



# THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS

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“Put on the whole armor of God”

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And Much More...



## FORGIVENESS: Setting the Captives Free

By **JEFF FLANICK**

The world today is becoming increasingly unsettled and polarized. Incivility, crime, and violence are on the rise against the backdrop of war in the Middle East and Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians (and Russians) are dead in two years of conflict between the two nations. Hamas invaded Israel last October, inflicting terror through murder and rape. Atrocities included the burning of bodies, the amputation of limbs, and even the *purported* beheadings of civilians. Innocent children were included among the victims of these attacks. People were killed without mercy. Some of the dead and abused Israelis were paraded around *like trophies* you’d expect to see after a successful hunting safari! In response, Israel’s retaliation has resulted in tens of thousands of Palestinians dead, with massive bombing campaigns destroying countless lives, property, and homes. Entire

cities within Gaza have been decimated. Animosity between Arabs and Jews has existed for more than just recent decades, it has gone on for millennia. This deep-seeded hatred is passed on from parent to child, from generation to generation. It is a chronic condition resulting in the manifestation of brutal, visceral, “over the top” violence, and terrorism, designed to cause an intense emotional reaction.

Reflecting on these current atrocities (on both sides), how is forgiveness of the offending party possible? When all is said and done, how do people “move on,” so to speak, after experiencing this level of hate toward themselves, or toward their loved ones? **Forgiveness is central in our walk with God, it is a cornerstone of our faith.** It has been said that not forgiving your enemy is like drinking poison, and expecting the *other* person to die!

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## Just Who Is Jesus Christ?

*Recent news of a small group of Orthodox Hasidic Jewish students that were digging tunnels under the Chabad Lubavitch World Headquarters has brought to light some very distasteful Talmudic information about who they claim Jesus Christ was. This demeaning negative description causes one to ask: So, just who is Jesus Christ, and what did He really do?*

By **BILL WATSON**

Back in January (2024) a disruption occurred at the Chabad Lubavitch World H.Q. over tunnels being dug under the building. As a side-light to all the “chaos,” some *not so complimentary writings* about Jesus Christ from the Talmud were disclosed publicly. And needless to say, people were stunned by the degree of disrespect, animosity, and hostility expressed

toward non-Jews (Gentiles/Goyim) and Jesus Christ that emerged on the Internet. And, admittedly, for those that had no idea of this “venomous and insulting ill will” harbored toward Jesus Christ and non-Jews in the writings of the Oral Law—known as the Talmud—were understandably shocked!

Let me take a moment to share with you some examples of just what Talmudic writings teach. But first, we should point out that the twelfth-century Jewish scholar Maimonides, who is credited with codifying the principles of modern Judaism, claimed God is one, not one of a pair, or a Trinity. For the Orthodox Jew, this premise is a fundamental difference with Christians, and it eliminates belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. So, as far as a modern-day Orthodox Jew, or rabbi, is concerned,

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## In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

### Was Matthew 28:19b in the Original Text?

By **MIKE JAMES**

Throughout my years in the Church of God I have heard different ideas about the following scripture (**Matthew 28:19**):

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (KJV).

“Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them *into* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (ASV).

“having gone, then, disciple all the nations, (baptizing them—to the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (YLT).

I’ve read where some Christians think this is written this way as proof of the Trinity. I have heard from others that this scripture may not have been part of the original text of the Gospel of Matthew. Let’s take a closer look at this scripture.

The Greek word used here for “in,” “into,” and “to” is *eis*. The word is a primary preposition and indicates the point reached or entered of place, time, or (figuratively) purpose.

*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1984, p. 597, says the following on the use of the word *eis*: “Matthew, unlike some NT writers, apparently avoids the confusion of *eis* (strictly “into”) and *en* (strictly “in”); cf. Zerwick, par. 106) common in Hellenistic Greek; and if so, the preposition “into” strongly suggests a coming-into-relationship-with or a coming-under-the Lordship-of (cf. Allen; Albright and Mann).”

Did you catch that, the use of this preposition suggests that we are coming under the Lordship of someone. Now think about this. Isn’t God’s Spirit involved in getting you to follow God’s way? Isn’t

See **MATT 28:19**, page 7

## FORGIVENESS

*Continued from page 1*

Our Messiah came to die for all of mankind's sins. He died for our sins, our transgressions, and our iniquities. This is contingent upon us taking Him up on the offer of forgiveness by purposely choosing to enter into Covenant with God. We do this by repenting, that is, changing our way of life, and striving to live, as best we can, a life of obedience to His Way. To follow His example of living a life in compliance with Torah.

Forgiveness is at the center of our Messiah's model prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." (Matthew 6:12).

How do we navigate this **command** to forgive others? This is a basic teaching of Christ. It is mandatory for believers to forgive. Like many things in life, we may know what to do; however, doing what we should do is not always easy. For example, we know we should exercise, but do we do so regularly? If we need to lose weight, do we forego that extra piece of pizza, or candy? Our walk with God, our walk with Messiah, requires us to be compliant with this forgiveness directive.

Even if we know **what** to do, the deeper questions always involve the **why** and the **how**. Motivation is necessary if you want someone to truly have a great deal of enthusiasm regarding a demanding project, or any challenging endeavor.

Why? It is a most important question! Think back to when you were young, or when you may have raised children. Recall those situations involving homework, cleaning a room, taking out the garbage, or taking a shower. Kids naturally protest and continually ask "Why?" It can become a game of "Because I said so!" (or your mother or your father said so.) Eventually, as children mature, they see the wisdom in their parents' advice. It is in their own best interest to study, get good grades, and learn good habits. Our parents had the best of intentions for us. It is the same way with our spiritual walk as "children" of our Father in heaven.

Christ tells us in **Matthew 6:14–15** why we should forgive others: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive yours."

Messiah also says this in **Luke 6:37–38**: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

Do we need any other reasons to forgive? The **why** is simple:

- a. You are a sinner.
- b. You want to be forgiven.
- c. You want eternal life with the



Father, and the Son in their Kingdom

d. Your Father (and your Lord) say this is what you **MUST** do, if you wish to be with them in their Kingdom.

The more difficult question to answer is the **how** question. To answer the **how** question, we should go through a sort of checklist, what I'll call "*The Mechanics of Forgiveness*." Let's consider the basic questions concerning forgiveness:

**WHAT?** We must FORGIVE.

**WHERE?** In our HEARTS and MINDS (in all our being).

**WHEN?** As soon as possible after we have been transgressed.

**WHO?** The person who has affected us (harmed us).

**WHY?** Because our Father and our Messiah told us to.

All we have left to answer is the **how** question. Forgiveness is not always easy. For some people, forgiveness is *never* easy. Problems with forgiveness contribute to the increasing mental health crisis we see in our world today. Therapy books are sold by the millions; and therapists make billions of dollars a year dealing with the effects of failed relationships. The inability of one party to forgive the other is one of the root causes of failing relationships. "Let go and let God"—is it quite that easy?

Navigating the **how** aspect of forgiveness is more enigmatic and abstract than, say, a "how to" set of instructions used to build a *Star Wars Lego* set. It is not as prescriptive as following a rigorous plan of time-tested steps needed to lose weight, or as following a recipe to bake a cake. There is no "step by step" manual for achieving forgiveness proficiency. People and situations involving conflict are never exactly the same. I hope to offer insight into thought processes, or what might be called "mental gymnastics," you can use in your desire to embrace the spirit of forgiveness. Certain "psychological tools" may be employed as a catalyst for success in your desire to forgive.

Part of the difficulty with forgiveness is not fully understanding the different aspects and intricate nuances of forgiveness.

One thing I've found helpful is to look beyond yourself and the detrimental effect someone's transgression has had on you. Attempt to look at the situation, or pattern of negative behavior(s), from another perspective. Try to

see things from the other person's point of view. In many cases, bullies come from dysfunctional homes, or are raised lacking proper positive attention. As such, they lash out at (perceived) weaker individuals, looking for sorely needed attention and validation. We only see the "tip of the iceberg" of that person; we aren't privy to what they are going through personally on the inside. We are unaware of what baggage they are carrying, all that massive "ice" (the trauma) under the surface of their "water." This is not an excuse to justify their behavior, nor does it make the maltreatment we may incur from them any easier to take. However, considering these things may make the abuse we suffer from them more tolerable.

I worked with Professor Banks in the chemistry lab for over twenty-five years. We became close friends working long nights together. His family was from deep-south Alabama. He experienced substantial racism during much of his life. Banks was a colonel in the Army during Vietnam. After his own recovery from alcoholism, Mr. Banks became heavily involved in Alcoholics Anonymous, helping hun-

dreds of people in the Cleveland area who struggled with addiction. There were times we would talk about an incident where an addict he was helping had taken advantage of his kindness. Other times, we would discuss the stress and aggravation I was experiencing raising five kids while married to my first wife. Banks told me the following story, which I found to be quite valuable in learning to be forgiving during difficult periods of my life:

Suppose you had a rough day and your spouse asked you to run to the store to get groceries. You are dressed in a nice suit en route to an important meeting you must attend after work. Just as you are about to get into your car—**BAM!**—someone slams into you from behind. The carton containing eggs breaks, messing up your suit jacket. The milk carton bursts open and runs down the front of your pants. How angry are you? You were already in an agitated state due to your troublesome day; now you are ready to *rage* at whoever hit you. As you turn around, you notice it is an old blind man with a cane who ran into you.

**Instantly**, your mood changes. What seemed like a purposeful event just occurred unintentionally because of someone's severe handicap. Banks said some people just can't help themselves, they are "blind" to their own ways, agendas, and selfishness. He said you must learn to let these things go. I found this analogy so easy to grasp then, as well as now. When we are attacked, put down, ignored, or harassed by someone, we don't always see the obvious baggage, or "handicap" they have (as with the blind man). However, upon reflection, we can surmise there must be something in this person's past (or psyche) that causes them to "act out" or behave in a certain way!

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## THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS

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Attempting to gain a perspective “outside of yourself”—that is, viewing a situation from the other person’s point of view—can be helpful in providing you with the ability to manifest a genuine spirit of forgiveness, especially in circumstances where it seems so very hard to do!

Rabbi Steve Berkson of Cleveland, Tennessee, has some insightful thoughts to consider regarding the topics of forgiveness, resentment, and restoration. Berkson purports real forgiveness entails giving up resentment, alongside the desire to punish others. When we truly forgive someone, we are releasing negative emotions associated with that event.

It is critical to remember during the process of forgiveness that you need to work on yourself, to take care of your own “business” so to speak. God will take care of everyone else, including the person who “wronged” you. The most important question to ask yourself is, do you *trust* Him—do you trust God to take care of His end of the bargain?

**Romans 12:17–19:** “Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

The Scriptures tell us people will reap what they sew. In the end, *God’s Will* will be accomplished—albeit, in God’s way, in God’s own perfect timing! God is not mocked. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul simply repeated what was recorded in Deuteronomy through Moses. Punishment is not your domain. You are not authorized to be judge and jury; this is God’s purview, His territory to manage. If you *truly* believe in God, and in His Word, *you must trust* what is written in the Scriptures. Remember, God cannot lie. Have faith that (eventually) justice will be served. Bad deeds, if not corrected, and bad behaviors, *if not put right*, will be punished. God is a God of both mercy and justice.

