmness of spirit is so decent and well-behaved, that it chloroforms its victim and kills him without a scream of terror. This is what makes it so awfully fatal. While open sin slays in hundreds, nice, respectable lukewarmness slays in tens of thousands!

The spiritual state of the church at Laodicea was somewhere between boiling zeal and love gone cold (cf. Mt. 24:12; Rom. 12:11). This in-between spiritual condition nauseated the Lord. Laodicea’s complacency and God’s harsh rebuke of it warn us to avoid suffering the same awful fate. Of all the letters to the churches in the book of Revelation, this one is the most biting and sarcastic.

**The City**

Laodicea was located 40 miles east of Ephesus on the banks of the fertile Lycus River Valley in Asia Minor. It was colonized between 261 and 246 B.C. by the Seleucid king Antiochus II of Syria. He named the city after his wife, Laodice, whom he divorced and who later poisoned him.

By the first century A.D., Greeks and Greek-cultured Syrians and Romans inhabited Laodicea. A large Jewish population also faithfully sent a tribute of 20 pounds of gold regularly to Jerusalem. Some scholars suggested these Jewish people might have formed the main nucleus of the early Christian community. There is no indication the apostle Paul was ever in Laodicea. But Epaphras, a fellow worker, may have founded the church there (Col. 4:12–13).

Due to its strategic trade-route location, the city was a center for commercial activities. In the fertile ground of the valley, the Laodiceans bred a special sheep that produced fine, soft, glossy, black wool that was widely sought and admired. A renowned medical school was even established there. Its founder, Herophilos, believed that compound diseases required compound medicines. So the city doctors practiced a strange system of combining mixtures to create cures. Two moderately successful concoctions were an ear ointment...
made from spice nard and an eye salve made from Phrygian stones. The Phrygian stones were pulverized and the powder mixed with oil to produce the well-known eye balm. This compound, exported throughout the Greek and Roman world, brought welcome relief to many travelers who were exposed to the strong sun and wind as they traversed the harsh regions of the land. Naturally, with so much wealth and fame, a widespread banking industry thrived. Materially speaking, the Laodiceans felt comfortable in their prosperity.

The Charge
(vv. 15–17)

However, the city had a major weakness. It had an overabundance of lukewarm water. Its northern neighbor, Hierapolis, six miles away, enjoyed the therapeutic effect of hot water from hot springs. Its eastern neighbor, Colossae, 10 miles away, had the refreshing power of cold water that was piped beneath the scorching sun through an aqueduct several miles away. The now hot water would then spill over a mile-long cliff that dropped 300 feet down onto the level of Laodicea. By the time the water reached Laodicea it was tepid—neither hot nor cold. It was also filled with minerals picked up from the calcium carbonate that covered the cliff with a white encrustation. It was widely known that the city’s lukewarm, mineral-laden water was suitable only as a means to induce vomiting. In clear, strong, metaphorical language, the Lord used Laodicea’s worthless water supply to describe its spiritual uselessness; and it made Him sick (vv. 15–16).

The main issue Jesus had against this church was that it was lukewarm. The old, graphic expression to straddle the fence means to be neutral, undecided, or uncommitted. The Laodicean Christians were complacent and indifferent to Christ, which rendered them ineffective to heal the brokenhearted or refresh the weary.

Currently this straddling-the-fence form of devotion still churns God’s stomach. Imagine if Joshua, the great warrior leader, had been lukewarm about his commission to claim the Promised Land. He would not have said to Israel, ‘And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD’ (Josh. 24:15).

Imagine if the great prophet Elijah had been lukewarm during his contention with the false priests of Baal. He would not have said to those who stood around, “‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him’” (1 Ki. 18:21).

More important, Jesus Himself explained why straddling the fence does not work: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [i.e. riches, money, possessions, etc.]” (Mt. 6:24). Being lukewarm is unacceptable.

The Laodiceans thought they were secure in their affluence, but Jesus said they were actually poor. The word for “poor” in verse 17 is a Greek verb that actually means to “cringe as a beggar.” Their excessive trust in money, pleasure, and riches left them beggarly and impoverished before God. They were blind, self-deluded, wretched, and most miserable.

Scripture warns, “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17).

The Challenge
(vv. 18–22)

Jesus offered a threefold counsel to the congregation of Laodicea. First, it needed a pure faith to obtain true spiritual riches. The Lord used an old, familiar analogy: “gold refined in the fire” (v. 18).

Faith comes from the fire in the crucible of life’s trials (Job 23:10; 1 Pet. 1:7). The correlation is illustrated in the ancient smelting process. The gold ore was heated in a vessel until it melted. All the impurities were then scraped off the surface of the molten metal. The process was repeated over and over until all alloy elements were separated from the gold. Purity was assured when the goldsmith could see his reflection on the surface of the precious metal.

