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DISCERN

A Magazine of *Life* *Hope* & *Truth*

Knowing GOD

Preview This Seven-Day Reading Plan



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THE MOST IMPORTANT JOURNEY OF OUR LIVES

Where are you going? Not just on your next road trip, but in life?

As I write, in the back of my mind logic is whispering, “Stay at home, stay off the road.” But I’ll ignore that voice of reason and later today will join the estimated 48.7 million Americans jamming the highways, airports and train stations on one of the heaviest travel days of the year.

Now these travelers didn’t wake up this morning and impulsively decide to take some random trip. They didn’t rouse the family with, “Let’s jump in the car, drive 300 miles and see where we end up!” They didn’t happen to be driving by an airport and on a sudden whim head for the first airline they could find and tell the agent to book them on any flight to anywhere.

No, we’re all traveling on well-thought-out trips—for specific reasons, with clear destinations and long-planned schedules. Anything less would be inconceivable because we’re all journeying to see friends and family for one of our national treasures, the Thanksgiving holiday.

As you read this, that trip will be long past and we’ll have moved on to others. We humans are always going somewhere, aren’t we? And it’s rare, strange even, if we don’t know how, when, why and where we are going.

“What’s my destiny, Momma?”

So why is it that for the most important trip in our lives, the vast majority of us are undertaking it in such a haphazard manner?

I’m talking about the journey of life!

If you could survey 100 diverse people around the world and ask, “Where are you going in life?” what would they say? If you asked, what are your travel plans—how are you getting to your destination—how many would have a clear idea?

You would get 100 different answers, which indicates how muddled we are.

Yet we face no more important question than: What is this trip of life for, anyway?

In one of the most poignant scenes in the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest’s mother explains to him that she is dying and that “it’s something we’re all destined to do.” When



she says, “I happened to believe you make your own destiny,” Forrest asks one of humanity’s most timeless questions: “What’s my destiny, Momma?”

Her answer also summarizes the best answer humanity has been able to come up with: “You’re gonna have to figure that out for yourself.”

And you? As you ponder your life, does her answer satisfy you? Is it enough for everyone to just “figure it out” for ourselves? Or do you sometimes wonder if perhaps God created us with a greater

destination, purpose and path, but somewhere along the way we strayed from Him and lost our way?

21 days to clarity

If you could invest a few minutes a day for 21 days, knowing you would come away with a clearer view of who God is, why the world is in the state it is and what God’s destiny for you is—would you do it?

If you could discover a sensible, logical path through the maze of conflicting religious and philosophical opinions, would you be interested?

This issue of *Discern* introduces three short, but life-changing, seven-day journeys—soon appearing on our website, Life, Hope & Truth—that will put you on the road to understanding these big issues of life. The lead article, “Knowing God: A Preview,” is a sample look at the first two days of Journey 1.

These Journeys are yours absolutely free of charge. When you sign up, you will receive by email seven daily studies that will clearly lay out for you God’s map for life and point you to sources of even greater understanding.

We don’t have to figure out our own destiny—our Creator has done that for us! We just need to find our way back to Him. These Journeys will put you on your way!

Clyde Kilough
Editor
@CKilough

Everyone's Got Predictions for 2017

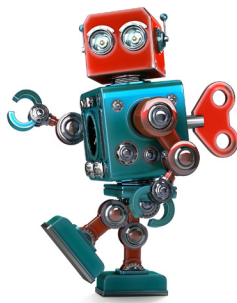
This time of year, everyone has predictions for the future. Here is a sampling:



It's Time to Leave the Planet

Stephen Hawking predicts humanity won't survive another 1,000 (or 10,000) years on earth and says our best chance for survival is to establish colonies on other planets.

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
MONITOR



Robots Will Take Our Jobs

Two-thirds of Americans think it's likely that in 50 years robots and computers will do much of the work currently done by humans.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



Brexit Will Start, and the Euro Will Pass the Pound

"U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May will trigger Article 50, formally starting the thorny process known as Brexit and further fueling concerns about the economy (scaring off capital). Meanwhile, inflation will curb ECB quantitative easing, driving the euro higher."

FORTUNE



Putin Will Pick New Targets

"The Baltic states are fairly well defended, but Russia may see a target in the Balkans. Moscow will continue to bulk up its cyber offensive too."

FORTUNE

What does the Bible say about coming events and trends? See "2017: Year in Preview" on PAGE 13.

"The world is in chaos."



—HENRY KISSINGER, former U.S. secretary of state. He continued, "Fundamental upheavals are occurring in many parts of the world simultaneously, most of which are governed by disparate principles. We are therefore faced with two problems: first,

how to reduce regional chaos; second, how to create a coherent world order based on agreed-upon principles that are necessary for the operation of the entire system."

THE ATLANTIC

UNHCR Report: More Displaced Than After WWII

The U.N.'s refugee agency reports that the number of displaced people is at a record high.

At the end of 2015 the total was 65.3 million, or one out of every 113 people on earth, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). That's a 5.8 million increase over the year before.

Here are five takeaways from the report:

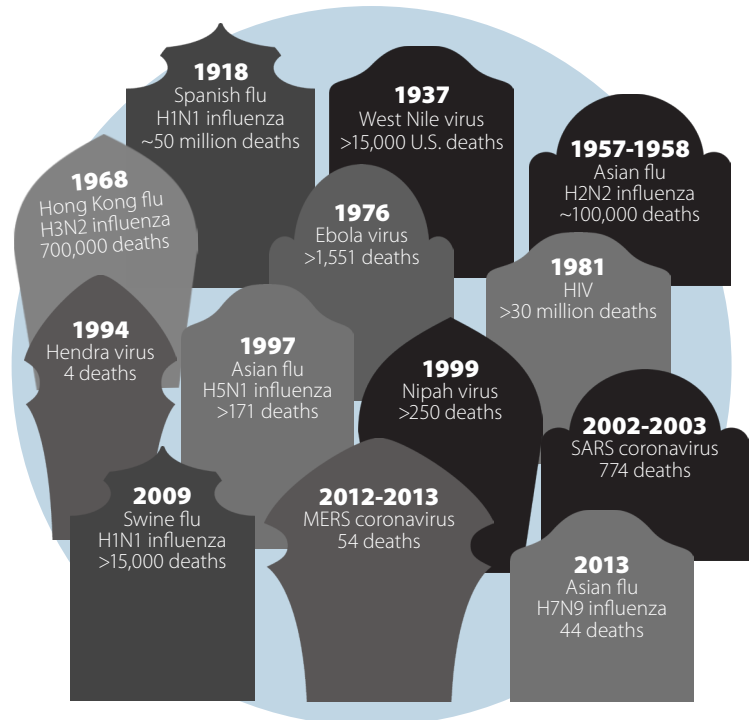
- Global displaced population is bigger than the entire population of the U.K.
- More than half of refugees come from Syria (4.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million) and Somalia (1.1 million).
- Almost 100,000 asylum applications are from unaccompanied children.
- 200,000 refugees returned home and 100,000 were resettled. The U.S. took in the highest number: 66,500.
- Turkey is the top host of refugees (with 2.5 million).

CNN

“Anyone who was alive during the outbreak of the bubonic plague in the 14th century experienced something terrifying close to the widespread death and chaos of an apocalyptic event.”

—ALAN HUFFMAN

Read more about the current increase in pandemics in the article “Why the Surge in Infectious Diseases?” on PAGE 19.



INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS TIMES

NATURE

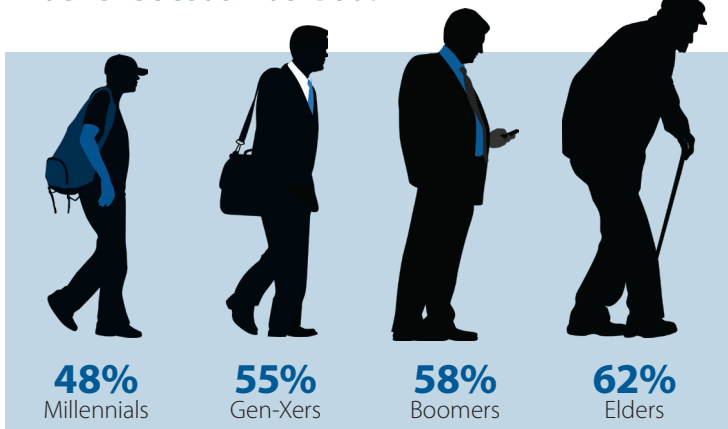
Read more in the article “3 Don’ts Before You Say ‘I Do’” on PAGE 22.

The Benefits of Premarital Education

“According to a survey published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, couples with premarital education reported higher levels of marital satisfaction and experienced a 30 percent decline in the likelihood of divorce over five years.”

HUFFINGTON POST

“I believe Jesus was God.”



BARNA

See more in our article “Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?” on PAGE 10.

“Nones” Now Largest American Faith Group

“It’s bad news for organized religion: A majority of the religiously unaffiliated—the so-called ‘nones’—say they fell away from faith not because of any negative experience, but because they ‘stopped believing,’ usually before the age of 30.

“Gloomier still for religion is this—nones now make up 25 percent of the American population, making them the single largest ‘faith group’ in the U.S., ahead of Catholics (21 percent) and white evangelicals (16 percent).

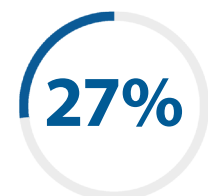
“And only a fraction—seven percent—say they are looking for a religion to belong to at all.”

RELIGIONNEWS.COM

Most Americans Believe in Supernatural Healing

People can be physically healed supernaturally by God.

Have personally experienced a miraculous physical healing.



PEW RESEARCH



In this issue of *Discern*, we're pleased to be able to give you a special preview of a brand-new resource we'll be releasing soon in the Learning Center of LifeHopeandTruth.com. "Knowing God" will be one of three seven-day Journeys designed to walk you through some of the Bible's most important truths, culminating in God's incredible plan for the entire human race. Keep an eye out for their official release, but for now, please enjoy this sneak peek of the first two days of the "Knowing God" Journey.

By Jeremy Lallier

DAY 1

GOD THE SELF-EXISTING

There are a lot of reasons you're not dead right now.

Take the atmosphere, for instance. Earth's atmosphere has a delicate balance of oxygen and other gases, and the end result is that when you take in a big lungful of air, you don't suffocate and die. That would be less true, say, in outer space or underwater.