Perhaps later on, because of the ordeal you have been put through, there will be sincere repentance by the offender. This individual will have their sins forgiven by God, covered by the Blood of the Messiah. Sure, the possibility of such an outcome does not necessarily make you feel better while in the process of being transgressed. However, with *higher level* spiritual thinking, it may help you endure the trial you’re in. We need to pray for our enemies and wish them well. We should hope they do indeed turn to repentance (not just in their clash with you, but in their overall lives as well)!

**Romans 12:14:** “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

Sadly, the sinner who may have harmed you may not repent. This person may not be called to understand God’s way to live with others during this lifetime. Ultimately, resolution of

the matter, be it repentance, *or* punishment, is between the offender and the Almighty (in His own perfect timing).

Even if you could be the person selected to punish the offender, would that be enough? If someone killed your spouse or child, and you could be the one to lock them up in solitary confinement, or flip the switch on the electric chair, would it erase the pain you have endured? Perhaps it might provide temporary relief, a moment of “satisfying revenge,” but it wouldn’t bring your loved one back. In the same way, having revenge on someone who has caused you harm won’t undo the ugliness, pain, or trauma of the event that has caused you such distress.

For illustration, let’s consider vicious murders. There is a marked difference between a random murder and a murder of passion. Many times on shows such as *Dateline NBC*, you’ll see that a murderer who committed a revenge-style killing ended up having stabbed their victim fifty or more times, well *after* the person is dead! This is because the death of the person (in the passion filled attack) did not solve the problem for the perpetrator: it did **not** take away the pain they experienced when they lost their loved one.

When you forgive someone, that is, pardon them from your perspective, you pass judgment onto a “higher court.” You are leaving it in the hands of God, trusting in His wisdom and His sovereignty. When you *pardon* someone, it can be more than just *pardon*ing the offender; you also release the negative emotions affecting you. You in effect *pardon yourself as well*. To quote from the song *Exodus* by Bob Marley “...Wipe away transgression, set the captives free.”

Some confuse forgiveness with reconciliation and restoration, adding to the complexity of letting go and forgiving someone. Unpacking the different aspects of forgiveness and reconciliation can be helpful in offering forgiveness to others.

It is important to understand forgiveness is not dependent on the other party having to say, “I’m sorry.” There is no obligation on their part to do *anything* for you to forgive them. Forgiveness is an endeavor performed by you alone, exclusively. You strive to resolve the matter in your own mind, independent of the actions of the other party. If you decide to pursue reconciliation later on, that is a different matter entirely.

Practical steps in managing forgiveness include understanding what happened. You must be able to recall the circumstance so it does not affect you in the same way again, should the trial return. In your remembrance of the ordeal, however, try and view it simply as a piece of information *without* attaching emotion to it. Attempt to remove the emotional lens, as well as the emotional pain, from what has transpired. Do your best to recall things in a more factual manner, as if you were a news reporter. Viewing



things objectively, rather than subjectively, is helpful in resolving conflict. One-time events, for the most part, are easier to manage than continued, entrenched conflicts. Just to be clear, I’m not talking about violent or abusive situations. I’m referring to ongoing disputes—quarrels between family members or coworkers, for instance.

We all have heard the saying “forgive and forget.” There are some who say, “Yeah, I’ll forgive you, but I’ll *never* forget!” Perhaps, neither answer is absolutely correct. It is important to differentiate between one-time events, abuses, betrayals, conflicts, and a pattern of continued, chronic circumstances in our lives. You need to have an awareness of triggers that cause you to revisit the hurt and pain of a bothersome incident, or pattern of incidents. This is where there needs to be a reworking of the old adage “forgive and forget.” There needs to be a distinction between the informational, and the *emotional* associations you have with a troubling incident, if you hope to mitigate the resultant negative emotions you feel as a consequence. It is essential to maintain a healthy balance between *remembering* an incident, and *reliving* an incident (or former pattern of incidents).

A scene from the old *Peanuts* cartoons helps to illustrate my point. Do you remember Charlie Brown unsuccessfully trying to kick the football in those television specials so many times? We shouldn’t act like Charlie Brown did, falling for Lucy’s trick of pulling the ball away at the last moment, time after time! What was Chuck’s problem, did he simply forget Lucy always pulls the ball away at the last second? Is he a glutton for punishment? Charlie should have simply let it go and not put himself into the same old trap, again and again. Charlie did not have to yell at Lucy, or punish her, he just needed to move on to something else. Likewise, we need to be

able to recall negative experiences and past mistakes—we *just don’t need to repeat them*. We should treat mental wounds like physical wounds. Once a cut has healed, a scar remains as a reminder, yet a scar no longer radiates the intense pain of a fresh injury. A healed scar is no longer prone to infection, *unless* you intentionally pick at it, opening it up to once again experience pain and further damage.

Forgiveness changes the *future*, not the past!

Rabbi Berkson also says, just because you are mandated in the Scriptures to forgive, it does not necessarily mean you need to reconcile, or restore that relationship. You are not expected to put yourself in harm’s way—an abusive situation, for example. Of course, reconciliation with all men and women of good will is desired ideally.

The next level in the process of forgiveness is resolution. If you don’t resolve the situation, it will continue to interfere with both your present and your future. Resolution is a firm decision to settle a matter in your mind, and in your heart. To make peace with an event, *and learn from it*, so it does not have an outsized emotional effect on the rest of your life. It is important to note reconciliation and restoration require the participation of all parties in a dispute. They must agree on the terms, or the boundaries (the rules), concerning difficult issues moving forward. Importantly, this is only possible **after** you have forgiven the other person and resolved the matter personally. It is also vital to understand that in the future, when dealing with other issues or problems that may arise, you must refrain from revisiting past matters. “Hot button” issues can easily be rekindled, like glowing embers at the bottom of a campfire. Warm coals left under ashes overnight can easily ignite

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with just a little wind and a few twigs. In short order, you may find that you have a fully raging inferno once again.

At the beginning of this article, I cited terrible events surrounding conflicts in our world today. How do we forgive the extremely intense stuff; the violent, the intrusive, the gut-wrenching betrayals we may experience from those closest to us? How is it possible to forgive the traumas experienced by both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? We must remember **Matthew 19:26**: “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” This verse was recorded in the context of idolizing wealth in the parable of *The Rich Young Ruler*. It is fair to apply this same logic to the topic of forgiveness, especially pertaining to things (seemingly) too painful, too ruthless, for us to forgive. Truly, with God all things are possible! The parable I find most able to help me in offering someone forgiveness in the most challenging of circumstances is *The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*:

“Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So, his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So, when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So, My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (**Matthew 18:21–35**).



In the introduction, Christ says we need to forgive our brother seventy times seven. The answer of course is not simply the mathematical number, four-hundred and ninety times. Messiah provides us a large number to illustrate there is **not** a maximum number of times we should forgive someone! I read an article saying, since seven is the number of completion, perhaps this is His way of saying completely times completely (times ten.) I found this analysis to be interesting. We must completely forgive our brother, every time. There are no exceptions (if we expect the same treatment from our Father). Would we want a “ceiling” on the number of times we are allowed to be forgiven by our Father?

Digging a little deeper into the story, the first servant brought before the king owed the king 10,000 talents. In 2015, Jud Davis published an article which calculated the value of this debt in today’s dollars. Davis wrote, “Now realize that 10,000 talents is 200,000 years of labor! It is 60,000,000 working days. In modern money, it is \$3.48 billion.” The Messiah’s point is that no one man could *ever* repay this huge amount. Davis went on to say, “100 denarii is a significant sum. It’s four month’s wages. In modern money, it is \$5,800.” Yes, a debt is owed, however it was very manageable. This smaller debt was so microscopic, so inconsequential, as compared to what the King forgave, it did not matter. **Romans 6:23** tells us our sins, our “wages,” have earned us the death penalty. Our King, our Messiah, has forgiven *all* our debts. Yes, this is indeed true, *if* we take God up on His offer of forgiveness through the process of repentance and baptism. *If* we earnestly attempt to walk in Covenant and obey Him, this debt is erased for all-time.

Can *anything* be done to us that outweighs the tremendous gift of forgiveness, the gift of our own lives? We are promised not only the expungement of our earned death penalty but also glorious eternal life as members of God’s Kingdom! Obviously, all the “small” things we encounter in our lives should be *so easy* to dismiss (in comparison to this amazing promise)! When contemplating more traumatic offenses such as abuse, crime, and violence (against yourself or a loved one), it is helpful to recall the terrible things

Christ endured to make our forgiveness possible.

Christ came to earth in a human body like ours, lived a perfect life; yet, He had to endure horrific abuse, ridicule, and torture. He was put on display and mocked, ultimately suffering a brutal death for you and me. Can anything be done to us that compares to what Jesus experienced? Of course not! In those situations where your ability to forgive someone, be it a brother or an enemy, is elusive, bring the suffering of Christ into mind. If you can meditate on the suffering Christ endured on your behalf, along with the astonishing opportunity it affords you, it may make it easier to forgive others. Such reflection may help you summon the power to forgive, even when doing so is painful, or goes against your inherent human nature.

The Apostle Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians, God won’t test us beyond our capabilities. We can extrapolate this logic to the arena of forgiveness. God won’t push us to forgive things which exceed our ability to forgive, as forgiveness is required of believers. The trials and tribulations we experience provide Him an opportunity to assess our ability to forgive others. Certainly, we hope to never experience abuse, trauma or violence in our lives. If we do indeed encounter such dark times, we must focus our minds on the eternal things of God. In so doing, the impact of transitory problems we experience in our lives diminishes.

Without question, our world is becoming more anti-Christian and secular. The growing influence of social media, responsible for cultivating an ever-expanding atmosphere of “group-think,” lays the groundwork for a future filled with the religious persecution of God’s people as described in the Bible.

**Revelation 13:4-8**: “So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?’ And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who

dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

How do we prepare to endure such persecution should we be subjected to it—persecution approaching the intensity of that suffered by the apostles and martyrs of the past? Even more poignantly, how do we maintain a spirit of forgiveness while undergoing such trying circumstances?

We must draw inspiration from Christ Himself! During His crucifixion, Christ exclaimed, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” We also have the incredibly inspiring example of Stephen, as recorded in the book of Acts. Stephen’s preaching infuriated the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin.

We are told, in **Acts 7:59–60**, “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep [died].”

The entire purpose of our spiritual journey is to become like Christ, as best we are able. We desire to become children of the Living God. Just as children take on the characteristics of their parents, we should endeavor to take on the characteristics of our Father in heaven. WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? Forgive—this is what He would do! *This is what He does!* Our brother in the faith, Stephen, imitated Christ in this respect (even when faced with certain death)!

In God’s glorious Kingdom, all will have unity of mind and character. Those in His presence will reflect God’s philosophy, God’s Will.

In **Ezekiel 11:19** (New Living Translation), God states, “And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart”—a tender, **forgiving heart**; a heart like God’s!

Members of the Kingdom will truly emulate Christ, by putting into practice the opening lines of the fifth chapter of Ephesians: “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God....”

As Passover approaches, let us remember that forgiveness is of paramount importance! **First John 2:2** reminds us, “He [that is, Christ] Himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

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## WHO IS JESUS?

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anything outside of that definition is clearly idolatrous and polytheistic in nature—to them it is plain blasphemy.