The Laodiceans were to reflect Jesus Christ in the trial of faith (1 Pet. 1:7). God’s warning to Israel long ago is the same warning for today: “I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy” (Isa. 1:25).

Second, Jesus told them to buy “white garments” to cover their nakedness (v. 18). White garments symbolize righteousness (19:8). The word nakedness is a metaphor for sin, judgment, and humiliation (Ezek. 16:37–39). God instructed them to repent of their sins and be clothed in His holiness. Scripture states, “Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2). “For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness” (1 Th. 4:7).

Finally, Jesus told them to anoint their eyes with eye salve. “Eye salve” is the Greek word kollurion, from the word kollura, meaning “a long roll of coarse bread.” As the Laodiceans mixed the grounded Phrygian powder with oil, a doughy, bread-like lump of paste was produced and applied to the eyes. The lukewarm believers were directed to have their eyes anointed. God’s remedy for spiritual blindness is the healing touch of Jesus the Messiah (Mt. 20:34). Today the eye salve is applied by focusing only on Jesus, who said, “I am the bread of life” (Jn. 6:48), and by reading, studying, memorizing, and

continued on page 39
Israel’s Defilement Removed

In the previous chapter, we saw God pour out His grace on Israel, resulting in the nation’s redemption, its reconciliation to God, and its renewed covenant relationship with Him. In chapter 13, Zechariah revealed how the Holy Spirit will bring national cleansing to a redeemed Israel.

Israel’s Cleansing

Zechariah declared, “In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness” (v. 1). The fountain of cleansing is the shed blood of the pierced Messiah (12:10). Like a fountain that gushes forth a continual provision of water, so the Messiah’s blood has been available to cleanse all individuals from sin, guilt, and moral defilement since the first century.

The word sin in verse 1 refers to “missing the mark,” or failing to meet God’s righteous moral standard. Uncleanness speaks metaphorically of ritual impurity associated with a woman’s monthly cycle. Both terms aptly represent Israel’s judicial guilt and defilement. This cleansing will take place at the Messiah’s Second Advent.

The “house of David” and the “inhabitants of Jerusalem” are singled out as beneficiaries. Israel’s cleansing will be all-inclusive, covering the kingly line of David and the commoners as well.

Idolatry Cut Off

When the Messiah returns, God will remove all idolatry and abolish even the idols’ names, so they will be remembered no more: “I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and... I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land” (v. 2). The unclean spirits are demonic agents or spirits that energize false prophets to speak and commit evil acts; they will also be cut off.

If any false prophet refuses to heed God’s warning to stop prophesying, his parents, as prescribed in the Mosaic Law, will execute him. His father and mother will say to him, “You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the LORD. And his father and mother shall thrust him through when he prophesies” (v. 3). In other words, honor for God’s name and love for truth will transcend the most intimate relationships, even a parent’s love for a son.

The Mosaic Law commanded parents to kill their evil sons by stoning, but in the Day of the Lord these sons will be stabbed to death. The word for “thrust” (Hebrew, dagar) is the same word used for “pierce” in Zechariah 12:10, where God said, “they will look on Me whom they pierced.”

On threat of death, false prophets will quickly deny involvement in such evil practices: “And it shall be... that every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; they will not wear a robe of coarse hair to deceive” (v. 4). Shame and fear of death will compel them to stop all prophesying. The genuine prophet often wore “a robe of coarse hair” to distinguish him as a prophet, in keeping with his frugal lifestyle and mournful pronouncements. (See 1 Kings 19:13, 19; 2 Kings 2:8, 14; Matthew 3:4.) Fearful of detection, the masquerading prophet will discard the mantle he wore to deceive people, covering up his activities.

Zechariah described the false prophet’s deception and defense: “But he will say, ‘I am no prophet, I am a farmer; for a man taught me to keep cattle from my youth” (v. 5). This means he literally will say, “A man bought or possessed me, and I have been made a bondsman from my youth.”

To hide his involvement, he will claim to have been sold into slavery while young and taught to farm by his master. Thus the man will claim to be a slave of the lowest class, who was controlled by his master and never able to acquire the knowledge or ability needed to be a prophet.

Discerning individuals who know him will detect his deception. Wounds on the man’s body will give him away. He will be asked, “What are these wounds between your arms [breast]?” Then he will answer, “Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends” (v. 6).