That's not all, of course. The fundamental laws of the universe (like gravity and the strong nuclear force) are precisely balanced in a way that keeps all of reality from collapsing on itself or unraveling like a ball of yarn. The telomeres on the end of your chromosomes are still long enough for your cells to divide and reproduce. Your brain and other vital organs are working in concert to perform all the myriad functions required to keep you alive.

The list goes on, and each additional point makes it more and more clear that our existence depends on an interminable host of variables, each delicately balanced and finely tuned. If just one of those variables stops working correctly, so do we.

God is different.

God doesn't require a certain atmosphere in order to exist. He doesn't depend on physical laws to provide Him with an environment He can live in. He doesn't age; He doesn't get sick or weak.

God depends on nothing.

Think about that for a minute:

Nothing.

There are no variables to tweak that would endanger God's existence. God simply *is*—no qualifiers, no exceptions, no dependencies. As Psalm 102:25-27 so beautifully phrases it, "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the

heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end."

When God described Himself to His servant Moses, He revealed two of His names: "I AM WHO I AM" and "the LORD God" (Exodus 3:14-15). The Old Testament was originally written in the Hebrew language, and in Hebrew both those names are heavily rooted in the word *hayah*—a word that simply means "to be."

In other words, God is the God who is. He exists without the aid of anything or anyone. The universe itself can come and go, but God remains, unchanging, self-existing and eternal.

That's good news for us. As fragile, temporary beings with limited lifespans, it's encouraging to know that our Maker has none of those limitations. We might be constrained by things like height and depth and width and time, but God isn't. The God who rules the universe exists apart from the universe.

That's not an easy thing to wrap our minds around. As human beings, we look at the world in terms of boundaries and limits. A thing is this and not that; it begins here and ends there. But God can't be stuffed into a box. He is limitless; He is unbounded in time and space, existing "from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 90:2).

No qualifications. No exceptions. If we want to understand God, then we have to start here, with this most basic truth:

God *is*.

Then, and only then, can we move on to understanding *who* He is.

DAY 2

GOD THE UNLIMITED

The problem with being human—well, one of the problems, anyway—is that we tend to define things by their edges. If you were to show someone where Tanzania is on a map, you’d also be showing them where it *isn’t*. Like all countries, it has borders that dictate where it begins—and where it ends.

We do the same thing when we measure time. If you’re talking about the second Thursday of September 1874, you’re talking about a discrete chunk of 24 hours with clearly defined boundaries.

That’s just how we’re wired. We look at the world, and we see edges. Beginnings and endings. Stop-pings and startings. Boundaries in time and space. And it’s a good thing too—life would be an absolute nightmare if we had no sense of time, no sense of where we began and ended, no way to comprehend the universe surrounding us. We *need* edges—and we need to be able to see them.

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what makes it so hard to wrap our minds around God—because God is a God without edges.

From a human standpoint, that doesn’t make sense. And yet, again and again, that’s how the Bible describes God. It’s not that God doesn’t have a distinct likeness—quite the opposite, we’re told that the human race was made in His image (Genesis 1:26)—but it’s an unlimited spiritual form we can’t fully comprehend with our limited human minds. David asks, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Psalm 139:7). God Himself reminds us, “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me?” (Isaiah 66:1). God can be anywhere, at any time, without restriction or qualification.

And that’s not all. The early disciples referred to God as “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all” (Acts 1:24), and God confirms it: “I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind” (Jeremiah 17:10). There is nowhere God cannot be, nothing past or present He cannot know and, just as important, nothing He is powerless to do. “Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh,” He tells us. “Is there anything too hard for Me?” (Jeremiah 32:27). Jesus provides the answer: “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

We can’t fit God into a box. He exists outside of time and space. He has no beginning; He will have no end. There is no corner of the universe He cannot reach; no action He is not powerful enough to perform. He is aware of everything at all times—from the number of hairs on your head to the most secret thoughts of your heart.

There are, however, certain boundaries God refuses to cross because of His perfect, righteous character. The Bible tells us that, among other things, God cannot—that is, *will* not—lie (Titus 1:2). But when it comes to us and the challenges we face, the simple fact remains: the God of the universe cannot be limited—not by anyone and not by anything.

Why is it so easy to forget that?

It’s the edges. We’re always looking for them—even with God; even when we know He has none. Some part of our mind tells us that those edges *must* exist, so we invent them. We tell ourselves all the reasons God can’t help us, can’t see us, can’t get to us in time, can’t make it work, can’t fix it.

Sometimes those reasons are born of desperation. Sometimes they’re born of doubt. Sometimes

they're nothing more than half-baked excuses for doing what we want to do instead of what God wants us to do.

But those reasons are wrong.

When an angry mob moved in to seize Jesus, one of His disciples decided to take action. The disciple believed Jesus was the Son of God, but he also seemed to think the Son of God needed his help. He sprang forward, swinging his sword—only to earn a swift rebuke from Jesus. “Put your sword in its place. ... Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:52-53).

God doesn't need our help. We need *His*. God is the One with the perspective and wisdom and power to do what we cannot. There is no scenario where God is powerless to act.

There are, however, times God chooses not to act. Sometimes God doesn't answer our prayers in the time frame or in the manner we'd like—but that doesn't mean He isn't listening. That doesn't mean He doesn't care. And it certainly doesn't mean He isn't capable.

There are a lot of reasons why God might not answer a prayer the way we'd like Him to. He might, for instance, be in the process of working out something better for us—something we can't see from our current perspective. We might be asking for something that's ultimately bad for us, even if we can't quite see that's the case.

Or it could be that our own life choices have distanced us from the God we're praying to. As Isaiah writes, “Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

In other words, when it comes to understanding when and why God chooses to act, the answers aren't always going to be as clear-cut as we might like. There's a lot of nuance involved, and it's not always going to make sense from our limited perspective. We don't know everything He knows; we

can't see everything He sees—but there's a world of difference between believing that sometimes God *chooses* not to act and believing that He simply *can't*.

In the end, it comes down to faith.

Faith is difficult. Faith means accepting that God knows best, despite what we think we see. Faith means believing in something that doesn't make sense in our world of edges and boundaries. Faith means looking at the impossible and accepting that with God, it's not just possible—it's plausible.

Faith means trusting in a God without edges.

None of that comes naturally. It's a struggle, and *that's okay*. God understands. When a desperate father brought his son to be healed by Jesus Christ, the father begged, “If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, ‘If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:22-24).

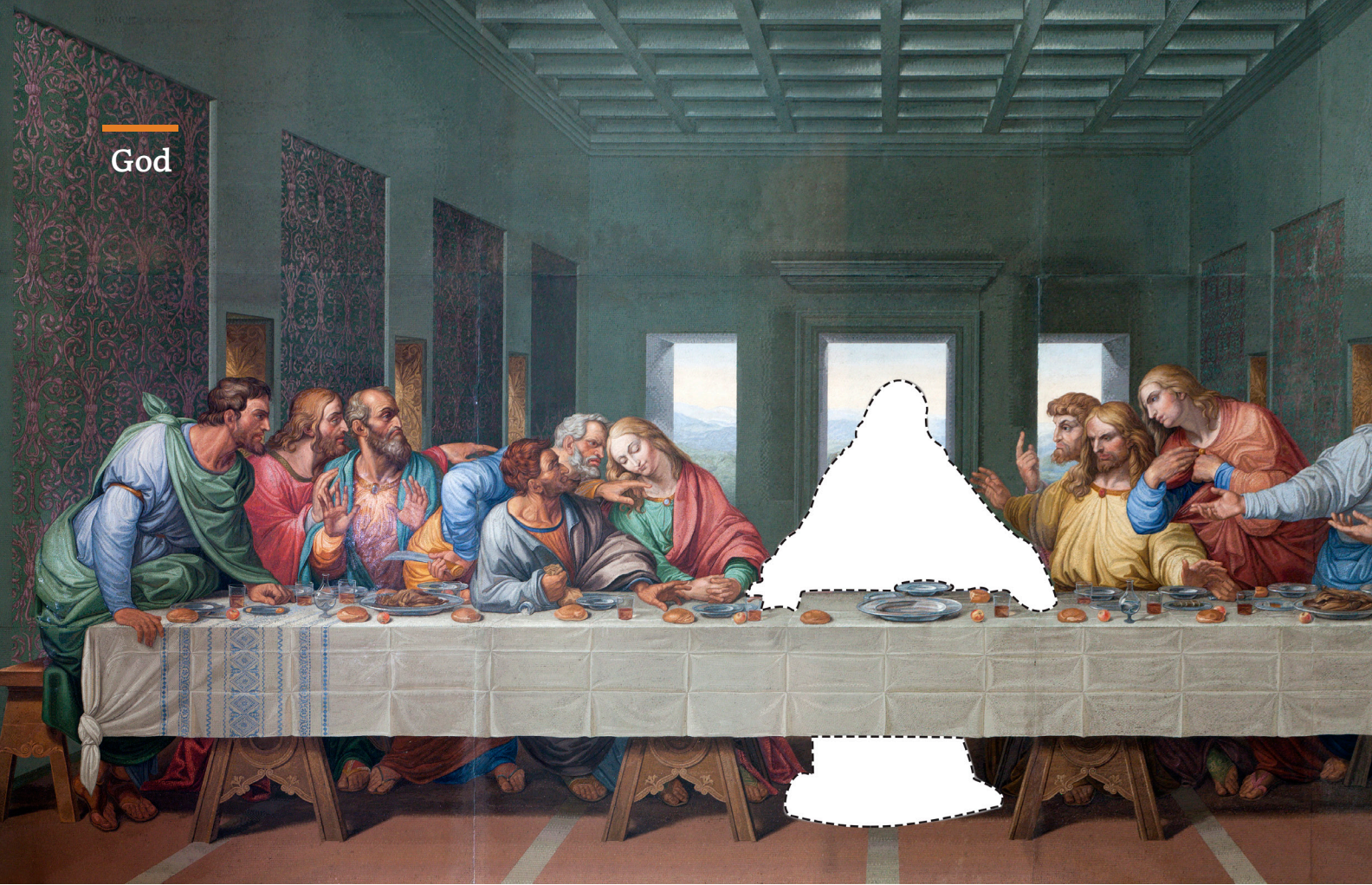
Oftentimes, we're in the same position. We have faith, but we also doubt. We trust, but we look on with skepticism. We're locked in an internal struggle between what we believe in our hearts and what we see with our eyes, *and there's nothing wrong with asking God for clarity*.