### What Are the Talmudic Writings?

First, let's try and understand just what the Talmud is. Many people have a misconception of the Talmud, thinking it is merely the Oral Law. And yes, in one sense it is an all-encompassing word for the Oral Law, but it is also much more. In simplicity, the Talmud is the link between Scripture (Torah—the first five books of the Old Testament) and Jewish practice.

However, the Talmud is based on the Mishnah (means Teaching). Understand, after the destruction of the second Temple and the subsequent unraveling of Jewish life and scholarship, Rabbi Judah ha Nasi, or *Judah the Prince*, edited a portion of the Talmud and developed a compendium of Jewish laws, lore, and commentary known as the Mishnah during the second century C.E. He spent some fifty years compiling and organizing this material that accumulated over centuries from a developed body of oral laws, going all the way back to the Jewish Babylonian captivity.

“Although he edited the six orders of the Mishna by subject matter, according to the method of two earlier tannaim... Judah [*the Prince*] made profound contributions of his own. He determined which rabbinic opinions were authoritative, at the same time carefully preserving minority opinions in case laws should be changed in the future and a precedent for these changes be required. On the other hand, he omitted laws that were obsolete or otherwise lacking in authority. The Mishna became the subject for commentaries by subsequent sages in Palestine and Babylonia called



Hasidic Jews tunnel beneath Jewish synagogue in Brooklyn.

amoraim: these commentaries became known as the Gemara (completion), which along with the Mishnah, make up the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

All of this writing and interpretation over the centuries that became what is considered the “Oral Law” was the result of some rabbis claiming the Torah was somewhat vague and, *in the opinions* of these Jewish sagas, could not cover all exigencies. And so, in order to preserve the “*detailed traditions*” and laws pertaining to agriculture, festivals, marriage, civil law, temple services, and ritual purity, and some history, Judah the Prince spent much of his life editing the six orders of the Mishna.

And, unfortunately, some of these

edits, additions, and interpretations lead to some extremes that even Jesus had to contend with. We all remember Him being criticized for healing on the Sabbath, picking wheat while traveling and, consequently, being accused of working on the Sabbath. Or Matthew 23:23, which explains contrasts between their self-righteous virtue signaling and the “weightier matters” of the Law (Torah). Jesus consistently accused them of teaching *traditions of men*, thereby canceling out the Law of God (Mark 7:6–9). Frankly, if the truth was known, much of Christ's contention with the religious leaders of His time concerned the differences He had with some of the tenets of the Oral Law, when comparing it to the Torah.

### What Does the Talmud Say?

So, we should understand Judaism is based *not only* on the Torah, but rabbinical commentary, underpinned by the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud. Furthermore, Judaism's Talmud is *NOT* claimed to be divinely inspired. It's essentially a commentary of “traditions from men” that serve as an instruction manual for Orthodox, Hasidic, Yeshivish, and Sephardic Jews.

We should also keep in mind, Jesus in particular was not well-liked by the religious leaders of His day. He was viewed as a rogue teacher (rabbi). He was *perceived* as counter-intuitive to what the Jews taught God's Will to be. They accused Him of all sorts of violations against the law, but His alleged transgressions were in fact simply violations of their *man-made traditions*. Yet, they believed themselves to be justified in challenging Him because they could not believe His claims to be who He said He was.

In John 8, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees, and over the remaining narrative of this chapter they argue back and forth about His declarations. Jesus declares He is the light and if you follow Him you will have light in your life instead of darkness. But the Pharisees accuse Him of bearing record of Himself, stating that He has no authority or proof for His claims. However, Jesus says *not so*, and proceeds to present the Father and Himself as bearing witness of Him, which confirms His claim (John 8:12–18). This confrontation continues throughout the chapter until it comes to a final climax—the Jews claim He is demon possessed! However, Jesus denies it and announces, “If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.” This infuriates the Pharisees,



Jewish students arrested at the tunnel.

*Continued Next page*

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causing them to *double-down* on their accusation of Him being demon possessed.

But Jesus continues to confront them and pushes their limit even further by declaring He is the “*I AM*.” Needless to say, upon hearing this, “they took up stones to cast at Him: but Jesus hid Himself, and went out of the temple...” (John 8:48–59).

Take some time to read this whole defying and recalcitrant encounter. It will explain a lot about why the Jews hold the opinions of who they think Jesus is. Understandably, since Jesus advanced the idea He was the “*I AM*” of the Torah, **which He is**—but to the Jews this is blasphemy because this was clearly idolatrous, as far as they were concerned!

And so with that as our framing, the following statements about our Lord, written in the Talmud, contributes to this very *unfortunate perception* of who the Orthodox, Hasidic, and some other Jewish branches think Jesus Christ is. It’s disappointing they have this understanding, but they are blinded by the stumbling block, which is Christ. “But their minds were blinded.... But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it [they] shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away” (2 Corinthians 3:14–18).

And so, some of this blindness expresses itself in grotesque fashion toward our Lord, but this should not be surprising since the New Testament addresses some of these accusations, as you will see.

The Talmud teaches that Jesus was a sorcerer and led the people of Israel to worship false gods, leading the Jews astray (Sotah 47a:14; Sanhedrin 43a:20). However, the New Testament verifies this accusation when the “Pharisees said, He casts out devils through the prince of the devils” (Matthew 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15). The Talmud also teaches that Jesus was born from an adulterous affair that Mary had, and that He was born out of wedlock—a “bastard” child [Shabbat 104b:5]. And again, we find this accusation verbalized by the Pharisees when they declared, “We be

not born of fornication: we have one Father even God” (John 8:41).

Perhaps one of the worst cases of disrespect is when the name Yeshu is used instead of the Hebrew Yeshua. Yeshu is a play on words based off His real Hebrew name Yeshua, which means Salvation. Yeshu is considered a curse, which stands for Yimach Shmo Ue-zikro and means: “May his name and memory be blotted out” (Ref: *Kehila News*; article: “Why do Israelis call Jesus ‘Yeshu’?”).

Clearly, the fact is our Lord and Savior is viewed among Orthodox, Hasidic, Saphardic, and other streams of Jews with disdain and disgust. They consider their very own—Jesus Christ, also a Jew—as a despicably illegitimately born idolater and blasphemous sorcerer. Again, the Bible forewarns us He would be rejected by His own ethnic group. “He came unto his own [the Jews] and his own received Him not.” Most Jews reject Him to this day. (See John 1:11).

**So What Causes this Contention?**

When Jesus confronted the disciple Thomas, some eight days after His resurrection, He mentioned something to him that was very important because it indicates a critical *component* that one must have to avoid stumbling. Notice what John wrote: “And after eight days again his disciples were within [a room] and Thomas with them: ...Then says He [Jesus] to Thomas, reach here your finger, and behold my hands; and reach here your hand, and thrust it into my side: and *be not faithless*, but *believing*. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. [Now notice] Jesus says unto him, Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are they that have **NOT SEEN**, and yet have believed” (John 20:26–29).

The component that is critical to knowing who Jesus Christ really is has to do with faith. *You must have faith*, or Christ will become a stumbling block to you. Notice: “But we preach Christ crucified, *unto the Jews a stumbling block*, and unto the Greeks foolishness: But unto them which are called [*those that have faith*], both Jew and Greeks [non-Israelites], Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.



**Orthodox Jews at the Wailing Wall**



**The Talmud**

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:23–25).

Unfortunately, this underpins the reasons why the Jewish Talmud is so contentious in its characterization of Jesus Christ—its authors *lack belief, or faith*, that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of mankind. However, this is explained more plainly by Paul as to why this has happened during this phase of God’s plan.

Notice: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.... For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believes” (Romans 10:1–4). This becomes the theme for Paul as he describes the importance of this belief that allows one to embrace Christ as God’s ultimate fulfillment of righteousness.

Paul continues: “But what says it? The word is near you, even in your mouth, and in your heart; that is, the word of **FAITH**, which we preach: that if you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall **BELIEVE** in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.... For the scripture says, Whosoever **BELIEVES** on Him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference

between the Jews and the Greek.... For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:8–13).

So, understandably, without this *component of belief* that Jesus is the Messiah, but at this time is in the role of Savior and High Priest from the divine order of Melchizedek, we can see how these Orthodox Jews stumble at the thought of Jesus Christ actually being this Son of God and having this authority from the Father. And, again, why is that? Because they simply *don’t believe* Jesus Christ was who He said He was. Unfortunately, their expectations of what the Messiah should be and do for them was not Jesus Christ’s mission at this time. What most Orthodox Jews don’t understand and don’t accept is the role of the “*Suffering Servant*” Jesus displays and the Melchizedek Priesthood He currently is serving!

**Who Did Christ Say He Was—and What Was He To Do?**

What really got Christ in trouble, as was mentioned before, was when He claimed to be the *I AM*. Yes, He revealed to the religious leaders of His day that He was the one, in *His preincarnate form*, who identified Himself as the *I AM* who answered Moses’ question about who he should say sent him. Notice: “And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers has sent me unto you; and they shall say to me,

What is his name? What shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shall you say unto the children of Israel, I AM has sent me unto you" (Exodus 3:13–14).

While contending with the Pharisees Jesus also mentions that Abraham rejoiced to see His day, which caused the Pharisees to question how that can be since Christ appeared to be less than fifty years old. Jesus responded by saying, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:56–59). This enraged the Pharisees who then proceeded to pick up stones in an attempt to stone Him to death.

But the New Testament writings are clear about **WHO** Christ said He was, and the Old Testament confirms **WHAT** He was to do by many scriptures that align with His mission and the events surrounding His life while here on earth. Here are five points to keep in mind about **who** Jesus Christ is and **what** He is currently doing:

1) *He is the Creator Being from the God Family* (John 1:1–3, 10; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:1–2; Psalms 33:6).

2) *Jesus Christ is the Messiah, Savior, and Son of God* (1 John 2:1–2; John 3:16; 4:25–26; Romans 3:25–26;

2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Mark 14:61–63).

3) *He is also a High Priest, representing a Divine Order—the Melchizedek Order* (Hebrews 4:14–15; 5:5–6—7:1–3, 15–17; Psalms 110:1–4).

4) *He is confirmed and validated by fulfilled prophecy* (Isaiah 9:6–7; 53:3, 2; Zechariah 9:9; Micah 5:2; Psalms 2:7; 16:8–10; 22:1–31).

5) *He is alive and at the right hand of the Father actively interceding for us* (Romans 8:32–34; Hebrews 1:1–3; 8:1–2; Mark 16:19; 1 Peter 3:22; Psalms 110:1).

So, brethren, we can be of "good

*cheer*" because Jesus Christ has successfully overcome Satan's plan to thwart God's efforts in reproducing Himself. He is now on a "countdown" from heaven to return to earth and collect His own by resurrecting them back to life (John 5:25–29) and establish a world-ruling government that will have no end. We are destined to be co-heirs with Him for all eternity (Romans 8:14–23), ultimately sharing in the joys of a New Heaven and New Earth, with the Father finally coming to Earth to tabernacle with His family of Spirit-born beings (Revelation 21:1–7; 22:7–21).

*What a glorious time that will be!*

## MATT 28:19

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the Father one with the Son! Without the Father, the Son does not rise from the dead! The point here is the theology of Matthew 28:19 makes perfect sense knowing what we know of our relationship with God. When we are baptized we get God's Spirit, submit to and accept Christ, who is under the authority of His Father.

