

# THE TORAH CODE

THE SYMBOLS OF YAHWEH

Volume 2: Studies in Contrast

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## Studies in Contrast

To a follower of any big religion today, this truth may sound like blasphemy: God is *not* inclusive, broad-minded, or universalist in His outlook. On the contrary, He's all about division, separation, and *contrast*. His path is exclusive, narrow-minded, uncompromising. God's way is set in sharp contrast with—it *excludes*—every conceivable alternative.

Don't take this the wrong way. The Kingdom of God is *accessible* to anyone who really wants to be a citizen. But there's a catch, of sorts. Think of it like taking a trip "home" on an airplane. The ticket for your flight is really expensive, much more than you can afford. But your Father has already paid the fare, and He's eagerly awaiting your arrival. But there's still something between you and the airplane. You can't get anywhere near it unless you go through a security check. This is where "exclusive" enters the picture. Getting on the airplane is the *exclusive* privilege of those who choose to submit to the airport rules—the baggage check, the metal detector, whatever. No one will force you to go through the security procedure—it's your privilege to refuse to submit to it. But even with a valid ticket in your possession, you can't get on the airplane if you do refuse. A contrast is thus drawn between those who choose to keep the rules and those who choose not to. But it's neither your Father nor the aviation authorities who place you in one group or another—it's you yourself.

Or think of heaven as a big party at God's house, and the whole world is invited. Although the *invitation* is universal and inclusive, admission to the party is not: you're only welcome if you enter His house through the front door, because that's where the Host is passing out a "garment of righteousness" to everyone who attends: it's a costume party. So sneaking in through the garage butt naked will get you thrown out, and it won't even work to put on a disguise and use the servants' entrance. Yahweh draws a clear line of division, contrasting those who've entered legitimately from those who try to crash the party. But since everyone is invited, the only possible reason someone would want to sneak in is that they don't want to "put on" the imputed righteousness—virtue the guest didn't actually earn—that the Host is providing. Again, it's completely your choice—God won't compel your attendance or force you to wear this "garment of light." But the fact remains: you can't get into the party without it.

A third example of exclusivity in an ostensibly inclusive environment: America has an extensive system of Interstate Highways that are freely available

to “everyone.” But even here there are restrictions and caveats. You must be in a properly registered vehicle of the correct type (so leave your bicycle or roller skates at home). The operator of this vehicle must have been granted a license to drive it. He must enter and exit the highway only at authorized on- and off-ramps—he may not simply crash through the bushes and get on wherever he pleases. And once on the highway, he must comply with any number of traffic laws. Again, a division—a *contrast*—is implied, separating those who choose to use the road properly from those who do not. Although the highway is meant for everyone’s benefit, it is, in fact, restricted by law to those who elect to abide by the rules of the road.

So although Yahweh has provided redemption and reconciliation for all mankind, we should not be shocked or dismayed to discover that He won’t force us to accept it, nor will He give it to *everybody* without any conditions whatsoever. His offer of salvation is indeed inclusive, but its acceptance is *exclusive* to those who choose to “play by His rules” by honoring His word. That’s why Yahshua declared, **“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”** (Matthew 7:13-14) There it is again: separation. On the one hand, destruction awaits; on the other, life. And the choice is ours to make between these two paths.

There is therefore something fundamentally wrong with a religious organization calling itself “Catholic,” a word the dictionary defines as “broad or wide-ranging in tastes, interests, or the like; having sympathies with all; broad-minded; liberal; universal in extent; involving all; of interest to all.” That’s actually a perfect description of the “wide gate” and “easy way” that Yahshua warned us to avoid—the way that leads to destruction.

Likewise, the Protestant Christian who espouses an “Onward Christian Soldiers” mentality has missed the point: Yahweh is opposed to forcing anyone into His kingdom. (It can’t be done, in point of fact.) Rather, He made us as creatures of free will: He invites us all to join Him, but He compels no one. Free will, then, separates those who choose Yahweh’s path from those who decline to do so. This separation is a condition known as “holiness”—being voluntarily set apart to Yahweh, set apart from the world that rejects Him.

When Yahshua advised us to “Enter by the narrow gate,” He was emphasizing that the choice of the matter is ours to make. So there is also something fatally flawed about a faith whose supreme goal is to suppress choice—to forcibly subjugate all of mankind under its banner. That was Muhammad’s aspiration: Islam’s very name means “submission.” Its scripture states, “Fight them till all opposition ends and the only religion is Islam.” (*Qur’an* 8:39) It’s founder said, “I

have been ordered to fight the people till they say, ‘None has the right to be worshipped but Allah’” (*The Hadith of al-Bukhari*).

The Hindu religion is therefore just as misguided as the others when it insists that God is in everything, and vice versa, for that would tend to make our choices concerning Him—whether for or against—rather pointless. But the Hindu *Purana* declares (somewhat illogically), “It should be the assiduous endeavour of wise men to attain unto God. He dwelleth eternally in all beings and all things dwell in him.... He is universal soul; all the interstices of the universe are filled up by him; he is one with all good qualities, and all created beings are endowed with a small portion of his individuality.” This universal, inclusive view of God’s nature is actually the antithesis of His holiness—the concept of Yahweh being separate and distinct from His own creation.

I find it significant that God’s process of division and separation goes all the way back to the very beginning, to the creation account. **“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day. Then God said, ‘Let there be a firmament [or expanse] in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.’ Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day. Then God said, ‘Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear’; and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas. And God saw that it was good.”** (Genesis 1:3-10) However He actually *did* it, God *describes* the process of making our world habitable as one of repeated division, of creating a series of contrasts between one thing and another—of light from darkness, water vapor from its liquid state, and the sea from the dry land. In the following verses, He would go on to extract life from inert matter, divide day from night, contrast light sources from those that merely reflect it, distinguish animal life from plants, make animal kinds different from one another, and finally, separate man from the animals by “breathing into his nostrils the breath of life”—which is, we’re told, tantamount to “making him in the image and likeness of God.”

Time after time in the creation account, then, we see division, separation, *contrasts* established by the hand of God. Moreover, every time we see a major partition achieved, God declares it “good.” In fact, when everything was finally split up to His satisfaction, He called it all “*very good*.” So why do the purveyors of popular religion these days reason that a “God of love” must necessarily be inclusive, with one-size-fits-all principles, shades-of-gray values, and a nebulous or non-existent moral code? Why do they think we’re all equally acceptable, no

matter what we do or say? It's because they insist that a loving God would reject no one, accommodate every belief, and welcome every lifestyle into the fold, 'cause that's what love is, right?

*No!* That's not love—it's neglect. It's the way lazy, self-absorbed, careless parents might raise their children: let them live on Skittles and Mountain Dew, because they prefer the taste of those "foods" to meat, vegetables, fruit, milk, and grain. Let them stay up all night watching television, because they like it and it keeps them occupied. Let them ignore their chores, schoolwork, and personal hygiene, 'cause they'd rather play. Don't make them get vaccinated, because shots hurt. Indulge every whim. Hold no principles. Offer no direction. Never say no. There's a word for a parent who operates like this: *unfit*. It's child abuse, pure and simple. And it's the antithesis of love.

The God of the Bible, on the other hand, has standards. He issues instructions. He rewards compliance and chastises rebellion. These standards, by definition, are *divisive*: they separate us into two groups—those who adhere to them (that is, those who recognize God's authority and therefore comply as best they can) and those who do not. It's not that Yahweh *likes* the exclusion that our sin brings into the world. I'm sure He'd prefer it if we were all on the same side of the equation: **"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"** (Psalm 133:1) **"The Lord is...patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."** (II Peter 3:9) But division is what naturally happens when free will is bestowed upon fallen men: the privilege of choice presupposes the possibility of choosing poorly.

Freedom, as we have seen, isn't a free-for-all. We need to get a handle on the difference between liberty and license. Liberty—free will, the privilege of choice—is bestowed upon us by God because He cares about our welfare. He wants us to grow, "increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." He wants us to experience the consequences of our actions (both positive and negative), so we can learn from our mistakes. License springs from precisely the opposite motivation: it is granted (or advocated) by one who doesn't give a flying fig about you or the outcome of your choice one way or another.

But *both* license and liberty are perceived to be the opposite of force; they're the converse of compulsion. Satan's first instinct is to try to exercise control over us—to dominate us, oppress us, and force us to submit. But he knows he's more likely to fool some people with a well crafted counterfeit than with a blatant fraud, and let's face it: license looks far more like liberty than it does top-down control, so people have a tendency to confuse the two things. Liberty, however, leads to abundant life, confidence, and the prospect of prosperity—while license leads to anarchy, dissipation, and low self-esteem. The bottom line: an all-inclusive god, a god without standards, values, or even opinions, would be a

purveyor of license, not of liberty. This hypothetical one-size-fits-all god is the invention of someone whose only agenda is to obfuscate Yahweh's concern for the ultimate welfare of mankind. In short, a god without standards is a myth.

A *loving* God, then, provides liberty, but not license. So theoretically, the only way a loving God could have saved *everyone*—the only way He could have achieved perfect inclusion—is for Him to have withheld the privilege of choice. With no free will, He could have *forced* everyone to “dwell in unity.” But this approach is fundamentally flawed because love *requires* choice: “love” that’s forced isn’t love at all, but something else. Real love is fundamentally different from obedience, compliance, or loyalty. It can’t be compelled, bought, stolen, held for ransom, or even manufactured; it can only be earned. Love can’t be sold or bartered; it can only be given away. Force might manifest itself in peaceful coexistence, good behavior, or societal restraint, but none of that is love. Love is shown when I help my neighbor because I perceive a need and spontaneously reach out to him. But if someone forces me to help him, I have not shown him love; I’ve merely bowed to external pressure. The victim of a mugging has not shown love to his assailant, no matter how badly the thief needed the money. Likewise, the taxpayer has not shown love to the welfare recipient (nor to the bureaucrat who took his cut off the top). Why? Because there was no *choice* involved. Whether robbed violently on the street, or “nicely” through polite, legal means, the “giver” hasn’t shown love to the taker. He has only bowed to coercion. In fact, he *couldn’t* show love under these circumstances even if he wanted to. The “robber” has taken not only his money and his security, he has also stolen (in some measure) victim’s *ability* to tangibly show his love to others.

In the same way, neither a god who forced our compliance nor one who made compliance impossible by asking nothing of us (i.e., the all-inclusive god of popular religious myth) could be a God of love. As I said, love requires choice. Think about it: the capacity to love implies the capacity *not* to love. If the object of God’s affection cannot reject Him, then accepting Him is a meaningless concept. Refusing to believe in an all-inclusive god is like refusing to believe in the tooth fairy. There are no consequences. Such a god must by definition suffer fools and wise men alike. He must reward (or at least tolerate) even those who despise and attack him. That’s the most immoral, unjust situation I can imagine.

Enough of this nonsense. Let us consider what Yahweh, through the pen of John, revealed about Himself: **“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”** (I John 4:7-8) If God is love, and love requires choice, then God is asking us to make a choice: to love Him or not—that is, to either reciprocate His love or choose not to. But how can we show love to a God who is not physically, corporeally present among us? While you ponder that,

consider this: Yahweh is said to be perfect and complete within Himself, which implies that He has no “needs” that we can unilaterally reach out to meet. But does He? Think about it. If His character is love, then it is in His nature to reach out to *us*—to mankind. Therefore, in order to stay in character, God “needs” to meet *our* needs. So John observes, **“If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.... If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.”** (I John 4:11-12) We can thus show our love to God by meeting the needs of our fellow man—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Doing so, however, requires conscious choice on our part. It is contrary to our fallen nature to love others as we do ourselves. Our natural inclination is to look out for number one—defined in ever widening circles of personal experience: first me, then my family, then my social group, then my nation, and so forth. We defend to the bitter end that which we perceive to be ours, not understanding that it *isn't* ours, not really. In truth, everything we are and everything we have are byproducts of Yahweh's love. So if we were thinking clearly, we would defend *Yahweh's* Kingdom and pursue *Yahweh's* agenda, not our own, because in the end, that's where our interests really lie. But make no mistake: choosing such a course of action is a divisive act. It will separate us from those who have not made this choice, or worse, have proactively chosen to serve another god.

Yahshua spoke of this division and His own role in causing it: **“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter.”** (Luke 12:49-53) A parallel passage in Matthew states: **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”** (Matthew 10:34-39) Yahshua not only states that there will be division, He declares that He Himself will be its cause. This isn't the wishy-washy all-inclusive Christ of popular myth. He is, rather, the point of controversy, the bone of contention. The issue is His identity: is He, or is He not, the Messiah, God's anointed—the one and only Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?

Most of the world contends that He is not, not really. Depending on who you're talking to, they'll tell you that Yahshua (they'll call Him Jesus, of course) was the founder of a new religion, a great moral teacher, or a charismatic spiritual



innovator who got Himself executed for his trouble. Muslims are taught that He was a prophet second only to Muhammad (odd, considering they disagreed about *everything*). Jews (expecting a conquering King) contend that His crucifixion (at their hands) proves He was a false Messiah. Hindus tend to see Him only as a supreme model of humankind—one to be imitated and referred to (again, odd, because He was executed as a common criminal). Buddhists have toyed with the idea that He could have been a *bodhisattva*, one of those rare beings committed to the redemption of all life. The Baha'i Faith considers Jesus to have been a manifestation of God—one of several. But Sikhs opine that He could not have been God because He had a human body. Catholics insist He *was* God, but they have trouble with the concept that His death could completely atone for one's sins—His sacrifice is deemed insufficient: it needs a little help in the form of alms and penance and intervention from saints. Many Protestants, despite their denominations' official doctrinal positions, act as if Jesus is more or less irrelevant—preferring to pursue a “social gospel” of charitable works and political correctness. And atheists, unwilling to admit the possibility of God's existence, think everybody else is deluded and naïve. (Oh, and by the way, if there is no God, there is no such thing as sin, either. Convenient, no? That means that for them, there is only one real rule in life: don't get caught.)

But some of us (comparatively few, it appears) believe, accept, and rely upon the premise that Yahshua (a.k.a. Jesus) was Yahweh's sole solution to the problem of mankind's estrangement from Him. At the very least, we believe the historical record of the Gospels—that Yahshua was God who came in the form of a man, that He lived a sinless life, that He died voluntarily to atone for our sins, and that He rose from the dead under His own power on the third day, proving His deity. Most of us never really get very far beyond this baseline faith—I know *I* didn't for the first quarter century or so of my Christian walk. The Spirit dwelling within me gave me no reason to doubt that the relationship I enjoyed with my God was real, although I was hard pressed to enumerate the “how” or “why” of it to people outside of my comfortable cultural circle. In short, I was the product of my religious upbringing. I believed the tenets of my faith pretty much the same way a Muslim believes in his, or a Hindu, or a Jew, or even an atheist. I had no reason to challenge it.

It was a sobering epiphany for me, then, to realize that my Christianity was largely the result of having been born to Christian parents in Los Angeles, rather than to Muslim parents in Baghdad, Hindu parents in Delhi, or atheist parents in Moscow. What would I have believed if I had been raised in a different culture? I never really began to doubt my faith, you understand, but as I pondered this, I came to the conclusion that if my beliefs were based on something real, then the deeper I dug, the more solid the foundation would prove to be—and vice versa.

The “house” in which I had been living was the New Testament, but if Yahshua was right (see Matthew 7:24-27) this house would prove to be only as good as its foundation—the Hebrew scriptures: the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets. So I dug. I dug deep. I studied prophecy, and discovered that the correlation between what Yahweh had predicted and what actually happened was astonishingly accurate—far beyond the possibility of coincidence or conspiracy—especially in regard to the Messiah’s advent. But the real treasure trove of evidence (to my mind, anyway) was found in the Torah, the Law of Moses.

On the surface, the Torah looks like a compendium of rules, regulations, and rituals, many of which couldn’t be kept today even if we wanted to. And if we’re honest with ourselves, they appear at first to be the demands of a micro-managing control freak of a God. It’s no surprise that the Torah is studiously ignored by most Christians and twisted beyond recognition by our Jewish brothers. But when I began to look at what it all *meant*—when I looked at it not as a compendium of religious rules but as a presentation of prophetic symbolism—the whole thing began to make sense. In imagery that was as detailed as it was stunningly beautiful, Yahweh was explaining through His instructions to the newly liberated nation of Israel precisely what His plan for the redemption of mankind would entail. In terms that could still be clearly understood thousands of years later, He asked His chosen people to *act out*, as if on a stage, the most poignant drama one could possibly imagine. The Torah revealed the process through which He, the Creator of the universe, would redeem, reclaim, and reconcile to Himself the lost and dying object of His affection: us.

It may seem to you that I’m rambling. I’m not. I’m merely trying to explain how I finally came to realize what this *separation* under God’s plan—the counterintuitive division and lack of peace with the world’s system that Yahshua predicted—is all about. It can all be boiled down to one word: holiness. The Hebrew noun is *qodesh*, meaning apartness, sacredness, separateness, the state of being consecrated. It’s based on the verb *qadash*, which means to consecrate, sanctify, dedicate, to separate or *be* separate—set apart in honor. Because Yahweh is holy—separate from His creation, outside and beyond it—we who follow Him are to be holy as well: we are to keep ourselves set apart from the world, dedicated instead to Yahweh and His kingdom. Like oil on water, we who love Him cannot be assimilated by the world’s godless agenda; rather, nature demands that we rise above it, for we are in fact different, separate, disconnected from and incompatible with the world.

Let us then celebrate the contrasts God has revealed in His word. They can teach us something we all tend to forget: understanding the journey is necessary if we wish to appreciate the destination.

## CHAOS & ORDER



### *Progress vs. Completion*

As if to establish the mindset of God from the very outset, the scriptural record commences with these words: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form [*tohu*], and void [*bohu*]; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”** (Genesis 1:1-2) Beginning with only Himself in existence, Yahweh created time-space (the heavens) and matter-energy (the earth), but He went out of His way to let us know His creation process wasn’t “magical,” simplistic, accidental, or instantaneous. Rather, He began by making raw materials—disorganized, incomplete, inert, and chaotic—and only then, implementing “laws” of physics that had never before existed, He put them together methodically and precisely to build the universe we now inhabit, moving inexorably from conditions of formless dark emptiness to order, light, and life.

Part of me would like to be able to tell you that this is God’s unwavering *modus operandi*—and that He intends to continue working on His creation until He can call it all “very good.” But alas, He reached that point some time ago, and it should be obvious by now that we’ve lost ground since then. You’d have to be blind not to notice that the condition of our world has deteriorated somewhat from the status of “very good” God proclaimed before Adam’s rebellion. Yes, order and perfection, knowledge and abundant life are Yahweh’s ideals, and yes, those of us who choose to live in His love will one day find ourselves completed and perfected—we will no longer be the “works in progress” we are now. But scripture is quite clear: not everyone will attain that bright future. Some—*most*—of mankind will eventually revert back to the chaos from which God built them. This isn’t because Yahweh isn’t good, strong, or loving enough to achieve His will in the world; rather, it’s the result of His primary gift to us—free will. Some have chosen to reject Him; and as strange as it may sound, He honors that choice.

As if to make my point for me, the prophet Jeremiah uses the same phrase as in the Genesis passage (“without form and void”) to explain what he sees, but he’s not describing what you and I might expect: **“I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form [*tohu*] and void [*bohu*]; and to the heavens, and they had no light.”** (Jeremiah 4:23). Check the context: he’s not talking about the primeval world, but about Judah and their state of spiritual rebellion against Yahweh. *Tohu* is a

Hebrew noun meaning formlessness, confusion, unreality, nothingness, or a place of chaos. It's based on a verb meaning to waste. And the parallel noun *bohu* denotes an emptiness, void, desolation, lack of order, or total chaos. It's based on a root verb meaning to be empty. *Bohu* is used only three times in scripture, always in association with *tohu*. We've just seen two occurrences.

The third—like the Jeremiah passage—also describes judgment, utter desolation, and total waste, but this time the subject is Edom: **“And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it. He shall stretch [*natah*] the line of confusion [*tohu*] over it, and the plumb line of emptiness [*bohu*].”** (Isaiah 34:9-11) This looks bad, but it's even worse than it looks. The “line” is a measuring line, used for building something precisely according to plan. The “plumb line” too speaks of craftsmanship, of constructing a wall that's straight, true, and upright. So Yahweh is saying Edom won't simply be left to deteriorate, suffering the inevitable ravages of the second law of thermodynamics. No, God is purposely designing and crafting its “confusion and emptiness” with foresight, care, and precision. He is *planning* their waste and emptiness.

And who is “Edom?” In a literal, geographical sense, Edom is southern Jordan—it's still inhabited (sparsely), so this prophecy is yet to be literally fulfilled—which it will be during the un-battle of Armageddon (see Isaiah 63:1-4) if not before. But Edom is the territory of the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob, and this is where things get interesting, in a metaphorical and spiritual sense. Esau, you'll recall, was the firstborn son of Isaac, but he sold his birthright to his younger twin brother for a bowl of red stew (hence the epithet: Edom means “red”). In other words, he “despised his birthright.” As the firstborn son of Isaac, that “birthright” represents nothing less than the mantle of grace through faith—the legacy of Abraham. Time and again in scripture, Esau/Edom is upbraided for his (or its) self-sufficient arrogance, earning Esau the dubious distinction of being the only character in the Bible whom Yahweh ever said He *hated* (see Malachi 1:2-4, Romans 9:13).

So when Yahweh “stretches the line of confusion” over Esau/Edom, and when He “plumbs the line of its emptiness,” He is stating His intention to bring to nothing, to chaos and waste, those who follow in the spiritual footsteps of Esau. He is purposely condemning to emptiness people who “despise their birthright” of grace, those who arrogantly declare that they don't need God in order to attain heaven. Once again, I should stress that this isn't petty vindictiveness on the part of Yahweh, but rather the simple result of us choosing our destiny unwisely. Yahweh is the God of order, perfection, and completion; if we choose to ignore,

reject, or attack Him, we are in effect choosing chaos and dissipation—or something worse—for ourselves.

The word *tohu*—formless emptiness—is used twenty times in the Hebrew scriptures. It is first used to describe the reality of the unrealized primeval universe: **“He stretches out the north over the void [*tohu*] and hangs the earth on nothing.”** (Job 26:7) To Yahweh, even “nothing” is something to work with. It wasn’t until Sir Isaac Newton had his famous “apple epiphany” that we understood the significance of that second phrase. “Hanging the earth on nothing” is an amazingly astute description of the force of gravity. But what about that enigmatic first statement? To “stretch out” (Hebrew: *natah*, the same word used in the Isaiah 34 passage above) is to extend, to spread out, or to hold out. The word is used to describe pitching a tent or bending a bow: there is tension involved; energy is being utilized in a very controlled way. “The north” (Hebrew: *saphown*) is based on a verb (*saphan*) that means to hide, treasure, or store up. We can easily see the connection (once we know what we’re looking for) in verses like: **“His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King.”** (Psalm 48:2) Mount Zion is *in* Jerusalem, not far north of it, but it is definitely Yahweh’s special treasure. “North” here is a symbol of being hidden or stored up as something precious to Yahweh. And *tohu*, as we’ve seen, is empty space, formlessness.

All of you astro-physicists reading this can smell where I’m going with it, can’t you? Bearing in mind that I’m a graphic artist by trade, not a scientist, here’s what I’m thinking. Recent measurements have led cosmologists to believe that the stuff that comprises the universe is largely unknown. We can only *see* about 4% of it—a mere 0.4% consisting of stars and planets, and 3.6% being composed of intergalactic gasses and dust. Since the galaxies and galaxy clusters hold together in a measurable way, however, the scientists calculate that about 22% of the universe’s mass is something they’ve named “dark matter”—providing the gravitational pull required for this observed cohesion. But the space *between* these things is expanding—and contrary to all previous expectations, the rate of expansion is actually accelerating. This cosmic expansion has led these scientists to postulate that a full 74% of the universe is composed of a mysterious force they call “dark energy.” This is calculated to be very homogeneous (spread uniformly throughout empty space), having a very low density ( $10^{-29}$  grams per cubic centimeter), and exhibiting “negative pressure” (that is, it acts repulsively), enabling it to expand the boundaries of the universe.

Physicists can only deal with what they can measure. God’s prophets, on the other hand, can report what is revealed to them, whether they understand it or not. What was it Job said? **“He stretches out the north over the void.”** Translated more fully: “Yahweh extends, holds in place, and stretches or spreads out His hidden

treasure over empty, formless space.” Gee, it sounds to me like Job, a God-fearing sheep rancher who lived some four thousand years ago, described “dark energy” quite well. But there’s something about this that should give us all pause. Yahweh’s intended pattern is to move from chaos to order, from progress to completion. Note that (in Job’s words) chaos—*tohu*—is still part of the formula describing the physical reality of the universe as God has made it. But when progress eventually gives way to perfection under Yahweh’s guidance, the physical universe as we know it (or think we know it) will have been rendered obsolete.

Yahweh designed and built the universe for mortal beings with finite life spans. (That’s right: I *don’t* think it was all just a big cosmic accident.) But there will come a time when none of His children will inhabit mortal bodies any longer, and at that time, He plans to give the universe a makeover. Peter put it this way: **“The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”** There’s a moral to the story, of course. **“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!”** Dissolve? Melt? Burn? Yep. We’re not going to be living according to the restraints of the electromagnetic field, the strong and weak nuclear forces, and the law of gravity any longer. Kiss the rules of physics, quantum mechanics, and thermodynamics goodbye. Yahweh has a whole new paradigm in store for us. **“But according to His promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”** (II Peter 3:10-13)

The Psalmist, not to be outdone, put the same truths in these terms: **“Of old You [Yahweh] laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but You are the same, and Your years have no end. The children of Your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you.”** (Psalm 102:25-28) The contrast being drawn here is between a universe that’s perishing—wearing out, changing, and passing away (a solid scientific principle, by the way: the inevitable end result of the Second Law of Thermodynamics)—and a new one that’s as permanent and perfect as the One who built it: endless, secure, and established. That last characteristic, being “established” (Hebrew: *kun*) is significant. We’ll dig deeper into that one in a moment: it’s sort of the antithesis of *tohu*.

This chaos under which we now live may seem inconvenient and counterproductive, but in a twisted sort of way, I see in it evidence of God’s mercy. Satan, as we have seen, is most comfortable imposing top-down control.

Forcing people to submit is his idea of success, and given an inch, he'll take a mile. It is said that power corrupts. As an American, I always cringe when one party or the other has uncontested control of both the White House and Capitol Hill at the same time. This kind of concentrated power is a situation that breeds all sorts of mischief. It's even worse, of course, in nations that have no pretense of governmental restraint. We'd all end up living in permanent lockdown, slaves to those who hold the reins of power, except for one thing: **"He [Yahweh] takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth and makes them wander in a pathless waste [tohu]. They grope in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man."** (Job 12:24-25) I, for one, thank God our leaders don't seem to be able to tie their own shoes sometimes. If, while remaining rebellious of Yahweh's precepts, they had the understanding and vision needed to actually achieve their self-centered goals, they'd really be dangerous. But as it stands, **"All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are accounted by Him as less than nothing and emptiness [tohu]."** (Isaiah 40:17)

That being said, I'd rather see the proactive hand of God in my life than the mere ineffectiveness of evil men and the frustration of their evil plans. Israel is (or at least, was supposed to be) the poster child for Yahweh's blessing, rescued from emptiness: **"Yahweh's portion is His people, Jacob His allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste [tohu] of the wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of His eye."** (Deuteronomy 32:10) But the chaos of living in the physical world can and does revisit those who refuse to put Yahweh first in their lives—even those as privileged as Israel. So He admonishes us: **"Do not turn aside after empty things [tohu] that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty [tohu]."** (I Samuel 12:21) Speaking of the idolatrous "counselors" of Israel, those "chiefs of the people" who "grobe and stagger in the dark," Isaiah concludes, **"Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty [tohu] wind."** (Isaiah 41:29) Not only are their idols *tohu*, they themselves are as well: **"All who fashion idols are nothing [tohu], and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame."** (Isaiah 44:9)

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Well, that's all pretty depressing, I must say, since the purveyors of chaos are running the show at the moment. But take heart: this is a study in *contrasts*, remember? What did Yahweh contrast against *tohu* and *bohu*? What's the alternative to chaos and emptiness, that state we'll leave behind as we walk with Yahweh? God states His intentions through the prophet Isaiah: **"For thus says Yahweh, who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it (He established [kun] it; He did not create it empty [tohu]; He formed it to be inhabited!): 'I**

am Yahweh, and there is no other.' I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek Me in vain.' I, Yahweh, speak the truth; I declare what is right." (Isaiah 45:18-19) The emptiness, darkness, lifelessness, and hopelessness that characterized our world in its primeval (or idolatrous) state are set in sharp relief to that which Yahweh is in the process of accomplishing before our eyes: it will be established, inhabited, and filled with truth and righteousness.

The word translated "established" here is the Hebrew verb *kun*. It means to form or fashion; to establish, put in order, or set in place; to make (or be) firm, fixed, or stable; so by implication, it means to ready oneself, appoint, prepare, or be steadfast. *Kun* is thus more or less the opposite of *tohu*. Words derived from this root include *ken* (right or true), *makon* (place), and *mekona* (base). There is order and purpose in the *kun* concept, a sense of design and intentionality. And this—not chaos and anarchy—is the place toward which Yahweh wants to lead us. But please note: the tenor of the concept is one of natural stability and equilibrium, not mere orderliness and structure (the result of brute force having been brought to bear).

The first clue we have as to Yahweh's agenda of order and stability is the transformation He wrought upon the chaos of the primeval world. David, not remotely as aware as we are of the intricate state of balance demonstrated at every level of God's creation, nevertheless came to the logical conclusion: in light of Yahweh's awesome creative power, man has no right to be prideful. **"When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place [*kun*], what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him?"** (Psalm 8:3-4) Another Psalm of David (this one recorded in the Chronicles) continues the theme of praising Yahweh for His awesome accomplishments: **"Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due His name; bring an offering and come before Him! Worship Yahweh in the splendor of holiness; tremble before Him, all the earth; yes, the world is established [*kun*]; it shall never be moved. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, 'Yahweh reigns!'"** (I Chronicles 16:29-31) The word for "world" here is not the usual *eretz*—the land, ground, or earth. It's *tebel*, denoting the habitable part of the world, or those who inhabit it. David isn't saying we'll never have earthquakes, nor is he denying what Peter said about the world someday being undone. He's saying, "Mankind will always have a home under Yahweh's reign." It's basically the same thing Yahweh promised Noah: **"I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."** (Genesis 8:21-22) Yahweh has established the earth as our home for as long as we need it.



Time and again in scripture, we see Yahweh actively involved in this process of “establishing.” For example, Joseph recognized the significance of Yahweh having shown Pharaoh *two* dreams that meant the same thing: **“The doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed [*kun*] by God, and God will shortly bring it about.”** (Genesis 41:32) There are a plethora of last-days prophetic concepts that Yahweh has revealed not just twice, but *dozens* of different ways. Undoubtedly the most oft-repeated of these is the eventual spiritual (not to mention physical) restoration of the nation of Israel. Yahweh has gone out of His way to show us this information in excruciating detail—the wars, the players, the tragedy, and the triumph. For one of us to flippantly assume that the matter—and manner—of His coming are not firmly “established” is utter foolishness.

On their way out of Egypt, Israel witnessed a series of jaw-dropping signs and wonders, prompting Moses to wax poetic—zeroing in on the symbolic purpose for their “change of address.” **“You will bring them in and plant them on Your own mountain, the place, O Yahweh, which You have made for Your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established [*kun*].”** (Exodus 15:17) No longer were they to dwell in the uncertainty of bondage in the world; they were headed toward the “Mountain of Yahweh,” that is, the place of His power and authority. The “sanctuary” that God’s hands had established would be physically manifested in the Tabernacle—a comprehensive, multi-faceted symbol explaining (for those with eyes to see it) the plan of God for our redemption. There was nothing chaotic or accidental about the way Yahweh determined to achieve our redemption and reconciliation: from the very beginning, it was *kun*—established.

Yahweh’s later admonition reinforces this fact: **“Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared [*kun*]. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for My name is in him.”** (Exodus 23:20-21) Remember the broad definition of *kun*. The promised land was not a random destination: it had been formed, fashioned, prepared, and established specifically for the children of Israel. But in the larger, symbolic sense, the Land represents our walk in the Messiah’s grace—it’s a gift, but there are still battles to be fought there. This too has been formed, set in place, and fixed in position purposely through Yahweh’s plan of redemption. And the “angel” who “guards us on the way” and brings us into the place/state God has established, is, in the end, the Messiah Himself: Yahshua—of whom it can literally be said that Yahweh’s “name is in Him,” since “Yahshua” *means* Yahweh is Salvation. And what is the “transgression” that God’s messenger will not pardon? In the broad sense, it is refusal to enter “the place that Yahweh has prepared,” the promised land of imputed righteousness.

David was told the same thing, though in radically different terms: **“Moreover, Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled**

and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish [*kun*] His kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish [*kun*] the throne of His kingdom forever.” (II Samuel 7:11-13) The literal offspring of David being spoken of—his physical descendant—would be Yahshua of Nazareth. But is His throne and kingdom *established*? Jews or Romans might say, “Well, no: we succeeded in killing him, so apparently it’s not.” We in His called-out assembly would counter, “Yes, but He rose from the dead on the third day, as the scriptures required—proving He was God’s Passover Lamb, whose sacrifice keeps death at bay for those whose faith is counted as obedience to Yahweh’s commandments. So although His visible kingdom is a prophecy yet to be revealed, it’s a living reality today in our hearts.” The question, then, becomes: *Who do you trust, Yahweh or your own eyes?* As for me, I’ll take Yahweh’s word for it—my eyes betray me all the time. The “messenger” of Exodus 23 is the *same Person* as the coming King in II Samuel 7. The “place that I have prepared” is the *same kingdom* that Yahweh vowed to establish. And the “sanctuary” that Yahweh’s hands established in the Exodus 15 passage is the *same place* as the “house for My name” that the Son of David is building.

The Messiah’s kingdom, throne, and sanctuary, then, are being *established* by Yahweh. They’re being (to reprise the definition of *kun*) formed, fashioned, established, put in order, set in place, made firm, fixed, and stable—they are appointed, prepared, and made steadfast by Yahweh Himself (or should I say, “Yahweh: Himself”). But what about us—we who choose to follow and trust Him? Because He counts us as righteous, we are established as well: **“Yahweh judges the peoples; judge me, O Yahweh, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. Oh, let the evil of the wicked come to an end, and may You establish [*kun*] the righteous—You who test the minds and hearts, O righteous God!”** (Psalm 7:8-9) Judgment isn’t necessarily condemnation. It implies, rather, a separation, a contrast drawn between the guilty and the innocent. Of course, the distinction may seem academic, since we’re all guilty before God. But something beyond our own shortcomings is in view here, allowing the Psalmist to make some ridiculous requests. He asks God do judge him according to *his* righteousness, the integrity that is in *him*. Huh? The Psalmist here is David, whom by his own admission was an adulterous, murdering scalawag (who nevertheless loved and honored Yahweh with a whole heart). Any “integrity” or “righteousness” David had was *given to him* by God—not earned by his own merit. His integrity was precisely the same kind that Abraham had possessed: **“He believed Yahweh, and He counted it to him as righteousness.”** (Genesis 15:6)

There is therefore a choice to be made: to believe Yahweh—that is, to trust Him and rely upon His word—or not. That is God’s basis for judgment or separation—not our good behavior, for we all misbehave on occasion; not our alms, or penance, or piety, or knowledge, or our success at adhering to the

Torah's precepts—though these are all good things and worthy goals. The bottom line is that we can be established because Yahweh is established; we can move from *tohu*—confusion, unreality, nothingness, and chaos—to *kun*: a state of order and stability. But the choice is ours to make. Again, David describes the contrast: **"The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins; their cities You rooted out; the very memory of them has perished. But Yahweh sits enthroned forever; He has established [*kun*] His throne for justice, and He judges the world with righteousness; He judges the peoples with uprightness."** (Psalm 9:6-8)

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There's another Hebrew word that can further help us understand the alternative to *tohu* (chaos and confusion) that Yahweh would like us to enjoy. *'Arak* is often used to describe a battle formation, but it has nothing to do with warfare *per se*. It's a verb meaning to arrange, put in order, place in position, array into formation, prepare, or ordain. It can also suggest side-by-side comparison or contrast, as in, **"To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare [*'arak*] with him?"** (Isaiah 40:18) People who would like to "place God in a box," to relegate Him to some position other than center stage in their lives, would do well to heed these words. Yahweh is the Arranger, not the arrangee.

A look at some of the non-military usages of the word may help us get a better handle on what God thinks of order, preparation, and organization. We see the concept underlying one of the most important "dress rehearsals" in the entire Bible: **"When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order [*'arak*] and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood."** (Genesis 22:9) Considering what the almost-sacrifice of Isaac was meant to prophesy—the crucifixion of the Messiah—we are being told something significant about Yahweh's mindset here. The whole procedure was orderly and methodical. It was done according to plan. Abraham acted in deliberate obedience to Yahweh, and Isaac (who knew exactly what was going on and was old enough and strong enough to fight or flee) allowed his father to do whatever their God had asked. I'm of the opinion that both of them were convinced Yahweh would raise Isaac from the dead, for he was the child of promise—and they both *believed* the promise. All of this serves to inform us that the plan of God for our redemption was also arranged, planned, and placed purposely piece by piece into its position in history. The sacrifice of Yahshua the Messiah was purposeful, planned in every detail, and executed precisely on schedule. Neither Satan nor the Romans nor the Jewish religious leaders had done anything that Yahweh hadn't foreseen, prophesied, and placed in motion millennia before it happened. Nothing surprises Yahweh.

Another window into the mindset of God: **“You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend [‘arak] it from evening to morning before Yahweh. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel.”** (Exodus 27:20-21) Every element of the tabernacle’s design, from its rituals down to its dimensions, construction materials, and sacrificial elements, was symbolic of some facet or another of Yahweh’s plan for our redemption. The seven-branched golden lampstand is no exception. We’ll discuss its symbology in detail in a future chapter. For now, I just want to point out that the priests’ role concerning it was to mirror Yahweh’s involvement: they were to “tend” the lamp regularly and faithfully. Just as Yahweh takes a hands-on role in the process of our enlightenment—supplying His Spirit to light our way in the world, we are to order or arrange this light to provide illumination to the people around us.

As if to make my point for me, King David’s last words included this prophecy, describing the character of his own descendant, the Messiah, who would one day rule on his throne: **“The Spirit of Yahweh speaks by me; His word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, He dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.”** Unfortunately, I can’t think of a single politician whom I’d describe like that. But that’s all about to change. **“For does not my house stand so with God? For He has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered [‘arak] in all things and secure. For will He not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?”** (II Samuel 23:2-5) Once again, we see that Yahweh is all about order, preparation, and security—the antithesis of *tohu*’s confusion. This time, the covenant He made with David is what’s described as *‘arak*. That covenant guarantees that Yahshua will reign on the throne of David forever. Have patience: it won’t be long now. Soon the world will find itself ruled with a scepter of iron by the Rock of Israel Himself, the Son of God—the son of David. Note that the “help” that Yahweh will “cause to prosper” is the Hebrew noun *yesha*, meaning deliverance, salvation, rescue, safety, victory, or welfare. *Yesha* is a component of the Messiah’s name, Yahshua, which means “Yahweh is *yesha*.”

While we’re on the subject of names, note that the name “David” means *love*. So the throne of David is (in God’s language) the “throne of love.” It can be a revealing exercise to mentally substitute “love” for the personal pronouns “I” and “me” in Psalms where David is referring to his own experiences or insights. For example, **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare [‘arak] a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the**

**house of Yahweh forever.”** (Psalm 23:4-6) We haven’t left the subject of contrasting the world’s chaos with God’s order. David knew what it was to deal with chaos. He had been a shepherd in his youth, and he knew that there’s nothing quite as chaotic as a flock of sheep left to their own devices, especially in times of danger or distress. And realizing that men are just as apt to go astray, he compared *himself* to a sheep in this Psalm: **“Yahweh is my shepherd.”**

Just as a good shepherd finds pasture and water for his flocks, Yahweh “prepares a table before us.” He arranges it [ *‘arak*] so that we’re well provided for, no matter what we need—sustenance, shelter, peace, or rescue. If we’re His sheep, He doesn’t leave us in chaos, even when the wolves begin to circle. But Christians sometimes act as if they think God needs *our* help: He doesn’t seem to be able to make ends meet, so we feel we have to “bail Him out” with our alms. His salvation isn’t quite enough to get the job done, so we supplement His provision with penance—guilt and good works. We don’t really trust him, so we try to fight off enemies in our own strength—only to find that we’re no better at fighting off wolves than sheep are. That’s not what God has planned for us.

But as Yahshua put it, **“He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.”** That’s chaos, *tohu*, the world’s system. Order, on the other hand, is the result of God’s care for us: **“But He who enters by the door is the Shepherd of the sheep. To Him the gatekeeper opens.”** He’s speaking of Himself. **“The sheep hear His voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice.”** It’s amazing to me how often we sheep try to tell the Shepherd where to go. **“A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers....”** And why can we recognize His voice? It’s because we’ve grown accustomed to hearing it, through time spent in intimate fellowship. **“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”** (John 10:1-15) The moral of the story for the sheep: live within the Good Shepherd’s order, or risk being devoured by chaos.

## DARKNESS & LIGHT



### *Questions vs. Answers*

In a way, the scriptural contrast between darkness and light is equivalent—or at least parallel—to what we just examined, the movement from chaos toward order. Indeed, the condition that accompanied the formlessness and emptiness (*tohu* and *bohu*) of the initial creation was darkness. So the first thing Yahweh addressed in His shaping of the primeval universe for our benefit was the creation of light. **“God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.”** The very first event in God’s process of separation—read: *holiness*—was that of light from darkness. **“God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.”** (Genesis 1:3-5)

Since God went to all the trouble to define His terms, so should we. “Day” is the word *yom*—which is just as broad in Hebrew as the English word we use to render it (a fact that has gotten many a Bible expositor into trouble). It’s based on an unused Hebrew root meaning “to be hot.” In actual usage, *yom* can mean (1) a 24-hour day, i.e., one revolution of the earth in relation to the sun, (2) the period of light, as opposed to nighttime, (3) a generalized period of time, such as a “day of trouble,” (4) a specific division of time, such as one’s work day or a day’s journey, and (5) a point in time. Thus to insist, as some do, that the six “days” of creation in Genesis 1 encompassed only six 24-hour earth days (the first two of which happened before our solar system was even formed), or that the “Day of the LORD” (correctly rendered “the Day of Yahweh”) must be accomplished in one solar day, are indefensible positions.

“Night” is the Hebrew *layil*, meaning nighttime as opposed to daytime; gloom or shadow—the lack of light. As we proceed, we’re going to see that “night” is used as a symbol for the condition of godlessness. For pagan sun-worshipping peoples, this was taken quite literally, and it was a serious problem. Their “god,” the sun, disappeared every night, conquered, as it were, by the darkness. The ninth plague of Egypt was three days of darkness—demonstrating to them that Yahweh was more powerful than the top deity in the Egyptian pantheon, Ra, the “sun god.” And the same thing will happen during the Tribulation, when darkness will fall upon the kingdom of the Antichrist (see Revelation 16:10—the fifth bowl judgment). Putting the symbol aside for a moment, we should note that Yahweh is

not “afraid of the dark.” He is master over the night as He is the day—darkness and light *both* are His creation. **“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to You; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with You.”** (Psalm 139:11-12) Yahweh, as I keep saying, is holy—He is separate, outside, *beyond* His own handiwork. Darkness, like chaos, is not a problem for our God, but merely a means to express where we were, so we might better understand where we can be. He teaches us through contrasts: without darkness, we wouldn’t recognize light when we saw it.

The word translated “darkness” is *choshek*—darkness, lack of light, obscurity, thus figuratively, terror, ignorance, sadness, confusion, or evil. A *yom choshek* (“day of darkness,” as in Job 15:23) is a time of distress. It is often characterized as a curse or judgment in scripture. For example: **“Give glory to Yahweh your God before He brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains, and while you look for light He turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness.”** (Jeremiah 13:16)

The terms “evening” and “morning” both refer to times of transition. “Evening” is *‘ereb*, based on the root verb (*‘arab*) meaning “to grow dark.” (I’m not making this stuff up, I swear.) It denotes sunset, evening, night—the time of the setting of the sun, of moving from a period of light to that of darkness. *Boqer*—“morning”—is just the opposite: it means the break of day, sunrise, the end of night. It’s based on a root verb (*baqar*) meaning to seek, enquire, consider, or reflect. So moving from *‘ereb* to *boqer* is a picture of the transition from chaos to order, of obscurity to enlightenment, of ignorance to answers. I think it’s a safe bet that this is the direction Yahweh wants to see us moving—out of darkness, into the light; out of ignorance, into understanding.

“Light,” by the way, is the Hebrew *‘owr*. This is the generalized word for light, regardless of its source—the sun (especially the dawn—sunrise), moon, stars, lamps, even lightning. Figuratively, it is applied to the “light” of life, health, happiness, prosperity, instruction, enlightened judgment, and to Yahweh Himself as Israel’s light source. It is no accident that light in scripture, as a symbol, is to be preferred over darkness. Nor is it accidental that the great counterfeit, our adversary who disguises himself as an “angel of light,” is called *helel* (light bearer, translated Lucifer) in the one place in scripture that “names” him (though it’s still more of a description than a name—Isaiah 14:12). It’s based on the versatile verb *halal*: to shine, praise, boast, or make a fool of oneself. It’s as if Yahweh is asking us to decide for ourselves what Satan’s name really means.

Back in Genesis, we see light coming into play again on the fourth “day” of creation: **“Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the firmament [i.e., expanse] of the heavens to divide the day from the night.’”** There we go again with the division of one thing from another: God is teaching us how to be holy. **“And let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the**

heavens to give light on the earth'; and it was so...." Here's another example of how precise Yahweh is in His communication to us—telling us exactly what we need to know while avoiding the falsehood and inaccuracy that permeates the texts of manmade religions. He says He put the lights *in* the expanse, and He told us how we were supposed to make use of them—to keep track of time in the short term (days), mid-term (seasons), and long term (years). But He didn't even hint that the "lights" were all there was to it. As I explained above, we've learned that what we can see in the night sky comprises only about four percent of what's actually out there. The rest is either dark matter or dark energy—something we can't see but know is there because of its effects on "light" objects we *can* see. (What was it Job said about Yahweh "stretching out His hidden treasure over empty space" and "hanging the earth on nothing"?)

**"Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also. God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. So the evening and the morning were the fourth day.** (Genesis 1:14-19) It's a fine point to be sure, but Yahweh didn't actually describe the sun and moon as "lights," i.e., *owr*. The word here is *ma'owr*, which is more correctly translated "luminaries." God didn't want his people looking up into the sky and thinking the sun and moon were the *sources* of light, and thus worthy of their adoration. *He* is the source of light, after all. The suffix *ma* is an interrogative pronoun making the word it modifies a question, of sorts. It means what, who, whatever, how, why, or wherefore—it's the all-purpose query (and the word upon which the name of the mysterious "bread from heaven," manna, was based). It's as if Yahweh wanted His children to question and contemplate the source of those big, bright lights every time they looked up into the sky—Who put them there? How awesome must *He* be?

John answered both these questions in one succinct statement: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** (John 1:1-5) The "Word," of course, is Yahshua the Messiah, who, though fully human, shares *identity* with the Creator, Yahweh—they're the same Person. So, although it boggles the mind, the One who *created* light *was* the light; the One who separated light from darkness in the primeval universe continues that process in the lives of men. It's the ultimate spiritual expression of the first law of thermodynamics (the conservation of matter and energy): the Light appears in different forms, but its (or should I say, *His*) existence is constant, unwavering, and eternal.



The prophets saw this coming. Isaiah reports, **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined."** (Isaiah 9:2) That's the inspiring bottom line. But what's stunning is that the verses leading up to this revelation pinpoint who the "Light" is, and identify the reason for the "deep darkness" as well. After complaining that the people wanted him to "inquire of the mediums and wizards" instead of turning to the Living God and heeding His revealed instructions, Isaiah retorts, **"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."** In other words, the Torah and Prophets would reveal the source of light. **"They will pass through it hard-pressed and hungry; and it shall happen, when they are hungry, that they will be enraged and curse their king and their God, and look upward. Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they will be driven into darkness."** Any alternative to that which is revealed in God's law will result in spiritual hunger, frustration, anguish, and darkness of soul. **"Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, as when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles."** (Isaiah 8:20-9:1) Only now does the prophet reveal the remarkable transformation from darkness to light that we read above: *these* people will see a great light.

Who was associated with these places? Yahshua grew up in the town of Nazareth—that's in the territory settled by Zebulun. He ministered primarily in the towns of Northern Galilee; that's in—you guessed it—Naphtali. "By the way of the sea?" Not only did Yahshua's ministry focus on the people living near the Sea of Galilee, He ministered as well to the multitude from Tyre and Sidon, the premier seaport cities of the eastern Mediterranean (see Luke 6:17). And what about "beyond the Jordan?" Yahshua was baptized there by John the Baptist (see John 1:28) and later ministered in Decapolis (remember the demoniac of Gadara? See Luke 8:26-40) and Perea (John 10:40), both on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Remember, Isaiah is identifying where the people should be looking in order to "see a great light." You might expect the Savior to show up in Jerusalem, but these places the prophet singled out? Not likely. But what was the misinformed complaint of Christ's detractors? **"They answered...Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee."** (John 7:52) Really? Isaiah would beg to differ.

So Yahshua, in direct fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, announced the bottom line: **"Jesus cried out and said, 'Whoever believes in Me, believes not [only] in Me but in Him who sent Me. And whoever sees Me sees Him who sent Me.'**" Remember, Isaiah had directed them to go back to "the Law and the testimony," for these things would reveal the "great light" that was to be seen by people living in darkness. That light was Yahshua Himself: **"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in Me may not remain in darkness."** (John 12:44-46) If we can grasp the fact that Yahshua was indeed Yahweh's human manifestation (and not just another

prophet, preacher, or rabbi) then this statement makes perfect sense. But if He was *not* God incarnate, it would brand Him as the worst sort of lunatic—one who claims for himself the honor reserved for deity alone—a blatant violation of the First Commandment. There is no middle ground.

It's one thing to claim to have come "as light," of course, and something else entirely to prove it. Again, it was the prophet Isaiah who provided the litmus test: providing sight to the blind. Speaking in the Messiah's voice, he writes, **"And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground."** (Isaiah 42:16) Spiritually and figuratively, all of us who follow Yahshua have experienced this transformation. But the Messiah *literally* cured the blind as well. One such story is related in John 9, where a man born blind was given his sight. Before He cured him, Yahshua announced, **"We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."** (John 9:4-5) Yahshua knew He would have only a brief window of opportunity in which to personally demonstrate God's power among men. Healing physical blindness during His sojourn was to be a metaphor for providing spiritual light from that time onward. Bringing sight to the blind was to serve as a parable representing our deliverance out of spiritual darkness.

Bringing *and being* light were common themes for Yahshua: **"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"** (John 8:12) And amazingly, it doesn't stop with Him. If we, through Him, have received the "light of life," then we too have become beacons to the world, for Christ's light shines through us. It follows that **"You [believers] are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."** (Matthew 5:14-16) We've all heard the exclamation "Hallelujah!" It's a compound of two Hebrew words, *halal* (to praise or shine) and *Yah*—the short form of Yahweh. In other words, it means "Praise Yahweh" or "Shine forth Yahweh's light." That's precisely what we're doing when we, through Yahshua, become the "light of the world." The admonition here is to not conceal God's light shining within us, but rather to let the world see it openly. We make our salvation obvious to those we meet by exhibiting love and doing good works on their behalf—the very crux of the Torah.

Our works and our walk say a lot about who we are—and *whose* we are. Yahshua told His disciples, **"Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."** (John 11:9-10) He said this in reference to doing the right thing—*because* it's the right thing—regardless of the

consequences. (The context is His determination to go and raise His friend Lazarus from the dead, even though there were people there who were seeking to kill Him.) We “stumble”—that is, we fail to achieve perfection (otherwise known as *sinning*)—when we walk according to our own “lights,” our own wisdom and opinion. The true light—that by which we can negotiate the path and avoid the pitfalls of the world—is Yahshua. Again, we see Him stressing the urgency of the situation: we can only see where we’re going while it is daylight. What He didn’t say (not here, anyway) is that the sun is about to set on our world.

John points out these same truths, but he takes it one step further: **“This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”** This much we’ve heard before: to walk with Christ is to walk in the light. But it’s all too easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that we’re “walking in the light” merely because we think our doctrinal position is unassailable, our religious credentials are impeccable, or our behavior is acceptable in polite society. John notes that there is a touchstone we must use to determine whether the light in which we walk is genuine or not: it’s *fellowship*—not with God this time, but with each another. **“But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”** (I John 1:5-7) “Fellowship” is the Greek word *koinonia*—association, community, participation, and intimacy—in this case, with others who, like you, rely upon “the blood of Yahshua for cleansing from all sin.” *Koinonia* is the matrix in which one’s love can be brought to the surface. It doesn’t mean compromise—finding some spiritual lowest common denominator. But it does entail some potentially uncomfortable contact with folks.

On the one hand, you may feel unworthy—that you’ve screwed up so badly you have no right to “fellowship” with all those pious, god-fearing folk. I’ll let you in on a little secret: those folks may be better at hiding it than you are, but they’re sinners too. They’re saved by faith in the atoning power of Yahshua’s blood, if they’re saved at all. (And if they’re walking in the light, they’ll be the first to admit it.) On the other hand, you may be refusing to fellowship with other believers because they (the people who *are* fellowshiping together) aren’t yet perfect. They don’t all hold precisely the same doctrinal position you do (though admit it: yours is somewhat different from what it was five years ago, isn’t it?). They don’t know the scriptures backward and forward. They still fall into sin now and then. They’re hypocrites. They dress funny. They meet for worship on what you’ve determined is the wrong day of the week. You don’t like their style of music. The list of objections—even valid ones—can go on *ad infinitum*. Only one thing is certain: if you ever did find the “perfect” fellowship, when you joined them you’d change the dynamic—*ergo*, it would no longer be perfect.

You'll note that I didn't use the word "church" in there anywhere, nor did John. We believers are the *ekklesia*—Yahshua's called-out assembly. But the "church" today is a very different concept than that which we ordinarily associate with the Greek word so translated. "Having fellowship with one another" needn't necessarily manifest itself in American-style worship services, though it can and often does. John's point, I believe, is merely that we who are walking in Yahshua's light need to seek out and associate with others who are also indwelt with Yahweh's Spirit—whose light is within them. The problem (for some) is that God's scriptures are so deep, once you've become familiar with them you may have trouble finding *anyone* who agrees with you on *everything*. But that must not prevent you from enjoying intimate fellowship with other believers. We are all part of the same body, but that doesn't mean we all have to be capable of doing the same things. If you get dust in your eyes, your whole body is going to have trouble seeing where it's going. (Or as Yahshua put it, **"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"**—Matthew 6:22-23.) If you break a bone, compromise a kidney, or infect your appendix, believe me, your whole body is going to feel it. We're all in this together. In a healthy body, the brain isn't too proud to fellowship with the intestines, and the kneecap isn't ashamed of being beneath the heart. They all enjoy *koinonia*. We should too.

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Yahshua was—and will be again—Yahweh's Light personified among us. But our Messiah needn't be physically present for God to illuminate our souls. In this age, we have His Word and His Holy Spirit to guide us on the path. We have but to follow this light. Solomon spoke of following God's light when defending oneself against idolatry (characterized as an adulterous woman): **"My son, keep your father's [read: Yahweh's] commandment, and forsake not your mother's [read: the Spirit's] teaching. Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life."** (Proverbs 6:20-23) It may seem odd, but God won't force us to "see the light." The choice as to whether we'll pursue Yahweh's truth is ours to make (though He implores us to choose wisely). Yes, God's precepts are "commandments." We are instructed to "do them." But a commandment (Hebrew: *mitzvah*) spells out the conditions of a covenant. Consequences are implied—blessings for compliance and curses for violation. These consequences are seldom proactive punishments from the hand of God,

however. Rather, they are the natural outcome of pursuing an errant course of action. When our parents commanded us, saying “Don’t touch that—it’s hot,” they weren’t doing it to impose their will upon us, curtail our freedoms, or grasp power for themselves, but merely to save us from unnecessary pain. If we chose to disregard their commandment, we burned our disobedient little fingers.

Knowledge gained through obedience (rather than through painful experience) is characterized as “light.” (Light and heat aren’t necessarily the same thing, are they, boys and girls?) Some of us learn the easy way, some the hard way, and some of us never learn at all, remaining in self-imposed darkness. While life remains, however, light is always available. Isaiah says: **“Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of Yahweh and rely on his God.”** Walking in Yahweh’s light is the only sure way to prevent stumbling over obstacles hidden in the darkness. But we are a rebellious race. Even though we intuitively sense that we need light in order to see, we all too often reject the source of the true light. Instead of choosing to walk in broad daylight, we prefer anemic alternatives—candles or flashlights in the dead of night. So Yahweh warns us: **“Behold, all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches! Walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled! This you have from My hand: you shall lie down in torment.”** (Isaiah 50:10-11) If you choose your own path and illuminate your way with falsehood and irrelevance, you *will* fall down. We have His word on that.

None of us takes full advantage of the light Yahweh offers us in the world. Even we who “walk in the light” don’t see everything it reveals. But even if we did realize our full perceptive potential, the vision we would enjoy as mortals is but a dim shadow of what Yahweh has in store for us in the eternal state. Paul put it like this: **“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”** (I Corinthians 13:8-12) What is the key to attaining 20/20 spiritual vision? It’s love. In a world of partial comprehension, of dimly understood truth, we await that which is “perfect”—the Greek *teleios*—brought to an end, finished, completed, perfected, or fully mature. Once again, we are being reminded of the process of our redemption under God’s plan, the progress He has ordained: from chaos to order, from darkness to light, from mortal frailty to immortal glory. Yes, we’re still in the tunnel of our fallen state, but at least now we can see the light at the end of that tunnel.

So because we admittedly don’t have perfect spiritual vision—*yet*—we are admonished not to be too dogmatic in our pronouncements—and our denunciations—in this life. Yes, we are to be discerning and judicious in the light

of Yahweh's revealed truth, but we aren't to be prideful in our use of what little knowledge we possess. **"Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart."** (I Corinthians 4:5) Don't use scripture as a club with which to beat your less-enlightened brother over the head. Don't declare that because your interpretation is correct, everybody else must be in error. Don't be too quick to label your brother a heretic. How many honest followers of the Messiah have been burned at the stake (whether figuratively or literally) by people who *knew* they were right? The light by which we walk is getting progressively stronger, but we don't have all the answers yet. An example: I used to call the Messiah Jesus. Now I call Him Yahshua. Some call Him Yeshua. For all I know, His *real* name might have been Yahowshuwa. I *care* about being right, but I can't be sure I *am*, nor am I willing to "pronounce judgment" against my brother who holds a different opinion. When I stand in the King's presence at last, however, I'll *know* what His name is. I won't even have to ask.

You'd think everybody would be eagerly anticipating the unfettered spiritual awareness that awaits. But remember, we live in a dispensation of free will, and some—*most*, truth be told—have chosen to live in the darkness. The light of God's truth hurts their eyes, so they block out as much of it as they can. Because we are all equipped with consciences, ungodly men are uncomfortable having their deeds and motivations revealed in the light of day: whether they'll admit it or not, they *know* the difference between right and wrong (for the most part). The shame of having chosen to do wrong is something they'd rather not have brought to light. So they keep the spiritual curtains drawn.

As always, separation, division, and contrast is implied. Either one receives the testimony of God and nature, or he does not. Either he chooses to live in the light, or he elects to remain in darkness. So Yahshua informed Nicodemus: **"This is the judgment [that is, the *krisis*, the basis of separation, selection, or judicial decision]: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."** (John 3:19-21) In context, you'll recall, this conversation revealed the central determining factor separating light from darkness in our lives: being born from above in Yahweh's Spirit, resulting from a trusting reliance in the atoning sacrifice of Yahshua the Messiah. Those who have the Spirit have life, but those who don't are "already condemned" (verse 18). That is, they're in a *de facto* state of separation from God.

Although it's subtle in scripture, God draws a distinction between those who are merely "separated" from God and those who proactively war against Him,

doing what they can to prevent others from following the light that beckons. Paul points out two very important facts about this second group. First, God isn't going to allow them to suppress the truth forever, for doing so makes it harder for honest searchers to find their way: **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."** And second, there is no valid excuse for having rejected God's truth, for nature itself proclaims His power, if not His love, in unmistakable terms. **"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."** (Romans 1:18-21) If you can look at the starry sky, hold a newborn baby, experience a thunderstorm, or smell a rose in bloom, and *not* know there's a God, there's something wrong with you. But if you go out of your way to publically deny that fact, if you deliberately obfuscate the truth and hide it from your fellow man in an attempt to conceal your own unrighteousness, then the anger of the God you say *isn't there* will be made known to you in real—and unambiguous—terms.

It is this darkness of heart that the Great Commission was designed to overcome. We are instructed to be witnesses of the things we have seen, the things that have transformed our lives, for the power of Yahweh can and will transform the lives of others, if only we will share the good news of what has happened to us. Witnesses, by definition, present a choice: you may believe them or reject their testimony. But it is illogical in the extreme for a blind man to deny the testimony of an eyewitness. He can't legitimately claim, "Since I didn't see what you claim to have witnessed, it can't be true." Those who dwell in darkness must take their hopelessness on faith, whereas we who live "by faith" in the light are, ironically enough, walking by sight: we can honestly and accurately describe what we've seen with our own two eyes. (There *are* some things believers must "take on faith," of course, but the reality of God's love is not one of them.)

Those who consciously and purposely reject God's word and our eyewitness testimony concerning it—those who claim to be walking according to their own light—are risking being stricken blind by the very God whom they've refused to see. Don't believe me? **"If you will not obey the voice of Yahweh your God or be careful to do all his commandments...Yahweh will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind, and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways."** (Deuteronomy 28:15, 28-29) **"They know not, nor do they discern, for He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment....A deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in**

my right hand?” (Isaiah 44:18-20) **“Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not with wine; stagger, but not with strong drink! For Yahweh has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes (the prophets), and covered your heads (the seers).”** (Isaiah 29:9-10) **“None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand.”** (Daniel 12:10) Ouch!

Paul (who, paradoxically enough, had to be struck blind in order to see the light) was given his own “personalized” version of the Great Commission’s instructions. This is how he later recounted what had happened: **“And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen Me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’”** (Acts 26:15-18) Up until this moment, Paul had been “doing what seemed right in his own eyes,” that is, walking according to the light of the torch he himself had lit (as it was expressed in the Isaiah 50 passage we saw above). Now he had to make a choice. He could continue walking according to his own light; he could pull a “Jonah” and run away from his calling (which admittedly didn’t work out so well for Mr. Fish-puke); or he could change his mind and his direction and walk according to Yahweh’s light. I would submit to you that we all face the same choices, if not the same degree of specificity.

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The Bible is full of advice, directions, instructions, and commandments. Moving from darkness into light is not only a well-established principle of God’s intentions for us, it is something we are *told* to do—we have a part to play in this. Yahweh will not force us to live in the light any more than a loving mother will keep her children locked up to prevent them from encountering things that could potentially harm them. God, like our parents, watchfully allows us to explore our world, protecting us from what we can’t control, and admonishing us about what we can. As our world expands, so do our responsibilities; as we mature as believers, the choices we face become more and more complex. Toddlers and teenagers face very different challenges, but they all have to operate according to the light that is available to them—the source of wisdom in their lives, whether instruction or experience.

So although it may seem like an obvious thing to say, we are admonished to live in light rather than in darkness. Paul put it like this: **“Let no one deceive you with**



**empty words, for because of these things** [in context, fornication, uncleanness, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and coarse jesting—things characterized as “darkness”] **the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”**

There once again is the transformation we keep talking about. Note that we are not just *in* darkness or light, but we are said to actually *be* these things. That should be a sobering thought: how we comport ourselves has a direct effect on other people. **“Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord...”** And how can we do that? By heeding His word, by making His scriptures a “lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.”

**“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.”** (Ephesians 5:6-13) “Exposing” the works of darkness is a poor translation here. The word is *elegcho*, meaning to refute, reprove, find fault with, convict, chide, or admonish. The idea isn’t so much to bring other peoples’ faults to light—to be a witch-hunting whistle blower exposing the sins of others—but to simply point out that the evil things they do are indeed wrong. If ever there was a bit of sound advice aimed at our tepid, politically correct society, this is it.

I’ll give you a couple of timely examples of what it is to “expose” the works of darkness. First, Yahweh has unequivocally declared homosexuality to be sin. See Leviticus 18:22, if you don’t believe me. He considers it an abomination, right up there with rape and bestiality, worthy under the Torah of the death penalty. The world, meanwhile, insists that we must not only tolerate the practice, we should support it, promote it, and call it “normal.” Paul points out that doing so is tantamount to “taking part in the unfruitful works of darkness.” We are not to ignore the reality of God’s revealed truth. To do so is as dangerous as ignoring an active tumor. Our job, however, is not to accuse people of being homosexuals; after all, the choice is theirs to make. Our job is merely to point out Yahweh’s position on the matter, for as Hosea pointed out, **“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”** (Hosea 4:6)

A second example: people these days are falling all over themselves defending Islam as a “peaceful religion,” but one that has within it some violent fringe terrorist elements. Nothing could be further from the truth. The religion *itself* is violent and repressive to the core. But don’t take my word for it: take theirs. The Muslim “holy scriptures” are comprised of four principle works: (1) the Qur’an (supposedly the very word of Allah), (2) the Hadith (or “Sayings of the Prophet”) collected by al-Bukhari, and (3) the biographies, or Sunnah (i.e., “example”) of Muhammad, the earliest of which was written by Ibn Ishaq (of

which only the version edited many years later by Ibn Hisham survives). A later biography (4) by al-Tabari is particularly valuable—and damning—because it retains much of what Ibn Hisham edited out. The Hadith and Sunnah are essential to Islam because the Qur'an is incomprehensible without the background, commentary, and timeline they provide. In fact, Islamic law has no basis in the Qur'an without the support it derives from Muhammad's recorded words and deeds. All of these writings uniformly present Islam as a religion based on and driven by *jihad*—"holy fighting in Allah's cause" (something *never* defined as a mere "spiritual struggle" in the Islamic scripture. *Jihad* is said to be the *only* sure way for a Muslim to merit paradise. But what of all those "peace-loving" Muslims to which the media keeps referring? They do exist—in fact, they're still in the majority (so far). But according to the Islamic scriptures, they're *not really Muslims*. No, those "Muslims" who preferred to live peaceably and avoid bloodshed were the first to earn the scathing condemnation of "Allah and his Prophet." They were called "hypocrites," assigned as prime targets in this life by Muhammad's *jihad* fighters, and then consigned to the hottest fires of Allah's hell (see the Qur'an, surah 9). We need to call a spade a spade: Islam is an evil, warlike political doctrine, driven by terror and greed. The vast majority of Muslims are actually *victims* of their own dark religion—with neither the prospect of escape in this world, nor the hope of salvation in the next.

The point of all that was that we can't shine the light of God's truth on a dark world if we don't have His light within us ourselves. We can't differentiate "the unfruitful works of darkness" from "the fruit of light, found in all that is good and right and true" if we haven't first left the darkness behind. Peter contrasts the "before" and "after" of our redemption: **"They [those who are disobedient to Yahweh's calling] stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do."** Note that nobody is destined (or predestined) to disobey the word. But having disobeyed, they *are* destined to stumble because of their defiance. **"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."** (I Peter 2:8-10) The transformation, he says, is defined by leaving the darkness (being "called out" of it, which is what *ekklesia*—translated "church"—means) and entering the light. And that's not the only paradigm that's shifting: we were once estranged; now we are chosen. We were once unable to communicate with God; now we are His priests, enjoying unfettered access into His presence. We were once lost, scattered, and isolated; now we are a unified nation, set apart from the world for His honor. We were once under the condemnation of our separation from God; now we have been acquitted, justified, and restored to fellowship with Him.

This transformation is a completed fact, but it is also an ongoing process. We're still mortal. We're still living in bodies that are, for all their marvelous engineering, still vulnerable—physically and spiritually. If walking in the light means keeping our eyes open so we can proceed according to God's will, then we need to be aware of our own limitations. It's like driving a car. We blink, momentarily taking our eyes off the goal. We daydream, allowing things we can't even see to impede our vision and distract us from the task at hand. And sometimes we even fall asleep at the wheel, crashing and burning in spectacular confirmation of our own fallen humanity. That's why the Word of God is full of commandments: they're the lights and gauges on our dashboard, the signs and signals along the roadway, the onboard GPS system (or in my case, the map in the glove box). They're there to keep us alert, guide us toward our destination, warn us of danger, and inform us as to our progress, or at least tell us where we've gone wrong. If we don't use the eyes God gave us, we will never complete the journey.

John too speaks of our transition from darkness to light: **"The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."** (I John 2:8-11) Where Peter defined "darkness" as "disobedience to the Word," and Paul spoke of its "unfruitful works," John is a bit more specific: darkness is hatred, a failure to love. (Remember, Yahshua Himself defined the greatest commandments of the Torah as loving Yahweh and loving one's neighbor.) If we hate people (not what they *do*, mind you, but they themselves) then we are, by definition, not walking in God's light, for God is love.

This is where it gets tricky, however, for as a practical matter, we often don't have a very good handle on what love is, or how best to express it. A few pages back, we drew a distinction between liberty and license, and I used the illustration of how parents try to keep their children from hurting themselves. In this context, liberty (love) is instructing them not to touch hot things or run around with pointy scissors, whereas license (hate) would be to let them find out the hard way how injurious these hazards can be. (Brute force, on either end of the spectrum, is also indicative of hatred: love is neither chaining up your child in a closet to keep him from encountering danger, nor purposely burning or cutting him just so he'll know to avoid those hazards in the future—*thank you, Captain Obvious*). No, the only loving course of action open to a parent is to provide liberty with guidance.

So how does this principle work in practice with people in our sphere of influence? As we saw above, part of it is recognizing sin for what it is: *sin*. Of course, lots of things that go on in our society—murder, rape, illicit drug abuse, theft—are universally recognized (even by those who do them) as being evil. But

there is a whole cross current of behaviors condemned in scripture that are “winked at” or even approved of today: cultivating covetousness, sex between consenting unmarried adults, cheating on one’s responsibilities and obligations, abortion as retroactive birth control, legal drug or alcohol abuse—the list could go on forever. We have built our entire civilization around such things as greed, lust, and pride. We have made it the height of political incorrectness to honor and revere the One True God, Yahweh, in our public institutions, for fear of offending people who serve false gods.

What, then, can a believer do in light of our societal predicament to foster godly liberty in love? *Refuse to participate.* When confronted with the opportunity to cheat, don’t. Think long and hard before borrowing—for *anything*. Dress modestly. Keep your word, even if it’s only implied. Don’t use wealth as a pedestal for pride. Don’t use poverty as an excuse to steal. Forgive sinners, but don’t excuse sin. Lead by godly example, whether or not anyone follows. You may not be able to change the world, but you don’t have to agree with it, either. You may have to live in Babylon; you don’t have to join the country club.