Some believe the phrase wounded in the house of my friends is a Messianic prophecy referring to the piercing of Messiah’s hands. However, this view is untenable. First, the Messiah was never wounded in the house of His friends but by Roman executioners who had no relationship with Him. Second, He was never wounded many times in His breast, as indicated in verse 6, but in His hands. Third, Messiah was not, nor would He ever claim to have been, a slave to any man on Earth. Fourth, the Messiah was never questioned by people of the world concerning His wounds after His resurrection. Fifth, the Messiah was a carpenter, not a farmer. Sixth, the Messiah was a prophet and never denied it. Seventh, the sequence of events presented in this chapter does...
not coincide with the time of the Messiah’s crucifixion.

Those interrogating the man in Zechariah 13 know he is lying. Moreover, his wounds are self-inflicted, given to himself while practicing idolatry. Like the prophets of Baal, he cut his body hoping to propitiate or placate false gods (cf. 1 Ki. 18:28). These types of lesions characterized many idolatrous men in that day, especially Canaanites. In Israel, priests and prophets were continually warned against such practices (Dt. 14:1).

**Infliction of Christ**

Abruptly, the Lord’s focus shifts from the false prophet’s inflictions to the infliction of the true Shepherd who was smitten for the sins of God’s people:

_Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, against the Man who is My Companion._ . . . _Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; then I will turn My hand against the little ones_ (v. 7).

This verse covers a lengthy period, from the crucifixion of Christ through the Great Tribulation.

**The Shepherd.** Messiah is the righteous Shepherd. God the Father called Him “My Shepherd” and “My Companion.” The word _shepherd_ is related to the word used in Zechariah 11:4–17 and refers to the one who was pierced in Zechariah 12:10, that is, Jesus the Messiah.

The word _companion_ [Hebrew, _amit_] speaks of a human being who is associated in a family connection; in this context, he must be closely united or joined to God the Father. Thus he is a human being in an equal relationship with God. This word clearly refers to Jesus the Messiah, who is both human and divine. This truth is both awe-inspiring and staggering, plainly teaching the Messiah’s equality with God.

**The Sword.** The Redeemer is smitten: _“Awake, O sword, . . . and strike the Shepherd.”_ The word _sword_ pictures an instrument used by a judicial authority to inflict death and is a symbol of God’s divine wrath. This is not man’s wrath being inflicted on the Messiah, but God’s righteous wrath being poured out on Him who bore the sins of the world upon Himself and shed His blood for the remission of sin.

God the Father commanded the sword to arise and carry out divine justice. The command indicates it was God’s will that Jesus be smitten. Although wicked men murdered Him, His death nevertheless was predetermined by the counsel and divine plan of Almighty God who ordained that Messiah would die for the sins of the world (Acts 2:23). The sword of divine justice did not fall on a wicked man but on a righteous Messiah who is the Son of God. He is the same Lamb of God who was pierced for the sins of humankind (12:10; cf. Isa. 53:5). Isaiah prophesied that it pleased God the Father to bruise the Messiah and “make His soul an offering for sin” (Isa. 53:10).

**The Sheep.** The sheep that reject the shepherd are scattered. Those who fled the smitten Shepherd were the Jewish people at His crucifixion. The Lord predicted that His disciples would flee then (Mt. 26:31). But their scattering was not the complete fulfillment of this prophecy; the prophecy also involves the nation of Israel. Its scattering took place in A.D. 70, with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and again in 135 when the Romans put down the Bar Kokhba revolt against their occupation and rule in Jerusalem. After the revolt, Jewish people were scattered across the earth in what is commonly called the Diaspora.

The phrase _then I will turn my hand against the little one_ has been interpreted in various ways. Some teach that God has turned away from His anger against the sheep to show them mercy, love, and grace. We would like to embrace this position, but the context does not support the interpretation. This expression is to be interpreted in a punitive sense and does not suggest God showing mercy to a faithful remnant of Jewish people. Jewish people have suffered 2,000 years of persecution and are yet to face the greatest Holocaust of their history during the Great Tribulation (Jer. 30:7; Rev. 12:1–17): “And it shall come to pass in all the land, says the LORD, ‘that two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, but one-third shall be left in it’” (v. 8).

During the Great Tribulation two-thirds of the Jewish population will perish. This percentage is high because (1) Satan will try to annihilate Israel (Rev. 12), (2) the false prophet will kill Jewish people who refuse to worship the Antichrist (13:15), and (3) many will die during the invasion of Jerusalem (Zech. 14:1–3).

However, this chapter ends with a glorious prediction:

_I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, “This is My people”; and each one will say, “The LORD is my God”._ (v. 9).