Here is how the commentators in *Commentary on the New Testament* by R.C.H. Lenski put it: "The Father receives the baptized person as his child, the Son as his brother and disciple, the Holy Spirit as his temple and habitation." Again, another logical way of understanding why Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all mentioned in the act of baptism.

The significant expression in verse 19 is the phrase "in the name of." In Greek it is *eis to onoma*, an expression only used here in the entire New Testament. Literature from that time period in Greek has been found with this expression and shows its full meaning: "The phrase...is frequent in the papyri with reference to payments made 'to the account of any one'.... The usage is of interest in connection with Mt. 28:19, where the meaning would seem to be 'baptized into the possession of the Father, etc.'" (J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, p. 451).

According to the Worldwide Church of God Bible Correspondence Course, Lesson 10: Matthew 28:19 simply means that when we receive the Spirit of God, we automatically, through this miraculous begetting, become unborn children in the divine family called "God." This becomes our "baptism" or immersion into both the family and power of God or into sonship, brotherhood (with Christ) and their inherent blessings. This is in addition to our immersion into the spiritual "body of Christ," both occurring at the same time.

This scripture is often used by Trinitarians as a proof text that God is a Trinity. But be careful with proof texts. Always make sure you are looking at all the scriptures on a biblical topic and not just a few. Greater clarity

comes when you sift through all the relevant scriptures on God in considering this scripture.

Some may ask, Why would the Holy Spirit be mentioned here if it was not a third personal being in the Godhead? I would respond, the Holy Spirit is very involved in the baptismal act because it is the means by which God connects with us at baptism. There is no data in this verse defining the Holy Spirit as a person. It becomes a part of us at baptism so no wonder it is mentioned in this verse.

Also, when reading **Matthew 28:19** we need to recognize that the verse is not promoting the Trinity doctrine that was later formulated. Notice what scholar Andrew Perry has to say about this: "Similarly, to appreciate how Jesus spoke of himself as 'the Son,' we have to consider his teaching in John, rather than the Synoptics. What Jesus is doing with the third person impersonal form of address, 'the Son,' is to create what will be the new structural relationship for a believer to relate to God, his father. It is John, rather than the Synoptics, which brings out this teaching, but there are the occasional examples of the teaching in the Synoptics like Matt 28:19. This teaching is not trinitarian because it is subordinationist; the Son is subordinate to the Father and an intercessor between God and human beings."

Remember, the Trinity doctrine that later became popular in Christianity teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are co-equal, among other things. As Perry states, Matthew 28:19 is showing a subordination of the Son to the Father. That is not Trinitarian.

There is another aspect to this discussion too. Some in the Church over the years have argued that the verse in question is not in the oldest manuscripts. But this is more of a theory than a fact.

There are many quotes you can find out there that cast doubt on this scripture being originally in the Bible. Here are just a few:

The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*: As to Matthew 28:19, it says: It is the central piece of evidence for the traditional [Trinitarian] view. If it were undisputed, this would, of course, be decisive, but its trustworthiness is impugned on grounds of textual criti-

cism, literary criticism and historical criticism." The same *Encyclopedia* further states: "The obvious explanation of the silence of the New Testament on the triune name, and the use of another [Jesus' name] formula in Acts and Paul, is that this other formula was the earlier, and the triune formula is a later addition."

Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, page 28: "The baptismal command in its Matthew 28:19 form cannot be the historical origin of Christian baptism. At the very least, it must be assumed that the text has been transmitted in a form expanded by the [Catholic] church."

The *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, I, 275: "It is often affirmed that the words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost are not the *ipsissima verba* [exact words] of Jesus, but...a later liturgical addition."

Other evidence sometimes cited for the idea the original text of **Matthew 28:19** only mentioned the name of Christ is found in *De Rebaptismate* by an anonymous author in the third century. In this work the writer dwells at length on the power of the name of Jesus invoked on a man at baptism.

I can provide you other sources on this side of the debate, but I fall on the other side of this debate and believe the scripture is part of the original text of the Bible. Let's look at why I say this.

All the full manuscripts we do have date back to the fourth century. In none of these manuscripts is there any variation in **Matthew 28:19**. Yet there are other variations between these manuscripts. Some of the older papyri (partial manuscripts prior to the fourth century) do not have this verse in them, but they are also missing other parts of the text of Matthew, too. So we can't use the older documents to judge anything related to **Matthew 28:19**.

The reason we don't have many old manuscripts is because the Emperor Diocletian tried to destroy them back around AD 300. Some conspiracy theorists believe the older manuscripts had the different reading of Matthew, "in my name," referring to Jesus only. But there is no evidence of this. It is all based on speculation and opinion.

But we do have written Christian

data prior to the fourth century that can weigh in on this controversy. For example, in the *Didache* (a book about Christian practices) which was written between AD 60 and 150, we find the familiar mentioning to baptize "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Some argue against using the *Didache* because it does have unbiblical practices also mentioned.

In the *First Apology* (around AD 155) by Justin Martyr, he mentions baptism with this line: "receive washing in water in the name of God the Father and Master of all, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit."

In the *Diatesseron 55* (AD 170) by Tatian the Syrian, he mentions Jesus saying, "...and baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

In the book, *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus (AD 180), we read the following: "And again, giving to the disciples the power of regeneration into God, he said to them, 'Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'..."

In the book, *On Baptism* by Tertullian (AD 198), we read this: "For the law of baptizing has been imposed, and the formula prescribed: 'Go,' He saith, 'teach the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'"

In *The Apostolic Tradition* by Hippolytus (AD 200–235) we read this: "And when he who is baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say thus: Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?... Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God... Do you believe in holy spirit..."

In *Letters 73:18* by Cyprian of Carthage (AD 253) we read, "He [Jesus] commanded them to baptize the Gentiles in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The conspiracy theory idea states the Church historian Eusebius (circa AD 260–339) quoted a shorter version of **Matthew 28:19** more often in his writings. There is evidence that Eusebius used the phrase, "Go ye and make disciples of all the nations in my name, teaching them to observe all things

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whatsoever I have commanded you....”

Eusebius short form is found in his following works (Demonstratio 3.6, 7 (bis); 9.11; Hist. Eccl. III.5.2; Psalms 65.6; 67.34; 76.20 [59.9 not the same reading]; Isaiah 18.2; 34.16 (v.l.); Theophania 4.16; 5.17; 5.46; 5.49; Oratio 16.8).

But we also have evidence of Eusebius using the phrase with, “Go ye and make disciples of all nations in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit....”

Eusebius quotes the long form in Contra Marcellum I.1.9; I.1.36; Theologia III.5.22; EpCaesarea 3 (Socrates, Eccl.Hist 1.8); Psalms 117.1-4; and Theophania 4.8.

The argument is then made that Eusebius only used Father, Son, and Holy Spirit after the first council of Nicea in AD 325. In other words, he was influenced by ideas he heard there about the Trinity concept. But we must remember the full Trinity concept was not ratified until the Council meeting in AD 381.

Something else to note about Eusebius and his quotes is he often would only partially quote certain scriptures, depending on the point he was trying to make in his writings. Other church fathers did the same thing. So just because he is quoted several times saying “in my [Jesus Christ’s] name” does not mean he is excluding using the mentioning of the Father and Holy Spirit.

One great example of this is in *Demonstratio Evangelica*, one of the places where he quotes the shorter version of **Matthew 28:19**. He also quotes **Philippians 2:9** here, but he writes it like this: “God bestowed on him the name above every name, that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow of things in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

The full text of **Philippians 2:9** is: “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.”

Note this quote from Everett Ferguson, “An examination of

Eusebius’ references where the baptismal command was omitted shows that it was superfluous to the context (for in every case the emphasis was on the universality of Christ’s teaching in contrast to previous religious and civil law), and consideration of Eusebius’ method of citing Scripture (omitting phrases he counted irrelevant and blending phrases from other passages he counted pertinent) deprives the argument for a shorter test of any validity” (Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009, p. 134).

Another thing to think about here is, are we saying God could not preserve the Bible? If you believe this verse is not in the original Gospel of Matthew than you must believe God was not able to provide full manuscripts of His Word that were original. The oldest complete manuscripts we have today do have the longer form of the phrase in them.

Something else to think about in this discussion is during the baptism of Jesus the Father and the Holy Spirit are also involved (**Matthew 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22**). There are other scriptures when the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mentioned together (**1 Corinthians 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4–6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; 1 Peter 1:2–3; Revelation 1:4–6**). But once again, this does not prove the Trinitarian concept of God. None of these scriptures support Trinitarian doctrine.

Another argument proponents of the conspiracy theory make has to do with the book of Acts. In Acts there are four scriptures (**Acts 2:38; Acts 8:16; Acts 10:47–48; Acts 19:5–6**) that address being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus or Jesus Christ only. In these four scriptures the Father and the Holy Spirit are not mentioned.

According to Everett Ferguson, this is why that may be: “The phrases in Acts may not, however, reflect alternative formulas in the administration of baptism or alternative understandings of the meaning of the act. In some cases the description in Acts may mean a baptism administered on a confession of Jesus as Lord and Christ (cf. Acts 22:16), or it may be a general

characterization of the baptism as related to Jesus and not a formula pronounced at the baptism. In the later history the only formula regularly attested as pronounced by the administrator includes the triune name, but in Matthew it too may be descriptive rather than formulaic. If Matthew 28:19 is not a formula, then there is no necessary contradiction to the description ‘in the name of the Lord’ in Acts and Paul” (Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009, p. 136).

But let’s think about this whole issue in a big picture format. Would it matter if we baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit only or in the name of Jesus Christ only? Isn’t the Holy Spirit the Spirit of the Father and the Son (**Matthew 10:19–20; Mark 13:11; Galatians 4:6**)? Yes, it is.

When we are baptized, we receive the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit comes from the Father (**John 14:26**). But that very same Spirit is shared by the Son (**Romans 8:9**). At baptism we receive that Spirit of God (Father and Son’s Spirit). So, in my mind, the concern some have over whether “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is in the original Gospel of Matthew is a moot point. Knowing all we know about God in

the rest of the Bible makes it clear there is nothing wrong with mentioning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at a baptism.

Another interesting thing to note about the “Great Commission” (**Matthew 28:19–20**) scripture is **Luke 24:45–49** and **John 20:21–22** seem to be echoing what we read in Matthew’s scripture. The context of the scripture in **Luke 24** is similar to **Matthew 28**. In Luke, we read about preaching repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name, but it also mentions the Holy Spirit coming on these new believers through the Father. In John, again the context is similar. It is after Jesus resurrection and Jesus mentions the Father sending Him so now He is sending out His disciples. He then breathes on them and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit. In other words all three of these Gospel accounts provide a similar type of “great commission” where the Father, Son, and Spirit are all mentioned.

In my opinion mentioning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the same sentence does not mean you agree with Trinitarian dogma. The Trinitarians don’t control the understanding of those words; only the Bible does.

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## Does Genesis Present Two Conflicting Creation Stories?

By VANCE A. STINSON

Critical scholars claim that the Genesis 2 story of the creation of man is much older than, and contradictory to, the creation narrative of Genesis 1. This conclusion is based partly on alleged discrepancies in the two sections and partly on clues that the two sections were drawn from two separate sources, one much older than the other. The differences in the two narratives are said to support the documentary hypothesis, or theory that the narratives making up the five books attributed to Moses were taken from documents representing different periods of Israel’s history. Are these ideas beyond dispute?