That clarity starts when we begin to let go of the predefined edges we try to force onto God. Let go of what you believe God cannot accomplish. Wipe the slate clean and allow for a God without limits on what He can do, what He can know and where He can be.

Once we're willing to part with those edges, we can finally begin to see God for who He is—and not for who we think He must be.

And that God, as we'll discover in the days to come, is truly incredible. **D**

Note: We will announce when the rest of these Journeys are available in the Learning Center of LifeHopeandTruth.com. Stay tuned!



Will the **Real Jesus** Please Stand Up?

Jesus Christ may be the most famous person in history, but how many of the ideas about Him are true? How many people would recognize the real Jesus Christ?

By Jim Franks

Almost two decades ago, a book was published titled *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?*

The title of the book was a spin-off from a popular TV program in the U.S., *To Tell the Truth*. On each episode three individuals, all claiming to be the same person, answered questions from celebrities who were trying to identify the real person. At the end of the program, when each celebrity had given his or her vote, the host would say, "Will the real _____ please stand up?"

If we could stage such an event about Jesus Christ, how many people would be able to identify the real Jesus Christ? Is it that difficult to know who Christ really is? It seems so!

In the Christian religion ideas abound about Jesus Christ—ideas that do not come from the Bible! In fact, if you take the Christ of Christianity and compare Him to the Christ of the



Bible, you will find vast differences. Almost everything is different—His appearance, the story of His birth, His teaching and His resurrection from the dead after three days and three nights in the tomb.

A wide range of ideas

Just consider some of the teachings among professing Christians and agnostics—ranging from the bizarre to the more traditional—and compare them with Scripture.

- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) teaches that Jesus is the spirit brother of Lucifer and the offspring of a heavenly mother and father.
- Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Jesus is really the archangel Michael, a created being who died on a stake and never rose bodily from the grave.
- A number of years ago, an author who professes agnosticism as-

serted that Jesus never really existed at all, that He was a myth, a legend constructed from pagan beliefs that predated the first century (*Mystery Babylon and the Lost Ten Tribes in the End Time* by Darrell Conder).

So what are we to think? Was Jesus Christ really “God” and is He to be worshipped? While pagan religions from the past greatly influenced the development of our modern versions of Christianity, substantial historical evidence exists that a man named Jesus really did live in the area of Palestine during the first century. (See our Life, Hope & Truth article “[Is the Bible True? Proof 3: What History Tells Us.](#)”)

But who was He? The traditional teaching of mainstream Christianity is that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity. But even this belief has serious problems, with its proponents acknowledging that the Trinity is not found in Scripture. (Learn more in our article “[The Trinity: What Is It?](#)”)

Another Jesus

The apostle Paul warned those in his day, only a couple of decades after the time when Christ walked this earth, about individuals who would come preaching another Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:1-15). Is that not what we are seeing today—Christianity teaching a Jesus with few similarities to the Christ of the Bible?

For example, Jesus is often portrayed as a baby in a manger around Christmas time and as an individual who was beaten and left hanging on a cross around Easter. The artwork focusing on this has Him looking weak, with long hair and the facial features of a Western European. In reality, Jesus looked nothing like this image but was similar to the average Jewish person of His day in physical appearance and without the long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14; learn more about this in our article “[What Did and Didn't Jesus Look Like?](#)”).

When everything is considered, it is clear that the real Jesus Christ, the One identified in Scripture, is not the same as the one being taught by the vast majority of professing Christianity. But how can this be? Isn't Christianity based on Jesus Christ? If the real Jesus is not being taught by the traditional Christian denominations, then who is the real Jesus?

Will the real Jesus please stand up? He will, if we look for Him solely in the pages of our Bible.

God, or madman?

In the New Testament Jesus Christ is identified as both “God with us” and as being God “manifested in the flesh.” In Matthew 1:23 He is called Immanuel, which is “God with us.” And in 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul refers to Jesus Christ as “God ... manifested in the flesh.”

C.S. Lewis, a Cambridge University professor and former agnostic, in his book *Mere Christianity* wrote this about Christ: “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish things that people often say about Him [Jesus]: ‘I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of hell. You must make a choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse.”

Either Jesus Christ was who He claimed to be—God, in the flesh—or He was not!

The Jesus Christ of the Bible

Here is what Scripture tells us about Jesus Christ:

- He was capable of giving life to His followers (John 5:21; 10:28).
- He claimed to be one with God the Father (John 17:20-23).

The real Jesus will indeed stand up at that time in such a way that the whole world will see Him!

- While on this earth He was worshipped (Matthew 2:11; 14:33; and 28:9). None should be worshipped except God (Matthew 4:9-10; Luke 4:8; and Revelation 19:10).
- He forgave sins (Mark 2:5).
- He said He would return to God (John 3:13) and resume His previous glory (John 17:5).
- He was God (John 1:1; 8:58; 10:33).
- Thomas declared Him to be “my God” (John 20:28).
- God created everything that was created through Him (Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:2).

Key section of Scripture

One section of Scripture that states clearly who Jesus really was is John 1:1-5. Though these verses are powerful and conclusive, some people still claim they are telling us that Christ was simply “godlike” and that in reality He was not God, but a created being. This seems highly unlikely when you examine the Greek words used in these verses.

The primary Greek word for God is *theos*. John uses *theos* on 70 occasions in his writings, and all are in reference to God. If John believed that Jesus was simply “godlike” and not really “God,” then he would have used a different Greek word. That word is *theios*, found only three times in the New Testament, once translated as “Godhead” and twice as “divine.”

But John doesn’t identify the Word as just divine or godlike. He identifies Him as God!

The structure of the sentence in John 1:1 shows that Christ is God and preexisted His human birth: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God” (emphasis added).

The Greek word for “with” is *pros*, a word used to show direction (for example, “I am with you or beside you”). You must have two beings in this verse for the Greek word *pros* to be correct. And both beings are called God!

Robertson’s *New Testament Word Pictures* states the following for this verse: “Though existing eternally with God, the Logos was in perfect fellowship with God. *Pros* with the accusative presents a plane of equality and intimacy, face to face with each other.”

Jesus and the tetragrammaton

In the Hebrew Scriptures the Word, the One who became Jesus Christ, is often identified by the Hebrew name for God, YHWH, most likely pronounced *Yahweh*. The Jews came to consider YHWH as the sacred name for God and, because of its sacred nature, they would not pronounce it. Scholars today commonly refer to it as the tetragrammaton (the “four letters”).

In Zechariah 14:3-4 we read about the coming of YHWH to the earth:

“Then the LORD [YHWH] will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east.”

Compare this to Acts 1:9-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; and Revelation 19:11-16—where we read that it is Jesus Christ who will return to the Mount of Olives and destroy the armies gathered to fight against Him. So, Zechariah 14 is a prophecy about the second coming of Jesus Christ, who is called YHWH, or in English, the LORD.

The real Jesus will indeed stand up at that time in such a way that the whole world will see Him!

The true Jesus Christ

In the meantime, though, you can come to know the real Jesus. We’ve only touched on a few points in this article, but you can read much more about Him in the articles in the “Who Is Jesus?” section of Life, Hope & Truth.

The true Jesus Christ was born as a human being, but He preexisted His human birth. He walked and talked with Enoch, Abraham, Moses and the prophets of old and identified Himself as the LORD (YHWH). As a human being, He was born of Mary, who was engaged to Joseph when the angel announced to her that she would bear the Messiah (Luke 1:30-35).

As a human being, He was descended from David and fulfilled the many prophecies about David’s lineage (Matthew 1; Luke 3). He was baptized by John at about the age of 30 and began His ministry at that time. He died on a stake outside the walls of Jerusalem, and He was resurrected after three days and three nights in the tomb, exactly as He prophesied. He is the Messiah, and He is the Savior who will return to this earth a “second time” to save mankind (Hebrews 9:28).

Christianity has adopted a view of Jesus Christ that is very different from what we read in Scripture. Who is the real Jesus Christ? Scripture shows that He is not part of a Triune Godhead, He is not a created being. He is God and has eternally existed with God the Father.

And He is the Savior of mankind (John 3:16). **D**

What does 2017 hold in store for us—for you? What events will dominate the news in the year to come, and how might they affect you?

By Joel Meeker



Prophecy

ON Sept. 20, 2016, outgoing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon gave his final address to the 71st General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. In this state-of-the-world overview, delivered partly in English and partly in French, he mentioned several key trends on the world scene that are likely to dominate the year ahead. He pulled few punches, stating that he stood before the assembly “with deep concern,” and that whatever progress the United Nations has been able to accomplish toward peace is “threatened by grave security threats.”

What are those trends and threats?

Alienation of the governed from those who rule

“Gulfs of mistrust divide citizens from their leaders.” Mr. Ban stated specifically, “Armed conflicts have grown more protracted and complex. Governance failures have pushed societies past the brink. Radicalization has threatened social cohesion—precisely the response that violent extremists seek and welcome.”

He gave examples: Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sahel (the zone between the Sahara and African savannah) and the Lake Chad Basin. Mr. Ban castigated in particular the government of Syria, which is killing its own citizens in horrific ways in order to maintain power. “Indeed, in too many places, we see leaders rewriting constitutions, manipulating elections and taking other desperate steps to cling to power.”

We have learned in recent years that such crises, even occurring on the other side of the world, can have a powerful and violent impact on other nations far away. Radicalized citizens of Middle Eastern nations have perpetrated terror attacks in Britain, France, Belgium, Germany and other European nations, as well as in the United States. This instability and violence show no sign of abating and are likely to affect more and more people in 2017.

This alienation leads to open conflict in certain nations, but in others it brings a marked breakdown in social cohesion. The success of the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump represented rejections of established political orders by concerned and disgruntled citizens. This polarization will continue to grow.

Migrants bring contentious societal changes

Mr. Ban spoke of the need to continue “helping people find a haven from conflict and tyranny.” He went on to say that such migrants are not always welcome. Some immigrants have behaved in shocking and abusive manners. Terrorists have used lax screening procedures to gain entry into Western countries to perpetrate attacks, raising understandable concerns.

There are essentially two schools of thought on the issue of immigration. One can be called *globalist* and the other *nationalist*. Jonathan Haidt in his essay “When and Why Nationalism Beats Globalism,” which appeared in *The American Interest*, explains the difference:



Clockwise from top left Protesters take to the streets after the Brexit vote; a Syrian woman awaits transport to a refugee camp in Turkey; commuters in Tokyo stare at their phones; a nurse draws blood from a patient.

The societal upheavals we see in so many places in the world will be a continuing source of contention and strife.

lead to increasing polarization among Western nations.