The other side of loving your brother is, of course, contained in Christ’s parable on the “Good Samaritan.” Not only are we to refrain from committing proactive acts of evil ourselves, we are to *personally* do what we can to aid those we meet who have fallen afoul of the world’s malevolence. It would be easy to twist this into an argument for “social justice,” a government-imposed system of raids and rewards designed to level the playing field, but that would have been like “the priest and the Levite” in the parable (the ones who selfishly refused to help the stricken man themselves) coming back, holding the Samaritan at gunpoint, and forcing him to do what his conscience was telling him to do anyway. The point of Yahshua’s story was that we are to do what’s right *because* it’s the right thing to do. If it’s not voluntary, it’s not really love.

In what may at first sound like a challenge to this, Paul advises us, **“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?”** (II Corinthians 6:14-16) To be “yoked” together is to work toward the same goal, to share the same agenda—it’s walking in the same direction, pulling the same plow. Believers and unbelievers are by definition oriented toward different goals. But does showing love toward someone (as we are commanded to do) constitute being “yoked” together with them? No, it doesn’t. Quite the opposite, in fact. We are instructed in scripture, **“If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and Yahweh will reward you.”** (Proverbs 25:21-22) To rewrite the bumper sticker, “Love them all, and let God sort it out.”

This may all sound a bit counterintuitive. After all, the world's largest religions (most notably, Islam) uniformly insist that their adherents are supposed to do their gods' "wet work" for them. Yahweh takes exception to that idea, stating quite clearly that He intends to "tread the winepress of His wrath *alone*." He doesn't need, or want, our help in that regard. (There was but one historical exception, introduced for its symbolic significance. Israel under Joshua was instructed wage total, genocidal war against seven idolatrous Canaanite tribes, nations that represented the darkness that cannot coexist with the light in our lives. But unless you're a Ba'al-worshipping Canaanite, Hittite, Amorite, Perizzite, Hivite, Jebusite, or Girgashite, you have nothing to fear from Yahweh's people. Our God is perfectly capable of dispensing His own wrath.

Why doesn't "loving your enemy" violate the admonition against being unequally yoked? It's because rendering aid does not constitute a partnership between the helper and the one in need. Love is a unilateral act. It may be (and should be) reciprocated, but it cannot be conditional. If there are strings attached, it's not love at all. The best example of this principle, of course, is Yahshua's sacrifice to atone for our sins—a unilateral act of love on the part of God. It is our positive *response* to that act that forges the bond; it is our *reciprocation* of God's love that completes the circle of fellowship. But it is important to understand that light and darkness are fundamentally incompatible: they cannot coexist. Returning to the imagery of the parable, it is conceivable (though we aren't told) that the Samaritan and the Jewish robbery victim he helped became fast friends in the wake of the incident—despite their former cultural enmity. It is *not* conceivable, however, that the bandits shared in that fellowship. They represent those among us who not only dwell in darkness, but proactively attack the light so that others may not see. In short, they are the children of Satan (see John 8:42-44). They're beyond help and beyond hope.

We live in a time of transition. If we have responded to Yahweh's love, we are on a journey out of darkness into the light. Where we were once blind, our eyes are being opened. Where once we had only questions, we are beginning to see answers. Where once we saw "through a glass, darkly," we are now, as the coming of our Savior approaches, being given more insight, more clarity of vision. Where once we saw things in murky shades of gray, our Father is adjusting the contrast control on our world, and we are beginning to perceive denser blacks, purer whites, and colors more brilliant than we ever thought possible. But even this is only the beginning. In describing the New Jerusalem—the eternal heavenly city of the redeemed—John reports, **"And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."** (Revelation 22:5)

## DEATH & LIFE



### *Separation vs. Union*

I was watching one of those beautifully filmed BBC nature documentaries the other night, and it occurred to me (for the umpteenth time) that life as we find it on earth *seems to be* the most frustratingly pointless thing imaginable. Evolutionists, of course, are perfectly comfortable with the idea of senseless serendipity: their whole theory is based on the illogical premise of trillions of happy accidents occurring, one after the other *ad infinitum*, resulting in what we see in our biosphere. But life's inherent contradictions aren't quite so easy to comprehend for someone like me, who sees the Designer's hand all over it.

On the one hand, we're faced with the miracle of life itself, something so wonderful scientists still don't understand how it happens or what it is. All we know for sure is that life transcends chemistry—it's infinitely more than the sum of its parts, a concept fundamentally distinct from the physical bodies that possess it. Our biosphere consists of an almost inconceivable variety of life forms, ranging from the tiniest microbe (the lowliest of which is still astonishingly complex) to whales as big as houses; from single-celled bacteria to massive trees—to men, equipped with minds capable of appreciating it all. Even though countless species have gone extinct since life first appeared, our earth still hosts more kinds of life that we can catalog or comprehend—some relatively simple, some complex beyond comprehension; some common and familiar, some so strange as to tax the imagination; some (to our eyes) stunningly beautiful, others laughably ugly; some clever and cooperative, others apparently running mindless biological programs; some ruthless and efficient as predators, and others so vulnerable and specialized they're restricted to the narrowest of ecological niches. And remarkably, these species survive—and even thrive—in a world that seems bent on their destruction.

But then we're confronted with the inescapable fact that every living thing—as *an individual*—is doomed to death the moment it comes into existence. It doesn't matter how worthy, or capable, or well suited an organism is to life on this planet—it eventually dies. Even stranger, the Creator of life apparently planned it this way: animals whose assigned role in life is to get eaten by larger animals bear many young, whereas the predators at the top of the food chain bear few. Throughout the biosphere, there seem to be only three universal imperatives while life endures: (1) eat; (2) defend yourself; and (3) reproduce. But in the end,

everything dies. The species may live on, but the individual is gone and forgotten. What is God trying to teach us here? I think He may have a mind-bending epiphany in store for us (or at least, me) concerning the nature of our spiritual existence, but we're going to have to pay close attention to God's creation—and His word—for the clues He left for us if we ever hope to understand His mind on this.

When I was a child, I was taught (in church) that nothing had ever died until Adam sinned. After all, Paul had written, **"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."** (Romans 5:12) So (as the story went) when my pet parakeet died, it was ultimately because mankind had introduced sin and death into the world. Naturally, I felt guilty, helpless, frustrated, and not a little confused. But then I got my first look at the fossilized skeleton of a saber-toothed cat—a *smilodon*—and I knew intuitively that God had *designed* it as a killing machine. Therefore, it logically followed that the "death" that had entered the world through sin—the kind of thing Paul was talking about—had to have been something fundamentally different than what the tar-pit tiger could bring about with those eleven-inch teeth. (Does a *normal* nine-year-old think about stuff like that?) Now, having had over half a century to reflect on the matter, I've come to the conclusion that not only are there two *kinds* of death in view, but one of them—the physical death to which all mortal creatures are appointed—was designed by Yahweh to be a symbol, a picture, of the other one. Physical death is "merely" a metaphor through which God teaches us what we need to know about something we can't see as we walk through this life: *spiritual* death.

And if there are two kinds of death, there must also be two types of life, one of which, as before, functions as a symbol informing us about the other. The life we *see*—where big fish eat little fish, where individuals perish but their species live on—is supposed to teach us something about the life we *can't* see, the life possible in the spiritual realm. The differences between these two types of life are revealed by the differences in the bodies in which they are lived out. Our flesh and blood bodies are mortal—they're not designed to live forever. But because we can't directly observe the spiritual realm, we need to explore what God's word has to say about the "bodies" in which these spiritual lives are to be lived.

And taking the thought process back another step, the fact that our physical bodies have a beginning—conception leading to birth—should tell us to expect a parallel reality in the spiritual side of things as well. How is one "born" spiritually? What is the mechanism of conception? Is there something equivalent to a gestation period? The contrast between birth and death that we witness in our finite physical world is, I believe, designed to inform us about the larger world into which Yahweh is inviting us. As Paul (paraphrasing Isaiah) put it, **"Eye has not**

seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” (I Corinthians 2:9)

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In the wake of Eve’s role in the downfall of the human race into sin, Yahweh pronounced the following curse: **“To the woman He said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing [*herown*]; in pain you shall bring forth [*yalad*] children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’”** (Genesis 3:16) The reason the “forbidden fruit” had seemed desirable to Adam’s bride was the promise of wisdom. The serpent had promised her that if she ate it, she would know the difference between good and evil. From our perspective, that might seem like a very good thing—we all too often have a hard time distinguishing between them. Between outright lies and the law of unintended consequences, we find ourselves deceived time after time in our quest for “good.” But the only reason Eve didn’t already know good from evil was that she had never *seen* evil. She had no frame of reference, nothing with which to compare the good that Yahweh had already lavished upon her. Good was *all* she knew. She thought she was buying knowledge, when in fact she was merely being sold experience. There’s a vast difference.

So honoring the choice Eve had made, God gave her precisely what she had asked for: the *experience* of evil, along with that of good. Adam, recognizing her primary role, named his wife Chavvah (boiled down to “Eve” in transliteration), which literally means “to show breath,” hence, “life, or living.” (Thus *chavvah* also denotes a *place* of life—a village or town.) The process of bringing forth life—i.e., childbearing—is described with two separate words in this verse, and there are also two different words for the pain associated with it. In the first instance, “childbearing” is the Hebrew *herown*, denoting the whole process—the sexual act, conception, the gestation period, and the childbirth. The word is used only two other times in scripture, both of them unambiguously referring to conception. The *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains* notes that in this context, both the pains and pleasures of the childbearing process would be intensified. The “pain” associated with *herown* is *itstabown*—pain, labor, hardship, sorrow, and toil. It’s based on the root verb *‘asab*, meaning to grieve, displease, vex, or wrest, leading us to conclude that there is a heavy emotional or psychological component to the “pain” of *herown*.

In the second instance, to “bring forth” children is the verb *yalad*: to bear, bring forth, beget, or travail—it’s the all-purpose Hebrew word having to do with bearing children, used of the mother, the father, and even the midwife. The “pain”



associated with *yalad* is *'etseb*—the physical sensation of pain, trouble or difficulty, or hard work. So in other words, bringing new life into the world would henceforth not be easy. Because Eve had desired the knowledge of both good *and* evil, she would be given heightened sensory experience, especially in her role as life-bringer, an intensification of pleasure, pain, and desire.

*Yalad*—to beget or bear children—is used 498 times in the Hebrew scriptures, mostly in the “begats.” Genealogies are significant in scripture, for the family tree of the Messiah is revealed in detail—demonstrating beyond a reasonable doubt that Yahshua is the only *bona fide* candidate for the job who ever showed up in history. But the non-genealogical instances of the word can teach us something about the mindset of Yahweh concerning the concept of birth and how it relates to our redemption. Speaking of Yahshua’s *real* lineage, the Psalmist tells of a King who will rule with a rod of iron from Zion, Yahweh’s holy hill: **“I will tell of the decree: Yahweh said to Me, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten [*yalad*] You.”** (Psalm 2:7) Jews who expect their Messiah to be something less than the literal Son of God need to reconsider their position.

On the other hand, the Messiah would be a human male, born into the world in the usual way, one destined to sit on the throne of King David: **“For to us a child is born [*yalad*], to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of Yahweh of hosts will do this.”** (Isaiah 9:6-7) So, He would be both “born as a child” *and* be “Mighty God.” Well, nobody ever said the redemption of mankind would be simple.

Complicating matters even further, Yahweh speaks of the human race as if He were *our* Parent, for that’s how He wants us to think of Him: **“You were unmindful of the Rock that bore [*yalad*] you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth [*chuw*l].”** (Deuteronomy 32:18) The problem is that we don’t honor that parent-child relationship (as required in the Fifth Commandment), nor do we appreciate what Yahweh had to do in order to bring us forth in life. The word translated “gave birth” here is *chuw*l, a colorful description of the pain of childbirth: it means to twist, writhe, or travail. It’s the motion of a whirlwind, circling and intense. This is how God describes what He went through to bring forth the human race. No wonder He told us to honor our father and mother. We tend to take our existence for granted, but doing so betrays our self-centered arrogance, an abysmal lack of appreciation for the effort Yahweh put into this. Just because Yahweh is God, it doesn’t necessarily follow that everything He does is easy for Him. It’s as if we’re Pope Julius, strolling through the Sistine Chapel and telling Michelangelo, “It

looks okay, I guess, but you could've been done a lot sooner if you'd used a roller."

Yahweh considers the human race, and especially Israel, to be His own children, made in His own image and likeness. As the father of eleven children, I can attest that a parent's greatest joy is to see his children loving each other—and his greatest sadness is to see them hurting, abusing, and hating one other. So imagine how Yahweh must have felt when Israel turned their back on Him and began worshipping Molech—a bloodthirsty Canaanite god whose "priests" demanded that their children be burned alive to honor him: **"And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne [yalad] to Me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your whorings so small a matter that you slaughtered My children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them?"** (Ezekiel 16:20-21) He says, "Those were *My* children you were offering up to your false god!" We, of course, cluck our tongues and say, "How barbaric! We would never do anything like that." Are you sure? The leading cause of death in the U.S. is listed as heart disease, followed closely by cancer—together totaling 1.19 million deaths per year. But *abortion* claims more souls than both of these causes *combined*: 1.21 million young lives every year in this country—*twenty-two percent* of all pregnancies. Molech worshippers sacrificed their children in hopes of being granted material prosperity—bountiful crops and increased flocks and herds. But no fewer than ninety-three percent of all abortions are performed because the child is deemed "inconvenient"—a burden that might negatively impact the lifestyle of the mother and/or the father. I would submit to you that there is no appreciable difference between the two things. Approximately 42 million abortions are performed annually worldwide. That means that *every year* 39 million children—two thirds of the death toll of World War II—are sacrificed on the red-hot outstretched arms of the image of Molech. And we wonder why Yahweh is still angry.

But wait a minute. Is our sinful behavior really our fault? Anybody who's ever tried to be "good" knows how hard it can be. We can't seem to behave perfectly according to our own standards, much less Yahweh's, for longer than a New York minute. Job's "miserable comforters," trying to convince him that he must have done *something* bad to earn Yahweh's wrath—'cause everybody does—pointed out that sin follows birth like night follows day. First, Eliphaz opined, **"For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born [yalad] to trouble as the sparks fly upward."** (Job 5:6-7) Later, Bildad chimed in: **"How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born [yalad] of woman be pure? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!"** (Job 25:4-6)

While our own personal experience tells us that these things are true, Job—without really knowing how—sensed that there was something in the picture beyond the obvious consequences of guilt. **“If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. You would call, and I would answer You; You would long for the work of Your hands. For then You would number my steps; You would not keep watch over my sin; my transgression would be sealed up in a bag, and You would cover over my iniquity.”** (Job 14:14-17) Yes, we commit iniquity that must be covered—“sealed up in a bag” as it were—if we are to be considered righteous. But that’s precisely the point Job’s friends missed: it *can* be, and it *will* be. Job even reveals how this will happen. Someone in Whom life dwells will pay our debt of sin for us, giving us His own life: **“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.”** (Job 19:25-26) We *can be* redeemed, revived, and reborn.

Failing to recognize the role of the coming Redeemer was where Job’s friends went wrong, prompting Yahweh to ask, **“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”** (Job 38:2) Oooh, I just hate it when He says that. After posing some impossible questions of Job, designed to remind him just how awesome this God is who’s reputation and character we bandy about so lightly, **“Yahweh said to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.’”** (Job 42:7) The bottom line: yes, we are “born to trouble,” but because our Redeemer lives, we may be born *again* into a new reality, a new state of purity, an entirely new kind of life.

All of this would come into sharper focus, of course, as the Messiah’s mission unfolded. The new birth that Job had anticipated was described by John as a right that’s granted to us who believe—who trust and rely upon—His *name* (a name that literally means “Yahweh is Salvation”): **“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born [gennao], not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”** (John 1:9-13) The Greek *gennao* is the rough equivalent of the Hebrew *yalad*. The root of English words such as “genealogy,” “generation” and “generate,” it is the generic Greek verb denoting “to give birth.” Like *yalad*, it is used of both mothers and fathers. In the idiom of the day, it was also used to describe “causing something to arise,” or “bringing something about,” such as an opinion or condition, or to engender a feeling such as wrath or fear. *Gennao* could thus be used to portray a spiritual conversion. Here in John 1, that idiomatic distinction is quite clear: physical birth (involving blood and the will of man’s flesh) is contrasted with being born according to the will of God into a different kind of life, one not subject to the death of the physical body.

Yahshua explained the difference to Nicodemus: **“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [*gennao anothēn*: literally, born from above] he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born [*gennao*] of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born [*gennao*] of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again [literally, from above].” The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”** (John 3:3-8) Thus the two births lead to two different kinds of life. Flesh is temporary and mortal; spirit is permanent and immortal. Flesh is visible and corporeal; spirit is unseen and intangible. Flesh cannot discern spiritual things; spirit transcends the inadequacies of the flesh.

A few pages back, we broached the provocative question of whether there is anything like a gestation period leading up to spiritual rebirth. But as we have seen, both *yalad* and *gennao*—the Hebrew and Greek verbs meaning “to be born” or “to procreate”—encompass the entire process, from conception to birth, and refer to both male and female roles. If you ever want to have a pointless and frustrating afternoon, spend it discussing “when life begins” with a proponent of abortion. No matter when you pinpoint the beginning of one’s mortal life, however, you must agree that life begins *somewhere*. There is a time before which life is not, and after which, it is. The spiritual second birth also has a beginning, one that’s every bit as controversial (which is to say, I don’t have any facile answers for you). I would have to disagree with a Catholic who might suggest that spiritual life begins when an infant is baptized, for the babe has no choice in the matter. Many Evangelicals presume it begins when one has an emotional response to a gospel message. That may be true for some, I suppose, but emotions are a terribly imprecise and erratic unit of measure. You can “feel” saved one minute, only to fall into sin and “feel” lost the next.

My own “conversion” experience wasn’t really an *experience* at all, but a natural process: I was taught the word of God at my mother’s knee, and I simply woke up one day realizing that I did indeed believe what I’d been taught: I *did* trust and rely upon “Jesus Christ.” Did I know *everything*? Gimme a break—I was only seven or eight years old. I didn’t even know God’s real name. All I knew was that my faith was genuine because my God was genuine. Now, at the other end of my life, I *still* know that, and a few other things as well. But my increased knowledge (such as it is) hasn’t made my salvation any more sure than it was when I was a small boy. Indeed, I have read works by men whose knowledge of theology is deep and profound, but whose relationship with Yahweh is, for all I can tell, nonexistent. Thus it is my observation that neither knowledge, nor emotion, nor religious rituals are legitimate indicators of spiritual life.

So I'm not in a position to state categorically *when* the "new birth" begins in one's life (though I suspect it's a little different for each of us). I am, however, aware of evidence scripture offers by which one can *know* that he has indeed been born from above. John's first epistle identifies the spiritual equivalent of a newborn baby's first cry. It's love. **"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born [gennao] of God and knows God."** (I John 4:7) Love for one another, then, is Proof of Spiritual Life #1.

There's more to human life, of course, than that first gulp of air. So we should not be too surprised to find that evidence of our spiritual life is found in other things as well. What we think and what we do reveal the presence of God's Spirit within us, if it's there at all: **"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born [gennao] of God."** (I John 5:1) It's one thing to say, "I believe in Jesus." That's a rather nebulous and slippery declaration, however. Do we mean that we think Yahshua actually existed, that He walked the earth two thousand years ago and raised some eyebrows with His revolutionary teachings? Do we mean we accept the premise that He was a prophet sent from God? You can find Hindus and Muslims who believe these very same things.

No, John is being quite specific here. The mental Rubicon is whether we believe that Yahshua is "the Christ." "Christ" is not Yahshua's "last name." It's a title, meaning the same thing "Messiah" does—which doesn't help much unless you understand what *that* means, in technical terms. It literally means "anointed." In the Tanach, the priests and kings of Israel were to be anointed with olive oil (itself a symbol of God's Spirit) as an indication of their consecration and dedication to Yahweh. Many of the scriptural instances of the word *mashiyach* (transliterated Messiah) refer to actual kings or priests. But these offices were prophetic of *the* Anointed One—Yahweh's promised redeemer, Yahshua.

We first hear of Him (in these terms) in the prophecy of Hannah (Samuel's mother): **"Yahweh will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to His king and exalt the power of His Anointed."** (I Samuel 2:10) He is portrayed in the Psalms: **"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord [adonay] holds them in derision."** (Psalm 2:1-4) And we see Him again in Daniel's remarkably precise messianic prophecy: **"Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; The street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself."** (Daniel 9:25-26) Proof of Spiritual Life #2, then, is acceptance of the fact that Yahshua was (and is) this promised *Mashiyach*—Yahweh's Anointed One.

John continues: **“And everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of Him.”** This is a clarification of PoSL#1—the love of one another. He’s saying that our love for Yahweh is demonstrated by our love for His children—those who have been “born of Him” and who are therefore spiritually alive. How then can we be sure that our love for Yahweh’s children is genuine? What is the litmus test for that? **“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments....”** If you’ll recall, Yahshua confirmed that the whole Torah could be summed up in two related principles: loving Yahweh with all our heart, soul, and might, and loving our neighbors as we do ourselves.

**“And His commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born [gennaō] of God overcomes the world.”** Here’s where we get into trouble if we’re merely looking for a laundry list of do’s and don’ts to follow. If “overcoming the world” is the same thing as perfectly keeping all the precepts of the Torah, then *nobody* is “born of God,” for no one (except for Yahshua Himself) has managed not to run afoul of the Law in some way or another: all of us have sinned—we all fall short of God’s “glory” (that’s the Greek *doxa*: literally, His opinion, judgment, or estimation; see Romans 3:23). This idea would also make the previous statement sound hollow indeed: if “His commandments” are coterminous with the literal Torah, then why has mankind universally found them too “burdensome” to keep? Peter said as much in Acts 15:10. I too can testify to this: I spent years studying the Torah—I wrote a thousand-page book detailing what I found. I can assure you, *it cannot be kept*, not literally anyway (if for no other reason than the priesthood no longer exists and the temple no longer stands).

Did John understand this? Yes, he did. So he explains what he meant, in his own maddeningly cryptic idiom: **“And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”** (I John 5:1-5) No, it’s not our faith that saves us. It’s the *object* of that faith: Yahshua. He has “overcome the world” by fulfilling every last shred of the Torah’s symbolic requirements. And we can share in His victory—i.e., we can “overcome the world” on the basis of what He accomplished—if we believe, trust, and rely upon the fact that Yahshua is the Son of God, Yahweh’s Anointed Redeemer. Remember, we’re trying to identify the things that define us as being spiritually alive. This, then, would be Proof of Spiritual Life #3: overcoming the world by trusting in the deity of Yahshua and the efficacy of His sacrifice—the essence of Messianic promise.

Stating the same basic principle another way, John next tells us, **“And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born [gennaō] of Him.”** (I John 2:28-29)

It's not that we're expected to be able to "practice righteousness" in our own strength. It's that because Yahshua is righteousness *personified*, whatever righteousness God sees in us—the garment of light, if you will, that keeps us from having to stand before Yahweh naked and ashamed in our sins—is, in fact, Yahshua's sinless state. It is *His* sinlessness, not ours, that has the potential to provide Proof of Spiritual Life #4: a life that honors God before men.

It has been my experience in life that people do pretty much what they want to do, insofar as it's in their power. So there's a litmus test for PoSL#4: what do people see when they look at your life? Do you flout your "faith" by living immersed in the world, presuming that since all your sins are covered by grace you're free to act like the devil? Do you sow your wild oats and then pray for a crop failure? Does your religious pride make people regard you as being so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good? Be honest: whom do you honor with your walk through this world, Yahweh or yourself?

I'm not saying believers born in Yahweh's Spirit will never miss the target of behavioral perfection; I'm merely asserting that they will characteristically take careful aim at it—they'll *try* to do what they know is right. John put it like this: **"No one born [*gennao*] of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God."** Why not? It's because of the conviction of the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, making him miserable (or at least uncomfortable) when he's not in the center of God's will. **"By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."** (I John 3:9-10) If Yahweh's Spirit is living within you, sin will feel uncomfortable, irritating, and abnormal, like wearing burlap underwear: you won't be happy until it's gone.

In our parting shot on this subject from John, let's address one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. The King James puts it like this: **"We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not."** This *sounds* like anyone who is "born of God" must henceforth live a perfect, flawless, sinless life—and if he stumbles into sin, it's because he has failed in his responsibility before God to keep himself pure, so he's been given over to Satan to mess with him. But that's not what the verse is saying at all. There are actually *two* parties identified here, both of whom are described as being "born (*gennao*) of God," but the first of which is kept, guarded, or protected (*tereo*) by the second. The ESV provides a far more accurate translation here, but you still have to stay on your toes: **"We know that everyone who has been born of God [i.e., the Spirit-indwelted believer] does not keep on sinning, but He who was born of God [that is, Yahshua] protects him [the believer], and the evil one does not touch him."** (I John 5:18)

First, let's look at the grammatical differences between the two instances of the verb *gennao*—to be born. They're both passive participles, but the tenses are different—and telling. The first instance (the one describing us believers) is in the perfect tense. That means our “birth” is an action that's complete, but it has an ongoing state of being, an existing result in the present time. The second (the one describing Yahshua as being “born of God”) is in the aorist tense, simply indicating that His birth has occurred: it is accomplished. The aorist tense speaks of the reality of the action without regard to elapsed time. In other words, Yahshua is not being described as a second-generation deity, but rather as One whose eternal reality consists of being the Son of God—the One who represents Yahweh's interests before mankind (as it's pictured in Psalm 127:3-5).

Then, note that the verb “to sin” here (Greek: *hamartano*) is in the present tense (indicating continuous, linear action), the indicative mood (meaning that it is really happening), and the active voice (stating that the action is being accomplished by the subject). This means that the ESV's “keep on sinning” translation is correct. The errant KJV translation makes it sound as if the aorist tense had been used—which would have pretty much thrown the rest of Scripture into the dumpster.

The bottom line here is that the “evil one,” Satan, can't “touch” someone who is being protected by Yahshua—that is, through the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, just as Yahshua promised His disciples in John 14. (The word “touch” in this verse is fascinating: the Greek verb *hupto* literally means to fasten to, to adhere to, to seize or grasp—especially to “fasten” fire to something, i.e., to set it on fire.) So once we're born into Christ—from that moment—Satan can't burn us.

In the biological sense, we don't get to choose when we're born. That's up to our parents to decide (and frankly, I don't think they usually put a lot of thought into it). But birth happens nevertheless. As Solomon said, **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born [*yalad*], and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.”** (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2) But there's nothing about *spiritual* birth that's accidental, incidental, or beyond our own ability to bring about. For this kind of life, we get to choose the day of our birth; we get to decide when the devil can no longer seize us and set fire to our souls. I concur with Pinocchio on this one: why would anybody postpone becoming a real live person?

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We have established that physical, biological birth is a symbol God uses to teach us about the “second birth”—birth “from above” in His Spirit. But birth is



just the beginning of life; there's more to the human race than the starting gun. We shouldn't be too surprised then to find God's word speaking of life itself—as it does birth—in dual terms: temporary, biological life is a picture, a metaphor, used to teach us about eternal, spiritual life.

The primary words used to convey this concept are the Greek *psuche* and the Hebrew *nephesh*, both usually translated “life” or “soul.” Both words are derived from the idea of breath or respiration—something every living thing is observed to do, one way or another. The Genesis account of how Adam became a man, unique in the biosphere, tells us a great deal about the interrelationship of the scriptural concepts of life, breath, and simply *being*. **“Then Yahweh, God, formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed [*naphach*] into his nostrils the breath [*neshamah*] of life [*hayah*], and the man became [*hayah*] a living [*hay* or *chay*—pronounced somewhere in between the two] creature (or soul) [*nephesh*].”** (Genesis 2:7) Note the similarities, the family ties, between some of these words. The verb *hayah* (to become) and the adjective *hay* (living) are both based on the primitive root verb *chayah*—to live, have life, or be alive. In the thought process of the living God, to *be* is to *live*—which sort of explains why *chayah* is a component of His own self-revealed name: Yahweh. Conversely, death is defined as the cessation of existence on some level.

In the same way, the words translated “breathed” (*naphach*) and “soul” (*nephesh*—unfortunately translated “creature” here in the ESV) are related, the basic root idea being “breath.” *Neshamah*, the feminine noun translated “breath” here, is not linguistically related to *nephesh*, but it *is* based on a related concept: *nasham* means to pant or gasp, as in a woman's labor in childbirth. We should perhaps take this as a clue that making man in His own image was God's idea of “giving birth” to our race. Breath and life, then, are parallel concepts. This is an important thing to understand, because another word based on the concept of breathing—*ruach*—is the Hebrew word used to convey spirit. Thus the same basic metaphor—breath—is used to communicate spirit, soul, and life.

From Yahweh's point of view, then, these ideas are all related: existence, life, breath, soul, and spirit. Together, they define the eternal destiny of the child of God. But the picture is still not complete. There are two components yet missing, making a total of (surprise!) seven—presented (as usual) as six plus one. Look again at Genesis 2:7. **“Then Yahweh, God, formed the man of dust from the ground.”** The sixth component is seen here as “dust,” informing us that whether in this life or the next, we will have a bodily form. We'll explore that subject a bit later. The seventh component—the one, as expected, that stands separate from the others—is Yahweh's personal involvement in the whole process: **“Yahweh formed the man.”** He not only formed Adam's mortal carcass, but He'll fashion our immortal bodies as well. He has already built the prototype—Yahshua's resurrection body, a

model complete with existence, life, breath, soul, and the Spirit of God. We can expect Him to complete the same process in each of us in whom His Spirit dwells.

For now, however, we must content ourselves with the symbol, the promise. And that symbol reveals the danger we face: if the soul is separated from the body, the body dies: one's mortal life exists no longer. At one point, the patriarch Jacob was rather surprised to find himself alive, for he had just had a personal encounter with God—and he'd lived to tell the tale: **"So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel ["the face of God"], saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life [*nephesh*] has been delivered.'"** (Genesis 32:30) As we discovered in a previous chapter, the only way this was possible was for Yahweh to have manifested Himself in a diminished form, a "theophany" in which His glory was reduced to the point of non-lethality, though His identity remained intact. Jacob didn't need Paul to tell him that the wages of sin is death.

Our sins will eventually separate all of our souls from our mortal bodies. That ought to be depressing enough. But there are situations when the process of dying is unnaturally accelerated: **"Whoever takes a human life [*nephesh*] shall surely be put to death."** (Leviticus 24:17) **"If there is harm, then you shall pay life for life [*nephesh*], eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."** (Exodus 21:23-25) I don't really care if you find capital punishment cruel and barbaric. God disagrees with you, commanding its practice—carried out with all the caveats and safeguards He instituted—as the *only* just course of action. But we should not be unaware that the death penalty is in itself only one more of Yahweh's metaphors. The crime for which the death penalty is invoked, the forcible separation of another's soul from his mortal body (a.k.a. murder), is analogous to the prevention of Yahweh's Spirit from entering someone's soul—the very thing that would have defined him as being eternally, spiritually alive. You're free to choose your own destiny, of course, but you're not free to negatively impact the ability of others to make their own good choices: **"If there is harm, you shall pay, soul for soul."** Note that God isn't warning us against giving guidance—only against guidance that leads to another person's spiritual demise. He considers the "separation of church and state" (in the symbolic sense of separating our relationship with Him from the way we conduct our lives in the world) to be positively idiotic.

This truth is highlighted in such fundamental commands as this: **"You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul [*nephesh*] and with all your might."** (Deuteronomy 6:5) The Torah fairly screams that our God won't take a back seat to anyone or anything in our affections or attention. He doesn't want us to relegate Him to a remote corner of our lives, dredged up and given lip service for a couple of hours a week, or in times of great joy, or periods of profound grief. Yahweh is not a God of church services, weddings, and funerals. He's not just

Someone to turn to in times of national disaster or personal catastrophe. “Thank God it’s Friday” is a swell sentiment, as long as we’re also thanking Him when it’s Monday, and the whole week looming before us looks like a train wreck about to happen. It’s not that Yahweh is a narcissist—*He* doesn’t need the attention. It’s *us* that need to be in constant touch with Him, for He is the place of blessing and shelter, the source of life itself. Anything short of constant fellowship with Yahweh is detrimental to our health.

In Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, Yahweh listed specific blessings that would rest upon Israel if they would do as He had instructed them, but He also enumerated explicit curses that would befall them if they didn’t. Together, those instructions (the Torah) were supposed to comprise a sweeping and comprehensive picture of what He was doing in the world to effect mankind’s salvation—our redemption from the state of bondage into which we had sold ourselves. But the words had no sooner left the lips of His prophet, Moses, than Yahweh predicted what Israel would actually do: for the most part, they would reject His blessing and embrace the curse—forcing Him in the end to evict them from the land of promise. They would *not* “love Yahweh their God with all their heart and soul.” But those in the “Church” who are tempted to kick Israel while they’re down, claiming their covenant blessings for themselves, should bite their tongues, for they have done no better than Israel in loving Yahweh unreservedly. We all need to realize that Israel is a prophetic microcosm of the whole human race: where they failed, we are vulnerable as well; where they are given hope, we too can rejoice.

Knowing Israel would get lost, Yahweh showed them (and us) the way back home—which was basically to return to where we had swerved off course in the first place: **“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where Yahweh your God has driven you, and return to Yahweh your God, you and your children, and obey His voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul [*nephesh*], then Yahweh your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you.”** (Deuteronomy 30:1-3) Notice that He didn’t say “if,” but “when.” A remnant of God’s chosen race *will* “return to Yahweh with their whole heart and soul—it’s a prophetic *fait accompli*. And that means there’s hope for the rest of us. But blessed are they who never distance themselves from Yahweh’s love in the first place.

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A relationship with Yahweh is not (as some see it) like a hat you can put on your head or take off again. You can't logically compartmentalize the function of your *nephesh*—your life—into sacred and secular sections. It won't work. Worshipping God one day a week (and ignoring Him for the other six) would be like asking your heart to pump blood through your arteries only during business hours. But just as biological life is not intermittent, neither is its spiritual counterpart. That's why Yahweh commands us to love Him and obey His precepts with "*all* our heart and *all* our soul."

We shouldn't be too surprised, then, to find that Yahweh has used *blood* as a potent metaphor to teach us something about the nature of life. Blood brings oxygen—*breath* (remember what that means?)—to every cell in our bodies. Blood is always flowing, always providing what is needed—always *loving* the whole body. It's ubiquitous: cut me *anywhere* and I'm going to bleed. So Yahweh says, **"If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life [*nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the life [*nephesh*]." (Leviticus 17:10-11)** The *shedding* of blood is symbolic of sacrifice, and specifically (in the context of the Torah) the sacrifice of the Innocent to atone for the sins of the guilty—characterized here as a gift Yahweh has made to us upon the altar. The *eating* of blood is a different picture altogether: it is symbolic of someone nourishing himself at the expense of the life of another.

When Cain slew his brother Abel, Yahweh demanded of the murderer, **"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."** (Genesis 4:10-11) The relative innocence of Abel was a metaphor for the absolute innocence of Yahshua. The blood of both men cried out to Yahweh from the ground where it was spilled, but figuratively, it was also "eaten" by their murderers. That is, both Cain and the Jewish religious establishment attempted to elevate, sustain, and nourish themselves by shedding the blood of their innocent rivals. Though Cain couldn't have known it, the Chief Priests and Pharisees certainly should have perceived that the consequence of such a thing would be Yahweh's "setting His face against them" and "cutting them off from among their people." Eating blood isn't only hazardous to your physical health; It's also metaphorical of taking a life—a crime punishable by death.

As if this "blood" metaphor weren't confusing enough already, Yahshua said: **"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on My**

**flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.**" (John 6:53-55) This time, of course, He was speaking *figuratively* of His blood that was to be shed to atone for our sins. Remember, Yahweh had informed us, **"The life [*nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood,"** and **"It is the blood that makes atonement for the life [*nephesh*]."** The fact is, we *do* need to be nourished by assimilating the Messiah's life into our lives. He alone is capable of sustaining our souls and elevating our spirits. So as *literal* blood is *symbolic* of one's mortal life (which makes eating it symbolic of murder), the *symbolic* blood of Christ is *literally* the substance of His life (making drinking it symbolic of assimilating that life into our own). Confused yet?

Put another way, we are all guilty of "eating blood," for we are all culpable in the murder of God's Anointed. The only way we can be absolved of our crime is to avail ourselves of the atoning efficacy that blood. The issue we must each address is how we came to partake of the blood of the Messiah: did we take it by force, or did we allow Yahweh to bestow it upon us as a gift? The difference isn't academic: it's a matter of life *versus* death.

The disposition of blood isn't the only way Yahweh tied the concepts of physical and spiritual life together. Actually, the symbolic continuity between the two worlds—between the type and the antitype—is ubiquitous in scripture. Job's friend Elihu apparently thought that repentance would compel God to spare a man's physical life, not thinking far enough ahead to realize that all men, even those (like Job) with no specific or identifiable sins from which to repent, are still destined for sheol. He intoned, **"He has redeemed my soul [*nephesh*] from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light. Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life."** (Job 33:28-30) Elihu figured that since his own life was relatively free from problems, it must mean that Yahweh had already "ransomed his soul from the pit," not realizing that he was, in fact, headed toward sheol just as certainly as Job was. Yahweh's plan, however, was to "bring his soul back from the pit" *after* death—producing new life, presented in a whole new kind of body. And as we have seen, Job had some idea of how Yahweh intended to accomplish this: **"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God."** (Job 19:25-26)

The contrast between Elihu's limited understanding and Job's more enlightened position is mirrored in a Psalm from the sons of Korah: **"Like sheep they [in context, the foolish and those who follow them] are appointed for Sheol. Death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell. But God will ransom my soul [*nephesh*] from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me."** (Psalm 49:14-15) Sheol, the grave, need not be the end of life. For the follower of Yahweh, ransom—redemption and renewal—awaits. As David put it, **"Yahweh redeems the life**

**[*nephesh*] of his servants; none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.”**  
(Psalm 34:22)

The point is that people whose only concern is this mortal life *are* foolish. Yahshua told a story about just such a man. **“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’”** Poor baby. We all have our crosses to bear, don’t we? **“And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul [*psuche*], you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul [*psuche*] is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”** (Luke 12:16-21)

Note first that you can be smart enough to earn a great deal of money and still be considered a total imbecile in God’s eyes. Second, the man’s wealth was only incidentally the result of his own industry and business acumen: it was primarily a gift from God: his *land* had produced plentifully. Today we might say, “The stock market was good to me” or “My education paid off.” Is there is *any* variable outside your control? Of course there is: there *always* is. You therefore can (and should) consider whatever success you’ve enjoyed a gift from God, and honor Him accordingly. Third, once you’re dead, the things you possessed in your mortal life are of no consequence to you—*unless* you used them to glorify God and to show love to your fellow man. And fourth, you never know when your time is up; all you can know for sure is that your days as a mortal human *will* come to an end.

The moral of the story is that you can plan, prepare, and provide for this life all you want, but you’re a fool if you think it’s going to last. A wise man factors eternity into his calculations for the future. Or as Yahshua put it, **“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life [*psuche*], what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”** (Luke 12:22-23) In other words, this mortal shell you have to feed and clothe is not all there is to life. A parallel passage in Matthew adds: **“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”** (Matthew 6:26-27) Funny He should have mentioned that: chronic anxiety and stress have now been conclusively demonstrated to *shorten* one’s life expectancy. The physical cause seems to be linked to a component of our DNA called “telomeres.” Yahweh of course, having designed our genetic structure, knows precisely how it all works—and He instructed us about the pitfalls of anxiety a couple of millennia before our scientists got around to figuring it out.

He didn't make a big deal about it, however—He didn't introduce yogaesque meditation techniques designed to reduce our stress levels and thereby lengthen our earthly lives—because our mortal bodies were never intended to be the vehicles of eternity. They're temporary, disposable, not built to last—they're only the Artist's sketch, not His actual masterpiece. That's why Yahshua told us, **"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life [*psuche*] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it..."** The Greek word *psuche* has a foot in both worlds, the temporal and the spiritual—and these dual meanings are being played against each other here. The "breath" of our mortal bodies is being contrasted with the "soul"—that component of our life that can be made immortal through the indwelling of God's Spirit. The point is that if we sacrifice our spiritual calling on the altar of our temporal requisites, we will lose both; but if we subjugate our earthly existence to our heavenly destiny, we will preserve everything that can be preserved.

This preservation is only possible if there is life beyond this life—if the temporary life we know and experience in this world is only a symbol for the *permanent* life that awaits us in Christ. **"For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life [*psuche*]? For what can a man give in return for his life?"** It is possible, under certain circumstances, to ransom or redeem a person's mortal life. Kidnappers count on it. But this is not true of his *real* life—his soul. That remains in the hands of a Holy God, and it can only be redeemed with the one thing we do *not* naturally possess: innocence. The obligatory innocence, however, is offered freely to us, the gift of a loving God. But this gift will avail us nothing if we refuse to accept it. **"For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."** (Mark 8:34-38) What does it mean to "be ashamed" of Yahshua? I'd say the most fundamental indication would be to act as if His sacrifice—His gift of innocence—were insufficient to atone for one's sins—that it must be supplemented by my works, penance, or alms.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with good works, of course. But they are not a component of the salvation we enjoy. It's a cart-before-the-horse sort of thing. Good works are *evidence* of life, not a means by which we can attain it. Without Yahshua's advent—the only example we have of a perfect Torah-compliant life—we wouldn't even know for sure what "good works" looked like. John reminds us: **"By this we know love, that He laid down his life [*psuche*] for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."** (I John 3:16-18) This, I believe, is what Yahshua characterized above as "taking up one's cross." It's not necessarily dying a martyr's death, although it occasionally comes

to that. It's more often manifested in a radical shifting of priorities—my needs are put on the back burner while I attend to those of my brother or sister. It's practical, tangible service offered in response to a perceived need—the kind of thing described in the parable of the “Good Samaritan.”

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It should be self-evident that “laying down our lives for the brothers” is something that can't be done with our soul alone. One's entire being has to be involved. Paul's concluding salutation in his first letter to the Thessalonians points out the multifaceted nature of our existence: **“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit [*pneuma*] and soul [*psuche*] and body [*soma*] be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.”** (I Thessalonians 5:23-24) We've been discussing this soul—the *psuche*—for the past few pages now. To recap, it is the thing that makes someone (or something—any animal) alive; its the seat of feelings, desires, affections, or aversions—the inner self: the heart, mind, and psychological faculty. The spirit—the *pneuma*—as we have seen, is a bit broader concept. Paul can't be referring to Yahweh's indwelling Holy Spirit here, for he prays that it will be “kept blameless.” I therefore believe that in this context, the *pneuma* to which Paul refers is “the vital principle by which the body is animated,” and specifically, “the disposition of influence which fills and governs the soul of anyone; the efficient source of any power, affection, emotion, or desire, etc.” (Those definitions are from the *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*.)

If I may use another of my dumb automotive metaphors, the soul (the *psuche*) is like a car's mechanical components—all the stuff that enables it go, turn, and stop. The spirit (the *pneuma*) would then be comparable to the driver—the one who directs and controls all this going, turning, and stopping. And the body (the *soma*) is the package that contains the soul and accommodates the spirit. Each of these components has its own function, and one could say a car isn't really fulfilling its destiny or purpose without all three. Yes, the mechanics are the essence of the automobile (just as a living soul is the essence of a man's being) but a car's existence is pointless if there is no one to drive it (or if there is no *reason* to drive it—no destination). And the body? It isn't just for looks: its form follows its function. The sheet metal and glass direct the wind (feel free to take *that* metaphor and run with it); the controls and gauges allows the driver (the spirit) to communicate with the car (the soul); and the operator's environment is specifically designed to facilitate the interface between the driver and the



automobile. In human terms, it's the place within the body where the spirit speaks to the soul. In Hebrew, you'd call that the *neshamah*—see Genesis 2:7.

Where a car goes is entirely dependent on will of the driver. So Paul's prayer inadvertently points out something important: our "blamelessness" before God is a package deal: our body and soul go wherever our spirit directs. So we need to be aware of who is in the driver's seat. There are three options. If Yahweh's Holy Spirit is driving us, then our destination is heaven and our path is God's love. The street lights and road signs along the way are the Word of God, and our safe arrival is assured by the heavenly escort—Yahweh's angelic host.

If we ourselves are behind the wheel, however, we're in trouble, because we don't really know where we're going, or how to get there. (The same thing would be true of the wholesale surrender of our will to another human—some charismatic figure like Muhammad or Hitler, perhaps—to whom we might foolishly assign our allegiance.) At the very best, life under human control is a pointless joyride; at the worst, it's a journey into terror and death. But either way, we'll never reach our destination: we don't even know where we *want* to go.

Option three, however, is by far the worst. If we allow Satan to drive, he's going to take us straight to hell with him.

Forgive me if I seem to be stretching this metaphor beyond the breaking point, but consider this. It's the *body* that accommodates the spirit. These days, some high end cars have the "ability" to keep unwanted drivers from getting behind the wheel: fancy locks, ignition kill switches, biometric identity verifiers, and so forth are used to keep people from driving the car who aren't supposed to—even the owner, if he's too inebriated to drive safely. In the same way (sort of) it is the function of *our bodies* (or, our souls within them) to determine who we want driving the vehicle of our eternal destiny. That is, the choices that ultimately determine our spiritual destination—deciding who is going to be in control of our lives—must be made in our mortal flesh. The responsibility and privilege of choice is the central reality of the human condition.

We should therefore resist the temptation to brush off the significance of the body, the flesh, just because it's temporary. (This was the error of one branch of the Gnostic heresy, leading to all sorts of licentiousness.) God designed the body with one job in mind—to be the vehicle through which the soul could operate in this world. We'll find the most eye-opening revelations concerning the body in the New Covenant scriptures, but the concept is, as usual, firmly grounded in the Tanach. The Hebrew word most often used to convey "the body" or "flesh" is *basar*, used 269 times in the Hebrew scriptures. Interestingly, it is based on a verb that means to bear news (usually good news), to show forth, proclaim, preach, or announce. I'm willing to take this as a heavy handed hint that Yahweh intended

the function of our flesh to be the proclamation of His good news. Just a theory, of course.

Perhaps the most stunning use of *basar* is a verse we've already seen: **"After my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh [*basar*] I shall see God."** (Job 19:26) Quite a few instances of the word concern the Levitical animal sacrifices—all of which are prophetic, one way or another, of the ultimate sacrifice of Yahshua. Another large group of *basar* sightings occurs in Leviticus, chapters 13-16, where the ritual cleansing of the body is used as a metaphor instructing us how to attain spiritual purity. Many instances of *basar* emphasize the frailty and impermanence of our mortal bodies. For example, **"All flesh [*basar*] is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of Yahweh blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."** (Isaiah 40:6-8) It therefore makes no sense at all to rely upon the arm of man. In fact, we're *cursed* if we do: **"Thus says Yahweh: 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh [*basar*] his strength, whose heart turns away from Yahweh.'"** (Jeremiah 17:5) Yahweh will judge us in flesh (see for example, Jeremiah 25:31, Ezekiel 39:17, and Zechariah 14:12) and He will redeem us in flesh (see Ezekiel 36:26 and Psalm 145:21).

But as I said, the clearest presentation of the contrast between the mortal body and its spiritual counterpart—and the transition between them—is to be found in the New Covenant scriptures. In Greek, the word for "body" is *soma*, a word that stresses the corporeal reality of the body (the thing that casts the shadow, as opposed to the shadow itself). It's hard to see what a soul is doing, and impossible for us to observe a spirit directly (see John 3:8). It is only through the body's actions that the soul (and the spirit driving it) can express itself in this world. That, of course, is why Yahweh manifested Himself in a body of flesh, as Yahshua informed His persecutors: **"So the Jews said to Him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?'"** *Things?* Yahshua had just "cleansed" Yahweh's temple—and not for the last time. He drove out the traders and their bleating overpriced merchandise, turned over the moneychangers' profitable tables, and generally acted like He owned the place (which, in reality, He *did*). **"Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But He was speaking about the temple of his body [*soma*]. When therefore He was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."** (John 2:18-22) It's significant that Yahshua compared His body with the temple of God. All the way back to its introduction to Israel (in the form of the wilderness tabernacle) the design, function, furnishings, rituals, materials, and even the dimensions of the sanctuary had all declared, in symbolic terms, Yahweh's plan for the redemption of mankind. That plan would come to fruition in the ministry of the Messiah, a

ministry Yahshua had just commenced when He spoke these words. I can virtually guarantee that He was the only One on earth who understood what He meant at the time.

Yahshua's body was the fulfillment of the temple's promise. But since we believers are "in Christ," we can expect to see a parallel in our own lives, our own bodies. Paul explains how it works. He begins by saying, **"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything...."** *All things are lawful?* He just got through telling the Corinthians that "the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God." So obviously he wasn't advocating throwing out the Torah and substituting it with "grace" (a.k.a. *license*)—a mistaken interpretation all too prevalent in Christian circles. He was, rather, addressing the Greco-Roman propensity to deem sins performed in the body (like fornication) as inconsequential to their spiritual well-being. Paul, knowing his Torah, was all too aware that you couldn't separate your "secular" life from your "spiritual" one. You have only one life (and remember: the spirit—whether God's, yours, or Satan's—is in the driver's seat). So take careful note: the word translated "lawful" here doesn't have anything to do with "law." It's *exesti*, literally denoting "out of what is." It's a verb meaning that something is possible—it can occur: it's logistically feasible. So Paul is actually saying something like: *Sure, I could do all sorts of things, but what I do in indifference to Yahweh can hurt me—even enslave me.*

So he continues his explanation: **"Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"—and God will destroy both one and the other.** The ESV, with their use of quotes, rightly treats these phrases as proverbs of sorts, expressions of attitudes prevalent in Corinthian society upon which Paul wished to comment. **"The body [soma] is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God [Yahweh] raised the Lord [that is, Yahshua] and will also raise us up by His power. Do you not know that your bodies [soma] are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh.' But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him."** This is the point that so many of us miss: there is a bond, a connection, between the believer and his God—and this spiritual bond is formed *in the flesh* if it is formed at all. It is in our mortal, corruptible bodies that our choices in life are made—the most significant of which is deciding whose spirit—Yahweh's, ours, or Satan's—will be invited to dwell within us, directing our journey through life. Paul was speaking to believers, so he concludes, **"Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body [soma], but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body [soma] is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."** (I Corinthians 6:12-20) Now you know why

Christians needn't bother trying to manage the morals of non-believers. Those without Yahweh's Spirit within them aren't even *alive*, in any permanent sense.

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But we're talking about contrasts, about transitions. Biological processes are here to teach us about spiritual possibilities. So ask yourself: what's the *one* difference between a fresh corpse and a living human? It's the presence of the *psuche*, the soul, the *life*. Once the soul has departed, your body is nothing but chemicals—two thirds water and one third dirt. But history (not to mention our own universal human longing) teaches us that one Man rose bodily from such a lifeless state into a new immortal state.

On the day He died, **"the women who had come with [Yahshua] from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body [*soma*] was laid.... But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.'"** (Luke 23:55, 24:1-5) Paul's counsel was to "Glorify God in your body." I can think of no better way of doing that than being raised from the dead by the power of Yahweh—just as our Messiah did. Bodily resurrection, starting with Yahshua's, proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Author of life is willing and able to transform death into life—and specifically, to change the inevitable end product of our mortal nature into the startling promise of the immortal state: being clothed in a new, indestructible kind of body—pure, holy, and incorruptible. (Mere resuscitations—"near-death experiences"—don't count for much, because they place the subject right back where he started: doomed to an inevitable and unavoidable physical death.)

Merely wishing to be "raised from the dead" is not enough to make it so, of course. A moment ago, Paul described the connection that must be made: **"God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?"** (I Corinthians 6:14-15) How, then, does one become a "member of Christ?" Is He some kind of club you join, with regular weekly meetings and dues to pay? No. The word "member" is the Greek *melos*, meaning a body part, such as a limb or an organ—hence figuratively someone who is part of a larger unit, part of a body. Yahshua explained it this way to Nicodemus: **"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."** (John 3:5-6) My

left foot is a “member” of my mortal body. And in a way, *I* am the left foot of Christ’s spiritual body, the ekklesia. (Yes, it’s true: I can’t dance.) My left foot may not be the most important part of my body, but if it weren’t there, I’d miss it. The same thing is true in the body of Christ. All of us need to be there, and be engaged, for the body to function as it should. (Really, how many appendixes does a body need, anyway?)

But we can’t all be the cerebral cortex, either. **“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body [*soma*] we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”** (Romans 12:3-6) Of all a body’s “parts,” unquestionably the most important is the head, the brain. It controls and coordinates the movements and functions of the whole body—the things we consciously think about, like moving our hands and feet, *and* the functions that go on “in the background,” like breathing and digestion.

In the body of Christ, He is the brain: **“He [Yahshua] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body [*soma*], the church [literally, the called-out]. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.”** (Colossians 1:15-18) What happens if the body doesn’t do exactly what the brain is telling it to do? It’s called “illness.” One of my daughters has a disease called Huntington’s Chorea, in which (among other symptoms) her limbs tremble uncontrollably. While she’s having an episode, she cannot speak clearly, has no strength in her limbs, and cannot even swallow properly. I mention this because it seems to be a perfect picture of the “church” when it refuses to take orders from its Head—which seems to be an increasingly prevalent condition these days. If the hands, feet, and tongue of the “body of Christ” aren’t listening to the Head but are off doing whatever they please, the whole body is going to suffer. Its ability to be a force for good in the world will be severely curtailed, it won’t have an effective voice, and to add insult to injury, it won’t even be able to get the spiritual nourishment it needs.

Paul addresses the subject of “body parts” from a slightly different angle in another epistle: **“For just as the body [*soma*] is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.”** (I Corinthians

12: 12-14) Think this time of the *kind* of tissue comprising your body. Bones and teeth have one kind of job to do, muscle and fat another, blood another, and nerves another. So it is that the body of Christ is made up of people of different nationalities, cultures, social status, gifts, and abilities—all comprising one body whose head is Yahshua.

**“There are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”** (I Corinthians 12: 20-27) The point is, God designed the body (ours *and* Christ’s) to be a perfectly functioning organism. Any compromise to its integrity will diminish the whole body. You may not think your liver or colon are particularly honorable, but without them, your body would accumulate waste and toxins and promptly perish. Somebody in the ekklesia has to perform these same functions—guarding it against heresy, keeping the message pure and nutritious.

The body of Christ, like our mortal bodies, needs to be nourished, fed, and replenished with the Word of God—the *Logos*, Yahshua Himself. I’m eating breakfast as I write these words. (They say you’re not supposed to do that, but “It’s how I roll”—or at least, why I’m “well rounded”). My oats and orange juice will eventually become part of me (at the molecular level), for in a very real sense, “you are what you eat.” Yahshua used this very truth as an illustration of what it means to become a “member” of the body of Christ: **“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body [*soma*].’ And he took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”** (Matthew 26:26) Bread sustains our mortal bodies: without food, we will eventually perish. In the same way, we must assimilate Christ; we must make Him the sustenance of our very souls. Spiritual starvation sounds like a horrible way to die.

This assimilation is a two way street. As we feed on Yahshua, He also makes us part of Himself. It seems counterintuitive, I know, but we not only need to be “in Christ,” we need *Him* to be “in us” as well. Yahshua is the alpha *and* the omega, the first *and* the last, the beginning *and* the end, the root *and* stem of Jesse. The Messiah is *both ends* of the spiritual food chain: He’s both the plankton

in the ocean of our existence *and* the orca who roams these seas at will, fearing no predator. Or expressing this truth another way, He became the foundation of our house (our life) in order that He might take up residence *in us*.

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The idea of us attaining life through Yahshua's death makes no sense to the unregenerate man, of course, but as Paul reminds us, this sort of thing happens all the time in the natural world: **"Someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies...."** Don't take being called a "fool" personally, but that's what we are if we ignore the fact that Yahweh built object lessons into the natural world. In this case, the example is a seed—the genetic "offspring" of a plant. It can't achieve its potential—becoming a new "individual" of the same species as its forebears—if it does not undergo a transformation, a "death" of sorts, complete with a proper burial.

What arises from a seed planted in the ground is not merely another seed, but an entire plant—an organism (a "body") capable of bearing a multitude of seeds of the same kind that had been planted. Or as Paul puts it, **"And what you sow is not the body [soma] that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body [soma] as He has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body."** Yes: you plant corn kernels, you expect to get corn stalks; you plant acorns, you expect to see oak trees. The same genetic boundaries apply for animals as well, and for people. You can cross a lion with a tiger, for they're both cats, but you can't breed a hybrid of an eagle and a three-toed tree toad: they're fundamentally different kinds of beasts. **"For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies [soma] and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory...."** Though heavenly "bodies" (the word—*soma*—is the same in Greek, just as it is in English) do not reproduce like plants and animals do, there is still a distinction between their basic physical makeup—their "DNA," so to speak. One emits light, while the other only reflects it.

So far, that's all pretty self-evident. But now we are told how these symbols relate to the reality they represent: **"So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body...."** When you plant

a viable seed in fertile ground, you can expect it to be “raised in power and glory” in the form of a plant of the same species. My wife and I do this every spring, expecting to harvest hundreds of tomatoes, green beans, and zucchinis from a few tiny seeds. God designed us to be similarly transformed—from “perishable” (i.e., mortal), dishonorable, weak, *natural* creatures into imperishable (read: immortal), glorious, powerful, *spiritual* people.

This may come as a surprise, however, because we don’t actually see it happening in our daily experience. That it does (and will) happen is something we must take on faith, based on reliable scriptural revelation. The fact is, there has thus far been only *one* historical occurrence of this remarkable transformation. I speak, of course, of the resurrection of Yahshua the Messiah—slain as a mortal man, but raised in an immortal, spiritual body. Will this also happen to us who trust in Him? Yes. It’s not for nothing that Christ is called God’s “*firstfruits*” offering—the *firstborn* of the dead. He was the first; we *will* follow Him.

The reason we’re weak, mortal, and dishonorable is that our father (that is, our original *human* father, Adam) took on these attributes through his sin (a mutation in his spiritual DNA, so to speak) and passed them down to us. But Yahshua reminds us that if we’re born from above, born of His Spirit, we will leave Adam’s curse behind when we leave our mortal bodies behind: Yahshua became our *second* Father when we were adopted into His family. **“Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam [i.e., Yahshua] became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable....”** The idea of exchanging whose “image” we bear is something with which my wife and I are intimately familiar. You see, we adopted nine of our eleven children, and the adopted ones came from all over the place. My firstborn son looks a lot like me (that is, what I looked like when I was his age). But our kids from Korea and India look nothing like us, physically. And yet, from a cultural, societal, linguistic, or even psychological point of view, they now “look” a whole lot more like us (their adoptive parents) than they would their “original” parents.

And that’s not all. Our children—both the biological and adopted ones—are named in our will. They’ll inherit whatever’s left when my wife and I pass on (I hope they’re not counting on much). In the same way (sort of) we believers are “in the will” (that is, we are partakers of God’s covenant promises). We, as adopted children, are co-heirs with Christ, who is (as the Bible’s admittedly metaphorical language phrases it) the “only begotten Son of God.”



So (as with any number of other Bible contributors) Paul describes something that's sort of a cross between a "reading of the will" and a big family reunion—*Yahweh's* family. **"Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."** I firmly believe that this event will fulfill the next scheduled "feast" or convocation of Yahweh (the fifth of the seven)—the Feast of Trumpets, *Yom Teruah*. **"For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'"** (I Corinthians 15:35-54) This event (which obviously hasn't happened yet) marks the moment when we believers will be instantaneously transformed from our mortal state to one of immortality, from being corruptible (or *corrupted*—the redeemed dead are included in this) to being incorruptible. In that moment, we will all experience the total transformation of our bodies from their present natural, physical state into a supernatural, spiritual state, presumably like that in which Yahshua appeared after His resurrection. The body of sin we inherited from the first Adam will be traded in for that sinless vessel revealed by the second Adam—Yahshua.

Remarkably (at least to me), there are large numbers of people within the Christian faith who deny the possibility, never mind the inevitability, of such a thing. Speaking to the skeptics of His day, **"Jesus answered them, 'Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.'"** (John 6:43-44) The skeptics would answer, *Sure, we'll be raised—from the dead. But transformed from living mortals into the immortal state? That's just too "easy," too escapist a philosophy. We're not really holy unless we're suffering for Christ!* Really? Though we are guaranteed "tribulation" in this world, our suffering, whether light or heavy, has no effect whatsoever on our salvation status: it's *Yahshua's* suffering that atones for our sins, not our own.

Besides, Yahshua said, **"On this rock [in context, the foundational premise that Yahshua is the Messiah, the Son of the living God] I will build My church, and the gates of hell [literally, Hades, i.e., sheol: the grave, the abode of the dead—not the subsequent state of eternal torment commonly called hell] shall not prevail against it."** (Matthew 16:18) This assures me that the ekklesia will still be around—populated by living mortals—until its "last day." That, if you'll recall, is the day upon which Yahshua promised to "raise us up"—the definitive Feast of Trumpets, if I'm not mistaken. The "church age" will end abruptly with the transformation of every believer's body, living or dead, into its new immortal state. And if the seven "holy convocations" will be fulfilled in their annual order of celebration (as the first four were), then the Trumpets Transformation will occur *before* Israel

embraces her Messiah (the Day of Atonement), which in turn will happen *before* Yahshua's Millennial Kingdom commences (the Feast of Tabernacles).

You needn't take my word for any of this, of course. At this late stage of the game, you can simply remain alive until it happens, or die trying. (That's my strategy, anyway.) There will be only one generation for whom this whole discussion isn't merely a theoretical scenario: the one that will participate in it. For everyone else, it's just an exercise in faith, not materially different from praying to a God you can't see, tithing, being baptized, turning the other cheek, or any number of things we are instructed to do. I am of the opinion that we are—*today*—living within that generation.

It's revealing to me that the Feast of Trumpets, *Yom Teruah*, was also commonly referred to in Yahshua's day as *Yom Hakeseh*—the “hidden day.” This was because Jewish folklore had designated this as the one day of the year Satan came before Yahweh to accuse the Jews of their sins. So they never said when *Yom Teruah* was (it's the first day of the month of Tishri) but, tongue in cheek, they simply declared that the day was “hidden.” If only the devil were that dumb. Anyway, I'm wondering if this figure of speech (and the day to which it referred) was in the back of Yahshua's mind when He told His disciples, **“So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.”** The “them” here refers to people who would persecute and hate the disciples for His sake. In the parallel passage in Luke 12:1-5, He specifically identifies them as *religious* people—the Pharisees. **“What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body [soma] but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”** (Matthew 10:26-28) The transformation of the body (one way or another) is still in view. The body is always vulnerable; the soul may or may not be, depending on its spiritual state.

Who is Yahshua talking about? Who are these would-be “killers?” There was no shortage of people who were willing to kill one's body on a pretext, but whether Romans or robbers, we need not be particularly concerned about them, for the body was never *meant* to last forever. But who has a vested interest in killing your soul? It's not God: He has the *power* to do so, of course, but He pointedly leaves it up to us to decide our own eternal destiny—not being willing that any should perish. Nor is it Satan: Oh, he'd *like* to destroy our souls in hell, but in the real world, he can do nothing (beyond tempting us) without our permission—or Yahweh's. No, in a strange twist, it's somebody Yahshua had just declared that His followers *shouldn't* be afraid of—their persecutors: the Pharisees. What gives? Again, we must dig into the Greek grammar. When He says, **“Have no fear of them,”** He's speaking in the aorist tense, subjunctive mood, describing action that is likely to occur, but is not actually happening: *There is*

*potentially something to fear here, but it is not yet a problem for you.* But the second phrase, **“Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell,”** puts *phobeo* (to fear) in the aorist imperative, making it mean, in essence: *Start fearing these people.*

Why the transition? What all of a sudden made the Pharisees, scribes, and chief priests so all-fired dangerous? It was the presence of the Messiah, and the choice we would all subsequently have to make, based on His finished work. The religious establishment felt threatened by Yahshua, and for good reason. If folks began acknowledging His mission as the Torah’s perfect sacrifice—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—then the Pharisees would be revealed as the frauds they were. It’s one thing to be mistaken, of course, but the Pharisees were purposeful spiritual murderers: they were perfectly willing to see their countrymen go to hell in order to keep their dirty little secret hidden—and their power intact. The falsehood they preached—that keeping their twisted interpretation of the Torah would make people righteous before God—would **“destroy both soul and body in hell.”**

So Yahshua pointed out the awkward truth: though physical death is inevitable, it need not be a problem. The Author of Life has the power—and the desire—to overrule it. **“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven.”** (Matthew 10:29-33) For Yahshua to acknowledge or deny anyone before His Father in heaven, there has to be a life beyond this one—an immortal life following the mortal one. No one can stand before Yahweh in their mortal state and live to tell the tale. The transformation from natural to supernatural is absolutely necessary for Yahshua’s acknowledgment to have any real meaning. If we are to be citizens of heaven, we must be transformed—bodily—into something heavenly. As Paul reminds us, **“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body [*soma*] to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.”** (Philippians 3:20-21) But conversely, Yahshua’s promise of denial before the Father of someone who denied Him before men would be an empty gesture if transformation into the immortal state was a fairy tale. The horrible reality is that one *can* become an immortal citizen of hell—literally a fate worse than death.

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For a book that claims to reveal the source of eternal life, the Bible has an awful lot to say about death. This makes perfect sense, of course: contrast is the most effective teaching tool there is. You can't understand the significance of a green traffic light unless you're familiar with what a red one means. You can't really appreciate food if you've never known hunger. And you'll have no conception of how precious life is if you've never seen death. The thing that defines Yahweh as being unique, separate from His creation—in a word, *holy*—is that He is the source of all life, of all meaningful existence. Separation *from Him* is what physical death was meant to symbolize. If life is for learning (which is how I see it), then Yahweh's intended lesson for us is that being disconnected from Him is the worst thing imaginable. And bodily death—the end of one's mortal existence—is the textbook that makes that lesson crystal clear.

So from the very beginning, Yahweh characterized death as a bad thing—something to be avoided. God gave Adam only one admonition, but the consequence of non-compliance was *death*: **“And Yahweh, God, commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die [*muth*].”** (Genesis 2:16-17) How did Adam know what that meant? Had he seen plants wither and die there in the garden? Had he witnessed death in the animal world—swatting a mosquito on his own arm perhaps? I believe he knew *exactly* what Yahweh had implied: something very bad would happen. Funny thing, though: as it turned out, it wasn't physical death at all that befell the inhabitants of Eden in the wake of their sin. It was the *spiritual* death about which Yahweh had designed physical death as a teaching tool. Adam didn't physically die for another nine hundred and thirty years—a far cry from “in the day that you shall eat of it.” But Adam *did* die that day in the spiritual sense—he became estranged from the God who had made him. The “breath of life” that Yahweh had breathed into him departed, leaving behind what Pascal would later describe as a “God-shaped vacuum” that nothing other than Yahweh could fill. He *did* fill it again—after Adam's repentance and the sacrifice of an innocent animal to cover his sin. But from that moment on, all of Adam's children would be born outside of Eden, lost in the world—as Yahshua put it, “condemned already.” From that moment on, life with Yahweh was a choice we'd have to make, not a condition we were born into.

The Hebrew word used to describe Adam's impending “death” was *muth*, the generic verb for dying—to die or be in a state of death, to kill (or be killed), to murder, assassinate, or execute (or suffer any of these things). The end result of this death, in the physical sense, was described to Adam as “returning to dust”: **“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** (Genesis 3:19) Without Yahweh's eternal Spirit to keep his soul alive, Adam's personal existence would end when his soul departed his body—which would then deteriorate into the

elements from which it had been made. This cessation of existence is the sword of Damocles hanging over the head of everyone born into the world under the curse of Adam. It is inevitable—*unless* something is done to make the soul permanently alive. And the only way that can be done is to fill it, merge it, *indwell it* with an immortal spirit. Yahweh, of course, had His own eternal Spirit in mind: **“That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”** (John 3:6)

The catch is that Satan, though a created being, is also an immortal spirit—and can, upon invitation, inhabit one’s soul the same way Yahweh’s Spirit indwells that of His children. Yahshua bluntly told the Pharisees, **“If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I came from God.... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”** (John 8:42, 44) His persecutors were “born” of a spirit, all right: *Satan’s* spirit. The devil was their spiritual father. Their position, therefore, was far worse than Adam’s had been. Yes, his sin (a violation of Yahweh’s perfect standard) had condemned him to death. Death, however, was something that, by the power and love of God, could be overcome. The Pharisees’ overt and purposeful antipathy toward Yahweh, however, had earned them a fate far worse than mere death. They would partake of the same destiny as their spiritual father’s: eternal waking separation from God’s presence: a *living* hell.

It was never Yahweh’s intention, of course, that we should choose between death and damnation. He loves us: His only desire is for us to choose life over any conceivable alternative. That explains why the distinction between death and damnation is so subtle in the scriptures. The question isn’t, “Would you rather be beheaded, hanged, or shot?” The question is, “Would you rather live or die?” So on the symbolic level in Yahweh’s word, the undesirable alternatives to life are all lumped together under the heading of “death.” The elementary lesson we are supposed to learn is that death is bad, and life is good. Presented with the choice between them, we should choose life. *Duh!*

So in scripture we are confronted with one example after another of death—invariably with some lesson attached instructing us as to why it happens, what it means, and maybe how to avoid it. The men of Noah’s day were irretrievably corrupt, so Yahweh swept them away with a flood: **“Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath [*neshamah*] of life died [*muth*].”** (Genesis 7:22) The mention of the *neshamah* here makes it clear that the point of the flood was to deal with the descendants of Adam who had chosen not to walk with Yahweh. But there was collateral damage on a grand scale (which teaches us that our sins affect not only ourselves, but can negatively impact the world around us. **“For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the**

breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die [*gawa*].... all flesh died [*gawa*] that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind.” (Genesis 6:17, 7:21)

Here another Hebrew verb describing dying is used. *Gawa* means to die, to perish, to expire, to breathe one’s last. It is only used 24 times in the Tanach, and it seems (if the usage is any indication) to stress the inevitability of death. For instance: “O Yahweh, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it. These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die [*gawa*] and return to their dust.” (Psalm 104:24-29) For man and beast alike, life and death are in the hands of God, and nobody gets out of here alive—not in a mortal body, anyway.

A third Hebrew verb meaning “to die” is *abad*: to perish, vanish, go astray, be lost, squandered, or destroyed. Here the emphasis is on destruction, ruin, annihilation, extermination, or expulsion. A telling derivation of the word is the name of the demon king mentioned in the fifth trumpet judgment of Revelation (John 9:11): Abaddon, his Hebrew name, is equated with the Greek epithet Apollyon. Both words mean destruction or destroyer. So comparing the three common Hebrew words for death, we see a shift in emphasis. *Muth* speaks of the fact of death; *gawa* of its inevitability; and *abad* its waste.

Sometimes the word choice isn’t quite what we’d expect. Solomon remarked, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies [*muth*] just like the fool!” (Ecclesiastes 2:15-16) I half expected to see *gawa* here, stressing the inevitability of death. But the use of *muth* reminds me that there is a *reason* everyone dies: the wise and foolish alike are guilty of breaking God’s law. There is no sliding scale or grading curve—life is pass or fail, and we all fail, even the best of us. Of course, these shades of meaning for the different Hebrew verbs about dying aren’t mutually exclusive. They overlap and complement each other. So the Psalmist concurs with Solomon: “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit. For he sees that even the wise die [*muth*]; the fool and the stupid alike must perish [*abad*] and leave their wealth to others.” (Psalm 49:7-10) He’s speaking, of course, of the life we lead on this earth—in these mortal bodies—the life in which we stand up or fall short, in which we make our choices and form our allegiances, for better or worse.