No, not by a long shot! Critics claim that the order of creation in Genesis 2:4–7, 19

differs from the order presented in Genesis 1:1–27 in that the former has the creation of man preceding the creation of other living organisms (plants and animals alike), and the latter puts man’s creation last. However, if we understand that the plants and herbs “of the field” (2:5) are the plants and herbs man would plant and harvest after leaving the garden (3:18), we can see there is no conflict between these two verses. Originally, man’s habitat was the Garden of Eden. He was to “tend and keep it” (2:15) and “freely eat” of “every tree of the garden” (verse 16). He acquired food through toiling in the field after he left the garden.

Further, Genesis 2:19 does not necessarily mean that God made the beasts of the field and birds of the air after He made Adam, as a plain reading of some transla-

tions would indicate. The Hebrew construction permits the NIV’s rendition of the verse:

“Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them...” (emphasis added).

The expression “had formed” suggests that God had made these creatures at some point before He brought them to Adam for naming. This agrees with the Genesis 1 narrative.

I don’t have a problem with the theory that biblical writers used documents handed down from their forefathers. Just as the Spirit-inspired writers of the New Testament used the inspired Old Testament as they composed their accounts and epistles, the men God used in composing the

Old Testament could have used documents handed down from previous generations of God’s people. The Holy Spirit guided the entire process.

I do have a problem with the notion that many of the historical narratives (narratives presented as historical) of the Pentateuch are traceable to myths and legends previous generations of Hebrews had picked up from their heathen neighbors. Unfortunately, this form of biblical criticism has gained wide acceptance, and many who embrace it reject any other approach to the Scriptures. This tendency to reject the supernatural has done considerable damage to the historical critical method as a useful tool for serious biblical studies.



# What is Judaism?

## An Overview of the Historical Background

By ARNIE FONTAINE



In order to understand how the religion of the Jews came to be, we need to go back in time to the three phase destruction of Judah encompassing the years 605 and 586 BC. Depending on which date chosen, we come to the end of the captivity in the 530s BC.

Isaiah records the stunning prophecy foretelling a future king Cyrus' role in the return to the Holy Land.

"Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have made strong in order to humble nations before him. And I will loosen the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved doors; and the gates shall not be shut" (**Isaiah 45:1**).

And the connecting scripture is **2 Chronicles 36:22–23**:

"And in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, so that the Word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth have been given to me by the LORD God. And He has commanded me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the LORD his God be with him and let him go up!'"

In **Ezra 1:1–4** we read the official letter:

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the Word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might he fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. And He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel. He is the God Who is in Jerusalem. And whoever remains in any place where he resides, let the men of his place help him with silver and with gold and with goods and with animals, besides the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.'"

The Jews who returned were but a small fraction of the Jews around Babylon. Most of those descendants of the ones taken captive remained in Babylon through the time of Christ.

Peter wrote his letters from there amongst his fellow Jews. (**Editor's Note:** Some believe Peter was in Babylon; others believe "Babylon" was a code name for Rome.) The so-called wise men who came to honor Jesus came from this area, which was part of the Parthian Empire that Rome never seemed to be able to conquer.

A question that comes to mind is why so few left Babylon to join in the rebuilding effort? Jeremiah gives us a hint. God gives him a letter for the exiles. It encompasses nearly all of chapter 29. The salient point for this discussion is this:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I caused to be exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters. And take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters, that you may be multiplied there and not become few. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be exiled and pray to the LORD for it. For in its peace, you shall have peace'" (**Jeremiah 29:4–7**).

He is telling them to accept their punishment, settle down, don't make trouble, and God will prosper them. This is reason enough, after 70 years, to stay put—wouldn't you say? Why leave when you've a relatively good life and leave for a huge rebuilding task with many unknowns? So, when Peter left for Babylon, he was amongst his fellow Jews to preach the gospel.

Let us move to the return after 70 years. It was a difficult task for those returning. The task of building the city and the second temple proceeded with the temple being completed in 515 BC, to be embellished upon by the master builder Herod the Great much later. This early period is when the religion of Judaism began and developed to be what Christ had to deal with. Ezra records the process. It should be noted that Ezra's lineage goes back to Aaron (**Ezra 7:5**). In addition, Esther's influence during this time shouldn't be overlooked. The Book of Esther's events took place between Chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra. Josephus records that Ezra was High Priest in Babylon. He was thus respected and qualified. In addition, he was a scribe with skills of recording God's Word and teaching it.

"This Ezra went up from Babylon. And he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given. And the king granted him all he asked, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him" (**Ezra 7:6**).

The letter given to Ezra by King Artaxerxes was not just a letter, but full authority to oversee and finance as

Ezra saw fit to do. Authority and financing were limitless. Note this:

"And whatever more shall be need for the house of your God, which you shall have need to give, give it out of the king's treasure house. And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers who are beyond the river, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it shall be done with all diligence" (**Ezra 7:20–21**).

As for the actual governing authority:

"And now you, Ezra, after the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are beyond the river, all who know the laws of your God; and you teach them who do not know" (**Ezra 7:25**).

"And whoever will not do the law of your God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it is to death, or to exile, or to confiscation of goods, or imprisonment" (**Ezra 7:26**).

Ezra was sent by the king to check up on progress and to see if the Jews were being obedient to God. Isn't it interesting that a Babylonian king of all people would be so concerned about Godly relationships. God works with government leaders as this demonstrates. This king had murdered his own brother to be king himself; and yet, he was so kind to the Jews?!

This was about 60 years after the first returning Jews' release from captivity. What did Ezra find? Well things weren't quite right.

Ezra is informed that the people, priests, and Levites included, had entered into mixed marriages with the neighboring pagan peoples (**Ezra 9:1–2**), a direct violation of the law that God had given through Moses (**Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3**). The law in this regard was intended to keep the covenant people distinct as a nation and to protect them and their children from being influenced into false religious concepts and practices.

An important point here is to notice a key action.

"For they have taken of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, so the holy seed is mixed with the people of those lands. Yea, the hand of the princes and rulers has been chief in this sin" (**Ezra 9:2**).

Leadership failed to set the example and, further, did nothing to correct the problem.

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one scroll since divided and so Nehemiah picks up the story. We notice immediately that Nehemiah was one of the most trusted men as a cup bearer. The story as previously written places Nehemiah in Judea as governor and Ezra another highly

trusted Jew by Babylonish leadership as priest and scribe. These were two highly regarded, talented, and gifted individuals. Ezra's credentials as the leading priest and scribe had to be authenticated by lineage. Detailed records were kept even in captivity. Detailed genealogies were kept by evidence back in Ezra. These two men were placed here and at this time to ensure every aspect of the rebuilding and spiritual renewal was done according to the Law. Every detail.

Note this in **Nehemiah 7:5–6**:

"And my God put into my heart to gather together the nobles, and the rulers, and the people, so that they might be counted by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of those who came up at the first. And I found written in it: These are the children of the province who went up out of the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. And they came again to Jerusalem and to Judah, every one to his city."

As a little sidebar note: Matthew's account laid out Jesus' lineage as well to authenticate his pedigree as High Priest for us.

Time passes and the month of Tishri with the fall Holy Days were upon them. They observed them with great diligence and soon after a refresher course of God's faithfulness so powerfully before them in this historical review the people commit to emulating His faithfulness through the making of a sure covenant with Him and abiding by it, realizing their failures of so many years to live as God would have them.

"And because of all this, we are making a sure covenant and writing it, and our princes, Levites, and priests are sealing it" (**Nehemiah 9:38**).

A contract, sure sealed—and note the content:

"And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all those who had separated from the people of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters (everyone who had knowledge, and who had understanding), They have joined with their brethren, their nobles, and have entered into a curse and into an oath to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe to do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes" (**Nehemiah 10:28–29**).

Yes, and the chapter continues with details they would agree to. This zeal is not followed through by some and overdone by others, as we shall see in future posts. We as Christians have

*Continued on next page*

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that first love and zeal at our conversion. Where is it now? Do we pray and study to take on the Mind of Christ?

Then what is the origin of Judaism?

Most “Christians” today believe that Judaism is and has been the Law of Moses with a few minor tweaks. What I would like to demonstrate here is to show how far they, the Jews, deviated from Moses and the inspired guidelines he gave to Israel. A small percentage of the Jews returned to the Holy Land willing to endure the unknown challenges to restore the Holy Land to some semblance of past glories. Archaeology digs in the Babylon area have shown in fact how prosperous the Jewish communities that stayed were. In fact, more Jews lived in the Babylon areas in the time of Christ than in Judea.

Recall Peter wrote his epistles from there (assuming the “Babylon” Peter mentions is not a code name for Rome). Peter writes, “The church in Babylon, chosen together with you, greets you, as does Mark, my son. Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace be with all of you who are in Christ Jesus. Amen” (1 Peter 5:13–14). Mark of course wrote a Gospel. Peter has been postulated to have had a hand in that Gospel. Interesting little tidbits here and there.

OK, so let’s dig into this transition. History records that there is an ebb and flow of faithfulness to God’s Way. In many cases it was a reflection of the faithfulness of the leadership at the time. Even today we can see that, whether in the Church or in the world. The task of Ezra and Nehemiah was to establish God’s laws as the laws of the land and to build the Temple. This was initially successful. We need to be aware of the methodology by which they strayed, because the influences on them differ very little from those around us today. We are after all Spiritual Israel. Earlier in this study you may recall an oath was given in **Nehemiah 10**. This is a critical point to understand the origins of Judaism. **Nehemiah 10:28** states: “And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all those who had separated from the people of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge, and who had understanding.” The key word here is *separated*, which was a key feature and defining meaning of the Pharisees. The list of things they gave oath to were then listed:

Keeping the laws of God. Not to intermarry with the foreigners. Would keep the Sabbaths, weekly and annual. Observe the Sabbatical years and land Sabbaths. Finance the Temple for all the sacrificial needs, including wood as fuel. Bringing the first fruits of the harvests and even the first born to the Temple. Tithing was part of this system. That is a short overview that lays a foundation for our future study.

Not every single individual was part of this oath. The core participants were the 120 which was the Great Assembly, the great synagogue. They were almost entirely made up of the Levitical Priesthood. They were the leadership for the people. It was during this time that the canonization of the Old Testament was finalized under the guidance of Ezra. Periodically Nehemiah, as governor, had to return to Babylon for progress reports on the province of Judea. On one occasion Manasseh, a priest, married the daughter of Sanballat governor of Samaria. Ooops! Josephus records this and the consequences. He was told to divorce this woman but alas he refused. Sanballat tells him that he will build him a temple on Mt. Gerizim where Manasseh would be high priest. Nehemiah records this event so briefly.

“And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite; and I chased him from me” (**Nehemiah 13:28**). This did not sit well at all with the Jews. A competing temple? This “new” religion only accepted the Torah and further edited certain Scriptures to give them authority. One example was in **Deuteronomy 27:4**, exchanging Mt. Gerizim for Ebal. This temple was destroyed around 109 BC by the Jews.