More epidemics to come

Mr. Ban also mentioned recent and future disease epidemics. He stated in French (our translation), “The measures we have taken together to contain the epidemic of Ebola, have prepared us against future health emergencies.”

It is a given that there will be future epidemics, even pandemics, after the recent Ebola outbreak that killed over 11,000. In the early 1980s, when journalist Laurie Garrett began her career, the medical community generally believed infectious disease had been vanquished by antibiotics. The research that led to her groundbreaking work, *The Coming Plague*, highlighted how diseases mutate to become resistant to antibiotics, so that this battle will never be won. Newly emerging diseases are now counted among national security issues demanding constant state preparation.

Health-care experts are currently calling attention to a crisis of antibiotic resistance that threatens to leave humanity defenseless against certain diseases. The Centers for Disease Control currently estimate that in the U.S. each year 2 million fall ill with an antibiotic-resistant disease and at least 23,000 die.

This issue will not disappear and will certainly become more acute with time. (See more in the article “Why the Surge in Infectious Diseases?” starting on page 19.)

Technology’s mixed bag

Ban Ki-moon also mentioned the rapid changes brought to the world by Internet and telecommunications technology. He stated, “It is hard to be-

“As societies become more prosperous and safe, they generally become more open and tolerant. Combined with vastly greater access to the food, movies, and consumer products of other cultures brought to us by globalization and the internet, this openness leads almost inevitably to the rise of a cosmopolitan attitude, usually most visible in the young urban elite. Local ties weaken, parochialism becomes a dirty word, and people begin to think of their fellow human beings as fellow ‘citizens of the world.’ ... [These] cosmopolitans embrace diversity and welcome immigration, often turning those topics into litmus tests for moral respectability.”

On the other hand, “nationalists see patriotism as a virtue; they think their country and its culture are unique and worth preserving. This is a real moral commitment, not a pose to cover up racist bigotry. ... Nationalists feel a bond with their country, and they believe that this bond imposes

moral obligations both ways: Citizens have a duty to love and serve their country, and governments are duty bound to protect their own people. Governments should place their citizens’ interests above the interests of people in other countries.”

These different worldviews explain varying hierarchies of desires and fears for one’s homeland. Immigration into Western countries has increased in recent years, particularly due to the flood of refugees fleeing failed states.

USA Today reported last year that the percentage of foreign-born people living in the United States reached 13.7 percent in 2015 and is set to break its absolute record in 2025, when it is projected to reach 14.9 percent. Many of these people bring different religious beliefs and social views compared to the traditions of the host nation.

Globalists believe this is all to the good. Nationalists view it with concern or alarm. This clash of worldviews will

lieve, but when I took office, a smartphone like this had not even been introduced to the world. Today it is a lifeline and, perhaps at times, the bane of our existence!”

The Pew Research Center reports that 87 percent of people in the developed world use the Internet, and 68 percent have a smartphone. The numbers in the developing world are lower, but still impressive: 54 percent report using the Internet at least occasionally or owning a smartphone.

The growing interconnectedness represents progress as more people have access to information about the world. But increased Internet usage also has negative effects. As much as a third of all Internet use is viewing pornography, which destroys families.

The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains, a Pulitzer-prize finalist written by Nicholas Carr, underlines research showing that Internet use modifies the way we think. Many people are losing the ability to concentrate for longer periods and to think deeply about complex concepts—it’s too much work. Short texts, photos and video are much easier to process and more entertaining.

Henry Kissinger alludes to these changes in his recent book *World Order*. He writes, “Philosophers and poets have long separated the mind’s purview into three components: information, knowledge, and wisdom. The Internet focuses on the realm of information, whose spread it facilitates exponentially. ... Yet a surfeit of information may paradoxically inhibit the acquisition of knowledge and push wisdom even further away than it was before” (pp. 349-350).

People have access to more facts, but they don’t know what they mean or how to assemble them coherently so as to act on them effectively. This can actually disconnect people from reality.

Trends in prophecy

These and other trends underscored by Ban Ki-moon are setting the stage for events of the prophesied

period called *the time of the end*.

Jesus foretold that the time just before His return would see a massive increase in “wars and rumors of wars” (Matthew 24:6-7). This is certainly the case today, and the trend is sure to intensify further in coming years. Russia is reasserting itself. China seeks regional domination. The Middle East continues to be a powder keg with a short fuse.

The societal upheavals we see in so many places in the world will be a continuing source of contention and strife leading to violence of various degrees both within nations and between them.

Jesus also prophesied “pestilences,” epidemics of disease (Matthew 24:7). Health authorities around the world are, quite independently of any Bible understanding, preparing now against such plagues. This trend will also continue.

Many of the trends to which Mr. Ban alluded concern the way people think. Frustration, anger and alienation within a nation or concerning classes of its citizens stem from destructive modes of thinking. In large part because of the Internet, our thinking is becoming more shallow, more emotional and less reasonable.

A fascinating prophecy of the end time is found in 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (King James Version).

The selfishness, anger, betrayal, hedonism, amorality and violence that alarm the outgoing secretary-general today have long been prophesied. And the world scene will grow much worse before the situation improves.

Hope on the horizon

Mr. Ban finished his discourse with hope and confidence. He said, “A perfect world may be on the far horizon. But a route to a better world, a safer world, a more just world, is in each and every one of us.”

A perfect world is truly on the horizon, but the route to that world does not lie in the United Nations, or in any human being. In spite of the best efforts of well-intended people, they will not find the way to world harmony on their own.

God states, “The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace” (Isaiah 59:8).

But with the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God will come, through the gift of the Holy Spirit made available to all, a change in the heart of man. This amazing revolution will finally allow perfect peace on earth.

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:26-28).

Only then will the problems of humanity be resolved and the nations of the world truly be united. **D**



Read more about that wonderful future in our free booklet [The Mystery of the Kingdom](#).

Prophecy

UNDERSTANDING THE OLIVET PROPHECY



On the Mount of Olives Jesus answered His disciples' questions about the temple and end-time events. His prophecy remains a vital message for today.

By David Treybig

The Olivet Prophecy, found in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, is so named because Jesus delivered this instruction while He was on the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives plays an important role in history and prophecy. Jesus left earth from this location after appearing to His disciples for 40 days in His resurrected state (Acts 1:1-3, 9, 12), and He will return to the Mount of Olives when He comes again to rule the earth (Zechariah 14:1-4, 9).

The context

Let's consider the background of the prophecy. Jesus' disciples had shown Him the refurbished buildings of the temple, and He had made a shocking statement. The beautiful buildings they had just seen would be completely leveled! "Not one stone shall be left here upon another," He said (Matthew 24:2).

Retiring to the nearby Mount of Olives where they had some privacy from the crowd, the disciples asked Jesus, "When will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (verse 3). The answers to these questions are the primary subjects of this prophecy.

Often Bible prophecies can have dual or multiple fulfillments. Sometimes there is an initial fulfillment that foreshadows the main fulfillment. This is the case with the Olivet Prophecy.

As *The Expositor's Bible* notes, "It will be observed that the lesser event—the destruction of Jerusalem—stands out in full prominence in the beginning of the prophecy, and the greater event—the Great Day of our Saviour's appearing—in the latter part of it" (William Robertson Nicoll, ed., Vol. 29).

A magnificent refurbishing

The rebuilding of the temple was the major building project in Jerusalem during the early part of the first century. Herod the Great began the restoration in 19 B.C., but it wasn't completed until A.D. 63—just a few years before the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70.

The work included the creation of a larger foundation (part of which remains today and is called the Western, or Wailing, Wall) and the enlargement and beautification of the temple itself. When Jesus visited the temple around the time of the first Passover of His ministry, it had been under construction for 46 years (John 2:20).

Historians recount that the gleaming white stones of the temple complex made quite an impact upon visitors as they approached Jerusalem. It was the pride of the city, and the Jews looked upon the temple as a source of divine protection. Unfortunately, this view would soon be proven wrong.

The destruction of Jerusalem

Given the magnificent beauty of the temple and its accompanying buildings, Jesus' disciples were quite surprised to hear Him speak of its destruction. Jesus' words came to pass in A.D. 70 as Roman troops under the command of Titus burned the temple on Aug. 10 and finished taking the city several days later on Sept. 8 (see Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, chap. 10-11).

"The siege of Jerusalem was one of the most terrible sieges in all history. Jerusalem was obviously a difficult city to take, being a city set upon a hill and defended by religious fanatics; so Titus determined to starve it out" (*Barclay's Daily Study Bible*). By the time the city fell, the famine inside the city had become so severe that many had died of hunger and others had resorted to cannibalism.

For additional information on the Temple Mount, see "[Temple Mount: Its History and Future](#)" and "[Third Temple: When Will It Be Built?](#)"

The first four signs of Christ's second coming

As already noted, the Olivet Prophecy primarily focuses on the signs or indications of Christ's return. In addressing this subject, Jesus described a progression of events that mirror the six seals opened in Revelation 6.

The first indicators of Jesus' return—religious deception, wars, famines and pestilences (Matthew

24:4-7)—correspond to the first four seals of Revelation 6, which are also called the “[Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#).” As “the beginning of sorrows” (verse 8), these conditions have already been occurring for a long time. But as other prophecies show, these signs will increase in intensity—resulting in the deaths of vast numbers of people (Revelation 6:8)—even before the Great Tribulation begins.

Tribulation

The Olivet Prophecy then includes an extensive discussion of the next indicator of Christ’s return—tribulation (Matthew 24:9-28). The Greek word *thlipsis* “is rendered in the King James Version variously as ‘tribulation,’ ‘affliction,’ ‘persecution,’ and ‘is used generally of the hardships which Christ’s followers would suffer’” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary*, article “Tribulation”). The Bible also shows this will be a time of suffering for the national descendants of Jacob or Israel (Daniel 12:1; Jeremiah 30:7; see also our article “[Jacob’s Trouble: What Is It?](#)”).

Jesus’ discussion of tribulation begins with the martyrdom of some of God’s faithful people and corresponds to the fifth seal in Revelation 6:9-11. This tribulation and the following Day of the Lord are prophesied to become so severe that all people will be endangered. As Matthew 24:22 notes, “Unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved.” The terrible conditions in this tribulation will be even worse than those that occurred in the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, for “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (verse 21).

Consider several key points in this section of the prophecy. First, the gospel of the [Kingdom of God](#) will be “preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations” before the end of this age of man occurs (verse 14).