Whether we do relatively well or poorly, our lives are all proven to be imperfect in the end, and the penalty for imperfection is death.

And yet, there is hope for a life beyond this imperfect life. A ransom has been made available to us sufficient to buy back our freedom from the bondage of sin. That ransom is the blood of Yahshua. Remarkably however, not everyone chooses to participate in it. Some think their own good works ought to be sufficient to redeem themselves. Yahweh disagrees. Others imagine an illusory salvation achieved by elevating themselves over their brothers—the Darwinian soteriology of survival of the fittest. But Isaiah reports, **“O Yahweh our God, other lords besides You have ruled over us, but Your name alone we bring to remembrance. They are dead [muth], they will not live; they are shades [rapha'im: ghosts, departed spirits], they will not arise; to that end You have visited them with destruction [shamad—to annihilate or exterminate] and wiped out [abad] all remembrance of them.”** (Isaiah 26:13-14) This is a dire warning to those who would stand in Yahweh's shoes, making *themselves* the graven images forbidden in the Second Commandment. There is a fine line between service and self-aggrandizement. Politicians, captains of industry, media “stars,” *anyone* who seeks to gain an audience or following must examine their motives carefully and honestly, for God has promised to “visit with annihilation” those who would rule over His people.

But a few verses later, the prophet explains what's in store for those who belong to Yahweh. It's one of the clearest “rapture” passages in the entire Tanach. **“Your [i.e., Yahweh's] dead [muth] shall live; their bodies shall rise.”** Yes, our souls are going to vacate these bodies, one way or another, but this condition is only temporary. **“You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For Your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead [rapha'im].”** And if *this* isn't a blatant confirmation of the pre-Tribulation rapture, then I'm hallucinating: **“Come, My people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. For behold, Yahweh is coming out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.”** (Isaiah 26:19-21) Whether through rapture or miraculous temporal protection (as is the case with Israel—see Revelation 12), Yahweh's people will be “hidden,” sheltered from harm behind closed doors, during the time of God's coming wrath.

Job sensed the same amazing truth: God would remember, renew and transform His people. **“Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, that You would conceal me until Your wrath be past, that You would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies [muth], shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. You would call, and I would answer You.”** (Job 14:11-15) Job makes it sound nice and cozy, but being “hidden in sheol” is—let's face it—*death*, something universally dreaded by mankind since the fall of Adam. The idea that

sheol, the grave, could be a place of refuge and respite, where one's soul could await God's renewal in peace, is counterintuitive, to say the least. The Psalmist Asaph hints that this refuge begins before we even reach sheol: **"Let the groans of the prisoners come before You; according to Your great power, preserve those doomed to die [*muth*]!"** (Psalm 79:11) Our preservation by Yahweh commences in this life, and it is not interrupted by such trivial, inconsequential events as physical death.

Death, then, is not an obstacle for God. But you must admit: it's more than a little inconvenient for us, for it cuts off our opportunities to choose. You can't sin after you die, but you can't repent, either. Throughout scripture, Yahweh begs us to make good choices while we still can, for bad choices inevitably lead to death. Moses pleaded with the people: **"When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of Yahweh your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish [*abad*] from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed [*shamad*]."** (Deuteronomy 4:25-26) Since our personal sins condemn *all* of us to physical death in the end—even if we've led relatively faithful lives—Yahweh introduced another metaphor into the national life of Israel to make His point: devastation and exile—"death" on a *national* scale—would follow the abandonment of Yahweh as night follows day. **"And you shall have no power to stand before your enemies. And you shall perish [*abad*] among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up. And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies' lands because of their iniquity."** (Leviticus 26:37-39) Our "enemies' land" is not necessarily hell (although it can come to that). It is anything short of intimate fellowship with Yahweh—a place where you're left to perish and rot.

For all its talk of death and judgment, the Bible's clear message is that Yahweh wants us to avoid these things. That's why He incessantly warns us to turn from our iniquity. In sending Ezekiel to deliver His message to unrepentant Israel, Yahweh admonished him: **"Whenever you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die [*muth*],' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die [*muth*] for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked [*rasha*], and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul."** (Ezekiel 3:17-19) As the saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Yahweh would respond, "Yes, but if you *don't* lead him to water, I'll hold you responsible when he dies of thirst." So all during his long and frustrating prophetic career, Ezekiel grabbed the horse by the reins and marched him off toward the river: **"Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed,**



and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die [*muth*], O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord Yahweh; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:30-32)

This isn’t rocket science. The choice is simple, straightforward, and binary: yes or no, on or off, live or die. **“The wicked [*rasha*] will not stand [i.e., be confirmed or endure] in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish [*abad*].”** (Psalm 1:5-6) The contrast is crystal clear, and seemingly repeated in Scriptures in as many ways as God could think of. **“The wicked [*rasha*] will perish [*abad*]; the enemies of Yahweh are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away.”** (Psalm 37:20) We tend to think of being “wicked” in comparative terms: a “wicked” guy is somebody whose bad behavior is measurably worse (or at least more obvious) than the average person’s—yours, for instance. But *rasha* (guilty, wicked, criminal) speaks merely of a simple yes-or-no determination: one’s guilt according to a standard. In this sense, you can’t be *more wicked* than somebody else; you either are, or you aren’t—and unfortunately, we all *are*. We have all violated Yahweh’s standard, and are therefore assigned to *abad*—destruction—*unless* our sin is covered, atoned, forgiven.

This atonement is the promise (formally, the covenant) Yahweh keeps with people who choose to reciprocate His love. **“Know therefore that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate Him, by destroying [*abad*] them. He will not be slack with one who hates Him. He will repay him to his face.”** (Deuteronomy 7:9-10) I realize people often freak out when they see the word “commandment,” as if keeping God’s instructions is somehow tantamount to giving up their freedom. So they shake their fist at heaven and scream, “Give me liberty, or give me death,” not comprehending that keeping Yahweh’s commandments is the road to liberty—that it will actually *release* them from bondage. The fact is, we’re all slaves to something—either to a God who loves us, or to something less, something inferior to Him. Keeping Yahweh’s commandments is a red herring of sorts anyway—it’s an effect, not a cause. The real issue is who you *love*, Yahweh or (as before) something inferior to Him. Love for God will naturally result in a desire (however imperfectly implemented) to do as He instructed. That is, our love for Him is based on the understanding that He first loved us and therefore desires good things for us. *Ergo*, keeping His commandments will be of some benefit to us. (They don’t do a thing for God.) Bottom line: Yahweh, who loves us, wants us to avoid destruction by loving Him.

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Before Christ's advent, men really didn't know anything about the disposition of the departed dead past the concept of sheol. Beyond the rudimentary fact/hope of a coming reawakening, renewal, or transformation of some sort for the redeemed of Yahweh, the Hebrew scriptures are maddeningly taciturn on the subject. It's only in the New Covenant that we're introduced to the nuts and bolts of the coming immortal state—the resurrection. This makes perfect sense, I suppose, for how could we be expected to grasp the concept of a life after death without the Son of God to teach us—and then *show* us—what it was all about?

As in Hebrew, there are several word families in Koine Greek used to communicate the concept of death, but they don't really break down to direct linguistic equivalents. The first of these is *nekros*, an adjective meaning “dead.” It is derived from the noun *nekus*, a corpse. Strong's defines *nekros*: “Of one that has breathed his last, lifeless; deceased, departed, one whose soul is in Hades. Destitute of life, without life, inanimate. Spiritually dead [the state in which we all begin]: destitute of a life that recognizes and is devoted to God, because it is given up to trespasses and sins. Inactive as respects doing right. Destitute of force or power, inactive, inoperative.” *Nekros* is therefore primarily indicative of physical, bodily death—the kind of death that leaves a corpse in its wake. It is also used in scripture (sparingly) as a metaphor for spiritual lifelessness. But (and this is important) *nekros* is invariably used to describe a state from which one can be revived, restored, resurrected.

A few examples will give us the rough idea: **“And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ And the dead [*nekros*] man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has visited His people!’”** (Luke 7:14-16) Whoever blurted out “God has visited His people” probably had no idea how *literally* correct he was. But his observation was well taken: only Yahweh, the Author of life, could bestow life upon the lifeless. The man was *nekros*—physically, bodily, and to all accounts *permanently* dead—and yet none of this was the least bit problematical for the “Prophet” from Nazareth. I am therefore confident that He will someday touch my bier (so to speak) and command me, saying “Young man (well, okay, in your case, *old* man), arise.” And I'll have neither the choice nor the inclination but to obey.

Yahshua was speaking of Himself when He said, **“For as the Father raises the dead [*nekros*] and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.... “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead [*nekros*] will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself.”** (John 5:21, 25-26) It was easy enough for these folks to comprehend that Yahweh, the Creator Spirit of the entire

universe, had “life in Himself.” What wasn’t quite so easy to understand was that Yahshua was in fact Yahweh, presented among them in a radically diminished human manifestation, having taken upon Himself mortal flesh with the purpose of becoming the “Son” of God—not a second-generation deity, but One who represented His “Father” among men. How better to demonstrate that relationship than to wield Yahweh’s exclusive authority over life and death?

Yahshua told a story about two men who died and went to sheol, one an evil rich man and the other a poor but faithful beggar named Lazarus (whose name means “God has helped”). Finding himself in torment and wishing (too late) to warn his five brothers not to follow in his self-worshipping footsteps, the rich man appealed to Abraham to send back Lazarus from the dead. **“But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead [nekros].”** (Luke 16:30-31) Yahshua’s none-too-subtle point was that Moses and the prophets had spoken of Him, of His redemptive mission—and very little else. So if He—Yahshua—were to rise from the dead, they wouldn’t believe Him, either. They wouldn’t even believe the witness of their own eyes. The one thing we tend to gloss over in all of this is that unlike raising the son of the widow of Nain, or even His friend (not so coincidentally named Lazarus) from the dead, Yahshua’s resurrection would have to be performed—if at all—after He Himself was dead, *nekros*, a corpse. Last time I looked, dead people—even dead prophets—can’t do *anything* on their own. Yahshua’s bodily resurrection proved He was God. There is no other explanation.

The faithful dead of generations past, however, have not yet received their resurrection bodies. So far, Yahshua is the only One who has. So they are *nekros*—physically deceased. But are they actually *dead*? Yahshua says they’re not, not really: **“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead [nekros], but of the living.”** (Matthew 22:32) Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though they had physically died, were not dead to Yahweh. To Him, they were living souls, for they had been made permanently alive through the indwelling of the Spirit. Their bodily resurrection, though not yet a physical *fait accompli*, was as good as done in God’s eyes. Though not yet clothed in a corporeal body, the redeemed “dead” are very much alive. This sartorial transformation is scheduled, if I’m not mistaken, for the fifth *migra* on Yahweh’s redemptive calendar—the Feast of Trumpets. It will be rapture for the living believers, a resurrection for those who have already departed—and a revelation for everybody else.

Our bodies are not the only things about us that are subject to death (*nekros*) but may be restored to life. Our religious experience—the way we express our faith—is susceptible to all sorts of potentially fatal illnesses: ignorance, apathy, error, mindless tradition, and a lack of genuine love. But while life lasts, all of these things can be overcome. James reminds us, **“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead [*nekros*], so also faith apart from works is dead [*nekros*].** (James 2:14-17, 26) The “spirit” (*pneuma*) he speaks of here is not Yahweh’s Holy Spirit, but (as *Strong’s* words it) “the vital principle by which the body is animated.” Technically, I’d call it the soul, but in common usage these terms overlap a bit. The point is that when the body has been separated from the soul, all you’ve got left is a corpse. And the same thing is true of a “faith” that never moves beyond the mind—a theoretical faith of concepts and doctrines that never expresses itself in practical terms for the benefit of mankind. The priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan had just such a “faith.” I’m not saying that doctrines and concepts are bad, of course, but only that they’re worthless if not revealed by practical and personal acts of love.

James didn’t mention it, but I believe the converse is also true: works apart from faith are also dead. That is, things we do to benefit other people are of no lasting value outside of a real relationship with Yahweh. As Isaiah reminds us (in 64:6), all our own “righteous deeds” are as “filthy rags”—literally, a “witness of treachery” (*edah beged*) against us. Yahshua admonished the church in Sardis about this very thing. Yes, they were doing good works, and people thought they represented God in their community, but their lack of a vital and personal relationship with the God they claimed to serve defined them as being *nekros*—dead. **“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of Him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead [*nekros*]. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die [*apothnesko*], for I have not found your works complete in the sight of My God.’** (Revelation 3:1-2) Remember, being *nekros* is a state from which one can be revived, restored, and resurrected. Yahshua’s first instruction to Sardis after pointing out that they were dead was to “Wake up.” The Sardians (during the historical period prophetically represented by this local assembly) were going through the motions like spiritual zombies—giving alms, performing penance, sacrificially giving so that great cathedrals could be built to honor the church, its traditions, and its God (in that order). Between the lines, Yahshua is begging them to throw off the shackles of dead religion, embracing instead the “easy yoke” of

working and walking side by side with Him, enjoying a close personal relationship with their Messiah. They were “dead,” but they weren’t beyond hope.

But then He tells them to “strengthen what remains and is about to die.” An entirely different verb is used to denote “to die” here. *Apothnesko* is a compound of two Greek words: *apo* is a preposition usually translated “from” or “of.” It denotes separation or departure—especially the separation of a part from the whole, the idea being that union or fellowship has been destroyed. *Thnesko* is a verb meaning to die, to be dead, whether literally (i.e., bodily) or metaphorically (spiritually). *Apothnesko* (to die), then, carries with it the added meaning of dying *from* or *of* something. Movement, purpose, or *cause* is implied. Thus *apothnesko* is used to describe the natural death of men or animals, but more specifically, their violent death: it means to perish *because of* something. And therefore, by extension, it is used of eternal death—to be subject to eternal separation from life.

We’ve seen two Greek word families for “death,” then. The adjective *nekros* relates to the verb *nekroo* (to make dead) and *nekrosis*, a noun denoting a killing or the state of death. Like the Hebrew *muth*, *nekros* addresses the fact, the reality, of death. The *apothnesko* word family (which includes *thanatos*, an important concept I’ll cover shortly) has more to do with the separation that defines death—cause and effect, reasons and results. Both concepts are used to describe Yahshua’s death. *Nekros* tells us that He was literally deceased (disproving all the goofy fraudulent-death and “swoon” theories that have been hatched over the last two millennia). And *apothnesko/thanatos* reveal that He died for a *reason*. As Isaiah prophesies, **“He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.”** (Isaiah 53:5)

In a passage parallel to the Matthew 22 snippet we looked at above, we’re given more insight into the difference between *nekros* and *apothnesko*: **“Jesus said to them, ‘The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead [*nekros*] neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die [*apothnesko*] anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.’”** (Luke 20:34-36) *Nekros*, He says, describes a state from which “those deemed worthy” will be resurrected. But once they attain this immortal state, they will neither procreate succeeding immortal generations nor be subject to death for any reason. Whatever “fruit” we bear must be borne in our mortal bodies, and whatever choices we make must be made before we die. Stated another way, if we choose in this life to be born from above in Yahweh’s Spirit, we can never subsequently be separated from that Spirit, even though our mortal bodies will be separated from our souls.

In one of his confrontations with the Pharisees, Yahshua told them, **“You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die [apothnesko] in your sins, for unless you believe that I am He you will die [apothnesko] in your sins.”** (John 8:24) The death the Pharisees would die wasn’t just being *nekros*—the destination of all mortal beings. It was *apothnesko*—the death of separation, death *because of* their sins. Remember back in John 3, where Yahshua had told Nicodemus (a Pharisee, by the way) that he would have to be “born from above” in God’s Spirit? Here is a description of the converse condition: Yahshua tells the arrogant religious elite, in so many words, that they have been “born from below,” that is, that Satan is their father. Then He informs them what the real difference is between being born from below and born from above. The English reads “believe that I am He,” but the “He” has been supplied by the translators. What Yahshua actually said was that they must “believe that I Am.” This is a direct literal translation of what Yahweh’s self-revealed name means. He was saying, in effect, “You must believe that I am Yahweh.” John explains a few verses later that, **“They did not understand that He had been speaking to them about the Father.”** (John 8:27)

It would have made no sense to render Yahshua’s famous words to Martha with the Greek *nekros*, but this way, it makes perfect sense: **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die [apothnesko], yet shall he live.”** Yes, we all die (become *nekros*), and worse, we all die (*apothnesko*) because of our sins—there’s a *reason* for our demise. But only God Himself could go on to logically make the claim that **“Everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die [apothnesko].”** (John 11:25-26) One can only wonder what Aramaic words Yahshua used to express Himself, but the Gospel record, through the nuances of Greek word usage, informs us quite clearly that He is prepared to transfer the *reason* for our deaths to Himself—if only we’re willing to trust Him. And that transference will leave us not only alive, but also with no further grounds for condemnation (the penalty for which would have been eternal separation).

What Yahshua called “believing in Me” in this passage was characterized as “keeping My word” elsewhere: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word, he will never see death [thanatos].”** (John 8:51) The type of “death” we’ll “never see” is obviously not *nekros*—ordinary physical bodily death, the kind of thing we all experience. *Thanatos* is based on the same verb as our old friend *apothnesko*—*thnesko*: to die, either naturally or spiritually. The underlying idea of *thanatos* is that of separation, especially the soul from the body or the spirit from the soul—making it the word of choice to describe “eternal separation from God.” *Zodhaites* notes that “In the Septuagint, *thanatos* has the sense of destruction, perdition, misery, implying both physical death and exclusion from the presence and favor of God in consequence of sin and disobedience.” The Greek words used for contrasting death and life are revealing: *nekros* is the opposite of *bios* (biological

life, the kind of life one's *biography* is about); *thanatos* is contrasted in scripture with *zoe* (the essence of life, characterized as vital, blessed, and vibrant). Another way of looking at this: immortality is not presented as the absence of *nekros*. The Greek word translated "immortal" is *athanatos*—without *thanatos*.

Therefore, the bottom line in both passages is that our ultimate, permanent death (*thanatos*) is *not* inevitable. Quite the contrary: Yahweh's plan and wish is that we all might live. Paul reminds us, **"Christ has been raised from the dead [*nekros*], the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death [*thanatos*], by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead [*nekros*]. For as in Adam all die [*apothnesko*], so also in Christ shall all be made alive."** (I Corinthians 15:20-22)

That same basic truth is expressed here: **"And just as it is appointed for man to die [*apothnesko*] once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him."** (Hebrews 9:27-28) Oh, He's coming again to deal with sin, all right—but it won't be the sin of "those (like me) who are eagerly waiting for Him." *That* sin has already been atoned—covered. We will be "saved" at His appearing, either from the grave (in resurrection) or from our mortal lives in a fallen world (in rapture). But any way you slice it, the believer in Yahshua's divinity and in the efficacy of His sacrifice will only die *once*. There *is* such a thing as the "second death (*thanatos*)," but it will never be experienced by any child of God. More on that in a minute.

As the "great" Tribulation gets underway—that is, the second half, when Satan and his Antichrist hold uncontested temporal power over the earth for three and a half years—this notice from John's Apocalypse will go into effect: **"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead [*nekros*] who die [*apothnesko*] in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'"** (Revelation 14:13) These times will be so horrific, people will *literally* be better off dead than alive—something that has never been the case before this. But those who die "in the Lord" (that is, redeemed by Yahshua's sacrifice, having heeded the message of the angel in Revelation 14:7), are spoken of as if there is hardly a change in their status at all. For these dead people, life goes on—physical death is characterized as a mere hiccup, a speed bump on the road of life. What preceded it was "labors" and what followed was "rest." That has always been true for the believer, of course. It's what prompted Paul to remark, **"For to me to live is Christ, and to die [*apothnesko*] is gain."** (Philippians 1:21) Remember that *apothnesko* describes dying *from* something, a death characterized by separation, the departure of a part from the whole. In the case of the believer, that separation is defined as being removed from the world. No wonder it's spoken of in such positive terms.

For the informed believer, death holds no terror. In fact, if we're doing our jobs correctly, it merely holds the prospect of *inconvenience* for those we leave behind, for our place in the body of Christ will be left vacant when we leave. But even that is merely an opportunity for others to "stand on our shoulders" and achieve things we never had the courage, the provision, or the divine mandate to do—just as we stand upon the shoulders of the giants in our past. Paul puts it like this: **"For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies [*apothnesko*] to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."** (Romans 14:7-9) While that's true, we need to examine our lives. Are we still here because we've yet to finish the task God gave us to do, or is it because we're so abrasive not even *He* wants to be around us? Would we be lamented by Yahweh's people if we died today? Would anyone even notice our absence?

Our Greek verb *apothnesko* (to die) is often used figuratively in scripture: to die *to* something, that is, to be separated from (*apo*) it, severing any living connection. The most obvious application of this is "dying to sin." Paul asks, **"How can we who died [*apothnesko*] to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death [*thanatos*]?"** His point is that our baptism into the sinless Messiah includes immersion into His death, and everything that death symbolizes. **"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death [*thanatos*], in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead [*nekros*] by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life [*zoe*]...."** If Yahshua had been an ordinary sinner, then being intimately associated with his death would avail us nothing, for He would still be dead. But being sinless, He became the fulfillment of every prophetic blood sacrifice required by the Torah: the *olah* (or "burnt" offering—voluntary and complete); the *selem* (or "peace" offering—a spontaneous offering of praise to Yahweh); the *chata't* (or "sin" offering)—covering our lapses in behavior); the *asham* (or "trespass" offering—covering our lapses in holiness); and the *bekor* (the "firstborn" offering—prefiguring Yahshua as the "only begotten Son of God"); not to mention a plethora of sacrifices and offerings specified for special days like Sabbaths, new moons, *miqra*-convocations (i.e., the Feasts of Yahweh), and so forth. So unlike our own well-deserved demise, Yahshua's death *means* something: it is the vehicle Yahweh preordained to achieve our reconciliation with Him, our redemption from bondage in sin—which explains why we who have embraced Christ are counted as having "died" to it.

But it isn't just His death that unites us. We're also partakers of Yahshua's resurrection: **"For if we have been united with Him in a death [*thanatos*] like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we**



would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died [*apothnesko*] has been set free from sin. Now if we have died [*apothnesko*] with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead [*nekros*] will never die [*apothnesko*] again; death [*thanatos*] no longer has dominion over him.” (Romans 6:2-9) It’s one thing to share in Christ’s death—to be associated with Him in the ultimate fulfillment of the Torah’s requirements. To be indemnified from the wrath of God would have been enough, I suppose—certainly more than any of us deserve. But to share in His life! That’s a development that’s almost too wonderful to comprehend. But it’s true: **“Whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death [*thanatos*] to life.”** (John 5:24) Yahshua was speaking to living people, people who had not yet suffered *nekros*—biological death. And yet He insisted that we who heed and rely upon His word have *already* bypassed the possibility of being separated from God in death—*thanatos*. We tend to think of life as something that ends in death, but Yahweh sees it the other way around: *death ends in life*. Or at least, it can. Life is the ultimate result of God’s love, so it shouldn’t be surprising that love is the ultimate evidence of God’s life within us, or conversely, that people whose lives are characterized by hatred are separated from God: **“Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death [*thanatos*] into life [*zoe*], because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death [*thanatos*].”** (I John 3:13-14)

Passing from death into life—from a state of separation from God into union with Him—is the whole point of the redemptive process. Remember way back at the beginning of this topic, when I spoke of having been taught that nothing ever died before Adam’s sin, but how even as a young lad I could see evidence in God’s creation that didn’t support that hypothesis? Now it has become obvious that the misunderstanding springs from a misuse of the Greek word for death. It’s not corporification (to coin a word), but *separation* about which Paul was speaking when he said, **“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death [*thanatos*] through sin, and so death [*thanatos*] spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death [*thanatos*] reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.”** (Romans 5:12-14) It wasn’t *nekros* that entered the world through Adam’s sin, but rather, *thanatos*, spiritual death, the separation of God’s Spirit from the soul of man.

Paul has raised an important point about the nature of sin. Adam’s sin was defined as disobedience to one simple instruction: “Don’t eat the fruit of that tree.” Then, a couple of millennia later, God gave the Children of Israel hundreds of commandments through His prophet Moses—detailed, specific, and all, at some level, symbolic of Yahweh’s plan for the redemption of mankind. But what

of those people who lived—and died—between Adam’s day and Moses’? Yahweh had issued very little in the way of specific rules—and absolutely nothing that could be utilized as the basis of a religion. As far as we know, Yahweh hadn’t specifically instructed Cain not to murder people before he slew his brother Abel. So how can we call Cain’s act sin? If sin were simply a violation of God’s stated instructions, we couldn’t. But sin is more than that: it’s a violation of Yahweh’s *nature*.

The verbs translated “to sin” (*chatta’* in Hebrew, *hamartano* in Greek) basically mean “to miss the mark” or “to wander from the path.” The word is used in its fundamental sense in Judges 20:16 to describe seven hundred left-handed Benjamite slingshot sharpshooters who could all hurl their stones and “not miss.” The “target” for our thoughts, words, and deeds is the standard set by almighty God. The picture that pops immediately into my mind is my youngest son—who was “off-the-chart” small when we adopted him—trying to shoot baskets at the age of four or five. Not only could he not score a basket, he couldn’t even throw the ball high enough to reach the rim. But he never gave up trying (or growing, for that matter: he’s now six-feet-two and captain of his college volleyball team). By God’s standard, we’re all “sinners,” for we have all fallen short of the mark.

None of us has ever “earned” a spot on Yahweh’s team with a record of perfect performance—and that’s what it would take. We’re used to the idea of relative excellence, as reflected in our sports. But God’s standard (called “sin” when we miss it) would be like sinking *every* basket you ever shot—even the three-pointers. It’s batting a thousand—from your very first day of T-ball practice as a little kid—or throwing only strikes. It’s acing every serve. It’s completing every pass for a touchdown. It’s scoring a hole-in-one—on *every hole*. We tend to think of this kind of perfection as a once-in-a-lifetime event—if that. But a relationship with Yahweh requires perfection on a 24/7 basis: no flaws, no shortcomings, and no near misses—for your entire life. Imagine being a sports hero with performance like that: you’d be the most loved—and the most *hated*—player in the game, all at the same time. Now you have a feel for Yahshua’s effect on the folks among whom He walked. He was loved for being perfect, and hated for demonstrating that nobody else even comes close.

Obviously, God (having built us) knows how we’re built. He knows this kind of perfection is out of reach for us, like a ten-foot-high basketball hoop looming before a four-year-old boy. But even though He doesn’t *expect* perfection from us, He still *demand*s it; that is, His nature does. The “problem” is that He is holy, omnipotent, and omniscient—we couldn’t survive in His direct presence any more than we could stand on the surface of the sun in a swimsuit and flipflops. So Yahweh, in His love and mercy, provided what is needed for us to dwell in His presence (which, after all, was the whole point in creating us in the first place).

It's a hazmat suit, so to speak—a garment made of the righteousness of God Himself—something through which He cannot (or at least *does* not) see our sin. But it's not cheap: the price of this garment is the most precious substance known to man—*innocence*—the blood of the Lamb of God, the Son of God. And you thought *Prada* was expensive! Of course, we can't afford this garment of righteousness any more than we could live a perfect life, so we still would have been out of luck had not Yahweh Himself made it available to us at His own expense. We owe Him our very lives.

In a very real sense, we are indebted to *whatever* paradigm we live under—the world as we found it (where missing the mark is standard operating procedure) or imputed righteousness, in which God sees not our shortcomings, but His own perfection, as we stand before Him. Paul writes: **“When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.”** If we refuse God's gift of life, we owe Him nothing—no gratitude, no loyalty, no obedience. There is a downside, however, to not having life: **“But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death [*thanatos*], but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Romans 6:20-23) In the end, either we're slaves to sin that leads to death (*thanatos*: technically, separation from God), or we're slaves to Yahweh, who provides eternal, abundant life (the antithesis of separation—being joined to Him forever).

Yahshua once instructed us to pray, **“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”** (Matthew 6:12) If we think of sin as a debt to be paid, this all gets a bit easier to understand. Let's say a man owes a debt of a million dollars, but his assets are only worth a thousand. If he dies, his creditors are out of luck—there's no way they can pursue him into the grave to retrieve their money. They can't garnish his wages, throw him in prison, or threaten to break his legs. It does no good to make the corpse “an offer he can't refuse.” He's not listening: he's *dead*! But as Paul pointed out above, it is possible to “die to sin” without actually suffering physical death (well, not our own, anyway). Our sin had estranged us from Yahweh like that million-dollar debt, but Yahshua put our debt upon Himself and took it to the grave with Him. So we who are aligned and united with Christ are now miraculously beyond the reach of the wrath of God—which is precisely as He planned it.

Of course, it's not automatic. We have to ask to be included in this amazing amnesty. We have to choose to allow Yahshua to assume our debt for us. This entails swallowing our pride, admitting that we're debtors, and realizing that the debt we owe is beyond our ability to make good. And because Christ has redeemed us (i.e., bought our liberty from the sin to which we were once

enslaved) it also defines us as being “slaves to God” under the paradigm of grace: **“How can we who died to sin still live in it?... One who has died has been set free from sin.... Having been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness.”** (Romans 6:2, 7, 18) So don’t think of grace—unmerited favor resulting in imputed righteousness—as a way to avoid your responsibilities before God. It is, in point of fact, a measure of the crushing debt God forgave us. We no longer live in sin, slaves to its curse; we now live in righteousness, slaves to its blessing. In serving this new Master, we have all new responsibilities: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In transitioning from death into life, it should now be apparent that although what happens in and through our mortal bodies is critical, what happens *to* them is of secondary importance. They are the vehicles of *bios*, in which we make our choices in this life. But they are not the vehicles of *zoe*—they aren’t the bodies that will take us into eternity. They are, if I may use a metaphor, the shuttle that takes us out to the airport terminal; they’re not the airplane that takes us to our actual destination. So in His letter to the second church on the list of seven—together representing the prophetic course of the age of the ekklesia—Yahshua instructs John to tell the faithful at Smyrna, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.”** The church would suffer precisely that: ten distinct periods of intense persecution under Rome, beginning with Nero and ending with Diocletian, 230 years later. **“Be faithful until death [*thanatos*], and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death [*thanatos*].”** (Revelation 2:10-11) Overt persecution isn’t a thing of the past, of course, though it’s no longer the single defining challenge facing the followers of Yahshua. His point, however, is still valid: death for the believer is merely the doorway to everlasting life.

The first *thanatos* is the separation of the soul from the body—something we can all look forward to. But what is this *second* death to which He refers? Later on in Revelation, He explains, sort of: **“And the sea gave up the dead [*nekros*] who were in it, Death [*thanatos*] and Hades gave up the dead [*nekros*] who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death [*thanatos*] and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death [*thanatos*], the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”** (Revelation 20:13-14) Technically, the second *thanatos* (on a personal level) is the final separation of a person’s soul from God’s Spirit—the death from which there is no possibility of resurrection, no redemption, no rescue. This passage concludes the prophecy of the “great white throne” judgment, before which the dead whose names are not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life must stand.

But this separation of soul from spirit has been a *fait accompli* for the majority of the inmates of Hades for at least a millennium at this point. So we must ask ourselves: what issue is being decided at the great white throne judgment? It isn't life or death—they're *all* dead. It isn't salvation *versus* condemnation—they're *all* condemned. I believe the second *thanatos*—this final separation—is the division of death from damnation. It's a call only Yahweh Himself is qualified to make—one soul at a time.

We begin life “condemned already” (as Yahshua informed us in John 3:18), born in mortal flesh but not in immortal spirit. And we remain that way unless we become born again, born *from above* in Yahweh's Spirit. But this “condemnation” (the Greek verb is *krino*, meaning separated, put asunder, decided, judged, or evaluated) is not always manifested the same way. Sometimes it's spoken of in scripture as ending in death, destruction, or obliteration (one Hebrew word for it is *beliy*—nothingness, negation). But at other times it's described as what we normally refer to as “hell”—eternal punishment and unceasing torment (graphically pictured as the fate of those who receive the mark of the beast in Revelation 14:9-11), or as the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels (as it's characterized in Matthew 25).

We need to wake up and realize that these two eventualities—death and damnation—are mutually exclusive. They're fundamentally incompatible. The “dead” feel no pain, no emotional distress; they are not susceptible to punishment. Destruction, annihilation, and extermination are spoken of incessantly in scripture, describing a state where the lost, careless, stupid, apathetic, naughty, or even the merely unfortunate (abortion victims, for example) simply cease to be when their earthly life is over. “Death” is probably too strong a word: “spiritually stillborn” would be more accurate. Since these people never had an indwelling spirit making their soul alive, they are technically just human animals—they were never really *alive* at all in the spiritual sense.

That being said, the “damnation” passages in scripture are unambiguous and specific, not to mention terrifying. Eternal torment (of some sort) awaits those who host Satan's spirit, those who are (as Yahshua described His Pharisee antagonists) “of your father the devil.” Deciding who is thus damned and who is “merely” dead is not our call (thank God), but if you're looking for criteria, the Rubicon seems to be one's willingness to commit spiritual “murder,” that is, to prevent someone from enjoying the *zoe*-life available to us all through the sacrifice of Yahshua. John informs us, **“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”** (I John 3:15) The only other time in scripture this word “murderer” (*anthropoktonos*) is used was in the same breath as the imprecation against the Pharisees I mentioned above (in John 8:44), where Yahshua used it to describe Satan himself, the original “murderer.”

So if you're planning on living forever, the question is, "Who's your daddy?" Is it Yahweh, or the devil?

The "second death," then (in my humble opinion) includes the separation of the dead from the damned at the great white throne. Compared to eternal life in Christ, both eventualities are unimaginably horrible. But compared to *each other*, death must be characterized as the epitome of mercy. I realize that this whole line of thought is unconventional—that is, that two thousand years of theology based on the undeniable historical record of a risen Christ has somehow failed to recognize what's obvious and ubiquitous in scripture once we figure out what to look for. But "mainstream" or not, it bridges the seeming dichotomy between a God of justice and a God of love, a God of righteous wrath and a God whose mercy endures forever—something conventional Christian theology has never quite achieved. Yahweh is all of those things, but He is neither conflicted nor confused.

Our understanding of His nature must, if we are honest with ourselves, conform to the way He presented Himself in scripture: He is both Lord *and* Savior. Yes, Yahweh has the right (not to mention the power) to consign to a hell of eternal torments anyone who doesn't meet His standard of perfection. But He has told us in every conceivable way that He doesn't *want to*, that He doesn't *intend to*—He's not willing that anyone should perish; His mercy endures forever. It seems to me that a God clever enough to create you and me could have sorted out this problem in a more logical way than to consign everyone in the world not lucky enough to have been exposed to the Gospel—and there are multiplied billions of them—to an eternity of punishment for the crime of having been born unlucky, for the "sin" of having been victimized through the schemes of Satan and the error of man. For God to be God, justice and mercy must both be enabled to coexist. In Yahweh's plan, they do.

It's the ultimate study in contrast: death, in the end, is merely a tool Yahweh uses to teach us about life. There will, however, come a time when death—in every sense of the word—will have outlived its usefulness. John was told of a blessed state in which the synthesis of God and man will at last be complete: we will never again be separated from each other. **"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death [*thanatos*] shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."** (Revelation 21:3-4) He is describing the death of death itself. Death will have been swallowed up in life. And we will dwell in the house of Yahweh forever!

## WILDERNESS & PROMISED LAND



### *Anticipation vs. Satisfaction*

Any child who has ever attended Sunday School knows that the Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness before they entered the “Promised Land.” Because the Promised Land was the ultimate destination, we (or at least I) have always had a tendency to think of the “wilderness” as something that, if not evil, is at least *inferior* to the goal. And due to the Israelites’ experience, we may even see the wilderness as some sort of punishment.

But upon reflection, I’ve come to the conclusion that despite the bitter experience of that one Israelite generation, the wilderness was never meant to be a metaphor for God’s displeasure. If we remember that leaving Egypt (symbolic of bondage in the world) was the whole idea, then it becomes apparent that passing through the wilderness was always part of Yahweh’s plan. In fact, the initial request made of Pharaoh said nothing about going to the Promised Land at all! The wilderness itself was the stated destination: **“Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, “Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.”’ But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is Yahweh, that I should obey His voice and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.’ Then they said, ‘The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to Yahweh our God, lest He fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.’ But the king of Egypt said to them, ‘Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.’”** (Exodus 5:1-4)

Note a few salient points: first, it was Yahweh whose petition was presented and refused. Moses and Aaron were just the messengers. God didn’t begin by making unreasonable demands or by “throwing His weight around.” He was nice. He was polite. Moses even said “Please” on His behalf. We need to frame our invitations to join Yahweh’s family with the same degree of civility. It’s a *choice*, after all—not an ultimatum. Of course, choices have consequences: choosing to defy Yahweh always carries with it the ultimate prospect of “pestilence or sword,” metaphorically, at least.

Second, note that those who rule the world don’t know Yahweh, don’t want to know Him, and aren’t even ashamed to admit it. They honestly think they’re in charge. Speaking strictly for myself, sometimes I’d like to seize ’em by the collar and demand to know whether they were born stupid or attended a seminar. But I

realize that spiritual things are spiritually discerned: they're not equipped to deal with the truth of their own vulnerability. They just can't see it.

Third, the stated destination of the Israelites wasn't the Promised Land—Canaan, the land that had been promised to their patriarch Abraham half a millennium prior to this. It was the wilderness, the desert, a place in which a group this size couldn't really live very long without miraculous ongoing provision. In other words, this wasn't framed as a rebellion against Pharaoh; it was merely a request for a short respite from their four hundred years of unrelenting labor. Three days' journey would *maybe* get them to the middle of the Sinai—hardly an escape. They'd have a party there with their half-forgotten God and then return. It would all take a couple of weeks, if that. So why didn't Pharaoh feel he could let them go? Well, there's always the obvious: he knew that if they ever tasted freedom, they'd be useless as slaves. Perhaps he didn't trust them to keep their word: after all, he himself was about to break his own solemn promise half a dozen times in a row—people often accuse others of being guilty of their own peculiar shortcomings.

But I suspect that the real underlying reason for Pharaoh's intransigence was that he fancied *himself* to be a god on earth, and he didn't welcome competition from some other deity, real or imagined. What would a Pharaoh who had witnessed Yahweh's power and provision have done when presented with a request like this? The king under which Joseph had served 430 years previously was just such a man. I can practically guarantee that he would have given his immediate and heartfelt blessing, offering to provide bread and wine and any number of animals for the Israelites to sacrifice. And he would have been asking Joseph to put in a good word for Him with this God to Whom he knew he owed his prosperity, the kingdom, and possibly his very life. But Moses' Pharaoh had forgotten the lessons of history, dooming him to learn by his own bitter experience that which he could, and should, have learned from his forebears.

It's clear, then, that the wilderness to which Moses and Aaron asked to lead the people for a few weeks was characterized not as a place of punishment or exile, but as one of inspiration, of preparation. Although it was where Yahweh wanted Israel to go, it was not in itself the Promised Land. Yes, that would come, for God's word had sealed the matter, though He hadn't revealed His schedule. But this "retreat" was intended to be *preliminary* to the restoration of Israel to the Land. It was designed to be the overture to the opera, the foreword to the book, the school preceding the career. Before Israel could even contemplate a life of freedom in the land of promise, they would have to get reacquainted with the God of their ancestors—a God they had all but forgotten in their malaise and hopelessness in the world.



Moses had been chosen by Yahweh from the womb to lead His people out of bondage. He began by being given (miraculously, since he was the son of slaves) the best training the world had to offer: God arranged for him to be raised and educated in the very household of Pharaoh. Yahweh needed His man to be literate and confident, familiar with the wielding of authority, the practice of leadership. That phase took forty years to complete, and in a strange, symbolic way, it was in itself a “wilderness experience” of sorts for Moses. Here he was an anomaly, an Israelite slave being raised and prepared as a prince of Egypt. But in a way, he was also representative of all mankind—born under a death sentence but given shelter (as he chose to accept it) in the very family of the king.

Even more central to Yahweh’s plan, the emancipator of Israel would also have to be able to deal with timid, distrustful, short-sighted, and unmotivated people (or is that “sheeple?”)—millions of them—all apt to wander off aimlessly, panic at the first sign of adversity, rebel against any and all authority, and complain incessantly. So Yahweh sent Moses to “grad school” for *another* forty years: tending somebody else’s sheep in obscurity and humility. And where did this preparation—this advanced education—take place? In the *wilderness*, of course. It’s fascinating how often the number forty (indicating trial, testing, and preparation) shows up in the same scriptural contexts as the wilderness. It’s as if Yahweh wanted us to connect the two symbols in our minds. **“Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.”** (Exodus 3:1) This passage introduces the climax of Moses’ forty-year sojourn in the wilderness: his encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush. Note that Horeb, the “mountain of God” where the Torah would soon be delivered, was located not where powerful men negotiated the great issues of the day; it was neither a seat of temporal power nor of religious splendor. No, it was in the wilderness.

The word translated “wilderness” is *midbar*, an uninhabited land, a wasteland, desert, or pasture (though one providing scant sustenance). It is often described in a negative sense, as a place without much water, food, or shelter. The Psalmist recounts the murmurings of Israel: **“They spoke against God, saying, ‘Can God spread a table in the wilderness?’ He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed.”** The counterintuitive answer, as Israel was to discover, was *Yes, He can!* **““Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?”** Again, yes! We need only to ask Him. **“Therefore, when Yahweh heard, He was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; His anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust His saving power.”** (Psalm 78:19-22) A lack of apparent resources is not a problem for the Creator of the Universe, and it shouldn’t be seen as one for His people. But that’s the whole point of asking people to spend time in the wilderness: this is where the provision of God becomes apparent, even obvious. It’s much harder to see in the world (where you’ve got leeks and garlic to give

you bad breath—read: a life that stinks—while you labor pointlessly for somebody else’s benefit) or in the Promised Land (a land naturally flowing with milk and honey, even though it’s also crawling with Canaanites).

Though God’s people can expect to experience His provision and preparation in the wilderness, the world sees only adversity and disaster looming there. As the infant nation of Israel left Goshen and headed out of Egypt, they approached what appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle—the Red Sea (that is, its northeastern tributary, the Gulf of Aqaba). As He led them into what looked for all the world like a trap, Yahweh whispered the plan into Moses’ ear: **“For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am Yahweh.”** (Exodus 14:3-4) It reminds me of the Uncle Remus story of Br’er Rabbit’s great escape: “Oh, *please* don’t throw me in the briar patch.” What looked to Pharaoh like a thorny situation for departing Israel was merely a wilderness opportunity for Yahweh to reveal His awesome power. There are no *odds* for a thing like this: the Red Sea is ten miles across. Either you’re following the Living God or you’re not. And if you are, you have nothing to worry about.

Israel was still new at this whole “wilderness” thing, however. They were still (even after watching ten plagues from Yahweh decimate their tormentors on their behalf) seeing things through the eyes of Egypt: **“They said to Moses, ‘Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.’”** (Exodus 14:11-12) Lesson Number One was to learn who’s actually calling the shots. The Israelites were talking as if they were following *Moses*. Could they not see the pillar of fire and smoke that led the way? Did they not remember the wails of the Egyptians as Yahweh’s messenger of death slew their firstborn? Did they really think this stammering octogenarian sheep herder was single-handedly doing all of that?

You know the story. Yahweh delivered them by parting the waters of the sea. Sure, Moses held the rod, but only an idiot would have concluded that *he* was the one displacing all that water. And yet, a few days later, **“The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the hand of Yahweh in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’”** (Exodus 16:2-3) They “grumbled against *Moses*”? The wilderness experience was supposed to be teaching them to trust Yahweh. Moses and Aaron were only the messengers. This is like blaming

the postman for failing to bring you a mushy love letter from your heartthrob. Be reasonable, folks: it's not his fault.

There were perhaps two or three million Israelites to provide for—over six hundred thousand men able to bear arms, plus their families. Did Yahweh know they needed food? Of course He did. I believe that God, for His part, just wanted to hear them ask Him for it—to acknowledge that He alone was responsible for taking care of all these people out here in the desert. So, **“They looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am Yahweh your God.’”** In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat.’” (Exodus 16:10-15) The Israelites had accused Moses of bringing them **“out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”** Yet the record indicates that for the entire time they sojourned in the desert, not one single person died of hunger or thirst, even though they planted no crops and they moved away from proven water sources whenever the pillar of cloud indicated it was time to go.

It's easy enough for us, of course, to cluck our tongues and accuse the Israelites of being ungrateful and slow to believe. I must note, however, that we who harbor these thoughts are, by and large, either dwelling comfortably in the promised land of Yahweh's bounty, or we never really left the world in the first place. Very few of us are trudging through the wilderness at any given time—at least not here in America, where I live. Before you wag your head and point your finger at the Israelites, ask yourself this: when is the last time you really had to *trust* in Yahweh's provision to put food on the table or the rent check in the mailbox? I don't know about you, but my natural psychological constitution demands that I plan ahead, invest prudently, work hard, and take care of my family and myself. There's nothing wrong with any of that. But there is a fine line between being industrious and being self-sufficient. In my more lucid moments I realize that self-reliance is the antithesis of God-reliance.

My idea of the ideal position (for a believer, that is) is to be living in the “promised land”—i.e., being at home, though fully engaged in the battle—but living close enough to the edge of the wilderness to be constantly reminded of our utter dependence on Yahweh. In keeping with this point of view, my wife and I ventured into the wilderness and risked *everything* no fewer than ten times over the course of our long married life, honoring God by relying on His promises of

provision, even when the math didn't add up. It hasn't always been smooth sailing by any means, but we have always found Him faithful. No exceptions.

I only bring it up, however, because in Israel's wilderness experience, they did precisely the opposite—categorically refusing to trust Him *ten times*. **“Then Yahweh said, ‘I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of Yahweh, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed My voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised Me shall see it.’”** (Numbers 14:20-23) The straw that broke the back of Yahweh's patience with them was their negative reaction to the report of the spies they sent in to explore the Promised Land. Ten of the twelve came back with horror stories of a “land that devours its inhabitants,” a land of giants and formidable armies. And Israel promptly forgot Who had brought them out of Egypt—and how He had done it. Were it not for the entreaties of Moses, Yahweh was angry enough to wipe them all out right there and then, and start over. He relented, but decreed that those who had refused to believe Him would wander in the wilderness *their whole lives*: that generation would never enter the land of promise.

Instead, they would have but one task: preparing their *children* to inherit the blessings they themselves had rejected. **“But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness....”** As it would transpire, one of the last of those dead bodies would be that of Moses himself. Note that our unbelief can affect not only us, but those around us—those closest to us. Yahweh had told them, long before they ever went in to spy out the land, that “the iniquity of the fathers would be visited on the children, to the third or fourth generation of those who hate Him.” (See Exodus 20:5.) The context of that admonition was the Second Commandment, the one prohibiting the making or worshipping of idols. Their self-sufficiency, the assumption that they would have to rely upon their own strength to conquer the Canaanites (instead of allowing God to provide their victories), was actually *idolatry*. (Pay attention, America.)

**“According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know My displeasure. I, Yahweh, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against Me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.”** (Numbers 14:31-35) This, of course, is where we connect the idea of a sojourn in the wilderness with God's punishment, His “displeasure.” But there's punishment, and then there's *punishment*. If the wilderness is an institution of

learning, then it's clear that the Israelites weren't "expelled" (by getting sent back to Egypt, being abandoned by God, or suffering summary execution). They were merely required to sit in the corner wearing a dunce cap for the rest of the term. They would not graduate on schedule; in fact, they would *never* graduate. The wilderness is meant to be something we go *through*, not live *in*. We are intended to enter it, learn its lessons, and emerge from the other side equipped, renewed, trained, and focused on the task before us. It is neither our birthplace nor our destination—it's merely the journey between the two.

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Our "wilderness" may be a short or long term experience, but standing as it does between our bondage in the world and the "promised land" of a believer's walk in faith, it represents our salvation, our rescue, our spiritual epiphany, our calling into God's service. Joseph's adventure at the hands of his jealous brothers sheds some light on this aspect of the subject: **"They [the brothers] saw him [Joseph] from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.' But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' And Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; cast him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him'—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father."** (Genesis 37:18-22)

If we track the metaphors here, a beautiful picture emerges describing the salvation process. Joseph (whose name means "Yahweh has added") had been "called" by his father Israel ("God prevails") to minister to his brothers (see verse 14). In this context, then, Joseph represents the *ekklesia*, the "called-out." The brothers, who symbolize the lost world, resented the close relationship enjoyed by Joseph with their father—just as our world is offended by and suspicious of the bond we believers share with Yahweh. This bond so annoys some that they would just as soon kill us as look at us. But there are a few (like Reuben) who look at us and ponder the "big picture," the unforeseen ramifications and unintended consequences of rash action. (Reuben's name, by the way, means "behold—or perceive—a son." I believe he represents the honest seekers who have not yet found what they're looking for in this life). Reuben's rescue plan entailed taking Joseph out the hands of "the world" and stashing him for "safe keeping" in the wilderness (thus his profile also gives us a remarkable prophetic look at the coming Tribulation saints). His act of mercy (or was it just prudence?) would, through a decades-long series of miscalculations and misadventures, result in the preservation of Israel's entire family—and through them, the whole world.

Yahweh had a lot to teach Joseph, and He could only begin his education in “the wilderness.” But as any student (or teacher) knows, just being in school doesn’t necessarily guarantee that the lessons will be learned. Though the opportunity is there, we must choose to learn; we must apply ourselves to our studies. It follows, then, that the wilderness is a place of vulnerability for us. We are no longer slaves in the world, it’s true; but we are not yet living freely in the Land of Promise, either—bound only by love and gratitude to our Savior. In the wilderness, we are in a state of transition, a place of preparation, of education, of making choices. Satan (who’s evil, not stupid) knows this, and knows that our wilderness excursions are the logical time to attack, which is just what happened in the case of Joseph.

This is also subtly revealed in the story of Balak, the king of Moab at the time of the exodus, and Balaam, his official “seer,” his occult consultant. Terrified of Israel, Balak hired Balaam to curse them. So the diviner (who was fully aware of Yahweh’s power) did what he could to earn his paycheck. But every time he employed his standard occult methods, he ended up being compelled to bless Israel instead of cursing them. King Balak was not amused. Balaam’s solution was to change strategies: **“When Balaam saw that it pleased Yahweh to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face toward the wilderness.”** (Numbers 24:1) Basically, he said, “If I can’t get God to curse Israel, maybe I can get Israel to curse God.” At Balaam’s suggestion, Moab’s battle tactic was to make love, not war: if you can’t beat ’em, seduce ’em. **“While Israel lived in Shittim [Acacia Grove], the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel.”** (Numbers 25:1-3)

Israel had been no threat to Moab while they were in slavery in Egypt, and their destination, the Promised Land, wasn’t Moab but Canaan, on the other side of the Jordan. Furthermore, Yahweh had issued explicit instructions that Moab was not to be touched (see Deuteronomy 2:9). But Balak didn’t know any of that. From where he stood, they certainly *looked* like a threat. So out here in the wilderness, God’s people (who had been instructed in no uncertain terms to be holy—to separate themselves from the surrounding nations and their idolatrous practices) were given a “pop quiz.” And they flunked it. 24,000 died of the ensuing plague, stopped only when Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, passed the “make-up exam” with a javelin. (*That R-rated story is recorded in Numbers 25.*)

The lesson is that when we’re in the wilderness, we can expect to get tested. The whole point of being there is to learn to trust Yahweh—even when our own eyes are telling us not to, even when our own intellect (stunning though it may be) can’t figure out any reason why we should. As in any school, the tests are there

not to condemn us, but to inform us (and our instructor) as to our progress. And the wilderness is the best—maybe the *only*—place to do that. As long as we were in bondage in the world, our senses were suppressed, for it is painful to awaken to the reality of one's chains. It's hard to get answers out of people in comas. On the other hand, when we're settled in the Land, we tend to become complacent, comfortable with our religious traditions, inured to our surroundings. If we're not careful, Yahweh's voice can become an ever-present droning noise in the background of our lives, like spiritual tinnitus—constantly present but never clear, always in the picture but never in focus.

But in the wilderness, our senses are heightened; our spiritual reflexes are sharpened. The *fear* of God becomes a visceral reality to us once again. It is only in the wilderness that *this* happens: **"The voice of Yahweh is powerful; the voice of Yahweh is full of majesty. The voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars; Yahweh breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness; Yahweh shakes the wilderness of Kadesh [literally, holiness]. The voice of Yahweh makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in His temple all cry, 'Glory!'"** (Psalm 29:4-9) We can't live there all the time, for we have a job to do in the Promised Land. But it seems to me we all need to go back to the wilderness and get our eyes opened once in a while.

Not surprisingly, the "wilderness effect" has its counterfeit counterparts in the world. Soldiers and adrenaline junkies are familiar with the phenomenon: you never feel quite so "alive" as when you're facing death. But contriving situations (or merely falling into them) that "make our whole lives flash before our eyes" can, like anything else, become an idol, a false graven image. Our society winks at "performance enhancers" from caffeine to methamphetamines to metabolic steroids, all used (or misused) to give us an artificial edge. All of these things are mere simulations, caricatures of what Yahweh *really* wants us to experience—a wide-awake one-on-One wilderness confrontation with the Living God.

I'm not talking about an emotional religious experience (which, like jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, can become nothing more than an adrenaline-fueled false god to us). Rather, I'm speaking of following Yahweh's directives even if they're not the socially acceptable thing to do, even if they entail hardship or risk. Stephen did it when he proclaimed Yahshua as the Messiah to the very men who had (in his words) "betrayed and murdered" Him. William Tyndale did it when he defied the religious authorities and translated Yahweh's scriptures into his native tongue. Countless missionaries did it when they left their comfortable lives to serve their Savior as best they could in foreign lands. Closer to home, my wife did it when she insisted (after our fifth child came home) that from that point on she only wanted to adopt kids that nobody else wanted—damaged, abused,

handicapped, “un-placeable” kids. (So that’s what we did—six more times, finally running out of gas in our mid-forties). And finally, the Bible’s prophetic scriptures predict a large group who *will* do it, sometime in the not-so-distant future: they will risk (or more likely sacrifice) their lives “for the word of God and for the testimony they held,” (Revelation 6:9) and more specifically, to give aid and shelter to Jews fleeing the world’s genocidal rage during the dark days of the Great Tribulation (Matthew 25:31-46).

Admittedly, the kind of “wilderness confrontation with the Living God” of which I speak must be more figurative than literal in our present world, for God does not, at the moment, walk among us in any physical sense. He is, as the parable puts it, “on a long journey.” The paradigm *du jour* is that His Spirit dwells within us—on an invitation-only basis. And as we all know, we can grieve the Spirit through bitterness, anger, and malice; the Spirit’s influence can be quenched through our unwillingness to heed Her counsel. But the day is coming, and soon, when Yahweh will once again walk the earth among men—as a Man, the King: Yahshua. And at that time the figurative will give way to the literal: **“He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.”** (Isaiah 35:4-7)

We who study history should be well aware that the road out of the world, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land isn’t necessarily a one-way street. The traffic here flows both ways. Note first that the timing, not to mention the call itself, is Yahweh’s—He left Israel in bondage in Egypt for four hundred years before He called them out. And second, once we’re out of bondage, forward progress is contingent upon our willingness to follow Yahweh’s lead. Israel, you’ll recall, finally made it to Canaan, only to be evicted, allowed back in long enough to “host” their Messiah, and then evicted *again*—a state from which they’ve only recently been allowed to overcome, and then only partially.

The prophet Ezekiel describes this revolving door: **“Moreover, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, because they had not obeyed My rules, but had rejected My statutes and profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their fathers’ idols.”** (Ezekiel 20:23-24) Once in the Land, Israel quickly (within a generation or two) abandoned Yahweh and His Torah. During the period of the Judges, they bounced back and forth between the blessings of the Land and God’s woodshed in the wilderness—sometimes *literally*: remember the story of Ruth, the *Moabitess*? Yahweh dispersed the recalcitrant Israelites among the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and finally the Romans: the Diaspora eventually reached the farthest corners of the



globe. Religious Jews who think Israel is, and always has been, in the center of God's will need to deal with that uncomfortable fact.

But as I said, the street runs both ways: **"As I live, declares the Lord Yahweh, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be King over you."** He's not merely speaking figuratively here, as in "You will someday obey My precepts," though that's true enough. This is a reference to the physical return of the Risen Messiah/King, Yahshua. **"I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out..."** The *future* regathering of Israel will (unlike the first time) be punctuated by God's wrath. Its first wave was generated by Hitler's "final solution" in World War II, and the final phase will be driven by the Antichrist's unfathomable hatred of all things that are Yahweh's.

**"And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples."** Once again, the path from the world to the Promised Land runs through the wilderness, with all the peril that entails. But what on earth is the "wilderness of the peoples?" I believe this may be a reference to the United Nations, whose first (and perhaps *only*) significant act was the creation of a homeland for the Jews in 1947 (who subsequently declared their independence a year later). My reading of prophecy has led me to conclude (though it isn't flatly stated, of course) that the U.N. will be the tool the Antichrist will use to gain world domination. So Ezekiel reports, **"And there [in the 'wilderness of nations'] I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord Yahweh. I will make you pass under the rod...."** This is a picture of a shepherd counting his sheep as they enter the sheepfold. When counting the new lambs in the spring, the shepherd would use his rod to set apart every tenth animal for the tithe. In the same way, Yahweh intends to separate the rebels of Israel from those who are finally ready to recognize Him as their God, and Yahshua as their Messiah.

**"And I will bring you into the bond of the covenant..."** The word "bond" means just what it sounds like: *masoreth* is that with which someone is tied, bound, or obligated. As Yahweh made so clear so often, His covenant promises with Israel come with strings attached: if they wish to be blessed in the Land of Promise, they must heed His precepts, for they are designed by God to teach the rest of the world about His plan for their redemption. Think (in this respect) of Yahweh as the producer of a play: He's not going to pay His actors if they refuse to recite their lines on stage. Throughout history they have always balked (or choked), but this time, finally, they will perform flawlessly—brilliantly—and the world will at last understand what the drama is all about.

**"I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of**

**Israel. Then you will know that I am Yahweh.**" (Ezekiel 20: 33-38) As I keep saying, Yahweh is all about separation, about consecration, about holiness. Israel may always have its rebels, but under the reign of Yahshua, they will not be allowed to participate in the blessings of the Promised Land. As did their forebears, they will learn what they must in the wilderness—or die trying.

In the world, rebels like these tend to regard themselves (or even dumber, regard society) as the provider of what they need for life and happiness. Those who have arrived in the Promised Land run the opposite risk, that of falling into complacency: we may begin to feel that God somehow owes us a good life, because that's what He's always provided. But in the wilderness, we have no such flippant expectation. In the desert, every drop of rain, every flake of manna, is a miracle—and we know it (or at least we should). Yes, life is harder out here, but the wilderness is not really the forbidding and hostile environment it appears to be, not if we're following Yahweh's footsteps through it. It is, rather, the very welcome mat at the front door of the Promised Land: **"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor Me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to My chosen people, the people whom I formed for Myself that they might declare My praise."** (Isaiah 43:18-21)

All of this serves to shed some light on the rather counterintuitive rites of the Day of Atonement, in which, you'll recall, one goat was to be sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people, and another was kept alive to symbolically carry those sins into the wilderness: **"Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for Yahweh and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel [a.k.a. the scapegoat, literally, "entire removal"] shall be presented alive before Yahweh to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel...."** (Leviticus 16:9-10) Both goats represent Christ, each in its own way. The slain goat, of course, predicts the sacrifice of Yahshua in our stead, in which the *penalty* for sin is transferred to Him, and the sentence of death that we had earned for ourselves is nailed with Him to Calvary's pole.

But what about the sin itself? **"And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness."** (Leviticus 16:21-22) The imagery here is that we whose sins are being atoned (that is, *everybody*) remain "in the camp," while our sins—those lapses in behavior and holiness that separate us from fellowship with Yahweh—are separated from us by being sent into the wilderness. How? First, they're

transferred from us to the live goat (representing the Messiah) by the High Priest (also a metaphor for the Messiah, who intercedes on our behalf with the Father). Then the goat is lead away from the now-atoned people into the wilderness by “a man who is able, fit, ready, appointed to the task.” According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the word translated “in readiness” is derived from *anah*—a word meaning “to answer, respond, or testify.” So the underlying truth here is that the man “ready to” accompany the scapegoat into the wilderness is he who testifies to the efficacy of Yahshua’s sacrifice, he who responds to the offer of atonement that Yahweh has made available.

This is more significant than it looks at first. The primary requirement distinguishing the Day of Atonement from all of Yahweh’s other convocations is expressed in the word *anah*. It is invariably translated “afflict (or humble) your souls,” as in Leviticus 23:27-29, but as we just saw, *anah* also means “to answer, respond or testify.” Frankly, I see both attitudes being necessary. Affliction (a.k.a. “being sorry”) isn’t enough by itself, any more than a simple emotional response—without the requisite humility before God—would be. And for what it’s worth, there’s a third meaning for the Hebrew *anah*: “to be occupied, to be busy.” Once we have humbled ourselves before Almighty God, once we have answered His call and responded to His offer of grace, we are to be occupied with the tasks He has set for us; we are to “be about our Father’s business.” We can only do that if we have “accompanied the goat bearing our sin into the wilderness,” and then, leaving our sins behind, returned to the camp.

So what happens to the goat? As with anyone else in the wilderness, that depends on his willingness to follow God’s lead—to food, water, and safety. Yahshua, the One who carried our sin into the wilderness, followed it perfectly, making *Him* the one we want to be trailing whenever we find ourselves in the desert. But remember, the wilderness is symbolically a place of preparation: as Yahshua bore our sins away from us He Himself was being prepared for His next role—His *definitive* role: that of reigning King. When He returns, it will not be as the sacrificial Lamb of God, nor as the scapegoat of *Yom Kippurim*. He will be coming with authority—as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

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We’ve been concentrating on the Hebrew concept of “wilderness,” expressed in the term *midbar*. The Greek equivalent, the adjective *eremos*, also stresses the idea of being uninhabited, lonely, desolate, or forsaken. And the idea of the wilderness being a place of preparation is carried over as well. In fact, the New Testament usage often speaks of the wilderness as a place to which God’s people should retreat occasionally to seek solace, escape the world’s distraction, or flee

from formidable enemies—who, like Pharaoh of old, regard the wilderness as an evil, foreboding place, one to be avoided if at all possible. There are no creature comforts there, but its quiet solitude allows Yahweh's still, small voice be heard loud and clear. Terrifying, if you don't really want to hear it.

One of the most fascinating accounts of flight *to* the wilderness is found in the prophetic allegory of Revelation 12. **"And the dragon [Satan] stood before the woman who was about to give birth [Israel], so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron [obviously Yahshua], but her child was caught up to God and to His throne."** This much is historic *fait accompli*, but the rest of the prophecy has yet to be fulfilled: **"And the woman fled into the wilderness [eremos], where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days."** (Revelation 12:4-6) If you're willing to take this at face value (as I am), it means that Israel, who has been back in the Promised Land as a political entity for some time now, will be forced at some point to flee from "the dragon," Satan. And where will she find shelter? In the wilderness (to the east, if I'm not mistaken), where she will be protected miraculously by Yahweh for about three and a half years—roughly the second half of the Tribulation, otherwise known as "the Time of Jacob's Trouble." Israel will enter the wilderness a broken and persecuted nation (compare Daniel 12:7 and Matthew 24:15-21) but will emerge 1,260 days later the world's only superpower. What will have changed? What will have transformed them? Only the definitive fulfillment of the Day of Atonement: their affliction in repentance, their answer, response, and enthusiastic (though belated) testimony that Yahshua the Messiah is their God—Yahweh in the flesh. The national epiphany will take place in Jerusalem (see Zechariah 12:10), but the preparation for it will occur in the wilderness.

Two thousand years ago, this epiphany was also prepared in the wilderness: **"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is He who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of Yahweh; make His paths straight.'"** (Matthew 3:1-3) The prophecy being referred to is, **"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken."** (Isaiah 40:3-5) As always, the wilderness is described as a place of preparation. The epiphany was that John's task there was to "prepare the way of *Yahweh*," and yet the one he identified was Yahshua—described as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," the one whom the Spirit of God visibly rested upon in the form of a dove, and oh, by the way, as "the son of God" (see John 1:29-34). Either Yahshua was (and is) Yahweh in the flesh, or the Gospel writers, John the

Baptist, and Isaiah, are all liars. Note too that most of Isaiah's prophecy is yet to be fulfilled: the topography of Israel has not been radically altered, nor has "all flesh" seen the glory of Yahweh revealed among men. But the same "man" introduced by John will return to accomplish all of that and more—or *all of the prophets* are liars. The epiphanies of the wilderness experience are a package deal, and they all revolve around the identity and divinity of Yahshua of Nazareth.

Not only did John proclaim Yahshua, Yahshua had a bit to say about John, as well: **"As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?' Not likely. 'What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.'**" The people who responded to John were not only *not* deceived by the pretensions of men like Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate, they were disgusted, suspicious, or resentful of them. When John came along, they were more than ready for an encounter with someone who would give them the truth, unvarnished and unabashed. There hadn't been a prophet in Israel for four hundred years. As far as they were concerned, John was overdue. **"What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.'**" (Matthew 11:7-10)

Yahshua was alluding to Malachi's prophecy: **"Behold, I send My messenger and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the Messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says Yahweh of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?"** (Malachi 3:1-2) Later, this "messenger" of preparation (not to be confused with the "Messenger of the covenant") is identified by name: not John, but *Elijah*. **"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of Yahweh comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."** (Malachi 4:5-6) Yahshua would identify John the Baptist as this messenger whose coming was in the spirit and power of Elijah (see Matthew 11:14), if only they had been willing to heed his message—"Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

Both advents are in view in both of these prophecies. And as before, Elijah (or is that John?) is prophesied to be there before Yahshua's arrival in glory to lay down the ultimatum: **"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."** (Matthew 3:10-12) Or is it, "How

long will you go limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." (I Kings 18:21) Same message, same attitude—delivered in the same venue: the wilderness of our preparation.

One could argue that Yahshua, being God and all, didn't really need to be "prepared" for anything. And yet He spent time in the wilderness. In fact, right after He prevailed upon John to baptize Him in the Jordan River, **"the Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him."** (Mark 1:12-13) Yahweh had humbled Himself to a greater degree than we can possibly comprehend in manifesting Himself as a mere man. The human body and soul is a frail, vulnerable entity, capable of mistakes, limited in knowledge, and (since Adam's fall) estranged from the God who wants nothing more than to walk beside us in harmony and fellowship, keeping us out of harm's way. And yet Yahshua, although He was God, assumed a body just as vulnerable to error as the ones we have. It was the ultimate expression of empathy, not to mention being the most dangerous course of action imaginable: the God who upholds the very universe was placing *Himself* in harm's way.

The wilderness for Yahshua wasn't "God school." He wasn't there to learn how to become the Messiah. You don't have to teach a dog to bark, or a cat to shred furniture. They're born with these abilities: it's what they do. And if you're born *the Messiah*, you don't really have to learn how to fulfill your destiny, either. But finding yourself a human whose job is to redeem all of humanity is a unique challenge. The only way Yahshua could validate his qualifications as the Torah's perfect, flawless sacrifice—"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"—would be to pass the same test that Adam and Eve had failed. Actually, it's even worse: He would have to withstand the most rigorous and diabolical temptations that had ever plagued man, or ever would. Yahshua did this, and passed the test: **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."** (Hebrews 4:15) This is what Yahshua was doing out there in the wilderness for forty days: doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. It's a sobering thought: if He had failed there in the wilderness, it would have been all over for us. There was no back-up plan.

The word translated "tempted" in these verses is the Greek verb *peirazo*. It means to try, to examine, to test in order to learn the true nature or character of something or someone—even to attempt to entrap someone in order to catch them in a mistake or entice them to sin. We humans win a few and lose a few when tempted like this. But Yahshua, though fully human, never stumbled in deed, word, thought, or intent. Was the wilderness environment a factor in His success? I don't know. Many of us become increasingly susceptible to attack when we're

in a weakened state, through hunger, sensory deprivation, or uncertainty. Yahshua, however, seemed to thrive on it, allowing the hardship to focus Him even more sharply on the task at hand.

Indeed, Yahshua came to value the wilderness as a place where one could escape the distractions of life and responsibility and concentrate on what really counted, if only temporarily. **“And He said to [His disciples], ‘Come away by yourselves to a desolate place [*eremos*] and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.”** (Mark 6:31-32) They weren’t instructed to *live there* in monastic isolation, you understand. There was a job to do in the real world. In context, Yahshua had just sent them out in pairs into the community to serve, and they had returned to Him, excited at how God had used them. They would soon find themselves serving again. But for now, they just needed a little time alone with Him, recharging their batteries. We need to remember that as much as Yahweh enjoys seeing us serving faithfully on behalf of His people, the power we need to do so comes from Him alone; we can’t do anything on our own.

On the surface, the Gospel records seem to indicate that Yahshua was always trying to avoid the crowds that hung on His every word. But I think maybe the truth of the matter is that He wanted *them* to experience the same thing He was teaching His disciples: that the wilderness is a place to which we should return now and then, a place in which we can refocus our priorities, shed our distractions, and reestablish our lines of communication with Yahweh. So we read, **“Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to Him from every quarter.”** (Mark 1:45) And, **“When it was day, He departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought Him and came to Him, and would have kept Him from leaving them, but He said to them, ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.’”** (Luke 4:42-43) Yahshua knew exactly where He needed to be at any given time—even if it was the “middle of nowhere.”

It’s not just the *place*, either. The wilderness of spiritual refreshing can be found in an attitude of adoration, wherever we happen to be. Remember this scene? **“A woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to Him and said, ‘Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.’”** (Luke 10:38-41) Mary found a few square feet of “wilderness” right in the middle of a bustling city. The work would wait: the “good portion,” the “one necessary thing,” was to sit at the feet of Yahshua while it was still possible to do so.

We've seen that the wilderness can be a dangerous place if you're out there on your own. But it's perfectly safe if you're in the care of a loving and powerful God. **"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country [*eremos*: wilderness], and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."** (Luke 15:4-7) I realize this is a parable, but notice where the "righteous sheep" were left as the concerned owner went to look for the stray: *in the wilderness*. Unlike some "gods" I could name, Yahweh doesn't have to confine his sheep under armed guard. They're okay in the wilderness. This tells us a bit about God's attitude toward religious repression: it's not necessary; it's not even helpful. If we're truly Yahweh's sheep, He trusts us not to wander off, rebel, get ourselves in trouble, or attack the other sheep in His absence. It can be a bit disconcerting at times, but Yahweh has left us on our own recognizance (with Spiritual supervision, of course)—for the last two thousand years! (Between the goats and the wolves, I'm getting a little nervous; I really hope He gets back here soon with the last of our lost brothers. But I trust His judgment: we'll be perfectly safe here in the wilderness until He does.)