The Samaritans considered that mountaintop sacred. In **John 4:19–20**, the Samaritan woman said to Jesus, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, but you say that the place where it is obligatory to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus replied, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you shall neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem worship the Father. You do not know what you worship. We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is indeed seeking those who worship Him in this manner” (**verses 21–23**). Verse 21 is a reference to Mt. Gerizim. Part of the reason for the canonization of the Old Testament Scriptures was in response to Manasseh’s heresy. Ezra and the 120 put together what we know as the Old Testament. They gathered the various scrolls into one book with three partitions. The Law (Torah, or Teachings), the Prophets, and the Psalms (later called Writings). The total number was 22 for the 22 Hebrew letters and organized in the listed order. What did Jesus have to say of these Scriptures?

“And He said to them, “These are the words that I spoke to you when I was yet with you, that all the things which were written concerning Me in the Law of Moses and in the Prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled” (**Luke 24:44**). Jesus establishes His approval of those Scriptures and their order.

Now then, going back to Ezra and Nehemiah’s time, we have a period of peace. There was at this time a sub-

group within the Levitical Priesthood with particular responsibilities. They were the Sopherim. Their existence spanned the time of Ezra and Nehemiah down to Simon the Just. They were the Scribes who meticulously copied and counted every word of Scripture. Sofer means to count. Their responsibilities also included understanding and then explaining the Scriptures, teaching the Jews. Judea expanded over time which created a need for synagogues throughout the area. The teaching fell to these Sopherim. Synagogues were built and members of the Sopherim were assigned to teach at each with a copy of the Old Testament in hand in cities across Judea. These early years saw transitions of empires.

The Persian period was marked by allowing the Jews to practice their religion and customs (just pay your taxes). The Persian rulership did not instill their cultural beliefs on those they conquered. That would change though when Alexander the Great came swooping through. The Greek culture’s influence was the turning point away from those early vows. That was in 334 BC or thereabouts. They were dealing with Hellenism. Simon the Just died as the last of the Sopherim in 270 BC. There are no records of any replacement for him, and Jewish history reveals a dark period going down to 190 BC with dramatic changes. This 80-year period is referred to as religious anarchy with no formal teaching by a nonexistent Sopherim. So, what was a devout Jew to do?

Well, they became their own teachers. Remember it was the Levitical line that was tasked to teach, not the Jews. With such knowledge the devout Jews took it upon themselves to become the authority in scriptural matters. The 190s BC were a turning point in history, not only for the Jewish nation but the divisions left after Alexander the Great died in 323 BC. The journey in history to discover the roots of what we call Judaism continues.

Alexander’s vast empire was split into four parts, but for our study it is the two divisions encompassing the Holy Land and nearby countries. That would be the Seleucid and Ptolemies. It seems that even though the Jews were back in their homeland they never had complete autonomy as an independent nation going forward through AD 70. Amazing. Back to the timeline. During the Persian period the Jewish nation was keeping their original covenant they established under Ezra for the most part. Their overlords left them alone as long as they paid their taxes and didn’t incite rebellion. That was to change though when the Greeks assumed power.

The Hellenistic religions and philosophies became very attractive to the Jews without the guidance of the Levitical teachers. Greek language and culture were imitated throughout the conquered lands, including Judea. Apply that to today and Christians living amongst the nations at large. Are we adopting their

way of thinking and doing? Are we sliding away from God’s foundational Bible teachings? They did not see the danger before them; do we? Simon the Just died around 270 BC, and there are no records for the next 80 years of any Sopherim assuming their rightful roles as the teachers of the law in synagogues around the Holy Land. This vacuum was filled by Jewish laymen. This period has been labeled a time of religious anarchy. During the 190s the Seleucids overcame the Ptolemies, and this was when a new administration amongst the Jews took place. The body was called the Sanhedrin. For the first time the Jewish nation had an organized body including lay membership, Jews. It was under Antiochus III, the Great that the Jews were allowed to form this group. He sanctioned the Sanhedrin and gave them authority over the Jewish nation he oversaw. You would think that now that they had the Sanhedrin in place, the laws and statutes would be properly judged and applied. Not quite, because they had been influenced heavily by the Greek culture and adopted many of their practices. You might call this body of practices the “traditions of the elders.” Interesting? This body was tasked with teaching a heavily Hellenized population. The result was to reinterpret laws by opinion and current culture separate from the Torah in many cases. There became a body of decisions based on not the Law but on customs and beliefs of the general population which in turn affected the decision making of the newly formed Sanhedrin.

Let us look at a “religious” practice, Christmas. Who observes this man-made custom? One does not have to be a “Christian” to observe it. People of all persuasions revel in the celebration. It is entrenched in the population. Similarly, the Jewish population accepted and adopted practices not underpinned by Scripture. This Sanhedrin needed and wanted the support of the people. How were they to tell them that a given practice was not acceptable according to Scripture? Big problem. Within the Sanhedrin were the Sadducees, who had long before abdicated their role as teachers, Sopherim, to enjoy the wealth and prestige of their office. They were the country club gentry. Recall they did not believe in a resurrection. The devout Jews had little respect for them and had a difficult time accepting their authority. With both groups in the Sanhedrin, something had to give.

From the time of Moses and moving forward the Levitical method was Midrash, which means to read Scripture, explain and apply their meaning. Moses and his 70 used this method, although it wasn’t called that then. Ezra did the same. Note Nehemiah’s account:

“Then all the people gathered themselves as one man into the street before the Water Gate. And they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the con-

gregation, both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it in the open square in front of the Water Gate from daybreak until noon in front of the men and the women, and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchijah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen. Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. And Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, namely the Levites caused the people to understand the law. And the people stood in their place. And they read distinctly from the Book of the Law of God. And they expounded the meaning and caused them to understand the reading" (**Nehemiah 8:1-8**).

This is precisely what gradually disappeared after Simon the Just's death. Is it any wonder that the Jews had little respect for the Levites in the newly formed Sanhedrin? Something had to be done by the Sanhedrin to justify non-scriptural interpretations of the Law. Enter Mishnah or the applying law without Scripture to justify customs and behaviors not based on Scripture. This was used to justify the Hellenistic practices of the people since the Greek takeover many years earlier.

The reasoning generally is this: There was an oral transmission of the laws and judgments from the time of Moses. The people would transmit these laws down through time. Hence whatever non-scriptural practices that were being done in the 190s BC had to be OK. They further reasoned it would be inconceivable that the people would adopt Hellenistic practices. So, the Sanhedrin, in order to appease the people, sanctioned Mishnah-based decisions. Even today, we see similar situations justifying clearly unscriptural practices—Christmas, for example.

The birthplace of Judaism was around 190 BC. This is where it began. By the time of Jesus this Mishnah style evolved to be the traditions of the fathers or the traditions of the elders. Its authority was considered equal to or greater than the Law! The two factions were more interested in rulership over the people rather than teaching and governing properly. Hence Judaism morphed, evolved gradually over time to maintain influence over

the people. The Jewish faction, later the Pharisees, promoted the Mishnah teachings as authority. The combining of the Midrash and Mishnah became the Halakhah which is still in use today by the Jewish community.

The Pharisees had a problem with using the Midrash method exclusively for it was deemed "too restrictive." Sound familiar? The Midrash method was changed as well to have "broader interpretations." Here is an interesting quote from a Jewish site, Judaism 101 Today: "A takkanah is a rule unrelated to biblical laws that was created by the rabbis for the public welfare." You see, they know best.

We move down to the Maccabees, 160s and earlier, and Jose ben Joezer, who was a priest and president of the Sanhedrin. By this time Jose fully adopted the "new rules" of interpretation of the Midrash to create Mishnah applications declaring certain things unlawful that previously were not. Examples: He declared glass utensils "unclean," probably because they were manufactured in heathen countries. To prevent Jews from settling beyond Judea, he declared all heathen

countries unclean. His many decisions were not recognized as scriptural but, oddly, were accepted and taught. They were rejected as being too "novel" and yet taught over time using his name as authority without scriptural backing. The next generation, out of respect for him, taught these new laws as legitimate. Time moved on and the divide between the Sadducees and Pharisees grew.

The Pharisees pushed the Mishnah and the collective traditions of the fathers. They said it had equal authority as the Torah. This forced the Sadducees to back the Midrash method however polluted it had become. They knew the Scriptures supported them as sole authority to teach and apply the Law. Who would control the people? Time passed and the Pharisees became the party of the people, and the Sadducees oversaw the temple and related duties. How in the world did the Pharisees gain so much power? In part they saw themselves as inspired by God. Note this quote from Jacob Neusner: "because their men achieve sainthood through study of Torah and imitation of the conduct of the masters. In doing so, they conform to the heavenly paradigm, the Torah believed to have been created by God 'in his image,' revealed at Sinai, and handed down to their own teachers.... If the masters and disciples obey the divine teaching of Moses, 'our rabbi,' then their society, the school, replicates on earth the heavenly academy, just as the disciple incarnates the heavenly model of Moses, 'our rabbi.' The rabbis believe that Moses was (and the Messiah will be) a rabbi, God wears phylacteries, and the heavenly court studies Torah precisely as does the

earthly one, even arguing about the same questions.

These beliefs today may seem like projections of rabbinical values onto heaven, but the rabbis believe that they themselves are projections of heavenly values onto earth. The rabbis thus conceive that on earth they study Torah just as God, the angels, and Moses ("our rabbi") do in heaven. The heavenly schoolmen are even aware of Babylonian scholastic discussions, so they require a rabbi's information about an aspect of purity taboos. Self-appointed authorities indeed which lead to a progressive revelation given them by God.

As time changed the Torah would have to change, a living document. Principles of Hellenism encompassed the individual self. Ideas had equal value as any other. Persuasion was an accepted way of establishing a given

belief or custom. This was part of the Pharisees' methodology they adopted from Hellenism. Hence, they as the Greeks practiced, seeking knowledge and wisdom in four-tier progression. They demanded respect based on their self-appointed impor-

tance. Recall their desire to have special seating? Let us go to **Mark 7:1-9** to illustrate the point of this study:

"Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes from Jerusalem came together to Him. And when they saw some of His disciples eating with defiled hands [that is, unwashed hands], they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews, holding fast to the tradition of the elders, do not eat unless they wash their hands thoroughly. Even when coming from the market, they do not eat unless they first wash themselves. And there are many other things that they have received to observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and brass utensils

and tables. For this reason, the Pharisees and the scribes questioned Him, saying, 'Why don't Your disciples walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?' And He answered and said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy concerning you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men." For leaving the commandment of God, you hold fast the tradition of men, such as the washing of pots and cups; and you practice many other things like this.' Then He said to them, 'Full well do you reject the commandment of God, so that you may observe your own tradition.'"

Jesus is dealing with Mishnah law created by the Jews. The supposed law in verse 3 is not in the Torah, but just one of hundreds added over the last two centuries prior to Christ. They made things up! Does any of this seem familiar? Christendom in all its forms today has fully embraced the Mishnah style of placing tradition over Scripture. It did not just appear but morphed over time. We need to be aware of the subtleties of gradually adopting traditions. Are they Bible based? Do they contradict or replace given law? We are to prove all things as Paul taught. The Pharisees burdened their followers with well over 600 new add-ons to Scripture.

Jesus' answer is in **Matthew 11:28-30**: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are overly burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." Judaism was not the religion of Moses or the Levites but a replacement, even as modern-day Christianity is a replacement with practices devised by men. History indeed repeats itself.