Zechariah foresaw the redemption of a righteous remnant in Israel that will survive the refining furnace of tribulation. As silver and gold are tried in the fire, so will the Great Tribulation purge away all of Israel’s iniquity. This repentant remnant will emerge from its experience free of sin. With its suffering finally past, Israel will be established in its land to enjoy all the blessings promised in the New Covenant (Ezek. 36:25–38). Both Hosea and the apostle Paul foresaw this great day as well (Hos. 2:23; Rom. 11:26–27).

God will acknowledge the redeemed, refined remnant when He says, “This is My people,” whereupon, the people respond, “The LORD is my God” (v. 9). What a wonderful day awaits Israel when the Messiah brings a redeemed and cleansed remnant to complete salvation!

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God Is Moral
(Part 6)

Earlier parts of our study examined sexual violations and perversions of God’s moral absolutes and fixed order of moral law. Now we will begin to examine another violation and perversion of those moral absolutes: murder.

God’s Opposition to Murder

In at least five ways, God has revealed that murder is morally wrong.

Judgment. He inflicted a burdensome judgment on Cain, the first murderer (Gen. 4:8–10). God said, “So now you are cursed from the earth. . . . When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth” (vv. 11–12). Cain complained, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me” (vv. 13–14).

Vengeance. To prevent Cain from being murdered, God declared that vengeance would be taken sevenfold on any person who would kill Cain: “and the LORD set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him” (v. 15).

Flood. By Noah’s time God was so grieved by mankind’s extensive wickedness and violence that He sent a universal flood to rid the earth of all the perpetrators of that evil (6:5–17). The word translated “wickedness” refers to “activity that is contrary to God’s will.” That “activity begins with rejection of God” and includes “abuse of people and exploitation of their property” and “efforts to kill.” In the Old Testament, the word translated “violence” is “used almost always in connection with sinful violence. . . . It is often a name for extreme violence.”

Cain’s rebellious determination to go contrary to God’s will eventually prompted him to commit the first murder. Genesis 4 reveals that his descendants followed his example of murder. It appears, then, that Cain was the fountainhead of the wickedness and violence that spread through most of mankind prior to the flood and that he and his descendants played a key role in that spread. It also is apparent that the flood was God’s means of ending the spreading cycle of murderous violence and giving mankind a new beginning.

Capital Punishment. Immediately after the flood, God instituted—and began to require—capital punishment for murderers:

Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed (9:5–6).

The word translated “require” is “used of divine vengeance on those who take a life. God will diligently seek restitution of a life for a life.” The word translated “shed” is used most frequently in the Old Testament for “the pouring of blood.” This and other Old Testament passages signify that “blood is the source of life, the means by which life is perpetuated. To remove the blood is to terminate life.” The word translated “hand” refers to the “part of the arm used to perform functions of man’s will.” A murderer uses a handheld weapon to kill the person he has willfully determined to eliminate.

God said why He ordained and required capital punishment for murderers: “for in the image of God He made man” (v. 6). God’s creation of mankind in His own image, or likeness, is stated six times in Scripture (1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9). By placing four of these statements in the first book of the Bible, God emphasized at the very beginning that mankind’s creation in His image and likeness has considerable significance.

Indeed, it does have substantial significance. It signifies that human beings are the highest form of God’s earthly creation. Nowhere does the Bible declare that animals or plants were created in God’s image. God reserved that statement exclusively for mankind.

This means that human beings are distinct by nature from all other earthly forms of life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:39). Human beings are personal, moral beings; animals and plants are not.
In other words, human beings are not animals or plants. They are not a higher form of animal life that evolved from lower forms. Thus it is mankind’s creation in the image of God that gives every human being genuine dignity and worth.

In the personal realm, mankind’s intellect is different from and superior to that of all animal and plant life. In the moral realm, mankind’s uniqueness is seen in the fact that human beings are the only earthly creatures to whom God has revealed moral absolutes and forbidden to violate those absolutes.

The fact that God gave mankind dominion over the earth and all other earthly forms of life (Gen. 1:28–29) indicates that God (1) regarded mankind as distinct from and superior to all other earthly life forms and (2) created mankind to be His earthly representative, with the responsibility of administering His rule over this earthly province of His universal Kingdom.

God signified that distinctiveness and superiority again in the capital punishment passage. He declared that now mankind could kill and eat every kind of animal (9:2–3). By contrast, He required the execution of every animal that kills a human being (v. 5; cf. Ex. 21:28).

Because God created mankind in His image, He had two reasons for ordaining and requiring capital punishment for animals that kill human beings and for human beings who murder fellow human beings. First, such unlawful killings destroy the highest, and therefore most valuable, form of all God’s earthly creatures. Second, they are heinous attacks against the types of beings God created to represent Him on Earth. This second reason implies there is a sense in which murder of a human being is an indirect attack against God. Treatment of a representative often reveals the attitude people have toward the one he represents. Thus, to murder a human being is to strike at the image of God in that person.