Second, Jesus cited the “abomination of desolation,” spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” as a sign of His soon-coming

return. This prophecy is one in which the temple is desecrated. To read about this prophecy’s three fulfillments, including the one at the end of this age, see our article “[Abomination of Desolation: What Is It?](#)”

Third, false religious teachers will arise with miracle-working powers. Jesus’ warning was: “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (verse 24). To learn how to recognize false prophets—with four tests for determining whether a prophet is a true representative of God—see our article “[False Prophets](#).”

For additional explanation, see our article “[Great Tribulation](#).”

Heavenly signs

Jesus next spoke of celestial indicators of His imminent return. He said, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (verses 29-31; compare Revelation 6:12-17).

Earth’s inhabitants will mourn because “the great day of His [Christ’s] [wrath](#) has come” (Revelation 6:17). Note that Jesus said in this Olivet Prophecy that all people will see Him coming. Speaking of His second coming, Revelation 1:7 adds that “every eye will see Him.”

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus will first come secretly to earth to rapture people away and then appear to everyone. To learn why this popular notion is not true, see “[Rapture: Will There Be a Secret Rapture?](#)” and the *Discern* magazine article “[Left Behind: The Truth](#).”

In this section of the Olivet Prophecy Jesus also noted that there will be “a great sound of a trumpet” (Matthew 24:31) at His return. Christians who follow the example of Jesus and His disciples continue to observe the [Feast of Trumpets](#), which reminds us of His second coming and His promise to change His faithful followers—both those dead and alive—into spirit beings at His return.

Warning to watch

After answering His disciples’ questions about the destruction of Jerusalem and signs that would precede His second coming, Jesus emphasized to His followers the importance of faithfully watching for these events and living in accordance with His teaching (Matthew 24:32-51).

Even though we may know by these signs the general time of His return, we won’t know the exact day and hour (Matthew 24:36). That makes watching very important. Jesus said, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (verse 44).

In Luke’s account Jesus succinctly summarized this teaching: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36).

For assistance in watching world events and for encouragement in living as Christ desires, subscribe free of charge to *Discern* magazine, the Daily Bible Verse blog, the Insights blogs and our Life, Hope & Truth Weekly Newsletter from the [Learning Center](#) on [Lifehopeandtruth.com](#). **D**



To learn more about end-time events, see our booklet *The Book of Revelation: The Storm Before the Calm*.

Why is the world facing epidemic after epidemic of new and reemerging infectious diseases? What are we doing wrong, and how will the ultimate healing come?

Why the Surge in Infectious Diseases?

By Becky Sweat

W

est Nile virus, Zika, Ebola, H1N1 avian influenza, swine flu, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), yellow fever, hantavirus, Nipah, Hendra, Marburg, chikungunya, dengue.

Another virus with a peculiar name always seems to be lurking around the corner, poised to become the next global health emergency.

Just in the last few years we've witnessed the Ebola epidemic in western Africa in 2014, MERS outbreaks in the Arabian Peninsula in 2014 and Korea in 2015, and the spread of the Zika virus throughout most of the Americas at the close of 2016.

Sounding the alarm

Public health officials worldwide have been sounding the alarm: Infectious disease outbreaks are increasing in frequency and severity, and the number of unique pathogens responsible for disease is growing.

One of the most urgent warnings comes from World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan: "What we are seeing now looks more and more like a dramatic resurgence of the threat from emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases," she stated. "The world is not prepared to cope."

But what exactly is meant by *emerging* and *re-emerging* diseases? An *emerging* pathogen is one that is appearing in the human population for the first time and has never been recognized before. According to the WHO, at least 40 new infectious diseases have emerged since the 1980s, at a rate of one or more per year.

Examples include Ebola, HIV/AIDS and Lyme disease. Emerging viruses often have no effective treatment, cure or vaccine, and the possibility of preventing or controlling them is extremely limited.

The majority of emerging pathogens are *zoonotic*—meaning they are transmitted between animals and people—which makes them particularly challenging. "Zoonotic diseases cannot usually be eradicated due to the fact that it is not possible to eliminate all of the animal reservoirs or vectors that might be carrying the zoonosis," explains David Freedman, M.D., professor of medicine and epidemiology at the University of Alabama.

A *reemerging* disease is caused by a virus, bacterium, parasite or fungus that has long existed and was once thought to be controlled or wiped out, but is now making a comeback. These diseases are often spreading geographically, usually in a more virulent or drug-resistant form.

Today there are antibiotic-resistant strains of tuberculosis, malaria, cholera, diphtheria, staphylococ-

cus, streptococcus and salmonella—to name a few “superbugs” that have made their debut in recent times.

Each year, the number of infections and deaths caused by superbugs continues to rise. The *Review on Antimicrobial Resistance*, a 2016 report published in the U.K., predicts that by 2050, 10 million people globally will die each year from antibiotic-resistant bacteria alone, based on current trends.

Factors behind the trends

What a contrast to the optimism of 50 years ago! Then U.S. Surgeon General William Stewart famously proclaimed, “The time has come to close the book on infectious diseases. We have basically wiped out infection in the United States.”

So why are we now seeing a surge in infectious diseases?

The most straightforward answer comes from the Bible. In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus Christ predicted the signs that would precede His return, including pestilence and disease on a global scale (Matthew 24:3-8; Luke 21:11).

A parallel prophecy is found in Revelation 6, which describes the “[Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#).” The fourth horseman (verses 7 and 8) pictures the outbreak of pestilences (in addition to the sword and hunger) that will ravage a quarter of the earth’s population. The latter part of verse 8 refers to death resulting from the “beasts of the earth.” This could very well include the animals that transmit infectious diseases.

In addition to looking at Bible prophecies, we can observe specific factors that are helping cause the problems. Many health experts, like biotech consultant Thomas Monath, M.D., believe mankind is actually creating its own disease problems, albeit unintentionally. “We’re making changes in our environment or lifestyles to cause the emergence or spread of disease,” he says.

Some of the primary ways humans have paved the way for modern disease outbreaks include:



ENCROACHMENT ON ANIMAL HABITATS.

The number of people on planet earth has soared from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 7.5 billion in 2016. This has prompted people to settle in wilderness areas where only animals had lived.

“Environments in the developing world used to be quite remote but are now much less so as a result of human activities like deforestation, dam projects, irrigation, road construction and extensive agriculture,” says James Hughes, M.D., professor of medicine and public health at Emory University. When people enter these ecosystems, they often encounter new pathogens not found anywhere else. Once infected, they spread the pathogen wherever they go.



URBANIZATION AND OVERCROWDING.

Increasing numbers of people, particularly in the developing world, are moving from rural areas to large urban centers, seeking work. Many end up living in overcrowded “megacities” with 10 million or more residents. According to a 2016 report from the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, there are now 29 megacities in the world (up from 14 in 1995), and 79 percent of them are in developing nations.

With high population densities, megacities are ideal breeding grounds for disease. Furthermore, the typical megacity’s infrastructure isn’t prepared to handle its swelling population.

“Water and sanitation systems are often inadequate or nonexistent, so residents must drink water that’s contaminated with bacteria and sewage,” Dr. Freedman says. “Hospitals may be in short supply, so those who are ill may not be able to get the medical care they need.”



EATING EXOTIC ANIMALS.

Some cultures have a long tradition of eating exotic wildlife. Africa has its bush meat trade, where monkeys, apes, aardvarks, rats and other wild animals are hunted and sold for food. The Chinese have their open-air wet markets, where exotic creatures like civets, snakes, tree shrews, bats, badgers and pangolins are sold live to consumers, who will then slaughter and consume them.

“Any viruses carried by these animals can be transmitted to people via consumption, if people handle the animals, or sometimes if they just come into the same air space,” explains Dr. Hughes.

However, the issue is more than just the transmission of an animal pathogen to a human. The ultimate concern is that close contact with infected animals or consuming them can cause a new pathogen to emerge. Simply put, if a human infected with a virus comes in contact with an animal that has a similar type of virus, the genetic material of the two pathogens can get “mixed up” and recombine. This can result in a new virus that infects both animals and people.

This process has caused the emergence of some of the world's deadliest diseases. For instance, HIV is a fusion of the simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV) that infects monkeys and apes, and a similar type of virus that infects people. Scientists believe that HIV originated from butchering chimpanzees for bush meat.



CHANGES IN SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND IV DRUG USE.

Up until the mid-20th century, having multiple sexual partners was frowned upon by most people. However, in Western society today, having multiple sexual partners before marriage is not only acceptable, but has become the norm. Additionally, intravenous drug use has become rampant, with drug users often sharing injection paraphernalia. Both trends have fueled the spread of HIV, hepatitis C, genital herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases—all of which are transmitted through bodily fluids.



IMPROPER USE OF ANTIBIOTICS.

Overuse of antibiotics has created new antibiotic-resistant bacteria. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), up to 50 percent of antibiotics used in hospitals and clinics are either unnecessary or inappropriate. Often what happens is patients insist on

ULTIMATELY, DISEASE OUTBREAKS AND PANDEMICS ARE A RESULT OF MANKIND'S **BROKEN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.**

having antibiotics when they have a cold or the flu (which is almost always caused by a virus and won't respond to antibiotics), and doctors give in to these demands. Or physicians might prescribe antibiotics when they can't make a definite diagnosis, "just in case" bacteria are present.

When a particular drug is prescribed too much, bacteria can build defenses against it. Dr. Hughes explains, "This drug resistance is then transferred to the next generation of that bacteria, effectively rendering that particular medication useless."

Bacteria can develop resistance to multiple drugs, eventually becoming the virtually untreatable, so-called superbugs.

Biblical perspectives

Several of the factors just discussed are direct violations of biblical instruction. For one, Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 spell out which animals should and shouldn't be eaten. Many of the diseases plaguing our modern world wouldn't be problems if people weren't eating "unclean," exotic animals, which carry disease-causing organisms not present in domesticated "clean" animals. (Learn more about this in our Life, Hope & Truth article "[Clean and Unclean Animals: Does God Care What Meats We Eat?](#)")

Deuteronomy 23:13 says that human waste should be buried away from where people live. This prevents food and water supplies from becoming contaminated. It's no wonder that diseases like diarrhea, dysentery, hookworm, roundworms, cholera and typhoid—which all result from contact with human waste—are rampant in shantytowns that do not have sanitation systems.