## 2024 HOLY DAY CALENDAR

*These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times (Leviticus 23:4).*

**NT Passover:** April 21 (observed at sundown)

**Feast of Unleavened Bread:** April 23-29

**Pentecost:** June 16

**Feast of Trumpets:** October 3

**Day of Atonement:** October 12

**Feast of Tabernacles:** October 17-23

**Last Great Day (Eighth Day):** October 24

# Are You Keeping the Great Commandment?

By CAROLYN DAHL

I'm willing to bet your answer is, "Yes, of course I'm keeping the great commandment! I'm baptized, I go to Sabbath services, and I observe all the feasts of the Lord." But does that mean that you are truly keeping the great commandment? Let's find out.

What is the great commandment?

In the book of Matthew, a lawyer comes up to Jesus and asks Him a question.

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (Matthew 22:36-38 English Standard Version.)

The answer, therefore, is to love the LORD your God with:

1. All your heart
2. All your soul
3. All your mind

To be clear, Jesus also tells the lawyer, "And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:39-40). So loving the Lord and loving your neighbor are the two great commandments.

However, this article will focus on the first great commandment.

At this point, you might be thinking, "Yes, I know. I have been taught this since I first began studying the Bible and listening to sermons."

But do you truly understand what it means to keep the great commandment? Hint: It's far more than just keeping the laws, the Holy Days, and attending Sabbath services.

I don't know about you, but I like to read Scripture daily. In my readings of the New Testament, I came across many passages that spoke about the great commandment. But instead of moving on to the next reading, I paused and asked myself, "Do I love the Lord with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind? Does how I live my life daily reflect this, or am I lacking?"

I am baptized (27 years), attend Sabbath services, and keep the Holy Days. But the Holy Spirit revealed that I was not loving the Lord with ALL my heart, but only part of it. I also realized then that if I wasn't keeping the great commandment, what good was keeping the other laws if all the rest of the law (and the prophets) depended on it? To be clear, I am not saying that the other commandments don't have to be kept. Of course, we strive to keep God's law. What I mean is that keeping the other commandments merely out of habit will not please the Lord either (more on this later, so keep reading).

My next question became, "Lord God, I don't honestly know what it means to love you with ALL of my

heart and ALL of my soul and ALL of my mind. How can I do that? What does that look like? Please show me the way."

## What Keeping the Great Commandment Looks Like

When Jesus told the lawyer what the great commandment was, He wasn't telling him anything new.

The first time it appears in Scripture is when Moses was speaking to the Israelites, also known as part of the *Shema*:

"Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all of your soul and with all your might. And these words I command you today shall be on your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, ESV).

This is a command. "You shall..." No different in importance than the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," for example.

Most of us are familiar with this passage in Deuteronomy from booklets and sermons. I know I am, but it still doesn't answer the question, "What does this look like?" Are there living examples in the Bible for us to study to know what this looks like in everyday life?

The answer to that is yes; believe it or not, many are found in the pages of the Old Testament. The best example given to us in the Old Testament of keeping the great commandment is Josiah, King of Judah, found in 2 Kings 23:25:

"Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him" (ESV).

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. Was he perfect? No. Were any of the kings perfect? No. Are any of us perfect? No. But he is an awesome example to help us understand the meaning behind the great commandment.

Here is a list of all the accomplishments Josiah achieved for the Lord during his reign:

1. Enabled carpenters, builders, and masons to be paid to repair the house of the Lord.
2. Tore his clothes at the reading of the scroll that was found during temple repairs (he humbled himself and had a penitent heart toward the Lord).
3. Understood God's wrath was upon the people of Judah and requested the priest to inquire unto the Lord on his behalf and on behalf of the people.
4. In the presence of the elders of Judah and Jerusalem and all the people, great and small, read *all* the words of the scroll of the covenant that was found.
5. Made a covenant before the Lord and the people "to walk after the LORD

and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book" (2 Kings 23:3).

6. Gave orders that all the vessels made for Baal, Asherah, and all the host of heaven to be cleaned out of the temple.

7. Had those same vessels taken outside of Jerusalem to be burned.

8. Had those ashes taken even further away to Bethel.

9. Removed the priests who made offerings in the high places and who burned incense to Baal, the sun, moon, constellations, and the host of heaven.

10. Removed the Asherah from the house of the Lord to the outside of Jerusalem by the brook Kidron and had it beaten to dust and thrown onto the graves of the common people.

11. Tore down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the Lord.

12. Kicked the priests (occult priests, not of the line of Aaron) out of the cities of Judah.

13. Defiled all the high places where the priests had burned incense.

14. Broke down all the high places at the gates, which were the entrance to the Gates of Joshua, the city governor.

15. Defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom so that no one could make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Molech.

16. Removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun, and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire.

17. Broke down and pulverized the altars that *were* on the roof, the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars which Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord, and threw their dust into the Brook Kidron.

18. Defiled the high places east of Jerusalem, on the south of the Mount of Corruption, which Solomon, king of Israel, had built for the pagan gods his wife worshiped.

19. Broke in pieces the *sacred* pillars and cut down the wooden images, and filled their places with the bones of men.

20. Broke down the altar at Bethel.

21. Broke down the high place at Bethel that Jeroboam had made, burned it, then crushed it to powder and burned the wooden image, too.

22. Took away all the shrines of the high places in Samaria's cities.

23. Executed the priests of the high places in the cities of Samaria and burned men's bones on them.

24. Commanded the people to keep the Passover in Jerusalem.

25. Put away those who consulted mediums and spiritists, the household gods and idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and Jerusalem.

Other kings did what was right in the

sight of the Lord, too. They were David (a man after God's heart), Solomon (at the beginning of his reign), Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash (forsook the Lord later on), Amaziah (not with a whole heart), Uzziah (until he entered the temple to try and burn incense), Jotham, and Hezekiah.

Aside from David, the rest of the kings did not follow the Lord God to the extent that Josiah did. The account of Josiah's deeds in the Scriptures is an excellent example of what the great commandment looks like.

As a comparison, if we look at the account of Asa, you will find that he did right, but he did not go to the extent that Josiah did in keeping the words of the covenant like Josiah did.

"In the twentieth year of Jeroboam's reign as king of Israel, Asa began to reign over Judah, and he reigned forty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Maacah, the daughter of Abishalom. **And Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as David, his father, had done.** He put away the male cult prostitutes out of the land and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. He also removed Maacah, his mother, from being queen mother because she had made an abominable image for Asherah.

"And Asa cut down her image and burned it at the brook Kidron. **But the high places were not taken away.** Nevertheless, the heart of Asa was wholly true to the LORD all his days" (1 Kings 15:9-14 ESV).

Keeping the great commandment is striving to keep all the commandments of God, not just physically but spiritually.

"Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways and **to keep his commandments and to cling to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul**" (Joshua 22:5).

## What Hinders Us From Keeping the Great Commandment?

The answer to this question is not straightforward. But ultimately, it comes down to a choice we must make. Do we want to be a servant of Jesus Christ or a slave to sin (the world and all of the desires of the flesh)?

Do not be mistaken into thinking this is a one-time question. This is a question we must ask ourselves every day. What we do each day and what we say demonstrates the priorities in our lives.

A perfect example of this is found in Matthew 16:22-25:

"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! **You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.**' Then

Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’”

Setting our mind on the things of man and the things of this world is of Satan and is a hindrance to the work of the Kingdom, as Jesus clearly says to Peter.

The book of James further emphasizes this teaching, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we get closer to Passover, it is time to start examining our lives and removing not just the leaven but also the things hindering us from serving and loving the Lord God with all of our heart, mind, and soul.

What are your priorities? Where are you spending most of your time? Does your life truly reflect the glory and honor of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ? This is what we need to be asking ourselves.

### The Missing Ingredient

As a wife and a mother of five children, I spend a lot of time in the kitchen cooking and baking. I can tell you from years of experience (and many of you can agree) that a recipe will never turn out right if you are missing the key ingredient. Try making a chocolate cake without baking powder. You will not get a light, fluffy cake. It simply won't turn out right.

Is there a key ingredient necessary in our lives to truly keep the great commandment? Yes! Is it the Holy Spirit? Not exactly. Here's why:

Nobody in the Old Testament had the Holy Spirit in them. It was around them and influenced them at times.

In the account of the spies sent out into the land of Canaan in the book of Numbers, we read two very different responses to what the spies saw. Ten men gave a bad report:

“So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, ‘The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them’” (Numbers 13:32–33).

Two men by the names of Caleb and Joshua were not dissuaded from entering the promised land and taking their inheritance:

“And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, ‘The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them’” (Numbers 14:5–9).

None of these twelve men had the Holy Spirit.

Joshua and Caleb chose to put their faith in their God, and the other ten chose to be afraid and not believe in their God. It was a choice.

Therefore, the correct missing ingredient to keeping the great commandment is *zeal*.

Specifically, zeal for the Lord.

Jesus Christ wants His followers to be zealous for His name's sake. He doesn't want lukewarm believers.

“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, **because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.** Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:15–17).

An awesome example of someone zealous for the Lord was Phinehas, son of Eleazar the priest.

“And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus, the plague on the people of Israel was stopped” (Numbers 25:6–8).

This act of total and complete zeal for God's word ended the plague right there, and as a result, God gave him a covenant of peace.

“And the LORD 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).

This starkly contrasts those who merely go through the motions of keeping God's Word: “This people

honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of zeal in our lives towards our Lord and Saviour. He is looking for those whose hearts are zealous for good works

Paul says, “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord” (Romans 2:11).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the day is far spent, and the time of our Lord's return draws near. Now is the time to watch and examine yourselves, to see if you are walking closer to our Lord.

Now is not the time to be complacent. Jesus, as Lord of Hosts and Supreme Commander of our souls, is looking for those who are ALL IN. Not one hand on the plow and looking back. Not one foot still in the world. He wants 100 percent devotion. He wants us to be zealous for Him.

When you let go of what hinders you in your walk with Christ, you will find it easier to serve Him zealously.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11–14).

I don't know about you, but NOTHING this world has to offer even begins to compare to the glorious future that awaits us in the Kingdom that is to come. And it is coming soon, beloved! A-men.

Carolyn Dahl is a member of the Ottawa, Canada CGI congregation.

## The Temple of the Holy Spirit

By MICHELLE ALGARRA



The body is the tabernacle or temple of the Holy Spirit. It is sacred. It must not be used as a vessel for concupiscence or fornication. And it

must be taken care of through proper grooming and proper diet and exercise. We must follow the food laws and take care of the body through proper health practices. There is nothing wrong with wanting to feel and look good. The body produces natural endorphins that produce good health vibes and positive feelings.

When we degrade the physical body God gave us, the human mind or spirit is degraded as well. When people do

immoral things, their behaviour will naturally lead to depression and anxiety and low value of one's self. If one's mental attitude is not properly treated through Bible study and meditation, prayer and the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus, such kinds of sin may have permanent and lifetime consequences.

The Bible says we should esteem others better than ourselves, and judge not by appearance but judge righteous judgment. What right have we to ridicule other people for their physical appearance when we do not want to be ridiculed ourselves? We all must have proper esteem for ourselves according to the biblical affirmation that human beings were created in God's image and likeness. We are therefore all beautiful creatures in God's sight because we were created in the image of God.