So God instituted and required capital punishment for murderers in order to emphasize that humans are the highest form of His earthly creation and, therefore, of supreme value to Him. Consequently, a society’s failure to execute murderers desensitizes people to the significance and value of human life and to the seriousness of the crime.

It is interesting to note that God began to require capital punishment immediately after His flood that ended the pre-flood spread of murderous violence. Because the first murderer, Cain, was permitted to continue living his rebellious existence on the earth, He influenced his descendants and became the fountainhead of the widespread evil prior to the flood. Once God rid the earth of all that evil, He established capital punishment to prevent future murderers from continuing to live rebelliously, influencing others to do so, and becoming sources of the spread of that evil through mankind again.

God made it clear to Israel that He absolutely required the execution of murderers: “Moreover you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death” (Num. 35:31). At that time God revealed another reason to execute murderers. He indicated that the land where murder is committed becomes polluted because blood shed in murder “defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it” (v. 33). The Hebrew verb translated “atonement can be made” signifies “the removal of sin or defilement.”

God’s statement indicated that the only thing that would cleanse Israel’s land from defilement by murder was the nation’s execution of the murderer.

When God instituted capital punishment for murderers, He also instituted human government as a means of administering that punishment. For a murderer to be apprehended, tried, and executed (if found guilty), governmental agents would be necessary. Thus, during the present era—since the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ—the apostle Paul wrote the following:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil (Rom. 13:1–2, 4).

Paul thereby indicated that, even in our present era, government authorities “have the task of maintaining God’s order in the world” as “executor of divine judgment.” This means that capital punishment for murderers is still God’s order for the world today.

Commandment. God revealed that murder is morally wrong by giving Israel the following commandment: “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13).

The next article will discuss that commandment and other related issues.

**ENDNOTES**


2 Ibid.

3 R. Laird Harris, “hamas,” in Harris et al., 1:297.

4 Leonard J. Coppes, “midrash,” in Harris et al., 1:199.

5 Hermann J. Austel, “shapak,” in Harris et al., 2:950.

6 Victor P. Hamilton, “dam,” in Harris et al., 1:191.


8 R. Laird Harris, “koper,” in Harris et al., 1:453.


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If I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that the Israelites made it through the Red Sea because it was low tide or because they “knew where the stones were,” I’d be rich. I don’t care how pseudoscientific you make it, no story of the Jewish people’s Exodus from Egypt—except the Bible’s—adequately explains why not even one Egyptian was able to follow them through the water and into the land of Canaan.

But biblical truth doesn’t impress some people. They’ll sit for hours watching gruesome television shows about the evil, powerful supernatural; but tell them there is a God in heaven who loves them and performs miracles, and they’ll think you’re a simpleton. Interestingly, people with the least faith often carry the most clout in this world. And those with the most faith often carry none at all.

Perhaps that is why God chooses “the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise” and “the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:27). And who would be considered more foolish, insignificant, or weak than a little slave girl? The Bible never even tells us her name. But the three verses it does provide (2 Ki. 5:2–4) tell a great deal about her faith and about the God who loved her.

The child lived during the days of the divided kingdom, when the 10 northern tribes battled its greatest enemy, Syria, and Elisha was the prophet in Israel. According to Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim and others, Ben-Hadad II was the king of Syria, and Jehoram (Joram), wicked King Ahab’s son, was the king of Israel.¹ The time was probably between 852 B.C. and 841 B.C.²

The Syrians routinely raided Israel and carried Jewish people away as captives. In one of their attacks, they seized the little girl and, against her will, snatched her from her parents, family, country, and all she had ever known, to bring her into dreaded enemy territory as to cry out “unclean, unclean” to alert passersby to their presence (vv. 45–46). In Syria, lepers apparently remained in their communities.

Leprosy is still a problem in underdeveloped nations, and modern medicine only found what it considers a cure in 1983. Treatment can take two to three years, and nothing so far has been able to reverse the residual nerve damage the disease causes. So to be healed of leprosy in Naaman’s lifetime was a miracle indeed.

In a country as faithless as Israel, where every ruler was a murderer and idolater and Baal worship polluted the land, it was also something of a miracle that this child believed in Jehovah. Not only did she manifest faith, she also showed sincere compassion when

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¹ According to Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim, Ben-Hadad II was the king of Syria during this time.
² The time was probably between 852 B.C. and 841 B.C. according to Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim.
she could have become angry or bitter. It appears she genuinely cared about her master and exhibited tenderness and concern for him, possibly because she had grown close to Naaman’s wife and saw how deeply Naaman’s illness distressed her.