In Leviticus 18 and 20 God prohibits extramarital and premarital sex and other unhealthy sexual practices. There's no question that this kind of sexually immoral behavior has contributed greatly to the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Ultimately, disease outbreaks and pandemics are a result of mankind's broken relationship with God. When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, He told them they could avoid the curse of disease if they obeyed His commandments and statutes (Exodus 15:26). On the other hand, there would be consequences for disobedience, which included disease outbreaks (Deuteronomy 28:15, 21-22, 27-28). The Israelites—like all people before and since—disobeyed God, and mankind continues to reap the consequences of sin.

Today, humanity as a whole is cut off from God and vulnerable to the ravages of disease. This won't always be the case though. When Jesus Christ returns to earth and the Kingdom of God is established, mankind will at last be united with our Creator and receive all the blessings of living God's way of life—which includes good health and a world free of disease outbreaks. **D**



For more about that coming Kingdom, see our free booklet [The Mystery of the Kingdom](#).

Three Don'ts
Before
You Say
"I Do"

You've fallen in love, and you've begun planning a beautiful wedding! You pick a date, choose invitations, order the cake. ... You're ready to walk down the aisle—or are you?

By Debbie Pierce



you've ever built a home, you've had to consider a very important question: What type of foundation will you build on? The foundation is the first part of your house to be built; it's not as visible, yet it's as important as what you build on it. The foundation's role is vital, because it supports and gives stability to the rest of the house.

A family is like that house, and it needs a strong marriage for its foundation. And families are the building blocks of society.

Yet the institution of marriage has taken a real hit. Some even ask, "Why marriage?" Many more have broken foundations and are watching their families come crashing down.

Three don'ts for a firm foundation

The properties of concrete often make it the building material of choice for foundations. It has strength and durability, versatility, sustainability and elasticity, and other qualities that are important for the substructure of a house.

If you want a marriage that will stand the test of time and weather all types of disasters, you need to "pour concrete" for a stable foundation. But how?

1. DON'T BUILD WITHOUT A PLAN.

If you want to create something beautiful and sustainable, you need a good blueprint. If your blueprint doesn't extend beyond your wedding day, don't expect much.

God offers a blueprint that begins with a vision of what He wants you to build in your marriage, along with instructions for each stage of preparation and building.

A concrete foundation is poured in steps, and as with most things, this requires preparation. If the act of pouring is like the wedding day, then getting to know your future spouse can be likened to leveling the ground and building the form to pour the concrete into.

This implies a *design*. Where will the home be built? What does the floor plan look like? How big

will the home be? How much concrete will be needed to support the weight of this home? We develop ideas of what we want our marriage and family to be by looking to those couples we hold in high esteem. What is it about them that we like?

Next, create a *sketch* of what you want. Keep in mind, though, that while we often focus on what we want *in our spouse*, we also need to prepare ourselves. We make a checklist of characteristics for a potential mate, but do we ever think to do a checklist on ourselves? What kind of person do *you* need to be so that your marital foundation is strong and able to support a healthy family?

Consider bringing a professional *architect* into the design process. This might be your pastor or a professional counselor who shares the same core values about marriage that you do. It's the architect's job to help you make sure your design goals will work and steer you around design traps.

Gary* and his wife, who have been married for five years, completed four premarital counseling sessions, which included a compatibility test that highlighted what they had in common and areas that might be potential problems.

Elaine* and her husband Jim's* relationship has stood solid for 35 years, partly because they dated for four years before pouring their marriage foundation.

Amanda's* life tells a different story, however. Married and divorced twice, both her relationships developed cracks before the building process had even begun. Her first husband date-raped her after they'd known each other three months. (Back in the 1960s marriage seemed like the only viable option when one was 17 and pregnant.) There wasn't time to prepare a strong foundation, and the essential qualities of a good "pour" were missing.

Preparing to pour your marital foundation means taking time to get to know each other. Elaine attributes marital success to being able to see Jim in many different situations over the four years they dated.

"I wanted to see whether he had a heart for service, how he behaved around children and, most importantly, his commitment to God." Experts also suggest considering how a potential mate treats his or her parents and family.

Amanda, on the other hand, realizes that she was naive and easily manipulated by the man who became her second husband. She was too quick to trust, wanting to believe the best without actually getting it. She compromised her relationship by not having a thorough design and then sticking to it.

2. DON'T COMPROMISE WITH QUALITY.

Engineering concrete is complicated; the mixture of ingredients must be just right. Experts explain that if "proportions are off, even a little bit, concrete is weakened and durability is compromised."

Elaine's husband, who's also a pastor, has observed from many years of counseling others that when it comes to your spouse, "you get what you see, minus a little."

As a counselor, I often find that people ignore what they see when they're first dating, or they twist it to mean something else. I hear things like, "I just love him so much," despite knowing that he's a heavy drinker and that when he's drunk he's not very kind. Or I hear a man say that the woman he wants to marry is very clingy and emotionally dependent, but it's okay because that makes him feel important—at first.

If, as Elaine's husband said, you get just a little less than what you see, then what are you ignoring that will weaken your foundation? Are there some missing ingredients in yourself or in your partner that you're excusing away? The most common mistake with concrete is to *water it down*. Doing so makes concrete easier to work with at first, but ultimately it *compromises* its integrity.

Are you watering down your values? Values are what shape our character, and character is the *rebar* (steel reinforcement) that strengthens our marital foundation.

If you get just a little *less*, then don't expect him or her to change. If you marry thinking that you can change up the ingredients or *repour* him or her into something other than what he or she is right now, you're deluding yourself.

It doesn't work that way. Yes, marriage changes you. But once poured into the forms you've built, your foundation is what it is. So start with the very best materials you can find and use the best tools available for keeping that foundation strong, long after it's poured.

3. DON'T GIVE UP ON THE BLUEPRINT, EVEN WHEN IT GETS DIFFICULT.

Concrete needs time to cure after it's poured, and it gets stronger with every day that goes by. But almost all concrete will crack eventually due to improper dirt work, bad soil or stress. Builders know this, so they use rebar to reinforce the concrete, and often create joints to control where a crack will occur.

Marital rebar should be part of your design. You need to anticipate what those cracks will look like and build into your plan how you will address them. But, unfortunately, too many couples treat their problems as a reason to tear down their structure and start over, instead of *anticipating* and *planning* for them.

Cracks are inevitable in marriage. You can't put two imperfect people together—with different perspectives, upbringings, etc.—and not have them poke each other with the sharp edges of their personalities. It's the longevity of a marriage that smooths out the sharp edges and gives you the durability of a solid concrete foundation.

Ultimately, the blueprint for a strong, God-ordained marriage is found in Ephesians 5. Here we find an outline of instructions for husbands and wives that liken our roles and responsibilities in marriage to how Christ treats people: with love, humility, kindness and an attitude of service. When you follow this blueprint, your marriage will be able to absorb and distribute the tensions that will come.

Sometimes, though, we believe our problems are too numerous to repair. Perhaps the damage occurred because of poor quality materials, a lack of proper preparation or structural compromise. Maybe we became victims of erosion or were toppled by a devastating choice with *earthquake-like* ramifications. No matter how the damage comes about, it's a painful process for everyone, with far-reaching aftershocks. God hates divorce for this very reason (Malachi 2:14-16).

That's why so much time and effort need to go into the design process *before* you ever pour your foundation. If, however, you've poured that foundation prematurely, don't give up and start over. It will be hard work and require dedicated effort, but with the help of your architect, you can still build something beautiful that will last a lifetime.

Time to say "I do"

Considering these *don'ts* and other aspects of marriage preparation may not seem romantic or exciting, but they can be vital to ensuring lifelong romance and enduring love.

After you've leveled and compacted the ground, set your forms and tied your rebar, you'll be ready for the day when you will *pour your foundation*.

So enjoy your wedding day; it's a time of celebration that marks the building of your new life together. But if you want it to last a lifetime, remember your *don'ts* before you say "I do!"

Read more biblical advice about marriage in our Life, Hope & Truth articles "[What Is Marriage?](#)" and "[How Great Marriages Work.](#)"

**Client names have been changed to protect privacy. Debbie Pierce is a licensed counselor with more than 23 years of experience working with people of all ages in marriage and family issues.*



Women protest outside Cologne Cathedral days after an estimated 600 women were sexually assaulted on New Year's Eve.

EUROPE

Fear of an Immigrant Crime Wave Sparks Backlash

Violent crime has increased in parts of Europe in the wake of mass immigration from the Middle East and Africa. Will the European backlash continue to grow?

By Neal Hogberg

It was a watershed moment for Europe. A year ago on New Year's Eve, up to a thousand migrant men assaulted about 600 German women in the center of Cologne, Germany.

The shocking and sordid affair initiated a hardening of attitudes toward Muslim migrants, forcing Europe to struggle with the prospect of having taken on a mass of people it cannot assimilate.

A clash of cultures

German officials and media clumsily attempted to cover it up initially, but the fiasco became an international scandal anyway. Public outrage followed, and hundreds of women filed charges.

The assaults provided the most lurid and distasteful example to date of the clash of cultures between the libertine but politically correct host societies and the overwhelmingly unattached young migrant men seeking refuge and prosperity in Europe without the civilizing influence of mothers, sisters or wives.

Importing more than just people

In the wake of the assaults, Cologne's Mayor Henriette Reker feebly attempted to avoid blaming the assailants by releasing a code of conduct for women's behavior in public that bordered on victim blaming. It included keeping strangers "an arm's length away" and staying away from groups of people.

Several European countries are facing growing public unrest amid a rise in crime, including sexual assaults, prompting women's rights groups in Germany to decry that a "culture of rape and violence" was endangering women in refugee centers.

Refugee housing in Berlin.



Political expectations

European leaders have failed to fully confront the crime wave. There are accounts of political leaders instructing police to turn a blind eye to crimes perpetrated by migrants, apparently to avoid the appearance of Islamophobia or fueling anti-immigration sentiments. Information regarding migrant-related crimes has often been censored, with the nationality of perpetrators deemed not relevant or not given in the interests of “fair reporting.”

On Jan. 24, 2016, *Die Welt* reported that the suppression of data about migrant criminality is a “Germany-wide phenomenon.” According to Rainer Wendt, the head of the German police union, “Every police officer knows he has to meet a particular political expectation. It is better to keep quiet [about migrant crime] because you cannot go wrong.”

According to Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office, migrants in Germany committed 142,500 crimes in just the first six months of 2016. This was the equivalent of 780 crimes a day—an increase of nearly 40 percent over 2015 (*Daily Mail*, Nov. 1, 2016).