That's only true, however, if "Yahweh is my shepherd." He didn't say anything about the fate of sheep that *didn't* belong to Him. Not here, anyway. But in the "blessings and cursings" passage of Deuteronomy, Yahweh made His position quite clear: if the Israelites would not "be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes," He said, **"the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. Yahweh will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.... And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it. And Yahweh will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other."** (Deuteronomy 28:23-24, 63-64) In other words, if Israel followed other shepherds, first their Promised Land would revert to wilderness, and then they would be forcibly removed from whatever remained—back into the world.

By the time Yahshua appeared, Israel had already been removed from the Land once—for seventy years—and had been allowed to return (though not all of them had). But just before His crucifixion, He identified what it really meant to keep Yahweh's Law: it was recognizing and embracing the One the Torah had been designed to predict and reveal—*Himself*. He said, **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate [*eremos*]. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of Yahweh.'"** (Matthew 23:37-



39, quoting Psalm 118:26) Failure to receive their Messiah would doom Israel to wander in the wilderness again—not for forty years this time, but for forty *Jubilees*—two thousand years.

Unless I'm sadly deluded (and a truckload of prophetic revelation leads me to believe that I'm not) then Israel will be back in the Promised Land again—this time having accepted Yahshua their Messiah *as a nation*—by 2033, the bi-millennium of the Passion—at *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles, to be precise. Their Salvation won't be coming as a babe in a manger this time, however, nor as an inspiring teacher, nor as a miracle-working prophet. No, this time the Son of Man will appear as God, as light, as the irresistible King of kings and Lord of lords. **"For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."** (Matthew 24:24-27) The time for looking for Christ in the wilderness has come and gone. When He returns, the days of preparation will have passed. If we have not learned our lessons by this time, we will have demonstrated quite convincingly that we are unteachable and unreachable.

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It was a bit of surprise to me to discover that the Hebrew word for wilderness—*midbar* or *midebar*—is linguistically related to the "promise" that describes the land toward which we're headed. *Strong's Enhanced Lexicon* notes that *midbar* is based on the verb *dabar*, normally denoting "to speak, declare, promise, command, or warn. But in the Hiphil stem, *dabar* means "to lead away, to put to flight," hence the jump to *midbar*—the place in which (or to which) one is led away. (The Hiphil stem, I'm told, usually expresses the causative action of a verb in the Qal stem. Thus because the Qal form of *dabar* means, "to speak," the Hiphil would literally render it "to be spoken to, commanded, or led.") But *dabar* is the word translated "promised" when referring to the "Promised Land." (This time, as long as we're picking apart Hebrew parts of speech, *dabar* is in the Piel stem, which expresses intensive and intentional action. To "promise" is to speak in a certain intentional way. Of course, for Yahweh, *any* word spoken is a promise, for He cannot lie.)

I'm not pointing this stuff out to make myself look smart. (You know better, anyway.) I had to look it up in a book, just like you would. But I found it fascinating that even from an etymological point of view, the wilderness has far

more affinity to the Promised Land than it does to the world. It's as if Yahweh used language itself to demonstrate that the journey is an essential component of the destination. As long as we're "in the world," we have no connection whatsoever with His Land, but the minute we step out into the wilderness (a step of faith, for we never quite know what adventures await us out there) we are in a state of anticipation that connects us inexorably to our glorious future, while at the same time severing all bonds with our ignominious past. I get the distinct feeling that Yahweh considers the wilderness to be like the "front porch" of the house represented by the Promised Land. It's not "in the house," but it is attached.

Most people in the world today would take umbrage with the concept of the ancient land of Canaan being Israel's "Promised Land." *Promised by whom?* they whine. You could say, "By God," but then it becomes an issue of who your God is. In point of fact, Muslims think it's *their* promised land, even though Allah is not actually on record as *giving* the land to them. One commentator has offered a million dollar prize to the first person who can find a specific mention of Jerusalem in the Qur'an, and his money is quite safe. Columnist Moshe Kohn notes, tongue in cheek, that references to Jerusalem and Zion appear just as frequently in the Qur'an "as they do in the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, the Taoist *Tao-Te Ching*, the Buddhist *Dhamapada* and the Zoroastrian *Zend Avesta*," which is to say, they don't. Allah's supposed revelation to Muhammad doesn't mention Israel's holy city at all, except for a few cryptic and esoteric references that devotees *interpret* to mean Jerusalem. It's true that the holy city was Muhammad's *qibla*—the direction he bowed in prayer—for a short time when he was trying to convince the Jews of Yathrib (Medina) that he was their Messiah. But then he changed tactics, attacked and plundered the local Jews, and changed his *qibla* to Mecca—the center of pagan worship from which he had fled.

So why does *dar al-Islam* consider Jerusalem, and specifically the temple mount, to be so central to their "religion?" (Did I say *religion*? Judged solely on its scriptures, Islam is actually a militant political doctrine—it's no more or less religious than the Ku Klux Klan or Hitler's Nazis.) Why do the "Palestinians" insist that Jerusalem must be the capital city of their nation? In December, 2001, I was in Jerusalem doing research for a book, and my co-author and I had the opportunity to interview eight or ten *bona fide* blood-on-their-hands terrorists (first a group from Fatah and the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, and later with a group comprised of al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Hamas members). And we asked them that very question. They replied that their prophet, Muhammad, flew to the temple (which wasn't there at the time), and thence to heaven, on his epic "night's journey," on a magical flying jackass called a buraq. And that somehow made the land their possession, they said. (By that logic, I'd assume Charles Lindberg's fans own Paris.) Let's be honest, here. Muhammad was in Mecca at the time. His wife (Umm, daughter of Abu Talib) reported that he never left his

bed that night—it was just a dream. This all just serves to prove one thing, I guess: you can't get to heaven from Mecca.

Closer to the truth (not to mention sanity) is their claim to the land by right of conquest: Islamic jihad raiders (nothing “religious” about them) seized Jerusalem by force of arms about five years after Muhammad’s death. But since the Ottoman Caliphate lost the land to the British and their allies as a result of World War I, the “right of conquest” argument won’t fly, at least not in the Arabs’ favor. In fact, if “ownership by right of conquest” is a valid concept, then the Israelis should still be in undisputed possession of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and half of Lebanon. And the “West Bank” would not be considered “occupied” territory—it would be part of Israel. Period. The Arabs can’t have it both ways.

They also come up short in the “historical occupation” department. Arabs never left the Arabian Peninsula in “imperialist mode” until the seventh century AD, when Muhammad’s followers rode forth in search of booty and power. (I found it fascinating that during that first wave of conquest, they were forbidden to take the Qur’an with them—this was strictly political, if you can call stealing everything in sight and enslaving the populace a “political” objective. What was really going on here was that Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s first “caliph,” or successor, needed a target-rich environment if he hoped to hold Muhammad’s little empire together without the benefit of the prophet’s personal charisma, and there was nothing left to steal in Arabia.)

On the other hand, the nation of Israel has history in the neighborhood as far back as the fourteenth century B.C., and they have family traditions there going back over half a millennium before that. And *that* is where the promises began: Yahweh told Abraham, **“I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”** (Genesis 17:7-8) And He confirmed the covenant promise for generations afterward, this example being made to Abe’s grandson, Jacob/Israel: **“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”** (Genesis 28:15) So the promise is only as good as the God who made it. Allah (if you can believe the Qur’an) never made promises, only demands and threats. But Yahweh’s covenant—His binding, unbreakable promise to Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Israel—still stands. In order to deny Jewish ownership of the land of Canaan, you must (1) assert that Yahweh is not God, (2) contend that He has neither the authority to make such a promise nor the power to see it fulfilled, (3) declare (on your own authority) that His unilateral covenant with Abraham has become invalid, or (4) decide in your infinite wisdom that “everlasting” and

“throughout your generations” actually denote something temporary and fleeting. Speaking strictly for myself, I’m not willing to do any of those things.

And what of those who insist that Israel’s inheritance has been taken from them because of their rebellion and given to others more worthy? This is not only the core of the Muslim position, but also that of a sizable contingent of nominal Christianity, who insist that *they* have “replaced” Israel in the heart of God (hence the name of this heresy: replacement theology, also known as supersessionism). Yahweh’s own words (delivered through the prophet Jeremiah) settle the matter: **“I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of Me in their hearts, that they may not turn from Me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all My heart and all My soul. For thus says Yahweh: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them.”** (Jeremiah 32:40-42) This was written as Israel was being *evicted* from the Promised Land for their idolatries—just as Yahweh had promised them in Deuteronomy 28:63. Yahweh is reiterating that even though Israel may not always *hold* the Land, they will always be its rightful owners, for that is His promise to them. He never said any such thing to the church, and has actually promised to proactively fight *against* Islam (identified through geography—see Psalm 83, Ezekiel 38) when the time comes. No, Israel’s land is Israel’s—but their possession will only become secure when they finally learn to revere Yahweh. They’re not quite there yet.

Some would contend that the only land to which Israel is entitled is the anorexic strip of coastline and hunk of southern desert the U.N. granted it in 1947. Again, Yahweh disagrees—in more detail than anybody seems to want to hear. Yahweh’s promise of Israelite sovereign territory (repeated in half a dozen places) extends from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River west to east, and all the way from the Euphrates River to the Red Sea (read: Gulf of Aqaba) north to south. And I don’t want to confuse the issue, but the land to be distributed specifically *among the twelve tribes* was defined somewhat differently in both Numbers 34 and Ezekiel 47-48. The differences apparently identify and set apart Israelite “national lands” that aren’t to be distributed among the tribes. Here God gave us everything but GPS coordinates. Both of these descriptions comprise all of present-day Israel (though without the southernmost pointy part that extends from the Negev to the Gulf of Aqaba), including the West Bank and Gaza Strip, plus most of Lebanon (up to just north of the 34<sup>th</sup> parallel), plumping up Lebanon’s eastern border a bit to include a few miles of Syrian territory. This isn’t just wishful thinking on my part, either. If Yahweh is God, then these are Israel’s true borders—by divine decree. If He is *not* God, then the whole thing is up for grabs. Make your choice, world.

Israel's transition from wandering in the wilderness to entering the Promised Land was (and still is) inextricably linked to the Torah, to their willingness to embrace what it signifies. As they were about to enter for the first time, Moses admonished them, **"Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that Yahweh your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. And you shall write on them all the words of this law [*torah*], when you cross over to enter the land that Yahweh your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as Yahweh, the God of your fathers, has promised you."** (Deuteronomy 27:1-3) Enjoying God's promise was contingent upon "keeping the whole commandment," for that would have made them a beacon of hope to the entire gentile world. The nation of Israel would have been a living picture of the coming salvation of Yahweh. Alas, their subsequent idolatry had precisely the opposite effect: the world blasphemes Yahweh because of the testimony of Israel: their exile from the Land told the world, ever so eloquently: "These people have been in the very presence of Yahweh, and yet they have chosen to leave that place of privilege—He must not be much of a God." (See Ezekiel 36:16-21.)

It wasn't as if Israel never saw the blessings of the Promised Land with their own eyes. Their "golden age" peaked with the reign of David and the succession of his son Solomon, who at the dedication of the temple stated, **"Blessed be Yahweh who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all His good promise, which he spoke by Moses His servant."** (I Kings 8:56) True, but when they subsequently turned their backs on Him, His "*bad*" promises—the cursings that had been prophesied for their disobedience—would become just as real.

The Israelites entered the Promised land about three million strong. Today—a hundred generations later—their numbers (that we know of) are only about four times that. Indeed, recent history demonstrates that it's a miracle Israel isn't extinct. And yet, part of the blessing of living in the Promised Land was to be a dramatic increase in population. As Moses said, **"Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them [Yahweh's precepts], that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as Yahweh, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey."** (Deuteronomy 6:3) Again, we see that Israel's adherence to Yahweh's instructions—the Torah—would inevitably result in demographic prosperity in the Land. Since Israel's eventual repentance and restoration is the single most often repeated prophecy in the entire Bible, one wonders if *this* prayer of Moses might someday be granted: **"May Yahweh, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as He has promised you!"** (Deuteronomy 1:11) Could it be that by the end of the Millennial Kingdom—Yahshua's thousand year reign in Zion—now-faithful Israel's population will have risen to the three *billion* mark? If it does, one might expect some awfully

crowded living conditions, unless the Promised Land takes on some new, more spacious dimensions. And wouldn't you know it? This very thing is prophesied: **"They [the former overlords of Judah] are dead [a factor that places this prophecy solidly within the Millennium], they will not live; they are shades, they will not arise; to that end You have visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them. But You have increased the nation, O Yahweh, You have increased the nation; You are glorified; You have enlarged all the borders of the land."** (Isaiah 26:14-15)

In the end, the Promised Land is not an earthly country, but a state of being. It is as the Psalmist puts it: **"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to Yahweh, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust....' Because you have made Yahweh your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent... With long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation."** (Psalm 91:1-2, 9-10, 16) In other words, the Promised Land is a symbol for living one's life in reverence for Yahweh, in reliance upon His Salvation (read: Yahshua), and in the peace and confidence that can be found only by dwelling under "the shelter of the Most High God." There may be challenges here, but they're nothing our God can't handle; there may be enemies lurking, but here in the shadow of the Almighty, there is no real danger.

A common scriptural parallel to the concept of entering the Promised Land is that of receiving an inheritance. For example, **"Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. Yahweh your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as Yahweh your God promised you."** (Joshua 23:4-5) The word translated "inheritance" here is *nachalah*, a noun meaning a possession, property, an inheritance, share, portion, allotment, or heritage. It's based on the verb *nachal*, meaning to possess, acquire, inherit, or to receive (or assign) as an allotted inheritance or possession. We need to address (again) the touchy subject of precisely whose land Yahweh was giving to the Israelites.

It should be obvious that you can't bequeath something that doesn't belong to you. When my father passed away, he left his house to my brothers and I. He was entitled to do this, because he owned the house. He did not give us the house next door in his will, for the simple reason that it was not his to give. But the passage above sounds as if God was giving what rightfully belonged to the Canaanites to the Israelites. It is certain that they *occupied* the land—but did they *own* it? No. Ownership is determined by two factors: creation and/or purchase. Thus we read, **"The earth is Yahweh's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for He has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters."** (Psalm 24:1-2) Note that according to the "creation or purchase" rule, not only is the whole earth the property of Yahweh, but so are *we* ("those who dwell therein") for we have

been both created *and* purchased by God. So the Promised Land was Yahweh's to give away, even though Canaanite squatters had moved in. God's position is made a bit clearer in the Song of Moses: **"You will bring them [Israel] in and plant them on Your own mountain [literally, the mountain of Your inheritance], the place, O Yahweh, which You have made for Your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established."** (Exodus 15:17) Although He owns the whole earth, Yahweh has laid claim to only a tiny piece of it: Ariel, Zion, Jerusalem—and He has made it abundantly clear that He wants Israel to be there with Him.

So Yahweh set aside the Promised Land for Israel's inheritance: **"Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its population.'"** (Numbers 26:52-54) Yahweh was careful to ensure that each family would inherit an equal share of land. Of course, in anybody else's system, the "party in power" would have received the most and the best—as in the grim Communist joke: "Everybody is equal, but some are more equal than others." In Yahweh's world, it worked just the opposite (as far as any outside observer could tell): the tribe of Moses and Aaron—the Levites—were not allotted any tribal lands at all: **"The Levitical priests, all the tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel. They shall eat Yahweh's food offerings as their inheritance. They shall have no inheritance among their brothers; Yahweh is their inheritance, as He promised them."** (Deuteronomy 18:1-2)

They weren't left homeless or destitute, of course, but land, the form of inheritance which most clearly constituted temporal wealth (because you could grow crops or support flocks and herds on it), was substituted in the case of the Levites with affluence of a different kind: they got to be the custodians, the stewards, of the earthly affairs of Almighty God. Instead of riches, they were given responsibility. Instead of temporal treasure, they were given the tithes and offerings of Israel (which, ironically, amounted to roughly what the land might have produced for them if they *had* received it). In this respect, the tribe of Levi is symbolic of the redeemed of Christ: we aren't equipped to provide salvation for ourselves, and yet it is made available to us anyway—by God's command, through our faith. So it is with us as it was with Levi: Yahweh is our inheritance.

The twist here is that Yahweh also considers the people of Israel to be *His* inheritance—a mind-blowing concept, you must admit. Compare these two passages, both of which refer to the same event (Moses begging God not to destroy the Hebrews in the wake of their "golden calf" debacle). At the time, he pleaded with Yahweh, **"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall**

inherit [*nachal*] it forever.” (Exodus 32:13) God had promised the Land to Abraham and his descendants as their eternal heritage. Moses begs Yahweh to keep that in mind—in effect, to consider His own reputation. But recounting the story a generation later, Moses remembers appealing to the fact that the nation of Israel was as much Yahweh’s inheritance as He was theirs: **“O Lord Yahweh, destroy not Your people and your heritage [*nachalah*], whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom You have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin, lest the land from which You brought us say, ‘Because Yahweh was not able to bring them into the land that He promised [*dabar*] them, and because He hated them, He has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.’ For they are Your people and Your heritage [*nachalah*], whom You brought out by Your great power and by your outstretched arm.”** (Deuteronomy 9:26-29) Basically, Moses is saying to Yahweh, “You bought this people; You redeemed them—so now You *own* them. They belong to You; they’re Your inheritance. You knew going in that they’re only human, sin-prone children of Adam. So are you really going to destroy them, just because they did what You knew all along they were dumb enough to do? You brought them out of Egypt because you loved them, but if you kill them out here in the desert, it’ll look to the world like you *hated* them!”

And Yahweh (in my admittedly overactive imagination) replies, no doubt smiling to Himself, “Yes, I’m glad you noticed. Now pay attention, Moses, for this is all a parable. Because I love them, I redeemed these Israelites with the blood of insignificant Egyptians. But the day is coming when I will redeem the whole human race with the most precious substance in existence—*my own* blood—again, because I love them. This will make them *all* My inheritance, just as you guys are now. And because of My love, I won’t destroy *them*, either—provided they’ll do what Israel did, and follow My lead through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.” Of course, the same reality applies: how much time we’ll have to spend in the school of the wilderness will depend upon how well we learn our lessons there.

One thing is certain: what Yahweh gives to us—our destiny, heritage, and inheritance: our Promised Land—will always be ours. **“Yahweh knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever.”** (Psalm 37:18) Our imputed “blamelessness” is the heart of that heritage. The exodus Israelites fell in the wilderness because they didn’t trust their God. Their children entered the Promised Land because they *did* trust Him. Like Abraham, their faith was accounted unto them as righteousness—as *blamelessness*, the heritage that will remain forever.



## WATER & FIRE



### *Cleansing vs. Transformation*

**“Three things are never satisfied; four never say, ‘Enough’: Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, ‘Enough.’”** (Proverbs 30:15-16) Solomon was right: there are three insatiable realities in this world—four if you count unrealized potential separately. What he didn’t say (since it’s a *proverb*—it’s up to us to figure this out) was that Yahweh’s plan of redemption is designed to deal with each of these ravenous realities. Sheol is obvious: it is appointed unto all men to suffer physical death, and one way or another we will all eventually be separated from these mortal bodies. What’s not quite as obvious is the lost potential represented by the “barren womb,” those who lives—whether physically or spiritually—are never given a chance to see the light of day. Christ spoke of the need to be born of *both* water and the Spirit: to fail in either regard is to demonstrate the insatiability of the barren womb.

And what of water and fire? Both symbols (as we saw previously) are utilized to reveal Yahweh’s character. Fire (as a form of light) illuminates our way, and its heat allows precious metals like gold and silver to be purified through the separation and removal of contaminants. This makes it a perfect metaphor for the process of attaining holiness. Water too has multiple symbolic functions. As Solomon points out, the thirsty land can’t get enough, for water speaks of life, of refreshing and restoration, and in the end, of spiritual indwelling. But water is also an agent of cleansing, a ubiquitous scriptural theme.

Thus although we tend to see water and fire as enemies and opposites, they are presented in Yahweh’s glossary of metaphors as allies, parallel to each other, working side by side toward the goal of our reconciliation with Him. Unlike some other subjects in our study of contrasts, we don’t see a progression from one to the other (as from chaos to order, or from darkness into light), but rather a collaboration of two very different things, both crucial if Yahweh’s plan is to be realized in our lives. They are two means toward the same broad end, a symbiotic system. They’re right and left feet alternating steps on the path toward our righteousness and redemption. Both are necessary; both are moving in the same direction. But we must be careful not to place the right foot in the left boot: God has chosen to use water and fire to teach us two very different lessons.

Perhaps the most striking example of water and fire operating side by side is God's design for what stood outside the tabernacle—every detail of which illustrated in some way Yahweh's plan for our redemption. Once a worshipper entered the courtyard from the east (and there was only one way in), he'd encounter two significant items before he reached the tabernacle proper. First was the altar: **"You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square, and its height shall be three cubits. And you shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze."** (Exodus 27:1-2) This was basically a big barbeque upon which the sacrifices were to be roasted. Its materials are significant: it was basically a wooden box (that is, it was made of something that had once been alive), but it was encased in bronze (read: judgment), ostensibly so the "living part" could withstand the heat of the fire. The square shape of the altar speaks of order, design, and purpose. Taken together, these symbolic elements unmistakably connect the altar to Yahshua's Messianic mission. The tabernacle's model had to be portable, so it was only about seven and a half feet across. The scaled-up altar specified for the Millennial Temple (see Ezekiel 43:13-17) will be huge, about twenty-one feet square, standing some fourteen feet off the ground.

The lesson of the altar was that something innocent had to die in order to cover—to atone for—the sins of mankind. The carnage was graphic, but this was, after all, a picture of what would happen to our Savior Yahshua upon a Roman cross at Calvary, something far more brutal. In both places, the blood of the sacrifice would be poured out onto the ground (or was captured to be sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat in the Most Holy Place). The flesh of the sacrifice would serve one of two purposes, both symbolic of Christ. It could be eaten by the priests (and, depending on the type of sacrifice, shared with the worshippers), which would nourish them, symbolically transferring the life of the sacrifice to the people. Or, in the case of the *olah* (the "burnt offering"), the sacrifice would be completely consumed in the flame, a picture of the Messiah's total commitment to our reconciliation, the voluntary subjection of His body to judgment on our behalf. Both modes of sacrifice are, in their own ways, predictive of what Yahshua achieved for us. And fire is the agent that brought it all about.

We need to realize that the death of the sacrifice (whether Christ's or the animal's) is not enough by itself. Yes, the spilling of innocent blood is significant and necessary, but it does not complete the process of redemption. The life of the innocent has to *mean* something; it must be invested with purpose. And further, this innocent life has to be somehow linked to the guilt of the petitioner. And that's where fire comes in. The fire transforms the sacrifice: that which was placed upon the altar does not leave that place unchanged. As the sacrifice is eaten by the worshipper and the priest, its death provides life-giving nourishment—the same symbolic death-into-life transformation we saw earlier.

The point of substitutionary sacrifice is that the death of the innocent must provide something of value to the guilty—something he could not have gotten on his own. As far back as the Garden of Eden, that was God’s pattern. There, innocent animals were slain so that Adam and Eve’s shame could be covered. But this sacrifice would have been a pointless waste if our parents had refused to put on the garments Yahweh had given them. Here at the altar of sacrifice, the sin of the guilty one was transferred to the innocent sacrifice, which was “judged” by fire in his stead. These things were previews of Yahshua’s sacrifice, in which he bore the penalty for the sins of all mankind, enduring the judgment of God on our behalf. But as I said, His sacrifice is only as efficacious as our willingness to receive it. It’s up to us to decide: is Yahshua the Lamb of God who takes away our sin, or was He just another dumb criminal executed by the Romans? There is no middle ground.

The worshipper, having confronted the altar’s fires and having been transformed by association with the innocent sacrifice, found there was still something separating him from intimate fellowship with Yahweh in the sanctuary: **“Yahweh said to Moses, ‘You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.’”** The basin, or laver, was a shallow pan or bowl supported by a pedestal base—all of which was cast in bronze, indicative, as before, of judgment. Bear in mind that in scriptural usage, judgment is a legal term: it doesn’t so much mean condemnation as it does separation—the innocent set apart from the guilty, or in this case, the clean from the defiled. Aaron and his sons (in other words, the priests: those whose job was to intercede between the people and their God) were to use the bronze basin to wash their hands and feet as they ministered. **“When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to Yahweh, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die.”** (Exodus 30:17-20) The hands represent what one does—his works. And the feet symbolize where he goes—his walk through life. Note that Yahweh is grimly serious about this cleansing: to appear before Yahweh defiled by the world’s filth is a death sentence.

The priests’ washing their hands and feet at the bronze laver is, as usual, a metaphor for something that carries over into the daily life of every believer. But in practical terms, what does it mean for us to “wash” ourselves? Yahweh explains: **“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before My eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. Come now, let us reason together, says Yahweh: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”** (Isaiah 1:16-18) The adage “cleanliness is next to godliness” is an old wives’ tale; it’s not really a scriptural concept. But

it's close: symbolically, cleanliness *is* godliness: it's a metaphor for the elimination of evil intentions and oppression, leading to the practice of justice, mercy, and compassion. The surprising thing is that it apparently doesn't matter how indelible the stain of our sins seems to be; it is not beyond Yahweh's power to make clean. But deciding to do it is up to us: the command is "Wash *yourselves*; make *yourselves* clean." Yahweh won't force us to repent.

David came to know this truth all too well. When convicted at last of the reality of his own heinous sin, he pleaded, **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."** (Psalm 51:1-3, 7) The reference to hyssop (a small mint-like shrub) reminds us of the ordinance of the Red Heifer, described in Numbers 19. The ashes of a red heifer sacrificed for the purpose were to be mixed with water and sprinkled, with hyssop, upon someone to make them symbolically pure—and specifically, to ritually purify someone who had touched a dead body. (Note, however, that verse 9 pointedly states that the water is for the purification of *sin*, linking sin to death). David put two and two together, associating his own sin with the death he had earned: the "dead body" he had "touched" was *his own*. And as bad as his sins were—adultery, murder, and the misuse of his God-given throne in perpetrating his crimes—David knew that if Yahweh washed him, he would be truly clean. He also realized that God would do whatever it took to "blot out his transgressions"—using a stiff bristle brush and lots of elbow grease, in his case. But his repentance was real. He was ready for whatever was coming.

In practically the same breath, he pleaded, **"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."** (Psalm 51:10-12) David had first asked Yahweh to cleanse him of his iniquity, achieved symbolically with water (which separates us from our impurities by washing them away). Now he asks God to create a clean heart within him by renewing what motivated him. That's the function of fire: separating us from our impurities by destroying that which is worthless—the "wood, hay, and stubble" of our lives, or in David's case, a sin-polluted heart. This is purification by fire wrought upon the altar of sacrifice—the transformation of death into life.

Both water and fire are spoken of in scripture as agents of purification, but they do their jobs in entirely different ways. John the Baptist spoke of this divergence—the difference between cleansing and transformation—when contrasting his baptism with that of Yahshua's. **"I baptize you with water because of repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not**

**worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**" (Matthew 3:11) The cleansing David had sought represented, in a way, the baptism of John: it was born of a contrite heart, humility before God, and real repentance—a desire to turn around and walk in Yahweh's path instead of his own lusts. This was the cleansing of the bronze laver—something each of us needs every time we wish to approach God, which ought to be all the time. But baptism with fire—that corresponding to transformation at the altar, ultimately the baptism of the Holy Spirit into which Yahshua immerses us—was also in view. As I said, both things must be confronted before one is able to step into the tabernacle of meeting with Yahweh.

John's description of the One he had come to announce wasn't just plucked out of thin air. It was a paraphrase of this prophecy from Malachi: **"The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says Yahweh of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to Yahweh."** (Malachi 3:1-3) Yahshua the Messiah, called here "the Messenger of the Covenant," is prophesied to achieve both modes of purification. First He uses the fire of the refiner of metals—liquefying gold or silver to separate it from its impurities, releasing it from association with the worthless dross of its natural state. And then He will cleanse us using soap and water, washing away all the world's filth that so easily accumulates on us. So, you might say, He intends to purify us inside and out.

One group in particular is singled out for special attention here: Yahweh's mention of the Levites signals the future Millennial aspect of this purification process. Their restoration to a place of service in a glorious rebuilt temple is described in detail in Ezekiel, chapters 40-46. Although Ezekiel witnessed some very strange ecstatic visions, there is not the least hint in these chapters that what he's being shown is anything other than literal future history. He even names a sub-clan of Aaron's family (Zadok) who alone will be entrusted with the duties of the priesthood during Yahshua's thousand-year reign.

The same sort of purification process—through both fire and water—is prophesied (in the past tense) by the Psalmist: **"For You, O God, have tested us; You have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; You laid a crushing burden on our backs; You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet You have brought us out to a place of abundance."** (Psalm 66:10-12) This has only been fulfilled in the most tentative of terms in the past. Although their fiery trials and "crushing burdens" have been a grim reality for millennia, you could hardly call *any* blessing Israel has enjoyed since the Babylonian exile "a place of abundance." But the Tanach is peppered from one end to the other with specific

prophecies foretelling this very scenario—a time of great tribulation and testing, during which Israel will return *as a nation* to Yahweh, followed by their restoration, renewal, and unprecedented blessing. But as any child ought to know, you can't come to the dinner table until you've washed up.

This coming glorious restoration of Israel—both spiritually and politically—is by far the most oft repeated prophetic theme in the entire Tanach, characterized as a byproduct of the return and reign of Yahshua our Messiah. But notwithstanding the miraculous rebirth of Israel's political existence in 1948, it is still probably the least likely scenario one could imagine, given the world's current and ongoing state of geopolitical unrest. A billion Muslims would like nothing better than to see Israel pushed into the sea. Even her staunchest allies (like America) betray her on a regular basis. And the vast majority of her population remains at enmity with Yahweh. So how can a rational man today believe these “outlandish” prophecies of a new Jewish golden age? I personally find it easy, if I keep in mind the other, equally unlikely, prophecies that have *already* come to pass in exacting detail—mostly dealing with the Messiah's first advent.

David tells us why we can trust God's pronouncements: **“The words of Yahweh are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.”** (Psalm 12:6) It's not that Yahweh's words needed to be purified or cleansed, but rather that they have *already* been tried, tested, and proven true in the crucible of human history. Interestingly, the “earthen” furnace used to contain and focus the heat of the refining process is the word *l'erez*—which could just as well be translated “in the world.” That is precisely where God's word is vindicated—in events played out before the eyes of mankind. The reference to having been “purified seven times” speaks, I believe, of completion, of perfection, of there being so much evidence of the veracity of the words of Yahweh, that we are left without excuse. Anyone can guess a coin toss correctly once or twice. But in already-fulfilled Messianic prophecy, Yahweh has “called it” four or five hundred times *in a row*. Are you really prepared to bet against Him on the next flip? No, Yahweh's words have been thoroughly refined in the furnace of human experience. They *will not* be proven wrong.

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You and I, on the other hand, get things wrong all the time. That's why cleansing in water is such a big part of the Torah's prescriptions for living: until the process of our transformation is complete, we will still need periodic cleansing, for we still live in a dirty world. There are two types of water cleansing that appear side by side all the time in the Torah. Typical is this instruction

pertaining to the Day of Atonement: **“He who lets the goat go to Azazel [that is, ‘as the scapegoat’] shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp.”** (Leviticus 16:26)

To “wash” one’s clothes is the Hebrew verb *kabas*—to launder; specifically to render clothes clean and soft by treading, kneading, or beating them in water. (The meaning is consistent with the Old English verb “to full.” It’s the agitation and manipulation our washing machines do for us these days.) Since our clothing is symbolic of our standing or status before God (something we’ll cover in detail in a future chapter), to clean it in this way indicates that there is a certain amount of labor or effort required of us in the process of making these “garments” clean, i.e., enabling us to participate in our own sanctification. Don’t get me wrong: we can’t work to achieve our salvation. But remember, the “fine linen, clean and bright” in which the Bride of Christ was arrayed (see Revelation 19:8) was defined as the “righteous acts of the saints.” Although our *righteousness* is imputed to us, our *acts* are something we ourselves perform. (Remember what James said about “faith without works?” It’s dead.) So although water is the agent of cleansing in which the clothes are washed (and if you’ll recall, water is one of the seven symbols Yahweh uses to define His own character), the more we work at it, the cleaner our “garments” are likely to get. In other words, we’re not passive bystanders with God: we get to actively participate in our shared relationship, and our own actions determine how close and intimate this relationship will be. In the end, it’s the same thing Paul was talking about: **“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”** (Philippians 2:12-13)

The second recurring type of cleansing is the bathing of the body. This is the Hebrew verb *rahas*, to wash or bathe—to remove soil or impurities from your body using water, either through immersion (read: baptism) or the application of water to the skin. Since a derivative definition means “to be abundant,” it would seem that the basic tone of the word would favor the “immersion” idea. *Rahas* describes both ceremonial ritual washing and normal personal hygiene in scriptural usage. Out of seventy-two occurrences in the Bible, two thirds of them appear in the Pentateuch, and a third show up in a single book, Leviticus. For example, **“And whoever sits on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.”** (Leviticus 15:6) There are no fewer than thirteen such precepts commanding cleansing with water in Leviticus 15 alone. The reason for all this ritual cleansing, and the consequences of being lackadaisical about it, is stated pointedly in the chapter’s conclusion: the holiness of Yahweh demands it. **“Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling My tabernacle that is in their midst.”** (Leviticus 15:31) The point of the symbol is that

one must be clean if he wishes to enter Yahweh's tabernacle—Yahweh's plan for our redemption. That's why the bronze laver was stationed *outside* the sanctuary.

If you're looking for it, you can detect a subtle undercurrent in the use of *rahas* in scripture: that of bathing in anticipation of romantic encounter. And frankly, I think this may actually get closer to the heart of God's real issue with cleanliness and purity. The Song of Solomon is a visceral look at how Yahshua *really* feels about us, and how (if we're His bride) we feel about Him: we're head over heels in love. It's something you can't analyze, critique, or understand as an outsider; you can only experience it for yourself. So we read, **"I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking. 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.' I had put off my garment; how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them? My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me."** (Song of Solomon 5:2-4) We are attractive to our Lover *because* we are clean. We see the same thing in the story of Ruth. Naomi counsels her widowed daughter-in-law in how to be attractive to Boaz (the Torah's kinsman-redeemer—a prototype for Christ): **"Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do."** (Ruth 3:3-4) Ruth had already demonstrated her faithfulness and character: Boaz knew who she was. But Naomi was right: to be attractive to Boaz, to get close to him and stay there, Ruth would have to be clean. Is our relationship with Yahshua really any different?

Leviticus 13 and 14 are a treatise on what to do with systemic impurity, something that's given the code-word "leprosy" in scripture. This goes far beyond a single identifiable malady (today called Hansen's disease, a bacterial infection affecting the skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes), for it also describes spots that show up in garments of wool, linen, or leather, and even colored streaks that show up on the walls of someone's house (presumably mold or fungal infestations). The Torah offers no advice about how to *cure* this plague; it only prescribes what to do when you discover it—the idea being to separate the infected person or thing from the congregation. Quarantine the unclean person, burn the clothes, tear down and haul away the wall—whatever it takes to achieve separation (read: holiness). I found it fascinating that cleansing with water is part of the process—but only *after* the suspected "leper" had been examined and declared clean. **"And the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the diseased area has faded and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean."** (Leviticus 13:6) The washing with water does not cure the leprosy; it merely confirms the status of purity that has already been pronounced by the priest.



But what if the man actually has this contagious disease? **“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”** (Leviticus 13:45-46) Our liberal society today would whine, *The leper has rights, too—he must be allowed to mingle freely in society!* God disagrees: His agenda is holiness—setting His people apart from the contagious hazards of the world. In case you haven’t picked up on it, “leprosy” is a metaphor for sin, and more than sin—it illustrates a life that leads to death: the condition of the willfully lost. It seems to me that today’s “lepers” still announce themselves. Oh, they might wear three thousand dollar Italian suits and ride in limousines, but the things they say still proclaim, “Unclean, I’m unclean!” The problem is, the world has become one big leper colony. There are only small pockets of the faithful left: the “camp” is under siege.

The point I want to make is that no amount of washing can make a “leper” clean. As Moses said, **“He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease.”** Washing is only efficacious *after* his lethal disease has been cured. Did you ever notice that the Tanach records no Israelite *ever* being cured of leprosy under Torah rules? Miriam (Moses’ sister) was struck—and cured—before the precept was delivered. Naaman was a Syrian, not an Israelite. Azariah, a.k.a. Uzziah (II Kings 15:5) was never cured. It’s not until Yahshua arrived on the scene that anyone was ever cured of “leprosy” (which, as we saw, is code for “sin leading to death”). It is only *after* we are saved by grace through faith in Yahshua’s atoning sacrifice that “washing our clothing” (i.e., working toward a closer relationship with our God) or “bathing our bodies” (making us desirable and attractive to the One who loves us) does us any good at all.

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We’ve been talking about cleansing and purification, and most of us tend to consider these good and pleasant things. Unless you’re a ten year old boy, you probably associate cleanliness with comfort, with contentment. Even if the course of life demands that we get dirty and sweaty from time to time, we inevitably feel better after we’ve gotten ourselves “cleaned up.” But the filth, sweat, and grime we’ve washed away don’t find the cleansing process pleasant at all: from their personified point of view, it feels like wrath, like rejection, like condemnation. Purity is a good thing if you’re a person; if you’re dirt, not so much.

So not surprisingly, we find both fire and water identified in scripture as instruments of God’s wrath. We often fail to comprehend that when these tools

are wielded by Yahweh in anger, they are actually agents of cleansing. Thus we read: **“How long, O Yahweh? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?”** (Psalm 89:46) The answer is, “Until you are pure—until the corruption and impurities of your idolatry have been separated from you in the heat of My crucible, skimmed off and discarded.” To whom is He speaking? It would be a mistake to assume that all such passages are addressed strictly to Israel, and that gentiles therefore need not pay them any heed. What’s true for Israel is also true for gentiles, even if the truth is spoken in a different dialect. The family of Israel is, in Yahweh’s eyes, a trial balloon, a test market, a focus group; they are His prototype for the called-out assembly, the ekklesia, the Church. Put another way, they are the lens through which Yahweh’s plan for mankind’s redemption is brought into focus.

As if to make my point for me, Yahweh speaks to Israel (characterized in this passage as *Jeshurun*—literally, “upright,” or “law-keeping”) through His servant Moses, declaring, **“For a fire is kindled by My anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.”** (Deuteronomy 32:22) This warning of the impending purification through fire comes on the heels of a promise that Israel will be “provoked to jealousy” by a bunch of relative nobodies—whom history has subsequently shown to be the predominantly gentile ekklesia. So Moses concludes his song by informing us, **“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land and His people.”** (Deuteronomy 32:43) We’re all in this together.

Isaiah 5 tells a parable about Yahweh planting a vineyard in the earth. Although it should have been fruitful and bountiful, considering all the labor and resources God lavished upon it, it brought forth only wild grapes and pitifully poor harvests. So He determined to “lay it waste.” The vineyard is identified as Israel and Judah in verse 7: they were the ones tasked with bringing Yahweh’s plan of redemption before the world, just as a vineyard is tasked with bringing forth good grapes. **“As the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the law of Yahweh of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the anger of Yahweh was kindled against His people, and He stretched out His hand against them and struck them, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets. For all this His anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still.”** (Isaiah 5:24-25) This “tongue of fire” has been Israel’s grim reality, with only short periods of respite, from Isaiah’s day to this—twenty-seven hundred years now.

God’s anger was directed toward Israel, but this judgment, this purification by fire, will eventually—on God’s schedule—reach the entire world. The lessons—

and the judgment—will be extended to the gentiles for precisely the same reasons they were visited upon the Jews: we too (most of us) have **“rejected the law of Yahweh of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.”** The Law of Yahweh speaks of Christ, so to reject the Torah is to reject the Messiah it reveals; and “the Word of the Holy One of Israel” (as we learned in the first chapter of John’s Gospel) is Yahshua of Nazareth—the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us. So the gentiles will join Israel in being purged and cleansed in the fires of separation. In a passage that both berates Israel for its idolatries *and* predicts its rebirth, Isaiah foresees the means of Israel’s deliverance: the purification by fire of *all flesh*. **“For behold, Yahweh will come in fire, and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger in fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will Yahweh enter into judgment, and by His sword, with all flesh; and those slain by Yahweh shall be many.”** (Isaiah 66:15-16)

Rejecting Yahweh’s law and despising His Word are perfectly adequate reasons for the fiery anger of God, of course. But the Isaiah 5 passage is far more specific and detailed than this in identifying *why* the people need to be purified. Verse 8 warns against oppressive greed, specifically “accumulating houses,” gobbling up property until the poor have been “priced out.” Verse 10 condemns a lifestyle centered on pleasure seeking, amusement, and dissipation. Verse 13 begins a diatribe against arrogance and pride, especially as manifested in a refusal to know and honor Yahweh. Verse 18 derides those who are willfully tied to their sin, justifying their transgressions with lies and daring God to do something about it. Verse 20 denounces those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute light with darkness, and sweetness with bitterness. 21 speaks against prideful conceit, thinking one is smarter than he really is (according to Yahweh’s standards). 22 singles out those who seek to excel at performing iniquity—such as developing a capacity for drinking alcohol or a knack for skirting the law.

Jude reminds us of one more specific condition that begs for cleansing by fire: **“Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”** (Jude 7) The cities of the plain (see Genesis 19) had embraced a state of depravity that precluded choice. One could not live there and serve Yahweh openly without being continually oppressed, tormented, and persecuted as a hated outsider (as Lot was—see II Peter 2:7-8, Genesis 19:9). An examination of the Sodomites’ attitudes as revealed in the text tells us that they were defined by more than mere sexual perversion: every single item on the Isaiah 5 list describes them to a tee.

Ezekiel extends the list: **“The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice. And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall**

**and stand in the breach before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out My indignation upon them. I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath. I have returned their way upon their heads, declares the Lord Yahweh.”** (Ezekiel 22:29-31) Sin, he says, attempts to tear down the defenses of holiness surrounding God’s people. Yahweh was looking for someone willing to draw a line in the sand and stop the inroads of transgression—or at least try. But all He found was compromise, a refusal to call evil out for what it is. It reminds me of America today: even those who know better are unwilling to take a firm public stand against such obvious evils (by scriptural standards) as extra-marital sex, substance abuse, homosexuality, abortion, the core doctrines of Islam (or any other manmade religion), and what Zeke singled out here—the abuse of power.

Don’t misconstrue my words here. I’m not preaching a doctrine of hatred; quite the opposite—a timely warning of impending doom is an act of kindness, a demonstration of love. If the building is on fire, we rightly sound the alarm; if we truly love sinners, we won’t keep it a secret that the spiritual hazards they’re playing with can kill them. Nor am I suggesting we should attempt to force sinners to behave as if they were saints with a view toward somehow “sanctifying” them. That would be a fool’s errand. But we should be very clear in unequivocally *declaring* what God calls evil to *be* evil, for evil’s would-be victims deserve to be warned of the coming judgment. It is not our job to dispense God’s wrath—He’s perfectly capable of taking care of His own affairs. But it *is* our duty to “stand in the breach” and call sin what it is—a road that leads to death, impurity that will sooner or later have to be separated out from among us by fire.

Be not deceived: the prerogatives of fire are Yahweh’s, and His alone. The time, place, and object of the fire’s purging attentions are all Yahweh’s exclusive purview. I realize that our folklore connects fire with Satan, presumably because the devil is destined to be tormented in “hell-fire” (whatever that is) for eternity. But Satan doesn’t control fire; he can’t conjure it up at will. This was demonstrated unambiguously one day at Mt. Carmel, as Elijah and four hundred and fifty priests of Ba’al held what you might call a “prophets’ duel.” Elijah said (and I paraphrase), “Look, folks, it’s time for all of us to put our money where our mouth is. Let’s sacrifice two bulls, you to your god Ba’al, and me to mine, Yahweh. But don’t light the fires—we’ll let *whoever* the true and living God is reveal Himself by doing that. What do you say?”

**“And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of Yahweh, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.’ And all the people answered, ‘It is well spoken....’”** The priests of Ba’al (who, I suspect, were only pushing Ba’al worship because of the profit and power it could bring them) had no choice but to play the game. They were no doubt laboring under the misconception that Yahweh was no more real than Ba’al was—that these were merely competing local deities, or more

correctly, competing religious scams. So the priests of Ba'al fooled about all day long trying to entice their god to light their fire—without success. Finally, as the sun was nearing the horizon, Elijah said, “Enough of this; you guys have had your shot.” After soaking his sacrifice in water 'til it was soggy (just to make things more interesting), he prayed, **“Answer me, O Yahweh, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Yahweh, are God, and that You have turned their hearts back.”** Then the fire of Yahweh fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God.’” (I Kings 18:24, 37-39) *That* is the proper response to a demonstration of Yahweh's judgment by fire. But in truth, this sort of “putting God to the test” should not have been necessary. The people had the Torah and the Psalms. They had the testimony of Moses, Samuel, David and Solomon—more than sufficient to reveal who the *real* God was. Do we really need to see fire from heaven to compel us to repent? If so, shame on us.

And what of those who have gladly received the testimony of scripture? Will we too be tried, tested, and purged by fire? Yes and no. We ourselves have already been purified—washed clean, as it were, by the atoning blood of Yahshua. But we are still living in the world as mortal believers. We still encounter things that make us dirty, just by walking through life. We still have to make choices every day, and they're not always flawless because we're not flawless. Everything we do or say is an opportunity to honor Yahweh. Sometimes we succeed; sometimes we fail. These works, however, will be the only thing about us that will be subjected to the fires of judgment. Paul explains: **“No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”** (I Corinthians 3:11-15) One's “house” here is his mortal life. What, if anything, will be left behind as a lasting and precious legacy, edifying to others and honoring to Yahweh?

If we analyze this, we find that the “house on fire” metaphor has three possible outcomes. First (and best) is the man whose house is built upon the solid foundation of Christ, and who has subsequently built a life out of “materials” that are guaranteed to hold up in the crucible of time and adversity: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and self control. That house will survive the fire quite nicely. Second is he who has built his house on the same firm foundation, but of materials that can't withstand the heat—religious tradition, personal wealth, pride of intellect, or misplaced political correctness. This house will burn like a campfire marshmallow, but the foundation will stand firm, so at least the

“homeowner” will have someplace to pitch a pup tent after the fire—he’ll still have an address. But the third case is doomed to total destruction. This is the man whose foundation is something—*anything*—other than Yahshua the Messiah. If the foundation goes up in smoke, it doesn’t really matter what’s built upon it: that’s gone too. Even if the homeowner has his neighbors convinced that his house is made of love, peace, patience, and all the rest, none of it will survive, for the foundation itself will have been proved vulnerable and inadequate.

When will all this judgment by fire take place? The Torah provides the answer, if we’re willing to take God at his word. **“Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to Yahweh. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”** Read: You can’t work your way into heaven. In the end, you must rest in Yahweh’s finished work. **“You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day.”** (Exodus 35:2-3) The whole “Sabbath” concept is largely lost on Jews and Christians alike. Yahweh’s six-plus-one pattern is ubiquitous in scripture—especially in the Torah, where the foundations of God’s truth are laid. Is the Sabbath rule *really* just a semi-pointless burden imposed upon us by a micromanaging deity, or is it symbolic of something earth-shakingly significant in Yahweh’s prophetic revelation to us? Both the Old and New Testaments (Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8) equate one day with a thousand years in God’s view. If this is literally true (and not merely hyperbole about Yahweh’s patience) then we can conclude (as did the ancient rabbis) that God is planning to deal with mortal, fallen mankind for a *total* of seven thousand years. But—and this is important in our present context—the last of these seven millennia is characterized as a “day of solemn rest,” in a word, the Sabbath. Its character is described as such in dozens of prophetic passages in the Tanach, and its duration is specified, in Revelation 20, to be precisely one thousand years.

So what does our Exodus 35 passage have to do with it? Fire, as we have seen, is associated with Yahweh’s judgment, wrath, and the cleansing of the earth. So whatever fiery wrath there is in the earth’s future will take place *during the first six thousand years* of Yahweh’s timetable for man, because “kindling fire” is prohibited on the Sabbath. And any way we figure it, we are rapidly closing in on the end of the sixth millennium since the fall of Adam. Whatever awaits us—judgment or redemptive vindication—is right around the corner. Open your eyes, folks: *scores* of political, demographic, socio-economic, environmental, and prophetic “doomsday” factors are beginning to converge, to come into focus. It’s the end of the world as we know it (which is not to say it’s actually the end of the world). I don’t want to alarm you, only alert you.

If Exodus 35:3 means what it seems to, then, Yahweh’s judgment by fire upon this earth will have been accomplished *before* the end of the sixth millennium. That judgment includes not only the world in general (during the last seven years

of this age, known as the Tribulation), but also the judgment of the church-age believers' works that we previewed in I Corinthians 3. This is an event prophesied in scripture as the "Judgment Seat of Christ" (see Romans 14:10, II Corinthians 5:10), something logistics suggest will take place in heaven, between the rapture and Christ's second coming.

Yahweh's wrath, as I said, is expressed through both fire and water. As fire burns away the worthless elements in our midst, floods sweep away everything that is not solidly anchored. Moses tells us, **"You return man to dust and say, 'Return, O children of man!' For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. For we are brought to an end by Your anger; by Your wrath we are dismayed."** (Psalm 90:3-7) If men truly comprehended their frailty, the vulnerability of their mortal existence, would they stand as they do in the corridors of mortal power and shake their fists in the face of God? I think not.

Isaiah too speaks of the futility of self deception in the face of Yahweh's power. **"Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine! Behold, the Lord has One who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters, He casts down to the earth with His hand."** (Isaiah 28:1-2) who is this "mighty one" of Yahweh's who, like a class-5 hurricane, destroys those who are drunk on their own delusions of grandeur? The prophet explains (sort of) a few verses later: it's Yahweh Himself sitting in judgment—presented as the Messiah in His glory: **"In that day Yahweh of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of His people, and a spirit of justice to Him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate."** (Isaiah 28:5-6) It's up to us to choose how Yahweh will appear to us—as a crown of glory or as a destroying tempest, as the spirit of justice or a storm of hail and overflowing waters. Put another way, we may choose between being washed clean in the clear, cool waters of the bronze laver standing before the tabernacle, or being washed away in a torrent of God's wrath. Gee, that's a tough one.

Throughout these prophecies, Israel (in one form or another: Ephraim, Judah, Samaria, Jeshurun, etc.) is singled out for condemnation far more than any other people. Why does Yahweh seem to be picking on them? I believe the reason is something I've mentioned before: Israel's job is to be the actors on God's stage, while we in the audience are supposed to be paying close attention to the play because the story impacts all of us. Israel has been admonished, warned, and cautioned until God's prophets are blue in the face, but they have not listened. So history records not only their rebellions, but also Yahweh's sure and swift

punishment—up to and including the loss of their entire national identity for over eighteen hundred years.

But the Bible is also replete with dire warnings to the nations—everybody else. And these warnings have not yet been brought to fruition. So because Yahweh's wrath seems slow in coming, most of the world assumes that it's not coming at all—that God is either weak, uncommitted, nonexistent, or is somebody other than Yahweh. But His willingness to deal decisively with Israel's rebellions proves that God is none of these things. He is, rather, patient to a fault, willing to give us every opportunity to repent. We err if we mistake this patience for senility. My point is that in light of Israel's grim experiences, we would be foolish indeed to ignore Yahweh's warnings to the world, warnings like this: **"According to their deeds, so will He repay, wrath to His adversaries, repayment to His enemies; to the coastlands He will render repayment. So they shall fear the name of Yahweh from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun; for He will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of Yahweh drives."** (Isaiah 59:18-19) Just because it hasn't happened yet, don't assume it won't. Yahweh's wrath in response to Israel's folly has been revealed constantly over the centuries; but although His retribution against the rest of the world has been deferred, it will come as suddenly as a flash flood. There will be no escape if we haven't heeded His warnings and moved to high ground.

Man is only dimly aware, I'm afraid, of the trouble he's in. All too often, we see progress in terms of improving our conditions in this life, not preparing for the next. We conceive of God in terms of our own perceived needs, not His glory—and certainly not His agenda. If we really understood that it is Yahweh's intention to bless us, would we continue to seek shelter and sustenance elsewhere? Probably not. As a father, I would have thought it very strange—and not a little hurtful—if my children had refused to accept the food, clothing, and shelter my hard work had earned for them, or the care and nurturing their mother had lavished upon them, and instead insisted on "making their own way" at the age of five or six. And yet, that's a pretty good picture of how we treat Yahweh sometimes, whether out of ignorance, rebellion, or damnable arrogance. But the prophet writes, **"Yahweh is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; He knows those who take refuge in Him. But with an overflowing flood He will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue His enemies into darkness."** (Nahum 1:7-8)

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Water and fire are both seen in scripture as God's tools of transformation, and not only metaphorically in terms of our personal character being purged, cleansed, and purified. These elements are also seen remaking the very earth upon which



we dwell. Here part of the contrast is chronological. The flood of Noah is in our history; the transformation of earth through fire is yet future. Let us examine the scriptural record of both events with an eye toward discovering what connection, if any, exists between them.

The flood account is found in Genesis 6-8. After introducing Noah and his family, Yahweh reveals why a flood was deemed necessary: **“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.”** The word translated “corrupt” is the Hebrew verb *shachat*, meaning to destroy, spoil, corrupt, ruin, decay, or be rotten. From God’s point of view, life on earth was beyond saving, like a moldy six-month-old banana. **“And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy [*shachat*] them with the earth.’”** (Genesis 6:11-12) Can you really “destroy” something that’s already that far gone? Well, sort of: God used the same word to describe what He would do, as if to say “I will corrupt the corrupt,” or “I will destroy those who are destroyed.” All you can really do with rotten fruit is hold your nose and take out the trash. The reference to “all flesh” may make it seem to us that man is but one small part of the biosphere that had “spoiled.” But in the Hebrew, it’s pretty clear that God is focused only on punishing mankind (though innocent animals would suffer as a result of our crimes). The word “flesh” is *basar*, based on a similar verb meaning to bear news, publish, preach, or announce—there is a decidedly man-centric flavor to the word family. *Basar* was seen as a fundamental component of one’s humanity, as in **“My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of Yahweh; my heart and flesh [*basar*] sing for joy to the living God.”** (Psalm 84:2)

Another word we need to examine is “earth.” This is the Hebrew *eretz*, which is so broad in its usage, it’s worthless as a technical description. It can mean land, earth, the whole world, a country, territory, region, or plot of ground, soil, the land of Canaan, or even “the land of the living” (as opposed to Sheol, although Sheol itself is *also* referred to as an *eretz*). So when God says, **“For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven,”** He’s not necessarily stating that the flood will cover the entire planet (though He’s not ruling it out, either). He’s merely stating that the flood is *designed* to destroy all mortal men—those in whom is the breath (that’s *ruach*, normally translated “spirit”) of life. In other words, He is focused on every descendant of Adam and Eve: humans who have the capacity for spiritual indwelling through their *neshamah*, as we shall see shortly. Animals have souls (the *nephesh*) but they are never spoken of as having indwelling spirits (*ruach*).

When God says, **“Everything that is on the earth shall die,”** He’s not necessarily talking about “everything,” as in the entire zoosphere of the planet. The word is

*kol*, literally “all,” so He could just as easily be implying, “Everyone in this land shall die.” **“But I will establish my covenant with you [Noah], and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.”** (Genesis 6:17-18) **“Then Yahweh said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation.’”** (Genesis 7:1) **“And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.”** (Genesis 7:7) That’s the central lesson: Yahweh has provided deliverance for those who are found righteous before Him. Everyone else will die. It’s a timeless, universal truth. Which is not to say it’s popular.

There’s a reason I’ve gone out of my way to point out that although the record *suggests* a worldwide deluge, it doesn’t technically *specify* one. Researchers have found scant scientific evidence to prove a worldwide universally lethal flood about five thousand years ago, and therefore, they take great delight in calling God a liar. But perhaps their mocking is misplaced: there *is* evidence (recorded in humanity’s collective mitochondrial DNA) of a severe constriction, a narrowing of the human genome, sometime in our not-so-distant past—just what you’d expect to find if the Genesis narrative were true. At any rate, the skeptics fail to see Yahweh’s point in describing things this way. What *is* that point? As usual, it’s a parable: life on this planet exists at Yahweh’s pleasure; it’s not guaranteed to endure one minute beyond what He has purposed or promised. This is a lesson that will take on monumental significance as we approach the end of this age.

So what really happened? Let me preface my hypothetical remarks with the flat statement that I believe everything Noah saw with his own two eyes was recorded faithfully and accurately. But he couldn’t see what was happening over the horizon or half a world away, so Yahweh filled in the blanks in terms that were both spiritually symbolic and prophetically significant. In other words, He told us the story the same way He described the creation process: the narrative was designed to teach living spiritual truth, not lifeless historical fact. It’s not that the stories aren’t true, but we have to read through the poetry of spiritual implication to arrive at the prosaic data—something that would hardly be worth exploring were it not for the scoffers trying to lead us astray. I believe Yahweh is happy to let us “read into” the flood narrative a worldwide, universal catastrophe (even if it “only” caused total devastation in regions into which Adam’s descendants had settled) because Noah’s flood is a preview, a precursor, a *prophecy*, of something yet in our planet’s future—another cleansing, another purging of evil, this time by fire.

**“For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.”** (Genesis 7:4) Any meteorologist can calculate that there isn’t remotely enough water vapor in the atmosphere at any one time for it to rain all over the world for six weeks

straight, nor enough water held in clouds to cover the earth's surface thousands of feet deep in water. But this "impossible" thing is precisely what Yahweh told Noah was about to happen. Noah counted the days, and the prophecy came about just as God had said. But note that Yahweh specifically points out that ordinary rain *wasn't* the sole cause of the flood. **"On that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights."** (Genesis 7:11-12) Once again, the actual Hebrew words shed light on the nature of this event. "Fountains" is *ma'yan*: a spring or fountain, a spontaneously gushing source of water. "Burst forth" is the Hebrew *baqa'*, meaning to split, to cleave, to break open or tear apart. It speaks of violent upheaval. And "windows" is *aruba*, more accurately translated "sluice gate," that is, something through which a great deal of water is purposely and forcefully directed, as in a millstream. The tone of the word is betrayed by its root verb, *arab*, which means to lie in wait, to ambush. This flood was no gentle spring rain that merely went on longer than usual. It was, rather, a violent, purposeful, multiple-source "water ambush."

What could cause both an upheaval of subterranean aquifers and weeks of unceasing rain? How about a large meteor or comet strike? In 2005, Dallas Abbott, an adjunct research scientist at Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, N.Y., estimated the date of a massive meteorite strike 900 miles southeast of Madagascar to have occurred within the lifetime of Noah, "around 2800 B.C." The "Burckle Abyssal Impact Crater" (named after Lloyd Burckle of Columbia University) left by this impact measures eighteen miles wide, which is *huge*, considering it's some 12,500 feet beneath the surface of the Indian Ocean (and we all know what water does to muzzle velocity). The impact of such a large missile into these depths would have easily displaced enough water to account for forty days of rain over much of the earth's surface. It isn't just the displacement, either; it's also the extreme heat generated by the meteorite's entry and impact. One sample of the bolide's ejecta contained pure nickel with drops of oxidized nickel. Because nickel melts at 1453 degrees C, the projectile had to have reached temperatures at least that high. Thus it is no stretch at all to envision millions of tons of water *vapor* being sent aloft during such an impact—and deposited back to the earth over the next forty days and nights as an unrelenting rainstorm.

The initial impact, of course, would have caused a devastating tsunami. It doesn't really matter how long Noah stayed afloat or how long the rain fell: civilization would have been wiped out in the first hour. The famous Chicxulub impact, the dinosaur-killer 65 million years ago, was estimated to have generated a tsunami thousands of feet high. Though it was perhaps ten times the size of the Burckle meteorite, it impacted on land, though near the shoreline. Imagine what a projectile almost a mile across could do if it hit open water. If you think about it, a

tsunami of this magnitude *in itself* could be aptly described as “the fountains of the great deep bursting forth.”

Actually, researchers have postulated at least two similar meteor strikes, based on chevron dunes in Australia, India and Madagascar, some deposited over 500 feet above sea level. Abbott’s study reports, “We postulate a Shoemaker-Levy type event with multiple sites of large impact, including one site in the northern hemisphere.” The Shoemaker-Levy reference, of course, speaks of the spectacular comet strike on Jupiter in 1994 in which the missile broke up into a “string of pearls” sort of configuration before making multiple impacts on the planet. The implication is that several pieces of Noah’s earth-killer asteroid impacted the earth at widely scattered locations, but at roughly the same time. The second site is the Mahuika impact crater near New Zealand, in about a thousand feet of water. Other possible impact sites include the Kanmare (Serpent) and Tabban (Rainbow) craters in the South Pacific, and one in the Mediterranean near the Rhone delta in Southern France (which could account for the well-documented Black Sea inundation, breaching the Bosphorus and permanently flooding prehistoric shoreline settlements under 300 feet of water). The Burckle impact, of course, would have been the one that picked up Noah’s 450-foot ark like a twig and tossed it from its building site (probably on the Tigris/Euphrates plain) northward toward the mountains of Ararat.

How much energy did the Burckle impact release? It’s hard to comprehend the scope of the thing, so I’ll try to provide a point of reference. The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in World War II released about 15 kilotons of energy. (The largest bomb ever made was the Soviets’ 50-megaton AN602, detonated in 1961.) It is estimated that the Krakatau volcanic explosion in 1883, the most violent volcanic explosion ever experienced by man, blew with a force of 150 megatons—about 10,000 times that of Hiroshima. But the Burckle impact (not including Mahuika and the others) weighed in at about *two million* megatons—over 1.3 *billion* times as powerful as the Hiroshima explosion! Would this event have been powerful enough to cause the kind of devastation Noah describes? You tell me.

Anthropologists are aware of at least 175 local flood legends that parallel the Genesis account—some sources count as many as 500 of them. Though most of the stories have degenerated to the realm of tribal folklore, a surprising number of them have many of the same features: destruction by water, preservation in a vessel of some sort, humans and animals spared, birds employed to assess the situation, and most significantly, God’s involvement, including a divine warning of impending doom. These traditions in themselves are strong circumstantial evidence of an historical cataclysm in our common past, not to mention the world’s repopulation pattern, spreading outward from a single locale. That being

noted, it's fascinating to me how single-mindedly anti-theistic our scientific community can be. Enthusiastically seizing upon a golden opportunity to trash Yahweh's reputation, a scientist featured on the History Channel's treatment of the Burckle Crater remarked, "We no longer need God to explain the multiple flood legends." Really? Then please explain to me how Noah (or any other flood-legend hero) knew to start building a big boat decades before a mega-tsunami wiped his world off the map. Smart people can be soooo dumb.

Anyway, the Genesis narrative continues: **"The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters. And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep...."** Again, because of the broad range of meanings that "earth" (*eretz*) can assume, we can't be dogmatic about the universality of the actual event. But it's clear that Yahweh wants us to understand His unapologetic willingness to destroy *everything* in response to man's rebellion against Him. The worst mistake we could make would be to decide (in our infinite wisdom) that since the physical evidence for a worldwide deluge isn't blatantly obvious, then Yahweh isn't willing or able to carry through on His promises of future judgment. He told us what we need to know. He has led us by the hand to the proper conclusion. The message is crystal clear.

**"And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died."** This same English phrase, "the breath of life," was used earlier, but there the word translated "breath" was *ruach*—literally, "spirit." Here it's *neshamah*, a word introduced in the creation account to explain the distinctively spiritual nature of man, as opposed to animals who are equipped only with a *nephesh*, or soul. If I'm seeing this correctly, it is the *neshamah* that gives man his unique ability among God's creatures to be born of spirit in addition to flesh, a fundamental requirement, according to Yahshua, for eternal life (see John 3). Though we aren't specifically told, my guess is that when Yahweh tells us "all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth," (Genesis 6:12) He may be indicating that most of mankind had received the spirit of Satan into their *neshamah*—they were "born from below," as we are instructed to be "born from above." If this is true, it's significant, for we are given similar hints concerning the earth's population by the end of the Tribulation. Review the conclusion to the prophecy of the "sheep and goats" in Matthew 25:31-46.

**"He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. And the waters prevailed on the**

**earth 150 days.”** (Genesis 7:17-24) We are reminded in no uncertain terms that our rebellions against Yahweh result not only in personal consequences but also collateral damage. The “creeping things and birds of the heavens” had not sinned against God, and yet they were swept away with man in his punishment. Their deaths were our fault. Logically then, “animal rights” activists should be the first in line to honor Yahweh (yeah, picture that). This principle didn’t end with the flood, by the way. Zechariah prophesies concerning a particularly squishy last-days plague: **“And this shall be the plague with which Yahweh will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.... And a plague like this plague shall fall on the horses, the mules, the camels, the donkeys, and whatever beasts may be in those camps.”** (Zechariah 14:12, 15) In other words, if you don’t want the deaths of innocent animals on your conscience, don’t attack the God who made them—or the people He has vowed to protect.

**“But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters receded from the earth continually.”** (Genesis 8:1-3) How long did the flood last? It depends on what facet of the event you’re looking at. The bolide that created the Burckle crater was, I believe, the single cosmic event that set everything else in motion (bearing in mind that this was probably only one of several strikes from pieces of the same huge asteroid or comet). It’s (or *their*) timing and placement were completely under Yahweh’s control. The mega-tsunamis generated would have arrived with hours, destroying antediluvian civilization more or less instantaneously. The ocean water the impact sent aloft was precipitated back to earth as rain over the next forty days and nights (7:12). Waters deep enough to keep the ark floating freely prevailed for 150 days—five months (7:24). But it wasn’t until two and a half months later (8:4) that the water level had receded to the point where the boat was firmly grounded. I am reminded that when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, the storm blew through in hours but the flood persisted for weeks. Comparing Genesis 7:11 with 8:14, we learn that Noah (following God’s instruction) had to remain on the ark for a total of one year and ten days. Why were we given so much detail? I believe it’s to impress upon us that this was an actual historical event, not a fanciful myth told to intimidate small children and impress religious zealots. Why is that important? Because the same God who engineered the flood has promised to do something equally drastic in the face of *our* total depravity—not cleansing the earth with water this time, but transforming it with fire.

The flood left Noah’s world a radically different place. It was so different, in fact, the very atmosphere was recruited to display a sign guaranteeing God’s promise never again to destroy the earth with water: **“Then God said to Noah and to**

his sons with him, ‘Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’” That’s the promise. The sign confirming the covenant was revealed next: **“And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember My covenant that is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.’”** (Genesis 9:8-15) We’ll address rainbows at length in a future chapter, but for now, just notice that several of the elements of Yahweh’s self-portrait are involved in making them—water, light, air, and in the context of Yahweh’s covenant, the Word.

The point of all that is simply that Yahweh’s judgments have lasting consequences and teach timeless lessons. He doesn’t want us to forget. He leaves reminders behind. During the coming Millennial Kingdom, He is planning to leave a permanent and pungent memento of His wrath within a three-hour bus ride from Jerusalem: **“For Yahweh has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever.”** (Isaiah 34:8-10) Most of the world will eventually revert to a pristine state under Yahshua’s reign as the healing waters flow east and west from beneath the Millennial Temple (see Zechariah 14:8, Ezekiel 47:1-12). But Edom (southern Jordan) will be preserved as a hell on earth—an undying monument to man’s folly, a reminder of the results of rebellion. It won’t be pretty, but it will be effective. Israel will never again turn her back on Yahweh.

But that’s all in the future. Today, the only evidence we have that Yahweh is prepared to follow through on His promises of judgment is the record of the flood, written in stone, scripture, and our own DNA. Those who are willing to call God a liar to His face find it easy to deny such subtle evidence. Funny thing, though. Yahweh, through Peter, prophesied even this denial: **“Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’”** Not to be picky, but the “promise of His coming” can be found in a big impact crater on the floor of the Indian Ocean. **“‘For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.’ For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these [that is, by means of the heavens, the earth, water, and the word of God] the world that then**

**existed was deluged with water and perished.”** Deny it all you want, but be aware that God, from the very beginning, designed the flood of Noah to be prophetic of something in your future: **“But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”** (II Peter 3:3-7) Same God, same word, same agenda, different method—fire instead of water. It appears the only thing He neglected to tell us is *when*.

Or did He? Appearances can be deceiving. First, let’s look at the Genesis record again. Yahweh said He’d put up with men’s corruption for only another hundred and twenty years (6:3). Then He told Noah to build an ark, telling him why he was going to need it and giving him plenty of time to get the job done (6:14, 17). Then, he gave Noah a seven-day “last minute” heads up: *the flood is on its way—get everybody aboard* (7:1-4). In other words, Yahweh gave His man plenty of warning, both in the long and short term. Why wouldn’t He do that with the coming judgment by fire as well?

I believe He did: in the very next breath, Peter tells us *when* this conflagration is coming, in terms anyone familiar with Yahweh’s metaphors should be able to figure out. **“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day....”** What? You say you didn’t see a timeline there? Don’t feel bad; hardly anybody does. I read that verse for fifty years before I finally got it. He’s not just poetically asserting that God is patient, although that’s certainly true; he’s explaining a symbolic formula Yahweh laid down in the very first chapter of the Bible: the six days of creation, followed by one day of rest, are a *timeline*. The formula was codified in the Torah—in the Ten Commandments, no less—as the Sabbath Law: we are to work on six days and rest on the seventh. Actually, this six-plus-one pattern pops up constantly in scripture, and it always means pretty much the same thing: there are six of “something” in which “doing” is appropriate and good, followed by a seventh of these things in which “resting” becomes the rule. That’s God’s pattern.

It pops up again here in II Peter because, in the context of the final judgment, we need to comprehend Yahweh’s timetable for mankind: we will ultimately have only six thousand years in which to “work things out” with God—six thousand years, beginning with the fall of Adam, in which we must dwell on earth as mortals estranged from God, making our choices, doing our deeds, and figuring out what to believe and whom to trust. The problem is, after almost six thousand years of this condition, the scoffers almost seem justified in thinking everything will “continue as it was since the beginning of creation.” If you’re not of a mind to see it, Yahweh’s patience might be mistaken for His *non-existence*. That’s why Peter immediately explained, **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.”** (II Peter 3:8-10) The



point is, even though the lost world will be taken completely by surprise when Yahshua returns, Yahweh is clearly on a schedule. The train left the station when Adam fell into sin, and it won't arrive at its final destination until the six thousand years have elapsed.

Moreover, it is my observation that there have been scheduled stops along the way: spiritually significant milestones spaced at precise one-thousand-year intervals. The fall, the flood, Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah, the building of Solomon's temple, the passion of the Messiah in 33 AD, and a stunning 1033 AD confirmation (based on the odd Numbers 5 method for confirming a cheating wife's unfaithfulness) in which Yahweh found *both* the Church and Israel to be adulterous and idolatrous (all of which I'll explore in more detail a bit later)—these things have led me to the conclusion that we will arrive at the next “station,” the end of the line for us fallen mortals, in 2033 (and specifically, on the Feast of Tabernacles, the seventh and final holy convocation prescribed by Yahweh, falling on Tishri 15, October 8, 2033). If you'll recall, I referred a few pages back to the Torah's prohibition against kindling a fire (read: rendering judgment) on the Sabbath. Thus I expect **“the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly”** to be fully accomplished *before* the end of the sixth millennium. Yahweh too rests on the seventh “day.”