The child had no trouble believing God could perform a miracle of such great magnitude that He could cure leprosy—and she had no hesitation saying so. Obviously, she was known to be truthful and earnest, or Naaman’s wife would have paid no attention to anything she said.

And pay attention she did. She immediately told her husband, who told the king of Syria, who promptly dispatched Naaman to Israel with a letter to the king that read, “Now be advised, when this letter comes to you, that I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may heal him of his leprosy” (2 Ki. 5:6).

The king of Israel, less confident in God than the pagan Syrian, the Syrian’s wife, or even the king of Syria, tore his clothes in fear and grief and complained that Ben-Hadad was trying to pick another fight with him (v. 7). Did Joram even send for Elisha? Of course not. Unlike the slave girl, Joram had no faith Jehovah could do anything.

But Elisha offered his services anyway. He told Naaman to dip seven times in the Jordan River. When Naaman came up from the water on the seventh time, “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean” (v. 14). That day, Naaman became a believer in the God of Israel.

My youngest daughter is a student in a secular university. “Mom,” she told me, “you won’t believe the weird stuff people believe to avoid believing the truth.”

Oh yes I would. I remember watching Carl Sagan on television. Sagan was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1934, the son of Jewish parents. His father, Sam, worked in the garment district. Credited with bringing science to the unwashed masses, Sagan believed that without empirical evidence, you cannot prove God exists.

He was a professor of astronomy and space sciences and director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. His many awards included an Emmy, a Peabody, and a Pulitzer Prize.

His book Cosmos (more than 5 million copies in print) begins, “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.” It is a direct, and probably intentional, contradiction of Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God.” Sagan died of cancer in 1996, reportedly content in his atheism. He saw faith as foolishness and refused to believe he would stand before God and give an account (1 Pet. 4:5). A young, insignificant, uneducated, Jewish slave girl was wiser than he.

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). Perhaps someday I’ll actually bother to calculate how long it would take 2.5 million people (plus livestock) to tip toe through the Red Sea on stones. But I doubt it. Reasoning with people usually does not help them come to faith. The little maiden’s method was far superior. She exemplified the perfect triad: She possessed true faith, she lived her faith, and she shared her faith.

And her trust in the true and living God is a testimony to Jehovah’s faithfulness in always preserving a remnant that does not bend the knee to Baal—or to the cosmos.

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**ENDNOTES**


** ISRAEL MY GLORY **

Lorna Simcox is senior editor for The Friends of Israel.

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**Danger! Lukewarmness Ahead**

from page 33

meditating on the “bread” of God’s Word: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105).

Jesus disdained the Laodiceans’ lack of usefulness and fruitfulness. Churches and individual believers must constantly guard against this alarming disposition. If devotion to Jesus Christ becomes a shallow, religious pastime rather than a passion of heart, mind, and soul, then beware. Jesus despises an ineffective church. God is no less concerned with complacency today than He was with that of the Israelites when He told them, “And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil’” (Zeph. 1:12).

Therefore, be zealous, not for worldly pleasures, but for God (v. 19).

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12-13).

Repentance is the key to a real relationship with the Lord. Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (v. 20). The word knock is present tense, indicating a continuous knocking. The challenge is for individuals to respond and open the door to Christ in their lives. The Lord said He will enter, and they will “dine” together, which speaks of fellowship, communion, and intimacy.

The great 19th-century American evangelist Dwight L. Moody once commented on this verse: “The latch of the door is on the inside. Who are my guests?” Either you open the door to the Lord or to lukewarmness. The choice is yours.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. G. D. Watson, Soul Food, Pilgrim’s Path <pilgrimspath.org/soul_5.htm>.


** ISRAEL MY GLORY **

Peter Colón is the Southeastern States director for The Friends of Israel.
**Christian Zionists ‘worship Satan’**

*Arutz-7*—A senior Palestinian Authority (PA) religious leader has said on a PA-affiliated Web site that Christian Zionists worship “Satan as God.” So reports Palestinian Media Watch (PMW).

The author of the PMW article, Hamed Al-Tamimi, is a member of the Supreme (Islamic) Judicial Council and the director of the Inter-Religion Dialogue Department. He charges that the Christian and Jewish Zionists “both agree on hatred of Islam and the Muslims and on [the goal] to destroy them.”

He goes on to slam the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, accusing the organization of “criminal activities against the Palestinian issue and the Palestinian people.”

PMW quotes a PA TV religious leader who announced a prayer for the murder of “infidels”—a term that includes the Christian West, it notes. “Destroy the Infidels and the Polytheists!” the prayer exhorts viewers. “Count them and kill them to the last one, and don’t leave even one.”