Reported sexual violence in Germany has also increased, and up to 90 percent of the sex crimes committed don’t appear in the official statistics, according to André Schulz, the head of the Association of Criminal Police.

The growing backlash of public opinion

An Oct. 24, 2016, YouGov poll found that 68 percent of Germans believe that security has deteriorated dramatically recently and that they fear for their lives and property in German train stations and subways.

Research by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which is associated with the center-left Social Democratic Party, found that one in three Germans feel they are “strangers in their own country” due to “Muslim infiltration,” and nearly half of Germans fear their country is being “subverted by Islam.”

Many of Europe’s Muslims, far more religious than the average European, have not integrated well into their respective host societies.

Immigration without assimilation

In France, as in the rest of Europe, immigrant workers moved into subsidized housing in the *banlieues*, which gradually came to be perceived as breeding grounds for Islamist radicals.

Many refuse to assimilate at all, preferring areas where they can work, shop, play and engage in social activities without speaking a word of the local language.

A sensational 2016 dossier released by the anti-immigrant Hungarian government claims there are more than 900 “no-go” zones throughout Europe where police have lost control. Typically these are Muslim enclaves fringing otherwise prosperous cities like Paris, Brussels, Stockholm and Berlin.

Not an economic miracle for all

Starting in 1955, Germany encouraged an inflow of unskilled laborers, initially from Turkey, who helped produce the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, which elevated the country to top-tier economic status. For many years—long before the current refugee crisis—Germany was the European country most open to immigration.

According to Eurostat, from 2005 to 2014 Germany welcomed more than 6 million immigrants, many from countries hostile to Western culture.

But low-skill jobs with decent wages are waning throughout the West, and migrants are the least prepared for the job market. Less than one-quarter of Iraqis come with completed vocational training. Munich economist Ludger Wössmann notes that two-thirds of young Syrians are “functional illiterates by international standards.”

Tino Sanandaji of the Stockholm Business School told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that “it takes an average of seven years before a refugee gets a steady job.”

Hence, a recent survey of refugees’ employment status, educational background and values tabulated that only about one in eight have found jobs so far (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and the IAB and DIW research institutes).

Is a “German Islam” the answer?

Despite a Reuters report detailing how mosques in Germany are more conservative than those in Syria, Germany’s Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble penned an opinion article calling for the development of a “German Islam” with “a free, open, pluralistic and tolerant order, according to our laws and the religious neutrality of the state” (*Welt am Sonntag*). “There is no doubt,” acknowledged Schäuble, “that the growing number of Muslims in our country today is testing the tolerance of mainstream society.”

Despite those cultural impediments, outgoing German President Joachim Gauck surprised many when he stated his belief that Germany will eventually have a Muslim president.

How did the face of Europe change so rapidly?

In little more than one generation, Europe has changed from population exporter to importer, and in another generation it may be unrecognizable.

One reason for the drastic change is that Europeans got old and stopped having babies. Eastern Europe now has the largest population loss in modern history, and Germany overtook Japan in the race for the world’s lowest birth rate. According to population projections made by Eurostat in 2013, without the influx of migrants, Europe’s population would plunge from 507 million in 2015 to 399 million by 2080. In the same time span Germany’s 80 million would shrink to 50 million. Spain and Italy also show precipitous drops.

To replace its workers and still maintain the social welfare state, Europe chose, in essence, to borrow a low-wage population from Turkey, Northern Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. These migrants bring cultures with radically different values.

Anger and populism influencing elections

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s continued justification of her decision to admit 2 million more migrants to Germany has left her increasingly isolated from other leaders coping with the fallout of anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim sentiment in their electorates. Mrs. Merkel is heading toward 2017’s national elections more politically vulnerable than ever, even as the right-wing populist party Alternative

“Without any action the migratory influx will be like the barbarian invasion of the fourth century, and the consequences will be the same.”

—MARINE LE PEN



for Germany, which advocates the incompatibility of Islam with the German constitution, has gained ground.

Upcoming national elections in Italy, France and the Netherlands are all considered referendums on Europe’s future, with many candidates taking a hard line toward the immigration crisis. The French presidential election appears set to be between François Fillon, who has vowed to “conquer Islamic totalitarianism,” and Marine Le Pen, the leader of France’s far-right National Front party, who warned last year: “Without any action the migratory influx will be like the barbarian invasion of the fourth century, and the consequences will be the same.”

Times of tension and crisis

Peace depends on prosperity, and as the consequences of Europe’s open borders bring additional costs, pain and instability, many “politically correct” sentiments may dissolve as Europeans desire security above all else.

Bible prophecies have long foretold that a southern kingdom will push against or attack a kingdom to the north. This will prompt a swift and fierce response by the “king of the North,” a coming European superpower, described as a combination of iron and clay—partly strong and partly weak (Daniel 11:40; 2:31-45).

Times of tension and crisis—like those Europe is currently experiencing with the ongoing migrant predicament—will challenge the odd iron-and-clay mixture and may prompt a populist cry for a strong hand to resolve the existential threat. **D**



Learn more about the future for Europe and the world in our free booklet *The Book of Revelation: The Storm Before the Calm*.



Should You Pray to Mary?

The largest denomination of Christendom teaches its members to pray to Mary as a mediatrix. But does Jesus Christ want us to pray to His physical mother?

By Erik Jones

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

This is a daily prayer, often called the "Hail Mary," repeated by millions of Roman Catholics around the world. It is a part of a larger sequence of devotions called the rosary, which derives its name from a Latin word meaning a wreath or garland of roses. According to tradition, whenever it is recited, Mary's head is crowned with a wreath of flowers in heaven.

The full rosary consists of more than 200 "Hail Marys" and 20 "Our Fathers" interspersed between other statements and prayers. Traditionally, devotees pray one fourth of this each day, including five of the 20 "mysteries."

Catholics keep track of where they are in this litany through a string of beads. Many popes have endorsed the practice, as did (supposedly) Mary herself—who is said to have appeared to three children in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917. According to the children, one of her consistent messages throughout six separate apparitions was the need for humanity to recite the rosary daily to bring world peace.

WHY DO CATHOLICS PRAY TO MARY?

If you're a non-Catholic, you may be curious why Catholics pray to Mary. In *My Catholic Faith* (a basic, yet detailed book explaining Catholic doctrine), Bishop Louis LaRavoire Morrow writes:

"We pay special honor to the Blessed Virgin because she is the Mother of God, and our Mother. God has exalted her above all other creatures. Her intercession is more powerful with God than that of any other saint. No man refuses his mother a favor; so God does not refuse any request of Mary" (1958, p. 198).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

"Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving

office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. ... Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix."

Essentially, the belief is that Mary's body was taken to heaven before she experienced physical death ("the Assumption") where she was crowned and exalted as queen of heaven and continues to function as the mother of God in heaven. They're convinced that Christ shows dutiful favor to any request she makes of Him—and therefore their prayers are most effective when they are made through Mary as a mediatrix (feminine form of *mediator*).

Catholics consider that just as a Christian on earth may ask a fellow believer to pray about something for them, they can also solicit help from the saints in heaven as mediators between themselves and God.

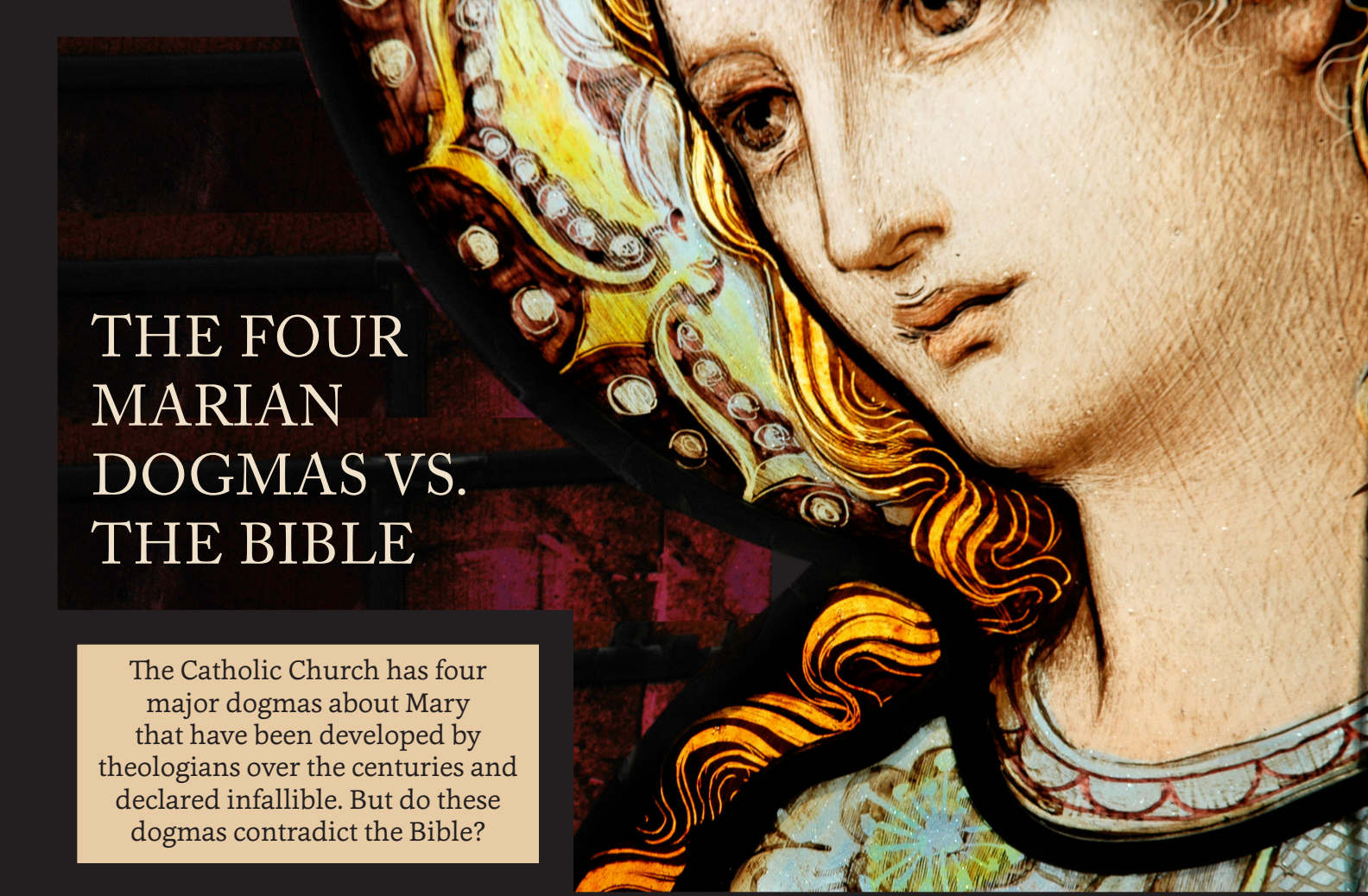
But the Bible does not teach this. Of course, Catholics do not consider Scripture to be the only authoritative source for doctrine. They believe church tradition is also authoritative and that God has revealed to the Roman Catholic Church other truths not found in the Bible.