I'm the first to admit that there's enough “connecting the dots” and scriptural interpolation involved in the “2033 theory” to make me less than dogmatic about it. I am *personally* convinced that it's correct, but please remember: it's only a hypothesis. I find it compelling, however, that there are literally hundreds of prophetic confirmations that seem to be converging on the same general timeframe. For example, of the thirteen or so signs of the “beginning of sorrows (or birth pangs)” Yahshua listed in the Olivet Discourse, all but one of them are everyday realities in our present world, and the last one—“great signs in the heavens”—seems to be gaining steam, at least sporadically. Only a blind man could fail to see it: “Mother Earth” (so to speak) is nearing the end of her six thousand year pregnancy. She will soon give birth to the wrath of God. It is so obvious, her friends are starting to ask if it's twins!

We have established that Yahweh once cleansed the earth with water (apparently at the end of the first millennium of His revealed schedule), and He intends to purify it again, this time through fire, at the end of the sixth millennium. (Hmmm. Sort of reminds me of Yahshua's two temple cleansings—one near the beginning and the other at the end of His earthly ministry.) And we have further noted that no judgment will take place during the seventh millennium, the thousand-year reign of our Messiah-King. But what will happen when the Millennium has run its course? Will things just peter out into oblivion? Will they simply revert to the way they were at some previous point in time?

No. Paul and others make it quite clear that all believers will eventually be given immortal, incorruptible bodies (see I Corinthians 15:35-58). These bodies, like those of Christ's resurrection body, will be built for another kind of world than the one we now inhabit. It never ceases to amaze me—the lengths to which Yahweh went in creating a world where mortal creatures like us could survive and thrive. It's the most amazing feat one can imagine, creating the perfect environment for supporting biological life—impossibly unlikely and balanced on a razor's edge: a shift of a few percentage points in any of a hundred variables would make our planet as uninhabitable as Mars. I'd say we all owe Yahweh a big *Thank You*. But like I said, scripture reveals that someday we'll inhabit bodies that have no need for such astrophysical heroics. What then? What happens when Yahweh's Sabbath rest is over? Transformation of the universe—by fire.

We weren't done with our passage from Peter. Without missing a beat, he describes the conclusion of the matter: **"And then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed...."** This is what led me to the outlandish conclusion that God created the entire vast universe just so He could inhabit it with people who could reciprocate His love. When the Psalmist says, "The heavens declare the glory of God," he's not just stating that the stars look pretty. The whole universe fairly screams that Yahweh its Creator is awesome. But when God's purpose for having created the universe has been fulfilled, He will not be sentimental about keeping it around in its present form, for it, like us, is dying.

Naturally (since our response to Yahweh's glory is the whole point) there is a moral to the story: **"Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to His promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."** (II Peter 3:10-13) Peter links the impermanence of the present universe to our need for holiness. That which will happen to creation—total transformation by fire—can be our destiny as well. Our requisite holiness and godliness are the result of Yahweh's purging of everything worthless from our lives—leaving only the purity of His truth to define our existence. What will happen to the old universe? It will be replaced with a "new heaven and new earth." And what will happen to our mortal lives? They will be replaced with new, eternal lives defined by the very righteousness of God (if we're His, that is). Just as the old universe was perfectly suited to our mortal lives, the new one will be purposely built to accommodate us in our immortality. Now *that's* what I call evolution.

The Psalmist concurs: **"Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a**

**garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away.”** (Psalm 102:25-26) When Yahweh finished His creation, He called it all “very good.” We need to come to terms with the fact that this doesn’t necessarily imply everlasting perfection on every possible level. It merely means that it was perfectly suited for the purpose God had intended for it—which in the end was to reveal His glory by demonstrating His love. In this respect, it’s sort of like the Law, the Torah, the original covenant. First we read, **“The law of Yahweh is perfect, reviving the soul.”** (Psalm 19:7) Then the writer to the Hebrews comes along and says, **“Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant He mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.... In speaking of a new covenant, He makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”** (Hebrews 8:7, 13) What looks like a blatant contradiction is nothing of the sort. The Torah functioned exactly as it was intended to do, for it is a symbolic harbinger of Yahshua, His mission and His purpose. Any apparent “obsolescence” is due to the fact that Messiah’s role has now been fulfilled. A road sign’s significance is different once the destination has been reached. The same sort of thing is true of creation: what was once “very good” is on its way toward being a prime candidate for transformation.

Isaiah reports Yahweh’s intentions: **“Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.”** (Isaiah 65:17-18) We can only “be glad and rejoice” temporarily in the present creation, for we (not to mention *it*) are only temporary. But Yahweh is in the business of *permanence*.

We’ll give John the last word. **“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.... Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”** (Revelation 20:11, 21:1) The closer we get to the eternal state, the nearer we are to seeing Yahweh in His true, undiminished glory. The present creation (including us) cannot stand in God’s presence. The whole point of building a physical universe was to provide a matrix in which God could interact with that which is *not* God, for God is love, and it takes two to tango, so to speak. Once we have all made our choice to love Him back (or not), the universe in which we live (as awe-inspiring as it was) will be transformed by fire into something even better—something perfectly suited to our new immortal reality—a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

## EARTH & HEAVEN



### *Limitation vs. Liberty*

The contrast I'd like to highlight here is *not*—as might have been expected—between heaven and hell. The dichotomy between the two things is obvious enough, of course, but there is little instructive value in comparing them. It would be like explaining the difference between kissing your spouse and hitting your thumb with a hammer—it's not really necessary. Besides, these concepts are often misunderstood and misleading—not because of some fault with Yahweh's promises or power, but because of our own sloppy use of terminology. Further, "hell," in the Christian sense (a state of unceasing torment for the damned) has no natural continuity or connection with our mortal lives on this earth. It's an aberration, an anomaly. In fact, from what we can discern from Yahshua's admonition (see Matthew 25:41) the "everlasting fire" of hell was never even *intended* for people—it was "prepared for the devil and his angels." So "heaven vs. hell" is not really the issue, as far as Yahweh's symbols are concerned.

No, the lesson God's word teaches—so incessantly it's impossible to ignore—is that the natural comparison to make is between heaven and *earth*. As we've seen, this present life was not made to last: it was designed to lead to something else. God's intended order is that our mortal, temporal lives here on earth should transition seamlessly into immortal, eternal existence in His presence. What we begin here, we'll end there. What we learn here, we'll know there. Who we meet here, we'll share life with there. The issue, then, is where (or how) we live, for what we do here on earth will determine our eternal disposition. Just as the physically dead don't enjoy life on earth, the spiritually dead cannot participate in everlasting life in heaven. In fact, it seems to me that there can be only one thing worse than being spiritually dead—being spiritually *alive* but at the same time banished from the presence of Yahweh (in other words, being in "hell," or as John put it, "abiding in death"). That's a contingency God never intended for mankind as far as I can tell—which doesn't make it any less real.

Let's begin by reviewing the terminology scripture uses to define "heaven" and "earth." In the Old Testament, the words used to define "heaven" are most often the Hebrew *shameh*, it's plural *shamayim* ("the heavens"), or the Chaldean equivalent *shamayin*. Strong's defines the word: "The sky (as aloft; the dual [or plural] perhaps alluding to the visible arch in which the clouds move, as well as to

the higher ether where the celestial bodies revolve).” Thus *shameh* means the air or atmosphere and anything above that: properly, the “heights above” or the “upper regions.”

The usual Greek equivalent is *ouranos*, meaning, according to Thayer, “the vaulted expanse of the sky with all the things visible in it,” including the aerial heavens or sky and the sidereal or starry heavens; and “the region above the sidereal heavens, the seat of an order of things eternal and consummately perfect, where God and the other heavenly beings dwell.” This definition lines up perfectly with the Hebrew *shameh*. Note that it’s not a technically “religious” term; it’s an ordinary Koine Greek word, with all the baggage that half a millennium of Greek culture would have added to it. In both Hebrew and Greek, then, “heaven” had three parallel and symbolically interrelated meanings: (1) the sky, where rain and snow came from (Genesis 8:2, Job 38:29) or in which the birds flew; (2) the “sidereal heavens” where the stars and planets were (e.g. Genesis 22:17); and (3) the place Yahweh lived (e.g. I Kings 8:30, Psalm 11:4), and the angels stayed (e.g. Nehemiah 9:6).

The Rabbis imagined a seven-leveled heaven, though the idea is not given credence in the Tanach. (Paul described being caught up to the “third heaven,” but this wouldn’t have been the third of the rabbinical seven but rather a common description of the abode of God—the first heaven being the atmosphere of our planet and the second being the starry sky.) Two other Greek words are translated “heaven,” but they just stress one feature of it over the other—they don’t expand the meaning beyond *ouranos*, which is actually a component of both words. *Mesouranema* merely means “mid-sky,” in other words, “up in the air.” And *Epouranious* means “above the sky—celestial,” used in such phrases as “heavenly Father.”

As with the concept of “heaven,” the idea of “earth” is quite similar in the Hebrew and Greek languages. As I noted above, the Hebrew term *eretz* “is so broad in its usage, it’s worthless as a technical description. It can mean land, earth, the whole world, a country, territory, region, or plot of ground, soil, the land of Canaan, or even ‘the land of the living’ (as opposed to sheol, although sheol itself is *also* referred to as an *eretz*).” The Greek equivalent is *ge*, and its usage is equally broad: arable land, ground, soil, the surface of this planet, land (as opposed to the sea), earth as a whole, as opposed to the heavens, or the inhabited portion (the abode of men and animals). It can mean a country, a land defined by its borders, a tract of land, territory, or socio-political region. Basically, *eretz/ge* is “where we live” as mortal beings, its particular application being linked to who “we” are conceived to be at any given moment (i.e., an individual, family, nation, or the whole human race).

Another take on “where we live” is the concept of dwelling or habitation. As a heavy-handed hint of what we’re all supposed to do, Israel was instructed to pay attention to where Yahweh “lived”: **“You shall seek the place that Yahweh your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there.”**

(Deuteronomy 12:5) The word translated “habitation” here is *sheken*, from the Hebrew verb *shakan*, meaning to abide, dwell, reside, tabernacle, or encamp. The Greek approaches this idea from several different angles: *skenoo* is to abide, to dwell—especially in a tent or tabernacle; and the related noun *skene* is a dwelling place, a tent, and most specifically, the tabernacle after which the temple was patterned (or is it the other way around?). Another Greek verb denoting “to dwell” is *katoikeo*—to settle, to dwell in, or inhabit. This word is used metaphorically to indicate God “dwelling in” His temple or inhabiting and influencing His children. The noun form is *katoikesis*—a dwelling or abode. These words pop up time and again in scripture, a constant reminder of the connection between where we’re living now and where we’re *destined to* live as Yahweh’s children.

The Psalmist points out the nature of this connection: **“Yahweh looks down from heaven; He sees all the children of man. From where He sits enthroned He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.”** (Psalm 33:13-15) Though God inhabits heaven as we do earth, there is a relationship between the two states, a connection based on Yahweh’s character (which can be boiled down to one word: love). He cares about what goes on here because He cares about *us*. **“Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. Yes, Yahweh will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before Him and make His footsteps a way.”** (Psalm 85:11-13)

In the same vein, we read: **“May you be blessed by Yahweh, who made heaven and earth! The heavens are Yahweh’s heavens, but the earth He has given to the children of man.”** A holy God must by definition remain apart from sinful men (for our own good), but that doesn’t preclude Him from providing the platform from which we can seek Him if we wish. That platform is this mortal life upon the earth—a gift from Yahweh. So the Psalmist draws the inevitable conclusion: **“The dead do not praise Yahweh, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless Yahweh from this time forth and forevermore. Praise Yahweh!”** (Psalm 115:15-18) Those who are dead, those who have no spiritual life within them, cannot relate to God, for God is spirit. But “we” are not spiritually dead. We have Yahweh’s eternal life within us. “Earth” may be our home for now, but we who trust Him will inherit “heaven”—not so much God’s physical home as an eternity in His presence.

So David says, **“Trust in Yahweh, and do good. Dwell in the land [eretz] and befriend faithfulness.... In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land [or earth] and delight**

themselves in abundant peace.... The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever.... Wait for Yahweh and keep his way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off.” (Psalm 37:3, 10-11, 29, 34) The meaning of *eretz* here depends on who you are. If you’re a faithful Israelite, it specifically means the area promised to Abraham. If you’re a human believer, it means planet earth—and more specifically, the new one that’s slated to replace the old. After all, when you see *eretz* and “forever” in the same context, you know that something beyond our present mortal state is in view.

Note that the righteous are differentiated from the wicked by what they can expect to inherit: the land, the earth. Someday the righteous and meek won’t have to coexist with the wicked any more. (“Meek” is the Hebrew *anav*, literally: the afflicted, oppressed, or humble. The word is based on *anah*, the “affliction of soul” response required for life on the Day of Atonement.) Why won’t the humble have to share their inheritance with the wicked? Because they—the evildoers—will be gone, absent, cut off. So David asks (rhetorically), **“Who is the man who fears Yahweh? Him will He instruct in the way that he should choose. His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land.”** (Psalm 25:12-13) For the one who reveres Yahweh, the line differentiating earth from heaven can get awfully fuzzy.

Inheritance implies a transfer, specifically between two parties who are related. Further, someone cannot inherit that which did not rightfully belong to the one bequeathing it. So what establishes ownership? Creation is probably the most fundamental factor. Rembrandt may sell a painting to pay the rent, but in a very real sense, it remains his forever. Solomon reminds us, **“Yahweh by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens.”** (Proverbs 3:19) Yahweh created the heavens, the earth, and everything in them; *ergo*, He owns it all—including us. Blessing and honor is the rightful domain of our Creator/Owner/Deliverer, so Melchizedek—clearly a type of Christ—pointed out the connection: **“Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed [Abram] and said, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’”** (Genesis 14:18-20)

Jeremiah concurs: **“It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom, and by His understanding stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and He brings forth the wind from His storehouses.”** (Jeremiah 51:15-16) Not only did Yahweh create the heavens and the earth, He remains active and interested in what goes on there, for they are (at the moment) the home of His children. **“Ah, Lord Yahweh! It is You who has made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for You.”** (Jeremiah 32:17)

Having created earth and heaven, they are God's to distribute however He chooses. The second obvious indicator of ownership is purchase. Yahweh created the earth for our use, and then, in a very real sense, turned it over to us to manage. When we "managed" to get cheated out of the title deed to earth by our conniving adversary, Yahweh purchased it back with the most precious substance known to man: the blood of the Messiah. So Yahweh owns the earth twice over, and having established ownership, it is His privilege to leave it to whomever He wishes.

God speaks of those who revere Him "inheriting" the land/earth, but what does that really mean? As long as we're mortals, we can't really "own" anything; the minute we die, our lease on all that stuff we thought we had accumulated expires, and it all gets "re-inherited" by somebody else. If we really understood that Yahweh retains ultimate ownership of *everything*, we'd start to see the idiocy of our covetousness, our lack of trust, our petty idolatries. Yes, Yahweh owns the earth, and He's pleased to let us borrow it for a while (just to see what we'll do with it, I imagine). But we need to remember that even when good things come our way, they are merely "on loan" from God. He is the source of our blessings—all of them: **"For not by their own sword did they win the land [*eretz*, whether the Promised Land, the whole world, or next Friday's paycheck], nor did their own arm save them, but Your right hand and Your arm, and the light of Your face, for You delighted in them."** (Psalm 44:3) It may seem to us that we're working for it—that we've earned whatever we have—since Yahweh, like a doting father letting his four-year-old "help" with the chores, allows us to participate. But in the end, it's all a gift. Let us therefore not neglect to give thanks.

The Promised Land was the ultimate demonstration of this principle: **"I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant."** Yahweh was teaching us that we didn't (and *can't*) really earn anything. Our blessings in this world are gifts, and temporary gifts at that—we only get to use them *in this world*. But (and this is the lesson) what He really wants to give us—our real inheritance—will (or at least, can) transcend the bounds of this temporary life and extend into eternity. Earth is designed to be a picture of heaven, a preview, a precursor. What we choose here in this life will determine what—if any—kind of life we'll enjoy beyond our mortal state. So Joshua, having led Israel into the Promised Land, pleaded with his people to choose wisely whom they would serve, for two things were certain: they *would* serve something, and the choice of what (or whom) that would be was entirely up to them. **"Now therefore fear Yahweh and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh."** (Joshua 24:13-15)



Joshua was asking his people to make a choice—a selection of one thing and the rejection of its rival. He was telling Israel to get off the fence, to cease trying to keep a foot in each of two different worlds. It's a lesson that few of us ever master—how to live in the world (as we must) without letting the world live in us. The implied separation is, of course, the essence of holiness. As Yahweh is separate from His creation (that is, not part of it), we are to be set apart from the earth we live upon—its attractions and its lusts. That, you may have noticed, is harder than it looks, for there is a fine line between desire and necessity. We all wear clothing, but do we “dress to impress,” or choose our wardrobe primarily with the weather in mind? Most of us drive cars, but how do we select them? (I drive a cute little red sports car, but not to impress anybody. It's because there are twenty miles of winding road between my home and anything you might call “civilization.” At the moment, handling matters.) Holiness, then, often boils down to motive: why we do what we do, or what we choose when we've got a choice.

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Since choice—free will—is Yahweh's primary gift to the human race, it is instructive to study those times when virtually everyone had chosen to serve false gods, substitutes for Yahweh. Three instances from early in our history come to mind, and Yahweh dealt with each of these situations in different ways. All of them, however, achieved roughly the same end result: the setting apart of a faithful remnant. The subject is of the utmost importance, for God has told us—in hundreds of overt prophecies—that He intends to do it again. Notice that each phase of Yahweh's historical lesson plan revolved around what was happening *on the earth*. I know: it sounds obvious. *Where else would it happen?* But it's as if He's trying to make the point—over and over again—that the choices we make in this world will determine to a certainty what our condition will be in the next. We'll be either with Yahweh or separated from Him—for eternity.

The first instance of forced separation (a.k.a. “judgment”) was doubtless the most drastic: the flood of Noah. We looked at it in the previous section: a cleansing of the earth through the agency of water, as the coming separation will be a transformation of the world wrought by fire. **“Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And Yahweh was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart.... Now the earth [*eret*] was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.”** (Genesis 6:5-6, 11)

Having made His point (at least temporarily) with the flood, **“Yahweh said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart**

is evil from his youth.” The word translated “ground” here is *adamah*, which is related to Adam’s name (meaning “man”). A loose synonym for *eretz*, it stresses human habitation: the ground, land, soil that is tilled to raise crops, a plot of land, “earth” as a building material (clay), a territory or country, or the whole inhabited surface of the earth. **“Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth [*eretz*] remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”** (Genesis 8:21-22) Separation on earth this time was achieved by providing an escape mechanism for one faithful family while all the others were unceremoniously swept away. That’s one way of doing it, but it’s awfully hard on the infrastructure. More to the point, if He wanted humans to be on the earth at all, Yahweh wouldn’t be able to do this sort of thing every time we went astray, for **“Every intention of the thoughts of [man’s] heart is only evil continually,”** and **“the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”** Next time, therefore, He would try something a bit more subtle.

Half a dozen generations after the flood, mankind had once again made an art form out of his “evil intentions.” Man had ignored Yahweh’s commandment to “fill the earth,” (Genesis 9:1) opting instead to band together in the land of Shinar, the Tigris-Euphrates river valley. We can trace the movements of many families listed in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10) to far-flung locations in Europe, Africa, and Asia, but they didn’t go willingly. Instead, they stayed together at first and proceeded to invent the world’s first religion. I’ll admit that unity can be a good thing if we’ve chosen to unite around Yahweh (see Psalm 133). But this generation had come together “to make a name for themselves,” that is, to elevate *themselves* to the status of “gods.” The factor that made this collective apostasy possible (if not inevitable) was the ability to freely communicate: **“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.”** (Genesis 11:1)

Yahweh’s solution to the problem this time was “simply” to **“confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.”** (Well, it was less complicated than destroying the earth with a flood, at least. I have no idea how Yahweh actually did it.) **“So Yahweh dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there Yahweh confused the language of all the earth. And from there Yahweh dispersed them over the face of all the earth [*eretz*].”** (Genesis 11:7-9) This time, Yahweh didn’t kill those who had forsaken Him. He merely separated them from the faithful remnant (and from each other) by making it impossible for them to understand what other folks were saying. (Funny how that phenomenon is hanging on: today I can listen to politicians pontificate in English, and I *still* can’t figure out what they’re really saying.) History reveals that the Babylonian religion would continue to develop, but it would make its inroads far more slowly than it might have otherwise.

That would give Yahweh time to call out a godly line for His purposes, a family whose story dominates the Bible. As there were six generations from Noah to the tower of Babel, there were six more to Abram, later known as Abraham. That Abram wasn't the only man of his time to know Yahweh is evident through the stories of such near-contemporary characters as Job and Melchizedek—and later with Moses' father-in-law, Reuel (a.k.a. Jethro), the priest of Midian. But it is evident also that apostasy and idol worship had made deep inroads into humanity by this point. So Yahweh's solution this time was to call His man out from among his pagan neighbors and send him to an entirely new geographical location. **"Now Yahweh said to Abram, 'Go from your country [eretz] and your kindred and your father's house to the land [eretz] that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth [adamah] shall be blessed.'" (Genesis 12:1-3)**

This is the first hint we're given that Yahweh's sporadic separation process had an overarching objective. By isolating His faithful from a world bent on evil, God was, at every stage, focusing ever more closely on the one thing—the one *Person*—who could save that world from its own folly. The counterintuitive factor in all of this is the connection of that salvation with a piece of *land*—"the land [eretz] that I will show you," as God had promised Abram. As soon as he arrived, **"Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to Yahweh, who had appeared to him."** (Genesis 12:7) This was no quarter-acre lot in a housing tract, either—it was the whole country. A bit later, Yahweh told Abram to **"Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land [eretz], for I will give it to you."** (Genesis 13:17)

The point was not (as Muhammad would later conclude) that you could just show up somewhere, sword in hand, and the place was therefore yours forever. Quite the contrary: Abraham believed Yahweh's promise, but he (personally) never actually *owned* any of the Promised Land, except for one small burial cave he purchased from a Hittite colonist near present-day Hebron. This doesn't make Yahweh a liar, for He had clearly stated, **"To your offspring I will give this land."** The promise was repeated to Abe's son Isaac, with the same caveat: **"Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands [by the way, Isaac was in the Gaza Strip when Yahweh said this to him—the Palestinians are squatting on Israelite land, like it or not], and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws."** (Genesis 26:3-5)

“*All these lands*” specified as Abraham’s inheritance wouldn’t be occupied by his offspring for another millennium—under David and Solomon. And several times since then, because of Israel’s rebelliousness, Yahweh has had to temporarily “evict” His favored tenant from the land, holding it “in escrow” for them until they were ready to receive it. Actually, they’ve been in and out of the land for the past thirty-five hundred years. At the moment, they’re “in” again, at least partially. And if the weight of prophetic revelation is as clear as it seems, Israel is on the very doorstep of permanent occupancy under the reign of their Messiah (who also happens to be *our* Messiah, Yahshua—though they don’t know that yet).

What isn’t quite so obvious is the parallel condition, the thing of which the *eretz* of Israel is “only” a symbol: heaven. Israel is a microcosm of mankind, a metaphor for the whole human race, our calling and our condition. If they were paying attention to their scriptures, they would be anticipating with deep longing the reign of the Prince of Peace in the land of promise. And if *we* were paying attention, we would crave to the bottom of our souls what Christ’s Millennial Kingdom on earth prophetically represents—eternity in the presence and favor of our God and King, Yahshua.

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**“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”** (Genesis 1:1) Although this mortal life is the only one we know by experience, and our world is—as far as we can perceive—the home of all living things, I believe God didn’t make the earth as an end in itself, but rather as a tool with which to teach us about “heaven”—our potential eternal state in His presence. I see the physical world as His textbook, His blackboard, His laboratory demonstration. Like any classroom experience, how well we do will depend on how closely we pay attention, how much we want to learn, our willingness to do our homework, and even our respect for the teacher.

I remember (don’t ask me how) that back in college, I had an art history professor, a diminutive Hungarian expatriate named Dr. Bela Biro, who seemed rather more dogmatic and authoritative than most of my professors. The reason, it transpired, was that he had personally authored the textbook for the course. So any way we sliced it, we were going to be graded on our adherence to *Dr. Biro’s* point of view. Our mortal lives are kind of like that. The class is “Life 101.” Yahweh is the Professor, and He too wrote the textbook for this course, one entitled *The Heavens and the Earth*. But whereas Dr. B’s book presented third parties like Cezanne and Renoir, God’s “book” is actually about *Himself*. The

final exam entails our own death (and you thought Freshman English was tough), but a passing grade is rewarded with the privilege of remaining in the Beloved Professor's inner circle—forever. Or something like that.

Part of the course deals with investment strategies. Yahshua taught us, **“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** (Matthew 6:19-21) *“Your treasure?”* We've already established that whatever we have—up to and including life itself—is a gift. It's only characterized as *our* treasure because God entrusted it to us. But because *we're* temporary (i.e., mortal), what we have in this world is only temporarily ours. So the issue is what to do with what we've got during the limited time we have possession of it. We can't really accumulate treasures on earth, for we have no way of accessing them after death. But the remarkable truth revealed here is that it *is* possible to “lay up treasures in heaven.” This is the evidence we need—eyewitness testimony—that there is indeed a continuity, a connection, between life on earth and the heavenly state, for Yahweh's children, anyway.

Yahshua, in a parallel passage, admonishes us, **“Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.”** (Luke 12:29-33) Obviously (if you've read this carefully), our *worldly* possessions can't be “laid up” in heaven. We're reminded that they're vulnerable to all sorts of hazards. But something can be deposited in the heavenly bank—spiritual “gold, silver, and precious stones” that will withstand the fires of judgment.

Strangely, Yahshua doesn't exactly say what these things are. He does, however, give us plenty of guidance here in Luke 12 as to what *won't* work as heavenly currency. He warns us against (1) religious hypocrisy and political intrigue (vs. 1-3); (2) reverence for unworthy objects (vs. 4-7); (3) failure to heed the Holy Spirit (vs. 8-12); (4) reliance on earthly possessions (vs. 13-21); (5) undue concern with this life at the expense of the next (vs. 22-34); (6) willful ignorance, apathy, and negligence—a failure to be watchful (vs. 35-48); and (7) unwillingness to heed the signs—a lack of discernment (vs. 49-59). The opposite of these things, then, might be characterized as treasure in heaven: honesty and openness, reverence for Yahweh alone; sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit; reliance on God's provision; concern for the advancement of Yahweh's kingdom; vigilance concerning the promise of our Messiah's return; and a willingness to

judge for ourselves (based on God's truth) between right and wrong—sticking to our godly convictions despite pressure from the world to compromise or retreat.

The undercurrent of thought here is that if we are Yahweh's children and citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we should think as He does, value what He values, and love what He loves. Look at it this way: in my yard there are lots of resident squirrels. When there's snow on the ground and food is scarce, we like to throw out some peanuts, corn, or sunflower seeds for them, for these things have value out there, if you're a squirrel. But what would happen if I threw out money instead? (After all, it's what *I* use when I want to go out and get something to eat.) Money is worthless to squirrels. Here in the woods, nuts are the "coin of the realm." They grow on the trees, a gift from God. My point is that just as squirrels don't value the same things we do, we don't always value what God does, either. He is not impressed with our wealth, power, abilities, prestige, or good looks, for those are all gifts we received from Him—and they're temporary gifts at that. What we *do* with our gifts, though—that may be another story.

What has value in the Kingdom of God? What is the nature of "treasure in heaven?" Yahshua revealed the answer this way: **"And one of [the Pharisees], a lawyer, asked [Yahshua] a question to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And He said to him, 'You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'"** (Matthew 22:34-40) How does identifying the greatest commandments help us? Moses directly linked the keeping of God's precepts with Israel's welfare: **"And now, Israel, what does Yahweh your God require of you, but to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of Yahweh, which I am commanding you today for your good?..."** Our compliance doesn't do anything for God—it only benefits the ones who follow His instructions.

Keeping someone's commandments, of course, won't help you if he can't (or won't) keep his own promises. A politician might promise you the moon to get elected, but can he deliver (and at what cost)? A false god might command you to do something horrible, as when Allah commanded all Muslims to "Fight and kill the disbelievers wherever you find them." (Qur'an 9:5) But can he follow through on his threats to those peaceful Muslims who were reluctant to terrorize their neighbors? He promised them, "Unless you march (i.e., in jihad), he (Allah) will afflict and punish you with a painful torture." (Qur'an 9:38) If every Muslim really *believed* Allah, the world would have no respite from their attacks until we (or they) were all dead. (On the other hand, if every Christian really believed Yahweh, the world would have no respite from our constant outpouring of love.) In the end, we all obey whoever it is we truly believe is capable of fulfilling his

promises. We pay our taxes because we believe the IRS has the power to make our lives miserable if we don't—not because we have faith in the government's ability to spend our money wisely.

So Moses explains *why* Yahweh's commandments can be relied upon to result in "your good." **"Behold, to Yahweh your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it."** (Deuteronomy 10:12-14) Ownership of the universe gives Yahweh the right to call the shots—not to mention reminding us that He has the power to fulfill His promises. In light of this, the only logical thing I can do is heed His word, His precepts, His instructions.

And as we've seen, Yahweh's instructions boil down to just one thing: love—first for God, and then for man. Love is not an action *per se*, but rather a *motivation* for action: the exact same earthly act (for example, giving alms) could be "treasure laid up in heaven" *or not*, depending upon one's motive for doing it. Everything Moses listed above as "the requirements of God" are love's derivatives. "Fear" (more properly translated "reverence") comes from a comprehension of and appreciation for Yahweh's character—love. "Walking in His ways" implies trust. And why should we trust Him? Because He who owns heaven and earth loves us. Wholehearted "service" to God is, as far as Yahweh told us, little more than showing love to our fellow man (the specifics of how to do this being enumerated in both the Torah and the Gospels).

Micah put it like this: **"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"** (Micah 6:8) "Justice" is seeing to it that all parties are treated fairly, balancing the Torah's requirement for restitution (i.e., love for the wronged party) against Yahweh's characteristic mercy (i.e., love for the guilty party). "Kindness" is obviously something Yahweh wants to be an attribute of our lives, but note that Micah says God wants us to *love* kindness: if we have to grit our teeth and force ourselves to be nice against our natural instincts, then something's wrong. And "walking humbly with our God" presupposes an understanding of Yahweh's greatness—at least in comparison to our own. It never ceases to amaze me how many otherwise smart and talented people walk in a posture of total arrogance before God.

As our walk on earth is meant to be a learning experience for what we'll need to know in "heaven," so the Promised Land was designed by Yahweh to reveal the difference between living in the world and living in the kingdom of God. Moses told the Israelites, **"For the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables."** The place from which they had come could be bountiful enough, but only if they worked at it. Egypt was a land of bondage, of hard labor. You could get used to it, but it wasn't really God's ideal. **"But the**

land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that Yahweh your God cares for. The eyes of Yahweh your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.” (Deuteronomy 11:10-12) You can plant all the seed you want; if there’s no water, you aren’t going to get any food. So Moses prayed, **“I have obeyed the voice of Yahweh my God. I have done according to all that You have commanded me. Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the ground [*adamah*] that You have given us, as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.”**

(Deuteronomy 26:14-15) In Egypt—the world—people had been forced to “bless themselves,” so to speak, irrigating their fields laboriously. But the Promised Land is where heaven addresses the earth. Here Yahweh provides the blessings Himself, sending “the early and latter rain” upon the land at just the right times and in just the right amounts. It’s sort of like the distinction between the six-day work week and the Sabbath: up to a point, there’s nothing wrong with work; but in the end, Yahweh intends to provide for His children directly and *personally*.

At this point, you’re saying, *Wait a minute! Israel is nothing like that. It’s dry and rocky, fruitful only because of the herculean effort and clever innovation the Israelis have brought to bear.* Yes, that’s true. It’s like they’re back in Egypt again, only worse, because theirs is a land of “hills and valleys,” not easy-to-till alluvial plains. Why is the land barren today? Because Israel didn’t heed the rest of the lesson: **“Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of Yahweh will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that Yahweh is giving you.”** (Deuteronomy 11:16-17) Human nature is goofy. First, we cry out to God, “Our burdens are unbearable—please rescue us!” And He does, and we are thankful. But a few generations later, our grandchildren are heard saying, “Life is good—Who needs God?” as they sink into apathy, hedonism, and malaise, and from there into apostasy and outright rebellion. And at that point, *their* grandchildren cry out to God, “Our burdens are unbearable—please rescue us!” Heeding the lessons of history would help. But what we really need to be doing is paying attention to God’s original instructions, for nothing has changed. Yahweh had promised His people that if they did not obey His voice or observe His commandments, **“The heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. Yahweh will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.”** (Deuteronomy 28:23-24) Was that really so hard to understand?

I can’t stress strongly enough that the lessons here aren’t confined to our lives on earth. They are, rather designed to help us see the continuity between earth and what lies beyond. Temporal blessings are only a pale shadow of what Yahweh wants us to enjoy in His presence. And temporal curses are only whispered hints of what looms in the eternal distance. Think of earthly blessings and curses as the



range of temperature in your living room over a year's time: a little warm in the summer, perhaps, and a bit chilly in the dead of winter, but bearable, all things considered. Then think of "heavenly" blessings and curses—that is, the difference between being Yahweh's child for eternity and *not* being His—as the temperature range in outer space. That's a whole different kettle of fish. The basic background temperature in deep space is below 3 degrees Kelvin (i.e., just above absolute zero, the point at which energy becomes totally unavailable). That's minus 455° Fahrenheit. But if you're near a star, say, our sun, the thermometer will read more like 11,000° F (and if you're *inside* that star, the temperature can climb to 27 million degrees F.) In other words, God knows we can't comprehend the *real* difference between heaven and hell, so He gives us blessings and cursings on earth to help us get the general idea.

The rub is that all of our fundamental choices must be made here on earth; all of our lessons must be learned in these mortal bodies. That's why Moses pleaded with his people to choose wisely. The real choice they were making was between life and death: **"But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish."** "Other gods?" Don't just think of primitive idols and graven images. Whatever you're devoted to, whatever you serve, is your "god." Choose carefully. **"You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving Yahweh your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him, for He is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that Yahweh swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."** (Deuteronomy 30:17-20) Let's see: Yahweh, blessing, and life; or some other god, cursing, and death. That's our basic choice. Call me crazy, but this doesn't really seem all that hard to figure out.

As we are taught about heaven by living on earth, perhaps the most important lesson we can learn is that Yahweh is sovereign. This may sound ridiculously elementary to the average Christian, but it's not. We (and I'm talking about the whole human race now) somehow feel that it's our right and privilege to hold and express our own opinions about anything and everything—including God and His kingdom. Granted, free will is apparently God's most fundamental gift to us. Yahweh's love requires that we have the right to choose between His revealed word and any conceivable alternative. But that's not the same thing. We are *not* free to reinvent God in our own image, or to build religions based on our own distorted views of what God is or wants. We are required to either take His word for it—or leave it. It is neither our place nor privilege to redefine God to suit our own preconceived preferences. If you'll recall, that sort of thing is what got Job's "comforters" into trouble. Solomon wisely wrote: **"Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on**

**earth. Therefore let your words be few.**" (Ecclesiastes 5:2) I've tried to be neither rash nor hasty with my thoughts, for I respect Yahweh's absolute sovereignty. (That "few words" thing, though—it appears I may still need work in that department.)

Do we have to be "smart" to figure out that Yahweh is sovereign? Not really. Human intelligence, after all, is a gift, and some have been given greater intellectual capacity than others. But our mental acuity, strangely enough, has no direct bearing on our potential for relationship with Yahweh. Some of the most brilliant men this world has ever seen were atheists or heretics. But small children are extolled in scripture as shining examples of faithfulness and innocence—things God prizes far above human intellectual prowess. **"At that time Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise [*sophos*: skilled, lettered, cultivated, or learned] and understanding [*sunetos*: intelligent, clever] and revealed them to little children.'"** (Matthew 11:25) The point (I think) is that children have an uncanny ability to learn from their surroundings—the very thing Yahweh is asking all of us to do during our sojourn on the earth. They soak up data like a sponge. Children intuitively trust their parents, search for boundaries, seek the truth, and recognize injustice—until they "grow up" and the insidious world teaches them how to be clever and self-deceptive instead. While they are born with instinct and intuition, they must acquire knowledge and experience. And we, like children, need to learn (or re-learn) to discern right from wrong, safety from danger, love from hatred, and truth from falsehood. If Yahweh is sovereign in our lives, we'll never go too far wrong.

Isaiah specifically highlights this connection between Yahweh, His schoolroom (heaven and earth) and the intended students (us, His beloved children): **"Thus says Yahweh, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: 'I am Yahweh, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by Myself.'"** In the very next breath, He states His parallel purpose—to expose even the most brilliant of human thought as utter idiocy in comparison: **"Who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish,"** while He provides insight and vindication—"spiritual intelligence"—to His children: **"who confirms the word of His servant and fulfills the counsel of His messengers."** (Isaiah 44:24-26)

David employs the same sort of imagery: **"Yahweh is in his holy temple; Yahweh's throne is in heaven; His eyes see, His eyelids test** [the idea being that this "testing" happens in the blink of an eye], **the children of man."** (Psalm 11:4) Once again, there is continuity between heaven and earth: what we do on earth is seen as of being of great interest to God in heaven—the testing (*bachan*: to examine, scrutinize, try, or prove) speaks of Yahweh's earnest desire to see something of value in us. Later, David reveals the result of this examination: **"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who**

does good. Yahweh looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up My people as they eat bread and do not call upon Yahweh?"

(Psalm 14:1-4) Left to our own devices, we all fail the test.

Can you imagine a university in which a Professor, after being forced to flunk the whole class for their poor performance, offers to take the make-up exam Himself? He says, "I really want you all to succeed, so if you'll trust Me, I'll take the test for you. I know I'll get fired for cheating, but you'll get an 'A' that will go on your permanent record. I'm willing to do this for you because I love you." The responses among us students are varied. Some don't trust the Professor to have the answers, so they decline His offer. Some arrogant overachievers are convinced they can pass the test on their own (even though no one has *ever* passed it), so they too say "no." Some were only there to party, so they have no idea what's going on. They didn't even know there *was* a test. But a few of us, knowing we can't pass it on our own but desperately wanting to, accept the Professor's generous offer, touched and mortified at the sacrifice He's making on our behalf. So He takes the test and faces the world's outrage. As He packs up His desk to go, we all stand around weeping and promising never to dishonor what He's done for us. But on His way out the door, He winks at us and says, "Don't worry. My Father owns the university, and He asked Me to do this for you. In three days, I'll be back, not as your Professor this time, but as the Chancellor."

Some will protest, "That's a fine parable, but there's still one glaring problem: the Professor *cheated*—and so did the students who followed Him." Yes, that's something with which we need to come to grips. The fact is, God *does* cheat. He's *not* fair. He forgives unpaid debts and sets guilty prisoners free—if they ask Him to. Don't get me wrong: Yahweh is never *unjust*. There was a price to be paid for giving an "unfair" advantage to people in need—and the Professor (Yahshua) paid it willingly. If God were "fair," we'd all be dead. But since He's *just* (and at the same time merciful), He's willing to let someone else, someone worthy, take our exam, pay our debt, and stand our prison sentence. The fact that there was only one Man in history willing and able to do this (by virtue of His own sinlessness) doesn't change anything. But it does raise the issue of who is qualified to "take the exam" in our stead. That is, who (or what) is able (never mind willing) to atone for our sins? Who is our teacher, our redeemer, our God?

This is not a popularity contest, but a search for truth. Man has always had an odd propensity to assign personality profiles to heavenly bodies. Moses warned Israel about them: **"And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that Yahweh your God has allotted to all the peoples under**

**the whole heaven.**" (Deuteronomy 4:19) It's part of God's lesson of heaven and earth: worship the Creator, not the creation. The world's pantheon is peppered with "sun gods" like Tammuz, Mithras, or Apollo, and "moon gods" like Isis, Diana, or Allah (which is strange: moon deities are usually seen as females. Does that make Allah gender ambivalent? Gay, perhaps? Just a thought). And then there are the planets. Mercury is a swift messenger, Venus a seductress. Earth (the goddess of choice for many, these days) is worshipped as our "mother." Mars is supposed to be the god of war, Saturn the god of agriculture, and Jupiter the god of the sky—of thunder and lightning. They've all got dozens of names and complicated, interrelated mythologies. But where in the world did mankind get the idea that they're alive, that they have any intrinsic power or personal authority? If "gods" other than Yahweh were really what people claimed them to be, we should have expected some interaction, some continuity between their "world" and ours. We should have expected—if they were real—that they had something of value to teach us, that they were something greater than the insecure self-centered narcissists their scriptures or devotees envision. These false gods have never actually *done* anything. Perhaps it's time to hold these so-called deities (I'm talkin' to *you*, Allah) to a higher standard—Yahweh's standard: either show up or shut up. At the very least, do your own "wet work."

And Yahweh? Is He any different? Yes, He is. First, He is our foundation, our Creator: **"I am He; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together."** (Isaiah 48:12-13) He then walked among us, voluntarily humbled for our benefit and our salvation: **"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."** (John 1:14) Today, He dwells within us, as Yahshua promised: **"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."** (John 14:16-17) Soon, He will personally judge the earth, purging it with fire and sword: **"For behold, Yahweh will come in fire, and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger in fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will Yahweh enter into judgment, and by His sword, with all flesh; and those slain by Yahweh shall be many."** (Isaiah 66:15-16) And in the end, He promises to teach His children—*here on the earth*—everything we need to know: **"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea."** (Habakkuk 2:14)

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I've mentioned that Yahweh has apparently designed earth and heaven (in the sense of our eternity with Him) as a continuity: our earthly lives will, if we choose His path, flow seamlessly from one paradigm to the next. Yahshua's rhetorical question points out this very thing: **"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"** (John 3:12) Stated as a positive, He's actually implying, "What I tell you about your earthly, mortal life has a direct and relevant bearing on the immortal life to come, for I alone am at home in both worlds."

Man tends to think homo-centrally; that is, that heaven may be the domain of God (whoever he may be), but earth is man's turf. We may not say so out loud, but most of us behave as if we believed that. Yahweh, however, has informed us in no uncertain terms that *everything* is His—including our world. **"The heavens are Yours; the earth also is Yours; the world and all that is in it; You have founded them."** (Psalm 89:11) Ironically, the only reason we can be so far off base on this issue is that He has given us the mental acumen to ponder it, coupled with the free will necessary to come to our own conclusions. I sincerely doubt that garden slugs and dung beetles give Yahweh's sovereignty a second thought. Only man "knows" enough to contradict his Maker.

We're not *completely* self-deceived, of course. We understand that *we* didn't create the heavens and the earth. But we're sharp enough to grasp the fact that if Someone *did* purposely built all this, then we are logically part of that creation, which in turn makes us subjects of the Creator—thus indebted to Him on some level, maybe even obliged to obey Him (*gasp!*). So we humans invent fictions designed to release us from the God-shaped responsibility we sense within our souls. We illogically insist, *It's all just a big accident, a series of lucky coincidences (billions of them, in fact—one right after the other)*. Or we say, *God, if he exists, is a great spirit who put the physical universe in motion a long time ago, but who has no personal interest or involvement in our lives now*. Humanity as a whole desperately wants to disconnect earth from heaven, for connection implies relationship, and relationship necessitates comparison—an honest determination of who is greater and who is lesser. So man, like a pitiful has-been boxer, shakes his fist in the face of the God he hopes isn't there and declares, "I am the greatest!" No, you're not. Actually, you're not even *second* greatest.

The creation account was written in such a way as to reveal the purposeful connection between the heavens and the earth that Yahweh intended us to see: **"And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.' And it was so...."** Signs are meaningless if there is no one to "read" them. The ability to mark days and years—as indicated by the relative position of "lights in the expanse of the

heavens”—is of no use to anyone who isn’t (1) living on the surface of the earth, and (2) intelligent enough to comprehend what is being displayed. The concept of “seasons” has even more significance. The word translated “seasons” is *mo’ed*—the same word used to describe the seven annual “appointments” Yahweh instructed Israel to observe (see Leviticus 23:2). These seven holy convocations (of which four have been fulfilled and the final three are still pending) comprise a prophetic synopsis of Yahweh’s grand plan for our redemption. (I intend to cover them in detail in a future chapter.) And finally, “light upon the earth” is pointless (or at least not worth mentioning) unless the Creator had planned for there to be someone here able to see it.

**“And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.”** (Genesis 1:14-18) This creative continuity God engineered between heaven and earth has a stated purpose. God wanted us humans to be able to discern between light and darkness—between good and evil. The symbolism here is so thick you can cut it with a knife.

This continuum isn’t a one-way street, either. The traffic flows both ways. Jacob had a vision in which he saw this very clearly: **“And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!”** Since Jacob saw this in a dream, some would protest that it wasn’t real, that it meant nothing. On the other hand, the dream wasn’t sent to the scoffers, but to one who already had a working relationship with the God who had sent the vision. Yahweh has no information to impart to those who are not of a mind to hear it. But He did have something to say to Jacob: **“And behold, Yahweh stood above it and said, ‘I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.’** Once again, we see heaven’s concern for the earth. **“Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”** Through the Messiah, that is. **“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”** Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, **“Surely Yahweh is in this place, and I did not know it.”** Well, actually, Jacob, Yahweh is everywhere He chooses to be, and He reveals Himself to whomever He pleases. **“And he was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’”** (Genesis 28:12-17)

Jacob had been the privileged recipient of a rare and wonderful glimpse into the physical interplay between heaven and earth. Yahweh rarely renders this connection quite so unmistakably. But I strongly suspect that divine and/or

angelic involvement in the mundane affairs of our world is something that goes on all the time, unseen perhaps, but real nevertheless. To the one who fully trusts in Yahweh, even though overt “miracles” may not occur, providence happens all the time. If we’re paying close attention, wherever we happen to be we might echo Jacob’s observation, **“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”**

In a different way, David noticed the same thing. As he waxed poetic in his praise for Yahweh in preserving him from his enemies, he morphed into prophet mode, describing the miraculous salvation Israel will experience during the Tribulation, when there will be no one on earth willing to stand with her against her satanic enemies: **“In my distress, I [in the prophetic sense, Israel] called upon Yahweh; to my God I called. From His temple He heard my voice, and my cry came to His ears. Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations of the heavens trembled and quaked, because He was angry. Smoke went up from His nostrils, and devouring fire from His mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from Him. He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under His feet.”** (II Samuel 22:7-9) Needless to say, neither David nor Israel has ever been defended personally by Yahweh in quite such a spectacular a manner: this is either yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy describing the vital connection between heaven and earth, or it’s a lie. But one thing is clear: we’re not allowed to ignore it.

Yahweh’s fondness for humanity—and especially for the unlikely people He chose to be the vehicle of salvation to the world, Israel—did not go unnoticed in the angelic realm. When Satan rebelled against Yahweh, he didn’t become *God’s* opponent. Compared to Yahweh, the devil has less mass than navel lint. No, he became *our* adversary. Satan can’t touch Yahweh, but he can try to separate earth from heaven, something merely annoying to God but *fatal* to us if he succeeds. So the prophet asks, **“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star [Hebrew *heylel*, sometimes translated Lucifer, but more a description than a name], son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’”** Note that Satan doesn’t even pretend that he can replace the true God, only “be like” Him, become His rival in some way. **“But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?’”** (Isaiah 14:12-17) Since man was created “a little lower than the angels” in our capabilities, being compared to a *dead man* must, for Satan, be like us being called a dog, or an ass, or a worm—a lower species. Cute, considering his basic sin was pride.

Fortunately for us, Satan's successes are not in his own power to achieve, but rather in ours. If we choose to seek the truth, we will find it, and the song of heaven will be sung here on earth: "[Yahshua] said to them, **'But who do you say that I am?'** Simon Peter replied, **'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'** And Jesus answered him, **'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.'**" (Matthew 16:15-17) Would we see *anything* if Father Yahweh didn't reveal it to us? I kind of doubt it. It is only His personal involvement in the affairs of mankind that allows us to rise, if only for a moment, above the spiritual perception of a paramecium.

The most obvious personal repository of Yahweh's revelation to us was, of course, His advent as a human, in the person of Yahshua of Nazareth. He told Nicodemus, **"No one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."** (John 3:13) This cycle of communication between heaven and earth was completed with Yahshua's ascension. Luke records the scene: **"While He blessed them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven... As they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight."** (Luke 24:52, Acts 1:9) Or as Mark puts it, **"So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God."** (Mark 16:19) He left behind His Scriptures and His Spirit to guide us in His physical absence. For now, it is enough. But the time is coming—and soon—when the connection between earth and heaven will be reestablished. He who left as the Son of Man will return to us as the King of Kings. And we will know what it is for Yahweh to walk among us upon the earth.

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It's an uncomfortable thought for the vast majority of humanity: the concept that God might actually follow through on His promises. (Well, it *would be* if they knew what He's promised to do.) Actually, just as they're willingly ignorant of what He said and did in the past, most people remain oblivious to what He has vowed to do in the future. Sticking one's head in the sand may seem like a sound defense strategy to an ostrich, but it makes no sense at all if you're a person. The worldwide consensus today seems to be, *God is not making His presence known, so He must not exist*. As Peter put it, **"Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of His coming?'"** (II Peter 3:3-4) And yet, if they would simply open the scriptures, they would see that Yahweh has been personally involved in the affairs of men since before we were even here. He is sovereign not only in heaven, but also on earth. The fact that He doesn't "throw His weight around" (which would have the effect of



curtailing our freedom to choose) shouldn't be construed as disinterest, incompetence, or non-existence.

A few verses later, Peter explains why: **"But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief."** (II Peter 3:8-10) This tells us several things about Yahweh's *modus operandi*: (1) God is on a schedule, one that He revealed in His instructions in symbolic terms: as our weeks are structured according to the creation account pattern—six days of work followed by one day of rest—fallen man's God-given tenure on earth will be seven thousand years—six millennia in which to "work things out" with Yahweh, and a seventh in which to rest in His salvation. (2) God's unwillingness to rush into overt judgment is due to His mercy; He wants to give us all the time we need (within His predetermined schedule) to come to our senses and repent. (3) Even after revealing His schedule (in admittedly cryptic terms), His coming will still take the world by surprise. And (4) Yahweh is running things His way—there is nothing man can do to hasten, delay, or prevent His kingdom. The only thing we can do is decide which side to be on when the time comes.

So Yahshua taught His disciples to pray, **"Your kingdom come; Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."** (Matthew 6:10) It's a given that God's will is done in heaven, but alas, it's seldom done on earth these days. This rebellion, of course, is a byproduct of free will being exercised by fallen, sinful men. We are instructed to pray that God's authority will become as obvious here on earth as it is in heaven. Does this imply that we are to implore God to eliminate free will? In a way, yes, as counterintuitive as that may seem. What we're really asking for is that Yahshua's kingdom be established on earth—as He promised—with all that entails. First, the Messiah-King will reign personally on the earth, in transcendent glory and with a scepter of iron. Second, the adversary/accuser/deceiver—Satan—will be bound in chains in the abyss, no longer able to trouble mankind. Third, the sheep will have been separated from the goats, the wheat from the tares: in other words, the kingdom age will commence populated only by the redeemed of Yahweh, both resurrected and mortal. The *children* of these mortals will still have choices to make during the kingdom age, but as the Millennial reign of Christ begins, Yahweh's sovereign purpose *will* be done on earth—just as it always has been in heaven. And David's prophetic prayer will at last be fulfilled: **"Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, 'Yahweh reigns!'"** (I Chronicles 16:31)

The Millennial reign of Christ won't mark the beginning of God's sovereignty over the earth, of course—only the overt manifestation of a state of affairs that

has always existed. I believe Abraham understood this principle when he told his servant to **“Swear by Yahweh, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.”** (Genesis 24:3-4) There was a connection between Abraham and “his country and kindred” that’s parallel to that which joins heaven and earth. Yes, he was absent from his home, living as a pilgrim among heathen idolaters in a foreign (though “promised”) land—which, if you think about it, is a pretty good picture of us believers living here on earth. But he knew that for him and his household, the only place for a relationship to have its foundation was “at home” (in symbolic terms, in heaven—the abode of our heavenly Father).

But Yahweh’s overt interventions in the affairs of mankind have historically been rare, and focused primarily on Israel. Moses pointed this out to them: **“Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror [i.e., inspiring awe or fear], all of which Yahweh your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that Yahweh is God; there is no other besides Him. Out of heaven He let you hear His voice, that He might discipline you. And on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire....”** Israel had been chosen by God to be the vehicle or conduit of His salvation of all mankind—two thousand years before the Messiah actually appeared. So it’s only natural that He would, on occasion, choose to be somewhat less than subtle in demonstrating His presence and power on their behalf. It was crucial that they, of all people, were witnesses of the connection that existed between heaven and earth, between God and man.

**“And because He loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with His own presence, by His great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day, know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that Yahweh is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.”** People in that age were accustomed to thinking of deities as “local gods,” dedicated to one tribe or region. In our day, society tends to make the opposite mistake—believing that all “gods” are somehow the *same*. If I was paid a nickel for every time some idiotic politician intoned, “We all worship the same God,” I could take my wife out for a nice lunch with the proceeds. But here, on the doorstep of the promised land, the truth is proclaimed: there is only one God in heaven and on earth, and Yahweh is His name. And this fact has ramifications: we are obliged to heed His word. **“Therefore you shall keep His statutes and His commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you for all time.”** (Deuteronomy 4:34-40)

This wasn't the first time Yahweh had warned His people about falling for the "all gods are created equal" myth. They hadn't even left Sinai when He told them, **"I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."** (Exodus 23:31-33) Yahweh is saying, in effect, *I am the one true God in heaven and on the earth, and you are the people I have chosen to deliver salvation to the human race. Therefore, you need to remain separate from the idolaters of the land—and their so-called "gods."* This separation is called "holiness." Even today, when we make what seem to us like reasonable (or at least politically correct) compromises with the world, we run afoul of Yahweh's admonition. Love is supplanted by tolerance. Familial relationship with Yahweh is replaced with religious duty. Individual mercy gives way to social justice. Godly responsibility and stewardship becomes environmental hysteria. And the promises of God are substituted with the schemes of man. If Yahweh is sovereign over both heaven and earth, then why don't we take His instructions to heart? When did compromise with evil become a virtue?

For Israel, compromise was defined as coexistence with the idolaters of the Land. That being said, their conquest of Canaan was to be limited in scope: only seven hopelessly corrupt tribal nations were targeted for destruction, and then only within well-defined borders. (For example, the Hittites were listed, but the heart of their empire was located far to the north in modern Turkey, outside Joshua's mandate.) **"When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it.... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them."** (Numbers 33:51-56) How does this translate into spiritual truth in 21<sup>st</sup> century society? The spiritual ramifications are hard to miss. We are to (1) honor Yahweh as sovereign and holy; (2) not allow idols to share our space with Him (and by "idols," I mean *anything* that competes with Yahweh for our affections—amusement, ambition, security, lust, possessions, pride, etc.); (3) separate ourselves from people who's *agenda* is to draw us into such idolatry (not to be confused with mere "sinners," whose lives we are to positively impact if we can); (4) cease tolerating falsehood and deception; and (5) recognize that whatever we have in this world is a gift from Yahweh—to be used for His glory.

It helps to remember that Israel in the Land is a microcosm of mankind in the earth. (Same concept: *eretz*.) A divine commandment to Israel is also a godly principle to live by for the rest of us. (Again, it's the same concept: *dabar/logos*

—the Word.) That which was to be “acted out” as if on stage by Israel is to be observed, embraced, and applauded by their gentile audience. The nations should not be unaware that the admonitions of Yahweh toward Israel apply to *them* as well—in an even deeper sense. For example: **“You shall keep My statutes and My rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.”** (Leviticus 18:26-28) We look at Israel’s history (in and out of the land of promise) and we shake our heads in horror. Do we not realize that the *whole earth* is about to vomit out its rebellious inhabitants, just as Canaan did to Israel, and for roughly the same reasons?

It’s not as if we have no evidence of what’s coming, no historical precedent to guide us: **“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine.”** (Exodus 19:4-5) Israel’s special place in the heart and plan of God brought with it special responsibilities. They have not obeyed Yahweh’s voice and kept His covenant—yet—but that “treasured possession” status is still available to them, *as a nation*, contingent only upon their national repentance. In the meantime, since “all the earth is Yahweh’s,” everyone lives under His sovereignty, whether we realize it or not. Ironically, it is through Israel’s history (a history they themselves have largely chosen to ignore) that gentile believers find their most compelling reasons for honoring Yahweh through His Messiah. Considering Israel’s rebellion, they shouldn’t even exist anymore. Logically, they should have gone the way of the Amorites and the Girgashites—and they *wouldn’t* exist were it not for Yahweh’s unilateral promises of restoration.

Yahweh’s sovereignty over both heaven and earth gives Him the right to be worshipped—exclusively. The Second Commandment codifies this thought: **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God.”** (Exodus 20:4-5) “Jealous” here means “zealous for that which belongs to you.” The implication is that if we serve other gods—of any description—we aren’t really interested in belonging to Yahweh. That’s why it’s so important that we understand that Yahshua *is* Yahweh, and not some derivative deity, demigod, or worse, a mere prophet or religious innovator. Yahshua is the “carved image” Yahweh made of *Himself*—the very likeness of God in heaven walking among us here on earth. It is therefore Yahshua alone—Yahweh in flesh—whom it is proper for us to serve and worship.

Yahshua didn't *become* God when He was born in Bethlehem. Being Yahweh, He always *was* God, even before He was manifested in flesh. Like the Holy Spirit and all of the other manifestations of Yahweh in human experience, Yahshua's character, purpose, and identity are Yahweh's. **"Yahweh, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God."** (Psalm 90:1-2) The form God assumes is suited to the venue, whether heaven or earth. But make no mistake: He who is sovereign over the heavens rules over the earth as well. This is something that ought to have been obvious, and would have been were it not for the privilege of free will He bestowed upon us. The right to choose presupposes the possibility of choosing badly, and many men have. But blessed are those who recognize Yahweh's universal sovereignty: **"Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let Your glory be over all the earth!"** (Psalm 108:5)

As the Psalmist begs Yahweh to make His glory known, Yahweh answers with an admonition: just open your eyes! **"Thus says Yahweh: 'Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool; what is the house that you would build for Me, and what is the place of My rest? All these things My hand has made, and so all these things came to be,' declares Yahweh."** If we're paying attention to Yahweh's glory as it's revealed in the heavens, we will recognize our relative insignificance here on the earth. Like a loving father with His small children, God does not need our help, but He does enjoy our company. **"But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word."** (Isaiah 66:1-2) It's ironic, in a way, that Yahweh promises to "look upon," to pay heed to, those who humble themselves before Him—but *not* to those who elevate themselves among men.

Although it's hard for us to understand, differences in relative size are not an issue with Yahweh. He can be as "big" as it takes to get the job done, and He can—at the same time—be our most intimate associate. **"Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares Yahweh. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares Yahweh."** (Jeremiah 23:24) I've always found it fascinating that God made man "mid-sized." That is, as far as we can tell, our bodies are about halfway between the immensity of the scale of the universe and the complexity of the sub-atomic realm. We can describe—even if we can't really comprehend—the whole vast picture. And Yahweh? If I'm seeing this correctly, He's "bigger" (if that word can be used) than the biggest thing of which we can conceive, but at the same time, He directs the path of every quark, lepton, and boson as surely as you navigate your way to work every morning.

If we really understood what Yahweh is and does, human pride would be absolutely unthinkable. If we truly came to grips with His glory, we probably wouldn't be able to breathe, much less function as normal human beings. And yet at every turn, our God is heard inviting us to live in fellowship with Him, to

receive His blessings, to stand in holiness before Him. **“The earth is Yahweh’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for He has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.”** Is He also the master of esoteric understatement, or is it merely the inadequacies of human language? **“Who shall ascend the hill of Yahweh? And who shall stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from Yahweh and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.”** (Psalm 24:1-6) “Ascending the hill of Yahweh” is a euphemism for achieving—of being part of—the ultimate connection between earth and heaven. Note that the very righteousness we need in order to do this—the requisite clean hands, pure heart, and hunger for the truth—are gifts bestowed by Yahweh upon the one who seeks His face. We can’t approach Him on our own merit: we *have* no merit. All we can do is ask to be called, cleansed, and covered.

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As we contemplate the earth beneath our feet, or even the stars in the heavens, we tend to think of them as permanent. After all, they were here long before we were, and will be here long after we’re gone (or so it would seem). Sure, our observation tells us that as a system, the universe is slowly decaying—that left alone to unravel at its own pace, it will eventually consist of randomly distributed atoms floating through nothingness at absolute zero—no organization, no movement, no beauty, no life, no purpose. But what is that to us? We live only seventy or eighty years—*nothing*, compared to the billions upon billions of years the cosmos apparently has yet to run.

And yet, God’s word teaches us that if we are in Yahweh, *we* are what’s permanent, for He is permanent. The creation we see before us is, in comparison, temporary, fleeting, and ephemeral, for our universe—the heavens and the earth—exists at the discretion of Yahweh, and He has destined it for destruction. **“Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner; but My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will never be dismayed.”** (Isaiah 51:6) A contrast is being drawn here between the old, decaying cosmos and the new, eternal creation. What separates the new state from the old is “salvation” and “righteousness,” two things (actually, just one) that Yahweh offers freely to those of us who seek Him. **“For behold, I [Yahweh] create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.”** (Isaiah 65:17-18) This refers to the “New

Jerusalem” described in such glowing detail by the New Testament prophets. We’ll revisit that theme in a moment. Note that logically, one cannot “be glad and rejoice forever” unless he’s alive—*forever*.

The “new heavens and new earth” of which Isaiah wrote are also prophesied in the New Covenant scriptures. **“But according to His promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”** (II Peter 3:13) Whereas the present creation “groans and travails” under the weight of our sin (see Romans 8:20-22), the new heaven and earth will be the exclusive abode of “righteousness.” I can only conclude that we who inhabit these domains will no longer have a sin nature to deal with: we will have been transformed into the likeness of Christ, fulfilling our destiny as believers (Romans 8:29). Likewise, John wrote, **“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”** (Revelation 21:1) The new cosmos isn’t built alongside the old one—a parallel universe, so to speak. It is, rather, a replacement: the old one will be gone and forgotten.

Is goes without saying (but I’ll say it anyway) that the only thing that’s *intrinsically* permanent is Yahweh Himself. The “steady-state” universe once so philosophically dear to scientists has been conclusively proven to be an unsupportable myth, a mere product of wishful thinking by brilliant fools who insist there is no God. There *was* a beginning, they now (reluctantly) admit. (They still haven’t come to terms, however, with the disconcerting fact that only Life begets life. Spontaneous biological serendipity remains the last bastion of desperate hope for the religion of atheism.) The Psalmist, without any scientific training at all, was nevertheless able to see the truth of the matter: **“Of old You [Yahweh] laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but You are the same, and Your years have no end.”** That much would be easy enough to deduce from science and a rudimentary knowledge of the nature of our God, I suppose. But the really amazing thing is the Psalmist’s conclusion on the subject. He goes on to say that the inevitable result of this never-ending “sameness” of Yahweh’s nature is that **“The children of Your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before You.”** (Psalm 102:25-28) You can’t “dwell secure” and “be established” if you’re dead and gone. No, if it’s true that God’s “years have no end,” then we who are His can, and will, inherit eternal life.

The complete remaking of the universe is a bit beyond our ability to envision, of course. But in both scriptural history and prophecy, Yahweh has given us numerous glimpses into how—and why—it will happen. It should come as no surprise by this time that the whole point of the exercise is holiness: Yahweh’s purpose is to separate, step by step, the corruption of the cosmos that exists from

the purity of the world that shall be. I get the feeling that the infrastructure of the universe is the least of it in His mind; His focus is on man—and specifically on the relatively few of us who have joyfully chosen to embrace Him as our adopted Father. Everything else is collateral damage, chaff in the wind, worthless dross to be skimmed off and cast aside in the process of our purification. Is God angry that so many have chosen to arrogantly reject His entreaties and decline His sacrifice? Wouldn't you be?

Three apocalyptic passages from Isaiah (selected from among scores of worthy candidates) will suffice to demonstrate Yahweh's frame of mind on the subject. Whether blended into prophecies concerning near-contemporary nations or not (this first selection emerges from a diatribe against Babylon—initially fulfilled over a century after Isaiah issued the warning), the prophet's point is quite clear: God's temporal punishment of wicked men in this life is but a pale shadow of the things to come—a preview of cosmic events yet in our future. He says, **"I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. I will make people more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of Yahweh of hosts in the day of his fierce anger."** (Isaiah 13:11-13) There will come a day, Yahweh says, when He will no longer put up with the ridiculous arrogance of ruthless men. This will be accomplished at first through the purging of the populace during the Tribulation, but ultimately through the introduction of the new heaven and new earth—a universe designed and built for immortal, spiritually living beings in the same way the present one is built for mortals. If the wicked were still around (they won't be), they'd find themselves in a world that couldn't accommodate them; they'd be as out of place as snowflakes on the sun.

In the short run, it's going to get far worse than it has ever been: **"For behold, Yahweh is coming out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain."** (Isaiah 26:21) I once saw a bumper sticker that portrays God as an angry parent, saying "Don't make Me come down there!" Isaiah has revealed that this is precisely what He is going to have to do. Yahweh has been patient with us, not willing that any should perish. But enough is enough, children. If He is a God of justice (as well as One of mercy) there must come a time when He rights the wrongs, punishes the guilty, and rewards the innocent. This means that the earth must someday (and soon, I'm guessing) experience a rare and terrifying "close encounter" with heaven: "Yahweh is coming out from His place"—not for fellowship this time, but for punishment. Since the days of Cain, the blood of our victims has cried out to Yahweh from the ground. Here at last, He will answer: the slain will be so numerous, there will be no one left to bury them.



Remember how Yahshua talked about the Kingdom of God being accessible only through the “narrow gate?” Isaiah’s prophecy also stresses the sad fact that very few (comparatively speaking) will choose this path. **“Behold, Yahweh will empty the earth and make it desolate, and He will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.”** This desolation won’t be distributed along class lines, either, for our choices are an individual matter: **“And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for Yahweh has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish.”** This isn’t just Isaiah being pessimistic. Yahweh Himself has declared this verdict upon the earth—which is scary, because He’s the only One qualified to judge, the only One who has a right to be angry, and the only One powerful enough to do anything about it. Note that for once, the “highest people”—the privileged elite—will not escape. **“The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.”** (Isaiah 24:1-6) What once befell Israel (in partial fulfillment of this prophecy) is the inevitable—and literal—fate of the whole world. John describes (in Revelation 6:4, 6:8, and 8:7) a future war—apparently thermonuclear—that will consume a third of the earth in fire and kill a quarter of its inhabitants. Isaiah has just informed us as to why God will allow this to happen: mankind has arrogantly turned its collective back on His word.

But as I said, the “end of the world as we know it,” the coming Tribulation, is just a preview of the ultimate recycling of planet earth—a grand urban renewal project Yahweh has had scheduled since the dawn of time. John’s vision revealed it: **“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”** (Revelation 21:1) No *sea*? There’s our first clue as to how fundamental and comprehensive the change is going to be. Today, oceans cover 71% of the earth’s surface. Presuming the new earth will be the same size as the old one (which, of course, is something we can’t really presume), that’s an additional 140 million square miles of land area. Beyond that, an entirely different ecosphere is implied: our oceans drive our present climate, for good or ill. The hydrologic cycle is essential for our present mortal existence. But if we’re no longer mortal—if we cannot die—then what’s necessary and what’s not? I can only imagine what the new earth will be like, but from what I know of Yahweh’s character, I’d guess that it will be more beautiful than anything we’ve ever seen up to this point. And that’s saying a lot: in its natural state, the world as we know it is (in my eyes, at least) jaw-droppingly beautiful—something worth praising God over.

And the new heavens? We aren't told what John saw—only that he did see them. We can presume, then, that there was something to see, and that it was impressive. We have been, in these last few years of mortal man's existence upon the old earth, privileged with glimpses into the stunning splendor of God's sidereal creation. Space based telescopes like the Hubble have brought us images of incredible beauty we never before knew existed. If we didn't know before, we do now: the heavens declare the glory of God. And that's the *old* heavens. What will we see in the new? And how will we see it? It would be pointless to speculate, of course, and words couldn't adequately express what's out there anyway. So I'll have to content myself with what God did choose to reveal: **"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."** In other words, it'll be as pretty as Yahweh knows how to make it. **"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place [Greek: *skene*] of God is with man. He will dwell [*skenoo*] with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."** (Revelation 21:1-4)

I've highlighted a couple of Greek words we've seen before, because their significance is largely lost in the English, as mind-blowing as the rough concept is anyway. The noun *skene* is a particular sort of "dwelling place"—a tent, a tabernacle, a temporary shelter or booth. In other word, it's not "permanent"—a house, castle, or palace. And the related verb, *skenoo*, means to dwell or take up residence, especially in a temporary abode like a tent or tabernacle. This is precisely the same picture we're given with the wilderness tabernacle, the portable proto-temple the Israelites were instructed to use as they made their way toward the Promised Land. This tabernacle, including its fenced courtyard, is a complex and comprehensive symbol of Yahweh's plan for mankind's redemption. Everything within it is a picture of one facet or another of the way Yahweh ordained to redeem us. The function, placement, materials, and even dimensions of every sanctuary element specified in scripture is meaningful and significant. So what Yahweh is saying here in Revelation is that He—in the persona of the glorified Messiah—is the tabernacle and everything it represents.

He declares this plainly a few verses later: **"And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."** The "Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" are descriptions of Yahshua—no longer the babe in the manger, no longer the persecuted itinerant rabbi, but now the reigning King of kings. **"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there...."** We're not told whether the sun and moon are gone at this point, or merely superfluous. But as part of the "old heavens," they are slated for early

retirement at some point, to be replaced with something more in keeping with the new spiritual paradigm.

The New Jerusalem is described as the eternal home of the ekklesia's redeemed. You can call it "heaven" if you want, but it's clear that we aren't going to live with God, exactly. Rather, He is coming to "camp out" with us! This—the New Jerusalem—is what Yahshua was talking about when He described the "mansions" in His Father's house that He was going to prepare for us (see John 14:2-3). One thing's for sure: it's a very exclusive neighborhood, a guard-gated residential community: **"They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."** (Revelation 21:22-27) Since this "city" (actually, it's apparently more like a small planet) is called "the dwelling place of God with man," it's the ultimate expression of the continuity between earth and heaven—a continuity that is, in the end, the whole point.

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Considering the fact that Yahweh called His original creation "very good," it may seem strange to hear Him say He plans to melt it all down, like out-of-style gold jewelry, and start all over again. But if we pay attention, we can detect this subtle undercurrent of thought running throughout His word: God's plan from the very beginning was for us to dwell with Him—not as subjects, and certainly not as adversaries, but as dearly beloved children. Our living arrangements as mortals on earth were, I believe, meant to teach us what this could be like. **"Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of Yahweh by doing righteousness and justice, so that Yahweh may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."** (Genesis 18:17-19) The heart of what God promised to Abraham was that through him, "all the families of the earth would be blessed." Yahweh reiterated this several times. **"By myself I have sworn, declares Yahweh, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of His enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."** (Genesis 22:16-18)

The fulfillment—the fruition—of that promise was Yahshua's provision for our reconciliation with Yahweh. So Peter writes, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is**

imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (I Peter 1:3-5) If our status as God's newly adopted children—with all the privileges that relationship might be expected to bring with it—were revealed in temporal terms in this life, people would be clamoring to "join the club" for what they could get out of it, not because they revered Yahweh and were eternally grateful to His Messiah. So the overt benefits of having this imperishable inheritance are concealed from the world, held in escrow for us, so to speak. They'll be revealed soon enough.