Society judges people by human standards of physical appearance, not by the contents of one's heart, or the value of a person as having the potentiality to become a spirit being in God's Kingdom. God's judgment, however, is not based on the way one looks but on the contents of one's heart—one's attitude of repentance and penitence, of continually relying on God for forgiveness of sins and mistakes and help in overcoming.

We also must learn to forgive ourselves of an ignominious past, and allow the Lord Jesus' cleansing blood to clean out the clutter of our past. If people continually judge us for past mistakes we already repented of, it is our personal responsibility to learn to forgive others as we have tried to forgive ourselves.

The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Even without the Holy Spirit it

is a vessel that contains the human spirit or mind God has given us. The seat of emotions, the intellect dictates also the human conscience and the dictates of one's heart. It is also the repository of information one accumulates in life, and all God-given talents and skills.

Learn to respect yourself as a being created in God's image and likeness—even when maltreated by society for aspects of one's appearance that a degraded society considers impure and unclean, vile and degraded.

We all grow old and bodily health declines, and there are people with mental and physical abnormalities. But the human spirit can be continually renewed through diligence in prayer and the utilization of all talents and skills and abilities that are God-given.

## In Loving Memory

### Anita Fay Smith

December 12, 1943 – December 12, 2023



Graveside services for Anita Fay Moore Smith, 79, of Whitehouse were held on Monday, December 18, 2023, at Carmel Cemetery in Lindale, TX with Mr. John Reedy officiating under the direction of Stewart Family Funeral Home.

Mrs. Smith passed away Tuesday, December 12, 2023, in Whitehouse. She was born December 20, 1943, in Dallas to Eugene Palmer Moore and Edna Harkins Moore.

She was a member of the Body of Christ. She graduated from South Oak Cliff High School class of 1962. She was one of the greatest stay-at-home moms ever!

Anita was preceded in death by her husband, Mitchell L. Smith, Jr.; brother, David E Moore; and parents, Eugene and Edna Moore. She is survived by her loving family, including her brother,

Donnie L. Moore (Donna); sisters-in-law, Mattie Slayton and Gloria Smith; her children, Gary Smith (Aimee), Lisa McComb (Robert), Gina Ellis, Leona Cryer, and Cryssi Ballard (Timothy, Sr.); ten grandchildren, Mitchell Smith III, Rebekah and Melody McComb, Tristan (Ashley) and Taryn Ellis, Isaac and Westan Cryer, and Mason, Timothy, Jr., and Blayne Ballard; four great-grandchildren, Mason, Cooper and Clara Smith, and Lorelai Ellis.

Anita was a very strong person and faithful Christian. She loved deeply, and lived her almost 80-year life with grace, stubbornness, and laughter. Her five kids, ten-plus-two grandkids, and four great grandchildren are the legacy she leaves behind. She was truly blessed and was a blessing to others. She will be greatly missed.

## My Report on My Two-Month Mission in the USA

By **ROBERT ONSANDO**

Having completed my two-month mission and learning trip in the USA, I flew back to Kenya on December 4. It was a long but very busy trip. I spent most of my time in the East Coast of the US. I appreciate and thank God for a very successful trip. I want to thank CGI headquarters for their continued support that made my trip a success. I want to thank CGI Philippines for their extraordinary support, which enabled me fly to the US with the donation they made through CGI headquarters. I want to thank Mike and Dianne Webb who made their house available for my accommodation. I can't thank Elder Ray Hall enough for giving his time and vehicle to drive me round, as well as Elder Mark Ellis for opening his house for me in New York.

### Feast of Tabernacles

I had such a wonderful experience at the Hot Springs, Arkansas Feast site, where I attended and had an opportunity to speak and present at the seminar. I was blessed with wisdom from Elders Charles Groce and John Reedy, and from Skip Martin, among others. I thank Elder Blake Silverstein and Linda Benton from Christian Educational Ministries for inviting me.

I learned a lot on how to organize such a magnificent event at that high scale. This gave me heads-up to what we are planning for in 2024 in Kenya. We plan to host the Feast of Tabernacles at the Masaai Mara National Park, one of the most visited tourist attraction sites. Over 20 people have already shown interest. I would love all of us to appreciate God's wonderful creation, which points us to God's original plan and interaction with animals. I can't wait.

### Christian Bible Centre

Two years ago I started a training centre, "Christian Bible Centre," for basic Bible studies, to serve as a training centre for our church leaders, and open to everybody for the purpose of



**Robert at the Feast of Tabernacles in Hot Springs, Arkansas**

sharing our doctrines and introducing the servant leadership strategy. We had our first 20 students enrolled; 12 dropped out because of finances, but 8 graduated.

Six months ago, a religious organization (cult) radicalized its members into a slogan, "fasting to death to see Jesus." Unfortunately, some members believed the leader and fasted; over 420 people died. When the government (Kenya) discovered this, the president set up an inquiry team that has now set up rules to regulate churches, and one of the things they want is all ministers must undergo a theological training and produce a certificate from a registered institution. Christian Bible Centre is not a registered institution.

After discussions with the registrar of societies, I was advised to register Christian Bible Centre following government requirements. Because of this, one of the reasons for my trip to the USA was to ask the CGI's headquarters leadership for help in preparing the appropriate documents to meet the government's new requirements. I want to report that I appreciate the support I received at the home office. I now have all the required documents for official registration.

One of the most important documents was to develop a training curriculum following a given sample and how it should look like. I had an opportunity to visit Foundation Institute

found in COGWA. I was not able to get in touch with Ambassador Bible College of UCG. With what I gathered, finally, Christian Bible Centre Curriculum, to which I infused MAP/MIP (CGI's ministerial programs), was prepared. I thank Mike James for the support in this wonderful document.

Christian Bible Centre plans to have at least 20 Bible students ready in 2024. Following the difficult times and experience with the first batch of students, I have set up a scholarship plan for all our students, and, for that reason, I had the opportunity to visit different friends to support the students. I still have a few not sponsored yet.

### Tabitha Outreach Foundation Academy

This is one of the most successful projects I have undertaken, an orphan and needy school, which Mike and Dianne Webb dreamt of starting. At the right time God sent me on their way to actualize this dream two years ago. From 43 students in 2022, which included grade 9 and 10, to 73 students in 2023 with additional grade 11. In 2024 we are anticipating 105 with Grade 12 being high school final year. This is the first school in Kenya and probably in Africa where students keep both the Sabbath and the Holy Days. In 2022 we baptized 5 students, and this year we baptized 12 students. It is a school that has brought joy to

many, with 17 staffs both teaching and support staff, who in turn may be supporting over 68 family members and this school has brought life in the community where it is situated. I am currently the minister in the school and I am mentoring another minister.

When we started the school, it was under the name of Father Angelo, which was under Catholic sponsorship. I immediately started the process of registration of the school to bear the name Tabitha Outreach Foundation Academy, under Church of God International sponsorship. The process is usually tedious and money consuming. We saw the Hand of God and a real miracle; the process of registration took only 6 months and we were handed over our operation license on the October 27. Tabitha Outreach Foundation Academy is officially registered and recognized by the government of Kenya.

Three projects at stake. One is a trade workshop. One reason for this is we have kids that are not endowed with academic, so we give them an option of trade training which include sewing, plumbing, woodwork, and metal work. As well, they have opportunity to grow their talents in either music or sports. Due to poor growing environment, some of the kids have compromised immunity and easily catch diseases. We spend a lot of money taking them to the hospital. Our next project is to open a medical clinic that will be open to the community as well. This will be an evangelizing tool, as we teach the community on hygiene and good living and eating lifestyles.

During my time in the US I had opportunity to visit various Sabbath-keeping church organizations to fundraise for Tabitha Outreach Foundation Academy. I developed a 2024 strategic plan which I shared with the board as well as developed rules and regulations for the school.

I can honestly say that this was my busiest and most successful mission trips and it would not be possible without your support in all aspects.

# Auburndale Congregation Celebrates 30th Anniversary

On December 23, 2023, the Auburndale (Florida) Church of God, International celebrated its 30th anniversary. The first service was held on Christmas day, December 25, 1993, in the high school classroom of a local member. When that location became unavailable, our founding members learned about the local Women’s Center, and services continued there for many years. The Women’s Center then encountered a problem with termites and the damage was becoming more apparent each Sabbath, so searching for a new location began.

When a new location was found, the earnest work began of demolishing walls, painting, laying tile, and installing a kitchen. Members helped with all the tasks, from putting chairs together with screwdrivers to purchasing tables for the dining room and having a beautiful podium specially built. It was a team effort and a work of love for all involved. Acquiring the building, remodeling, and holding the first event at the new location took three weeks. The first use of the building was the Sabbath service on June 11, 2011. The next day was Pentecost. On Pentecost more than 70 people were present, from former members to neighboring churches, some traveling from Miami. It was truly a Pentecost to remember.

Since that first service, our church has hosted numerous joyful events like weddings, anniversary parties, baby showers, baptisms, and baby dedications. We have had 11 children born to church members throughout these years. We gained a local minister, and the Clearwater congregation was an outgrowth from the Auburndale church. Along with the happy events, we have had our fair share of sad events, too, like memorials and celebrations of life for our members we have lost over the years. Even Covid-19 did not stop us, as we hosted the Feast of Tabernacles 2020 at our Auburndale church with our local brethren and out-of-town guests attending this convocation together.

Our Auburndale church has become a part of the community by collecting food for homeless high school seniors, snacks for school children, advertising at local restaurants and at the Little League Baseball Park, feeding local football players and advertising in their programs, and allowing community groups to use the building for events.

Through all these years we have had that core group of members who support our church through tithing, service, and love. This church could not have endured and thrived for 30 years without the individuals and their belief and faith in our Almighty Father. As we all know, the church is not the building, it’s the people, and we will continue our mission of spreading God’s Word and truths though our presence and our church.



Larry Sharp giving a history of the local church



Appetizers outdoors before the catered dinner



Morgan Pinkerman giving the sermon



Next generation—Joshua is the audiovisual backup person for his dad Richard Sharp.



Bible Jeopardy games played before dinner



Lots of fellowship!



# Ocho Rios, Jamaica Congregation Welcomes Newest Member!

Bright sunshine and cool Caribbean breeze greeted us as we drove onto the private beachfront property of Flavours Beach in Runaway Bay, St. Ann, on Jamaica's north coast just west of Ocho Rios. Our group of fourteen was buzzing with excitement, not for a beach party but for a more solemn and

joyful event. On Wednesday morning, December 27, we gathered on the beach for a baptism service.

After welcoming everyone, pastor Kenroy Allen, said opening prayers and gave a brief exposition on the significance of baptism from Romans

chapter six. With family and friends looking on, Elder Allen and Ocho Rios church member Paul Thomas led his daughter Ashley Thomas into the water to be baptised. It was a particularly emotional moment for Paul to actually participate in baptising his eldest daughter, Ashley.

We made our way out of the water onto the beach for the laying on of hands and prayer for our newest baptised member of the Ocho Rios church. It was with much joy as we celebrated and welcomed Ashley Thomas into the Body of Christ.

*Submitted by Kenroy Allen*



Newly baptized Ashley (towel around her neck) along with family and friends



Elder Kenroy Allen laying hands on and praying for Ashley while her dad Paul Thomas supports her



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