What does the Bible say? Consider these three biblical reasons for not praying to Mary:

1. MARY IS NOT IN HEAVEN.

The entire practice of praying to Mary is based on the premise that Mary (and all the other saints) are in heaven. In 1950 Pope Pius XII declared *ex cathedra* (meaning it is considered infallible) that "the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory"—a statement that is not supported by Scripture.

Since Christ's ascension was such a momentous event, the Bible vividly describes it (Acts 1:9). The Bible, however, makes no mention of Mary ascending to heaven because she never did. Instead, Scripture plainly states that "no one



THE FOUR MARIAN DOGMAS VS. THE BIBLE

The Catholic Church has four major dogmas about Mary that have been developed by theologians over the centuries and declared infallible. But do these dogmas contradict the Bible?

THE MOTHER OF GOD

Mary was God's mother and continues to be Christ's mother in heaven.

The Bible nowhere calls Mary "the mother of God." She is referred to three times as "the mother of Jesus" (John 2:1, 3; Acts 1:14). When given the chance to give special privileges to Mary and His brothers, Jesus instead emphasized that all who truly follow Him are His family (Matthew 12:47-49).

PERPETUAL VIRGINITY

Mary remained a virgin her entire life.

The Bible is clear that Mary was a virgin when the angel revealed that she would bear the Messiah (Luke 1:34). But it is also clear that she had normal marital relations with her husband after Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:25). Joseph and Mary actually had *at least* six additional children after Jesus (Matthew 12:47; Mark 6:3). Having sexual relations with her husband did not make Mary any less of a righteous woman (Hebrews 13:4).

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Mary was preserved from original sin at her conception and remained sinless her entire life.

Though the Bible doesn't detail any of Mary's personal sins, it never says she was preserved from sin at her conception or throughout her life. She was "blessed" and was a "maidservant" of God (Luke 1:48)—but she also expressed her personal need for a "Savior" (verse 47). If she had never sinned, she would have had no need for a Savior (Matthew 1:21). The Bible declares that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). Though Mary was a humble servant of God, she was not perfect—no one can claim to be sinless (1 John 1:8-10).

ASSUMPTION

Mary's body and soul were taken to heaven before she died. Upon arrival in heaven, she was crowned the queen of heaven and exalted above all of the saints and angels.

Though the Bible describes Jesus' ascension (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9), it makes no mention of Mary ascending to heaven. Jesus Christ is the only person who has ascended into the third heaven (John 3:13). Many scriptures describe Jesus now being seated "at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22)—but none mention Mary there. God's servants (including Mary) will be resurrected to eternal life at Christ's return. They will be "glorified together" "at His coming" (Romans 8:17; 1 Corinthians 15:23; see also 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).



Praying to Mary (or other saints) as mediators is meaningless and contradicts the teaching of Christ and the examples of scores of men and women of the Bible.

has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven" (John 3:13). The Bible also says that "it is appointed for men to die once" (Hebrews 9:27) and that all who have died will be resurrected after Jesus returns (John 5:28-29).

The real Mary, who was a true servant of God, died like the rest of humanity before and after her. She *sleeps* in death, awaiting the resurrection at Christ's return (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). Since the Bible is clear that "the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5), she cannot hear the thousands of prayers that are recited to her every day.

To learn more of what the Bible says about death, read our free booklet *The Last Enemy: What Really Happens After Death?*

2. THE BIBLE TELLS US TO PRAY TO THE FATHER.

Prayer is not a peripheral topic in the Bible. The words *prayer*, *pray* and *prayed* are found in hundreds of biblical passages. When you study the many examples of righteous people in the Bible—from Abraham (Genesis 20:17) to Paul (2 Timothy 1:3; Philemon 1:4)—you will not find one single example of them praying to anyone other than God.

When asked by His disciples, Jesus gave them guidelines about how to pray (Matthew 6:5-13; Luke 11:1-4). He emphasized first that prayer should primarily be done in private, and second, it should not be a "meaningless repetition" (Matthew 6:7, New American Standard Bible). Sadly, much of today's Christendom ignores both principles.

Jesus then said, "In this manner, therefore, pray" (verse 9).

Notice that He didn't present multiple formats—such as prayers to His mother or saints—He gave *one model*. Prayer is to be directed to "our Father in heaven."

To learn more about the biblical teaching on prayer, read "[Do You Pray the Way Jesus Taught?](#)"

3. JESUS CHRIST IS THE SOLE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MAN.

After His ascension to heaven, Jesus Christ was given the role as our heavenly "High Priest" (Hebrews 4:14-15). The book of Hebrews explains clearly that we should pray to the Father "through Him" because He "lives to make intercession for [us]" (Hebrews 7:25).

Paul taught there is only "one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). If you study every scripture where this responsibility of Christ is discussed, you will notice that embedded in the context is singularity—Christ is *the sole Mediator* between the Father and human beings (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24).

We should trust what the Bible teaches on prayer: God the Father is all-powerful, and Christ is a loving, kind and powerful "Advocate" on our behalf (1 John 2:1). You can pray directly to the Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, and have total assurance that "His ears are open" to righteous Christians' prayers (1 Peter 3:12).

Praying to Mary (or other saints) as mediators is meaningless and contradicts the teaching of Christ and the examples of scores of men and women of the Bible.

A CORRECT PERSPECTIVE ON MARY

If you walk into any Catholic cathedral, you will see numerous statues and paintings venerating an image that is supposed to be the mother of Jesus (though probably bearing little resemblance to a first-century Jewish woman). Currently there are four Marian dogmas in Catholic theology (see the infographic on page 29), and there is currently a movement to add a fifth: Mary as co-redemptrix (the belief that she has a role with Jesus in the redemption of humanity).

But if you study Mary in the Bible, you won't find the same emphasis or any hint of her being prayed to. You will find a godly woman who was blessed to be chosen to carry the Christ in her womb—despite needing a Savior from her own sins. You will find a woman who had other children after she gave birth to Jesus. You will find a woman who had to witness the brutal beating and execution of her firstborn Son, Jesus.

You will find a woman who continued to be a dedicated pillar in the early Church. Though the Bible does not give details, there is no indication that she did not continue to be faithful for the rest of her life. She eventually died and now awaits the resurrection.

At one point in His ministry, a woman interrupted Jesus with a statement about how blessed His mother was to bear Him (Luke 11:27). Jesus' response was, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (verse 28).

Instead of praying to or venerating Mary, follow her example of lifelong dedication to *hearing the Word of God and keeping it!* **D**

RELATED READING

To learn more, read "[The Real Mary](#)" and "[Should We Pray to Saints?](#)" on [LifeHopeandTruth.com](#).

Escaping Gustave

The danger lurking in the Ruzizi River is an apt metaphor for an even more deadly foe we all face.

■ AS I WRITE HERE IN BUJUMBURA, the capital of Burundi in east-central Africa, I can see out of my window the deceptively small-looking Lake Tanganyika, filling part of the great African rift. This deep lake holds almost 20 percent of the world's fresh water. Beyond it, the mountains of the eastern Congo darken the horizon. Just a few miles toward the border, the Ruzizi River empties into Lake Tanganyika. Along the Ruzizi, I've seen hippopotami and a plethora of amazing tropical birds.

Man-eater

The river is also the den of a darker denizen. His name is Gustave. He's one of the largest Nile crocodiles ever encountered. Estimates of his length surpass 20 feet (6 meters), and he could literally weigh a ton (900 kilograms).

Villagers living near the river are understandably terrified of him, because he is said to have killed as many as 300 people! Whenever he is sighted, warnings are announced on local radio stations. If a big crocodile snaps his jaws shut on a person, it's almost certainly going to be fatal. The victim is dragged under the water to drown. A few people have escaped a crocodile by striking it on the snout or stabbing at its eyes, but once he has a grip, odds of escape are very poor.

Defending against crocs

The only good defense against a large crocodile is to avoid the places he might be. Crocodiles can attack from underwater. We may not see them, but they can see us. My wife learned this on the banks of the Zambezi, when she was rinsing her hands. I suggested she not take too long. "There could be a croc there," I warned. She thought I was joking until she saw the wide eyes and nod of our guide. She didn't linger. ...

I've learned when in crocodile country not to loiter at the water's edge. A safe distance is 15 feet (5 meters) or more. One shouldn't lean over water from a boat, tree or river bank, since under certain circumstances a crocodile can launch almost its entire body length above the surface to snatch prey.

There are other safety guidelines. When it comes to crocodiles, prevention is certainly better than cure.

When sin is like a crocodile

The Bible encourages us to treat sin, the transgression of God's law, rather like a large crocodile: to avoid situations where it might take us by surprise. God warned Cain: "And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door" (Genesis 4:7). Sin lurks like a deadly beast, waiting to strike if we give it the opportunity.

When I walk in crocodile zones, I'm always aware of the water's edge. Sometimes I go through a "what if" exercise: What if there was a croc here or over there? So should we do in our spiritual lives: What sin could lie at *this* door? "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished" (Proverbs 22:3).

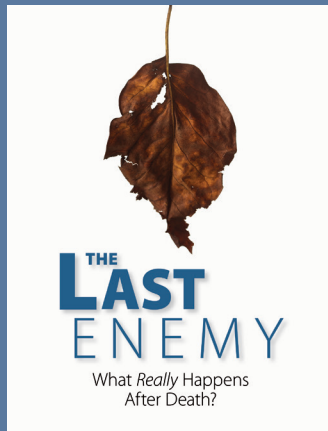
James wrote: "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:14-15). We are to be alert to our spiritual surroundings and remain focused to avoid being taken unaware. We must be conscious of our own proclivities, giving a wide berth to situations that might lead us into temptation.

To remain observant and cautious about our environment and our own inclinations is crucial. Keeping a respectful distance is the only way to escape Gustave.

—Joel Meeker
@JoelMeeker



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