By the way, that phrase "born again" isn't quite accurate. But it's not the same phrase mistranslated in John 3, either—it's not *gennao anothēn*: "born from above." This time the word is *anagennao*, which literally means "born into the midst," or "born among." (*Ana* can also mean "each," speaking of relative distribution, as in Matthew 20:9). What Peter (who's the only guy to use the word in scripture) is really saying is, "**He has caused us to be born into the midst of a living hope** [*elpis*: the joyful and confident expectation of good] **through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,**" or perhaps "**He has begotten each of us into a living hope.**" My point is that our birth into hope in Christ is unique: it does not happen "again." It can't really be compared to anything else in our experience. It alone marks the commencement into a life that's "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading," the inheritance reserved for us in heaven.

I must confess, sometimes I just sit here staring at my computer screen, dumbfounded. I mean, I can sort of understand how Yahweh pulled His plan together, how He put the pieces in place, how he balanced His own wishes against our free will. But what I can't figure out is *why* He would do this. It's not enough to explain it by appealing to the intrinsic "bargain" involved—the idea that if God wanted people who would love Him, He would have to risk allowing them to choose *not* to (since real love can only be the result of choice). Nor is it a "numbers game," in which God was willing to accept a certain level of loss in order to guarantee the gains He had calculated. No, the fact is, He had no guarantees at all—His risk was absolute. His sacrifice was offered *up front* with no assurance that *anybody* would respond. (Yes, there were saints who had already demonstrated their faith in His promises by the time Yahshua came, but Yahweh's plan and promise had been established from the foundation of the world—and revealed as far back as the Garden of Eden).

The Calvinist view of limited atonement doesn't fly either, because Yahweh's sovereignty (the truth upon which the doctrine is based) is ultimately expressed in His decision to let us all make our own choices. Just because God is sovereign, it doesn't mean He has to force His opinion down everybody's throats—or worse, down the throats of only a privileged few that He Himself selected, condemning

everybody else to hell (which is basically the Islamic view of things). A God who is *really* in charge can, if He wishes, opt to delegate the decision making process, and scripture clearly indicates that this is what Yahweh chose to do.

So why did Yahweh put it all on the line for us? There can be only one answer, but I can't claim to comprehend the depth of the thing. It's His compassion. It's as if He said to Himself, *How people respond to My love is up to them. They may or may not choose wisely, but as things stand, they're lost. I must try to reach them—to save them. My nature demands it.* I might be able to comprehend how a hypothetical finite god could “intervene” in the course of human affairs with an eye toward nudging the outcome in his favor. People do this sort of thing all the time. The “problem” is, Yahweh is *not* finite, limited, or restricted in any way. He does not struggle. He need not “try.” As long as His objective is not nonsensical—both of two mutually exclusive alternatives—He has the power to simply say “Let it be,” and it is. It is said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That is true enough for men, I suppose. But in Yahweh's case, absolute power was voluntarily relinquished out of compassion for us—mere creatures, and corrupt ones at that. If I told you I understood why Yahweh did this, I'd be lying. But I'm glad He did.

Solomon struggled with the same conundrum. **“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!”** The “house” to which Solomon is referring is the new temple he'd been privileged to build in Jerusalem in 967 BC (precisely one thousand years prior to the passion of the Messiah it was designed to represent), replacing the portable tabernacle that had been in use since Moses' day. **“Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his plea, O Yahweh my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that Your servant prays before You this day, that Your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that You may listen to the prayer that Your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven Your dwelling place, and when You hear, forgive.”** (I Kings 8:27-30) In asking Yahweh to listen to the prayers of his people, Solomon is declaring some very remarkable things, if viewed through the skeptical eyes of our generation: (1) There is a God, infinite in presence and unlimited in power; (2) This God is interested in sharing an intimate relationship with us; (3) Yahweh wants to be identified with a single location on earth, though His dwelling place is in heaven; and (4) He is willing to grant forgiveness to those who ask, because His forgiveness is necessary if we are to dwell together in harmony with Him.

The scoffers of our day deny all of this. They'd say that god, if he exists at all, has neither power nor moral standards; he isn't so much a spiritual personality as he is a vague “force” or feeling; he has no special relationship with Israel (even if

he once did), so it's safe to support Israel's enemies in hopes of currying favor with their oil-rich allies; and people don't need forgiveness, so they don't want a god who says they do. Meanwhile, Yahweh looks upon the world with sadness and compassion, longing for our repentance but remaining unwilling to force us to choose His path. His scriptures incessantly declare the desire of God to free us from the chains of our self-delusion. **"Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise Yahweh: that He looked down from His holy height; from heaven Yahweh looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, that they may declare in Zion the name of Yahweh, and in Jerusalem His praise."** (Psalm 102:18-21) The "people yet to be created" are the ekklesia, the church, the called out assembly of Yahshua. It is us who praise Yahweh today, praying that our brothers in Israel will come at last to "declare in Zion the name of Yahweh" as we do. It's only a matter of time.

Unfortunately, it will take utter catastrophe to shake Israel out of her two-thousand year coma. The prophet writes, **"Come, let us return to Yahweh; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days [read: two thousand years] He will revive us; on the third day [i.e., the Millennial reign of the Messiah that will follow the "two days"] He will raise us up, that we may live before Him."** (Hosea 6:1-2) There it is once again: the counterintuitive idea that God and men (in this case, Israel) are destined to dwell together in perfect harmony. The last seven of these two thousand years (see Daniel 9:24-27) will be the roughest for Israel—in fact, the latter part of this period is referred to (in Jeremiah 30:7) as "the time of Jacob's trouble," which is something of an understatement, if you understand the prophecies. However, against all odds (since "odds" have nothing to do with it, but rather the will of God), Israel will emerge as the world's sole superpower, the home of the Kingdom of God, the seat of the Millennial reign of Christ.

This seven-year (actually, an even 2,520-day) period of time is generally known as "the Tribulation." Much of yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy centers on this time or on the conditions leading up to it—in the years in which we now live. But even here, in the darkest days of the history of the human race, the message of scripture is that heaven and earth will be reconciled, that God and man (those who have, whether early or late, chosen to follow Him) will dwell together. For example, **"Therefore [that is, because these Tribulation martyrs have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"] they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter [skenoō] them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."** (Revelation 7:15-17) The "silver lining" to the Tribulation's dark cloud is turning out to be platinum.

Speaking of these Tribulation martyrs, John writes, **“And they have conquered him [the accuser of the brethren—Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them!”** Note that somebody is seen dwelling in heaven, even while the Tribulation is still raging on earth: **“But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”** (Revelation 12:11-12) Later, we read, **“It [the beast] opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming His name and His dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.”** (Revelation 13:6) *Who?* Who dwells in heaven while the martyrs (not to mention billions of lost souls) are getting hammered on the earth?

Without getting too wrapped up in the technical state of the souls of the redeemed departed, I believe that when John speaks of those “dwelling in heaven,” he’s not referring to disembodied souls (the state of the dead in paradise, a.k.a. “Abraham’s bosom”). He referring, rather, to those who have, like the risen Christ, received immortal, spiritual bodies. Paul begins with this cryptic reference: **“For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”** (II Corinthians 5:1) The “tent,” of course, is our mortal body, a marvelous piece of machinery, yet designed to be temporary. It will be destroyed, only to be replaced with a permanent dwelling place—a body built by God to last for eternity.

Paul’s account continues: **“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”** (I Corinthians 15:50-52) He explains further how we can expect to receive these new bodies: **“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up [Latin: *rapiemur*, giving rise to the common English term for this event: the “rapture”] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”** (I Thessalonians 4:16-18) From everything we’ve seen so far, that’s been Yahweh’s purpose from the beginning—for us to “be with the Lord” (i.e., Yahshua).

That’s not to say we’ll remain in heaven forever after our transformation. When Yahshua returns at last to rule upon the earth, the saints will come with Him: **“And He will send out His angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”** (Matthew 24:31) Note that we’ll be gathered from *heaven*, not from the earth. The earth, rather, is our destination: we’ll make a grand triumphal entrance in the company of the

conquering King. **“And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following Him on white horses.”** (Revelation 19:14) These “armies of heaven” can’t be angels, because the “fine linen” they’re wearing symbolizes the imputed righteousness that covers the redeemed saints.

The transformation from mortal into immortal isn’t strictly a New Testament revelation, either. The psalmist Asaph writes, **“He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that He may judge His people: ‘Gather to Me My faithful ones, who made a covenant with Me by sacrifice!’ The heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge!”** (Psalm 50:4-6) No man may see God in His undiminished glory and live to tell the tale. Therefore, these “faithful ones” whom Yahweh wishes to gather together will of necessity need to be transformed—“raised imperishable,” as Paul put it: *changed*. And what qualifies them for this? What defines them as being “faithful?” What do they have to do to be declared righteous by the heavenly Judge? They must “make a covenant with Yahweh *by sacrifice*.” In other words, someone *innocent* has to die in order for the sacrifice to ratify the covenant. But there has been only One who is truly innocent: Yahshua. Therefore, the only way man may come into the presence of God is for him to be atoned, indemnified, covered, and transformed by the blood of Yahshua.

So He told His disciples, **“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”** Good point. Among the various religions of the world, there is no expectation whatsoever of God wanting to live with people. The Greek gods lived on Olympus and pretty much kept to themselves; Hindu hopes center on being reincarnated into a higher life form, but never one that shares a personal relationship with any god; Allah promises an afterlife for his martyrs in a paradise overrun with sex-starved virgins, but he won’t be there sharing the fun—he says he’ll be in hell, torturing the poor souls he himself predestined to go there. Only Yahweh wants to spend eternity enjoying the company of his created friends: **“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also.”** (John 14:1-3) Yahshua prayed, **“Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory that you have given Me because you loved Me before the foundation of the world.”** (John 17:24) So with whom will we share eternity, Yahweh or Yahshua? Trick question: *both of them*, for they are the same Person: **“Yahweh will be king over all the earth. On that day Yahweh will be one and His name one.”** (Zechariah 14:9)



## TIME & ETERNITY



### *Hope vs. Fulfillment*

It would seem to some that comparing time to eternity is like comparing a pet pussycat to the Easter Bunny: one is real, while the other is only theoretical (a polite way of saying “mythical”). But unlike the other innocent, tongue-in-cheek lies our parents told us—like Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the fundamental goodness of our fellow man—this one (eternity, not the Easter Bunny) has its roots in the Word of God.

The very first words in the Bible, “In the beginning...,” tell us that there was a time before which time existed. Yahweh was there (or is it “then”?), since He had no beginning and will have no end. But there was nothing else. Thinking too hard about the concept of “eternity past” will make you crazy, of course. We who live in space-time aren’t really equipped to comprehend it. We who live in a universe consisting of matter-energy cannot conceive of a state in which nothing except God exists. And yet, we’re constantly invited to enter into a personal relationship with Yahweh, who is described in His Word as **“One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy,”** who says, **“I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”** (Isaiah 57:15) We mortals inhabit time. We sort of understand how it works. But how can we possibly comprehend what it means to “inhabit eternity?” How can we time-bound creatures relate to One who does this?

Since we can’t really understand eternity as an abstract concept, God invariably explains it in terms germane to our own mortal experience. Moses points out that because Yahweh is eternal, we can find shelter and protection in association with Him: **“The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”** (Deuteronomy 33:27) Conversely then, if God were not eternal, we could find no lasting refuge in Him. The point is that false gods, gods of our own manufacture or imagination, cannot help us when trouble comes (though they seem eager enough to make demands of us all the rest of the time).

A God who is unlimited in time would presumably have equally unlimited power and knowledge. So the prophet incredulously asks, **“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from Yahweh, and my right [that is, the justice due to me, my case, my cause] is disregarded by my God’? Have you not known? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not**

**faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable.**" (Isaiah 40:27-28) Ba'al, Zeus, and Allah can be *counted upon* to "disregard your cause." Since they live only in the imagination of their devotees, they are powerless to effect change (whether for good or ill). But Yahweh is not only the omnipotent Creator, He is also just, unwavering, and infinitely wise. Only a fool would presume he could live his out life hidden from Yahweh's watchful eye.

These attributes are directly attributable to His eternal nature, so the Psalmist reminds us: **"May the glory of Yahweh endure forever; may Yahweh rejoice in His works."** (Psalm 104:31) His glory and His works are connected in the context of eternity. This may sound elementary if you're used to reading your Bible; but replace Yahweh's name in that sentence with any other, and the truth begins to emerge: "May the glory of [my presidential candidate] endure forever; may he rejoice in his works." Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Traditionally, the "glory" of a president (whose office makes him the world's most powerful man) doesn't even last until the mid-term elections, even for the best of them. "Forever" is a tall order indeed.

Isaiah gives us another take on this: **"Trust in Yahweh forever, for Yah—Yahweh—is an everlasting rock."** (Isaiah 26:4) This time, Yahweh's eternal status translates into security for His people—*unending* security. If you don't exist, of course, you can't do anything. That seems simple enough. But since we can only trust in Yahweh if *we* exist, to trust Him *forever*, we must exist forever. And because Yahweh alone is intrinsically eternal—the self-existent "everlasting rock"—we cannot exist forever outside of association with Him. Our existence depends upon His existence. Our security depends upon His unwavering strength.

The security we enjoy in Yahweh is not only the result of us "hiding in the Rock," as the metaphor puts it. In His own time and in His own way, Yahweh also promises to proactively destroy His adversaries. The fact that He doesn't do this on a daily basis should not be taken as a sign of weakness (or non-existence). He is merely extending mankind's opportunities for repentance to their utmost limit. But all earthly things—including our window of grace—must come to an end: **"For I lift up My hand to heaven and swear, as I live forever, if I sharpen my flashing sword and My hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on My adversaries and will repay those who hate Me."** (Deuteronomy 32:40-41) God's unadorned word is sufficient to establish the truth of a matter, so when He finds it necessary to take an oath, it behooves us to take Him very seriously. And upon what does Yahweh swear when He swears? On His own eternal life.

In case you were wondering, yes: the "vengeance" of which Yahweh speaks here (Hebrew: *naqam*) is properly translated. This tends to make some people uncomfortable: the idea of vengeance seems so "unchristian." But that's precisely the point. *We* aren't to exact vengeance: it's God's prerogative alone (which, by the way, is the polar opposite of Islamic doctrine). Our instructions, rather, are to

demonstrate God's love and reflect His mercy, so people can through our testimony avoid encountering Yahweh's "flashing sword." Our job is to provide the clearest choice possible: either receive God's love, or discover the hard way what eternity is like without it. Just because we're told to "turn the other cheek" when we're wronged, it doesn't follow that God neither notices nor cares when the world attacks His children (or His Messiah, for that matter). Yahweh is watching, waiting, and taking notes. When the time comes, He will identify His adversaries and "tread the winepress of His wrath—*alone*" (see Isaiah 63:1-6, Revelation 19:15). The thing we need to notice in the context of time and eternity is that if God could not honestly "**lift His hand to heaven and swear, as I live forever,**" neither His mercy nor His vengeance would have any lasting significance.

And besides, I get the distinct feeling that Yahweh would really rather be in the "blessing" business than be compelled by our rebellions to execute vengeance. The concepts of blessing and eternity are often linked in scripture—always in the context of what Yahweh has done for us: "**Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!**" (I Chronicles 16:36) "**Blessed be the name of Yahweh from this time forth and forevermore!**" (Psalm 113: 2) "**You have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in Your presence forever. Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!**" (Psalm 41:12-13) We ordinarily (and rightly) think of "blessing" as "speaking words invoking divine favor, with the intent that the object will have favorable circumstances or state at a future time," or to "praise, extol, thank for greatness or goodness, i.e., speak words of the excellence of an object—an act of worship." (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*) But the primary meaning of the word (Hebrew: *barak*, used in each of these passages) is to kneel down (*berek* is the Hebrew word for "knee"), to place oneself in a position of worship or humility. *Barak* implies an asymmetrical relationship between the blessing and the blessed. As one would normally kneel before a potentate when receiving a grant or blessing (picture someone being knighted by the queen), so also are we to come in humility and thankfulness before Yahweh. The word acknowledges that "blessings" are not given between equals, but are rather bestowed by the greater upon the lesser. "**Without question, the person who has the power to bless is always greater than the person who is blessed.**" (Hebrews 7:7 NLT)

So does it make any sense for us to say, "Blessed be Yahweh"? Yes, as long as we realize that we're not doing Him any favors by doing so. For us to "be a blessing" to God, we must recognize and acknowledge that He is in every way superior to us. The kneeling posture is more a mindset than a physical position however, for we Nehemiah tells us to "**Stand up and bless Yahweh your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.**" (Nehemiah 9:5) Obviously, we can't physically stand and kneel at the same time, but we can (and should) spiritually submit our lives in

humility before Yahweh while gratefully acknowledging that He has enabled us to stand guiltless before Him. Again, note the intimate connection between our impulse to “bless” God and His eternal nature. It would, in fact, make no sense at all to worship anything that *didn’t* live “from everlasting to everlasting,” that is, to bless—to kneel before—something other than Yahweh.

If we are “blessing” Yahweh, living in submission to His will, then He is, in effect, our King, our ruler, our Lord, the one who exercises dominion over us (specifically in the persona of King Yahshua, to whom all authority is given—see Matthew 28:18). The Kingdom of God is not like human governments, however. First, He is not elected, nor is His office attained by force, heredity, or popular acclaim. Rather, Yahweh/Yahshua is Sovereign by virtue of His natural right, first as omnipotent Creator, then as our Redeemer, our Savior.

Second, we have a choice, as individuals, as to whether or not to recognize Him as King. But there’s a catch: because His right to rule is a *natural* phenomenon, there are natural consequences for failing to honor His sovereignty. Yahweh doesn’t have to go out of His way to punish the rebels (although He reserves the right to do so, as we saw above); no, they stand “condemned already,” as it’s phrased in John 3:18. Citizens of the Kingdom are indwelt with the Holy Spirit, imbuing them with eternal life; illegal aliens and foreign enemies are not: they’re dead where they stand, whether they know it or not.

Third, the Kingdom of God will never end, because *He* will never end. **“Yahweh will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise Yahweh!”** (Psalm 146:10) The earthly manifestation of the Kingdom will be centered in Zion (that is, Jerusalem) during Yahshua’s Millennial reign (coming soon to a world near you). But it will continue for eternity—even after this present earth is no more. **“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of Your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness.”** (Psalm 45:6) Remember what I said about Yahweh’s natural right to rule? Here we see that His throne—that is, His authority—is as eternal as He is. I surmise from this that there was never a time before which Yahweh did not rule. He did not *become* Sovereign; He is, always was, and forever will be. He was the King, in fact, before there was anything to rule over. **“Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting.”** (Psalm 93:2) **“Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures throughout all generations.”** (Psalm 145:13)

Right about now, you’re thinking, *Wait a minute. I watched the evening news last night, and judging by what’s going on in the world, it sure doesn’t seem to me like there’s a God on some eternal throne reigning with a “scepter of uprightness.”* Your observation is quite correct: the evil that prevails in the world today does not reflect the reign of King Yahshua, for He has chosen to rule for the time being in absentia (which is not to say exile). Why would He do this? So He could ascertain who in this world would welcome His reign, and who would

not—or more to the point (since He’s omniscient) to give us a chance to show our true colors. Everyone will feel compelled to bow before the King when they find themselves in His presence; but he who is loyal to Him *in His absence* is the true patriot in the Kingdom of Heaven.

On the night before His crucifixion, Yahshua told His disciples what the plan was (not that they remotely understood what He was talking about at the time). **“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming.”** (John 14:26-30) In other words, “I’m going back to My heavenly throne, and the devil is going to try to mess with you while I’m away. But I’ve equipped you with the Holy Spirit so that you may live in peace, free from fear, until I return. Rejoice in this, for Yahweh is great!”

That has been true for the last couple of millennia now. But things will change a bit when Yahshua returns at last to establish His Kingdom on the earth. When that day comes, His reign will leave nothing to the imagination. We will walk by sight, no longer purely by faith. John gave us a glimpse of the Kingdom’s coming reality: **“Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”** (Revelation 1:4-6) It’s a funny thing, though. Yahweh (i.e., Yahshua) is described as the reigning King only as long as there are mortal humans on the earth—up until the Great White Throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15). After that (though admittedly, there isn’t much data left) the relationship between God and man is described not so much as a monarch over His subjects, but rather as husband and wife, as lover and loved one.

And what of those who participate in the final rebellion against the “faithful witness”? Their predicament will endure just as long as our blessing will—*forever*: **“The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name. Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.”** (Revelation 14:11-12) It has been pointed out by some (perhaps in the desperate hope that “eternity” isn’t really *eternal*) that in neither in Hebrew or Greek does “forever” *necessarily* demand a time duration without end. It’s true: the Hebrew noun/adjective *‘olam* can mean forever, always, a

continuous existence, a perpetual, everlasting, indefinite or unending future, in other words, eternity—or it can merely mean a long duration, in antiquity or futurity, an undetermined length of time, one with no anticipated end but one that may nevertheless have limits. In the same way, the Greek word translated “forever,” *aion*, can mean either eternity—an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, forever—or merely a long period of time, an age or an era. (It can even mean the universe or the world’s system, a definition that stresses its temporary side.)

So is Yahweh hedging His bets? Is it possible that “forever,” our eternal promises (whether for good or ill) are less than what they seem? No; the problem is in the imperfection of human language, not the intention (or power) of God. Both the context and phrasing make it perfectly clear that Yahweh, His Kingdom, and our destinies are indeed eternal, everlasting, without end. In reference to the Revelation 14 passage cited above, R. C. H. Lenski points out that “The strongest expression for our ‘forever’ is *eis tous aionan ton aionon*, ‘for the eons of eons’; many aeons, each of vast duration, are multiplied by many more, which we imitate by ‘forever and ever.’ Human language is able to use only temporal terms to express what is altogether beyond time and timeless. The Greek takes its greatest term for time, the eon, pluralizes this, and then multiplies it by its own plural, even using articles which make these eons the definite ones.” If God had meant to convey something less than a permanent and unending afterlife, He couldn’t have chosen more misleading words.

In Hebrew too, the phrase translated “forever and ever” (as in Psalm 45:6) is *‘olam ‘ad*, a compound that’s found 19 times in the Tanach. That second word denotes perpetuity, forever, a continuous future existence, an unlimited, unending duration of time, the unforeseeable future—in a word, eternity. Again, the two thoughts used in conjunction effectively refute the notion that the Kingdom of God (or the punishment of those who align themselves against it) is anything less than eternal.

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Perhaps because eternity is such a difficult concept to get our heads around, the Psalms incessantly make comparisons between the “time” in which we live and the “eternity” in which God operates. For example: **“My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. But You, O Yahweh, are enthroned forever; You are remembered throughout all generations.”** (Psalm 102:11-12) The contrast between time and eternity is demonstrated in the divergent natures of those who inhabit the two paradigms. Our mortal bodies are not built to last very long, but Yahweh transcends time (which is one more way of saying He’s “holy,” separate and distinct from His own creation). Scientists’ opinions wouldn’t necessarily have any bearing on the truth of the matter, but physicists have recently come to the

conclusion that the concept of time before the “big bang” is meaningless: time depends on the existence of space, which in turn is contingent upon the presence of matter/energy. Before Genesis 1:1, the universe did not exist, but Yahweh did.

It is, to my mind, impossible to envision a universe that had a finite beginning without also seeing the logical necessity for an external Creator. That is why, until the sheer preponderance of evidence forced them to capitulate to it, so many respected scientists found the idea of the “big bang” (a term coined in derision by astronomer Fred Hoyle) philosophically repugnant. They desperately wanted an eternal universe, or at the very least, a “steady state” sort of thing, in which stuff just sort of spontaneously appeared to replace matter lost to the ravages of the second law of thermodynamics—forever. The “problem” (for them) with a big bang in the neighborhood of 14 billion years ago (and the formation of our own solar system about 4.5 billion years ago) was that it didn’t leave remotely enough time for the impossible demands of organic evolution—the illogical premise of life arising from non-life, given enough time. Truth be told, even an infinite amount of time doesn’t solve the “problem” of creation without a creator, of design without intelligence. But until the finite universe theory was proven correct beyond the shadow of a doubt, the evolutionists—those who insisted on a materialistic view of the cosmos (a world without God)—could present their theory as if it were at least plausible. Fact is, it was *never* possible. Now, it’s not even conceivable. It’s just...

Well, I don’t want to make any unflattering characterizations myself. I’ll leave that job to Yahweh: **“The stupid man cannot know; the fool cannot understand this: that though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever [‘ad]; but You, O Yahweh, are on high forever [‘olam].”** (Psalm 92:7-8) There’s the uncomfortable truth that makes so many folks squirm: the existence of an eternal creative deity with moral standards (that is, One who recognizes and condemns evil and wickedness) implies responsibility on our part. And it’s not just the responsibility to acknowledge His existence: as David says, the one who won’t even do that is a fool (see Psalm 14:1). No, our larger responsibility is to honor, revere, obey, and love the One who brought us into existence. To fail in this regard is like a fetus in the womb refusing to believe that mom exists, just because he can’t see her. Like that unborn baby, we—even the smartest of us—don’t have all the facts yet. Give it time.

In a direct rebuke to those who insist that life spontaneously generated itself, Moses says, **“Yahweh, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.”** He’s implying that all men of all time derive their life from Yahweh alone—there is no such thing as a “self-made man.” Human life, however, is only the frosting on the cake. Yahweh had to create an entire infrastructure, space/time, matter/energy, and physical laws to govern it all, in order for mortal man to have a place to live:

**“Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God.”** Our bodies are made of the same stuff as the earth upon which we walk. “Earth” here is our old friend *eretz*—the physical land, earth, or soil. “World” is the Hebrew *tebel*, the inhabited part of the world, or by extension, the people who live there. Both things were “formed” by Yahweh, but unlike their Maker, neither of them is built to last. **“You return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O children of man!’ For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”** (Psalm 90:1-4)

An unidentified Psalmist says pretty much the same thing: **“Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but You are the same, and Your years have no end.”** (Psalm 102:25-27) It’s worth noting that this entire Psalm is a poignant, terrifyingly accurate description of the Nazi Holocaust, its aftermath, and its legacy. The point here is that because Yahweh inhabits eternity, there is always hope for His people, no matter how bad things get. The chapter concludes: **“The children of Your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before You.”** (Psalm 102:28) Against all odds, the world is about to discover how literally true those words are. The Messiah’s Millennial reign—centered in Zion—is practically upon us, no matter what you hear on the evening news. Remember what we learned a few paragraphs back: **“The fool cannot understand this.”**

The eternal Kingdom is also in view in another anonymous Psalm: **“Save us, O Yahweh our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to Your holy name and glory in Your praise.”** About half of the world’s Jews (at least those who can be identified) live today in the land of Israel—they have been “gathered from among the nations” (thanks, ironically enough, to the genocidal intentions of Adolph Hitler and Josef Stalin). So the prayer of the Psalmist is well on its way toward being fulfilled. (Unfortunately, we have yet to see much of the requisite thanksgiving to His holy name—to this day, the Jews are extremely reluctant to utter the name of their God—Yahweh. But this too will change.) The only reason a three thousand year old prayer had a prayer of being answered, of course, is that the God to whom it was addressed is eternal. **“Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!”** (Psalm 106:47-48)

Israel doesn’t “deserve” to be saved, but that’s kind of the point: if Yahweh can keep His promises of reconciliation to a nation as rebellious as they are, then there’s hope for the rest of us. Paul makes the principle personal: **“But I (Paul) received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost [of sinners], Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.”** (I Timothy 1:16-17) The old murderous Paul, as a privileged Pharisee, had



been every bit as rebellious against Yahweh as Israel, God's chosen nation, had been. But he received mercy, he says, to demonstrate just how far Yahweh was willing to go in effecting our redemption. And once again we are reminded of the baseline truth that makes God's perfect patience and unfathomable mercy possible: He reigns in glory *forever*. The truth should be obvious: as only a living God can create living things, only an eternal God can grant eternal life.

Yahshua Himself taught us to acknowledge the ramifications of Yahweh's eternal nature: **"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."** (Matthew 6:13) The model prayer ends at it began, with our reverent recognition of Yahweh's everlasting glory, of His right to rule and His ability to see His will done. It's the bread and butter of our "prayer sandwich." Our petitions—the stuff we usually consider "the meat" of prayer—are actually the least of it, and those consist primarily of admissions of our own failure, weakness, and vulnerability: we need forgiveness and protection from our own sinful natures just as much as we need material sustenance. Once again, the contrast is drawn between our temporal existence (as amazing as it is) and Yahweh's eternal brilliance.

We've run across the phrase "from everlasting to everlasting" a few times in reference to Yahweh's eternal nature. Another oft-repeated way of stating the same truth is that He is "the first and the last." **"Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am He; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together."** (Isaiah 48:12-13) Yahweh hints that His eternal nature, both past and future, is the key to His creative power. Only One who was beyond it all—before, after, and outside of the universe (read: holy)—would be in a position to create, manage, and utilize it all for His own glory. And that glory would be manifested in the most unlikely of places: Israel. Call me Captain Obvious, but if Yahshua of Nazareth, the first-century Jewish claimant to the office of God's Anointed, was not the promised redeemer of mankind, then Yahweh's enduring interest in Israel would seem sorely misplaced. I mean, their historical footprint has been far less significant than, say, the Hittites, Parthians, Carthaginians, or the Mongols—once-mighty peoples who now rate no more than a couple of paragraphs in the history books.

Isaiah uses this "first and last" theme over and over again: **"Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, Yahweh, the first, and with the last; I am He."** (Isaiah 41:4) I realize this looks pretty esoteric, out of context like this. Isaiah is referring to God's foreknowledge—and its revelation through His prophets—specifically of a future king who would be "stirred up from the east" and "called in righteousness to His service." He asks, **"Who gave the nations before him, and made him rule over kings?"** (Isaiah 41:2) Rhetorical question: the answer is, "Yahweh did." And to whom is the prophet referring? Apparently it's Cyrus the

Great of Persia (mentioned by name in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1) who would conquer Babylon in 539 BC. What's remarkable about this is that Isaiah wrote it down almost two centuries before it happened: Isaiah ministered from about 740 to 680 BC. The Babylonians, never mind the Persians, were barely a blip on the radar screen when he began: the *Assyrians* were the terror of Isaiah's age.

I bring it up because of the reference to Yahweh being "first and last" in verse 4. The idea is not that "God was born a really long time ago and it looks like he'll outlive us all." It's that He maneuvers in time because He inhabits eternity. In other words, Yahweh isn't restricted to the moment in which we find ourselves. He sees what we *will* do as clearly as what we already did. All time is, in a sense, present to Him. I should hasten to point out that it does not follow that we are therefore *predestined* to do this or that. Yahweh has made it abundantly clear that free will—the privilege of choice—is ours to exercise. He does not interfere. (If He *did* determine our choices, we would not be culpable for our crimes—He would.) The fact that He knows what we'll choose before we do doesn't change anything. But it does give God the opportunity to confirm His deity by declaring what will happen in the future. **"Thus says Yahweh, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, Yahweh of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; beside me there is no god. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before Me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.'**" (Isaiah 44:6-7) This is a challenge to those who would flout Yahweh's authority, His right to rule. He says, *You want to be the god of your own life? You think you're qualified? Okay, then tell me what will happen tomorrow, or next year, or say, on October 3, 2033, if you think you're so smart. I know what will happen on that day, for I see it. Do you? If so, let's hear it.*

There are two sides to predictive prophecy: foreknowledge and the ability to bring about one's will, however and whenever you wish. Yahweh is master of both disciplines. He knows what will happen because He's timeless; and He brings His word to pass (when He can do so without abridging man's free will) because He's omnipotent. **"The former things I declared of old; they went out from My mouth and I announced them; then suddenly I did them and they came to pass."** Knowing Israel would rebel (but being unwilling to force them to make better choices) Yahweh did what He could to demonstrate His deity to them: **"Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, I declared them to you from of old, before they came to pass I announced them to you, lest you should say, 'My idol did them, my carved image and my metal image commanded them.'**" Yahweh is uniquely qualified to say, "I told you so." Everybody else is either guessing or hallucinating; He alone knows what will happen and declares it to us before hand. **"You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forth I announce to you new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, lest you should say, 'Behold, I**

knew them.' You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would surely deal treacherously, and that from before birth you were called a rebel." (Isaiah 48:3-8)

It must be painful for God to know that, for the most part, His entreaties will be met with scorn, and His loving kindness with derision. But even with this grim foreknowledge, His only proactive response is to reach out in love, offering us counsel and admonition, giving us a chance to recognize our sin for what it is, while there's still time to turn away from it. That—His agenda of mercy and reconciliation—is why Yahweh instructs His prophets to warn us of the coming judgment: **"And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of Yahweh."** (Isaiah 30:8-9) It's not that He wants sinners to suffer His wrath; He'd prefer that we all avoided it.

The things revealed by God's prophets and servants were to serve as witnesses of His eternal nature. So, **"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith."** (Hebrews 12:1-2) Calling Yahshua the "founder (or author) and perfecter of our faith" is another way of saying He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end—the very attributes that enable Him to provide for us such a "great cloud of witnesses." Note that our response to these witnesses should be three-fold: (1) We are to put aside our sins—those things we do that weigh us down, preventing us from rising to the level of fellowship with God that He has made possible. (2) We are to participate in the "human race" with unflagging enthusiasm, an ability Yahweh Himself provides: **"He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might He increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for Yahweh shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."** (Isaiah 40:29-31) And (3), we are to rely upon our Messiah, not ourselves, for He alone is worthy of our trust.

**"I am the Alpha and the Omega,"** says the Lord God, **'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'** (Revelation 1:8) The Alpha, of course, is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the Omega is the last. But notice that His subsequent self-description states that He's also "everything in between." God is not only the Creator of the distant past and the ruler of far-off and inaccessible future heavenly realms. He is also a present reality in our lives through the ministry of His Holy Spirit, if only we'll open our eyes and hearts. As the Psalmist says, **"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea."** (Psalm 46:1-2) Our lives do not consist of our mortal, earthly existence. They will (or at least

can) exist forever, beyond what we can presently see. Because He was there for us yesterday, Yahweh is in us today, assuring us of life in Him tomorrow.

We are reminded of the “Alpha and Omega” theme more often as we approach the end of the story, presumably because understanding the ramifications of Yahweh’s eternal nature will become all the more critical as the days grow short. **“And He said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’** This time, He links His eternity to direct blessings for those who earnestly desire to be His children: **“To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be My son.”** And vice versa, I’m afraid. **“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”** (Revelation 21:6-8) Eternal cursing lasts just as long as eternal blessing, because both things are the result of the same root cause—the eternal nature of our God. One more time: **“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing My recompense with Me, to repay everyone for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”** (Revelation 22:12-13)

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It may come as an epiphany to some, but the same God who is eternal, the Alpha and Omega who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, is on a schedule. If we’re not careful to observe who Yahshua was talking to—and what He was talking about—some of the statements He made might lead us to the conclusion that He’s making up the timeline as He goes along, or at the very least, He doesn’t want us to know anything about it. After all, He said, **“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”** (Matthew 24:36) But He can’t be saying that no one will *ever* know the day and hour of His coming, because after all, the whole world will know it when they see it—which is not to say they’ll all like it. The word translated “knows” here doesn’t imply cognition, knowledge, or understanding, however; it actually means “perceives.” Yahshua is declaring that from where His disciples stood in history, it would have been impossible to envision or observe the conditions He had been talking about—encompassing the entire “beginning of sorrows” period leading up to His coming in glory.

And what is the specific “day” and “hour” to which He’s referring? He explains in the verses that immediately follow: it’s the rapture of the ekklesia (although He doesn’t *call it* the rapture; He merely describes it): **“One will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming....**

**Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**" (Matthew 24:41-44) This translation and transformation of the Church will happen with blinding speed—"in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye (I Corinthians 15:52), or as a flash of lightning, as He put it in Matthew 24:27. It will be so sudden, no one will perceive it—no one will see it coming. (By the way, I'm convinced that we *have* been told the "day" *of the year* upon which the rapture will take place. The imagery of the fifth appointment on Yahweh's annual calendar, the Feast of Trumpets (*Yom Teruah*) on the first day of Tishri, fits the rapture like a glove, though we haven't been given any hints as to the year in which it might occur. It theoretically could have happened during any autumn since the resurrection. But it didn't. Trust me, we would have noticed.)

Lets take a look at another of these "misleading-if-you're-not-careful" passages. Just before His ascension, forty days after the resurrection, Yahshua told His followers, **"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."** (Acts 1:7) *See? We aren't supposed to know diddley squat about God's timing, right?* No, not right. Granted, this time the Greek word used *does* accurately describe "to know" (*ginosko*). But who was Yahshua addressing when He said this? They were believers at the very cusp of the Church age. They hadn't even been given the Holy Spirit yet. Although He didn't want to discourage them, Yahshua *knew* that He wouldn't be returning to "restore the kingdom to Israel" (the focus of their inquiry in verse 6) for another two thousand years. In fact, Yahweh had prophesied that very thing through the prophet Hosea: **"Come, let us return to Yahweh; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him."** (Hosea 6:1-2) The "tearing" would come as a result of Israel's national rejection of their Messiah (though many individuals believed). As long as you understand that "two days" in God's parlance means "two thousand years" (see II Peter 3:8), then the reason for Yahshua's admonition becomes clear: it would have been quite pointless—even counterproductive—for first-generation Christians to spend their time agonizing over when He would return. It was not for them to know. You and I, on the other hand, find ourselves on the other end of that era: the year 2033 will mark precisely two thousand years since the Passion of Yahshua took place—the conclusion of Hosea's "second day." That's when Yahweh promised to "restore the kingdom to Israel," for **"on the third day He will raise [Israel] up."** Like I said, He's on a schedule, whether we understand it or not.

Throughout the Tanach, Yahweh told us that the timing was in His own hands: **"Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I might be glorified. The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am Yahweh; in its time I will hasten it."** (Isaiah 60:21-22) More often than not, the schedule He has revealed has to do with what we'd call "mission improbable"—the restoration of Israel. **"You, O**

**Yahweh, are enthroned forever; You are remembered throughout all generations. You will arise and have pity on Zion; it is the time to favor her; the appointed time has come."**

(Psalm 102: 12-13) Here again, we see the eternal nature of Yahweh contrasted with the temporal timetable under which we live—and again it's used to explain the inevitability of His prophetic fulfillments. If Yahweh is "enthroned forever," then His pronouncements must come true. And if they do not, He is a fraud. So far, they have been one hundred percent accurate: I wouldn't bet against Him.

I mentioned above that the rapture of the ekklesia seems to be in view in the imagery of the fifth of Yahweh's seven mandated "appointments," the Feast of Trumpets. These "holy convocations" were introduced to Israel, as a collective concept, with these words: **"These are the appointed feasts of Yahweh that you shall proclaim as holy convocations; they are My appointed feasts."** (Leviticus 23:2) "Appointed feasts" here is the same Hebrew word translated "appointed times" in Psalm 102 above: *mo'ed*. Thus it's not a stretch to envision the fulfillment of one of these seven "appointed feasts" (though that's a mistranslation—they're not exactly "feasts," not all of them, anyway) as being that to which the Psalmist referred: **"It is the time to favor her; the appointed time has come."** And which of Yahweh's seven "appointed times" is in view? The first four were fulfilled in 33 AD with Yahshua's death, burial, and resurrection, followed by the indwelling of Yahshua's called-out assembly with the Holy Spirit. (I plan to discuss all seven appointments in detail, by the way, in a future chapter.) The fifth, as I noted, will be fulfilled with the rapture of the Church (still in our future, in case you haven't noticed). That would make the fourth and fifth *mo'edim*—Pentecost and Trumpets—the "bookends" of the Church age. The sixth, *Yom Kippurim* or the Day of Atonement, seems to be prophetic of Israel's national repentance, their belated recognition of Yahshua as their Messiah. And this would indeed mark the commencement of God's "favor," His "pity on Zion," after a hiatus of two millennia.

But the seventh and final appointment, the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot*, is prophetic of God incarnate coming to "camp out" with mankind. In other words, it marks the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom of Yahweh upon the earth. This is the *mo'ed* to which Hosea specifically referred: **"On the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him."** It's also what Isaiah was talking about: **"Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I [Yahweh] might be glorified."** The Feast of Tabernacles is an eight-day convocation. I believe (based on the structure of the Feast as described in the Torah) that the first seven days speak of the perfection of the Millennial Kingdom—the whole thousand-year reign of Christ—and that the eighth day represents the commencement of the eternal state. The primary differentiation between the two blessed conditions is that during the eternal state, there will be no more mortal humans. All of Yahweh's children—even those born during the

Millennium—will have received their immortal, spiritual bodies (as described in I Corinthians 15). And Yahweh will unveil a new heaven and new earth designed to be compatible with these new bodies, just as the physical earth is what our mortal bodies require during the present age.

When I contemplate the Millennial Kingdom of Yahshua, and what lies beyond it, I can't help but be reminded of what Solomon wrote: **"He has made everything beautiful in its time."** These days you have to look at the world through the eyes of faith to see the beauty that God once created—and will again—in our world. Man's inhumanity and faithlessness have obscured the perfection of a world that God once called "very good." But most of us have an intuitive sense that there is more to it than what we see before us. We can try to deny the hope of heaven, and suppress the dread of hell, that we all feel, but somehow, we *know*. Why is that? It's because **"He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."** (Ecclesiastes 3:11) Since we're mortal, we can't really comprehend eternity, and yet Yahweh has placed something within us—some intuitive sense that tells us our souls can live forever. I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the "breath of life"—the *neshamah*—that Yahweh breathed into our father Adam in the Garden. Our bewilderment concerning eternity began when our parents sinned, but it will end when we are raised from our mortal state in newness of life—in bodies designed and built for the eternal state.

Whether or not we ever inhabit these eternal bodies, however, is a choice that we alone must make. Yahweh has responded to our need, but it is up to us to respond in turn to the salvation He has provided. **"Thus says Yahweh: In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you."** Interestingly enough, the word translated "answered" here—describing something God did for us—is the very same word defining *our* primary responsibility to Him on the Day of Atonement: *anah*—to answer or respond to Yahweh. **"I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'"** (Isaiah 49:8-9) As Paul remarked upon quoting this passage, **"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."** (II Corinthians 6:2) God has provided the opportunity. It is up to us to seize it. *Carpe Diem*.

Yahweh presented His Messiah to the world at precisely the right moment: **"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."** (Galatians 4:4) Before Yahshua came into the world, the "Law"—God's instructions to Israel—foretold His mission in detail, though in symbolic terms. By observing its precepts, Israel announced (or would have, had they been faithful) the means by which Yahweh planned to redeem the world from its fallen

state. But after Yahshua's mission was complete, our willingness to recognize what He had done for us (and in us) was what defined our relationship with Him. But whether before or after "the fullness of time had come," there was only one way to be reconciled to God and become His children: exercise faith in what He had determined to do on our behalf. That redemption, the price of which was Yahshua's blood, **"...[made] known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth."** (Ephesians 1:9-10) God's plan, that series of redemptive events He's bringing about according to His own schedule, didn't end with the resurrection of Christ, although that was certainly a high point for us. It will continue beyond time and into eternity, resulting in the end with "all things" being brought together in Christ—which means (I presume) united under His authority, being brought into a single coherent sphere of spiritual synchronicity: perfect harmony throughout the universe. I can't even imagine what that will be like.

But the eternal state cannot commence until we who inhabit time have all finished using it. The universal spiritual synchronicity under Christ of which Paul spoke cannot become reality until every last human being on the planet has had an opportunity, one way or another, to either choose Yahweh's friendship or reject it. And more to the point, this decision process can't merely drift on the tide of time (as it's apparently been doing since the fall of man) forever. As I said, Yahweh is on a schedule. He has revealed that at some point He intends to compel everyone left on the earth to get off the spiritual fence: to choose one side or the other, to get right or get left, so to speak.

As usual, Israel is the test market for this concept—a microcosm for what will eventually transpire worldwide. As far back as the conquest of Canaan, Joshua told his people, **"If it is evil [*ra'a*—a bad thing] in your eyes to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh."** (Joshua 24:15) The day is coming, and soon, when the whole world will be asked—no, *compelled*—to make the same black-and-white choice: Yahweh or somebody else. If the order and prophetic symbolism of the fourth and fifth of Yahweh's holy appointments has any significance at all (and I think you know where I stand on that issue) then the Church—the called-out assembly of Yahshua—will have come *and gone* by the time Yahweh requires the world to show their true colors. And once again, Israel will be on the cutting edge of the process. **"Alas! That day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it."** (Jeremiah 30:7) The amazing thing is that God has revealed that Israel—for the first time in their long and rebellious history—will choose Yahweh's path, and never again look back.



This window of decision goes by many different names: the Day of Yahweh, the Indignation, the Time of Jacob's Trouble. Its most common title is "the Tribulation." It is defined as the last "seven" or "week" of the sweeping Daniel 9 prophecy—the final 2,520 days (7 x 360) preceding the Millennial reign of the Messiah. The history of the world is the unbroken record of man's unrelenting evil. And contrary to popular myth, the more "advanced" we get, the worse we treat each other. While we talk piously of "surgical strikes" and minimizing collateral damage, and while we rightly mourn each fallen soldier as we would a beloved son, we keep weapons in our arsenals capable of obliterating entire cities indiscriminately. And the only thing preventing us from using these weapons is not MAD (the concept of "mutually assured destruction"), nor is it universal love for our fellow man (not because that wouldn't have done the trick, but because it simply isn't there.) What keeps us from pushing the button is an insufficient appreciation of the evil that confronts us. Were it not for the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit, the fear of reprisals, and an abysmal ignorance of who (and how bad) our enemies really are, the world would be a very different place.

Am I advocating disarmament, then? No. A bad attitude and a big stick are still sufficient to get the job done: Cain proved that. What I'm advocating here is that we start paying attention to Yahweh's incessant warnings about what's on our immediate horizon: **"Thus says the Lord Yahweh: Disaster after disaster! Behold, it comes. An end has come; the end has come; it has awakened against you. Behold, it comes. Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come; the day is near, a day of tumult, and not of joyful shouting on the mountains...."** There it is again: the eternal God observing a temporal timetable. **"Behold, the day! Behold, it comes! Your doom has come; the rod has blossomed; pride has budded. Violence has grown up into a rod of wickedness. None of them shall remain, nor their abundance, nor their wealth; neither shall there be preeminence among them. The time has come; the day has arrived."** (Ezekiel 7:5-7; 10-12) The looming Babylonian conquest of Judah that originally occasioned these dire warnings was but a taste, a small-scale preview of what awaits our present world. What once happened to Israel will be the undoing of the entire world—and for precisely the same reasons. God is about to divide the world between those who are His and those who don't want to be. The earth's fate is sealed, and we're running out of time.

*"Oh, please,"* you say. *"I haven't heard anything on the news about an impending day of judgment—well, maybe a little, but only from the lunatic fringe on the Internet telling me to buy gold and stock up on ammo."* Funny you should say that. A couple of thousand years ago, one of Yahshua's disciples predicted, **"Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation....'"** The evolutionary viewpoint that's crammed down our throats in state-run schools insists that ever

since the big bang, the universe has been running on auto-pilot, with no intelligent force guiding it—read: with no “god” to whom we are accountable. They say, *the laws of physics explain everything—even the occasional pang of conscience we feel when we’re screwing over our neighbors in an attempt to get ahead in life.*

Really? Peter opines that the real problem is revisionist history, prompted by an abject fear that God’s word might actually be true. **“For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.”** So, let’s see: if we convince ourselves that Noah’s flood never took place, we can “logically” ignore hundreds of specific prophecies concerning the coming Tribulation. In other words, if God was lying then, He must be lying now. **“But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly....”** What do you get when you cross an ostrich with a lemming?

But what if God told us *when* this judgment would take place? If I’m reading Genesis 6:3 correctly, He gave man a 120-year window in which to repent or die in the flood. The fact that nobody listened to Noah other than his immediate family is a sad commentary indeed. But, then as now, we needn’t be caught flat-footed when the Day of Yahweh arrives. Peter now explains the timing: **“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”** (II Peter 3:3-9) Just because he stressed God’s patience, there is no reason to suppose that this is only a metaphor, that it has no objective *mathematical* meaning. Call me overly literal, but I believe that Peter is explaining Yahweh’s timetable here—the whole thing. That is, God’s seven-day creation account, commemorated in His mandated seven-day week (both of them described as six “days” of work followed by one of Sabbath rest) is a picture, a prophecy, of His entire schedule for the redemption of mankind. Beginning with the fall of Adam into sin, mankind would have six “days,” (that is, six thousand years) to work things out with God—to choose to reciprocate His love and accept His salvation, or not to. Any way you slice it, that six-thousand year window of grace is almost over. And the seventh millennium will be a mandatory day of rest, in which no one can make up for what he failed to do during the “work week.”

A Psalm by Moses that we saw earlier states the same truth in slightly different terms: **“For a thousand years in Your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”** (Psalm 90:4) “Yesterday” is “one day” in our past—but something (like today or tomorrow) that God sees in the present tense. And what does the reference to “a watch in the night” mean? I believe God is telling us that just as soldiers stand guard at their posts per a predetermined schedule—so many

hours on, so many hours off—in the same way, God’s “days,” the thousand-year slices of time He has determined for the unfolding of His plan for our redemption, are scheduled, like stops on a subway route—delineated by pre-ordained “stations” or milestones. But unlike Yahweh’s seven *miqra’ey* (convocations), these mile markers for God’s redemptive plan appear on schedule every “day”—that is, every one thousand years. As Jeremiah said, **“The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning.”** (Lamentations 3:22) These “mercies” are either reminders of our need for redemption, or they reveal what Yahweh is doing to meet that need. Although the dates for the early ones are impossible to verify, the schedule looks like this:

(1) The fall of Adam apparently took place four thousand years before the “anchor date” of the series (the passion of the Messiah, in 33 AD). Because our sin nature is inherited from Him, this date (3967 BC, according to the theory) marks the commencement of Yahweh’s program for the redemption of our race. Remember the imagery of the creation account: the sun is said to have appeared on the *fourth* day—*after* plant life on earth. This apparent “scientific blunder” is explained by Malachi: **“For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.”** (Malachi 4:2) If one understands that the “Sun of righteousness” is actually Yahweh’s Spirit empowering Yahshua (who appeared at the very end of the “fourth day”—i.e., *before* the fifth millennial milestone) then Yahweh’s metaphor starts to make sense.

(2) The second milestone must surely have some connection with the flood of Noah—the prototypical “judgment vs. deliverance” scenario. The date is impossible to pin down from Biblical sources (since the chronological data from the Masoretic texts isn’t perfectly consistent with the Samaritan Pentateuch or the Septuagint, and the genealogical data in both Genesis 5 and I Chronicles are missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls). If not the flood proper, it seems likely that the milestone’s target date (2967 BC) marks the announcement of the coming judgment (Genesis 6:3) 120 years previously.

(3) Though its date is still impossible to determine exactly from the Bible’s genealogical data, the third milestone, I’m convinced, was Abraham’s almost-sacrifice of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah—in what would become Jerusalem. The prophetic parallels to the sacrifice of Christ are too numerous and too blatant to brush off. At least this time we *know* we’re in the ballpark of the target date, 1967 BC. I find it significant that all of the subsequent milestones took (or will take) place in this very same location. Yahweh is fine-tuning His message, and His metaphor: all of the last five millennial milestones occur on Moriah, and five (as we shall see) is the number of grace.

(4) The fourth milestone falls (finally) in historically verifiable territory. 967 BC—precisely one thousand years before Yahshua sacrificed Himself on

Calvary—marked the building of Solomon’s temple. The temple, of course, was patterned after the wilderness tabernacle (which in turn, we’re told, was patterned after a prototype in heaven). The tabernacle was built according to exacting specifications, every detail of which is symbolic of some facet of Yahweh’s plan for our redemption. (We’ll study the tabernacle’s symbols more closely in a later chapter.) Note that the temple was built in the same neighborhood as Abraham’s seminal demonstration of faith—Mount Moriah. I believe the temple was erected where Abraham’s “young men” stayed with their donkey (Genesis 22:5) while Isaac (carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his back, just as Yahshua would) walked with his father further up the hill about half a mile, to the place that would later be known as Golgotha. The irony would be stunning but for the fact that Yahweh orchestrated the whole scene. None of this was accidental or coincidental.

(5) Milestone number 5 is, as I said, the anchor date of the whole series. The passion—the death, burial, and resurrection of Yahshua the Messiah—is the fulfillment of the first three prophetic appointments of the Torah: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Firstfruits. Although the Gospels are silent on the matter of chronology, numerous historical rabbit trails conspire to pinpoint the date as the spring of 33 AD, not the least of which is the fact that the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which by Levitical Law was to begin on a Sabbath) fell on a *natural* Sabbath—a Saturday—that year. Furthermore, the Daniel 9 prophecy (which I won’t take the time to explain in detail here) also predicts, if you’ll do the math, the coming of the Messiah on what works out to the tenth day of Nisan (see Exodus 12:2 for the significance of that date): Monday, March 28, 33 AD—the date of the triumphal entry (Mark 11:1-11), Not “Palm Sunday,” but Palm *Monday* as it turns out—four days before the Passover sacrifice.

(6) The beginning of the sixth millennium had me stumped at first. Sure, 1033 was definitely a low point for Christendom, with the ascension of the twelve-year-old Pope Benedict IX, arguably the worst in a long line of abysmal pontiffs. A bisexual who sodomized animals and ordered several murders, he practiced witchcraft, necromancy, and Satanism, and before his untimely death in 1055, the church had split forever into warring fragments. But hey, nobody’s perfect. Is that really all there is to 1033?

Not by a long shot. Numbers 5:11-31 delineates a goofy-sounding procedure for determining the guilt or innocence of a woman suspected by her husband of infidelity, but then we never hear anything more about it. The jealous husband was to bring her before the priest, who was to take dust from the floor of the sanctuary, place it into “holy water” in an earthen vessel, and make the woman swear her innocence. She would then drink the water. If she was guilty, her “belly

would swell and her thigh would rot,” but if she were innocent, she would be blessed with children. As far as we know, however, nobody *ever* did this.

What’s my point? In 1033, a great earthquake shook Jerusalem. Result? The Spring of Gihon, the sole water source for the old city, located in the shadow of the temple mount) turned septic—a noxious condition that persisted for forty years. The Rabbis at the Jerusalem Academy took the hint, leaving town and setting up shop in Damascus instead. Then the Islamic overlords increased the *jizyah* (the “protection” taxes imposed on the *dhimmi*, the non-Muslims living under Islamic rule), driving out the last remaining Jewish farmers from the area. But there were also ramifications for Christendom. The year 1033 saw a great surge in Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem, since it was the one-millennium anniversary of Yahshua’s passion. And Catholic pilgrims, like the departing Jews, found the waters of Gihon (now *literally* mingled with the dust of the sanctuary) poisonous.

In Exodus 20:6, Yahweh had described Himself as “a jealous God.” Through this event in 1033, *both* Israel and the Church were declared unfaithful. The curse of Numbers 5 had come to pass. Not only did the Jews’ “belly swell and thigh rot,” but the prophecy concerning the Church of Thyatira had come about: **“Indeed, I will cast her [the false prophetess “Jezebel,” who had seduced the Church] into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery [read: idolatry] with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.”** (Revelation 2:22) Thus the beginning of the sixth millennium, 1033, was characterized by spiritual adultery on the part of both Yahweh’s “wife” Israel and Yahshua’s “bride,” the Church. The need for the redemption of mankind was never more obvious.

(7) You’d have to be blind not to see the pattern that’s emerging: a stunning spiritual milestone marking man’s need for salvation, and/or God’s plan for providing it, happens every thousand years, like clockwork. But the pattern doesn’t go on forever: we must remain cognizant of Yahweh’s prototypical blueprint: six days of work followed by one of rest. If things are as they appear, our six thousand year window of grace will end forever when we reach the next millennial milestone: 2033. The Millennial Kingdom age that follows will be analogous to the Sabbath rest Yahweh mandated in the Torah—a time in which our own efforts are forbidden, at time in which we must rely upon what Yahweh *already* provided (back in the fourth day, when the “Sun arose with healing in His wings,” if you’ll recall).

If you’re not living with your head in the sand like an ostrich, you have no doubt already noticed that things in the world seem to be coming to a head—on half a dozen different fronts. The world’s population is pushing the seven billion threshold, and our ability to feed ourselves is strained to the breaking point. For the first time in human history, mankind has developed the means to utterly

destroy itself in warfare. A fifth of the world's population espouse a religion whose scriptures demand (even if they do not) that everyone on the planet must eventually embrace their god and their prophet or be put to death—beginning with Christians and Jews. Diseases are emerging for which there is no known cure, while the mechanisms for spreading these plagues become more efficient by the day. The amount of information available to us is increasing at an exponential rate, but one inversely proportional, it would seem, to the wisdom needed to utilize this knowledge for the common good. More and more wealth is being grasped in fewer and fewer hands as the world teeters on the brink of total economic collapse. There are strident cries for one-world governance, economic policy, and environmental and societal controls. But since man has *never* been able to govern himself in wisdom and benevolence, it would seem the height of folly to concentrate all of the world's power in the hands of a single elite overlord.

And if you plot the growth of these hazards—any one of which has the potential to end civilization as we know it—out to the point where they look likely to become totally insurmountable, you'll find your paradigm of peril converging about three decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Everybody with his eyes open knows we're in trouble. And everybody, it seems, has a theory as to what should be done to correct the course of humanity. But only a handful of us (relatively speaking) are willing to admit that God has already told us what will happen—that although things *could have been* fixed, they won't be. The Last Days are almost upon us. The Tribulation will run its course. And the seventh Millennium will commence, just as Yahweh planned from the beginning, on a Sabbath, the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Tishri 15 (October 8), 2033.

Either that, or I'm just making this stuff up as I go along.

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Even if we weren't nearing the end of the era God allotted for unredeemed man to walk upon the earth, each of us would still have to face the fact that *as individuals*, time is always on the verge of running out. Hardly anybody gets more than eight or nine decades. We shouldn't need the Bible to remind us that our days are fleeting, limited, and uncertain, nor that we should try to make the best use of them that we possibly can. The Psalmist, feeling the uncomfortable rod of Yahweh's discipline upon his nation's backside, laments, **"How long, O Yahweh? Will You hide Yourself forever? How long will Your wrath burn like fire? Remember how short my time is! For what vanity You have created all the children of man! What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?"** (Psalm 89:46-48) Yes, our time as mortals is short—so short that it can seem as if Yahweh's eternal

presence mocks our predicament. When we become aware of His greatness, our own lives can only be seen as pointless and insignificant. But that's kind of the point: the "vanity" of our existence is what Yahweh's plan of redemption was designed to rectify. The amazing thing is not so much the eternal greatness of God, but that He is both willing and able to interject His own eternity into our otherwise futile temporal lives.

Having made us, Yahweh knows the handicaps under which we labor. Since we're living in time, He doesn't expect us to "get it" until the time is right. Some 2,500 years ago, the prophet Daniel was shown things that he couldn't possibly comprehend—disturbing, puzzling things that he was nevertheless instructed to write down for the edification of a future generation. **"Then I said, 'O my lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?'"** Daniel had been shown an unprecedented "time of trouble," out of which Israel's remnant would be miraculously delivered. He saw the resurrection of the dead—some to everlasting life, and others to eternal shame. And he saw the "time of the end," prior to which mobility and information would be exponentially enhanced while the "power of the holy people" was "completely shattered." And Daniel was not ashamed to admit that he didn't understand any of this. But the angel who was delivering the vision to him said, **"Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end. Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand."** (Daniel 12:8-10) The "time of the end," he intimates, would be incomprehensible until it was right on mankind's front doorstep. It would be characterized by a widening gap between the pure and the wicked, between behavior of the saved and that of the lost. And accompanying this division of good from evil would be a "wisdom gap" in which God's people (the "wise") would begin to see and understand what was really going on, while the wicked from whom they were being separated would remain clueless—until destruction was upon them.

This is a pattern we've seen throughout scripture, of course: the ark of Noah's salvation; the rescue of Lot from Sodom; Yahshua's warning to flee from Jerusalem when the armies of Titus started closing in. The redeemed of Yahweh have always been given the means to "get out of town" before disaster strikes (though the warnings were never kept a secret from anybody). The ultimate permutation of this principle, no doubt, will be the rapture. But none of these escapes would have been possible were it not for the fact that Yahweh operates in eternity while we exist in time. We who belong to Him receive the benefit of His foreknowledge. The rub, of course, is that we have to trust Him enough to take Him at His word—which means in turn that we have to know His word well enough to recognize the warning signs. Describing the approaching of the same "time of the end" that rattled Daniel so badly, Yahshua, in the Olivet Discourse

(Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) delineated a series of “signs” that would precede His coming and the end of the age. My friends, *every one* of those signs (with one possible exception) is a common, obvious, and recurring reality today. And that single exception, “fearful sights and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11), seems to be gaining traction. **“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that He is near, at the very gates.”** (Mark 13:28-29) “These things” *are* taking place.

The idea that there are appropriate seasons for everything—even the “end of the world as we know it”—shouldn’t really come as a surprise. Solomon’s familiar words lay down the principle: **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”** (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) Did he really need to spell it out? There is also a time—for God—to let things run as they have since the dawn of history, as well as a time to bring all human affairs to a conclusion. Those “times” are, ironically, the purview of the One who holds eternity in the palm of His hand and calls it all “now.”

Men of faith have always longed for the eternal God to intervene in the course of time—to impose order and meaning on the timeline that constrains us. In the earliest writings in scripture, Job prays, **“Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, that You would conceal me until Your wrath be past, that You would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. You would call, and I would answer You; You would long for the work of Your hands.”** (Job 14:13-15) Yahweh has answered in the affirmative, not only to Job, but to all of us: He *has* appointed us a set time; He *does* intend to call us to renewal, even if we’re hidden in the grave—if we allow ourselves to be “the work of His hands.” I remain astounded that so many people—even *Christians*—act as if Yahweh doesn’t have a schedule, a timetable, *a plan*. They behave as if the status quo will continue pretty much forever—that they needn’t be particularly watchful, ’cause after all, “Where is the promise of His coming?”

Meanwhile, those of us with our eyes open want to scream, “*How can you not see this?* How many more leaves does the fig tree have to sprout before you’ll admit that summer is upon us?” We’ve been advised, we’ve been informed, we’ve been admonished: God knows precisely what He’s doing, and precisely *when* He’s going to do it. You can argue that He has been unusually obscure in



revealing what His timeline is, but the fact that He *has one* should be apparent to anyone who even glances at the scriptural data. This becomes all the more obvious as we approach the end of the story: **“And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.”** (Revelation 10:5-7) Last things first: the angel flatly declares that God’s schedule was revealed through the Old Testament prophets (even though from man’s point of view, its fulfillment was so long in coming, it seemed “delayed”). He calls it a “mystery,” however—something that in biblical parlance indicates that nobody really understood its nature until it came to pass, no matter how many hints and clues Yahweh gave us ahead of time. (The classic example of a “mystery” is the largely-gentile Church, the called-out assembly of Yahshua. Nobody saw that one coming until it was already here.)

The “seventh trumpet” to which the angel referred was the last of a series of “wake-up calls” that are prophesied to come to pass during the Tribulation, beginning with thermonuclear war—“fire and blood” destroying one third the earth’s land surface. The seventh of the series describes the commencement of the Millennial Kingdom: **“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.”** (Revelation 11:15) I believe the “days” (note that it’s plural) of the seventh trumpet will begin with the definitive *Yom Kippurim*, the Day of Atonement, which will mark Yahshua’s physical return to earth on the Mount of Olives. The kingdom itself, as we saw above, will begin five days later, on Tishri 15, the Feast of Tabernacles, in the year 2033. What lies between the two dates? Armageddon!

John was given the privilege of recording the final words of the Bible. I find it fascinating that he didn’t spend them telling us to do any of a thousand things the church has been fixated upon for the past couple of millennia. These last words, rather, do three things: confirm Christ’s credentials, encourage those who are His to heed His precious promises, and invite those who are outside to enter into fellowship while the opportunity lasts. Three times in this passage we are reminded that Christ is coming soon. Three times is God’s eternal nature cited as a reason for hope and faith. And three times we are encouraged to remain holy—separate from a world that chooses not to receive the grace that defines us. **“And he [the angel] said to me [John], ‘These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book...’”** You may protest, *Soon? It’s been almost two thousand years! You call that “soon?”* Well, actually, the word *tachu* would be better translated “quickly,” “speedily,” or “without delay.” Remember, God is on a

schedule: He'll come precisely when He means to. Besides, for us as individuals, it *is* soon: we're never all that far from physical death—the point at which the march of time becomes irrelevant.

But what does it mean to “keep” the prophecy of the Apocalypse for all those generations who would not personally experience its seals, trumpets, and bowl judgments? The Greek word is *tereo*, which means “to attend to carefully, to take care of, to guard.” (*Strong's*) I would point out that Philadelphia, the sixth of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 to whom the Book of Revelation was addressed, was promised that because they *had* “kept” (*tereo*) Christ's command to persevere, He would also “keep” (again, *tereo*) these believers out of the worldwide trial described so vividly in the following chapters. In other words, for the faithful and “blessed” believers of Philadelphia (and them alone), Christ is *literally* “coming soon.” He told them as much in Revelation 3:11, when He said, **“I am coming soon. Hold fast, so that no one may seize your crown.”** (None of the other churches on the list, including the seventh and final assembly, Laodicea, received any such promise of temporal deliverance.)

Continuing with Revelation's concluding verses, we read: **“I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, but he said to me, ‘You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.’”** You can't really fault John for his confusion: this was all awe-inspiring stuff. **“And he said to me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy....’”** The angel points out, quite logically, that there's really no point in pretending to be good if you're not a child of God—the origin of Good. If you're dead, no amount of good intentions can make you alive, and no amount of washing can make you truly clean. But at the same time, we who have become alive—i.e., righteous and holy through the finished work of our Redeemer—should act like it. I believe that as the end draws closer, we're going to see that this is actually a prophecy: the saved will be increasingly revealed to be fundamentally different from the lost among whom they live. And as the Day approaches, we will be marginalized, persecuted, and treated as some sort of alien species. The process has already begun.

So it is with timely concern that Yahshua tells us, **“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end....”** We are all going to reap what we have sown in the world, whether evil filthiness or righteous holiness. The fact that righteousness and holiness are possible only in the strength of God's Spirit living within us doesn't change anything—that Spirit was available to everybody. And don't misread “recompense” as a euphemism for

“vindictive payback.” The word is *misthos*: one’s wages, what one is rightfully paid for the job he does. It’s a reward, in the strictest sense; but a proper reward for evil deeds is actually punishment, so that word can be misleading. Note once again that Yahshua’s eternal nature is what ultimately gives Him the right to decide what our just “recompense” is—big bucks, minimum wage, the unemployment line, or a prison cell.

**“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood....”** Once again, division is stressed: inside vs. outside, clean vs. filthy, blessed vs. cursed, living vs. dead. Attaining this separation (*to* God and *from* the world) is the essence of being holy. Note the metaphorical criteria for being in Yahweh’s camp: they have “washed their robes.” Clothing (as we shall see in a future chapter) is symbolic of our status before God—that is, what we “put on” in order to hide the shame of our sin. Adam and Eve knew intuitively that they couldn’t go around butt naked after they disobeyed Yahweh’s instructions, so they made themselves clothes out of fig leaves. But God knew an innocent sacrifice was necessary, so he slew an animal and made them proper garments to put on. In later times, God used linen clothing as a metaphor for imputed righteousness, while wool signified the alternate path—works. But here in the closing chapter of the Bible, what matters is that the believers’ robes (identified as “linen” in Revelation 19:8) are washed, made clean in the blood of Christ and the water of the Spirit through the Word of God. And note *who* is to wash them: it’s the one who wishes to be blessed. God won’t “wash our clothes” Himself, not without our permission. In other words, our choices—our actions—have eternal significance. No one is predestined to go to heaven or to hell. We choose our own destination, even though Yahweh reserves the right to select the route.

At this point, Yahshua Himself speaks: **“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star....”** John had been getting lots of amazing information from the angels—so much so that it had all begun to look like the glory of deity to him, as we saw above. So Yahshua reminds him that He is the source of it all. These angels may be awesome, but they’re still “only” messengers (which is what *aggelos* means), created beings sent by God to deliver his truth to us, “the churches,” i.e., those who are called out of the world. Once again, Christ’s self-description stresses His eternal nature and contrasts it with our temporal existence. David is the prototypical king: to be his “root” is to be the ultimate source of both his life and authority: Yahweh Himself. And to be his “descendant” is to lay claim to the throne of Israel as God’s Anointed One, the Messiah. Yahshua is all of that, and more.

The “bright morning star” reference is a bit more esoteric. It is apparently an allusion to the passage in Isaiah 14 where the king of Babylon is characterized as “Lucifer, son of the morning” (*helel ben shachar*—shining one or day-star, literally: son of the dawn) who boasted in his heart that he would ascend to heaven, set his throne on high, sit on the mountain of assembly, and “be like the Most High.” Basically, the arrogant ambition of a temporal pagan king is being recruited to educate us about Satan, the mighty angel who rebelled against Yahweh and became our adversary. Satan would like to present himself as the “light bringer,” the great illuminator, the sun god. In fact, virtually every false religion in history has incorporated some permutation of the “sun god” myth. The truth, of course, is that he brings only darkness and death. But here in Revelation, Yahshua the Messiah is revealed as the *real* “bright morning star,” the genuine Light of the world. The point (in context) is that just as Yahshua’s eternal nature makes Him the rightful King of Glory, it also makes Him infinitely superior to even the most impressive counterfeit spirit—which explains why John’s angel was so careful to chastise him for falling at his feet in worship (vs. 8-9, above). Eternal existence trumps mere immortality.

The angelic testimony John related to the churches has but one point: it’s an invitation to the world to share in Yahweh’s gift of everlasting life: **“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”** A cynical and suspicious world may look at God’s free gift of life and say, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch: there must be strings attached. This has to be a trick.” Okay, maybe. There *is* one string attached: if you accept Yahweh’s gift, you’ll be *alive*, and that can be a shocking epiphany if all you really wanted was to feel good about remaining dead. But let’s face it. It’s very hard to explain life to the dead. They’re just not equipped to comprehend it. All God can really do is employ symbols to inform us that our choices have consequences: as it is in this life, so it shall be in the next. **“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”** That’s a sobering admonition for a guy who’s written a 900-page book on biblical prophecy. How does one do that and not “add” anything? Actually, I’ve studiously endeavored to neither add nor subtract from God’s revelation, but merely to correlate the myriad of scriptures on the subject, Old Testament and New. Put together like a ten thousand piece jigsaw puzzle, they form a remarkably coherent picture. And the picture has but one thing to say: “Come!”