Nor does the Balfour Declaration escape notice. “Balfour and Prime Minister Lloyd George were Christian Zionists,” said Al-Tamimi. Al-Tamimi concluded his diatribe by saying Hamas is “seeking a peace settlement and promises on its Web site to ‘drink the blood’ of the Jews.”

The Yemenite newspaper Al-Ayyam quoted Hamas’s Nabil Nassar as saying Hamas will use every means, including kidnapping Israeli soldiers, to free terrorists in Israeli jails.

Meanwhile, another Hamas official denied telling CBS News he was “seeking a peace settlement and stability in this region,” looked forward to “peace and tranquility,” and was “seeking American administration to create this missing peace.”

Itamar Marcus and Barbara Crook of the Palestinian Media Watch (PMW) said Nassar called the CBS report “lies” and “part of a conspiracy of the US media to damage the true image of Hamas,” which has vowed to destroy Israel. Hamas leaders continue the practice of late PA chieftain Yasser Arafat, who spoke of peace in English and war in Arabic.

The comic books, translated into English by PMW, refer to Israelis as “evil Zionists” who aspire to kill small children. The comics teach Arab youth to become terrorists to “liberate” Israel from “Zionist thieves.”

For months now, the Hamas Web site has promoted the parting video messages of two Hamas suicide terrorists. One said, “We are a nation that drinks blood, and we know that there is no blood better than the blood of Jews. We will not leave you alone until we have quenched our thirst with your blood, and our children’s thirst with your blood. We will not leave until you leave the Muslim countries.”

**Hamas comics, kidnappings**

While Hamas tries to legitimize and sanitize itself for the West, it has plans to kidnap Israeli soldiers and use them as bargaining chips for the release of Palestinian terrorists. It also has come out with comic strips to entice Arab children to become terrorists and promises on its Web site to “drink the blood” of the Jews.

**Warren Buffett buys Israeli firms**

American billionaire Warren Buffett has bought two Israeli companies in less than a week, paying $4 billion for one of them.

Hillel Fendel of Arutz-7 reported that Buffett, owner of the investment company Berkshire Hathaway and reputed to be the second richest person in the world, purchased 80 percent of the Iscar Metalworking Companies from the Wertheimer family.

Wrote Fendel, “Iscar began some 50 years ago as a small aluminum framing company in the northern Israeli town of Nahariya. Stef Wertheimer, who founded the company, and his son Eitan, the current chairman, will continue to own 20 percent of the company.”

It will remain headquartered in Tefen, in the western Galilee. The sale makes the Wertheimers the wealthiest family in Israel.

The ink was hardly dry on the deal when CTB, an Indiana-based subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway, purchased 60 percent of Israel’s AgroLogic company for between $5 million and $10 million, according to Haaretz.com. The firm manufactures climate control and weighing systems for feed and poultry. It is based in Netanya.

Haaretz said Iscar was Buffett’s first purchase outside the United States.

*Arutz-7* reported that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert welcomed Iscar’s purchase, saying it indicated worldwide confidence in the Israeli economy. “This is not just another billion-dollar deal. The fact is that [Buffett] is neither a Jew nor a Zionist; the biggest investor in the world believes in Israel’s economy, and this will give us a great push and will encourage innumerable other investors.”

**Go wireless!**

*Arutz-7*—The Nortel Networks has set up a “Wireless Mesh” network in the Samaria city of Ariel in order to test the system for wider applications worldwide. It will provide broader wireless Internet coverage than Wi-Fi and will be used by the municipality to read water meters remotely, streamline communication between city workers, bolster law enforcement capabilities with extended video surveillance, extend the University of Judea and Samaria’s network in the town, and provide all residents with wireless Internet.
Is Abbas Hanging by a Thread?

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas (left) is greeted by European Union (EU) parliament President Josep Borrell Fontelles at the parliament on May 16 in Strasbourg, France. Abbas addressed the parliament, calling on the EU to resume aid to his people after Western donors suspended aid to the Hamas-led government (Omar Rashidi/PPO via Getty Images).

Life appears precarious these days for Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. While Abbas tries to convince Russia and other nations to pour millions into the bankrupt PA to avert what some call a “humanitarian disaster,” terrorist groups are trying to kill him.

Even the Arab-run Aljazeera.net reported that security around Abbas has been tightened, and a “senior Palestinian source” stated, “We have information there are plans to kill President Abbas.”

The situation is symptomatic of the acute power struggle between Abbas, who heads the Fatah movement, and Hamas, which won control of the PA in the January elections. Arutz-7 reported that Fatah terrorists and Hamas terrorists are “locked in an internal war.”