Whether or not we choose to “come,” there is no ambiguity about the Messiah’s intentions: ready or not, here *He* comes. The Bible concludes with a witness, a promise, and a prayer: **“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am**

coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen." (Revelation 22:6-21) The thing that lingered in John's mind as he put down his pen was God's invitation to participate in His grace—to enjoy the unmerited favor for which Christ died in order to bestow upon us.

Peter noted that this was nothing new: **"The prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories."** (I Peter 1:10-11) I probably read that a hundred times before I saw it: the prophets, he says, inquired of God about the *timing* of the Messiah's advents—both of His suffering and His coming reign. We now know that Daniel was spot on when pinpointing the date of Yahshua's triumphal entry into Jerusalem—followed less than a week later by His crucifixion. And if I were a betting man, I'd be willing to wager that Moses, Hosea, Peter and John will be proven no less accurate in pointing us to the "time the Spirit of Christ was indicating" for His "subsequent glories." But I must reiterate: being "right" about God's timing is of no particular value unless you're alive; and being "wrong" need not be an insurmountable problem unless you're dead. The only essential thing is life, and the only way to attain eternal life is to come to the One who lives eternally.

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Where I live, we enjoy four distinct seasons, and there are lots of deciduous trees here to remind us at a glance what time of year it is. I can't help but wonder if the changing of the seasons was designed by God to be an annual picture of something—the course of our individual lives, or perhaps the course of nations upon the earth. Yahweh set "New Year" in the early spring (Exodus 12:2), when the new leaves are just budding; they're young, tender (read: innocent), and an enthusiastic bright green in color. The forest becomes lush and verdant as we move into summer—a paradise for birds, squirrels, and deer. But as the heat of late summer becomes oppressive, the leaves turn a darker, more somber (or is that cynical?) shade of green, and they take on a tough, leathery quality that's very different from that of the baby leaves of spring. This seems to be a picture of what typically happens to folks as they "mature." It's a good-news / bad-news story. On one hand, we tend to become inflexible, set in our ways, hard to teach, and suspicious of anything we aren't accustomed to. But we're also less likely to be shaken by adverse circumstances, more resistant to empty fads and fashions, and more securely anchored to what really matters.

As we move into the autumn, though, something happens. The leaves begin to change color. They eventually fall off their branches and descend to the forest floor, where they decompose, providing nutrients for future generations of leaves. But visually, the process varies. Some leaves sort of skip fall and move straight from summer into winter: they simply turn brown and fall off. But if the conditions are right, the leaves first turn brilliant yellows, oranges, or reds, hanging on for a month in a spectacular display of botanical glory. The brightest autumn colors are caused by an increase in anthocyanin and carotene as chlorophyll decreases—the result of dry sunny fall days followed by cool, dry nights. But that’s just science; we’re looking for a spiritual metaphor here.

I think perhaps what Yahweh was trying to tell us with the changing seasons is that our life on earth was never designed to be permanent. We are mortal: like the leaves, we’re all destined to end up flat on our backs on the forest floor—our legacies nourishing succeeding generations. And although we all start off the same—tender, pliable, thirsty, enthusiastic for life, and reaching out toward the heavens—we can finish our time on this earth in one of two ways. We can either die badly—dry, stiff, shriveled caricatures mocking the forgotten promise of our youth—or we can go out in a blaze of glory, as something beautiful and attractive in spite of what we all know is coming—the cold death of winter.

In North America (which has the most numerous species of indigenous deciduous trees), there is a billion dollar tourist industry built around people departing their drab cities to witness the annual autumn spectacle. What does it all mean? Perhaps I’m a bit *too* attuned to the natural metaphors Yahweh has put in our path, but I can’t help but notice that if folks are not blinded by their own misconceptions and prejudices, they’re naturally drawn to the beauty of Yahweh’s Spirit living within the souls of the believers they meet. They’re put off, of course, by religious display and arrogant, pushy proselytizing, but they’re intrigued and attracted by the genuine life of a true follower of Yahshua—especially in the face of adversity (which explains why Christianity has always flourished under persecution). And once Israel has come to her senses and has recognized her Messiah, this mantle will fall upon her shoulders as well: **“Thus says Yahweh of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the favor of Yahweh and to seek Yahweh of hosts; I myself am going.’ Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek Yahweh of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of Yahweh. Thus says Yahweh of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”** (Zechariah 8:20-23) We wouldn’t walk across the street to see a dead tree, but we’ll drive hundreds of miles to witness the glory of a New England forest in October. Could the beauty of the fall foliage be a subtle prophetic metaphor for the splendor of Christ’s coming kingdom? I mean, even the dates line up.

I'm the first to admit that I may be seeing something that just isn't there. "Seasons" in the Bible invariably speak generally of things happening at their proper time—on God's schedule. Furthermore, illustrations from nature that appear in the Bible are invariably witnessed by Israelites, within the Land of Israel. But Israel (like my native Southern California) really has but two seasons, summer and winter. The prophets never saw the Blue Ridge Mountains ablaze with color, as I am now privileged to do every autumn. Perhaps this lesson is one Yahweh wanted to be especially clear to North American believers—the same thing Daniel observed as he walked with Israel's God while a pilgrim in exile: **"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him."** (Daniel 2:20-22) The annual changing of the seasons (though that's not really what Daniel was talking about) only serves to make the permanence of Yahweh that much more awe inspiring.

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A while back, a friend of mine introduced me to a little known concept—the idea that the ancients of Israel did not string their weeks together end to end like we do, but began their weekly cycles all over again at every new moon. In other words, the beginning of each month, marked when the first sliver of the new moon was sighted in the night sky, would reset the cycle. So the 7<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup> of every month would always be Sabbath days. As strange as the idea sounds to us today, there is actually some circumstantial evidence to suggest that this might have been the practice at one time.

The ramifications for those with a legalistic mindset could be a little unsettling. Could it be that the day you thought was the Sabbath (or Sunday, for that matter) is no such thing? Are you (and everybody else) worshipping on the "wrong" day? And more to the point, is God angry because you're not "observing the day" correctly? I wouldn't lose any sleep over this. Let me point out a few salient facts: (1) There is no way to be absolutely sure which system was in use in ancient Israel. Scripture doesn't say, and the clues are inconclusive. (2) Although Yahweh instructed Israel to observe both the new moon and a seven day week ending with a Sabbath, He never specifically tied one event to the other. (3) He did not instruct us to begin the weekly cycle over again at the new moon (nor were we told to use the unbroken daily sequence we're familiar with today). He didn't say anything about it. (4) There are other cycles in the Torah, such as the

three-year Levitical tithing cycle and the Sabbatical year, for which there is a similar dearth of instruction concerning how they were to be linked—if at all.

Although it can be hard to sort out sometimes, we should be aware that what God *didn't* tell us can be as revealing as what He did. Yahweh—the Eternally Existent One—used a variety of time measurements to communicate with us. And as far as what He actually *said* is concerned, these time units are completely independent: a day is sunset to sunset, a week is seven days ending with a Sabbath rest, a month lasts from one new moon to the next, the sabbatical-year cycle lasts seven *solar* years, and Jubilee comes once every fifty years. The Torah does not require readjusting or resetting any time-measuring period, nor does it link one to any other. Rather, Yahweh seems to be teaching us different lessons through each unit of time measurement. Each time unit specified in God's word, then, should be recognized as a symbol of a separate truth, a recurring reminder of some fundamental facet of Yahweh's plan. And at this late date, we should not be too terribly surprised to learn that there are seven such time units used in scripture—seven being the number of completion or perfection. These seven, taken as a whole, describe what the eternal Yahweh is in the process of accomplishing in the temporal arena of mankind's redemption:

1. The day—one full revolution of the earth on its axis—was described by Moses as beginning and ending not at midnight or sunrise, but at sunset. Speaking of Yom Kippurim, he writes, **“Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement.... On the ninth day of the month beginning at evening, from evening to evening shall you keep your Sabbath.”** (Leviticus 23:27, 32) So the “day” in God's mind and metaphor progressed from darkness into light. It is therefore a picture of Yahweh's mercy and healing, of the process of moving His people out of chaos and obscurity into truth. Thus we read of His mercies being “new every morning,” and of the “Sun of righteousness rising with healing in His wings.” Every new day is an opportunity for us to recognize and embrace the mercies of our Creator. Even when the “day” is used as a euphemism for an age or an era—as in the creation account—there is invariably an element of progress implied: from nothing to something, from unformed to organized, or from flawed to perfect.

2. The seven-day week is established in the very first chapter of the Bible. Since each day represents a fresh look at God's grace or the renewed prospect of comprehension concerning His plan, multiplying it by seven tells us that the “week” represents the totality of man's opportunity to receive Yahweh's gift of redemption. But note the pattern He instituted: whenever we see seven of something, it's invariably structured as six plus one—six of one thing contrasted with one of something else. And the week is no exception. Yahweh's creative activities all took place during the first six “days,” and on the seventh, He is said to have rested. This pattern was codified into Law in the Fourth Commandment:



**“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”** (Exodus 20:8-11) The “week,” then, represents Yahweh’s timeline for the redemption of mankind. The week—six days of work followed by one of rest—signifies six millennia of humanity’s “working out our own salvation with fear and trembling,” followed by one final Millennium of resting in the Messiah’s reign. Both before and after man’s “week,” however, the eternal state is the paradigm in operation.

3. A month in Biblical symbology isn’t the artificial construct of any man-made calendar, but rather one complete cycle of the moon’s phases. The month officially begins at the only time one can precisely gauge its status through visual means: at the sighting of the first sliver of the new moon. Neither weeks nor days fit exactly into a lunar cycle, since the synodic month (as it’s known) is 29.530588 days long. As usual, this measurement of time stands independent of all the others, functionally and symbolically. The “month” is, I believe, a picture of how much spiritual light or darkness is being experienced by the human race at any given time. Our months begin in almost total darkness, but as the time wears on, more and more of the sun’s light is reflected from the lunar surface—up to a point, after which things gradually get dark again. The point of maximum brightness (the full moon) falls on the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> of a lunar month—the middle of the month. Just as in the phases of the moon, the closer we are to the center of God’s will, the clearer things will be, and the more we’ll be able to perceive.

This symbolic principle can perhaps best be seen by correlating the seven annual “appointments with God” scheduled in the Torah with the phases of the moon in which they occur. The first three of these occur in the spring: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Firstfruits—prophetic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, respectively. These all hover around the middle of the month of Nisan, when the moon is at its brightest: we are being given the clearest possible look at one side of Yahweh’s true nature—compassion. Note however that there is one other *miqra* that occurs at the full moon: the Feast of Tabernacles (the final appointment on the calendar, Tishri 15, in the fall) is a picture of the glorious reign of our Messiah as King over the whole earth. It illuminates the other side of Yahweh’s nature—His glory, power, and unabridged authority. And what of the others? Both the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and the Day of Atonement are scheduled under a “waxing” moon—when things have been dark, but they’re getting brighter day by day. But alas, the Feast of Trumpets (prophetic of the rapture of the church) is scheduled at a new moon, the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the lunar month of Tishri—a time of maximum spiritual darkness, when

comparatively few can see where they're going or appreciate what Yahweh is doing. In other words, any time now.

4. A solar year—one full revolution of the earth around the sun—is the bird's eye view of God's entire plan, to be viewed (again) through the lens of Yahweh's seven appointments. It begins almost immediately after God's "New Year" (i.e., Nisan 1) with the rebirth of hope in the spring—the Passover sequence—and is punctuated again, seven months later, with the joyful harvest, the Feast of Tabernacles. But the year is not nearly over at this point: there are still five months left to run. It is my opinion that five is the number symbolizing Yahweh's grace toward us. So if I'm right about any of this, the "year" begins with the perfection and completion of Yahweh's plan of redemption, and it concludes with grace. By the time the earth (the home of humanity) has circumnavigated the sun (representative of Malachi's "Sun of righteousness," the Spirit of Yahweh in our midst) we will have had an opportunity to see it from every angle: mankind will have experienced God's creation, disappointment, anger, compassion, instruction, redemption, mercy, salvation, resurrection, separation, patience, judgment, grace, and glory. If we don't know Him by then, we never will.

5. The sabbatical year cycle (six years of normal activity followed by one year of rest and release—See Leviticus 25:1-7) combines the mercies of God's character with the awareness of His schedule (the six-plus-one pattern). There is emphasis on forgiveness and freedom in the seventh year, for debts were to be forgiven and indentured servants were to be released. But there was also a strong trust component, for Israelites were instructed not to sow their fields, nor reap what came up voluntarily during the Sabbatical year. Rather, they were to live on what Yahweh had *already* provided. Symbolically, the Sabbatical year cycle differs from the weekly cycle in that the week of days informed us of God's six-plus-one schedule; the seven-year metaphor revealed what He would accomplish during that time: our freedom, our provision, and our rest.

6. The Jubilee is a fifty-year cycle. Unlike the week/month relationship, there is apparently a connection between the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee: **"You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines."** (Leviticus 25:8-11) In other words, there were to be seven Sabbatical cycles—49 years total—followed by the year of Jubilee, after which the whole thing would presumably begin again. There's a lot more to it

than the timing, of course. It's sort of like a Sabbatical year on steroids. The most significant difference is that all land that had changed hands in Israel (you couldn't buy someone's inheritance; you could only "lease" it) reverted to its original owner. Jubilee is therefore predictive and indicative of Yahweh's willingness and ability to set right the wrongs of our lives. The timing (on a human scale) hints that this forgiveness is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And the fifty-year time span is also significant in another way: if a man's normal allotted lifespan is seventy years (Psalm 90:10), and if he becomes responsible for being a soldier in God's army at the age of twenty (Numbers 1:3), then the fifty years represent the sum total of his adult responsibilities before God, focused on his responsibility to choose to honor Yahweh.

You'll note that all six of these units for marking time are based on "natural" sidereal phenomenon—the kind of thing we read about in the creation account: **"Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years."** (Genesis 1:14) But if we're attuned to Yahweh's ubiquitous six-plus-one pattern, we would expect to find one more time unit—a seventh, one distinct from the others in some material way. And we wouldn't be disappointed. The last time unit is not linked to any obvious heavenly phenomenon. It's apparently quite arbitrary—based on Yahweh's preference alone—and for good reason:

7. The "time" or "prophetic year," is a 360-day unit of measure, used for only one thing: to describe the chronological destiny of the nation of Israel. It figures prominently in both the Daniel 9 prophecy and in the Revelation. It is the unit that revealed the timing of the coming of the Messiah—to the very day—and it will define the tempo by which the Tribulation—the time of Jacob's trouble—is played out. Interestingly, we never encounter a single "time" in scripture. The name I'm using for this 360-day "Designer year" comes from the phrase "time, times, and half a time" (Daniel 12:7; Revelation 12:14), meaning, of course, three and a half of this unit. This is apparently equated with two other descriptions—42 months (which still allows room for questions, since a "month" might be either lunar or solar and could thus be defined as anything between 28 and 31 days) and 1,260 days (a definition that leaves no wiggle room whatsoever).

The seventy "weeks" of the Daniel 9 prophecy are each comprised of seven of these 360-day "times." We know this because Yahshua triumphantly entered Jerusalem on Nisan 10 (Monday, March 28), 33AD, precisely 173,880 days, or 476 solar years plus twenty-five days, after the prophesied starting point. (That's  $(7 + 62) \times 7 \times 360$ , as required in Daniel 9:25.) This means that Yahweh's prophetic dealings with Israel have "one week," or seven "times" (that is, 2,520 days) left to run. This 70<sup>th</sup> of Daniel's "weeks" is popularly known as the Tribulation, and by the time it's over, the most fundamental goals of Yahweh's

plan for our redemption will have been met: Daniel was told, **“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint the most holy.”** (Daniel 9:24) You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the end of this auspicious 70<sup>th</sup> week will coincide with the definitive Feast of Tabernacles: “anointing the most holy” is tantamount to inaugurating the Millennial reign of the Messiah (literally, “the anointed one”), and the Feast of Tabernacles is a picture of God “camping out” with men. Does His title “Immanuel,” meaning “God with us,” ring any bells?

The question we ought to be asking, to my mind, is why Yahweh chose to use this artificial, rounded off unit of time to define Israel’s destiny? Why not just use the solar year? I think the answer may be bound up in the question: Yahweh *chose*. Our salvation (like our creation) is *designed*. It didn’t just happen; there’s nothing “natural” about it. Left to our own devices, we would live, sin, and die, with neither the means nor the possibility of forming a personal relationship with the God who made us for no other purpose. A solar year is *approximately* 365.24219879 days long. The number is strictly serendipity. There’s no particular reason for it; it just *is*. The 360-day “time” of prophetic revelation, on the other hand, is obviously designed by Someone, like the degrees on a compass. The point, I believe, is that Yahweh is trying to tell us that He planned all of this; none of the salvation scenario is a fortuitous coincidence, an inadvertent incident, a happy accident. Since God went to all this trouble, it seems to me the least we can do is to seriously consider what He did on our behalf.

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We’ve been discussing the contrast between time—the paradigm inhabited by matter and man—and eternity, the abode of God. Ever since the debut of Einstein’s theory of relativity, the issue of time and its origin has been a thorny one for scientists. Though they’re comfortable enough with extremely large numbers, physicists don’t really like the idea of infinities, such as the hypothetical singularity from which sprang the big bang (as the theory goes). The very idea of an eternal God is often seen as philosophically repugnant, for the simple reason that He can’t be measured, analyzed, or contained. (As Yahweh Himself intimated, He can’t really be known by anyone bereft of His Spirit. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.) And yet, the more thoughtful scientists are not above referring to His hypothetical role if they run into a conundrum they can’t sort out. Time is one such Gordian knot.

Paul Davies, in *About Time, Einstein's Unfinished Revolution*, writes, “The fashionable theory that time originated with the big bang is probably the biggest outstanding issue, begging all sorts of (maybe unanswerable) questions concerning causality, God, and eternity. If time existed before the big bang, we have to explain what physical processes predated this dramatic and violent event, and how it was caused. If the universe has always existed, we also run into major problems over the arrow of time. If, on the other hand, time really did ‘switch on’ at the big bang, perhaps as a result of quantum processes, then we confront some equally tough problems. If the process was unique, can it be considered in any sense natural (as opposed to supernatural)?” That’s the rub, isn’t it, Dr. Davies? Supernatural processes stick in the collective craw of the scientific community, don’t they? (And more to the point, if you admit God—you can kiss your funding goodbye!)

Stephen Hawking, in his classic *A Brief History of Time*, writes, “Up to now, most scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe *what* the universe is to ask the question *why*. On the other hand, the people whose business it is to ask *why*, the philosophers, have not been able to keep up with the advance of scientific theories.” I would argue that both the *what* and the *why* of it are to be found exclusively in the one place the philosophers and scientists refuse to look: the revealed character of Yahweh. Hawking bemoans the fact that the scientists haven’t been able to come up with a satisfactory “theory of everything” that explains *all* that they observe (something neither Newton’s laws, relativity, nor quantum mechanics can do). He concludes, “If we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.”

*Really?* I know I’m just an “ordinary person,” and presumably not as smart as you are, Dr. Hawking, but wouldn’t it make more sense, if you really wanted to know the mind of God, to simply *ask* Him? Wouldn’t it seem more reasonable to receive and embrace the answers He’s already given you? The universe exists because “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” And *we* exist because “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is with us.” (In case you missed it, that’s how the Bible begins and ends.) Yahweh has told you *what* He did, and *why*. You scientists, bless your hearts, have figured out *when* He did it, and *how* (though you usually don’t appreciate the ramifications of own data). There’s really only one critically important thing left for you to figure out: *Who!*

## MAN & GOD



### *Promise vs. Perfection*

On the surface, contrasting man and God would seem a fool's errand. Anyone who's spiritually attuned knows intuitively that God is greater than man in every way—and not just superior, but *infinitely* so. We're not comparing apples to oranges here; it's more like the Milky Way galaxy versus a Fourth of July sparkler: the only reason man might even *seem* comparable to God is the vast difference in their apparent proximity.

And yet, man does, on occasion, worship man—which should at least make us aware that there's a systemic misconception that needs to be addressed. Worse, there have been men throughout history, from Nimrod to Nero, from Herod to Hitler, who have demanded the worship of others, as if they were God—going so far as to seize for themselves Yahweh's prerogatives over life and death.

I'm not talking about silliness like lionizing our political candidates, or calling some musician a "rock god," however talented an individual he might be. (Aging guitarists like me can remember the ridiculous "Clapton is god" hype of decades past, but I imagine he was more comfortable with the self-deprecating moniker "Slowhand.") No, I'm talking about arrogance like this: **"They asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, 'The voice of a god, and not of a man!'"** The reference is to Herod Agrippa I, grandson of the Herod "the Great" who reigned at the time of Christ's birth (not to be confused with Herod Antipas, the tetrarch who presided over Yahshua's execution). Herod Agrippa wasn't really even a "king" in the formal sense, since the *real* temporal ruler was ultimately the emperor of Rome. Think of him as upper-middle management in the corporate hierarchy of the empire, like the CEO of a small subsidiary company. **"Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last."** (Acts 12:20-23) According to Josephus, Herod was struck down in the middle of his oration (in 44 AD), lingering in agony for five days before proving (by his death) that he was most definitely *not* a god.

Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon (somebody who could be—and was—rightly referred to as a "king of kings") might have been tempted to fancy himself a "god" among men. But he had the rare privilege of having among his foreign

captives a devout young Israelite prince named Daniel, who taught the king in unmistakable terms what the *real* God, Yahweh, was like. In one of the most unlikely political dramas of the age, Nebuchadnezzar completely lost his mind for seven long years, yet through the diplomatic skill of Daniel and others, he was able to return to his throne when his senses returned. Nebuchadnezzar had been singled out by Yahweh to be taught the ultimate lesson in humility.

This is his testimony: **“At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored Him who lives forever, for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”** Nebuchadnezzar arguably wielded more personal power than any other monarch who ever lived, before or since. In spite of this (or more likely, because of it) he was given the privilege of being humbled before God and living to tell the tale. **“At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are right and His ways are just; and those who walk in pride He is able to humble.”** (Daniel 4:32-37) Perhaps more clearly than any other man in history, he was allowed to experience the difference between the most exalted of men and the living God.

Nebuchadnezzar’s “temporary political death” may be one of the oddest Messianic prophecies in the Bible. (Or I may be seeing something that just isn’t there—I’ll let you decide.) I see distinct parallels between Nebuchadnezzar and Yahshua. The seven-year madness of Nebuchadnezzar seems analogous to the humbling of the Son of God as He came to walk among us as a man. The fall of Nebuchadnezzar into insanity is nothing compared to what the Messiah relinquished on our behalf, of course, but at least it paints a picture.

What happened during the “humbling experience?” The king’s servants honored him as if in absentia, refusing to place someone else on his throne and running his kingdom as if they expected him back at any time. Is that not how we’re instructed to conduct Yahshua’s affairs in His absence? And what transpired *after* the king returned? The “glory, majesty, and splendor” that were rightfully his were rendered in even greater measure unto him by the same “counselors and lords” who had waited so faithfully for his return. And in the end, God was honored and glorified above all. Is this not a revealing picture of the impending return of King Yahshua? Of course, one may argue that considering the general lack of respect He received, Yahshua was “crazy” to come at all. But no one will question His sanity—or His right to rule—when He returns.

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Anthropologists and sociologists, for all their education and research, can't for the life of them seem to be able to tell the difference between God and religion. James Lynne opines, "We invented God so we could use him as a tool to dominate and control others, so that we could have hope of more than the here and now, and so that we could rationalize what we do not comprehend in life. Sociologically we can trace the god-concept to early man and then follow the god thread into the present. Having a God to believe in validates the human need to feel there is more to our existence than only the present. We invented god out of our inability to understand the complexity of the universe." Sorry, James: while all of those things may be true of *religion*, none of them are true of God Himself.

I, on the other hand, would describe the dichotomy between creator and creature this way: God invented man who, finding himself endowed with the gift of free will, chose to turn his back on his Creator—only to discover that his rebellion had left a gaping spiritual chasm in his soul, a vacuum (as Pascal would put it) that only God could fill. So man invented religion in a lame attempt to reconnect with the God whom he had betrayed. While religion may work reasonably well as a tool with which to "dominate and control others," while it helps us to "rationalize what we do not comprehend," and serves to "validate the human need to feel that there's more to our existence" than what we see before us, it actually impedes our quest for reconciliation with our Maker, for it serves as a psychological substitute for the god it claims to represent—whoever or whatever that god is. In other words, religion itself is a counterfeit deity.

At its core (that is, stripped of its cultural baggage), religion isn't a declaration that you've chosen to worship one god instead of another. Rather, it's the selection of a *method* of approaching the divine entity with which your empty soul is begging to be filled. Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, and the Secular Materialist all worship the same God that Christians and Jews do (i.e., Yahweh), for they do not. I'm saying that they are all *responding to the same impetus*. Everyone *knows* there's something missing within them; everyone shares a longing, however nebulous and ill defined, for our lost and forgotten Source, our vaguely perceived Destiny. It's like the old Kevin Costner movie *Waterworld*: even though nobody had ever seen "Dry Land," they all knew it must exist because they were equipped with feet, not fins. In our unguarded moments, we all crave God because He *designed* us to share a relationship with Him. The Psalmist puts it like this: **"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?"** (Psalm 42:1-2) The problem with religion is that you could end up trying to quench that thirst with sea water—or



alcohol. Only the *real* God—Yahweh—will satisfy your craving and fill your longing; anything else will only add to your problem.

After survival and procreation, slaking our thirst for God is one of the strongest instincts universal to man. But if we don't know that "God" is Yahweh, the deity revealed in the Bible, we'll be apt to try to fill the void with whatever's at hand: we'll either invent a religion around what we imagine god ought to be like (which, for some strange reason, invariably looks something like the worst sort of man) or we'll settle for substitutes: pleasures and pursuits, heroes and habits, distractions and deceptions, toys and traditions. None of it satisfies because none of it addresses the way God built us: **"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."** (Genesis 1:26-27) This may explain why man sometimes mistakes himself for God: we are made in God's "image." Since God is spirit, however, this can't refer to our physical form. Rather, it describes certain similarities between God's nature and man's that He built into our species. What we sometimes miss is that these things not only explain how we're "like God." They also explain what God is like.

There are three factors listed here, three things that are specific clues to God's nature that we humans are designed to reflect. First, God is creative. He makes stuff out of nothing. He has ideas and brings them to fruition. He builds, invents, directs, and improves. And mankind is designed to follow in these footsteps, not that all of us do. God's creative nature may seem obvious until we consider the alternative. Our adversary, Satan, has none of these characteristics. His assigned function was to follow orders, so all he knows is submission. He doesn't have a creative bone in his body, so his envy drives him to copy, to counterfeit what has been done by Yahweh (or even by His "creative creation," us), or failing that, to destroy what has been built by God and men. Thus by examining the works of people claiming to follow their god, we can determine what "god" they're following. If they're creative, inventive, and industrious, Yahweh's influence is being demonstrated. But if all they seem to be able to achieve is to force others to submit, to destroy, steal, or copy what others have built, and to seize and squander whatever resources they find, then Satan's agenda is in evidence.

The second attribute of God reflected in the design of man is "dominion" over the remainder of the created world—specifically, its living component. Authority naturally "rolls downhill," that is, it is always derived from a higher source, traceable all the way back to God. (It can be usurped, of course, but only temporarily. In the end, all authority in heaven and on earth will rest upon the shoulders of Yahshua the Messiah-King—see Matthew 28:18 and Isaiah 9:6.) The

Hebrew verb used in Genesis 1:26, translated “have dominion,” is *radah*, which (according the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*) means, “to rule over, dominate, direct, lead, control, subdue, i.e., manage or govern an entity, people, or government with considerable or forceful authority.” I find it telling that the same verb means, “to scoop out and hold in one’s hands,” (like Sampson’s honey in Judges 14:9). This places the emphasis of *radah* on management, not domination. In other words, you’re responsible for the well-being of whatever you rule over—in man’s case, the entire biosphere (no pressure or anything, guys). Note that man was not given dominion over man, but only over the animals. Man himself remained under the *radah*-authority of Yahweh.

The third attribute listed may come as a bit of an epiphany. It says, “**Male and female He created them.**” We’ve previously discussed the “gender roles” of Yahweh and His Holy Spirit, and this reinforces what I observed there: Yahweh can’t be strictly defined by gender. “He” exhibits both “male” and “female” attributes, and these are reflected in the way He built us—male *and* female. Yahweh is generally seen in His male persona—father, provider, protector, savior (when it comes to that) and ultimate authority, while His Holy Spirit is manifested through attributes that stress God’s maternal side—life giver, comforter, confronter, convicter, and fierce defender. One side looks outward, the other, inward. You know how it works: Father is the one who (traditionally, at least) goes out and does battle with the world on behalf of the family; Mom, on the other hand, is in our hearts and in our heads, knowing even before we do when we’ve screwed up. (How *does* she do that, anyway?) It’s no accident that Yahweh commands us to honor *both* our fathers and our mothers (Exodus 20:12): they *both* teach us about God’s nature and His relationship with mankind. Religions that make women second class citizens (Islam springs immediately to mind, but there are others) are reflecting Satan’s desire to obfuscate Yahweh’s pattern and plan. *Both* men and women are created in the image of God—and both sexes are designed to show us who God is.

God’s creation of mankind, as well as His calling us out of the world, is characterized in scripture as a “birth,” of sorts. Chastising Israel, Moses reminds them, “**You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.**” (Deuteronomy 32:18) The word for “bore you” (*yalad*) is the all-purpose Hebrew word for childbirth, used, if you’ll recall, of father, mother, and even the midwife, a concept linked (ever since the fall) to physical distress. In other words, Yahweh brought us forth, though our unwillingness to heed His word causes Him pain. As a human parent, I can relate to that: our children don’t always meet our hopes, or even our expectations. The occasional disappointment and frustration we feel with our kids are tempered with joy and pride (or is that relief?) when they do well, but there are no guarantees.

One thing I *know* human children don't comprehend is the sheer amount of "junk" their parents endure just so their kids can have a life—the pain, expense, sacrifice, planning, and risk. (Adopting kids, as my wife and I have done, at least forces you to go into it with your eyes open.) Don't get me wrong: it's worth every penny, every sleepless night, every drop of blood, sweat, and tears. But from decorating the nursery to paying for college, there are ramifications to "bearing children" (*yalad*) that most kids never think twice about—until they have children of their own, that is.

We should not be surprised, then, to find that God ("**...who gave you birth**") invested far more in us than we normally acknowledge. He says, "**I made the earth and created man on it.... For thus says Yahweh, who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it (He established it; He did not create it empty, He formed it to be inhabited!): 'I am Yahweh, and there is no other.'**" (Isaiah 45:12, 18) Before He created us, God had to create a world for us to live in—an entire universe, in fact. When's the last time you thanked Him for doing that? Think about it: wouldn't you just love to sit your kids down and explain to them everything you've done on their behalf—explain that they aren't merely the semi-accidental result of a moment of shared passion sometime in their distant past, but rather the treasured end product of their parents' combined love, commitment, and optimism? Yes, there was pleasure, but also sacrifice, expense, and hard work. If they really understood all that it took to give them a life, they might act a bit differently; they might not take so much for granted—they might actually honor their father and mother. So is it really so hard for us to understand that *our* Father, Yahweh, wants us to understand the same sorts of things about Him? Would we behave as we do if we really understood the incredible lengths to which God went in order to see us walking before Him? Whatever we feel about our kids, God feels about us—only more so. And if that thought terrifies you, then maybe you're beginning to see why "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom."

When I was a young packaging designer, I had a life-changing epiphany one day. After months of sparring with sales people and their clients over what I *should have done*, it occurred to me that my job was simply to be a competent designer; it was *not* my job to read minds. If they required something specific and unexpected (or merely stupid), they'd have to tell me about it. This took a tremendous burden off my shoulders, and strangely enough, it made me a better designer, for I began making fewer assumptions (read: guesses) and started asking tougher questions before I began each project. I bring it up now because there's a corollary in the relationship between God and man: He does not demand that we have abilities that He Himself didn't give us.

I'm not discounting the responsibilities implied by free will, of course, but you can't choose to do the impossible. I can elect to go and visit my kids in

Florida; I *cannot* choose to fly to the moon on gossamer wings. God asks nothing of us that's beyond our ability—even though it may be beyond our current state of faith and trust. When recruiting Moses at the burning bush, Yahweh (showing considerably more patience that we might have) “discussed” the matter with the man He had chosen for the task of liberating Israel before he was even born. Moses tried to “beg off,” claiming (with ample reason, no doubt) that he couldn't cut it as a public speaker. Yahweh countered, **“Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, Yahweh?”** (Exodus 4:11) In other words, God was telling Him, *What I've given you is adequate for the task I've asked you to do. Okay, so you've got a speech impediment. You've also got a brother who speaks quite well, so we'll count him among your assets. My grace is sufficient for you.* That's a lesson we all need to learn.

Of course, compared to the Living God, we can't do *anything* significant. Without Yahweh's power, Moses—even with brother Aaron as his wing man—couldn't have made a dent in Pharaoh's resolve to keep his slaves in bondage. And although God could have freed Israel in a heartbeat without resorting to such flawed and clumsy human representation, He chose not to. Like a doting father letting his young sons “help” with the chores, or a loving mother encouraging her little girls to “assist” in the kitchen, Yahweh wants us to participate, even though He could get things done a lot more efficiently without us. In His eyes, our participation is the whole point. God doesn't need our help, but He does want our involvement: **“Yahweh looks down from heaven; He sees all the children of man. From where He sits enthroned He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.”** (Psalm 33:13-15) “Fashioning the hearts of men” may sound suspiciously like “controlling their desires,” but it's not like that at all. Having been “made in the image of God,” we possess the privilege of choice—an essential component in the capacity for love. *That's* how hearts are fashioned—with the ability to choose our own destinies.

A choice is like a promise: it's a conscious declaration of which path one has decided to follow. Men however, being finite and fallible, change their minds—we make “course corrections”—throughout life. God expects us to do so. But since Yahweh is infinite and immutable, what He chooses *stays* chosen: **“God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not fulfill it?”** (Numbers 23:19) Yahweh isn't ever surprised at how things turned out, so there's no reason for Him to change His mind. Unlike us, He has no use for regret or remorse. **“The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for He is not a man, that He should have regret.”** (1 Samuel 15:29)

So what are we to make of passages like *this*? **“Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation**

or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in My sight, not listening to My voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.” (Jeremiah 18:6-10) At its core, this is one of the most amazing statements concerning God’s relationship with man in the entire Bible. As we have seen, Yahweh **“is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind.”** But here His stated intention is to modify His actions based upon whatever “course corrections” we make—for better or worse. In other words, we get to call the shots concerning the destiny of our own civilization. That’s an awesome amount of power to hold in our hands. As with the helm of a ship, we (in a sense) control something huge (the wrath or mercy of God) through something relatively insignificant—our own volition. We can either point the ship toward its intended destination, or steer it toward the rocks.

Perhaps the best example of this principle is Yahweh’s treatment of Nineveh—capital of the Assyrian empire—at the time of the prophet Jonah (about 760 BC). Their repentance (even though the grumpy prophet didn’t bother mentioning that such a thing might avert the looming disaster) bought the city another hundred years of peace. In the same way, Israel’s eventual repentance and acceptance of their Messiah—prophesied hundreds of times in scripture—will precipitate the most astonishing incidence of national restoration the world has ever seen. But alas, it hasn’t happened yet.

It’s important to note that both the “destruction and disaster” and the “building and planting” God has promised are *national* phenomena, first Israel’s, but also applying to other nations or kingdoms. (Pay attention, America.) We are not talking about individual spiritual destinies here, but corporate and temporal ones. When dealing with individuals, Yahweh’s position never changes, for the simple reason that individual salvation is defined not by our behavior (though that’s certainly an indicator of our spiritual condition) but by the presence of God’s life—His Spirit—within the soul of each believer, something that once given, is never taken away. As Yahshua said, **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born [from above].’”** (John 3:5-7) Or put more bluntly, **“Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”** (I John 5:12) A nation’s “lifespan” is negotiable with God; a person’s is not.

In the Jeremiah passage above, we read, **“Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.”** Isaiah too reports, **“But now, O Yahweh, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter. We are all the work of Your hand.”** (Isaiah 64:8) The point is that as the potter forms his creations in clay, it is

his prerogative alone to destroy a flawed piece, and then reform it—the clay doesn’t get a vote. God is like the potter in this respect (the difference being that He had to make his own “clay” out of nothing). Yahweh reserves the right to squash any nation back into a shapeless lump and start all over again with it, if in His estimation it can’t be salvaged. Indeed, Isaiah goes on to bemoan Israel’s state: **“Be not so terribly angry, O Yahweh, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all Your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised You, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. Will You restrain yourself at these things, O Yahweh? Will You keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?”** (Isaiah 64:9-12) *Huh?* These words were written at least a hundred years *before* Babylon’s armies sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon’s temple. But the clay on the wheel was already starting to wobble and fold: it was only a matter of time before Yahweh would have to **“relent of the good that [He] had intended to do to it.”**

It never ceases to amaze me how men treat God with such flippant familiarity. They’re perfectly willing to admit his superiority, of course, but their conception of *scale* is totally off base. Some of us behave as if we thought God was someone with whom we can deal *mano a mano*. We act as if, though He’s admittedly more powerful, His strength (compared to ours) is at least somewhere in the same order of magnitude. *No, it’s not!* Not even close. And it’s not just a question of who’s in charge (as in the metaphor of the potter and the clay). It’s a matter of an almost incomprehensible disparity in comparative glory. Man is alive; God is life itself. Man’s glory is derived; God’s is intrinsic. Man reasons, calculates, and makes progress; God’s wisdom is eternal, His understanding unfathomable. Man assembles; God creates. Man aspires; God condescends. Man occasionally does things of which he might be proud; God doesn’t even have peers to whom He might boast. The contrast between God and man is revealed in differences not of degree, but of kind.

Human language (not to mention our limited powers of perception) prevents us from adequately conveying the vast discrepancy between the awesomeness of Yahweh and our own mortal condition. David gave it a pretty good shot, though: **“When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet.”** (Psalm 8:3-6) That’s the question, isn’t it: “What *is* man that You are mindful of him?” If it were not for the fact that God created us specifically for the purpose of sharing fellowship with Him—enjoying the same kind of close familial relationship we experience in miniature through our parents, children, siblings and spouses—we would be so far beneath God, we

would not even be able to perceive His existence. It would be like a virus contemplating California—inconceivable. And yet, we not only perceive His presence, we underestimate it.

David has explained the reason why we find it so hard to comprehend the extent of the dichotomy between Yahweh's greatness and our own: God has elevated us in wisdom and ability far above the rest of his living creation, placing us in charge of every living thing He put on this planet (with the exception of other men, as we saw in Genesis 1:26). It helps to be reminded that we aren't number one in the universe; we aren't even number two. Though "crowned with glory and honor," man must take a distant back seat not only to God, but also to the angelic spirit messengers He created to serve Him. It kind of reminds me of the state of Texas: it used to be the undisputed biggest state in the Union, and they were insufferably proud of it. But in 1959, Alaska became the 49<sup>th</sup> state, and the mortified Texans were told to shut up and stop complaining or they'd split Alaska in two and make Texas the *third* largest state!

We humans have a lot to be thankful for, but little to boast of. All we are and all we have we owe to our Creator. **"Know that Yahweh, He is God. It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For Yahweh is good. His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations."** (Psalm 100:3-5) The only reason we are allowed to get this close to our matchless Creator is that He wants it this way. There is no other explanation.

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To compare man to God is of necessity to compare the temporary to the permanent. Yes, we are built in the image of God, so thoughts of "forever" are part of our nature: **"He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."** (Ecclesiastes 3:11) You don't have to believe the Bible to yearn for heaven (or dread hell, for that matter). The dream of an afterlife is endemic in humanity, even (oddly enough) among people who don't believe in God. But as far as our universal experience is concerned, people *don't* last forever. They're born, they live, and then they die. The only reason we can even conceive of a life beyond this one is that God has—one way or another—told us about it. He has put eternity into our hearts.

The Psalmist spells it out: **"O my God, I say, 'take me not away in the midst of my days—You whose years endure throughout all generations!' Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will**

pass away, but You are the same, and Your years have no end.” (Psalm 102:24-27) Even the “permanent” bits of the physical creation—the heavens and the earth—are vulnerable to the insidious ravages of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, but God is not. The Psalmist’s tacit prayer, then, is that we frail believers might be allowed to personally participate in Yahweh’s eternal nature.

In the very next Psalm, David affirms that this is not only possible, it’s actually Yahweh’s plan. He begins by telling us what we already knew: **“As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.”** That’s about as far as our common mortal experience takes us. We’re here today and gone tomorrow. **“But the steadfast love of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments.”** (Psalm 103:15-18) If His love extends from “everlasting to everlasting,” then the recipients of that love must logically be rendered “everlasting” as well. This requires that the permanent nature of Yahweh somehow be bestowed upon man. But not to all men. Three “conditions” for everlasting status are listed (all of which pretty much indicate the same thing).

First, the recipients of Yahweh’s everlasting love “fear” Him. The Hebrew word is *yare*: to fear, revere, respect, venerate, or stand in awe of Him. We tend to stress the “reverence” aspect of *yare* today (as perhaps we should, since it is also true that “perfect love casts out fear”), but we should not neglect the “being afraid” side of this. Let’s get something straight. Pop theology notwithstanding, God is not “the man upstairs,” our “friend in high places,” or our “co-pilot.” Our relationship is not that of equals, but more like a toddler with his father. Yes, Papa loves us with all His heart, but He’s not afraid to spank us when we get out of line—if He deems that a little “pain” in our lives will encourage us to learn a valuable lesson. Does He have the power to utterly destroy us? Absolutely—so much so that He has to go to extraordinary lengths just to shield us from His own awesome glory. Every form through which Yahweh has presented Himself in our collective human experience is a radically diminished manifestation of the One True God. This purposeful restraint is the only thing preventing our untimely demise. Fear? If the raw power wielded by the One who can *speak* galaxies into existence doesn’t give you pause, there’s something wrong with you.

The second requisite condition for everlasting life is “keeping Yahweh’s covenant.” A perceptive student of scripture might well ask, “*Which* covenant?” There are many of them, made by God to different men at different times, promising different things under different conditions. Some were unilateral—Yahweh promising to do something, with no “strings attached.” In His covenant with Noah for example, God promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood, and He provided the rainbow as a sign to ratify His word (Genesis 9).



Sometimes there were responsibilities required of the recipient of the covenant. Thus Yahweh's covenant with Abraham, giving His descendants the Promised Land in perpetuity, was to be sealed with the sign of circumcision (Genesis 17). In the same way, the Mosaic covenant was confirmed through the keeping of the Sabbath (see Genesis 31:16). In the end, however, none of these individual covenants stands on its own. Properly understood, they are all but components of one sweeping promise on God's part—an everlasting covenant of grace, in which Yahweh pledges to redeem and restore anyone who turns to Him in faith, trusting in *Him*, not their own works, for their salvation. (It's no coincidence that the Savior's name, Yahshua, means "Yahweh is Salvation.")

The third stated condition for receiving "everlasting" status is parallel to the second: it's "remembering to do God's commandments." I realize that this *sounds* like works-based salvation, but it's not. These "commandments" (Hebrew *piqudim*—literally: precepts, directions, regulations—the responsibilities that God places upon His people) are spelled out in the Torah. The "Law of Moses" is a body of instruction that nobody has ever been able to flawlessly observe. But having studied it for years (see my resulting tome on the subject: *The Owner's Manual*) I can assure you that *everything* Yahweh told Israel to do in the Torah was symbolic in some way of the coming Messiah—God's fulfillment of His end of the covenant of grace of which I spoke. Everything—the sacrifices, the design of the tabernacle, the appointed holy days, the priesthood and Levitical order, civil and criminal jurisprudence, even the dietary and cleanliness rules—*everything* is prophetic, one way or another, of Yahweh's solution to the problem, to wit: that we have, through our sin, separated ourselves from the God who made us and loves us.

The nature of both the problem and the solution is identified by Isaiah: **"Behold, Yahweh's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear."** (Isaiah 59:1-2) Our shortcomings are not "too much" for Yahweh to deal with. The only thing that curtails His power to save us is the restriction implied by His primary gift to man: free will. It was our choice to rebel; it is also our choice to repent. Everybody seems to like the idea of eternal life, but the fact is, that life is only possible through being assimilated into the One who lives forever. Eternity without God is an oxymoron.

Yahweh's offer of grace stands, whether or not we choose to receive it. **"I Yahweh do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."** Yahweh had promised Abraham that his descendants would be the beneficiaries of an "everlasting covenant" (as it's called in Genesis 17:7). So destroying Israel for its sins was not an option, for God keeps His word. It's worth noting, however, that

God never made this kind of everlasting promise to any other nation. The covenant is there to demonstrate Yahweh's faithfulness, not Israel's worthiness. I love Israel, but let's face it: spiritually, they're about as rebellious a nation as they come. If Yahweh can keep His promises to Israel, He can keep His promises to *anybody*. **"From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says Yahweh of hosts."** (Malachi 3:6-7) These "statutes," as I said, were a signpost that pointed toward Christ. He was their fulfillment, the personification of their prophetic promise. Therefore, acknowledging Yahshua as the Messiah is the only possible way to "keep" God's Law. And "keeping" the precepts of God—honoring His covenant—is, as we read in Psalm 103, the only possible way to enjoy **"The steadfast love of Yahweh...from everlasting to everlasting."**

The bottom line: our eternal prospects are entirely dependent upon our relationship with Yahweh, since our existence is fleeting and ephemeral without such a relationship. **"O Yahweh, what is man that You regard him, or the son of man that You think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow."** (Psalm 144:3-4) The irony is that without a living relationship with our eternal God, being as temporary as "a passing shadow" can only be construed as the most tender of mercies. I mean, why would anyone want to live forever separated from Yahweh's love?

And given the truth of the saying, **"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God,'"** (Psalm 14:1) why would any rational person, upon acknowledging the role of God as Creator, stop there? It seems to me, the fool might also say, "Thanks for the assist, Lord. But now that I'm here, I don't need You any more." Really? **"Have you not known? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable."** There's more to creation than just making stuff out of nothing, as impressive as that may be. **"He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might He increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for Yahweh shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."** (Isaiah 40:28-31) The "benefits" of a familial relationship with Yahweh aren't restricted to the afterlife. They begin the moment we're born—born *again* into His Spirit, that is. In *this* life, in our mortal existence, we can achieve whatever our God asks of us, even if it's "impossible." The power we use is His; the stamina we need to see the job through comes from Him. The understanding and insight we need for God's work comes from Him; all the resources we need are drawn from Yahweh's vast treasury.

You can kid yourself, of course: you can try to do God's work in your own strength (and, dare I say, for your own glory). But why would you want to? You'd

be much more productive (and have much more fun) if you serve God on God's terms—if you “wait for Yahweh.” I picture the difference this way: you can be a three-year-old trying to “mow” forty acres of hay on your hands and knees with a pair of blunt scissors. Or you can sit in Papa's lap up on that big 'ol John Deere tractor, pretending to steer and giggling yourself silly. And getting the job done. It's your choice.

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Have you ever heard some misguided soul say, “*I'd like to give God a piece of my mind,*” as if Yahweh would surely solve all this person's problems, if only He weren't so dimwitted or mean-spirited? This kind of irate outburst betrays an astonishing degree of arrogance, not to mention a fundamental misperception of who God is and what our relationship with Him is supposed to be like. Yahweh is not our heavenly “rich uncle,” some kind of celestial Santa Claus, or a magical genie poised to grant us three wishes, any more than He's a cold, distant, disinterested deity who's got nothing better to do than angrily condemn us for being human. Such people think a “God of love” ought to bail them out of jail, cover their gambling losses, and turn a blind eye toward their crimes and misdemeanors. They think God should keep them on the payroll just because they show up at the jobsite, or give them an “A” for merely attending class. But a God who actually *cares* about us will do none of those things. He will, rather, encourage us to improve, to fulfill our potential: Yahweh wants to *teach* us.

Scripture makes it quite clear that we are not in a position to impart any information to Yahweh. Paul asks (rhetorically, of course): **“Who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”** (I Corinthians 2:16) As does Isaiah: **“Who has measured the Spirit of Yahweh, or what man shows Him his counsel? Whom did He consult, and who made Him understand? Who taught Him the path of justice, and taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding?”** (Isaiah 40:13-14) The unstated answer is, “Nobody did, because nobody can.” On the contrary, God measures *us*; He provides His counsel to illuminate *us*. He teaches *us* in the paths of justice, and shows *us* the way of knowledge and understanding. We must consult Him: He doesn't need our opinions, even though He apparently loves to hear the sound of our voices.

The hypothetical absentee god of popular myth isn't interested in our personal welfare, but the God of the Bible *is*—Yahweh is up to His neck (so to speak) in our affairs. He's fully involved in this project called “man,” expending untold resources, taking unprecedented risks, and exhibiting a degree of emotional investment that we can't even imagine. If we fail, I'm pretty sure Yahweh takes it

personally. David informs us, **“Yahweh works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the people of Israel.”** These aren’t two independent thoughts. There’s a cause and effect relationship: making His ways known to us is *how* God “works righteousness,” and the moment His justice is forsaken, we find ourselves oppressed. **“Yahweh is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will He keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”** (Psalm 103:6-12)

A God of justice and righteousness has (by definition) inflexible standards of holiness and behavior. A God of mercy and love has (by definition) a burning desire to forgive. Yahweh is both things, as contradictory as that might sound. How does He fulfill both of these seemingly mutually exclusive character traits? How does He “remove our transgressions” far from us? *Someone* must be repaid “according to our iniquities.” *Someone* must be “dealt with according to our sins.” Normally, that would be us—the ones who actually broke God’s law. But Yahweh has arranged to pay the fines for us, if we’ll let Him.

This isn’t as ludicrous a concept as it sounds; it actually happens all the time. One rainy afternoon a while back, my youngest son had a minor solo automobile accident, and was subsequently “blessed” with a traffic ticket. Since he’s a stone-broke college student, I had a choice: let him suffer the consequences of his mistake, or get his car fixed myself and pay the ticket for him. Like Yahweh, I offered to pay for everything, so he could continue his studies. But my son also had a choice to make: he could have said, “Thanks, but no thanks, Pop. This was my fault, so I’m going to fix it myself. I’ll get a job within walking distance of the house, take a year off my studies, and make everything right.” While that may *sound* like the unselfish thing to do, it wouldn’t have achieved what his mother and I really wanted for him: to continue his education (while at the same time learning a valuable lesson about driving too fast on rain-slick roads). While we all *wished* that he had driven more carefully and avoided the accident, once it was done, it was done: we all had choices to make. My son (whose agenda aligned with mine in this case) gratefully accepted my help. Smart lad. As painful as it was for me to “fix” his self-imposed problem, we were both glad I did.

My question is this: if the solution was as obvious as this for a minor fender-bender, why is there such angst over the parallel (though infinitely more significant) problem of “paying” for our sins? The principle is identical: our Father didn’t want us to sin in the first place, though now that we have, He earnestly hopes that we’ll “go, and sin no more.” But because He loves us, because He’s a God of mercy as well as a God of justice, He paid everything that

was required to get us back on the road of life. So David concludes, **“As a father shows compassion to his children, so Yahweh shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.”** (Psalm 103:13-14) Our proper response should be (1) undying gratitude, (2) a reinforced sense of godly fear, (3) the resolve to learn our lesson—to improve where we failed in the past, and (4) a determination to forgive others as we have been forgiven.

Compassion and forgiveness can only be logically bestowed by the greater upon the lesser, just as justice must be served by the stronger upon the weaker, and knowledge is taught by the master to the neophyte. Any way we slice it, by any measure, God is in the position of supremacy: **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares Yahweh. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”** (Isaiah 55:8-9) Words fail us, of course. As we saw previously, the comparison is not that of degree, but of kind. It’s not just that Yahweh is “more worthy” than we are; it’s that His worthiness is of a different and greater sort entirely. He plays a different game, in a different league, under infinitely tougher rules. It’s not just the first day of T-ball season versus the last game of the World Series—the dichotomy is immeasurably greater than that. And we’re not merely speaking of temporal matters, either. Yahweh (being the Creator-Spirit) is fundamentally superior in the spiritual realm as well: **“Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker?”** (Job 4:17)

Yahshua Himself showed us where this line of reasoning leads: **“When He had washed [His disciples’] feet and put on His outer garments and resumed His place, He said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.’”** (John 13:12-17) Washing someone’s feet in that society was considered the lowliest of tasks, the work of slaves. One might have expected God incarnate (and note that Yahshua’s divine credentials were well established by this time) to insist on being shown honor and deference by the “little people.” But Christ, exercising God’s prerogative to teach, demonstrated the counterintuitive principle that only by humbling oneself in service does one become great in the Kingdom of God.

The ultimate act of humility, of course, would be for an innocent man to die willingly to cover the sins of a guilty one—but that’s a path down which we (being guilty ourselves) would not be able to follow. So foot washing was used as an example of the kind of thing we should do on behalf of others—humbling ourselves in whatever way and to whatever degree it would take to make the love

of God in our lives evident to a lost world. Note that humility doesn't appear in a vacuum—it's not of much use as an abstract concept. It must manifest itself in service, and not just in "glorious" modes of service (like "serving" as a senator, judge, or pastor), but in doing whatever is needful, however menial or demeaning that may seem to be.

One of the most oft-recurring themes in the Bible is God's annoyance with the pride of man. In the presence of Yahweh, we have nothing of which to boast, no occasion for arrogance. Like bacteria under the microscope, it would seem pointless to the witness if one microbe acted as though he were superior to any of the others, and even more ludicrous if the germs banded together and challenged the observer himself. (That does happen, of course. It's called "disease.") This is why Yahshua made a point of washing His disciples' feet: we are all equal before God—we are all sinners in need of grace. And yet, it is, ironically enough, God's own benevolence that can make it seem to us as if we're perhaps more valuable or significant than we really are. Job muses, **"What is man, that You make so much of him, and that You set your heart on him, visit him every morning and test him every moment?"** (Job 7:17-18) Good point: if God expends so much energy on our behalf, if He invests so much emotional capital into our race, then it's only natural to conclude that we must be exceptional in some way. And we are, but as a race of creatures uniquely made in His image, not as individuals within that race.

For this reason, we must be cognizant of two parallel misconceptions that plague mankind—two systematic sins that have walked hand in hand since the days of Nimrod. The first is that individuals can rise to the status of "gods" within their societies—that is, that people who are sufficiently strong, skilled, rich, beautiful, or even fortunate, may arise to a place of adoration among their peers. As attractive or powerful as these people may seem to be, we must remember to follow God alone, to worship the Creator, not the creature. This is as true for Gandhi as it is for Hitler.

The second delusion common to man is that he—as a race—can become a "god" unto himself. This, of course, is the basis of one of the world's most widespread religions today, atheistic secular humanism. The idea that we can solve our own problems, that we are intrinsically self-sufficient, that we by our own intellect and force of will can conquer all our adversaries, real and imagined, is what I call the pride of the paramecium—the microbe in the petri dish imagining his kind to be the very pinnacle of life in the universe. These fools think that if there were a God, mankind would surely stand on a par with Him. Job knew better. He observed, **"For He [Yahweh] is not a man, as I am, that I might answer Him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both."** (Job 9:32-33)

Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, had a similarly firm grasp on the reality of the situation: **“Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in Yahweh; my strength is exalted in Yahweh. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation. There is none holy like Yahweh. There is none besides You; there is no rock like our God.’ Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for Yahweh is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed.”** (I Samuel 2:1-3) She realized that whatever strength we humans may possess is due entirely to the God who provides it, the Rock in whom we find shelter. We therefore have no basis for pride, whether as individuals or as a species. Yahweh alone is qualified to teach and to render righteous judgment, for He alone is a “God of knowledge.”

So why is it that so few in today’s world listen to Yahweh? Why are His judgments ignored and his teachings disregarded? It’s because we still have free will—the right to choose our own destiny—and the vast majority have chosen poorly. Will this be the status quo forever? No. The scriptures speak incessantly of a time when all people (led by Israel) will sit at the feet of God and learn His ways. Isaiah, in a clearly Millennial passage, says, **“All your children shall be taught by Yahweh, and great shall be the peace of your children.”** Israel is Israel; Israel’s *“children”* are the called-out assembly of Yahshua—the ekklesia, the church (see Revelation 12:17), comprised of both believing Jews and gentiles. **“In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you.”** (Isaiah 54:13-14) Yahshua alluded to this passage, applying it to Himself, when He announced, **“It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me—not that anyone has seen the Father except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”** (John 6:45-47) In our present age, the vast majority have declared, “We will not have this man to rule over us.” But here He has bluntly stated that the Kingdom blessings—not to mention eternal life—are available only to those who “come to Him.” The only way to see God is to look upon Christ.

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“Seeing God” is the undying quest of mankind, isn’t it? Throughout our history, mankind has been faced with a riddle, a conundrum: we cannot see God, and yet we long for His presence, as if we somehow know that we’re made to be with Him. It might seem reasonable to conclude that worshipping something you can’t “see” is mere superstition, and yet Job, a near contemporary of Abraham who was described one who “feared God and turned away from evil,” knew Him only by reputation, as invisible Spirit: **“Behold, He passes by me, and I see Him not; He moves on, but I do not perceive Him.”** (Job 9:11) Yahweh would later speak

directly to Job “out of the whirlwind,” but he still wasn’t allowed to actually *see* His God.

Yahweh is so awesome, He had to warn Moses (who desired in the worst way to see Him), **“You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.”** (Exodus 33:20) He did, however, give Moses the briefest glimpse of His glory, and the echo of that experience was heard by all of Israel, as he reminded them decades later: **“You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then Yahweh spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.”** (Deuteronomy 4:11-12) And even that invisible voice was so terrifying, they begged Moses to intercede for them so they wouldn’t have to hear it again.

Moses descended the mountain bearing strict instructions that prohibited picturing what God might look like: **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.”** (Exodus 20:4-5) We can all understand God’s prohibition against idols representing false gods, but why restrain people from making images of what they imagined the One True God might look like? Would not that make worshipping Him easier, or more straightforward, at least? Since man was made in the image of God, we have an innate creative nature. Why not give it a chance to stretch its wings a little? What would be the harm in that? (...he asked, tongue planted firmly in cheek.)

The answer, of course, is that Yahweh intended to “make” for us *His own* “carved image,” so to speak—Someone who would be the very picture of God, visible to all mankind, One to whom it *would* be proper for us to “bow down and serve.” The problem was that He didn’t exactly produce this “image” that afternoon. They—and we—had to wait many centuries for it (Him) to arrive among us. But actually, that’s not entirely true, either. Immediately after Moses received the tablets of testimony on Mount Horeb (at the end of Exodus 24), the instructions began for the building of the sanctuary and its appurtenances. This, in artist’s terms, was to be the sketch preceding the painting, the clay scale model of the bronze or marble masterpiece. The tabernacle was to be the image of the Image. That’s why John wrote, **“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”** (John 1:18) The “Law” was the picture of the Messiah, who was in turn the picture of the invisible God. Grace and truth are the result of Yahweh having become visible to us, if only we’ll open our eyes. The word translated “declared” here tells the story: it’s the Greek verb *exegeomai*, meaning to lead or show the way, hence to draw out in narrative, to unfold a teaching: to recount, rehearse, describe, explain, make fully known, or



provide detailed information. If we wish to comprehend Yahweh, we must get to know His only begotten Son, Yahshua, God's very own "graven Image."

Paul takes the same truth in a different direction: **"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn [i.e., the one to whom belongs the right of inheritance] of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him."** (Colossians 1:15-16) It's pointless to try to sort out the pronoun "Him" here: it makes no difference whether you think of Yahshua or Yahweh as the Creator and ultimate authority, for they are the same person, the same divine entity—the one reduced to human manifestation, the other not. I expect this will be somewhat easier to comprehend when Christ reigns in glory in His Millennial Kingdom than when He first walked the earth as the sacrificial Lamb of God, of course. And lest it slip our minds, I should also reiterate that among the things created by, for, and through Him is *us*, the human race. Just because we're allowed to reject Him if we choose to, it doesn't follow that we don't belong to Him. Our only purpose for existing is to be in Him and with Him. **"He...is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion."** (I Timothy 6:15-16) Again, is he talking about Yahweh, or Yahshua? Yes, he is.

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When you've gotten past the utter dichotomy of existence between God and man, perhaps the most practical way of seeing the inherent contrast is as between a Judge and a defendant. The job of a judge is to try the case based on the evidence and testimony presented before him, to reach a verdict, and (if the verdict is guilty) pronounce a just sentence. He is bound to uphold the law. The court (ideally) operates according to established lawful rules and procedures, not anarchy, prejudice, bribery, or personal opinion. (The fact that Yahweh Himself instituted all of the laws, rules, and procedures is beside the point for our purposes. He's still got "rules" to follow. Because He cannot lie, He must live by His own word.) Further, the judge can be presumed to have the full authority of the government behind him.

The defendant (men as individuals, or mankind in general) finds himself standing before the judge because he has been accused of some crime. (No crime, no contact—at least in the context of satisfying the law.) It is therefore incumbent upon a defendant to either (1) demonstrate his innocence, (2) be prepared to pay the penalty, or (3) explain some reason why, though guilty, he should be

pardoned. David looked at his life and knew that #1 wasn't going to happen—for himself or anybody else: **“Hear my prayer, O Yahweh; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In Your faithfulness answer me, in Your righteousness! Enter not into judgment with Your servant, for no one living is righteous before You.”** (Psalm 143:1-2) But #2 would have meant his total and permanent separation from the God he loved, a fate he couldn't bear to face. What amazes me is how many of us *don't* think they'd mind being eternally separated from Yahweh, since He's not particularly welcome in their daily lives anyway. Me? I've gotta go with David on this one: the very thought of being separated from Yahweh terrifies me, though I too realize that my sins have—under the law—consigned me to that horrible fate.

So there's only one thing left to do: beg for mercy, as David did. I, of course, have a distinct advantage over David in this regard. For him, God's mercy was theoretical, a matter of hope and trust in what amounted to some rather nebulous promises on God's part. Mercy was assured, but how it was to be delivered wasn't remotely clear. (See Exodus 20:6, for example, where God's mercy is tied to our love for Him and our obedience to His commandments. But *nobody* was completely successful in literally keeping God's commandments, so where did that leave us?) For me, on the other hand, the means of God's mercy is a matter of historical record. Yahshua became the Lamb of God on our behalf, fulfilling the requirements of the Torah once and for all, and becoming the vehicle for Yahweh's mercy toward fallen mankind. Of course, like any other vehicle, you have to *get in* if you hope to go anywhere.

The story of Job portrays a court case, of sorts—a strange one, for Job, the victim, becomes the defendant in a way, like a rape case in which the perp's lawyers try to present the victim as a slut who “had it coming.” At issue is who was at fault for Job's fall from prosperity. The narrator states from the outset that Satan—the adversary—was directly responsible. But why was he allowed to do all this damage to an ostensibly innocent man—seizing his wealth, killing his children, and afflicting him with physical torment? Job's “friends” serve as the prosecutors. Their case is, in a nutshell, that Job *must* have sinned against Yahweh, and therefore his “punishment” is justified, making *Yahweh Himself* the perpetrator of Job's woes. Job, for his part, remains stubbornly unwilling to blame Yahweh for any unfairness, though he maintains his innocence and can't figure out what's happened to him either. His defense is summed up thusly: **“Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him. He also shall be my salvation [you guessed it: *yâshuw`ah*], for a hypocrite could not come before Him.”** (Job 13:15-16)

While all of us have sinned, the very first verse of the account describes Job as one who was “blameless and upright,” who “feared God and shunned evil.” So it would seem that if Job was singled out for the wrath of Yahweh, then we're all in

deep spit, and not just in the afterlife either, but now, in this world. But our experience tells us this just isn't so. Many really bad men live to ripe old ages, and die peacefully in their sleep. So after all the arguments had been presented about why Job might have been singled out like this, the Judge, Yahweh, bangs His gavel and proceeds to set the record straight.

**"Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?'"** He's addressing Job (the victim) but He's speaking about his prosecutors (or is that, *persecutors*?), Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, and the young Elihu. He's basically saying, "Shut up, all of you. I'm going to ask Job some questions that will help him understand what's going on, 'cause you guys are nowhere close." **"Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to Me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"** No matter how "good" he was, it was obvious to Job and everybody else that when faced with questions like these, he was out of his depth. Is this what it would take—for someone to be with God at creation, to in fact *be* God—for the trials we face in life to be undeserved?

Yahweh continues in the same impossibly demanding vein: **"Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?'"** I might rephrase that, "Do you know how gravity works?" He's demanding that Job explain what *still* stumps the most brilliant of humanity's scientific minds, as if to say, if you're not smarter than the smartest man who ever lived, then you have no right to stand in My presence. **"Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It is changed like clay under the seal, and its features stand out like a garment. From the wicked their light is withheld, and their uplifted arm is broken."** I like the way the New Living Translation puts this: **"Have you ever commanded the morning to appear and caused the dawn to rise in the east? Have you ever told the daylight to spread to the ends of the earth, to bring an end to the night's wickedness? For the features of the earth take shape as the light approaches, and the dawn is robed in red. The light disturbs the haunts of the wicked, and it stops the arm that is raised in violence."** Basically, He's asking Job, "Can you control the earth's rate of rotation? And can you drive man's evil impulses into hiding by shedding light upon them? (God, by the way, has promised to improve on even this, banishing darkness from the night altogether—see Revelation 22:5.) **"Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this."** (Job 38:1-18)

Yahweh continues pounding away with impossible questions for three agonizing chapters. The unspoken answer to every one of them was, “You can’t do any of this, Job, but I can, and I have. **“And Yahweh said to Job: ‘Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.’”** A “faultfinder” is one who reproves or teaches (from the verb *yasar*: to discipline, chasten or instruct). Job had been reproving his friends for their errant theological conclusions, but in doing so, he had come dangerously close to “contending” with Yahweh Himself. Now he began to realize that in defending Himself, He had tacitly called into question Yahweh’s sovereignty: **“Then Job answered Yahweh and said: ‘Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further....’”**

But he wasn’t getting off the hook quite that easily. **“Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: ‘Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to Me. Will you even put Me in the wrong? Will you condemn Me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like His? Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on everyone who is proud and abase him. Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you.’”** (Job 40:1-14) At last, God put his finger on Job’s problem: pride. Even though he realized his need for a redeemer, he was still protesting his innocence. As men go, Job was as good as they come, but here Yahweh points out that this wasn’t nearly good enough.

Finally, Job understands: **“I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”** (Job 42:2-6) Reality check: where Job failed, I have failed a hundred times over. It is only by God’s grace that I don’t sit in an ash heap, scraping my boils with a potsherd. I too readily admit that **“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”** And yet, I feel compelled to do so again:

We have been discussing, if you’ll recall, the contrast between God as judge and man as defendant. If you’re like me, you got thrown a bit when Yahweh addressed Job’s predicament by merely pointing out what he didn’t know and couldn’t do. Perhaps this explains why he wasn’t immune to trouble. But it doesn’t explain why Job, an admittedly “righteous” man, was singled out for suffering. Upon reflection, I believe the answer to the conundrum lies in the nature of the questions Yahweh posed. He didn’t ask, “Are you perfect, sinless, and totally without fault?” Job wasn’t: nobody is. No, what Yahweh asked him (for all intents and purposes) was, “Are you God?”

Why would Yahweh ask such a ridiculous question? Upon reflection, I think it was to reveal to us that His plan was to subject *Himself*—manifested in human form—to infinitely more suffering than Job had experienced, in order to *personally* become the “redeemer” Job himself knew he needed. As comparatively “upright” as he was, Job was still a sinner. His friends suspected it, but he *knew* it: he couldn’t reconcile *himself* to God, much less do so for anyone else. But Job understood the concept of substitutionary sacrifice (see Job 1:5), a precedent Yahweh had instituted as far back as the Garden of Eden. His woes weren’t a matter of punishment for the guilty. They were, rather, a hint—a prophecy—as to how, before God, guilty souls could be miraculously transformed into innocence through the act of sacrifice.

So when Yahweh asked Job, *Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth? Do you control the motion of the stars and planets? Can you manage the weather and the biosphere? Are life and death yours to administer?* Job could only hang his head in shame at his own comparative insignificance. But Yahshua the Messiah, faced with the same questions, could respond, *I was there—Yes, I am able to do all of this, for I am One with Yahweh the Creator. I, the Word of Yahweh, was in the beginning with God because I am God, though I am cloaked in humanity and diminished in glory.* Only a Man who could answer Yahweh’s withering verbal assault in the affirmative would be worthy to act as mankind’s living redeemer (see Job 19:25), becoming the sacrifice that satisfies the legal requirement that our sins be met with punishment, that our shortcomings be recompensed with separation from our holy God. Adam and Eve had learned in Eden that only innocence can cover guilt. Job learned in Uz that only God’s righteousness can stand before God. And we learned—or should have—at Calvary that both God’s righteousness and His perfect innocence were made available to us through the sacrifice of the guiltless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, if only we’ll allow Him to stand for us.

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There are two types of “criminal” in this world. First are those who recognize the authority of the “state” but err in their performance of their acknowledged legal responsibilities—like Job did, or as in my son’s “crime” that I mentioned a few pages back. The vast majority of us are this type of lawbreaker: we all make mistakes. That doesn’t make us innocent, of course; it only makes us normal. The second type of criminal, in contrast, acts as if he believes nobody has legitimate authority over him. He steals because he covets what does not rightfully belong to him. He murders (or merely assaults) because he has no love for any life but his own. And because he recognizes no authority higher than himself, he thinks no

further than his own short-term gratification, the satisfaction of his own lusts. Neither God nor government has any effect on what he wants. Only the prospect of punishment tempers his behavior.

Both types of criminal, however, (and we're all one or the other) have one basic rule: "Try not to get caught." And usually (in this world), we don't: the only thing that keeps most of us out of hot water is the fact that human governments are rather inefficient in enforcing their own laws. But man's law is only a microcosm of God's Law—and a flawed one at that. If temporal authorities exercise dominion over us here on earth (see I Peter 2:13-17 for example), it is only to remind us that there is an ultimate Authority who rules over everything from heaven. And because He is neither temporal, flawed, nor inefficient, every infraction of God's Law must eventually be addressed. As Solomon concluded, **"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."** (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14) Just because you haven't yet been caught and punished for your sins, don't assume it will never happen.

When "a deed is brought into judgment," we normally think in terms of condemnation or fault finding, but, as Solomon points out, it can be "judged" as being either evil *or* good—*mishpat* is a legal term describing the act of deciding a case, making a legal decision, or rendering justice in a court of law—resulting in a separation of wrong from right. Yahweh's decisions (based on His own precepts) are always perfect and just (which can be a scary thought if you're still bearing your own guilt), though the same can't be said of human judges, rendering their version of justice based on imperfect man-generated laws. David asks, **"Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?"** That's the Hebrew *'el*, not improperly translated "god," but literally meaning mighty one, a majestic or powerful "god-like" entity. **"Do you judge the children of man uprightly? No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth...."** That explains why human jurisprudence hasn't solved the world's problems: man can't do God's job. Man's laws are often but a silly caricature of the will of God; man's *mishpat*-judgments are flawed by our own fallen natures.