According to Arutz-7, “Fighters shot a Fatah member of the Palestinian Preventive Security Service, a force under Abbas’ control. Hours later, a Hamas terrorist was shot and seriously wounded by Fatah fighters.”

In May Israeli intelligence reportedly thwarted Islamic Jihad’s attempt to assassinate Abbas, warning him in advance. Earlier a 65-foot-long (20-meter-long) tunnel was discovered under Abbas’s house in Gaza, reportedly dug by Hamas as part of its plan to get rid of the president. And Britain’s Sunday Times reported a Hamas plan to kill Abbas when he visited Gaza.

The most recent conflict involves a new, 3,000-man Palestinian “security” force loyal to Hamas and created in defiance of Abbas. In a countermove, The Jerusalem Post reported, “Thousands of Palestinian police loyal to Abbas paraded in the streets of Gaza in a show of force. Marching near the Hamas-backed gunmen, the policemen chanted, ‘We are the authority. We salute Abu Mazen (Abbas).’”

Abbas is perceived as amenable to peace with Israel, while Hamas wants Israel’s complete destruction.
I have lived in Israel 58 years now. And in Jerusalem, particularly in the ultra-Orthodox quarter, men do not speak with women or girls. Men must speak with men, and women with women, especially when it comes to faith. But times are changing.

Today Orthodox women stop other women on the street, particularly on Fridays, to give them candles for the Sabbath that begins that evening. They stress that Sabbath candles must be kosher, suitable and approved by the rabbi. And they teach other women how to use the candles to usher in the Sabbath.

Recently several women stopped my wife and me as we walked down the street. “Do you keep the Sabbath?” one asked.

I told her I keep most of what is written in the Bible, but I do not follow the rabbinical commentaries because I do not believe in them, as they do. They looked at me with surprise. “How can you say that what the important rabbis wrote is not kosher?” one woman asked.

“Tell me,” I began, “what is more important: to worship God according to those thousands of rabbinical traditions or to worship Him according to the Bible? If we follow the traditions of rabbis, each of whom has his own interpretation of things, we will be like the people of India who have thousands of different faiths.”

They did not know what to say. Finally one woman asked, “Do you come to synagogue every morning to pray the morning prayers?”

“I pray at home every morning before our Lord,” I replied. Again they were surprised.

“But how can you pray when there is no one to listen to you and no one to say amen?”

“I open my heart before our Lord,” I told her. “I am not interested in having people listen to me, as you are. I come and pray before my Lord. He hears my prayers. And this is enough for me.”

“We do not understand,” she said. So I explained: “When Hannah went to the house of prayer in Shiloh to beg God to give her a son, did she pray in a loud, high voice? Or did she pray from the depths of her heart?”

This time the women remained quiet. So I continued: “Of course, we know she prayed silently, from the depths of her soul [1 Sam. 1:13]. Yet what did the high priest tell her afterward? ‘Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him’ [v. 17]. And so it was that later she gave birth to a son and named him Samuel, which means ‘God has heard.’

“So you see, if all you do is cry out in a loud voice so that all can hear, but you do not pray from the depths of your soul, your prayers are of no value. They will help you no more than glasses would help a blind horse.”

“You are becoming interesting to us,” said another woman. “Where did you learn all this?”

“I have received all this by faith through reading the Bible and by praying from my heart before the living God—not by looking to see if people hear my prayers.”

Now they began to ask questions. They had never heard anyone say such things. “Tell me who you are,” they said. “Are you one of those who believe in the New Testament, are you not?”

“I told them, “My duty as an Israeli, whom the Lord has chosen, is to proclaim His truth.”
One woman then said, “Of course, what you are telling us is written in the New Testament.”

“You see how blind you are?” I replied. “You do not even know these important verses from the Bible. So how can you go to people and speak to them of faith?” They wanted to know where all this was written. This was their first question about the Bible. So quickly I showed them.

“Read!” I said. I opened my Bible to Isaiah 49:3: “And He said to me, ‘You are My servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’” I had them read through verse 6, where it is written, “I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Since we live in Jerusalem, I also asked them to read 2:3, where it says, “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”

“This is what is written in God’s holy Word,” I said. “And I do my best to work for His glory and not to be a false teacher who leads people astray, as your teachers do. You are so confident that you are serving God. But think about what you are doing.”

Then one asked, “Did you serve in the army when you were young?”

The ultra-Orthodox do not serve in the army.

“This is my land,” I said. “I fought in every war from 1948 through 1973. Now our sons serve. And we have 15 grandchildren, and they are beginning to serve. They do not hide behind long beards and black clothing, while refusing to serve in the army. The Lord commands us, ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’” (Mt. 22:21).

We left on friendly terms and pray that God used us as His servants to help open their eyes to the truth.