**"The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.'"** (Psalm 58:1-2, 10-11) Sadly, we have become accustomed to seeing the wicked "get away" with his crimes, leaving the innocent to suffer in silence, without redress or recourse. But scripture assures us that this will not be the case forever: there will come a day when Yahweh will right the wrongs—and not just in the afterlife, but *in this world*. We need to come to grips with the fact that the insipid (or nonexistent) version of "justice" we see taking place in our world today is not as God ordained it. Yahweh intends to take His

“vengeance” during the seven-year bloodbath known in scripture as the Tribulation. That squishy “wading in blood” reference is a literal allusion to the aftermath of the Battle (if you can call it a battle) of Armageddon (see Revelation 14:20, 19:21), which is not to say it isn’t figuratively true of the entire Tribulation. During this time, upwards of half of the world’s population will perish—and perhaps *well* upwards: there will be no shortage of ways to die, none of them pleasant.

A couple of things bear mentioning: (1) This gruesome death of the wicked is not, *in itself*, cause for rejoicing. Yahweh and His saints would much rather see them repent and enjoy eternal life in Christ than suffer this ignominious end. The choice is theirs, although rebellion against Yahweh won’t be tolerated forever. (2) The “rejoicing of the righteous” (among whom I would include the raptured saints, the repentant nation of Israel, and the “neo-ekklesia,” those gentiles who, like Israel, came to faith belatedly, too late to avoid the world-wide trial) will be occasioned by the realization that Yahweh—in the person of the glorified King Yahshua—has kept all of His promises, including exercising the prerogative of judgment. (3) The “reward for the righteous” consists of witnessing the judgment of God upon the earth. For the redeemed, the justice meted out by the returning King will be sweet vindication of their faith, notwithstanding the horrors to be suffered by the wicked. **“But You, You are to be feared! Who can stand before You when once Your anger is roused? From the heavens You uttered judgment; the earth feared and was still, when God arose to establish judgment, to save all the humble of the earth.”** (Psalm 76:7-9) Note that the group formerly referred to as “the righteous” are now characterized as “the humble.” These are interrelated concepts.

There’s no indication that Paul was thinking in purely eschatological terms, however, when he wrote, **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth....”** He doesn’t say *when* this happens. My guess? A nanosecond after you die. Singled out for condemnation are those who not only sin themselves (a category that includes us all), but specifically those who “suppress the truth” for their own evil purposes. The world is a sinking ship: it’s one thing to refuse to get into the lifeboat yourself; that’s your privilege. It’s something else entirely to prevent others from doing so.

It’s not like these spiritual murderers were merely mistaken or deceived, as if they couldn’t have known the truth: **“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God [not personally, of course, but by nature, conscience, and reputation], they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their**

**foolish hearts were darkened.**" (Romans 1:18-21) It's like somebody who refuses to believe in telephones—the "crazy" idea that you can hold a conversation with someone who is not physically present. He knows such devices exist; he just doesn't accept the idea that they could possibly work. Bottom line: though it's his choice not to use the phone himself, it's *not* his choice to forcibly prevent you from calling 911 in an emergency because of his disbelief.

That being said, the usurpation of man's God-given privilege of choice will be an ever-increasing trend, I'm afraid, between now and the end of the age. The "suppression of truth in unrighteousness" of which Paul spoke is already a more or less ubiquitous phenomenon, though the wrath of God is seldom overtly "revealed from heaven" in response—yet. In fact, close examination of prophetic scripture reveals that Yahweh's proactive wrath (as opposed to man's unrestrained evil) will *not* be in evidence until the midpoint of the Tribulation. For those last three and a half years (defined by the reign of the Antichrist), however, God will be personally involved in judging the earth: **"The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea. The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, 'Just are You, O Holy One, who is and who was, for You brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!' And I heard the altar saying, 'Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are Your judgments!'"** (Revelation 16:3-7) Yahweh, the Righteous Judge, is seen "throwing the book" at the blatantly guilty defendants of planet earth. Why is mercy and patience all of a sudden in such short supply? It's because no one will remain apathetically uninformed anymore: everyone at this point will have decided either to receive Yahweh or reject Him, to trust Him or attack Him.

Unfortunately (for those who have chosen to reject God's love) the death of their mortal bodies isn't necessarily the end of their trials. Daniel was told, **"And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time."** That's the Tribulation of which we have been speaking. **"But at that time your people [Israel] shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."** (Daniel 12:1-2) Those who "awaken" from the dust—whose souls are resurrected from death—fall into two categories: blessed and cursed. (Note that Daniel wasn't told that *all* of the sleepers would awaken—only "many.") There are several "harvest" events for Yahweh's redeemed described or implied in scripture, the "rapture" being the most well-known. Eventually, every believer from every age—through the end of the Millennial Kingdom—will receive an immortal, spiritual body, one built for everlasting life with Yahshua. (See I Corinthians 15 for a description of this body.) These people, though every one of them is a sinner, will receive no



condemnation or punishment, for their sins have been atoned—covered—by the blood of Christ. Their *works* will be evaluated, but they themselves have already been pardoned: the case against them in Yahweh’s court has been dismissed.

But what of those who awaken to “shame and everlasting contempt?” They are made to stand before the divine Judge, as we see in this vignette from Daniel: **“As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took His seat; His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool; His throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before Him; a thousand thousands served Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.”** (Daniel 7:9-10) These “books” contain the record of their deeds and words: the evidence against them (not to be confused with the “book” we saw in the Daniel 12 passage above, in which is written the names of those who “shall be delivered.”) Note the awesome majesty displayed by the divine Judge—the reigning Yahshua. I get the feeling that words can’t really convey the glory Daniel saw in his vision. But one thing is clear: those standing before the Judge aren’t going to talk their way out of this one.

John describes this final judgment, and how the books are used: **“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.”** This, of course, is the same person Daniel identified as the “Ancient of Days.” It’s none other than Yahshua, the glorified reigning Messiah. **“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life.”** The “books” fall into two categories. One record describes what we did and said: our works, words, and walk. The other describes *whose* we are, that is, it’s the record of our adoption into the family of Yahweh—the state of having been “born from above” in Yahweh’s Spirit, as Yahshua phrased it in John 3. If this family relationship cannot be established, all the Judge has to go on are the defendants’ works—which by definition and observation fall short of Yahweh’s standard. **“And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.... And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”** (Revelation 20:11-12, 15) Again, think of what I said about my son and his “accident.” It was *only* because he is my son, legally adopted according to the law of the land—written in *my* “book of life,” as it were—that I was willing to pay his fine and spring for the repairs on his car, as expensive as they were. There were any number of accidents that rainy day, and any number of tickets written, but I cared only about that one incident. It’s the same with us and our sins against God: the only way for us to “beat the rap” is to swallow our pride and ask our Father to pay the fine. If our Father is Yahweh, He has, in fact, already done so.

## Covenant & Curse



### *Good vs. Evil*

We all know it as Newton's third law of motion. Simply stated, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." You don't have to be a physicist to understand it—you just have to get out of bed in the morning. It's wrapped up in such words as "because," "consequently," and "therefore." If X...then Y. Cause and effect. Reward and punishment. Carrot and stick. If we do one thing, one set of possibilities will result; if we do another, something entirely different will happen. The variables are nearly infinite and the outcomes impossible to flawlessly predict, of course (something called "the butterfly effect"), but we all live our lives on the basis of calculated results, if only subconsciously.

Every effect has a cause—or multiple causes—which were in turn effects of previous or more fundamental causes. Tracking it all back to the beginning (if such a thing were possible) would reveal that Yahweh is the "first cause" of everything that exists. But He Himself has no cause: "the buck stops here," so to speak. So in a very real sense, Yahweh is "responsible" for all of it—the good *and* the bad—or He would be, if He hadn't at some point introduced something that was, like Himself, creative in nature, able to make decisions independent of the "causes" in its past. Inanimate entities like heavenly bodies, weather, and the electrons that course through your espresso machine have no choice in the matter: they must obey the forces that are brought to bear upon them—gravity, electromagnetism, thermodynamics, time, etc. But mankind has been designed by his Creator with free will: though we are still affected by external forces, we are also to some extent free to manipulate our own destinies; that is, we can make choices. And having the ability to choose presupposes the ability to choose badly—to make mistakes, to act stupidly.

Thus in a world Yahweh created to be "very good," we now find both good and evil existing side by side in a perennial struggle for dominance. If we can sort out why God allowed this ostensibly imperfect state of affairs, we'll be very close to answering that most fundamental of questions: "Why are we here?" Consider the alternative: if God had created us *without* free will, we wouldn't have been able to sin against Him, and evil never would have entered the world. A good thing? Not exactly. Many of us act as if we think enforcing goodness in the world is Yahweh's primary objective. But if that were so, He could have created us like

angels—or amoebas—without permission to make up our own minds about things. That way, the world would have been tidy and well-behaved. But it would also have been more like a prison than a family. There could have been no real relationship—and no love—between God and man. And I’m pretty sure Yahweh would have found that rather pointless—certainly not worth the effort.

God instead chose to deal with the evil that we—against His will but *with His permission*—introduced into the world. He gave Adam a choice, in the form of a command: **“Yahweh, God, took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And Yahweh, God, commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”** (Genesis 2:15-17) This is the first of many covenants recorded in scripture. As they often do, it contained instruction, a blessing for obedience, and a curse for non-compliance. Yahweh had *already* delivered on the blessing: all Adam had to do to continue freely enjoying access to everything the Garden had to offer was to refrain from eating from one particular tree that God pointed out to him. I am of the opinion that there was nothing special about this tree—until Yahweh invested it with symbolic significance by prohibiting its fruit for food. The “death” that Adam would die would be defined by his disobedience; it would not occur because there was something physically harmful about the fruit. In fact, the death of which He spoke *wasn’t* the universal physical phenomenon we all suffer, for Adam lived on for another 930 years—hardly “in the day” that he ate the fruit of the forbidden tree (although, come to think of it, “with Yahweh, a thousand years is as one day...”) No, this “death” was *spiritual*: with that first little nibble, God’s Spirit would be separated from Adam’s soul, for Yahweh is holy—He and sin are incompatible. Like matter and antimatter (or so I’m told), they cannot dwell together.

Being God, Yahweh knew that Adam would fail, and He had a remedy for his failure prepared—a way the guilty man and his race could be reconciled with God, recovering what had been lost through sin. But first, Yahweh explained the “fine print” of the covenant to each of the participants of the fall—the results, the consequences, the “equal and opposite reaction” to the thing they had done in defiance of His stated will. He began with the serpent, the dragon, Satan’s physical vehicle in this case: **“Yahweh, God, said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.’”** This is the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible. As non-specific and as esoteric as it is, it still establishes the general course of events to come: Satan and his followers would henceforth be adversaries and enemies of the human race, but one Human in particular would, after suffering an injurious

assault Himself, achieve victory over the slithering satanic menace. Virtually all of subsequent scripture conspires to explain how this was to be achieved.

**“To the woman He said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you....’”** At the risk of oversimplifying this, the woman’s sin was to desire the evil as well as the good. After all, all she really knew about the forbidden tree was that it was called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” In other words, she unilaterally decided that what Yahweh had provided (which was “very good”) was not enough. Not knowing what evil was, she desired to experience it in order to obtain a kind of “wisdom” Yahweh hadn’t granted. Her “punishment” was to get precisely what she had asked for. Oops.

**“And to Adam He said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’”** (Genesis 3:14-19) The nature of Adam’s sin was a little different (though he *did* exactly the same thing Eve had). He is chastised for having listened to his wife instead of to God—of choosing to trust the creature rather than the Creator. In doing so, Adam separated himself from God: he turned his back on Yahweh. So his “punishment,” like that of his wife, was to be granted that very thing which he had said (by his actions) that he wanted. Be careful what you wish for, my friends.

Now that sin had entered the human race, now that spiritual death had been introduced, it was no longer in man’s nature to be at peace with God. We were all subsequently born with a “sin nature.” That is, it was *natural* for everyone born of Adam and Eve to miss the target of perfection before Yahweh, for we were no longer “living souls” in the sense of having Yahweh’s Spirit breathing life into our neshamah, as was the case with Adam and Eve before the fall (see Genesis 2:7) As Paul puts it, since we have now received reconciliation through Yahshua the Messiah, **“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.... Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam.”** (Romans 5:12-14) In other words, not everyone was guilty of the same sinful act that got Adam in trouble—eating the fruit of the no-no tree. As we’ve seen, not even Eve was charged with Adam’s sin, though she *did* precisely the same thing. Her guilt—and the precise nature of her punishment—lay elsewhere.

Thus as a proximate cause for the curse under which we live, the Law (the Torah) introduced under Moses, is a red herring. We are not condemned *only* for having broken the conditions of the Torah (though doing so will certainly do the

trick): we were all condemned before the Torah even showed up—**“Death reigned from Adam to Moses.”** We are all born spiritually lifeless: we must be born again, born from above in God’s Spirit. That’s why Yahshua told Nicodemus, **“Whoever believes in Him [the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”** (John 3:18) That spiritual life, then, begins when we trust in **“the name of the only Son of God.”** The *name*? Yes: Yahshua—which means “Yahweh is Salvation.” This—Yahshua—was the remedy for Adam’s sin, and ours, that Yahweh had already prepared before the fall even took place. It reverses what Adam had done to earn the curse: trusting something other than Yahweh.

The flood of Noah, a huge speed bump we encountered between Adam and Moses, demonstrated in rather dramatic fashion that “death reigned.” And yet no one who died in the flood was guilty of the *particular* sin of which Adam had been instructed: none of them had eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But they all died, nevertheless. Why? It’s because they all ran afoul of the *fundamental* sin of Adam: failure to trust and honor Yahweh their God. This separation from God inevitably led to a mindset and lifestyle that was in direct contradiction to Yahweh’s character, love.

The historical record says, **“Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”** (Genesis 6:5) Yet, **“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.”** (Genesis 6:9) But Yahweh hadn’t defined “evil” at this point in time: man was operating on conscience alone. The words “wickedness” and “evil” in this passage are related. The root verb is the Hebrew *ra’a*: to be bad or evil. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes, “The essential meaning of the root can be seen in its frequent juxtaposition with the root *tob*. Thus Moses concluded, ‘See, I set before you today life and what is good [*tob*], death and what is evil/bad [*ra’a*]’ .... Since the decision that something is bad depends subjectively on one’s taste, the root frequently occurs with the formula ‘in the eyes of.’ Thus Isaiah threatens those whose moral judgments are distorted: ‘Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.’ Because the Lord’s judgment stands as a moral absolute, however, one can speak of objective evil, of sin.... *Ra’a* designates experiences which entail physical or emotional pain. In the moral and religious realm of meaning, the verb denotes activity that is contrary to God’s will.... The range of activity associated with *ra’a* begins with rejection of God, particularly in the practice of idolatry. Abuse of people and exploitation of their property is common. This includes causing physical pain, harsh slavery, dishonesty, verbal abuse, and efforts to kill.” The fatal sin of the people of Noah’s wicked generation seems to be echoed in the words of Isaiah: **“Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken Yahweh, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.”** (Isaiah 1:4) Man’s

purposeful abandonment of Yahweh is the essence and source of iniquity. It always has been.

After the flood had swept them all away, **“Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘Behold, I establish My covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish My covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’”** This time, the covenant was unilateral. Nothing was required of Noah but to take note of Yahweh’s promise. The onus of the covenant was entirely on God: if the worldwide watery cataclysm ever repeated itself, Yahweh would be proved a liar, not worthy of our worship. Making such a covenant would have been a risky move, were it not for the fact that Yahweh is omnipotent—thus able to keep His promises. **“And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.’”** (Genesis 9:8-13) God’s promise of protection will remain in force as long as man walks the earth, for the sign He instituted verifying the covenant, the rainbow, shows up associated with the reigning Yahshua in John’s final vision: **“A throne stood in heaven, with One seated on the throne. And He who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.”** (Revelation 4:2-3)

The third covenant between God and man was made with Abram, though his name under the terms of the covenant was changed to Abraham. **“And God said to him, ‘Behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.’”** That is, it was changed from “exalted father” to “father of a multitude,” a hint that he would, under the covenant, become more than just the “father” of his own biological descendants, but also the spiritual progenitor of all who would follow him in faith. The focus however, was to be on his physical descendants, the people later known as Israel, or the Jews: **“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you....”** Not to be picky, but you can’t have an “everlasting covenant” unless both parties are still there. Not a problem with God, of course, but this means that Israel must exist as a distinct people as long as mortal man walks the earth; not to mention the concept that Abraham’s *spiritual* descendants—faithful believers who, like me, would someday call him father—must be granted eternal life if the covenant is to be truly “everlasting.”

This covenant had terrestrial ramifications for Abraham's physical descendants as well: **"And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God...."** One might contend that Yahweh has dropped the ball here. Yes, they displaced the Canaanites under Joshua and remained in the land (off and on) for fifteen hundred years, but the *next* two millennia saw Israel scattered to the four winds. But we shall see in a bit that their *occupancy* of the Land would be contingent on keeping the terms of another covenant (that delivered through Moses), but their legal *ownership* of Canaan was never revoked. (It's like getting locked out of your own house because it's a crime scene.) And what about Yahweh being their God? In this regard, it takes two to tango, so to speak: to be *their* God, Yahweh would have to be worshipped, revered, and obeyed by Israel—and not just a few faithful individuals, but the nation as a whole. That has been the case for only a few hundred years *total* in their entire four thousand year history. On the other hand, by far the most prevalent theme in Old Testament prophecy is that Israel will, in the end, be regathered—in the Land—under the banner of Yahweh. Just because it hasn't happened yet, don't assume it won't.

Like Noah's covenant, this one was sealed with a sign, but this time the sign was to be enacted by the beneficiary of the covenant. **"And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.'"** (Genesis 17:3-11) I'm planning on covering the symbolic aspects of circumcision in detail in a future chapter, but for now, notice a few salient points: The sign was to be carried out among Abraham's offspring (a fact that was reinforced later in the Torah). Circumcision (the surgical removal of the tip of the foreskin of the penis) could only be performed on males, one of several clues that this was not a *condition* for God's compliance with His part of the covenant (which would benefit both men and women), but was rather an act that signified that the covenant was already in force. The heart of the covenant had been given to Abram decades before the sign was instituted (see Genesis 12).

We would logically expect to see some symbolic link between the covenant and its sign. The promise was that Abraham would be the father of multitudes, that his offspring would inherit the Land, and (as it's stated in Genesis 12:3) **"I [Yahweh] will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."** Admittedly, you have to look hard for the connection, and in the end, you have to understand how the covenant would play out in history: Abraham's male Descendant, Yahshua, would be the vehicle through which "all the families of the earth" would be blessed. How? Through the complete and permanent removal of our sins from us—a process that, like the sign

of circumcision, involved blood, pain, and obedience to Yahweh. Yahshua's sacrifice on our behalf achieved everything the covenant of Abraham required. And, as with circumcision, once our sins are removed from us through this process, they're gone forever.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that a raging controversy would arise pitting those who focused only on the *sign* against those who comprehended only *what it signified*. Think of it this way: in order to come to Yahweh, we have to get off the world's broad highway leading to destruction, making a "right turn" (so to speak) onto the narrow path that leads to life. Circumcision is like the turn indicator signal in our car. Just as we are supposed to flip on our blinkers to alert those sharing the road of our intentions, so Israel, following Abraham, was instructed to circumcise their male children, making their intention to turn toward Yahweh clear to the gentiles following *them*.

But—and this is important—*the signal is not the same thing as the turn*. It does no good to click on your blinker if you never actually change direction; it's confusing, misleading, and sometimes even dangerous. It is, in fact, a lie. In the end, it's the turn itself that's essential. To get to our intended destination, we must choose to follow Yahweh's path. So Yahweh begs Israel to follow through on the signal, the symbol of circumcision: **"Circumcise yourselves to Yahweh; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest My wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds."** (Jeremiah 4:4) Circumcision of the flesh is not really the point, He says. What's critical is what it means—the separation of the sin from the soul.

But what if we "turn right" *without* signaling first? That's the scenario being discussed in Acts 15, where it was determined by the Jewish Christians that gentile believers need not be physically circumcised in order to be saved. Consider this: although the traffic laws require you to signal before you make a turn, using your turn indicator is theoretically pointless if you're the last vehicle in line—if there is no one behind you to see it. It is a good thing to follow the letter of the law, of course. We should do so, since the regulations are there for our benefit and safety. But what's *critically* important is reaching our destination, not the flawless adherence to the rules of the road while we're on our journey. *Making the turn* is what's needful.

The same basic concept—that the reality outweighs its shadow—applies to the entire Law of Moses, the man to whom the next covenant in scripture was made. Yahweh had repeated the covenant promises to Abraham's son Isaac and *his* son Jacob/Israel—effectively removing Abraham's other descendants from the list: Ishmael, the sons of Abe's second wife Keturah (not to mention those of his concubines—see Genesis 25:6), and Isaac's son Esau. Yahweh's subsequent covenant with Moses was built upon that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **"God**



spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name, Yahweh, I did not make Myself known to them.'"

It had been only shortly before this, at the burning bush, that Yahweh had first revealed the name by which He wished to be known. "I also established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners."

This, you'll recall, was a component of the covenant as revealed to all three patriarchs. "Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered My covenant...." It wasn't that Yahweh had *forgotten* His covenant with Israel during their centuries of captivity, but rather that He had chosen to wait until this time—when their circumstances looked impossibly bleak—to bring its promise of a homeland to fruition.

"Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am Yahweh, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.' If you'll recall, slavery was listed as a manifestation or example of *ra'at*, evil, sin, that which is contrary to God's will. "I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am Yahweh.'" (Exodus 6:2-8) Remember what Yahweh's original two-part promise to Abraham had been: (1) He would be given the land of Canaan as a possession, and (2) Yahweh would be his God. Israel's four hundred years of slavery in Egypt had been a necessary evil, designed to force them to connect these two things in their minds. In other words, if they had never left the Land, it would have been extremely hard to see the link between their temporal blessings and the God who was providing them. As I said, contrast can be an invaluable teaching tool.

This time, the terms of the covenant were written in stone—literally. God's part was to make good on the two conditions listed above, just as He had promised Abraham. But now, the people were told what their end of the bargain would entail. "And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.' So he was there with Yahweh forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." (Exodus 34:27-28) A generation later, Moses repeated the story: "And He declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And Yahweh commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess." (Deuteronomy 4:13-14) The Ten Commandments are thereby defined as "the words of the covenant."

Taken together, the Ten Commandments link the Yahweh-Israel relationship to their possession of the Promised Land. And on a symbolic level, they promise all of us something quite similar—they connect life in God’s grace to our mortal existence in the world. Paraphrased for our ears, they are as follows: “Yahweh alone is God, so don’t worship or serve anything else. Don’t make visual representations of what you think He may be like, for He will provide His own image for you. Revere the name of Yahweh, and don’t associate with it anything that is worthless, empty, or deceptive. Observe the Sabbath, for it explains both God’s redemptive program and the timeline He has ordained to bring it about. Honor your maker. And don’t murder, cheat, steal, lie, or covet what others have, for in doing so, you show disrespect for God and lack of trust in Him.” Looking at them in this light, they don’t really seem so tough. But upon reflection, it becomes apparent that in order to “keep” these precepts, we must maintain Yahweh in the forefront of our thoughts at all times. The minute we start “looking out for number one” (ourselves, that is), we relegate Yahweh to second place—or worse. That doesn’t harm Him, of course, but it does place us at a distinct disadvantage, for it means we’ve put a comparative idiot in charge of our affairs.

A subset of sorts to the Mosaic covenant (in the broader sense—the whole Torah) is this promise God made concerning the Priesthood. **“And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore say, “Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.”’”** (Numbers 25:10-13) Aaron’s grandson Phinehas single-handedly put an end to the seduction of Israel in the wake of Balaam’s treacherous counsel. The moral of the story is that the natural reward for service to Yahweh is the opportunity to perform even more significant service. (So if you’re not interested in serving God forever, you needn’t bother doing so now.) In this case, it was the promise of “a perpetual priesthood.” Looking forward to the Millennial reign of Christ, note which sub-family of the Aaronic priesthood will be serving *exclusively* in the temple: **“But the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the charge of My sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from Me, shall come near to Me to minister to Me. And they shall stand before Me to offer me the fat and the blood, declares the Sovereign Yahweh. They shall enter My sanctuary, and they shall approach My table, to minister to Me, and they shall keep My charge.”** (Ezekiel 44:15-16) And who was Zadok’s ancestor? That’s right: it was Phinehas—see I Chronicles 6. Yahweh never forgets, and He never breaks His word.

That fact would take on eternal significance in the terms of the next covenant, the one Yahweh made with David. **“Thus says Yahweh of hosts, ‘I took you [David] from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over My people Israel. And**

**I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you."** First, Yahweh reminds David of what He had already done for him. For his part, David was under no illusions: he knew that his unexpected rise to the throne of Israel had been due to Yahweh working through him, not his own abilities. So God now begins to describe what He would do in the future: **"And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth...."** There is a vast difference between being king of a smallish bronze age nation like David's Israel and being the undying legend that he would become. No amount of human effort can guarantee anything like that.

The promises to David extended to the nation as well, an echo of the original Abrahamic covenant: **"And I will appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over My people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies."** In case you haven't noticed, that part of the Davidic covenant is yet to be fully realized: yes, they're back in the Land after their long hiatus, but violent men and relentless enemies still abound. In the final permutation of the Kingdom of David however, with his Descendant Yahshua on the throne, these promises will become a blissful reality. God now describes how He will bring this about: **"Moreover, Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh will make you a house [that is, a royal dynasty]. 'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish His kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever. I will be to Him a father, and He shall be to Me a son...."** He's not talking about Solomon here, no matter what it looks like at first glance. Solomon is merely a "type," a near-term object of partial fulfillment. He's actually referring to David's ultimate offspring, Yahshua.

But this is where things go haywire, in English anyway. **"When He commits iniquity, I will discipline Him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men."** Huh? Yahshua committed no iniquity, though He certainly bore the "rod of men" for our transgressions. Solomon, on the other hand, *did* commit iniquity in his later years, but for David's sake he was spared the discipline of God (at least in his own lifetime). What's going on here? The problem lies in the word translated "when." The Hebrew *'asher* is a primitive relative pronoun or particle that can mean almost anything that shows a connection: when, who, which, what, if, how, because, in order that, etc. The key is that it's a marker of linkage, of comparison, cause, or result. So when Yahshua was *linked* or *associated with* iniquity (ours, in point of fact), He would be afflicted "with the stripes of the sons of men,"—"wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities," as Isaiah phrased it. **"But My steadfast love will not depart from Him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before Me. Your throne shall be established forever. (II Samuel 7:8-16)** David's "house

and kingdom” would be “established forever” but not through Solomon (who was merely Yahshua’s *legal* ancestor through His adoptive father, Joseph). The covenant would be realized through another of David’s sons, Nathan, who was Mary’s forebear. Yahshua, the son of God, was also the *physical* descendant of David, just as the covenant required.

Of course, all of this prophecy is moot (in fact, it’s a big lie) if the risen Yahshua never returns to earth in to reign in glory on Israel’s throne, fulfilling the terms of Yahweh’s covenant with David. Although He *already* “bore our griefs and carried our sorrows” by taking upon Himself “the chastisement that brought us peace” (again, prophetic phrases from Isaiah 53), Yahshua has *never* physically reigned as King in Jerusalem. Yahweh must therefore either put up or shut up. There’s no question in my mind that He *will* fulfill these things; the only question is when (and I am convinced that He’s told us this as well, though in somewhat more subtle terms). If the signs are as they appear to be, we are very, very close.

God’s covenant with David mentioned a son that *could have been* Solomon (if he had remained faithful), so Yahweh had a promise for Solomon as well. But knowing what Sol would do, God couched this covenant in very different terms: his choices would determine his own legacy, whether blessing or cursing. Solomon began well, asking God for wisdom in lieu of riches or power. And Yahweh was pleased to give him all the rope he needed—to either bind Israel to their God in spirit and truth, or to hang himself in vanity and self-deception. **“Yahweh appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice....”** Solomon was given the privilege of fulfilling David’s fondest desire, building a “permanent” temple to replace the centuries-old tabernacle. The location had actually been selected a thousand years previously, when Abraham had been instructed to sacrifice his son Isaac on a mountain in the Land of Moriah—that is, in what would someday be known as Jerusalem.

The purpose of the new temple would be the same as the old tabernacle had been: it was a place where man could meet God, learn His ways, contemplate His plan, and find atonement for his sins. Although I’m positive Yahweh would have *preferred* His people to be perfect, He knew they wouldn’t be—He *expected* them to sin, to miss the mark of perfection in judgment, behavior, and holiness. So the temple—or more correctly, what it represented—was to be the specified venue for reconciliation with Yahweh. First, He *promised* to discipline Israel for their wickedness, but in the same breath He told them how to return to Him. **“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if My people who are called by My name humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land....”** Remember what I said

about the Ten Commandments a few pages back? Yahweh's little "repentance seminar" here is, if you think about it, nothing more or less than returning to the principles of the Mosaic Covenant, expressed in the Ten Commandments. And to do that, we have to keep Yahweh our God at the forefront of our consciousness. We must filter everything we do through the lens of our relationship with Him—unless you *like* drought, locusts, and pestilence, that is.

Note that Yahweh said that He would hear "from heaven." The temple was not for His benefit, but ours. His attention, however, would be directed here, for this place, like the tabernacle preceding it, was to be the focal point of God's communication with mankind, the very picture of His plan of redemption. **"Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that My name may be there forever. My eyes and My heart will be there for all time...."** Not in the *building*, of course, but in what it represented. You would think that if God was so single-mindedly focused on what it would take to reconcile us to Himself, we would pay a little closer attention ourselves.

Lest we forget, this was Yahweh's covenant with Solomon, so He now gets personal: **"And as for you, if you will walk before Me as David your father walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping My statutes and My rules, then I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to rule Israel.'**" (II Chronicles 7:12-18) Wait a minute! Though it's pretty clear that David was Yahweh's favorite human, and that the shepherd-King was indeed a "man after God's own heart," the fact remains that David did *not* actually "do according to all that Yahweh commanded," or "keep His statutes and His rules." Solomon was living proof of this: his own mother was the woman with whom David had committed adultery (that's Commandment No. 7) after voyeuristically lusting after her (Commandment No. 10). Upon discovering that Bathsheba was pregnant, David tried to cover up his sin (Commandment No. 9) by bringing the woman's husband home from the war for a little R&R. When the honorable Uriah didn't bite, the King conspired to have him killed in battle (Commandment No. 6), leaving David "free" to marry the widow, even though he already had seven wives and a harem full of concubines. Later, he violated Commandment No. 1 (sort of) by numbering the military strength of Israel instead of relying on Yahweh regardless of the odds.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not trying to drag David's reputation through the mud. I too am a sinner. But scripture paints him as he was—as Cromwell would have put it, "warts and all." That's the only way we could have seen what Yahweh was *really* thinking about "good vs. evil." How could a man who behaved this badly be counted as righteous? How could a man who willfully violated some of God's rules be held up as an example of someone who kept them

all? There can be only one explanation. It's grace. Because of his unshakable love for Yahweh, because of his trust in the promises of God, David's sins were covered, atoned, forgiven, removed from his "rap sheet."

David himself explains: **"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom Yahweh counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You [yeah, after the prophet Nathan dragged him to it, kicking and screaming], and I did not cover my iniquity [well, better late than never, both for David and for us]; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to Yahweh,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin."** The key to forgiveness, he says, is to acknowledge one's sin, to admit one's transgressions before Yahweh. We are all guilty. That's why the Torah specified sacrifices and offerings—all of which were signs pointing toward the ultimate sacrifice, Yahshua. But the only way for us to receive God's grace, this unmerited favor that covers our sins—is to ask for it. **"Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to You at a time when You may be found; surely in the rush of great waters [a metaphor for judgment], they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with shouts of deliverance."** (Psalm 32:1-7)

This can come as a horrible shock for those who think that strict adherence to the Torah's literal precepts is what Yahweh requires of us—or worse, that keeping some man-made code of conduct (read: religion), however well intentioned, is necessary for our salvation. For one thing, flawlessly keeping God's law can't be done—or at least, no one ever has. Those who claim to be "Torah observant" today are actually following an extremely truncated list of rules—a mere caricature of the Law of Moses. It's like insisting you've "kept the traffic laws" just because you didn't exceed the speed limit. What about that lane change you made, after failing to signal? Do you realize you have a tendency to follow a bit too closely? Have you really *checked* to verify that your taillights can be clearly seen 500 feet behind your vehicle? See what I mean? It's not as easy as it looks. I'm not saying you *shouldn't* keep the law (whether Torah or traffic). I'm merely saying you can't, and you don't.

There's far, *far* more to "Torah observance" than meeting for worship on Saturdays, not eating pork, taking care of the circumcision thing, and maybe wearing a tsitzit. And since the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the problem with trying to keep God's Law is even worse (actually, it's impossible), for without a temple and a priesthood we can't invoke the picture of Yahweh's redemption (i.e., perform the Levitical sacrifices) as the Law *requires*—I haven't actually done the survey, but shooting from the hip, I'd guess that about eighty percent of the Torah depends on having a sanctuary and priesthood. And the other stuff? Deal with

murder, adultery, or homosexuality as the Torah prescribes, and you'll find yourself in jail. You can't even tithe properly, for the tithes were to go to the Levites, who were in turn directed to tithe from these tithes to the priests: but nobody knows who these guys are anymore! Bottom line: if Yahweh's grace—the forgiveness and atonement counted upon by David—is insufficient to achieve reconciliation with God, then we are lost, every one of us.

So putting the shoe on the other foot, Yahweh warned Solomon of what *not* to do, and what the consequences would be if he did: **“But if you turn aside and forsake [Hebrew: *azab*, a concept we'll explore more deeply in a bit] My statutes and My commandments that I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from my land that I have given you, and this house that I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight, and I will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples.”** (II Chronicles 7:19-20) Worded this way, it sounds kind of like a laundry list—don't (1) turn aside, (2) forsake My statutes, (3) forsake My commandments, (4) serve other gods, and (5) worship other gods—but I don't think it is. It seems, rather, to be a multifaceted way of describing just one thing: abandoning Yahweh. Solomon's father David may have *violated* Yahweh's commandments on occasion (as do all of us) but he never *forsook* them; he never declared them invalid, replacing them in his heart and mind with a code more to his own liking. He always—even in the depths of debauchery and denial—embraced Yahweh as the ultimate authority. Weakness is not the same thing as rebellion, it appears.

To put this in perspective, compare David's outlook to that of the typical American today. When he seduced Bathsheba, he *knew* that it was contrary to God's law—a law with which he agreed because it was Yahweh's word—but he let his flesh overrule his mind: he scratched the itch. We Americans, on the other hand, refuse to make adultery illegal, and in doing so, we declare our own authority to be higher than Yahweh's. It's not just sexual sin, either: the principle could be repeated *ad infinitum*. Thus someone who agrees with our laws that say “sex between any two consenting adults is lawful,” *even if he or she never actually engages in adultery*, is guilty of rebellion against Yahweh. But someone who recognizes and accepts Yahweh's absolute authority and yet succumbs to the lust of the flesh, is not a rebel, but “only” a sinner in need of atonement and cleansing. The distinction is critical to our understanding of grace. It's what Yahshua meant when He said, **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”** (Matthew 9:12) Declaring ourselves to be “well” merely demonstrates that we think our opinions carry more weight than God's.

So Yahweh tells Solomon what to expect if he and his nation forsake their God: **“And at this house, which was exalted, everyone passing by will be astonished and say, ‘Why has Yahweh done thus to this land and to this house?’ Then they will say,**

**'Because they abandoned [*azab*] Yahweh, the God of their fathers who brought them out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore he has brought all this disaster on them.'** (II Chronicles 7:21-22) There's the bottom line: God's wrath is promised *for those who abandon Him*. The Hebrew verb *azab* denotes, to leave, to forsake, depart from, leave behind, abandon, neglect, or put aside. Abandoning Yahweh is defined as "worshipping other gods and serving them," in other words, placing something—*anything*—other than Yahweh in the position of ultimate authority in one's life and thought. However, it needn't be another "god" in the traditional sense, like Allah or Shiva. It could just as easily be one's philosophy, political position, religion, or any passionate interest. It needn't even be something "bad." For many patriotic Americans, the Constitution takes precedence over the Torah.

This explains why Yahweh allowed His temple to be ransacked and desecrated, dismantled stone by stone—*twice*. The temple (and the tabernacle that preceded it) was a complex and comprehensive symbol of Yahweh's plan for our redemption. And it was absolutely essential for the literal observance of most of the Torah's precepts. As long as we were counting upon Him for reconciling us to Himself—as long as we recognized no authority higher than Yahweh—then the everlasting covenant had not been breached, no matter how many "mistakes" we made. Remember, the Ten Commandments were said to have comprised "the words of the covenant," (Exodus 34:38) and the very first of these commandments admonished us to have no other gods before Yahweh. But when Israel "abandoned Yahweh" in favor of "other gods," Solomon's temple, the "house that Yahweh had consecrated for His name," became meaningless to Israel, a mockery of God's love and provision. David had said, **"Delight yourself in Yahweh, and He will give you the desires of your heart."** (Psalm 37:4) As long as Israel's delight was for Yahweh, the "desires of their hearts" were illustrated by the temple—which in turn was to be personified by the Messiah. What David *didn't* say, but often proves true anyway, is that when we delight ourselves in something other than Yahweh, we *still* might get what we wish for. But whatever that might be, it's vastly inferior to what Yahweh had in mind.

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We aren't done thinking about God's covenants. But let us take a moment to delve a bit deeper into this whole concept of "forsaking," or "abandonment." As we saw above, the Hebrew verb *azab* means "to leave, to forsake, depart from, leave behind, abandon, neglect, or put aside." In a way, this concept is the direct converse of the covenant (Hebrew: *berit* or *beriyth*), an alliance, treaty, compact, agreement, or pledge. A *berit* is a formal promise, one with terms and obligations,



that exists between two parties—individuals, governments, or God. Although the terms of the covenant vary, there are always consequences (whether implied or specified) for the breaking of such an agreement, and this is where the idea of *azab* comes in. If we forsake Yahweh—if we put aside the terms of His covenant—then He will in turn abandon us to the fate we have chosen.

Moses spent forty years trying to teach this simple truth to Israel. How disappointing it must have been to learn that his admonitions would not prevent Israel from eventually forsaking their God: **“And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake [*azab*] Me and break My covenant that I have made with them. Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake [*azab*] them and hide My face from them, and they will be devoured.”** Note that although our forsaking—our departure from the covenant—will surely be reciprocated, God Himself will not instigate the breach: any such violation will be the result of our choice alone. **“And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, ‘Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?’ And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods.”** (Deuteronomy 31:16-18) What we see depends upon what direction we’re facing. If we have turned away from God, we shouldn’t be surprised to find ourselves face to face with evil.

The generation that entered the promised land had the best of intentions, of course. They remembered Yahweh’s provision in the wilderness and witnessed His power and preservation as they did battle with the pagans. **“Then the people answered [Joshua], ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake [*azab*] Yahweh to serve other gods, for it is Yahweh our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And Yahweh drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve Yahweh, for He is our God.’”** So far, so good. After fifteen years or so of cleansing the Land, their focus was still on Yahweh. But they had not driven out everyone they were supposed to. Notably, the Philistines along the southern coast and the Sidonians in Lebanon remained entrenched—and would prove to be persistent thorns in the side of Israel for generations to come, both militarily and spiritually. If we read between the lines, though, it appears that Joshua could already perceive a looming problem—and it wasn’t with the pagans; it was with Israel’s less-than-total dedication to Yahweh: **“But Joshua said to the people, ‘You are not able to serve Yahweh, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.’”** Yes, they were generally following Yahweh’s directions, but not exclusively. A few verses later, Joshua would tell them to “put away the foreign gods among them.” It’s clear that something was already amiss.

We will not be *able* to serve Yahweh if we are not holy as He is holy. We cannot serve two masters, both God and the world. **“If you forsake [*azab*] Yahweh and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, but we will serve Yahweh.’** (Joshua 24:16-21)

Really? They meant well, but within a generation, *this* was happening: **“And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh and served the Baals. And they abandoned [*azab*] Yahweh, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked Yahweh to anger. They abandoned [*azab*] Yahweh and served the Baals and the Ashtarothe. So the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel, and He gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And He sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.”** (Judges 2:11-14) We tend to read these passages and assume that everybody in Israel all of a sudden decided to ditch their God and His Torah in favor of these ridiculous Babylonian derivatives. But I don’t think that’s the case at all. I think, rather, that what happened to Israel is the same thing that happens over and over again to the Christian Church: they gradually became comfortable, get settled in the world, and wax broadminded concerning the falsehood they had failed to root out of their environment. They—and we—forget that about which Joshua had warned them: Yahweh is a holy God. He has no peers or serious rivals, but is absolutely unique. Furthermore, He is “jealous,” that is, zealous for what belongs to Him (and remember, He had claimed and redeemed Israel to be His own special possession).

You don’t just wake up one morning and decide to sacrifice your child to Molech. Not if you’re a nominally Torah-observant Israelite, anyway. No, in order to “abandon Yahweh,” there’s invariably a long and gradual process that sneaks up on an unsuspecting believer before he even knows what’s even going on. It begins when we forget (or ignore) the fundamentals: worship Yahweh alone; don’t reinvent Him in your own image; don’t associate anything false or deceptive with His name. (In case you missed it, those are the first three of the Ten Commandments.) Be holy—set apart from the world—for Yahweh is holy. Love Yahweh with your whole heart, and love your fellow man as you do yourself. When we lose sight of these basic tenets of the faith, we lay ourselves open to error.

The path to perdition begins with a single, seemingly innocent step: we become tolerant—not of sinners, for we all fall into that category, but tolerant of alternatives to Yahweh’s revealed truth. We substitute Yahweh’s glory with other things—not “bad” things *per se*, just *other* things. Religion is probably the most insidious of these: it’s far easier to “go to church” than it is to worship God in spirit and truth. It’s relatively easy to be “circumcised in the flesh,” but incredibly

hard to be “circumcised of heart”—impossible, in fact, in our own efforts. Charity—the giving of alms—is easy; loving your neighbor as you do yourself takes real dedication. It’s in our nature to turn good intentions into habits, then into traditions, and then into laws; but only Yahweh’s actual instructions *mean* anything. Once we’ve decided that our traditions carry the same (or greater) weight than God’s word, we’re in trouble. The problem is, we seldom even realize we’ve done it.

One rather silly example: Christians, through what I am convinced is a misinterpretation of Paul’s writings, have over the centuries come to the conclusion that the Torah has been abrogated, that it is no longer of value. But although it was *never intended* to be God’s vehicle for our salvation (which was Paul’s point) it’s not a worthless, outdated document, either. It was given for our benefit, our edification, and our knowledge of Yahweh’s redemptive plan. It is *still* the word of God: at the very least, the Torah offers flawless advice for living in our world. But show up at any church pot-luck, and you’re sure to find the obligatory ham. Our traditions have thus superseded God’s clear Leviticus 11 instructions. We have put ourselves in authority over Yahweh, and we don’t even realize it!

When David was instructing his son Solomon in how to be Israel’s king, he offered this admonition: **“And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve Him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for Yahweh searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek Him, He will be found by you, but if you forsake [azab] Him, He will cast you off forever.”** (I Chronicles 28:9) And the prophet Azariah had virtually the same advice for King Asa: **“Yahweh is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you, but if you forsake [azab] Him, He will forsake you.”** (II Chronicles 15:2) Both kings achieved great things for their people while they remembered this admonition, and both grew complacent and careless in their later years. Time can change us; as I grow older, I’m all too aware of this. Solomon’s old age was characterized by compromise, and Asa’s with human solutions instead of reliance on Yahweh alone. Both men forgot the terms of the covenant: “If you forsake Yahweh, He will forsake you.” It is my intention to seek Yahweh until the day I die. These passages offer somber warning concerning the pitfalls I face: it is all too easy to substitute the expedient for the essential, to mistake the journey for the destination.

As King David got older, he too made some observations about maintaining focus upon Yahweh: **“I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken [azab] or his children begging for bread.... For Yahweh loves justice; He will not forsake [azab] His saints. They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.”** (Psalm 37:25, 28) Interesting that in both verses, he pointed out that our children—and not just ourselves—can bear the brunt of our poor

choices in this life. We leave a legacy behind us, whether we intend to or not. In the broader sense, our “children” are all of those who follow in our footsteps—those we influence, whether for good or ill. We are responsible, to some extent, for those who hear our words or witness our behavior.

There’s a land mine buried in David’s statement, however. He says, **“Yahweh loves justice; He will not forsake His saints.”** Actually, in order to be truly just, Yahweh should logically be *required* to forsake us all, for we have all fallen short of his standard of holiness. We have all broken His everlasting covenant, one way or another, even if we didn’t intend to. No one reading this, of course, will fail to instantly recognize God’s solution to the problem: in order to transform us into “saints,” people who can stand “righteous” before Him, Yahweh took upon Himself the form of a mortal man for the purpose of personally paying the debt we incurred through our sins. Though we have all “forsaken” Yahweh, He has redeemed us—bought us back—by becoming “forsaken” Himself on our behalf. Thus we hear the words of David on the lips of Christ: **“My God, my God, why have You forsaken [azab] Me?”** (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46) It’s a rhetorical question, but one with eternal consequences for all of us.

Of course, because Yahshua was actually God (though cloaked in human flesh), the grave couldn’t hold Him. This too was seen by David, though he doubtless didn’t realize the full import of what he’d said: **“For You will not abandon [azab] my soul to Sheol, or let Your Holy One see corruption.”** That this refers to Christ is made clear in Acts 2:31-32. **“You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”** (Psalm 16:10-11) Because our Messiah was not abandoned in the grave, neither shall we be. As David says in the previous verse, **“My flesh also will rest in hope.”**

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The first Mosaic covenant, given at Mount Horeb (a.k.a. Sinai), was, as we have seen, defined by the Ten Commandments. In very brief and fundamental terms, this covenant laid out Israel’s responsibilities before God—and subsequently, ours as well. (A plethora of laws, rules, and precepts—both symbolic and practical—were handed down at roughly the same time, but the covenant proper was said to consist of these specific Ten Commandments, listed in Exodus 20.) At that time, Moses delineated (in Leviticus 26) what good things would happen if the people adhered to these precepts, and what bad things would happen if they did not. The list of blessings and curses (a covenant in its own right) makes it clear that they were primarily meant to apply to life *within the Land*—it speaks of crops, cities, and the possibility of being evicted for their

disobedience. (And remember: living in the Promised Land is metaphorical of life for mortal believers in this world, where our choices are made. There are still battles to be fought and work to be done here.) But alas, Israel's reluctance to trust Yahweh (because of the discouraging report of the ten spies) prevented that entire generation from entering the Land. Out of perhaps two million souls, all of them but two (Joshua and Caleb, the "Minority Report," as it were) left their corpses rotting in the wilderness.

So almost four decades later, as the children of the exodus generation were about to enter the promised land, Moses restated the blessings that would result from their adherence to Yahweh's instructions, and the cursings that would befall them if they abandoned God's law. It's a long list—Moses rambles on for several pages, presumably so nobody could later whine, "Nobody warned me!" The bottom line is this: **"These are the words of the covenant that Yahweh commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab [where they were camped as they prepared to cross the Jordan], besides the covenant that He had made with them at Horeb."** (Deuteronomy 29:1) Lest we should mistake this as mere "suggestion" or "good advice," we are reminded that these warnings are a *covenant*—a contract between God and Israel, an agreement or pledge with binding terms and consequences. In other words, if Yahweh failed to follow through on His end of the bargain (whether for good or ill), then He would be proven untrustworthy—no better (and no more real) than the "gods" of the surrounding nations. Therefore, if someone really trusted Yahweh to be who He said He was—Almighty God, something He had proven a thousand times over in the previous forty years—he would naturally do everything in his power to comply with what the covenant required of him.

And what was that? There are actually no new instructions here. What is being "commanded" is merely that the Israelites do what Yahweh had *already* commanded. Stated in positive terms, **"If you faithfully obey the voice of Yahweh your God, being careful to do all His commandments that I command you today, Yahweh your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of Yahweh your God."** (Deuteronomy 28:1-2) There is only one significant difference between the Leviticus 26 list and the one in Deuteronomy, and it shows up right here in the introduction. At first, only "peace" was promised: **"I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid...and the sword shall not go through your land."** (Leviticus 26:6) That would have been good enough for me. But here, *worldwide political ascendancy* is guaranteed to Israel if they will only obey the voice of Yahweh. As ludicrous as this proposition may seem in today's geopolitical climate, it will literally come to pass under the terms of the "New Covenant," something we'll explore in a moment. As we shall see, "obeying the voice of Yahweh your God" is tantamount to recognizing and accepting Yahshua as Yahweh's Messiah, for

the entire Torah conspires to establish this one essential thing. If Israel is not “set high above all the nations of the earth,” then one of two things is true: either Yahweh is a fraud (and He’s *not*), or Israel has not yet obeyed His voice. The key word is “yet.” They *will* receive their Messiah. It’s a prophetic *fait accompli*.

The blessings for compliance with God’s Law, boiled down to their essentials, also included material prosperity, numerous and healthy children, victory in battle, and best of all, close fellowship with Yahweh. Israel would enjoy a harmonious relationship with nature, whether positive (good weather, predictable rain, etc.), or negative (no predators killing off their flocks). I hasten to reiterate that although this conversation, this covenant, was being made with the children of Israel—who were thereby assigned to be the exclusive keepers of the Torah’s symbols—the promises (both the blessing and the cursing) can be legitimately applied to gentile believers as well, at least in a general sense. This is because Israel is a microcosm of the gentile world. Although our roles are different, truth is still truth: what’s true for Israel is also true for the nations. It also bears mentioning—again—that we’re talking about *national* blessing or cursing, not some method whereby we can engineer a predictable positive outcome on an individual basis. God reserves the right to teach us through trial: it’s what develops character, perseverance, and empathy in us—attributes Yahweh values far more highly than our comfort, prosperity, and ease.

The curses for non-compliance should also be heeded by everyone: **“But if you will not obey the voice of Yahweh your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.”** (Deuteronomy 28:15) The list is, once again, geared more toward the nation as a whole than for individuals within it—although of course, consensus among faithful individuals *defines* a faithful nation. The curses are pretty much the converse of the blessings, but the list is much longer and more detailed. Poor physical and mental health, disastrous weather (resulting in compromised agriculture, leading in turn to hunger), irrational fear, defeat in battle, invasion by enemies, frustration of hopes and dreams, incompetent (or just plain evil) leadership, natural plagues, desperation so dire it results in cannibalism, and finally, slavery in exile—these things are all *promised* to Israel in response to their continued disobedience to Yahweh’s precepts.

In the midst of the list, the root of the problem is revealed. It’s the same thing we learned previously: **“Yahweh will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken [azab] Me.”** (Deuteronomy 28:20) That’s right: abandonment of Yahweh by Israel would lead to the removal of His hand of blessing upon their nation—and worse: He would actually work *against* them.

What part of “**If you seek Him, He will be found by you, but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you**” didn’t they understand? What part don’t *we* understand?

We note a prophesied progression of judgment, getting worse by stages in response to Israel’s stubborn refusal to repent. It moves steadily from mere lack of success to overwhelming purposeful defeat; it escalates from bad luck to tragedy to catastrophe to utter annihilation, or so it would seem. If they didn’t reverse course, the only thing that would prevent Israel from going the way of the Hittites and Amorites was Yahweh’s ultimate promise of national redemption, the one first made to Abraham. But in case you’re historically challenged, the curses for disobedience described in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 have come about precisely as Yahweh predicted. Interspersed between all-too-brief episodes of spiritual compliance, Israel’s history is primarily one of rebellion and apostasy—so much so that Yahweh has had to evict them from their own Promised Land—*twice*. Their temple has been totally destroyed—*twice*. For almost nineteen centuries, any Israelite within Israel was considered a foreigner in his own land. Jews today who assume that their religious traditions are in compliance with the Torah need to deal with these inconvenient facts. If they are right, then Yahweh is either a liar or is completely incompetent, for everything that has happened to Israel—especially since the crucifixion of Yahshua—was promised as a curse, the inevitable, predictable result of having forsaken God.

It has been said that, “Promises are like crying babies in a theater; they should be carried out at once.” That’s true enough for us humans, I suppose. But Yahweh’s promises are being carried out in His own sweet time, according to His own foreknowledge and pre-ordained schedule. He can only promise an everlasting nation to Abraham and an eternal throne to David—and *at the same time* promise these curses for disobedience through Moses—because He knows that in the end, Israel *will* finally come to their senses and seek His face. It’s only a matter of time.

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Yahweh, then, has instituted any number of covenants with the human race, the nation of Israel, or individuals within that nation. Although He has kept His end of each successive bargain, mankind has never failed to fail in keeping ours. Oh, we’ve had our bright spots, our moments of spiritual clarity, but they’ve been few and far between. The most comprehensive covenant by far—and the one requiring the greatest degree of human participation—was the Mosaic covenant, the Law, the Torah. And we (primarily through Israel) have proven mankind’s

inability or unwillingness to follow God's instructions—instructions that would have brought us life and blessing, had we followed them.

My point is not that we should try harder—that perhaps with redoubled effort, we can somehow reconnect with God under our own steam. No, my point is that the Torah was never intended to *be* our salvation at all; it was merely designed to reveal what (or Who) our salvation is. To revisit a simile I've used in the past, the Torah is like the script to a play. It's Author is Yahweh, and the actors are Israel. We gentiles are the intended audience. Up until now, the actors—those whose responsibility it is to recite their lines so that the audience can understand and appreciate the plot—have proven woefully inadequate. They've been rehearsing this thing for thousands of years now, learning their lines by rote memorization. But it's as if the play is written in a foreign language: they're sounding out the words, syllable by syllable, with only limited comprehension of what they mean (sort of like me reading something in Spanish). At some point, figuring they knew what the play was about, they set the script aside and began adlibbing their lines. The Author was not amused. And the audience? We've stopped paying attention to what these actors are saying, because it's mostly gibberish. But some of us have come to recognize what the Torah's symbols—the language in which the script is written—mean, and we're reading it for ourselves. In the process, we're learning how awesome the Playwright is, and we've fallen in love with His Leading Man, Yahshua the Messiah.

That's how things stand at the moment, during the age of the ekklesia. Israel has the script, though they don't know what it means. But the Author has revealed how He plans to remedy the situation. **"Behold, the days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares Yahweh...."** Yahweh readily admits that the Torah isn't being performed as intended. Israel has broken the covenant—or as my metaphor puts it, they've misread the script, saying it means something the Author never wrote, substituting their own traditions in place of His truth.

So what is He planning to do? **"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares Yahweh: I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know Yahweh,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares Yahweh. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."** (Jeremiah 31:31-34) Right now, the Law is *on* Israel. It is a burden they bear, or would, if they could. As a practical matter, the majority of Jews in the world today have recognized the impossibility of keeping the Torah, and have either given up altogether or have



retreated to the deceptive comfort of religious tradition. Yahweh's plan, however, it to put His Law *within* them. Instead of "sounding out the words" of a language they don't know, they will finally understand what their Torah really means. It will be like the tower of Babel in reverse.

The "New Covenant" isn't really new. It still describes, as it always has, the means through which Yahweh draws mankind unto Himself. What's "new" about it is the ability and willingness of *Israel* to recognize and receive God's truth. Why can't they (as a nation) see it? It's because they (as a nation) rejected their Messiah, saying, **"His blood be on us and on our children!"** (Matthew 27:25) It has been nearly two thousand years since this disastrous prayer was uttered by the Jewish leadership, and Yahweh is still answering, "Okay, if that's what you want." But this state of affairs won't last forever: Hosea prophesied, **"Come, let us return to Yahweh; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him."** (Hosea 6:1-2) As both Moses and Peter have informed us, one day in God's sight is as a thousand years. Yahweh's "tearing" will therefore be at an end after two thousand years, and His healing will commence. Two thousand years after what? After the rejection and crucifixion of Christ, in 33 AD. You do the math.

The fact (not to mention the ramifications) of Israel's rejection of their Messiah was a central theme of Isaiah's prophetic commission. Yahweh told him, **"Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed...."** Because of their unbelief, Yahweh says, Israel will not perceive the truth, even if it is standing right in front of them. They will hear the word of God in their ears, but they won't understand it.

And like Hosea, Isaiah addresses the time issue. How long would God's stubborn child have to remain in "time out"? Yahweh describes Israel's period of spiritual exile to him, not in terms of years, but through the events that would transpire: **"Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And He said: 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and Yahweh removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.'" The first part of that would happen in Isaiah's lifetime, with the Assyrian conquest of Israel's northern kingdom. But that would only be the beginning. "And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump."** (Isaiah 6:9-13) You know the history: Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon finished what Assyria's Sennacherib had begun, sending the idolatrous Judah into exile for seventy years. Half a millennium later, and back in the Land under Roman rule, the Israelite remnant

rejected Yahshua as their Messiah, prompting the one-two punch of Titus (in 70 AD) and Hadrian (in 135), “burning” Israel to the ground and scattering her ashes among the nations. Only now is their “stump” once again showing signs of life. The day is not far off when Yahweh will fulfill the New Covenant in Israel: **“I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”**

A casual glance at some statements defining the “New Covenant” might lead one to assume that literal adherence to the precepts of the Torah is what Yahweh has in mind. When He says, **“I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts,”** what, precisely, does He mean? We are given clarification elsewhere: **“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with Me.”** (Hosea 6:6-7) Whatever “covenant” Yahweh is looking forward to restoring is far more fundamental than the Torah’s instructions, for even Adam (who by all accounts didn’t receive much direction at all) is said to have breached it. Micah asks, **“With what shall I come before Yahweh, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?...”** That’s what the Torah had demanded, but it’s clear that its requirements were *symbolic*: they would all be fulfilled in the life and mission of Yahshua our Messiah. So what does He *really* want from us? In a nutshell, it’s to be as much like Christ as is humanly possible: **“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”** (Micah 6:6, 8)

So when Christ referred to the New Covenant, it wasn’t to the Torah *per se*, but to what the Torah revealed: Himself. **“And when the hour came, He reclined at table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks he said, ‘Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And He took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.’”** (Luke 22:14-20) Here, the New Covenant is specifically tied to the Torah’s symbology of wine and blood, and is presented in the context of bread and the Passover Lamb. These elements, of course, all figure heavily in Levitical ritual. Luke’s account stresses the admonition that we *remember*. The bread and the wine were symbols of Christ’s sacrifice. We must never forget about that.

Matthew shows us the same scene from a slightly different angle: **“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He**

gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.'" (Matthew 26:26-29) Here, a specific connection is made between the wine (representing Yahshua's blood) and the forgiveness of sins—the basis and *raison d'être* of every blood sacrifice specified in the Torah.

To get to the bottom of this, we really need to look at what the Torah had to say about the drink offering. It was called the *neseq*, described (for example) in Numbers 15:2-10 and 28:7. Wine was to be offered up in conjunction with every animal sacrifice, whether the burnt offering (*olah*), trespass offering (*asham*), sin offering (*chata't*), or peace offering (the *selem*). The *neseq* would accompany the grain component that was mixed with oil, and there was always to be the same amount of wine as there was oil, a hint that God intended us to see the connection—the equivalence—between Christ's sacrifice and the work of the Holy Spirit. The amount of wine (and oil) varied with the size of the sacrificial animal, about a quart for a lamb or goat, up to twice that amount for a bull. As with most offerings, the worshipper would supply the wine and the priest would attend to its ritual. The wine was to be poured out at the time of the sacrifice, presumably upon the altar, for the libation was described as a "sweet aroma to Yahweh." Although the Torah itself says nothing about what the pouring out of wine might mean, all four Gospels tie it directly to the blood of Yahshua that was "poured out" for us at Calvary. You don't have to be a Torah scholar to see what this means. In retrospect, it's patently obvious—unless, of course, you think you have a vested interest in continuing to deny the deity and Messianic credentials of Yahshua.

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It is fairly clear that, though they emphasize different aspects of our relationship with Yahweh, all these various covenants of God are ultimately meant to be viewed as one composite entity. When considered together as a comprehensive whole, they (or should I say, *it*) summarizes and encapsulates man's connection with His Maker, as Yahweh intended it to be. It is the bottom line, the lowest common denominator of our relationship. The scriptures call it "the everlasting covenant."

The bad news is that mankind has, for the most part, purposely chosen to live in defiance of God's revealed will. Speaking of a time yet future to us (though apparently not by much), when the apostasy, idolatry, and rebellion of man will have reached "critical mass," Isaiah paints this grim picture: **"The earth lies defiled**

**under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.”**

(Isaiah 24:5-6) Since we have already established that the everlasting covenant was established long before the Torah was instituted, the “laws and statutes” spoken of here must encompass more than just the instructions of Moses, but must also include man’s intuitive knowledge of right and wrong—the “law” of his own conscience. All of it has been violated.

We understand the logic behind “suffering for our guilt,” of course, but what about this reference to being “scorched” (or “burned,” as in some translations)? This refers to a literal future event (the first trumpet judgment of Revelation 8) but it’s also symbolic. The Torah lists only two offenses that are to be punished by fire, and both of them are sexual perversions. In fact, every single mention of execution by fire in the entire Bible (whether advocated by Yahweh or not) is associated in some way with either sexual sin, the worship of false gods, or both. That makes sense: in God’s economy, one is a picture of the other. Seeing things through the lens of the Torah therefore, Isaiah is reporting that “breaking the everlasting covenant” is tantamount to forsaking Yahweh in order to join oneself to “other gods.” Basically, it’s a systematic worldwide violation of the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

The good news is that for us who “have no other gods before Yahweh,” the Everlasting Covenant allows us to stand guiltless before Him. The Hebrew scriptures predict it, and the New Testament explains *how* the covenant was to be implemented. Although it’s the essence of the entire New Testament, this eternal covenant is mentioned *by name* only once there, in the closing benediction to the Book of Hebrews: **“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”** (Hebrews 13:20-21) If we sort out the convoluted English here, we may discover several things about the “eternal covenant.” (1) This, like the “new” covenant in Christ (because they’re really the same thing), is said to be brought about through the shedding of His blood; (2) God’s intention through the covenant is to equip us to do His will; (3) When God works in and through us, it is pleasing to Him (which implies, if I may extrapolate, that good works done in our own strength are *not* automatically pleasing to God); and (4) Our good works, if done through the power of the risen Messiah, glorify Him—and will continue to do so for eternity. This in turn necessitates that not only God, but we who are glorifying Him through our works, will live forever, one way or another.

The vast majority of “eternal covenant” references are found in the Hebrew scriptures. Not surprisingly, then, many of these refer specifically to Israel’s part in the unfolding of Yahweh’s plan of redemption. We should bear in mind that although Israel’s role is literal, it is also symbolic: Israel is a prophetic harbinger of the kind of blessings that *can* be enjoyed by all mankind. A quick survey reveals that the Everlasting Covenant is specifically linked to, or confirmed through, each of these things: (1) Noah’s rainbow sign; (2) Abraham’s descendants—whether physical or spiritual; (3) the sign of circumcision; (4) the institution of the Sabbath day; (5) the showbread in the sanctuary, indicative of Yahweh’s provision; (6) the offerings received by the priests of Israel; (7) the throne of David; (8) Israel’s geographical inheritance, the land of Canaan; and (9) repentant and purified Israel under Yahshua’s Millennial reign—a people described in Isaiah 61 as “those who mourn in Zion.”

Bearing in mind that “Israel,” the literal, biological descendants of Jacob, is also the symbolic spiritual forerunner of all of Abraham’s “descendants-in-faith,” let us review what Yahweh has to say about the everlasting covenant as revealed through the future history of this people. **“Behold, I will gather them [Israel] from all the countries to which I drove them in My anger and My wrath and in great indignation.”** Not to belabor the point, but Israel cannot (as some believe) be simply replaced by the church, for Yahweh has never driven us anywhere in His wrath (no matter how much we deserved it). Nor can we logically expect the believing population of the entire earth to be relocated and squeezed into Israel’s tiny homeland: **“I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. And they shall be My people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of Me in their hearts, that they may not turn from Me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all My heart and all My soul.”** (Jeremiah 32:37-41) It has been two and a half millennia since Jeremiah wrote these words, and they still haven’t come to pass, though the everlasting covenant God desires to make with the children of Israel is being enjoyed by millions of (mostly) gentile believers. Will biological Israel—as a nation—ever fulfill their part of the covenant? I wouldn’t bet against it: Yahweh has staked His very reputation on it, time after time after time...

**“In those days and in that time, declares Yahweh, the people of Israel and the people of Judah shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek Yahweh their God.”** This, in case you missed it, is a poignant picture of the ultimate Day of Atonement, in which the primary instruction is to “afflict” (Hebrew: *anah*) one’s soul. Why is Israel seen weeping? Because they have finally realized the disastrous error of their fathers—the rejection of Yahshua the Messiah. The verb *anah* also means to answer or respond, something “seeking Yahweh their God”

addresses. **“They shall ask the way to Zion, with faces turned toward it, saying, ‘Come, let us join ourselves to Yahweh in an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten.’”**

(Jeremiah 50:4-5) The point here is that it’s not enough for Yahweh to *offer* the blessings of the eternal covenant. Israel (not to mention us) also needs to *receive* it—we need to “join ourselves to Yahweh.” To be in force, any covenant needs to be embraced by all of the interested parties. That is, the terms of the covenant must be accepted and voluntarily fulfilled by everyone involved. (Thus getting your driver’s license is a covenant, while paying Federal income taxes is not.) Yahweh has been known (e.g. Genesis 15:12-21) to make *unilateral* covenants, wherein nothing is required of the recipient of the promise. But normally, it’s a case of “If you do this, I will do that.” Yahweh fulfilled His end of the bargain when He appeared in flesh to offer Himself up as a sacrifice to atone for our sins. Israel’s part of the covenant (and ours) is to humbly receive Yahweh’s gift—one that is symbolically defined through every line of the Torah. Jeremiah has described that very thing: Israel must ultimately say, **“Come, let us join ourselves to Yahweh in an everlasting covenant.”**

Ezekiel reminds Israel that although their historical unwillingness to honor Yahweh has led inexorably to the curses promised in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28—rather than the blessings that could have been theirs—the long-term picture hasn’t changed. **“For thus says the Lord Yahweh: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant....”** The “days of their youth” was when Abraham was given God’s unilateral promise that in him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That promise was fulfilled with the advent of Yahshua the Messiah, but Israel has yet to embrace that fact. But when they do, **“I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall know that I am Yahweh, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord Yahweh.”** (Ezekiel 16:59-63)

**“When I atone for you?”** The atonement sacrifice was achieved on Passover, 33AD. It is finished. But the everlasting covenant is not yet in force because Israel has not yet *accepted* this atonement. Have you ever wondered why the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippurim*) is the next-to-last convocation on Yahweh’s schedule? It’s a rather alarming statistic: if its definitive fulfillment falls in the same year as the last “feast” in the series, the Feast of Tabernacles (and having studied the prophetic implications, I am convinced that this is indeed the case), then only five days separate the two dates. This means that Israel will at last recognize and receive their Messiah on the definitive Day of Atonement, completing their part in the everlasting covenant. What finally persuades them? Why this particular day? Because it marks the second coming, the return of Christ, His visible descent to the Mount of Olives. The prophet Zechariah

describes the scene: **“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on Me, on Him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over Him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”** (Zechariah 12:10) The Day of Atonement is Israel’s great awakening, complete with *anah*—both “affliction of soul” and a positive (though belated) response to Yahweh’s everlasting covenant.

Concluding a pair of remarkable prophecies concerning the miraculous rebirth of Israel, Ezekiel reports the bottom line: **“I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Then the nations will know that I am Yahweh who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”**

(Ezekiel 37:26-28) He’s describing the Millennial kingdom of Yahshua. Notice that although Israel is finally reunited with their God (in the person of His Messiah), the nations—the gentiles—are still part of the picture. The cart is finally behind the horse, where it belongs. The God-King reigns in Israel, the people of Israel are at last partakers of His everlasting covenant, and the gentiles are witnesses to (and beneficiaries of) this relationship.

Who are these “nations?” We’re talking about mortal populations here, not the resurrected now-immortal ekklesia. They are the offspring of the “sheep” (see Matthew 25:31-46) to whom the conquering Messiah-King said, upon assessing their spiritual status as neo-believers at the end of the Tribulation, **“Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”** (Matthew 25:34) They are therefore not part of the church of Philadelphia, who were “kept out of the hour of trial” (Revelation 3:10)—i.e., raptured out of the world before the Tribulation even began—but rather those of the final prophetic church, that of Laodicea. These had not yet come to faith at the time of the rapture harvest, but they did subsequently take Yahshua’s advice: **“I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire [symbolic of immutable purity], so that you may be rich, and white garments [imputed righteousness] so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see [Yahshua alone opens the eyes of the blind]. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me.”** (Revelation 3:18-20) Those who escaped martyrdom (or death in the general mayhem of the times) will enter the Kingdom age as mortal believers, with the mandate of rebuilding and repopulating the ruined world under Yahshua’s guidance for the next thousand years.

Isaiah has the same objective (and apparently the same ultimate timeframe) in view: **“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come,**

**buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to Me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, My steadfast, sure love for David.”** (Isaiah 55:1-3) Follow the train of thought here: mortal man needs food and drink to maintain life. But our mortal existence is only a temporary metaphor for the eternal spiritual life we can enjoy as Yahweh’s children. It follows, then, that our souls need spiritual food—the word of God—to grow and thrive. The Torah’s dietary laws taught us to be discerning about what we put into our bodies. This principle is even more significant in the spiritual realm: falsehood is expensive, unsatisfying, and unable to sustain us—in other words, pointless. It’s empty calories, or worse, poison. But *real* food and drink—the “rich food” of the everlasting covenant—gives life to our souls. It’s equated here to the love Yahweh showed to (and through) David. So just as we taste and assimilate food so our bodies can live, we are to “listen diligently, incline our ears, and hear” Yahweh, so that our souls may live as well.

Isaiah stressed the fact that this spiritual food and drink is given freely to us. We need not pay for it; in fact, we couldn’t buy it if we tried: it’s a gift, both priceless *and* without price. John’s final invitation emphasizes the same thing: **“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”** (Revelation 22:17) To insist on “paying” for the benefits of the everlasting covenant is not only foolish, but also insulting to Yahweh—who voluntarily made the greatest sacrifice imaginable to buy our lives back. To contend that we can purchase our own “heaven” with charitable works, by behaving a bit better than our neighbor, by pleasing an imaginary God we have invented in our own minds, or by feeling guilty from breakfast to bedtime every day is not only irrational, it’s dishonoring and belittling to the God who revealed Himself and His plan in excruciating detail through scripture and history.

We’re closing in on the heart of the matter—how we may participate in the Everlasting Covenant. And it’s turning out to be absurdly simple. Two words: Honor Yahweh. In the end, it has nothing to do with behavior or doctrine or faith or knowledge, at least in any fundamental, causal sense. It simply boils down to one choice we all must make: either honor God or forsake Him. Everything else—the instructions, the symbols, the rites, the stories, the prophecies, the miracles, and the theology—they’re all just means to an end, ways to help us understand. If we truly honor the Living God, the tiniest ray of light will be enough to see by, yet the unfiltered brilliance of His glory will not overwhelm us. But if we do not revere Him, all the scholarship, compliance, piety, and penance in the world will fail to illuminate our hearts or satisfy our thirsty souls. Only one thing is needful: to honor Yahweh.